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Things That Linger

Mark Babin
University of New Orleans

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Things That Linger

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

Mark Babin

B.A. Louisiana State University, 2005

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Dedication

For my parents, Steve, and Merrill: You are the best.

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Things That Linger

I stood watching the procession underneath a tree, fifty yards away. I didn't know most of the people anyway. A few had probably heard of, or about me, but any recognition would be accompanied by inquisitive looks. "That's Jeff, Meghan's new guy," they would think. "Why did she never bring him around?"

So I stood alone, feeling safety in the separation, not really knowing why.

Rain fell on the mourners. Not like in the movies where every person comes prepared with an umbrella. This was messy. People got wet, their soaked clothes heavy. Their shoes splashed in muddy water, and I imagined the wetness seeping through the leather and clinging to the cotton of their socks. The raindrops coated their faces and hid the tears.

The branches of the tree did little to hinder the rain. It fell on me the same as it did on them. The water landed in my hair and disappeared into my clothes, but I barely noticed the added weight. My eyes fixated on the line of sodden grieverers. Her friends and family. Brothers and sister, aunts and uncles, grandparents, perhaps.

Her parents, Cindy and Bill, walked in the front. Bill walked with his arm around his wife and measured his steps so she could keep up with his stride. I had met them at the hospital. He'd had his arm draped around her in a similar fashion back then.

She buried her face into his chest creating unevenness in their gait. Bill saw me and gave me a look. Was he welcoming me to join them or warning me to stay where I was? I remained at my distance.

They walked out of the rain and under a large white tent. Sheltered, they stood at the

grave in silence. But I felt a sudden urge to scream, which startled me. I had grown used to being numb. But now I wanted to shout out, even if the wind and rain ate my words.

Meghan should have come over. If only she had come over.

*

“You’re such a nerd, Jeff,” Meghan said as she sat on the edge of the bed painting her toenails. Princess Pink.

“No, I’m not,” I said, acting like the comment annoyed me. It was a game we played.

“Why would you think such a thing?”

“You wear glasses and read books. Need I say more?” She craned her neck back around to show me her playful smile.

“Megs, you have a pretty limited definition of ‘nerd,’” I retorted as I thumbed through the current book I was reading. *The World According to Garp*. I never told her that I had been a basketball jock for most of my youth, until I blew out my knee junior year in high school. Easier just to be who she thought I was.

“It’s okay. I like that you’re a nerd.”

“You like that I’m dead sexy.”

She laughed and kissed me. “You really are a nerd.”

I put the book down and pulled her back into my bed, ignoring her protests about wet nail polish. “Come here lover,” I said in my Transylvanian accent as I threw the covers over us and began kissing her.

After, she spooned into me and fell asleep. Within five minutes, I heard the soft whimpers she made when she dreamt. Little noises, these half-moans that always killed me. I smelled her hair as she lay next to me. Mango and something. Lavender maybe. It mixed with

her scent. The one that was just hers, the one that lingered on my pillows for days after she had gone. I wanted to pull her body closer to me, but I feared waking her. Instead, I stared at the dark ceiling and listened to her.

I couldn't sleep with someone next to me in my bed. I'm not sure why. I guess I felt like my territory was being invaded. If I had believed in therapy and psycho-babble, I might have spouted off some self-diagnosis about my fear of intimacy, about how my tendency to keep everyone at an arm's length was at the root of my insomnia. But I didn't believe in that crap. I just never liked having anyone in my bed.

In the past, most times after sex I would count the seconds, just waiting for the girl to get out of my bed and leave. It was different with Meghan. Oh, I still couldn't sleep, but I didn't care. With her next to me, I felt content lying there with her soft moans and rich smells.

*

Now at her funeral, I stared at her loved ones in their suffering. I was too far away to hear the words, but the priest stood next to her grave and read a passage from the Bible. Meghan wouldn't have liked that. Better to have somebody play a throbbing rock song. Like "Sympathy for the Devil" – she loved the Stones.

I wondered what she looked like. I hadn't gone to the wake, for the same reasons that I stood apart during the funeral. I didn't belong. I could only picture her vibrant and alive, and I half-expected her to pop out of her coffin and say "Why are y'all crying?" Can't you take a little joke?"

Still I wondered what she looked like. Was her tan skin already ashen? Had her hair become stiff? Did she even look like herself?

The rain seeped into the fabric of my pants just above my ankle. The water turned the

gray fabric to black. I looked at the people under the tent, noting the couples consoling each other. A part of me wanted to join them, to feel the solidarity of grief. I couldn't though.

We had just been getting started.

No, I didn't belong, but I might have. And whether I ever would have, I could have saved her. I should have saved her.

*

Her bare shoulder glistened under the dim light of my room. A small, feminine shoulder. A tiny pink scar peeked out from the spaghetti strap of her tube top. I leaned over and kissed it.

I had noticed the scar the first time she spent the night with me. Weeks into our relationship, her sleeping over had become a regular thing. And during some point of those nights, I found myself thinking about her scar.

I always wanted to ask how she got it, but I never did. She would be curled up next to me in my bed and that little spot of raised pink flesh, slightly contrasting with her tan skin, would catch my eye, and I would think of all the possible ways that she might have gotten the little scar. Was it something simple? A random nail? Or something more exciting like a jagged piece of glass from a broken window that sliced her skin as she was trying to sneak into an abandoned house. Or something crazy, like the knife of a jealous lover.

I usually settled on something exciting. Meghan always had a story. The scar on her shoulder was probably no different.

"What was that for?" Meghan asked about the kiss.

"Oh, nothing," I said, shrugging.

What was it for? It wasn't for anything. That mark, that scar, was the evidence of a wound. She had been hurt there. No matter how it had happened, it had happened. And so I

kissed it. My way of saying, I am sorry that you were hurt here; I wish you hadn't been; I wish I had been there to stop whatever it was that caused this scar.

I didn't tell her any of that. Part of me thought that she wouldn't understand. I worried that we hadn't been together long enough for me to have such feelings. Or, better, I worried that she might think we hadn't been together long enough for me to have such feelings.

Rather than tell her how I actually felt, I just shrugged. And in the shrugging I told myself that my feelings were premature. I liked her well enough. But what I liked was just sex.

*

I think most guys noticed Meghan the first time they laid eyes on her. Long brown, almost black, hair. Blue eyes. Golden-tan skin, tight muscular legs and perky breasts. I noticed all that, but what really got me was her walk. It wasn't the "I'm-fucking-sexy-and-I-know-it" walk. She had a bounce in her step as if she would start skipping at any moment. She looked happy. And that was narcotic.

Nonetheless, it never occurred to me that we'd become more than just friends. We had nothing in common. She loved fashion, musical theater, and cold weather. I walked around in ratty jeans and worn T-shirts, I thought musical theater was almost inevitably cheesy, and I chapped up if the temperature dropped below forty. At twenty-one she was five years younger than I was. She worked as a barmaid and still piddled in college with absolutely no idea what she wanted to do with her life. I worked for a small publishing company and submitted my short stories to literary magazines.

One night I saw her at one of my favorite dive-bars sitting in a booth by herself.

"Hey-a Jeff."

She had been crying. I hated seeing a girl cry or even knowing that one had been crying.

I'd get all chivalrous and angry. And uncomfortable. A product of a Catholic upbringing and a male-dominated family.

“Hey-a Megs. You okay?”

“Oh yeah. I'm just dandy.” She wiped at her running mascara, creating black smears under her eyes.

“Sarcasm, uh? Must be serious.”

“How much time you got, Doctor?”

I saw that she had a Sea Breeze. “You want another?” I asked. She nodded, and I went to the bar for drinks.

“So, why the red eyes?” I asked, after handing her the red drink and sitting down opposite her.

“My boyfriend—excuse me—my *ex*-boyfriend is an asshole.”

I refrained from divulging that all guys were assholes. “I didn't know you even had a boyfriend.”

“Well I don't anymore. Found him with his dick in some whore.”

Then she told me all about Frank. She thought she was going to marry Frank. They had been so right for each other. Frank was rich. Frank had a summer condo in Ft. Walton and a ski lodge in Colorado.

I could see why she wanted to marry Frank. I might like to marry Frank myself.

I listened to the whole story without saying much. When she was finished, I spoke up.

“You know, when I was five years old, I had this really awesome yellow Tonka Truck. This thing was the shit. It had that plastic compartment in the back that was open. I could fit more sand in that thing than any of the other jokesters at the sandbox. You know what I'm

talking about?”

Meghan looked at me like I was crazy, but I kept on.

“My favorite toy in the world. Till I let Tommy Roberts play with it in my driveway.

That little shit rolled my Tonka down the driveway as fast as he could, right out into the street. I chased after it, but only to see a pickup blast it into a heap of plastic parts.”

Her eyes searched mine, waiting for the connection.

“But two good things came out of that incident.”

“And what were they?” Her tone was dry. She was no doubt wondering why I was comparing an unfaithful boyfriend to a child’s very replaceable toy.

“Well, the first was that my mom put the fear of God into me about running into the street. That speech and the subsequent spanking just may have kept me alive throughout the next couple of years. I still look both ways before crossing.”

“Um, okay. And the second thing?” Was she beginning to suspect that I wasn’t just being a dick?

“For my sixth birthday I got an even bigger midnight-blue, remote-controlled Tonka Truck. Blew the other one away. I never let Tommy Roberts play with that one. In fact, I still have it. You could say that Tommy Roberts did me a favor.”

She responded with a twisted grin. “Wow, Dr. Phil. You’re deep.”

I reached out and touched her hand.

*

A little girl in a navy-blue dress at the funeral caught my eye. She didn’t really look like Meghan, so I wasn’t sure whether she was a relative. She was about eight years old, I guessed. She stood with one leg crossed behind the other, as if she needed to go to the bathroom. One of

her tiny hands held a card flapping in the wind, while her other hand disappeared inside her mother's larger one. The card broke free and fluttered in the air like a giant butterfly. The little girl pulled away from her mother and went chasing after the runaway card. Meghan must have run just like that as a little girl, I thought. That little bounce—that ingrained happiness. I thought of Meghan and smiled.

Then I almost sobbed. I would never again see Meghan's bouncing walk.

I suddenly felt hot. As if I had done some irreparable damage. Maybe I had. What could I have done that would have gotten her to me?

Maybe if I had told her that I loved her, just once, she wouldn't have gone to that stupid fucking bar.

But I hadn't been in love with her. That's what I told myself. We were just having fun. Friends with benefits as they say. But what if I had loved her? What if saying it would have made a difference? Maybe I didn't even need to say it. What if I had just stopped trying to keep things light? If I had let her in, just a little? She would have come to me, and we would have been in my bed when it happened. She would have made her soft moans, and I wouldn't feel like I was an accessory.

I had the unwelcome feeling that I might burst into tears right there. I dug my fingernails into my thigh, hard, till it hurt.

*

She had this thing for Choco-Taco's. She even had the logic ready. The ratio of the ice cream to the crunchy shell was perfect. Not like the cone version, which was too much ice cream and not enough crunch. She would ask for one at the strangest times. Impossible times. Like at two

a.m. when she was across town unable to go to sleep, knowing full well that there was nowhere to get a Choco-Taco at that hour.

Before long I had gotten used to sleepless nights, soft moans, and the richness of her hair.

Still, we were just fuck buddies. That's what I presumed. And I got no indication that she wanted anything more. Every once in a while I would catch her looking at me, staring. While I was writing or reading or watching TV, and I thought that maybe she felt something more. But she never said anything, and I certainly didn't want to be that guy who threw away great sex because his emotions got in the way.

I was good at light and easy. We talked about objective things. Favorite movies, books. Funny things that happened during the day. I once spent forty-five minutes on the phone explaining to her why Jack Nicholson was the coolest person alive. Silly things like that. Superficial things, in the end. I never even learned her middle name.

So I held back with Meghan, counseled myself that she was still into Frank. I told myself to be careful. I avoided getting too emotional. Maybe I had good cause to. She was used to private jets and private parties. I had a one-bedroom shack with poor water pressure. I told myself that the situation couldn't conceivably last.

Maybe I wasn't ready. Maybe I was afraid to fall in love.

That part was difficult for me. I had never told a woman that I loved her. I thought about saying it to Meghan. Just to hear how the words sounded, I told myself. I took an on-line quiz to see if I loved her. It told me I was in lust. I agreed. But what if I hadn't answered the questions truthfully?

Whatever, I never said it. I wanted to make sure I really meant it. How would I know? Would it just come out when the time came? Or was it something I would have to force, even

when the time was right? What if the time was right, and I froze up? What if I died before I was ever certain?

Or maybe I was just too young to realize what I had. But then again, how old do you have to be to realize what you have? I don't think it was my age. How old had I been when I met Meghan? Twenty-six. No, it wasn't age. I had just been too wrapped up in keeping things light. Too guarded to let her in.

*

People always say things like, "If I had it to do all over again, I would do things differently." But they always say that after things didn't work out the first time. Sure you would do things differently if you knew the first way wouldn't work out. But I would venture to say that without any prior knowledge, most people would do things exactly as they did the first go round.

I just wish she would have come over.

The night she died, I hadn't seen her in almost a week. Maybe it had been longer. I can't remember. Our schedules weren't meshing; we couldn't seem to get together.

I did manage to get her on the phone and pleaded, "Megs, come over tonight."

"Oh, Jeff, I wish you would have called earlier. I already told my girlfriends I'd meet them for drinks."

"Who you meeting?" I didn't really want to know. Unless it was somebody I could've linked with Frank.

"A couple of girls from work. Nobody you know."

Girls from work? She spent hours upon hours with the girls from work. I wanted to tell her to blow them off. I wanted to say, "I miss you. Come over."

But I didn't. I didn't want to sound needy.

“Oh,” was all I said.

“I can’t blow them off. But I’ll try to cut out early.”

“It’s been a while,” I said, still fighting the urge to tell her I missed her.

“I know. I miss you. I’ll come over as soon as I can, okay.”

That was the last time I ever talked to her.

I waited. She’d come over. She always came over.

Hours passed. She didn’t come.

I spent much of the night pissed off at her. She could have at least called. Was she lying to me? Had she gone off with Frank? I comforted myself that she just got drunk and forgot to call. She did that sometimes. I picked up my phone then put it down at least ten times. I wasn’t going to beg. She didn’t want to come then fine. I told myself not to care. It was just sex.

Around two a.m. I put my phone on silent in protest and went to sleep. Not once did I think that something bad had happened to her. I almost expected her to bang on my door at some ungodly hour, drunk and horny. I would play like I was pissed off, but it wouldn’t last too long. She would flash her little smile and kiss my neck, and I would wrap myself up with her.

But she never came over.

I found a frantic voicemail the next day. A female voice was hysterically shouting that something had happened to her friend Meghan. A shooting outside the bar. She had gotten my number from Meghan’s phone. Meghan had been shot in the stomach.

I don’t remember driving to the hospital. Not really. I can picture my white knuckles against the steering wheel. And I remember the feeling. Hot all over, and light and heavy all at the same time. Like being under warm water with somebody standing on my chest.

When I got there, Bill awkwardly introduced Cindy and himself. Their eyes were

bloodshot from crying. You cry when your daughter gets shot. That didn't mean she wouldn't be okay.

“Meghan talked about you quite a bit,” he said, and for a second I wondered if he was just being polite. I doubted that Meghan mentioned me, except in passing.

Then the past tense hammered me between the eyes. “Talked?” I repeated barely above a whisper. Cindy sobbed.

Meghan had died five minutes before I reached the hospital.

Bill repeated to me what the doctors had said. He put his hand on my shoulder as he searched for the words. The warmth startled me, and I felt his hand pulsing on me.

I watched his lips move as he talked. But it was like watching television with the sound off. I didn't hear a thing. Since then the story has been burned into my consciousness. The owner of the bar had pissed off the wrong people, probably gang related. A car had driven by and just opened fire. They hit five people, killing Meghan and a forty-year-old man who had a wife and two kids. The police didn't expect arrests, much less convictions.

I said nothing. All around me people were crying and screaming. Emotions inside me churned, but I kept them inside. I beat myself for thinking she had been blowing me off, and I cursed myself for not being more persuasive. Why couldn't I have just told her what I was thinking? That I missed her. That I enjoyed seeing her so much. That we didn't even have to have sex. That I loved her.

What had she been thinking about, just before? Had she been almost ready to leave? I could see her, kissing her girlfriends, coyly hinting she was going to see a man. Did they know about me? They would have giggled and asked questions, delaying the departure. But what if she was waiting for me to call? What if she had decided she would stay at the bar until I called?

Guilt washed over me. I had been mad at her. Cursing her, thinking she was slighting me, ignoring me, cheating on me. And she had been dying. She had been dying, and I had been mad.

I had the sudden feeling that everyone there knew. That at any moment all those people crying in the hospital would turn and look at me and scream, “It’s all your fault!”

There must’ve been something I could have done. I should have insisted. I should have told her I had stocked up on Choco Tacos. I should have made her come over. I should have done something. Anything. I should have told her I loved her. Instead, I let her down.

If only she had come.

*

The mourners paraded off in a soaking wake of grief. The rain hit my face just like it had for them. But the drops hid no tears. I didn’t cry. I waited until they were all gone and then I walked to her grave. My shoes splashed in the muddy puddles and new moisture crept into the fabric of my socks.

Workers had already started scooping dirt into the hole. They worked around me, respectful but methodical. I was soaking wet, but I still felt hot.

A card had fallen into the wet grass near the fresh mud. I wondered if it was the same card that blew away from the little girl. The ink bled from the moisture, but I made it out.

“A beloved daughter,” it read.

Not to me. She wasn’t my daughter, or my sister. She was Meghan. Lover and friend, but also mystery.

“Meghan,” I muttered, “you should have come over.” A worker tilted his head at me for a moment then plunged his shovel back into the dirt with a soft thud.

An image of her scar popped into my head. That tiny little scar that had been on her shoulder—a little bit of her history that I had never made myself privy to. I thought there'd be more time. But I was robbed. A tiny bullet meant for someone else robbed me of knowing.

I picked up the card and rubbed the wet paper between my thumb and index finger feeling little bits of mush balling from the friction.

In that moment I felt like I could say it. If she were there in front of me, I could quit playing it so cool. I wouldn't tell myself it was just sex. I wouldn't avoid the emotion. I would just say it.

I still wasn't sure if I had been in love with her. But I knew it was more than just sex. I had always figured it would end sooner or later. Frank. Or somebody like Frank. Or just fatigue with the likes of me.

But really I missed her. I missed her calling me a nerd and the way she giggled when I did a stupid voice. The scar on her shoulder. I missed the parts of her I knew and the parts I would never get to know.

If she were there, I would say the words, "I love you." Maybe that was enough. The feeling intensified like a light getting brighter, hotter. I thought that it had been love. I started to say the words. Even though she wasn't there. The "I" was vibrating somewhere in my throat, when I dropped the card. It floated down to a puddle at my feet, rested buoyant for a moment then sank. I thought about reaching for it, but the ink had probably washed away. As the card sank, the feeling did too, and I was again unsure of what had been between Meghan and me.

I realized the not knowing didn't matter. Whatever I had felt for Meghan, I had felt. Love, friendship, some kind of morph of the two. It didn't matter. I missed her. That's what mattered.

The guilt still burned hot on my skin. But I knew it would fade.

The missing her, I knew as well, never would.

Knowing Doug

I see Doug's back tense. His huge shoulders rise up like he's holding a shrug for a pose. The muscles in his back twitch beneath the bright blue fabric of his shirt, and they speak to me.

"Mitch" the muscles say to me, "we're about to get a workout."

"Hey man, leave the girl alone." Doug's voice breaks through the loud, booming music of the bar. Sweaty bodies separate me from him, and I struggle to get past them, but they spread out their arms and back away as if they are keeping the crowd from some toxic chemical.

The guy Doug is talking to has been hitting on this cute, little blonde girl a bit too aggressively. His hand rests just above the girl's hip, and I can see in the girl's eyes that she wishes it wasn't there. I wonder what Doug sees in her eyes.

The guy's almost as big as Doug, and I can tell he's not just going to walk away. I also know Doug can never walk away, especially when he sees a girl in trouble.

"Why don't you mind your own fucking business, douche-nut?"

Great, this guy's a hard-case. No doubt there will be a fight now. I'm twenty-two now—not old, but too old for this crap. I regret blowing off Millie for this. Shit. Here we go again.

"'Douche-nut' huh? Well, I'm making it my fucking business." Doug takes a step closer to the guy. Their faces are only inches apart.

"Hey Matt, tell this guy he can blow you," the guy on the other side of the girl says.

Matt takes his hand off of the girl's waist. She starts slinking away trying to disappear into the crowd and escape. But before she can Matt grabs her by the wrist.

"I'm just having a friendly interaction with my female friend here."

“Not anymore, you’re not.”

Doug forces Matt’s hand off the girl’s wrist. Matt retaliates by pushing Doug, who stumbles backward.

I shut my eyes and wait for the thud of bone hitting bone. It doesn’t come.

“Outside, asshole” is all that Doug says before he walks off. Matt smiles nastily, shrugs, and follows. Fucking idiots. Both of them. Fucking idiots.

Doug and Matt spill out into the alley behind the bar. The sticky heat of the New Orleans night slaps me as I follow the crowd.

“Beat his ass,” Matt’s friend from the bar yells. I doubt the fight will go the way he wants it. I’ve seen Doug on top of people too many times.

Dirty puddles and broken beer bottles litter the alley, and the thick smell of stale booze swirls in the air. This is such a dirty city.

I don’t wait long for that thud. Doug connects first. His right fist catches Matt flush on the nose. Blood runs. It is so bright.

*

The summer I graduated from LSU, I used to go on walks. I was twenty-one years old, had a college degree in American Literature and no clue what I wanted to do with the rest of my life. For months I didn’t do anything, except hang out with Millie and read some of the books that I should have read in college. Aside from the reading, I was bored out of my mind.

Walking helped. I’d leave my house and walk to nowhere in particular. I liked the time to myself. I didn’t have to worry about talking, about anything, other than the sounds around me and in which direction to head. I’d end up at all sorts of places. The park. The mall. The levee. Sometimes I went to people watch, and other times I just wanted to be by myself. One day I

ended up at a cemetery.

The cemeteries in New Orleans have tombs that are above ground. Little stone houses for the dead. I was walking among them that day, feeling like a privileged visitor. These beautiful miniature castles cast shadows on me as I strolled along, and I imagined that the inhabitants were watching over me—protecting me. I had the strange urge to knock on one of the tombs. I felt like maybe somebody would open up, and I'd say, "Care to come out for a walk?" The person would say, "Sure." And we would walk in the green grass surrounded by the departed, and the person would tell me all about what it was like being dead. The sun shone, and a light breeze blew in my face. The usual thick humidity of the city felt lessened there in the cemetery. I felt alive suddenly, and realized I didn't want to know what it was like to be deceased.

"Pepps, what the shit are you doing here?" No one else called me Pepps. Doug had come up with it as abbreviation of my last name, Peppinger. I wouldn't have tolerated it from anyone but Doug. Our whole childhood was in that nickname.

Doug was resting against one of the tombs smoking a cigarette. I hadn't seen him much in the time I was away at LSU. But his reputation as a fighter hadn't changed much. A few stories had made their way up to Baton Rouge.

"You heard Doug Clement put some guy in the hospital?" Or "Did you hear Doug Clement got jumped by a Tulane frat? But then he beat up the whole fraternity one or two at time over the next month."

I was never sure which stories were true and which were embellished. And the few times he did come up and visit me, I didn't bring up any of the rumors.

"Just taking a walk," I said.

“In a cemetery, dude? That’s a, kind of morbid, now ain’t it, Pepps.”

I almost pointed out that he was there also. But I figured he might have been visiting his mother. I shrugged.

“So what the fuck, Peppinger? You get back in town, and I don’t get so much as a phone call.”

“Sorry man.” I thought about telling him that I’d been busy, but I didn’t want to flat out lie to him. “I just got back. Trying to get my shit together. You know how it is.”

“Whatever, college boy,” he replied, smiling and shaking his head. “First time I see my best pal in months, and it’s in a fucking cemetery.”

He flicked the cigarette to the ground and started walking away, motioning with his head for me to follow.

I stomped out the cigarette and then hurried to catch up with him.

“Come have a drink with me?” The question seemed odd. There was something about his tone. He sounded like I did when I was saying one thing to someone, but I had deeper meaning. Or I meant something else all together. I got the feeling he was really asking me, “So are we still friends or what?” And I felt awkward for not knowing how to answer.

“Sure,” I said chuckling nervously.

We were still friends. Had been friends since we were ten, but the truth was I worried we wouldn’t have anything in common anymore. We’d had fun the few times he came up to Baton Rouge to visit, but that had been mostly reminiscing. Talking about the time he’d stolen Diane Seale’s mom’s panties or when we used fake IDs both with the name Nick Popagiorgio at the Quickie Mart to buy booze our junior year. But recalling the good ole times wears itself out after a while.

We walked to a bar that was only a couple of blocks from the cemetery. Such a New Orleans thing. Cemetery, couple of blocks, bar. Location, location, location, right? Who doesn't want a drink after a visit to the dead?

Doug didn't say much on the way. He seemed preoccupied, had this hazy look about him, like he was lost.

When we got to the bar, we started out reminiscing. For half an hour we told stories that we'd shared a dozen times before. Stories we'd named. Rake Night—when our friend Dick had gotten mad at me for drinking too much of his parents' booze and chased me with a rake. Levee Cop Incident—when Doug and I were caught being out past curfew by the Levee Police. The cop wanted to haul us in, but we lied and said our friend's house was on the nearest street, and that I'd lost the key he'd given me and we were killing time until he got back to let us in. Technically, we'd been in at curfew Doug said and then casually asked if the cop knew his father, Sergeant Clement. After the cop left, we hid in Doug's car until the sun came up and curfew ended.

I feared I'd been right—that we had nothing in common any longer. Doug didn't even seem too enthusiastic about the old days. He still had that lost look.

But then the subject changed. "You ever heard of Eva Cassidy?" Doug asked matter-of-factly after swallowing a swig of beer. His whole demeanor changed.

The question surprised me.

Eva Cassidy was a singer. No relation to David Cassidy—in genetics or musical style. She was an obscure folk/soul singer with an incredible voice. Deep and rich, but somehow still soft and tender. She could belt notes out or whisper softly, and either way she made you feel her singing. She got some recognition for her version of Sting's "Fields of Gold," but she died

before she could enjoy it. Bone cancer, I think. But she definitely wasn't an artist I pictured playing on Doug's iPod.

"Yeah, she could really sing," I said, trying to keep the surprise from creeping into my voice. I remembered working out with Doug in high school. I attempted to reconcile the fact that a guy who listened to AC/DC while wearing a Black Sabbath T-shirt with no sleeves as he curled fifty-pound dumbbells and kissed his biceps, knew about Eva Cassidy. It didn't fit.

"She was my Mom's favorite singer. That song, 'Say Goodbye,' my Mom used to listen to it all the time. I acted like I hated it. Would tell her it was too girly. But I couldn't help but like it. I mean, her voice, you know? It sounded true."

I remember sitting there pleasantly surprised, grade school clichés about books and covers running through my mind. Maybe Doug and I still did have things in common. And he mentioned his mother. He never talked about his real mom. I think he'd only mentioned her to me twice before. The day I met him—after the playground incident—when he told me about her necklace. And when he told me how she died. Also cancer.

Maybe there was more to him than I ever realized. The thought of a person, any person let alone Doug, surprising me after knowing him for eleven years was refreshing.

*

Matt can give a little too. He catches Doug in the ribs, but Doug rolls with the punch. Blood is still dripping from Matt's nose. I see a spot trickle down his face, fall to the wet pavement and then disappear. Screams come from the crowd surrounding the two. I scan their faces. Fear. Glee. Worry. Bloodlust. The two fighters circle each other for a couple of seconds, and then Doug rushes at him like a linebacker. He gets Matt on the ground. It will be over soon.

I didn't recognize the kid. He must have been new to the playground. But I had been in his situation before. Scott Grant and Phil Olmas had been terrorizing the playground since I was seven. For the previous three years. So when I saw Phil locking the kid's arms and Scott punching him the stomach, I had to do something.

But I didn't know what. Scott and Phil were two years older, and the physical differences between my ten and their twelve were similar to those of a bantamweight and a heavyweight. Even if the kid they were picking on was tough, there was no way we could take on both of them without getting roughed up.

I scanned the playground looking for something I could use to my advantage. And then I saw it. On the outside wall of the adjacent gymnasium was a hose.

I ran over and turned the nozzle, which was difficult as my hands shook. I bent the hose into a "V" to cut off the water. I didn't want Scott and Phil getting wet prematurely and foiling my plan.

I snuck up like a Navy Seal, getting close enough to spray them, but far enough away so that I would have ample time to escape. My speed was a decided advantage. Scott and Phil were big, but they were lumbering, offensive-line big. I might have been small, but I was fast. I just couldn't let them catch me in the first hundred yards, and then I was home free. I heard Phil say, "Just give us the necklace, you stupid fuck."

"Fuck you, dickface," the kid shouted back. He had spunk. Scott punched him in the stomach again, doubling the kid over. I had to make my move.

I straightened the hose and aimed right at Scott. The built-up water pressure made the water surge out, and it hit Scott in the center of his back with a forceful slap. I moved my aim to Phil and hit him right in the face. Scott turned around, his eyes wide with surprise.

They didn't take long to recover. Scott and Phil charged at me, forgetting about the kid on the ground. "Run," I yelled at my newfound ally.

I held my ground for a second, aiming for a final shot at Scott's groin, then took off running. I ran as fast as I could, Scott and Phil's loud and vivid descriptions of what they were going to do to my face and ass spurring me on. I kept running, feeling more confident as I heard their steps become heavier and less frequent.

They gave up after a few blocks, and I ducked behind a dumpster to catch my breath. I hid there, basking in my victory, until I thought it safe enough to head home.

I was still wired on the walk home, so when I heard someone yell, "Hey you," I almost took off again. But when I looked back, I saw that it was the kid Scott and Phil had been beating up. I waited for him to catch up.

"Thanks man. They were trying to get my mom's necklace," the kid said as he shook my hand. "My name's Doug Clement."

*

Doug's wailing on Matt's face now. Left, right, left, right. Tiny specks of blood fly off his fists and smear back onto Matt's face. Some of the crowd starts walking away, thinking that the fight is over. I scan the faces that remain. They look disgusted. I imagine what Millie would say. Something about a disgusting display and a dare to defend Doug now. I catch a glimpse of Doug's eyes. For a moment, I think about Scott Grant. I've seen the look before. He's fucking gone.

*

"You think it's cool to hook up with my girlfriend, Peppinger?"

I cursed myself for being so stupid. Susie Westerfield was the hottest girl I knew. She

was a junior. I was only a sophomore. She was also Scott Grant's girlfriend. Scott Grant, the very same playground bully I had sprayed in the nuts five years earlier. He had only gotten worse with age. Scott, who had become a low-rate drug dealer after his bully-buddy, Phil, got shipped off to boarding school. Scott, who once punched a kid for eyeing his car. Not even touching it, just looking at it. Susie Westerfield was off limits.

But when the hottest of the hot Susie Westerfield came on to me, she didn't seem off limits. She seemed more like she didn't have limits. So I hadn't thought about crazy Scott. I hadn't thought about anything except her juicy lips, big breasts, and tight ass. Granted, I spent a lot of my time thinking about Susie's lips, breasts, and ass—I was fifteen—but when she had put them right in front of me, my brain couldn't function enough to think of refusing, much less verbalize that sentiment.

But now, Susie's lips, breasts, and ass hardly seemed worth it. Scott had found out, probably from Susie herself, and he had me cornered outside the back of the movie theater. Of course the two years were still between us, but the physical difference had narrowed to middleweight against heavyweight. I might not win, but I wouldn't get beaten into a coma. Still I sensed this was different. I knew he wasn't going to fight fair. I half expected Scott to pull out a knife and try to gut me.

I stared at him, wondering if denial was the right card to play. He seemed pretty sure that we had fooled around. I didn't want to make matters worse. I would just fight as hard as I could, get out as fast as possible and hope to escape with my vital organs intact.

“I'm gonna beat the ever-living shit out of you.”

I scanned my surroundings. Nothing. I longed for a hose, a head start, and a dumpster to hide behind. I thought about yelling, but all the security guards patrolled the front of the theater.

If they heard me, Scott could still do serious damage by the time they got here. And even if they got there in time, then I could look forward to watching my back for the foreseeable future. No, my best bet was to fight. I squared my shoulders and raised my fists.

“Are you fucking serious Peppinger?” He smiled, and I saw his snaggletooth pinching his bottom lip. Maybe I could knock that thing out.

He started moving forward. I took a deep breath and prepared my body for pain. I figured hitting him first was my best option. If I got lucky, I could knock him out. I steadied myself, waiting for the right moment. His eyes were full of hatred. I got the feeling the hatred wasn't all because of Susie Westerfield, like it wasn't even me he really hated. His father maybe? Mother? It didn't matter the cause; that hatred was headed right for me.

I threw a right cross with as much force as I could. My initiative caught him off guard, but he reacted quickly and the punch only partially landed. It moved him back, but he was far from knocked out.

And then I was gasping for air. He caught me in the stomach. I couldn't even see the punch coming. I felt it though. And I felt the next one as it landed on my cheekbone. I threw another right, blindly and wildly. It hit and for a second thought I might have him. But then a punch to my ribs sent me to my knees.

I tried to scramble back to my feet, but I couldn't breathe. I waited for Scott to pounce. But the pounce never came. At least not on me.

Someone came bolting in from the side and tackled Scott to the pavement. I scooted out of the way, trying to make out who had just saved me from a severe beating. Scott and the guy rolled around, until the tackler was able to get on top of him. It was Doug.

Doug had been more successful at closing that physical gap. He'd bulked up to

heavyweight status through a strict diet of protein shakes and a steady dose of the gym. Once Doug got on top, it wasn't much of a fight. He hit Scott two or three times in the face. Broke his nose. Then he was off him. Scott stayed on his back, spitting up blood.

"I'm not ten anymore, asshole. And you don't have your butt-buddy to gang up on me."

Scott gurgled something through the blood and spit and then slowly sat up. He eyed Doug and then kneeled forward, rocking on the balls of his feet spitting the whole time. And then he quickly moved his hand to his back pocket. He wasn't quick enough. Doug kicked him in his side and whatever he'd been reaching for flew out his hand and landed harmlessly in the parking lot. Doug kicked him again, and then again, making Scott groan and thrash wildly.

"Enough," I yelled and ran up to stop him. Doug shoved him with his foot once more for good measure, rolling him over face first.

"You ever touch my friend again, and I'll fucking kill you." Doug said. He walked over to the object Scott had been reaching for. A switchblade. I'd been right. And I'd been lucky. Thank god for Doug.

He slipped the knife in his pocket. A trophy he assured me.

*

I rush to Doug and try to push him off of Matt. He swats me away, and I land on my ass a couple of feet away. Doug smashes two more right hands into Matt's face. Matt's boy from the bar has seen enough now, and he rushes in with a boot to Doug's gut. Doug groans and rolls over, narrowly missing the stomp that chases him. His hands are smeared with blood. I struggle to my feet, and look up in time to see Doug taking down the kicker. I think that I'm done with this shit. Doug doesn't need me to look after him. I tried to help, I justify. If he won't listen to me, there's nothing I can do. I figure the worst that can happen is he gets beat up or spends the

night in jail. Either one could be good for him. But both are unlikely. Matt seems done and the new guy is no match for Doug. And Doug never goes to jail. Luck, I guess. Or his dad.

I start walking away, heading back to the bar. Maybe I'll call a cab and hit up Harrah's. Blow off some steam by losing some money. Or maybe I'll call Millie and get her to pick me up. I am going to have to smooth over blowing her off. Might as well do it now. Then I hear someone yell, "Knife!"

*

"You know he's no fucking good." Millie said one night when I told her I was going to meet Doug for a beer. She pushed the hair away from her forehead and curled a lock behind her ear.

"Oh, he's not that bad."

Millie Finn was my sometime girlfriend at LSU. One of those relationships that never seemed quite right, but I kept rekindling. Neither of us could stand being alone, and there was a comfortable familiarity between us. But after college the dynamic changed. I began thinking of her not just as a backup plan, not just as a person to relieve loneliness. She was something more.

The biggest problem we had now was that Millie hated Doug.

"Really?" She pushed at a piece of chicken in her salad with her fork, inspecting the lettuce underneath. She picked up a shred that wasn't up to her standards and placed it on her napkin.

"Yeah, really."

"He still fight a lot?"

"Not that much." Doug's fighting had always bugged me. But it wasn't like he would just wail on people for no good reason. He had an overactive sense of justice and a quick temper. If he ever saw someone weak getting picked on, that was it. He was fighting the bully.

Just didn't know when to leave well enough alone. Didn't understand when he became the thing he hated. But shit, I had benefited from his fists. I might be dead if it weren't for Doug.

And I couldn't just ignore that I'd been friends with him for twelve years. We'd been inseparable through high school.

And I couldn't just forget how much of a prick his dad had been. Doug always came over to my house when we were kids. Once, I told my dad that I was worried Mr. Clement abused Doug. He'd be bruised up from time to time. But Doug never told me specifically, and he changed the subject if I tried to bring it up. Plus, Mr. Clement was a cop. That was that.

And I couldn't overlook that he'd lost his mom, and that his stepmom treated him like a nuisance, not a person. I couldn't just suddenly act like I didn't know him, like I hadn't been hanging out with him again ever since that day in the cemetery. Close to a year ago.

I knew at some point Doug had to move past all the crap and get control of his anger. And I urged him to get help, maybe therapy. But he always laughed it off. Part of me hoped he would grow out of all the fighting. But I couldn't turn my back on him because he had issues. I just couldn't.

"Well, I wish you'd stop hanging out with him. Stick with people like him and they'll get you killed. Look what happened with you and Jake."

I got a flash of Jake Rain's bruised face and his bloody lip. My stomach lurched. "That wasn't Doug's fault."

"I know he egged you on. You wouldn't have done that without encouragement." Millie looked at me with the same disapproval that she had when she found out about the fight. The disgust and anger had faded, but there was still disapproval.

"I was defending you. I remind you of that. And you gave me enough shit for it when it

happened. Six months ago.” I looked at her sternly.

She responded with a sigh, and I knew she wanted to tell me that she could defend her own honor. But I was glad she didn’t. I didn’t want to rehash the argument.

“Come on, Millie,” I said. “Doug’s had it pretty rough. I mean his dad wasn’t exactly a positive influence. Doug’s a good guy. You’re starting to sound like my mom.”

“Well, she has a point.”

“I’m telling you, Mill. He’s not all that bad,” I said. “He needs to control his temper, but he’s not a bad person. He’s loyal. That’s more than you can say of other people.”

I meant what I said—to a degree. Doug had a temper and was way too quick to use his fists. But he was as good a friend as I’d ever had. And we did have things in common. We both liked Eva Cassidy and Jeff Buckley, Jim Morrison and Kurt Cobain. And Doug was smart. He read the books I suggested and had insights that I hadn’t thought of. He surprised me.

“You know he sells drugs don’t you,” Millie said. “Probably beats up school kids that can’t pay him too.”

I laughed. “You’re delusional. Doug doesn’t even smoke pot.”

“So what, just because he doesn’t use, doesn’t mean he doesn’t deal.” She looked like a concerned parent. I could practically hear my mother giving her serious, be-careful-what-crowd-you-run-with speech.

“Okay, I’ll bite. How do you know that Doug is drug dealer?” I asked. Her gravity had allowed a tiny seed of doubt to creep in.

“Tonya’s boyfriend’s brother told Tonya that he bought eight balls from Doug.”

The doubt fell out. “So let’s call the *Times-Picayune* and print that shit up. Tonya’s boyfriend’s brother, the cokehead, said he bought some eight balls off Doug. Must be true.”

“Fine. Don’t listen to me. Or your mother. But I’m telling you. He’s going to get you into trouble.” She turned her attention back to her salad—pushing and inspecting, inspecting and pushing.

Right then, I got the feeling that one of my relationships would be over soon.

*

Before I even think about what I’m doing, I sprint back toward the fight. I immediately feel guilty for leaving Doug with some psycho knife-puller. As I run my eyes scan the crowd for shiny metal, but I don’t see any knife. Doug is on his feet, and I mostly see his back. His arms are concealed in front of him. Matt rolls onto his side, and the guy who kicked Doug struggles to a knee. Blood drips from the corner of the kicker’s eye. I focus on the three of them and try to figure out what the fuck is going on.

*

Jake Rains was being an asshole. Jake and I had never particularly gotten along, and we usually stayed out of each other’s way. He had hooked up with Millie a while back; she and I hadn’t been together. But that night he was talking shit about her. I don’t know what set him off; he was probably blowing off steam because Millie had dropped him to start up with me again.

Doug happened to overhear Jake talking to his pals. Jake told them that Millie Finn was a five-cent whore who gave a decent blow job. But he was better off without the skank.

“Fucking hit this bastard, Pepps.” Doug said. “You can’t let him talk about her like that.”

I wanted to hit the bastard. I had seen Doug fight over some girl numerous times. He’d always been trying to correct some slight or get the girl out of a sticky situation. But I’d never understood how he’d get angry enough to want to hurt the guy so bad. Set him straight maybe,

but not physically hurt him. But when he told me what Jake Rains said about Millie, I got angry. I wanted to make Jake suffer.

I don't remember much of the fight. I couldn't give you a blow by blow. I know that I hit him, but I don't remember the feeling of my fist connecting with his face. I remember getting hit and thinking that it didn't hurt. That was it.

I won the fight, but the thing is, afterward I didn't feel better. Oh, I told Jake he better keep his mouth shut about Millie, but even that wasn't satisfying. When it was over, and I saw what I'd done, when I saw Jake sitting there defeated with a bruising face and bloody nose, all I felt was regret.

I wondered why Doug never felt that. Or if he had and he just kept fighting so much that the regret went away.

*

Doug turns to the side, and finally I see the knife. A switchblade and Doug's the one holding it. But I don't want to believe it. The moment hangs there slowly, letting me focus on Doug's bloody hand gripped around the knife, making me believe what I'm seeing. Most of the crowd is running away.

Matt and the kicker are still standing there. Maybe they are too scared or shocked to move. I am only a couple of feet away.

"Get out of here!" I scream.

Matt and the kicker's eyes get real big, the whites shining in the darkness of the night. They take off before I even finish yelling, and I watch them go. I feel a second of relief.

But at the same time I yell, Doug pivots and slashes blindly. I immediately jump back. I hear my shirt tear and then feel heat in my arm, just below the tricep.

*

A few weeks after Millie gave me the third degree on Doug, he asked me if I wanted to tag along to run an errand.

“Just got a little something to take care of, Pepps.”

He was always cryptic like that. It made me nervous, but I climbed in the passenger seat of his truck and went with him.

“So Millie’s not really a fan of mine, is she?” Doug shifted his eyes to me for a second, before focusing back on the road. He was always direct, but the question still caught me off guard.

“Aww, nah man,” I lied unconvincingly. “She likes you well enough. Just wants me to pay more attention to her. You know how chicks are.”

“Whatever Pepps. She hates me.”

I looked at Doug, not sure if I should continue to try to spare his feelings.

“Not that I blame her,” Doug said, glancing over at me. “I can be a piece of shit.”

The admission startled me. Doug tended to do that, though. “I don’t think you’re a piece of shit, man.”

Doug gave me a crooked, little smile.

I changed the subject. “Hey, you remember Phil Olmas?”

“Scott Grant’s buddy,” he recalled. “What made you think about that prick?”

“I ran into him the other day.”

Doug looked at me, and I saw a flicker of anger. I almost saw his brain turning; I could practically hear a punch landing on Phil’s face.

“Yeah, he actually apologized for being such a prick when we were growing up. He said

he just got caught up in Scott's bullshit."

"Well he should have picked his friends better," Doug said.

I nodded and thought about what else Phil had said. He told me he was working with a financial firm in New York, and was getting married down here next fall. At the time I wondered why he was telling me all that. I thought maybe he was just bragging—once a prick always a prick. But then I thought he wanted me to know that he straightened up.

In Gentilly, Doug pulled into the driveway of a gutted house. We were on a block that wasn't recovered from Katrina. Overgrown lawns, tall weeds and forgotten houses blighted the street.

"What are we doing here?" I asked.

Doug was already getting out of the truck. "Just got something to take care of."

Doug walked up to the abandoned house and knocked a couple of times. The door opened, and Doug disappeared inside.

My mind raced. What the shit was going on? Where was he going? And why were we in the middle of a deserted neighborhood? Maybe Millie was right. Maybe Doug was a coke dealer. What other possibilities were there? There had to be some.

But I couldn't think of any. I tried, but every time I came close to postulating a reasonable theory, I pictured Doug inside the house barking orders out like he was Tony Montana.

Inside I heard a thud.

"Shit!" Doug yelled from inside.

Adrenaline swirled in with my paranoia, and I got out of the truck. My heart pumped as I backed away from the house ready to take off down the street.

The door flew open, and Doug came limping out.

“Motherfucker,” he yelled.

I thought for a moment that he’d been shot. But there hadn’t been a gun shot. A silencer?

“Shit, that hurt,” Doug said.

I took a deep breath and looked Doug over. He wasn’t bleeding.

A small Hispanic man came out of the house.

“You okay, Doug?” the man asked.

“I’ll live,” Doug replied. He turned and looked at me. “Fucking support beams fell down. One caught my toe a little.”

I did not reply. I was still a little stunned. Doug didn’t notice.

“Wanna give us a hand in here?” he asked me as they walked back into the house.

I followed them in. No one else was in the house. There were no people in hazmat suits and gas masks cooking drugs. Just a lot of timber.

So I helped without saying anything, silently cursing myself for jumping to conclusions.

After we left, Doug explained that he was fixing the house up with Alex, hoping to flip it. They had just gotten the new support beams in, and Alex wanted his okay.

I felt like a jackass.

*

I look down and see blood flow down my arm. I clutch my arm and fall down to the wet pavement. My jeans suck up the wetness underneath—I am a human sponge.

My arm is throbbing now. I try not to focus on the pain. Instead, I look at the blood running over my hands and down my forearm before it drips off my fingertips and hits the

ground with a tiny splat.

I look up from the blood that is spilling out from between the creases of my fingers and see Doug just standing there, blood on his hands. He's not much better than Scott, I realize. A streetlight shines on him, and it's as if it exposes something in him. He drops the switchblade, and it falls into a puddle on the pavement, creating small waves in the water.

I remember what Millie said. He's going to get you in trouble.

I think about Doug, about everything I knew about him. About his shithole dad. His mom dying. Things that weren't his fault. I remember him saving my ass, maybe my life.

Fuck Susie Westerfield, I thought. That had started the whole thing. Doug had become a legend after he beat up Scott Grant, and he'd done so to protect me. Nobody even looked at me funny after that. I was friends with Doug Clement.

I remember him picking up Scott's knife. Just a trophy, he'd said. I wonder how long he'd been carrying it. Had he lied to me the whole time? Had I ever known him at all? People had always told me he was a bad egg. Good for nothing. I never saw that.

I look at the knife resting in the puddle. The blood, my blood, swirls with the dirty water, and the image startles me. Not because of the blood, not because I got hurt, rather because of the dirty water mixing with it.

What else has he hidden? How dirty is he?

"Get out of here," I say still looking at the puddle. I scoot over to the knife and kick it into a drain. It splashes when it hits the bottom. The sound echoes for a few seconds and then fades.

I hear wailing sirens. Doug and I just look at each other. For a second I think he is saying something, but I realize the voice is in my head.

Well he should have picked his friends better.

“Get out of here,” I tell him again.

He doesn't say anything, but he turns and runs. I close my eyes and listen to his footsteps grow distant.

I doubt he'll call me again. I hope he won't. And if that is the case, it will mean that at least one of us has learned something.

When I open my eyes, he is gone.

One Night at Rooster's

Jasper Collins took a swig of his Abita Amber. He didn't swallow right away; instead, he held the beer in his mouth for a bit, enjoying the bubbles as they tickled his tongue and fizzed on his teeth.

It had been a good week. He was keeping up in law school at Tulane, and he helped track down a key witness for one of his dad's cases. Plus, Susan had told him she would probably stop by Rooster's to see him. They had been flirting for the last few months, and he genuinely liked being around her. He was thinking that if tonight went well, he might set up a more formal date. He hadn't thought about going on a real date in a while. Been too busy, he told himself.

Jasper debated for a moment whether he should pay cash for his beer, but then thought he should keep it for the inevitable cab downtown. He threw down his credit card on the beer soaked bar then turned to survey the place.

Rooster's was just a dinky neighborhood bar that his cousin Tom owned in Old Metairie. Jasper didn't know what made Old Metairie old, besides the old money feel most of the suburb had. He lived across the neighborhood divide, in plain Metairie. He thought that the whole divide was pointless anyway because, if any out-of-towners asked, he just said he lived in New Orleans. His friends in Old Metairie did the same thing.

The bar drew a mixed crowd. The recently-out-of-college kids like him, came because, well, because Tom was recently out of college. But the bar also attracted a much older crowd. The Old Metairie Drunks. Guys with a lot of money, who hated their wives and came to drink themselves stupid, impart their wisdom to the twentysomethings there, and perhaps ogle some

young women. Problem was, that most of time, there were no young women to be found. In fact, the regular patrons—young and old—jokingly referred to Rooster’s as Cock’s.

But Jasper liked Rooster’s. He liked that it was close to where he lived and that his cousin owned it and let him crash on a couch in the back if he got too drunk to drive. He even liked the Old Metairie Drunks. They were funny, and they made him feel good about himself. He just didn’t want to end up like them.

Jasper took another swig of beer, again savoring it before swallowing. He felt good. He was glad it was Friday. He was ready to unwind, to get a little drunk and have a little fun. He spotted Tom drinking a beer at the middle of the bar and walked over to join him.

“What up, Tom?”

“Hey cuz. Good to see you out and about.”

Jasper felt a hint of concern in Tom’s voice. In fact the “good to see you,” sounded more like “hope you’re doing better.” Undoubtedly referring to Colleen. Jasper changed the subject.

“You getting a decent crowd in here tonight?”

“Fuck, well I need it. Damn bar is going to break me.”

Jasper nodded knowingly. He wasn’t sure how well Rooster’s actually did, but Tom had been saying the place was going to break him for the last two and half years. Jasper figured the first six months of the business must have been great.

“This band should bring some people in here,” Tom continued. “They play that emo shit. Not my cup of tea, but supposedly they have a healthy female following. It’ll be nice to have some tail in here.”

“Maybe they’ll spend some dough.”

“Doubt it. Kind of a younger crowd. They’ll probably tip for shit. You getting spicy

tonight?” Tom asked with a sly grin.

Jasper enjoyed when Tom asked if he was going out after starting the night at Rooster’s. He never did it the same way. It was always, *You getting wild tonight?* Or *Getting you that go out?* Never a simple, *Doing anything after this?* *Getting spicy* was a new one.

“Why not?” Jasper answered. “It’s Friday.”

“Good man. Want a shot?”

Jasper nodded. Why not?

*

Three beers and two shots later, Jasper wasn’t regretting his drinking decisions, but he was feeling a little unbalanced.

The band apparently had quite a following because the bar was getting pretty crowded. Tom had been right about forecasting the gender as well. Cock’s was not living up to its nickname.

Leave it to a band to bring in some girls, Jasper thought. He wondered what it was about girls and bands. Groupies. Band-aids. Whatever you called them, there were always girls hanging around bands. And the guys didn’t even have to be good looking. Mick Jagger was downright ugly. Rod Stewart looked like a drag queen. Or vice-versa. Even the newer bands, with their hair strategically covering one eye-shadowed eye in some lame attempt for them to seem dark and mysterious. Jasper didn’t get it. He thought talent was attractive, but only to a certain point. Aretha Franklin could sing her ass off, but that didn’t make Jasper want to sleep with her. At some point there had to be a physical attraction. He knew guys were into looks more than girls. Even so he couldn’t really get the whole band obsession. Maybe girls were attracted to the freedom. Guys in a band seemed to do whatever the hell they wanted. Jasper

understood that attraction. But he remembered someone telling him that the first thing a girl did after getting involved with a guy in a band, was to make him quit the band. So why did they bother? Jasper didn't understand the inner workings of the opposite sex, and he didn't pretend to.

Tom introduced the band very matter-of-factly, just around midnight. Undoubtedly some genius in the band picked that time. Their name was *The Midnight Cutters*. Jasper tried not to laugh when they came out onto the tiny stage—all black hair and eyeliner. But he was pleasantly surprised when they started to play. The lead singer was actually pretty good. Their songs were a little depressing, but at least the guy could sing. And Jasper could see why they attracted such a large female crowd. The lead singer was a good looking guy. More Gavin Rossdale or Michael Hutchence than Art Garfunkel or Bob Dylan.

Jasper slowed his drinking pace and listened through their first few songs. Susan sent him a text message saying she was running late and wouldn't get to Rooster's till after one. Jasper had wanted to head downtown before then, but he was having a good time. He'd just stay at Rooster's and wait for her.

The Midnight Cutters slowed things up a bit. The girls swooned as the lead singer sang about forgetting himself for a while—Jasper couldn't really make out the words. He concentrated more on the melancholy of the keyboard. It made him think of the rain that had fallen earlier that day. He closed his eyes and let it wash over him.

When he opened them back up, he wished he hadn't. Because when he opened his eyes back up, the first thing he saw was Colleen Pomes walking through the front entrance of Rooster's.

Colleen Pomes. Jasper was confused, a little angry, when she walked in. She hated Rooster's. She had told him so more than once. *Why do we have to go to Rooster's?* she'd ask. She knew he still hung out there. Why was she at his bar? Of course, she had moved to Old Metairie. He had even driven by her apartment after they first broke up. But he stopped doing that. She hadn't called the cops on him, or put out a restraining order; he just stopped. He moved on.

She was wearing a slinky, white dress that made her look glamorous like the classic actresses from Old Hollywood. Like Audrey Hepburn or Grace Kelly. She looked out of place in Rooster's. She hugged a couple of girlfriends in a big theatrical way. Jasper doubted she even knew most of them. But that's how she was. Then she made her way to the bar.

What was she doing here?

He'd heard she'd been dating. But he hadn't heard one particular name. He hadn't really wanted to know. He'd know if it was somebody who came to Rooster's though.

For a moment, their eyes met. Jasper tried to keep his face as stoic as possible. Colleen simply gave a little smile and went back to her friends.

Collins and Colleen. That was how their friends had referred to them. *Here come Collins and Colleen. Have you seen Collins and Colleen? You know who is the cutest couple? Collins and Colleen.* And here they were at Rooster's. Collins and Colleen. Except not.

Jasper watched her intently, and he knew she could tell he was watching. But he couldn't stop. She was laughing with her girlfriends at the other end of the bar. She held her drink the same way. Vodka and tonic, unless her tastes had changed. Maybe they had. She could be drinking gin. He hadn't seen her in a while. How long had it been?

She definitely held her drink the same way. Loosely in her hand just above her breasts, and she turned it unconsciously as if it were a pendant or a cross hanging from a necklace. He

used to love how she did that. He used to love her. Used to.

He could see her watching him also. She wasn't staring like he was. But she would glance over every once in a while.

He was determined not to fold. Let her come to him.

*

He saw her walking toward him, and his muscles tensed. A sinking feeling dropped inside him, like he had fumbled a crystal vase and could do nothing but watch it fall and wait for the crash. He wondered if that feeling had been hiding in him since they broke up. He hadn't been pining for her. Not for a while anyway. He had moved on. But as she stood in front of him, he missed her, wanted her—felt that he needed her.

“How are you?” she asked.

The question was innocent enough. But he didn't feel the innocence. He barely even heard her speak. His mind was busy racing. A barrage of images. The pink robe she used to wear when she got out of the shower and how it accented her flushed, rosy skin. Her thin, delicate hands as they tousled his hair. He couldn't help but picture her naked body curled next to him. He could see that little constellation of freckles that highlighted her left shoulder blade. He used to connect them with his fingertips.

She smelled the same. Lilacs. At least that's what she told Jasper it was, once, long ago. The scent could have been any flower, and he wouldn't have known the difference. But it didn't matter. He loved it.

“Fine,” he managed to say despite his overactive brain. He wanted to hug her, but he stopped himself. She reached out and touched his shoulder, patting it lightly like a person does to encourage a child. That-a-boy. Jasper thought her hand lingered there, and he felt the room

spin.

He remembered when they went out to the lakefront one night, and he held her as they lay in the grass and listened to the waves of Lake Pontchartrain. She told him that she loved him and that she wanted to be with him forever. They quickly made love right there, right in the grass, finishing just before the cops showed up. One of the policemen smirked at them, as if he knew what they had been doing moments earlier, but he said nothing, and the officers went on their way. The cops were too concerned with unruly teenagers drinking up and down the lake to care about a couple necking. Colleen laughed after they left, excited from their close call. Jasper caught his breath and told her it wasn't funny. They could've gotten in trouble. She stared at him, kissed the tiny scar on his chin, and told him he was cute when he was scared. He forgot the close call, the nerves. He felt free that night, like he could do anything and anything could happen. Colleen made him feel that way. And Jasper remembered thinking that Colleen Collins would sound pretty nice.

“So what are you up to these days?” Colleen asked.

Another perfectly reasonable question. Just making small talk. But Jasper wasn't sure how to answer. Colleen had another way of making him feel—like he didn't measure up. That feeling of having the ability to do anything had shifted to an expectation of something great and exciting. The only thing that had changed since they broke up was that he started law school. A solid accomplishment. Great even. Not that she would see it as such. Law was too mundane for Colleen. He felt she wanted him to join the Peace Corps and travel the world. Or backpack through Europe, getting jobs teaching English when the money ran out. Plus, he still had that same job at his father's law firm—a glorified secretary/girl Friday. And he had moved back in with his parents. Not because he had to, just to save money. He wasn't unsatisfied with his life,

but he doubted Colleen would be impressed. Did that bother him?

“Same old shit,” he settled on. He almost corrected himself. Colleen hated when he cursed. A strange trait, especially since she was unbridled when it came to most other aspects of her life. She liked sex in public, driving fast, and making fun of oddballs while people watching. But if you dropped an F-bomb in front her, she became chaste and holy. He reminded himself that it wasn't his problem anymore.

“I've sold some paintings. Might be close to getting my own show.” She smiled and Jasper felt lost in the mix of booze and beer he'd consumed.

He didn't know whether to feel happy for her or not. She was a talented artist; at least Jasper thought she was. Not that he knew much about it. But he had always supported her, and he used to have this image of standing in the gallery after her first show. She would thank him for being such an inspiration, and everyone would acknowledge his support and sacrifice with head-nods and pats on his shoulder. Not that he had ever given up much for her. Just helped her buy supplies and introduced her to some interested collectors. Nothing others hadn't also done. But it had been his fantasy, and for a while he'd thought it might actually happen.

Now the thought of running into one of her works was just a reminder that she didn't need him.

“Good for you, Colleen.” It was the first time he had said her name out loud in months. It felt strange coming off his lips, like he had bitten into a peach after not eating one for a long time. The taste surprised him.

“Thanks.” She looked him in his eyes.

He wasn't sure if she had been doing this the whole time, but Jasper was suddenly aware of it. It was as if she was searching for something. What did she want? Forgiveness? To see if

some hint of a connection was still there?

Jasper had heard she was fickle. That she moved from guy to guy like a bee moving from flower to flower. Her unbridled nature supported the theory. But he didn't believe it. Didn't want to believe it. How could she be? She was so in to him. So interested and caring. She did little things like DVRing his favorite shows even when he didn't ask. Or leaving the last piece of chicken even though he could tell she was still hungry and would be rooting for more food an hour later. The months flew by, and by the time they hit the year mark, Jasper had all but forgotten about the rumors. Then all of that interest, all of that care, just went away.

Jasper had suspected that toward the end she was seeing someone else. She had denied it. He quit bringing it up. But she pulled away for someone or something. She didn't do the little things anymore.

She started complaining that he never had time for her anymore. But he spent most of his free time with her. She said all he cared about was getting into law school and how completely unoriginal that was. Everybody's a goddamned lawyer, she'd said. Why couldn't he do something else? Something exotic and adventurous, he assumed.

He told her he wasn't sure what he was going to do, but a law degree never hurt.

He'd end up just like his dad, she said. Staying in New Orleans for the rest of his life and getting rich off other people's misfortune.

He reminded her that his dad wasn't an ambulance chaser, that his firm helped a lot of people. But she didn't seem to care.

And when she looked at him, he didn't feel like he could do anything anymore; he felt like he was expected to do something more. She needed him to be freer, to be more original. Something he didn't know how to do without her.

He remembered how she had looked when she broke it off with him. Indifferent. Cold even. She didn't love him anymore. She couldn't help it she said, as if someone had just flipped a don't-love-Jasper-Collins switch in her. Fickle. Jasper had felt the world crumble.

Five and a half months had passed since she flipped that switch. But he had pieced himself back together. He had gotten some focus in his life; he wasn't just working for Daddy as she used to say. He was happy. Happy. Without her.

But now she was in front of him, her eyes searching his, and he felt that he had been kidding himself. He wanted to ask her why she pulled away. How had she suddenly stopped loving him? Because he was too ordinary? How she had just cut the cord? He looked back into her eyes, hoping for some hint of the answers. Hoping for that feeling she used to give him. The possibility, the ability, to do anything.

"How's Tulane? Are you liking it?" She took a sip of her drink, biting down on the tip of the straw with her teeth.

"It's a lot of work, but yeah, I like it." Jasper focused on her lips as they covered her nibbling teeth. He quit thinking about the past and just looked at her standing in front him. There and now. He wanted to kiss her. Just for a second.

"You're going to make a great lawyer, Jasper."

"If that's what I decide to do with my degree. Still not sure."

She looked at him and smiled. Jasper wished he could see into her brain. He wanted to know what she was thinking. He was certain she was biting her tongue. That she wanted to say, "Listen, Jasper we both know you're going to be a lawyer. You're going to stay right here in New Orleans, probably live in Metairie and have a perfectly ordinary life." He wanted her to say it. He wanted her to be mean or bitter. To say something snide or snarky so he could hate her.

So this would be easier.

But she didn't.

All she said was, "Well, you've got time to decide. Besides you're going to be great at whatever you do, Jasper. I always thought that."

Jasper again searched for any semblance of sarcasm. He couldn't find it. She seemed sincere.

"Um, thanks."

"Good seeing you, Jasper. You look great." She leaned in and kissed him on his cheek then turned and left before Jasper could even reply, the scent of Lilacs lingering.

*

The whole thing had taken less than two minutes. But as Jasper watched her float away, hoping that she would come back or at least turn and look at him, he felt changed. Broken somehow.

Jasper walked back to the bar.

"You okay man?" Tom asked.

Jasper ignored him. "Get me a double Crown and Seven."

"So I'm guessing that went well."

"Great," Jasper replied and took the drink almost before Tom was able to set it on the bar.

Jasper took a big gulp and swallowed quickly. He didn't let it linger in his mouth.

"Want me to kick her out?" Tom offered.

"No." He took another gulp. He thought about doing something provocative. Using Susan to make Colleen jealous. It could work. She should be there soon. He could snuggle up to Susan, and whatever reasons that Colleen had for leaving him would evaporate, and she would fall back in love with him, only by then Jasper would have realized that Susan was the right girl

for him, and they would live happily ever after. Except Jasper Collins knew he wasn't in a romantic comedy.

The Midnight Cutters played for a while longer. The whole time Jasper pounded drinks and watched Colleen. What had happened to him? He had been fine. Happy. He hadn't been pining for her. It wasn't like he had just been sitting at home devising ways to win her back. But seeing her there. Seeing her laugh. Having her smile at him. It changed him.

The music stopped, and the band began packing up their equipment. Except for the lead singer, the Michael Hutchence wannabe. He walked up to Colleen, draped his arm around her, and kissed her on the lips. It wasn't overly affectionate or sexual. There was no unnecessary movie saliva stretching between their lips when they parted, but that kiss, that little peck, stung Jasper. It was a kiss of ownership. She's mine, he was saying with that kiss. Jasper knew Colleen would correct him. I'm not anyone's, she would say. I'm not property. So maybe it was a kiss of partnership.

The singer slid his hand down Colleen's back, finally stopping when it reached her ass.

Fuck that. It was ownership.

The Hutchence wannabe whispered something in her ear. Jasper cringed as she smiled at whatever he said. Why did she have to be there? And just before she was leaving, right before she turned and walked out the door, she looked right at Jasper. She turned and looked right at him. Then she walked out of the bar.

"Forget that bitch," Tom said. "Time for Jager Bombs."

But Jasper couldn't forget her. The beer and booze had his mind swimming. The images of her kept rushing to his head. Pink robe mixing with pink skin. Freckles on a shoulder blade. Sex with waves falling. Cold, stoic face. *She couldn't help it.* It was painful, like a constant

brain freeze from drinking an Icee too fast. Sweat beaded up at his temples, and his stomach knotted.

He had to see her again. He didn't think about why, or even what he'd say. He just had to see her. He walked away from Tom and the bar.

"Come on, man! Forget about it." Tom called out after him. But he kept walking, or stumbling. He stumbled right into Susan, spilling some of his drink on her.

"Jasper, are you okay?" Susan asked brushing the wetness off her shoulder. "You don't look so hot."

But Jasper just stumbled past her. He thought he heard her ask where he was going, but he wasn't sure. He was still thinking that he had to see Colleen. And maybe punch Michael Hutchence in the face.

He staggered outside. His steps felt rubbery and loose, like his legs had either become infantile or geriatric. The night air cooled the sweat on his forehead, and a chill came over him. He was surprised when he heard glass breaking and realized he dropped his drink. A couple was getting out of a truck heading toward Rooster's. Jasper thought they were staring at him. He must have been a sight. Bumbling along like an Old Metairie Drunk. But he didn't care. He was too drunk to care. He kept thinking about Colleen as he walked out to the sidewalk next to the street.

He had to see her.

With each step he took, that thought came back like the constant measured rhythm of a metronome. He had to see her. He had to see her.

Half a mile from Rooster's Jasper's phone vibrated, and he stopped under a streetlight. He leaned against the concrete base of the pole, letting the yellow glow of the light wash over

him. He pulled out his phone, and read the text message. It was from Susan—*Where are you going?*

Where was he going? He looked down the street, the urge to walk down it, to see Colleen still strong. But it was as if the light had given him some clarity, like its glow was lifting the haze of his drunkenness.

Where was he going? Jasper waited, thinking an answer would come flashing to him like a tidy movie montage to wrap up loose ends. He tried to imagine some exotic adventure with Colleen. A scene of them getting married on a beach in Santorini, or walking the Seine in Paris with their French friends. But he knew how the montage would go. A brief scene of him graduating from Tulane. Cut to his wedding with Susan or someone like her. Cut to home-life with 2.5 kids and a white-picket fence. Before tonight he would have been fine with that montage. Now he wasn't.

The light from his phone faded out, and he could no longer read the words. Just hours earlier everything had been fine. Then Colleen had walked in.

He wanted her. Or wanted to feel how she used to make him feel. Full of freedom and possibility. But even if he found her, what could he do? Get his ass beat by sober Michael Hutchence and win her back through pity? Declare his love for her in an inarticulate drunken stupor? Would she come back to him if he promised to chuck his future out the window? If he said screw Tulane, let's go have an adventure. Slowly reality set in. There was nothing he could do.

Still he wanted.

Jasper dropped down in the wet grass next to the sidewalk. He sat there under the streetlight, his jeans soaking up the water, torn between how he felt and what he knew.

I Am Not Jim Grobke

I have absolutely no clue who she is. And not in that “I know you from somewhere, but your name escapes me” kind of way. I honestly have never seen this girl in my life. But she knows me, or thinks she does.

She is a little young, but then again I’m hanging out in Carl’s, an LSU hotspot, so young is to be expected. I graduated three years ago, but my college buddy Timmy begged me to make the hour drive from New Orleans to Baton Rouge to play wingman for the weekend. This really consists of keeping one girl occupied while he flirts with a different one. This weekend he was ping-ponging between Samantha and Ashley.

“I need you, Blake. You got to come,” he said.

It’s nice to be needed.

I am usually more hesitant to make the trip. My ’95 Explorer is slowly creeping toward the junkyard, making 160 miles round trip no sure thing. Timmy tells me I need to be more adventurous. And my life in New Orleans has not been breeding adventure. It has been a pining adventure. Along with a steady mix of drinking at the same watering holes, I spend my time pining for Jillian, my cheating ex-girlfriend.

So here I am, feeling old in a bar I felt old in three years ago. I’m only a few years older than most of the people in here. But there is a big difference between twenty-one and still in college, and twenty-four working a crappy nine-to-five as desk clerk for my uncle’s construction company. Really getting mileage out of my English degree.

Carl’s hasn’t changed much. Same dim, yellow lighting and cracked concrete floor. The same cloud of smoke hovers in the air, irritating my eyes. The guys still wear the same pastel

polos and blue jeans, and the girls still wear tight jeans or short skirts. Except maybe a little tighter and a little shorter. Or maybe I'm becoming a prude.

The mystery girl walks over to me.

"Hey, how the hell have you been?" She gives me a hug, and I squeeze my arms around her skinny waist. She's cute. Short and tan and blonde, and she has a smile that shows the faintest hint of dimples. I briefly wonder why the word "cute" popped into my head, and I am in the midst of formulating a hypothesis about the height of a girl influencing whether she is cute or sexy or gorgeous, when I realize that this hug is lasting a little too long. If it goes on any longer, I'm afraid we might have babies.

We break apart, and I smile in an attempt to hide my bewilderment. Now is an appropriate time for me to offer a reply. "'I'm fine. And you?'"

"I'm really good. I just got accepted into nursing school in New Orleans..."

She continues talking, but I only half listen. I actually imagine a more interesting story for the mystery girl, changing the few details I do hear. She mentions work, and I immediately give her the job of a bus driver. Short, little blonde girl driving this huge vehicle, her small voice squeaking over the intercom. She mentions her sister, whom I turn into an agoraphobic, albino shut-in who can't come in contact with direct sunlight. Poor girl.

She stops talking, snapping me back to the here and now, and I realize that she just asked me a question. Luckily a new song has kicked on, so I pretend that I can't hear her. I cup my hand to my ear and yell, "What?"

She leans in close to my ear and says, "I need some tomorrow."

Some. What the shit is *some*? *Some sex*? *Some drugs*? *Some test answers*? Who the hell is this girl? She places her small hand on my forearm, stretches up on her tippie-toes, and

kisses me on the cheek. “Thanks a lot, Jim.”

A burst of energy runs through me. I feel like I do on Halloween, disguised and not myself. Like I can do something reckless and fun, something out of character. Anything.

“No problem,” I reply.

She bounces away, a tiny ball of energy, leaving me alone with one thought. Who the fuck is Jim?

I watch the mystery girl snake through the crowd, hoping that maybe she will talk to somebody that I know, but she disappears into the ladies’ restroom.

Timmy is in an in-depth conversation with Samantha—or is it Ashley?—in a corner of the dimly-lit bar. Samantha or Ashley looks like a model. She wears skin-tight, dark blue jeans that stretch over her long thighs until they meet the dark brown leather of her boots just below her knees. Sexy. Again I wonder if I think “sexy” because she is tall. Maybe I’m on to something with this. But then I think about diminutive celebrities who derail my hypothesis. Christina Aguilera, for instance. Tiny—but definitely sexy and not cute. Oh well.

I get Timmy’s attention; he gives me this “are you serious” look, which I return with a “yes, goddamnit” look. He whispers in sexy legs’ ear; she smiles and walks off.

“So what’s up?” Timmy is noticeably annoyed. Normally I would feel a little guilty, but I’ve been busting my ass keeping Samantha from Ashley, or Ashley from Samantha, so I really don’t care about Timmy’s feelings.

“You know anybody named Jim? Probably looks a lot like me.”

“Tall, white, and skinny?”

I should retort with a zinger about his salt-n-pepper hair at the ripe old age of twenty-five, but he gets a little touchy about that. “I’m wiry,” I say, “and I’m being serious.”

Timmy actually has a point. When you're generic, you look like a lot of people. Six feet, 170 pounds, brown hair, blue eyes. No identifiable scars or birthmarks. Pretty blah, I guess. I'm just saying, a guy like me wouldn't be fun for one of those criminal sketch artists.

"No, I don't know a Jim. Why?" Timmy's eyes scan the bar. Looking for the model in the boots, probably. But definitely not listening to me.

"Just had a conversation with some girl who thought I was Jim."

Timmy perks up at this, suddenly alert like a Labrador waiting for the duck to fall after the shot. "Was she hot?"

I have the cute/sexy debate in my head quickly and then reply, "Cute."

"Cute like kittens and puppy dogs or cute like you want to see her naked?"

"I don't know, Timmy. Just cute."

"You want to see her naked."

*

I sit in the passenger seat of Timmy's truck watching the digital direction on his review mirror change from north to northwest as the truck winds along the curved road. Timmy comes close to hitting the curb, and I buckle my seatbelt. In a flash, I imagine a brutal wreck. The truck upside down, the windshield smashed. Timmy's chest is pinned against the steering wheel—lifeless. Blood seeps from my forehead onto the dashboard as "Dead Man's Curve" comes on the radio followed by "Last Kiss."

I shake the thought and roll down the window, letting the wind rip through my hair. The air cleans the smell of smoke and booze still lingering from the bar, and for a moment I feel like a new man.

Timmy breaks the feeling. "Hey, so Samantha's following us home for Late-Night. Said

she's bringing some friends."

I am really not in the mood to be surrounded by drunken co-eds, but I urge myself into thinking there might be someone worthwhile, so that I can muster up the proper level of enthusiasm.

"Nice. Which one's Samantha?"

"The one with boots. Why? You think Ashley is hotter?"

Timmy can never decide if he is making the right choice when it comes to choosing between two girls. I decide to mess with him.

"I wasn't going to say anything, but yeah. Ashley is much hotter. Plus she's cool. And smart. Actually, do you mind if I go after her? I think I felt a connection with her when I was running interference for you."

Timmy looks over at me trying to gauge if I'm serious. I like to think that I'm not as superficial as he is, but when it comes down to it we have pretty much the same taste in girls. So this wouldn't be the first time we went after the same one. Timmy usually doesn't mind, probably because he usually gets the girl.

"Whatever, man. You want me to back off?"

I guess he decided I was serious. "Timmy, I didn't even know her name until two seconds ago. I'm just fucking with you."

"I'm cool with it man. I just don't want you sitting around pining for that slut."

Slut is Timmy's new name for Jillian. I feel obligated to defend her, so I shoot Timmy a "watch it buddy" look. But he knows I secretly appreciate his demeaning her.

Timmy smiles and says, "So you don't think she's hotter than Samantha?"

"No, buddy. You're making the right choice."

*

Samantha's "friends" end up being Terri, a bossy, unattractive girl whose hair reminds me of a wet dog. She constantly complains about the lack of eating options in Timmy's apartment. Timmy and Samantha hang out for all of two seconds before they skip off to his bedroom, leaving me alone with the food-whiner. What's worse is that Terri has a gigantic mole on her left cheek that stares at me every time she speaks. I imagine the mole is talking to me.

"I'm pretty freaking big, aren't I?" the mole suggests as Terri asks if we can order some pizza.

"Absolutely!" I reply to both of them.

I feel bad for staring at her mole, but it becomes like laughing in church. A giggle becomes a snort then a guffaw. My eyes are like laser beams as I dial Papa John's. After the fifth ring, I remember that everything in Baton Rouge shuts down at two a.m.

"Sorry. They're closed," I say to Terri and mole.

Terri stares at me, and I fear that I have been too obvious. I shift my eyes away, but she doesn't seem to notice, and her stare continues. Why is she staring at me? I imagine having a similar mark on my face. My friends would say horrible things about it, wouldn't they? Call me Mole-Man behind my back. Jillian probably would never have even talked to me. Poor Terri. But then maybe she doesn't have my self-esteem issues. I hope she doesn't.

"What did you say your name was?" Terri asks. The mole is silent, suddenly mute, as if my concerns over how it affected Terri's life had stripped its power of speech. Or maybe I am just getting used to it.

"I didn't say."

"You're not Jim, are you?"

Jim. Again. I think about pretending to be Jim for a second, and that energy from my role-playing earlier in the night comes back, but I fight the feeling. I figure I might learn more about the guy if I fess up.

“No, I’m not Jim. I’m Blake Atwood. But you’re the second person who has mistaken me for a Jim tonight. Which Jim did you think I was?”

“You don’t know Jim Grobke?”

She asks the question like I’m an idiot for not knowing this guy, which I find pretty humorous considering that she just asked if I *was* Jim Grobke. She can’t know him too well.

“No, I don’t know Jim Grobke.”

“Well, you look just like him.”

“Apparently.” I decide Terri isn’t all that bright. “So who is this guy?”

“Jim Grobke is only the biggest dealer on campus. He can get you anything. Weed, pills, coke. Even heroin. He legally emancipated himself at the age of fifteen. Been on his own ever since. He’s some kind of chemical genius; cooks up his own hybrid drugs. Oh yeah, and he has some inside deal with BRPD so he never gets busted.”

“Did he kill him a bear when he was only three?”

“Huh?”

“Nothing. You ever met this Jim Grobke?”

“Well, um no. But I’ve seen him before. He looks exactly like you. He dresses a little better, though.”

Jim Grobke. So now I know his name and his possible involvement in selling drugs. Makes sense. The “some” that the cute, little blonde referred to no doubt. Energy courses through my veins again. It is stronger this time, more defined with the added elements of danger

and fear. It feels good.

I think I feel my phone vibrate in my pocket, and the feeling flushes out as I quickly check to see if Jillian is calling. It isn't even ringing.

Without the prospect of food, and perhaps because of the disappointment at finding out I am not a drug dealer, Terri decides she wants to go home and asks if I can give her a lift. I am tempted to ask why Samantha can't, but Timmy would be pissed if I cock-blocked him, so I begrudgingly agree.

Once I get back to Timmy's after taking Terri home, I crawl into the bed in the spare room. I hear Samantha's moans coming from Timmy's room. An image of those long legs wrapping around my body pops into my mind, and I wrap a pillow around my head trying block out the noise. This is the closest thing to sex I've had since Jillian.

I think of Jillian.

Jillian. I am in that stage right after you break up with someone where you just really hate her. Of course my hatred might stem from the fact that she left me to get back with her ex-boyfriend. I try not to think about her, other than to hate her. That doesn't always work. Better yet, it rarely works.

She was my first real girlfriend. On some level I think I always knew it wouldn't pan out, but I loved her, and I allowed myself to get wrapped up. I didn't think about the fights or her need for space. I just concentrated on how good I felt when she was around and fantasized about how long we would be together.

Two years, it turned out.

Since the split, I often fantasize about her crawling back to me. I'd hear a knock at my door and there she'd be.

“Blake,” she’d say, “I made a mistake. Josh is a jerk. You’re the guy for me.”

I’d kiss her long and hard and then say, “Fuck off,” and slam the door in her face. For the last couple of weeks that imaginary slamming has been my only excitement.

I am not going to sleep tonight. Strangely, I find myself wondering what Jim Grobke would do in a similar situation.

*

I stick the key in the ignition, turn, and wait for the loud roar of my engine coming to life. Nothing. I wipe the sleep from my eyes and try again. Nothing again. The silence gives me a strange feeling, like watching someone try to scream only nothing comes out. Great. This is all I need. I only got two hours of sleep because of Timmy and Samantha, and now this.

*

Big Ed from Big Ed’s Auto Repair is not really big at all. In fact, he can’t be over five-seven. And he doesn’t strike me as an “Ed.” He has a thin, white moustache that makes me want to call him Marvin. I’m not sure why.

He is a nice enough guy, though. But a new alternator for an old car isn’t particularly cheap. He says he can get to it by Monday. I quickly run through options, briefly thinking about Chester, my normal repair man in New Orleans. Now there is a person whose name matches his looks. His curly red beard just screams “Chester.” But I would need to get the car towed—not a viable monetary solution.

Monday isn’t too bad. I’d have to spend two more days in Baton Rouge. My uncle could handle a day without me. He could probably handle a whole week without me. Really, I didn’t have any urgent matters to get back to. My life is boring. Five days of mind-numbing work sitting at desk answering phones, wasted nights in front of the television, and weekends

hopping bars, getting drunk, and trying to forget Jillian.

“Okay,” I say to Big Ed (Tiny Marvin), “Call me when it’s done.” I shake his tiny, greasy hand and turn to leave, but I can feel someone staring at me. Jillian, I think probably because she swam into my head seconds earlier. But the thought is stupid. Jillian never sets foot in Baton Rouge, and she certainly doesn’t creep around auto shops. The staring comes from a worker. He is young, around my age. Grease smears his tan skin, and he wipes his hands with a dirty rag. And he stares at me.

I glance around hesitantly, like a cautious cat or a lazy dog. He is definitely staring at me. If not for the night before, I might not notice. As it is, I am becoming extra-sensitive to stares.

He walks over to me, still wiping his hands.

“I think my brother knows you,” he says without introducing himself.

Jim Grobke’s name flashes to mind, and those elements of fear and danger overtake the excitement of that wild energy. The first scenario that pops into my warped imagination is that this guy’s brother might not like Jim Grobke. I frantically search his navy blue Dickies for a protruding bulge or a glint of metal—any hint of weapon that could be used to end my existence. I try to find the words, “I am not Jim Grobke,” but I keep imagining a bullet from a small handgun blasting through my forehead at point blank range. The worker doesn’t seem to notice my uneasiness, or he notices and comes to the realization that Jim Grobke is paranoid.

“Frankie Acosta. Remember him? You got him out of a little mishap last year. Remember?”

A flood of relief rushes over me, the image of my splattered brains on the wall behind me fades, and I smile without thinking.

The unnamed Acosta smiles back. And I figure I can sneak out of there without explaining.

“He introduced us not long after that, but I wouldn’t expect you to remember. So you got trouble with your car, huh?”

He turns and looks at my worn and beaten Explorer, no doubt wondering why a successful entrepreneur like Jim Grobke would be driving such a thing. I guess I have to explain this now. “I am not Jim Grobke,” I manage to spit out, barely above a whisper.

He turns back, smiling. “Hey man. I get it. Low profile and all. Probably why you rat around in that thing.” He nods in the direction of my car. “If Frankie was more like you, he wouldn’t have gotten into trouble.”

It takes me a moment to realize that Frankie’s brother doesn’t believe me. I start to say it again, but he cuts me off with a little wave.

“Look, I’ll talk to Ed and get him to discount the labor costs. Not that you can’t afford it, but Frankie would want me to.” He nudges me with his elbow, shakes my hand, and turns to go.

I look down at my hand, and for a second I don’t recognize it. It doesn’t feel like mine. And then before, I know what I’m saying, I blurt out, “How is Frankie? Haven’t seen him in a while.”

I wait for what seems like a full minute, transfixed as nervous energy and anticipation courses through me, binding me to the gravity of the moment. Had I made a mistake? Does he know I’m not Jim Grobke? Brains on the wall.

Frankie’s brother turns around and smiles again, “Moved to Alabama two months ago. Got arrested three weeks ago for...well...for the same thing you got him off for down here. You don’t know anybody in ‘Bama do you?”

“Sorry,” I say “not really my scene.”

He shrugs as if to say, “Oh well,” and tells me he will call me when my car is ready. I turn and walk out, but I don’t use my normal gait. I walk out as I imagine Jim Grobke would.

*

Timmy mentions going back to Carl’s, and although I’m a little apprehensive about running into the mystery girl and getting involved in a drug deal, I don’t put up much of a fight.

“Are you becoming adventurous?” Timmy asks, apparently expecting more of an argument.

“I am adventurous,” I reply, “just not in real life.” I cringe for a moment, surprised I would admit such a thing out loud. I wait for Timmy to say something about just how pathetic this admission is. He doesn’t.

He looks at me like I am crazy but ignores the statement.

The truth is that I am becoming adventurous. Or rather Jim Grobke is making me adventurous. That energy, that sense of being of someone else, someone powerful, someone active, someone...not like me—it’s exhilarating.

*

Mystery girl is here again. Blonde hair and bubbly walk. She sees me staring at her, so I give her a slight head nod as coolly as I think Jim Grobke would.

Maybe I shouldn’t have. She said today, didn’t she? But I said next week. I don’t have any drugs. I think about going out to Timmy’s car and looking for some Tylenol or some pills I could use. I quickly realize that’s a stupid idea. Maybe I should tell her that I am not Jim Grobke, drug-dealing, chemical-genius extraordinaire. I realize I need to stop thinking so much. I am Jim Grobke. I have connections. I mean this girl thinks I have connections. I’ll just tell her

I couldn't get "some" for tonight. She'd accept it. She'd have to.

Whatever she thinks about my greeting, she doesn't take it as an invitation. Maybe she was drunk last night. She is cute, in both the kittens-and-puppy-dogs and the wanting-to-see-her-naked kind of ways. I walk my new walk over to her, but she disappears into the crowd. I stumble after her, shuffling past shoulders and elbows. She exits at the front of the bar, pausing for a second at the doorway to see if I'm following. It takes me a minute to get through the rest of the crowd, but at the exit I am intercepted by Terri and her mole.

She is in a much better mood than last night, acting as if I am one of her oldest friends. She drones on about how sweet I was to bring her home the night before, and how I was different than what she expected. I find this odd. Terri has two friends behind her looking at me with curiosity, like I am a celebrity or slightly deranged. Maybe both.

Then I realize that she must have told them I am Jim Grobke. Trying to look cool in front of her friends. I think about playing along for a second. Terri's the only one who knows the truth, and she certainly wouldn't blow my cover. They would be easy targets, and it would be safe. But Jim Grobke doesn't do easy and safe. I gruffly excuse myself from her presence.

I scan the parking lot quickly and barely see the cute mystery girl vanish among the cars in the farthest row.

"Hey," I call out walking after her, "Where you going?"

She appears in the shadows of two SUVs at the very end of the parking lot where the gravel turns to grass.

"You got it?" she asks. I suddenly feel like I'm in a bad after-school special.

"About that," I say as I narrow the twenty-yard gap between us. "I said next week." I am only a couple of feet away, when she walks behind one of the cars.

“Where you going?” I walk behind the same car.

A fist connects with my jaw and sends me sprawling backwards. Before I can get up the figure attached to the fists is on top of me, wailing away at my face and midsection. Pain boils up. He pins my arms down with his knees and quits punching.

“Carver is taking over.” The figure’s voice is gruff. Disguised maybe. “I suggest you quit making deals and get the shit out of Dodge, because next time you’re going to get more than a beating.”

I try to speak. I want to tell him there has been a mistake. I am not Jim Grobke. I muster only a groan.

The figure gets off me and walks away. He has his arm around the blonde mystery girl. I bleed into the wet grass.

*

I sit in Timmy’s passenger seat, still bleeding as I watch the directions again. North. Northwest. The exhilaration of being Jim Grobke has disappeared, replaced with the physical pain of being Blake Atwood. I feel silly for needing to be someone else so badly. I decide not to think about why. There’s still Frankie’s brother to deal with when Big Ed fixes my car, but I tell myself not to worry about it. I can just send Timmy. No more being Jim Grobke.

Jim Grobke has resources; he has a contact with the police department. He even has a look-a-like to take beatings for him. I am not Jim Grobke.

I roll down my window and let the wind whip over my cuts and bruises. My mind starts to wander. I imagine hearing that knock...Jillian. My phone vibrates in my pocket, but I don’t answer it; I don’t even look at it. I feel the wind on my face. It hurts, but in a good way, a way that shouts “I’m alive!” The knock fades, and my phone stops buzzing. For the first time, in a

long time, my head feels empty. No crazy images, no crackpot theories. No Jillian. I stick my head out of the window, letting the full force of the wind hit me.

“Hey man, you okay? You’re not going to puke are you?” Timmy asks.

“No,” I say, “I feel fine.”

And I do. Better than fine. I feel different. I feel here.

Commitment

Michael walks back into the condo.

“Mary?” he calls out. She doesn’t answer.

He continues into the bedroom, but she’s not there. Then he hears her.

She’s crying in the bathroom. He hears her short bursts of shaky breath and has the strange thought that she sounds like a wheezing kitten. Strange, because he shouldn’t be thinking about how she sounds. He should be thinking about what to do. He has to do something. Say something.

“Mary, you okay in there?” he calls out, but he wonders if his voice sounds sincere.

He imagines her sitting on the cold tile floor, mascara-black tears smearing her face, as she thinks Michael McCabe is an asshole.

He is an asshole. Still, he has to do something.

*

It had briefly crossed his mind to just call the whole thing off. Maybe it was his lack of expertise in the area of breaking up that made him agree to go with her. His previous relationships had all just drifted away like rafts someone forgot to tie to the dock. Or, more accurately, that someone purposely didn’t tie to the dock. He always just stopped calling. He’d like to think he would have answered had Carmella, Ashley, or Stacy called him, but in each instance they seemed to know not to. He justified his cowardice by the fact none of these relationships lasted longer than three months, and he tried to feel that he owed no explanation. Perhaps he didn’t, but it’s still a shit thing to do. They all got over it—got over him. He was still friendly with all three of them, which he liked to think said something about his inherent likeability, but there was also the very

real possibility that they were never really that into him.

Not that he wanted to break up with Mary. She wasn't like the other girls. He liked being around her. They both loved to read. She would write little notes for him in the margins of books she read before he did. Like if a character reminded her of him—*this is so you Michael*—or maybe a silly note or just a little, *I love you*. Sometimes those notes kept him reading books he otherwise would have put down.

So no, Michael wasn't sure that breaking up was the best course of action. But she was getting antsy, and he was getting panicked. When he told Mary he would accompany her on a mini-vacation to her Uncle Murray's condo in Destin for four days, they had been together for a year. His longest by far. Just that scared him. She wanted something more. That scared the shit out of him. And he wasn't sure why. Michael tried to be a good guy. He didn't cheat, he listened to Mary, and he took her seriously. But he felt commitment inching closer and closer to him, and he knew he'd have to make a decision soon. And that also scared the shit out of Michael.

Still, when Mary looked at him with her pale, blue eyes, blue and sad like a faded, forgotten pair of jeans, and asked him to go with her, he agreed. A vacation would be nice.

Michael typed the destination into his Garmin GPS system. From New Orleans to Destin was pretty much a straight shot, but Mary didn't exactly know how to get to the condo, and she didn't like taking chances. Michael thought the precaution unnecessary, but if he refused to use it and they got lost, she would blame him, and a fight would ensue. Michael avoided confrontation.

For the most part the ride was uneventful. Mary slept most of the way, and Michael kept busy listening to music. He liked the way she fell asleep when he was driving. She would drape

her left arm around his neck and run her fingers through the long, curly hair on the back of his neck. It was such an unconscious gesture, but sweet. It made Michael feel good.

Mary had already executed this sweet, unconscious gesture a few times when they were nearing Destin so Michael was in a good mood. As an added bonus he only had to pull over once so Mary could go to the bathroom. Then the Garmin lady started chiming in as the changes in direction became more frequent.

“Do you think the Garmin lady is sexy?”

Michael looked over at Mary, trying to gauge if this was a serious question. He couldn't read her eyes with the current novel she was reading shoved in front of her. Michael Chabon's *Wonder Boys*.

“Never seen her.”

“You know what I mean. Do you think she sounds hot?”

“Based on her voice?” A motorcycle whizzed by him on the left. He had tried to get Mary to go riding with him again for months. He had gotten her on his bike when they first got together, but she thought motorcycles were too dangerous, and she wanted him to sell it. He quit asking her to ride.

“Yeah. Based on her voice.”

“Not gonna lie here. Every time she tells me to take a right and go straight for twenty miles, I get a little excited.”

“Shut up.” Mary laughed her tiny laugh. Measured and controlled, like she was laughing at a funny joke her boss made.

“You asked. I think it's her accent. Where's she from? Wales? Australia? Pretty sexy. You ever hear her say ‘Hard U-Turn.’ That really gets me going.”

“You’re an ass.”

“But you’ve got to remember that it’s just a voice. Remember my buddy, Jojo Simmons.”

“The sex addict?”

“Yep. He developed a crush on Belinda, his favorite phone sex operator, and talked her into meeting him. She had this incredibly sexy voice; at least, she did according to Jojo. Turned out her body didn’t really fit—into anything.”

“She was big?”

“Really big.” He extended his arm forward demonstrating how far Belinda’s belly protruded.

“So what did Jojo do?”

“What do you think he did? He fucked her. Sex addict remember.”

“Would you still love me if I were really big?”

Mary had put the book down and was staring at Michael, waiting and expecting the simple, loving lie all people responded with in similar situations. Michael hated questions like that. Why would she be putting on that much weight anyway? Belinda was huge. He’d seen a picture. Had Mary suddenly developed some life threatening disease that made survival impossible unless she gained more than her current body weight? If Mary put on that much weight, she’d have to love food more than him anyway, which would piss him off, and he’d end up resenting her. He hated the question because if he responded with even a hint of those sentiments, he was an asshole.

So Michael replied, “There would just be more of you to love, sweetie.” Michael thought he cared enough about her to lie, but then he was the kind of guy who inevitably tried to avoid

confrontation.

She leaned over and kissed him on the cheek making his response worth the momentary anxiety the question had caused. He changed the subject and asked what number the condo was.

*

They arrived a little after one. Uncle Murray's condo was nice, but not too nice. Wooden floors, but some nicks. Leather sofas, but worn. Michael liked when places were like that. He didn't feel like he was in a museum and had to be overly careful, but he could still imagine living the good life. The view was all he really cared about. The pretty teal-blue of the Gulf right out the window.

Michael threw his small duffle bag in the closet, made the half-hearted offer to help Mary straighten up the untidiness the previous renters left, caringly kissed her after she said his services would not be needed, and then ran down to the beach. She would spend at least an hour unpacking, spraying Lysol, and situating everything just so. She said she enjoyed tidying, organizing, cleaning. Michael didn't really believe her, but he was content to let her do the work.

She did have some OCD tendencies, so maybe she really did like it. Everything had a particular place. She was very compartmentalized; organized both in life and cleaning. She was conventional and tidy. Michael was a bit more free spirited. They were complementary. He loved taking her to places around New Orleans that weren't in her comfort level. She had nearly died when he took her to Frenchmen Street last Halloween. Mary was from Shreveport, and while she had heard stories about the intensity of New Orleans' revelries, she wasn't quite expecting ass-less chaps and naked women covered in body paint. But she enjoyed herself. Michael enjoyed being the one to bring her out of her conservative sensibilities. And she kept

him from getting too out of control, kept him grounded. The year with her had been a good one.

But the dynamic was changing. Mary was less willing to follow him out on a random Wednesday for absolutely no reason. She wanted to hang out with people she knew. Other couples who went out to dinner and were in bed after the local news. Most of her friends were either married or engaged. Plus her little sister had just gotten married, and Michael always felt weddings were contagious. It's why he conveniently had to go to the bathroom whenever the garter was thrown. Mary had caught on after the second time, so then Michael just went with a drink in one hand and his other hand in his pocket. If she wanted to think about marriage, that was one thing, but Michael wasn't going to catch the garter and have to listen to constant wedding talk.

Michael's bare feet hit the warm sand, and he decided not to worry. He was on vacation. Relationship problems could wait for him back in New Orleans. He found a spot, set down a towel, covered his cell phone with his T-shirt, and sprawled out in the sun. He let the heat bathe him and thought about really important things like how well LSU's new D-Coordinator would have the defense performing next year, and how Craig Ferguson was the funniest Late Night host as well as the least appreciated. Things that he enjoyed thinking about. Things that didn't scare him.

He drifted into states of semi-consciousness, only moving to reposition. Time seemed to slow, but actually it sped up. He lost track. Michael figured he had only been on the beach for thirty minutes, but when he checked his cell phone, he realized he had been out there for an hour. He decided to go for a dip in the ocean then go check on Mary.

When he walked out of the water feeling refreshed, a woman had settled not too far from his towel. From a distance, he thought it was Mary, but as he got closer, the skimpy, white bikini

told him differently. Mary would never wear something so revealing. She had the body for it, but she was too modest. Michael took a good look, studying the woman's curves. The white fabric popped out from her tan skin, making it impossible not to notice her large breasts and her long, shapely legs. What he would do to her if he were single. Assuming of course that she would have anything to do with him. He felt a tug from somewhere deep down, a tug that wanted him to just pick up the beautiful woman and run away to have his way with her like some modern Tarzan. He felt guilty for a moment but quickly rationalized that he was on vacation, so it was okay for him to ogle women in tiny bikinis and fantasize that they secretly wanted him.

By the time he reached his towel, she was reclining in a chair, oiling up with suntan lotion. Quite a sight. Michael quickly sat down, already formulating a plan to drape his T-shirt over his lap should his little Michael decide to say hello.

"Hey there," he said, trying to sound friendly, but not creepy. He shielded the sun from his eyes with his hand and looked at her. She sat directly in the sunlight, her curves disappearing into a dark shadow. She looked like a granite statue of a goddess.

"Hi," she said.

"Here on vacation?"

"Uh-huh," she said. A cloud passed over them and her face came back into focus as she escaped the light. She was striking. Different from Mary. Mary was pretty, even beautiful. But Mary had soft features, friendly features. This woman had a sharp, angular face and thin lips. Beautiful in an alarming sort of way. A way that made him look more than once. She had smooth, tan skin that made Michael think of milk when he added just the right amount Hershey's Syrup. He wondered if she tasted like chocolate.

He was about to ask her a different question when she said, "I love being on vacation.

Don't you? Anything can happen." She looked at him and smiled. Michael reached for his T-shirt.

"Anything can happen," he repeated.

She looked at Michael like he was crazy, and he realized that she hadn't actually replied to him. She hadn't said a damn word, except in the little daydream that had just taken place in his head. Michael thought about burying his head in the sand, but luckily his cell phone rang. Mary wanted to go get food and drinks for the rest their stay. Casually draping his T-shirt in front of his crotch, he walked away from the woman while he was on the phone. Michael was sure that she smiled at him as he was leaving.

*

That night they stayed in. Michael cooked; they watched a movie. It was nice.

Later they had sex. Good sex. Not that the sex wasn't usually good, but that night it was different. A little rougher, more exciting. Maybe it was being in a new bed, someone else's place. Or maybe it was because the woman in the white bikini flashed into Michael's mind right before he came.

When they were done, he told Mary he loved her and rolled over to go to sleep. The sun and sex had drained him. He was exhausted.

Mary sighed loudly.

She wanted to talk about something. And as much as Michael just wanted to go to sleep, as much he wanted to pretend that he hadn't heard that sigh, he knew that if he didn't respond she would keep sighing. Once he had let her go on for close to five minutes. When he still hadn't answered, she punched him in the ass. It annoyed him that she could never just say, "I want to talk." But she definitely wanted to talk; there was no getting around it. So Michael

spoke. "Everything okay? Did you not finish?"

"No, it was great."

He almost wished it was the sex. As tired as Michael was, if it was the sex, he could just jump back on and try again. He was sure it would be less draining than whatever she wanted to talk about. He also knew that it probably wasn't the sex. He had responded the same way to a sighing session once before, and Mary had informed him that it was such a male response. And yet he had responded the same way again, in some vain hope, that by some wisp of a prayer, he was right and would not have to get into an emotionally charged argument before drifting to sleep.

"You don't sound all that satisfied," Michael said

"I'm not," Mary said. Her eyes cast down as if she were studying the floral pattern of the comforter.

Michael sat up and looked at her. Tiny beads of sweat glittered on her temples in the half-light of the night. She frowned.

"You just said it was great."

"Michael, where is this going?"

The question both surprised him and didn't. Michael knew the question had been coming, but her timing threw him. In bed, after sex. Had she been thinking about that the whole time they were fucking? *I wonder if he wants to move in together. Are we ever going to get married?* All Michael had been thinking about was how good it felt inside her. And the white bikini.

"So, it wasn't great?" He couldn't help but make a joke. A part of him still hoped she was joking. She wasn't.

“I’m serious.”

“Do we have to talk about this now?” Michael desperately wanted to bury his head under the pillow and drift into the dark safeness of sleep. No more talk about feelings he wanted to say.

“It’s why I asked you here.”

The admission startled him. Most people went on vacation to get away from their problems. That’s why Michael went on vacation. But she brought him here to discuss them. His problems. Because he wasn’t ready to get married. Because he still thought of himself as twenty-one, even though he was twenty-six. Because he was content not to ask questions. God, he hated questions. He didn’t like asking them, and he hated answering them.

“So you brought me here to discuss our relationship?”

“I just want to know where this is going.”

Where this was going. Ask the fucking Garmin lady, he wanted to say. Couldn’t she just enjoy the ride. Michael had no clue where they were going. Apparently at some point Mary was going to gain over two hundred pounds just to see if he would still love her. Or she was going to ambush him after great sex with questions that made him want to leave a cartoon, Michael-McCabe-sized hole in the wall. That’s where this was going. He took a deep breath.

An image of their first kiss popped into his head. She had been drunk and tasted of cigarettes. They had gone out to eat then headed to a bar that wasn’t too far from his house. Michael had decided on the bar because it was a dive of a place, and he wanted to see if Mary could handle such places. It was practically empty when they walked in. She was on her third vodka and cranberry when an elderly cowboy wandered into the bar and started chatting her up. His face was weathered and wrinkled, and he looked like Scott Glenn. Michael didn’t know

New Orleans had cowboys. He sat off to the side smiling and listening. The cowboy was obviously alone, and not just for the night. He had sad, defeated eyes—almost apologetic, like those of an old mutt’s after it’s done something wrong. Michael felt sorry for him. Mary rubbed Michael’s thigh the whole time she talked to the cowboy as if to assure Michael that she was not flirting or perhaps to keep Michael from getting jealous. It was nice having that hand there. The guy was a little scary looking, but eventually he left. Michael and Mary moved from the bar to a big, brown, leather recliner—the owner was going for a bohemian feel. Mary sat down in Michael’s lap. She ran her fingers through the hair on the back of his neck.

“You’re cute, you know that,” she said softly, drunkenly, into his ear.

“I think so too,” Michael said smiling down at her.

She grabbed the back of his neck, gently pulling herself to him and kissed him. Michael felt the eyes of the bartender on them, and even though he knew the guy had nothing else to look at, Michael became uneasy. His eyes fused them together, instantly making them a couple. Michael thought of the lonely cowboy and wondered if he had been right to feel sorry for him. Mary hadn’t noticed a thing. He realized she could handle the seedy little bar. She just kept kissing him. The first kiss. She had been drunk and tasted of cigarettes, but it had been nice. There was room to grow, things he could learn to appreciate.

“Are you going to answer me?” she asked, jolting Michael from his reminiscence.

Why couldn’t she be like she was that first night? Not expecting. Just being.

“I don’t know.”

“Have you thought about it at all?”

Michael was on vacation. He didn’t want to think about anything. He racked his brain trying to think of something to say that would stop this conversation.

“What do you want from me?” he asked.

“I want you to make a commitment.”

There it was. The dreaded C-word. Michael had joked once to a girlfriend there were two words that should never be said to the opposite sex. They both started with c and ended with t. She told him one day he would change his mind. Michael wasn't so sure.

“I am committed.” He tried not to choke on the words as he said them.

Michael had been faithful. Okay, so he had been fantasizing about the white bikini moments earlier, but that wasn't cheating. He hadn't touched another girl in the year he had been with Mary.

“Just because you don't fuck anyone else, doesn't mean you're committed.”

“Then what the fuck does it mean?”

“Do you even *want* to get married?”

“Oh, Jesus Christ!” Had the room gotten smaller? He was sweating more than he had been during sex. *Did he want to get married?* Maybe in like five years. Thirty-one was a good age to get married. Mary would only be twenty-eight.

“What? Is it so ridiculous that I need to know? What do you want?”

“Have you been talking to your mother again? Is that what this is all about?”

Mary's mother hated Michael. Thought he was never going to get serious, and that he was just stringing Mary along. She didn't like his bike either. Said only criminals and daredevils rode motorcycles, and she never saw him doing any fancy tricks. Michael thought she was a bitch. But she may have been right. Maybe Michael was stringing Mary along.

“My mother has nothing to do with this.”

“Fuck, if she doesn't. Just because your little sister got married, to a douche bag I might

add, doesn't mean you need to get married. Tell her to back off."

"What do you want?" Her tone was soft and pleading, as if she were whispering a prayer.

"We are not having this conversation right now." Michael kicked the covers off and started to get dressed.

"Where are you going?"

Her voice quivered. She was on the verge of crying, and he wanted to soothe her. To tell her everything would be fine.

But he couldn't, because he wasn't sure if he could make it fine. He walked out without saying a word.

"Where are you going?" she called after him again.

Michael wandered down to the beach, letting the night winds whip away his anger. It wasn't Mary's fault. She was just being who she was. She had plans on how to pack her freaking car. He knew that her life was no different. He could just see her life goals listed on a little Post-it in tiny, bulleted handwriting—*Get married, 23yrs old*. He felt it was a little too early to be considering marriage, but he still had to decide. He had to make a decision.

Michael sat there on the beach, digging his toes into the damp sand. The sand collapsed over his feet and made them disappear. From beneath he felt the cold sucking pressure of thousands of small grains, as if he had created a miniature pit of quicksand. When he exerted enough force, his feet easily broke free and back into the night air.

What did he want? Mary was great. Someone told him once that when you find a girl who can put up with your shit, you've found the one. Was it that simple? Was that why he had stayed with Mary this whole time? Was there only one person who could actually put up with

his shit? Did he keep asking himself these questions just to avoid having to answer the original one? What did he want?

He could leave. He could just get on a bus or plane and high-tail it back to New Orleans and just let the relationship float away. Or he could go back up.

Both plans had drawbacks. If he left, he would be leaving all his stuff. Nothing huge, but the new novel he just bought and some of his favorite CD's. The nice dress shirt that Mary bought him, his shoes, and whatever other junk he had brought. And he would be leaving Mary. He would be treating her like something he grew out of or something he forgot. Something replaceable. He owed her more than that.

Or he could go back up. Which would lead to more decisions. If he went back up, he would have to do something, say something. He would have to end it, or he would have to convince her that he wasn't a jackass.

In all Michael's other relationships there was a point when he realized that there was no way in hell that he would wind up with the girl. He would realize that she was no fun. That she was too high-maintenance. That she was too stupid. Too mean. That she hated his juvenile friends. That he hated her juvenile friends. Whatever it was, there was that realization. He would try to imagine his life if he stayed with that person for another year, another month, another week, another day. Nightmares. That's what he would see.

Would Mary still write notes for him in the margins? Would he still find her OCD tendencies cute? What would she start nagging him about after they got married? Would she get fat? Not Belinda fat, but fat. Michael felt his thoughts starting to take that turn, that warped, bad-trip-on-acid turn. He buried his feet deep in the sand, took a deep breath, closed his eyes, and tried to think about exactly what his life would be like with Mary.

But the only thing that popped into his head was the white-bikini woman. That couldn't be a good sign. The woman with the chocolate-milk skin, and the alarming beauty. She would never drag him on vacation to ambush him about marriage. She would take baths with him, wrap her long, tan legs around him, and nibble on the back of his neck as she fed him grapes. She would jump on the back of his hog, and they would go to her mother's, who would love Michael. Hell, she would have saved him the last piece of apple pie. If there was a good game on Monday night, the white-bikini woman wouldn't complain. Nope, she would pop open a beer for him, and give him a blow job while he sat on the sofa and watched.

An old man walked in front of Michael, his old shuffling feet broke Michael from his fantasy. For some reason he made Michael think of the cowboy from the bar where Mary and he first kissed. Michael couldn't see his eyes, but he imagined that they looked the same as that cowboy's. Sad and defeated. He didn't want to end up that way.

That didn't mean Mary was the one. Michael didn't want to marry her because she thought they should, or because her nagging mom did, or because he was scared of ending up alone. He wanted the decision to be his. To be right. He wasn't ready to get married. No way, no how.

Michael took a deep breath and closed his eyes again. He tried to forget about everything. White-bikini girl was just a fantasy. She was only capable of doing what he imagined. The truth was that no one would be exactly what he wanted her to be, or do exactly what he wanted her to do. The white-bikini girl could have been a raging bitch for all he knew.

He thought about Mary as she was. And he realized he had never come to that point where he just couldn't see himself with her. Sure she was a little crazy, sometimes nagging, but so were a lot of girls. She was also kind, and smart, and beautiful. She wrote little notes for him

in the margins of books. She ran her fingers through his hair. She cared about him. And she was upstairs crying over him. She wanted him. He thought about her as she was, with no delusions, no nightmares, no fantasies, and he felt good.

He didn't want to lose her.

Michael ran through his options again, but could see only one. There was no way to avoid the confrontation. Yes, he was on vacation, and the last thing he wanted to do was sit down for hours and talk about where "this" was going, but that was the only way. If he didn't, she was going to walk out on him.

He walked back to the condo, wondering what he was going to do to convince her that he wasn't a complete jackass. He had to do something.

*

"Mary, you okay in there?" he calls out, but he wonders if his voice sounds sincere.

He imagines her sitting on the cold tile floor, mascara-black tears smearing her face, as she thinks Michael McCabe is an asshole.

He is an asshole. Still, he has to do something, say something.

"Mary, I'm sorry."

Her cries slow down.

"Mary, open the door."

"You're an asshole," she mutters between sobs.

"I know," he says. "Just open the door. I like looking at your face when we talk."

He hears the lock click. He takes a deep breath, trying to collect his thoughts. He doesn't know exactly what he's going to say, or even how he's going to say it. But he knows that he cares about Mary. Enough to lie to her when she asks him a stupid question. Enough to

make a decision. Enough to make a commitment.

Michael places his hand on the cold metal knob and waits to see if something will stop him. If some revelation that this is a big mistake will come. But nothing stops him, no revelation comes.

There's only one way to truly find out.

He opens the door.

Beware of Scorpions

I push at the pancakes on my plate with my fork, trying to figure out what happened to my life. How did I get here? I think of that song “Once in a Lifetime” by Talking Heads when David Byrne screams that out.

Well, how did I get here? Letting the days go by.

My wife, Marlene, is talking about her day, and try as I might, I just can’t pay attention. She shovels another pancake on my plate, so I smile and nod, but really I’m daydreaming about what my life could be like. A good-looking, no-nonsense detective who always solves the case and has a beautiful, young girlfriend who is an aspiring singer. Or an up-and-coming lawyer with a hard heart and a huge bank account who sleeps with a hot stewardess.

In this life—the real one—I am an average-looking teacher and a failed writer. I shouldn’t be this old, this overweight. This apathetic. But I am.

I try to remember the last time I was genuinely interested in something Marlene said. Two weeks? Longer? I look at her shuffling around the kitchen in her wild, colorful scrubs—she’s a pediatric nurse, and the kids like the colors, she says—and I honestly can’t remember.

I do remember—fondly—how we were in the beginning. When we were all passion and full of aspirations. Before life.

She was such a pistol. Different from the rest of the girls. I had known plenty of girls who wanted to be nurses, but none of them talked about it the way Marlene did. She actually believed in it. She genuinely wanted to help people. Her little brother had died from the flu when they were kids, and she’d be damned if she’d let that happen to anybody else. No kids were going to die on her watch.

But things didn't work out exactly that way. Sure, she started out working with all passion and gusto in a children's ER, but then she got pregnant, and we had Sebastian. Money became more important than high ideals. Now she works for Dr. Emmitt Levon, an overpriced pediatric specialist who caters to New Orleans' rich, uptown clientele. I hate the guy. For one thing, he has the last name of my favorite Elton John song, from my favorite Elton John album, and second I'm pretty sure he's banging my wife. The combination of the two things don't work in his favor.

One would think my suspicions would give me something to talk about with Marlene. But the truth is, I don't have any proof, and when it comes right down to it, I'm not sure I want to know. I can't really blame her if she is cheating on me. Levon, that little fucker, is young and vibrant—asshole knows Elton John more from some duet he did with Eminem on an awards show than from *Madman across the Water*. I am old and bitter.

Affair or not, I've grown less interested in what she has to say. I'm sure some of it may be important, but it is stuff I've heard for the twenty years we've been married. I know everything about her, and still she's a stranger.

"Dale, honey, don't forget that Sebastian is coming back from drama camp today. You need to pick him up at school."

Drama camp. All of my friends' kids are athletic. Chris's kid is shaping up to be the star tailback for the football team. Dave's boy is a basketball and a baseball stud. We'll be out slamming back a few, and they'll be bragging on their boys. How Winston gained over a hundred yards and scored two touchdowns or how Tommy dropped thirty-four points even though he sat out most of the fourth quarter. And then they'll both glance at me with this look of pity because they know my bragging about Sebastian would sound a little different. And they

don't give a shit about costume designing for the school plays, no matter how good. I guess I don't much care about it either. I always just smile and bring up some memory of my own high school exploits like I'm stuck in Bruce Springsteen's "Glory Days."

"Got it," I say in between bites of pancake and make a silent promise that I'll visit *Boho Joe's Vinyl Shop*. I haven't been by in a while. I can spend hours there, just perusing the old records, asking Joe to play one that I'm interested in. Music sounds right on vinyl. Even the scratches seem perfect.

"And Dale?" Marlene says.

I look up at her, knowing from experience that some type of instruction is coming. And then I get this strange feeling in my gut. Sinking, like I'm trapped in a car falling off a bridge.

"Try to show a little enthusiasm dear. He's really passionate about this."

I nod and go back to my breakfast. Why couldn't he be really passionate about sports? Computers? Even chess. Why did it have to be something so girly? Passionate about being a costume designer. My father would have kicked my ass if I tried to get him to let me go to a drama camp. He certainly wouldn't have paid for it. I attempt to convince myself that I'm better than my father, that because I don't hit Sebastian and I financially support his passions, I'm a good father. Deep down, I fear I'm just as much a prick as my old man.

*

I get in my old Taurus—like a-year-from-scraping-for-parts old—to go teach English at Delgado Community College. I sit there, my hands gripped tight around the worn rubber of the steering wheel, and then it hits me. I'll just leave. Just take off and start a new life. People do that sometimes. The thought is freeing until I think of my father. He left my mother and me when I was seventeen. He was younger than I am now, but perhaps the Lipinicki men can only

take seventeen years of family.

He didn't take a damn thing with him—just left. So maybe it's in my blood, in my nature. Sebastian's sixteen. Maybe that's when Dad started feeling the itch. A little, tickling boil in the pit of his stomach telling him that his life wasn't his own. So maybe he scratched it for a year, and it spread until he couldn't contain it. Or maybe it just festered and spread on its own. Point is he left. Waited till I was a man, or close to it, and then high-tailed it to wherever deadbeat dads high-tail it to. For most of my life I didn't understand it. I think I'm beginning to.

The thought evaporates into a realm beyond reality, and I finally start the car. And then I start it again after it dies while backing out of the driveway.

I go to my first class like a responsible adult, and I teach with the enthusiasm of a fat kid at a fitness test.

I used to be a good teacher. I don't think I ever had the passion Marlene once had for nursing, but I really cared about helping my students, and I earnestly tried to make a difference. At some point I stopped giving a shit. Maybe it was because I couldn't relate to the kids anymore. Maybe their indifference caused mine. I don't know the when or why of my demise. I just know that kids no longer actively try to get into my class.

Today, the blank faces staring back at me only make me more depressed, so I have them do a writing exercise. At least I won't have to talk and watch them ignore me anymore. I spend the next thirty minutes wondering if any of the females would even consider having an affair with Mr. Lipinicki. Ten years earlier there were always a couple who had crushes on me. I never took advantage, and I didn't really want to now. But it might be nice to have the option.

After my second class, which was eerily similar to the first one, I sit in my office like I'm supposed to, in case a student actually realizes he needs help. Students rarely come. So for the

moment, I sit alone and think about Sebastian.

I remember how proud and happy I was when he was born. When the doctor put him in my arms and suddenly I completely loved this chubby little thing, this little person that I hadn't known minutes before. He was my son.

Immediately I had visions of all the things I would teach him. All the father-son adventures we would go on. Fishing trips, playing catch in the yard, shooting baskets, going camping, watching the Tigers on Saturdays and the Saints on Sundays. He'd be an athlete all right. I had been a varsity letterman in both football and basketball in high school, and Marlene was a tennis star all through college, until her knee gave out. He'd be the next freaking Pistol Pete, or maybe Terry Bradshaw.

But that didn't really work out either.

My phone rings and interrupts my musings.

"Mr. Lipinicki's office," I answer.

"Hey Lipinicki, you want to go grab a late lunch with me?"

I am thankful for Chris' invitation. I'm wallowing too much today. I agree, and we decide to hit up a sushi joint on St. Charles.

Dr. Chris Fredricks. He's who I was supposed to be. Doctorate in English Literature with a concentration on the modern novel, and he has written three of his own novels, all critical successes and one a national bestseller. He teaches over at Tulane. He has the intelligent jock son, and a wife who still looks great in gym shorts. He gets hit on by students constantly. He's a prick. He is also my best friend.

I feel like Pete Best when I'm around Chris. Like he was Ringo Starr, and had just swooped in, replaced me, and stolen my dream. Still, I have a perverted fascination with him. I

get to listen to all his literary exploits and adventures and secretly pretend it's me. I get to stay with The Beatles.

I used to think I had just as much talent as Chris. When I was twenty-five, I won a fiction contest for a story about a runaway dad and the effects on the child and wife he left behind. I was so proud of myself. And I thought it was just the first step. Then I showed it to my mother. She didn't talk to me for months. I couldn't write about my family after that. I got published a few more times, but nothing big. Chris meanwhile had become a bestseller and a media darling. I no longer think I'm just as talented.

"The protagonist is too sympathetic. Almost pathetic. I think he needs some more backbone." He shoves a Philadelphia Roll into his mouth. The roll is too big for his mouth and tiny bit of cream cheese drips onto his bottom lip. I don't tell him.

Chris always uses me as his sounding board. He doesn't really want my opinion, just wants me to say something so he can continue his thought process out loud.

"So give him more backbone," I reply.

"I wish it were that simple, friend. But it's a delicate balance. I don't have to tell you that. I'm afraid changing him too much will make him seem unnatural."

That is a big dilemma, isn't it? Who says natural is better though? It's true that people always tell you to be yourself, but what if you needed to change? My father had a tattoo on his shoulder of a scorpion on top of a frog. The scorpion's tail was poised, ready to strike down with its venom. When I asked him about it, he told me the parable.

The frog agrees to ferry the scorpion across the river, warning that if the scorpion stings him, they'll both die. The scorpion agrees not to sting him, but midway through, the scorpion strikes. And as they are both about to drown, the frog asks why. The scorpion replies, "Because

it is my nature.”

He ended by telling me to be cautious. No good deed goes unpunished. Beware of scorpions. But I think my father admired the scorpion for being itself. For saying I am who I am, and I ain't changing. He never seemed to realize that the scorpion dies as well, that its nature was its demise. For my part, I just remember thinking the scorpion was an asshole.

The waitress brings the check, and Chris lets his hand linger on her wrist. “You have beautiful hands,” he says.

The girl blushes. “Thank you, sir.”

“Ouch. Sir? Call me Chris please.”

She smiles and walks off. Chris follows her with his eyes, no doubt looking at her young, perky ass and imagining his hands all over it.

He turns back around and says, “Don't you just love Asian girls. They stay so tight.”

Chris picks up the bill, despite my protests, and thanks me for listening. I am supposed to go to campus for another round of office hours, but I don't feel like it.

I go to a bar down the street from the restaurant and order a beer. Again my thoughts drift to my dad. The king of embellishment. Most kids have to endure lectures about how their fathers had to walk uphill in the snow for hours to get school, but my father was ridiculous. Of course he didn't use hills or snow—New Orleans has neither. He never really talked about how hard he had it. He would just make shit up. He once told me he had been the driver of the getaway van for the guys who broke into Watergate. Said it with a straight face too. I stopped believing anything he said when I turned twelve.

I order a second beer and think that it's amazing how much our parents can fuck us up. After he left, I used to imagine that my father was Cat Stevens. Because of that song, “Father

and Son.” You know, where Cat changes his voice to show the different sides of a conversation between a father and a son. In the song, the son is pretty much fed up with his father’s advice, wants to strike out on his own. But I identified with the father. He was trying; he was giving advice; he was sticking around.

It’s the son who’s supposed to leave the father.

I wonder how Sebastian would react to the song. I don’t know if he’s ever heard it. Is he like the son who has to go away? He couldn’t be. Because I wasn’t the father trying to give advice. Sebastian had nothing to ignore.

After I down the second beer, it’s about time to pick up Sebastian, so I settle the bill and head out.

As I pull up to the school, I see him outside with a group of friends. He talks naturally with a very pretty girl, until he sees my car. He kisses her on both cheeks, Parisian style, then walks away from her smiling while carrying something in a big black garbage bag.

Marlene says when he smiles he looks just like me. We do share a physical resemblance. You can tell he’s my son. I had forgotten about that smile. He rarely shows it around me.

I love Sebastian. I really do. I’m just not sure I like him. Now I know that sounds awful, but what I mean is, if he wasn’t my son, he wouldn’t be a buddy of mine. Although we look alike, I see nothing of myself in him. We have little in common.

Marlene has asked why Sebastian’s passion bothers me. “You know he gets it from you,” she says referring generously to my writing. “You should be proud of his creativity.”

It shouldn’t bother me. He’s good at it. I’ve seen some of the costumes he’s brought home to work on, and they’re impressive. But I was an athlete growing up. I got dirty. Broke limbs. And I held on to those dreams I had when I held him as a newborn in my arms. Held on

to them longer than I should have. One by one they crumbled. He showed more interest in dressing up than playing catch. He wanted to watch *Gone with the Wind* or *Dr. Zhivago* instead of watching LSU or the Saints. There was the fishing trip debacle, when Sebastian cried every time we caught a fish and ended up throwing all the trout back into the water. Or the camping trip when he spent more time sewing patches onto his favorite pair of jeans than hiking or swimming. I tried forcing him to play sports until he was ten and flat out refused.

Finally I realized that Sebastian wasn't ever going to be who I had dreamed of in those first few moments of his life. I stopped pushing. I stopped trying all together. I paid for his drama camps and sewing machines, but I didn't show interest. I didn't encourage. I didn't try to connect.

"How was camp?" I offer after he has gotten situated and we drive away.

"Fine."

He doesn't present any further information. I wonder if this is because he knows I'm not really interested in the details or because he wants to keep the experience for himself. I hope it's the latter.

We drive in silence for a while. I try to speak up a couple of times. To find something we can talk about.

"Who's the girl?"

"What girl?" His thumbs pound furiously on the keys of his phone. Text messaging.

"The one you were talking with when I pulled up. She's pretty."

"Tori."

Again with the one word answers. It frustrates me, but I remember I was the same way. So we do have something in common.

I want to ask if they have anything going on. If he and Tori are going steady, or talking, or dating, or doing whatever sixteen-year-old kids do these days. But I don't. Maybe I'm scared to. I've speculated that Sebastian is gay on more than one occasion. I mean, costume designing? That was a tell-tale sign, right? He's a little effeminate, but he doesn't wave his wrists around, or whatever. I don't know all the signs. I've wondered how I would react if he ever came out to me. Honestly, it wouldn't change anything.

So I don't ask him about Tori; it doesn't seem important anyway. But I want to say something important to him. Something that will let him know that I love him, even though I don't know how to relate to him.

"Sebastian," I say slowly, "the world is full of pretenders. Don't go through life pretending."

His thumbs stop pounding, and he looks over at me. I can feel his eyes on me, and I think he must think I am crazy. It would be an understandable reaction. He looks like he's about to say something. He doesn't.

I'm not sure why I said it. It just bubbled up. My father told me the same thing the day before he left. I think he was telling me that he had just been pretending at having a family, at being a father. Another way of saying, be true to your nature. He was telling me he was a scorpion. It never offered me any comfort. And yet still I say it to Sebastian.

I think I say it more for me than for him. He's not pretending. He's doing exactly what he wants to do, what makes him happy. Despite me. If anybody is the pretender it's me. But what am I pretending. Am I like my father? Pretending at having a family, at being a father. And if I am, if I am a scorpion too, then am I supposed to just leave like he did?

I try to think about what it would mean if I just took off. What would happen? I try to

think about if I would be happy. If Marlene and Sebastian would be better off. But I can't. Instead, I think of my dad.

He took me to a Saints game once. One of the years with Archie Manning when they were God-awful, cellar-dwellers. I was only a little boy. He held my hand as we waited in the concession line to get hot dogs and nachos and large sodas. We were high up in the cheap seats of the Superdome, and I could barely make out the different players, but I didn't care. He sat next to me explaining the different formations, and he didn't even become impatient when I asked questions. The Saints lost, but I didn't care. I don't think I even saw the end of the game. But I remember my father carrying me out of the Dome. I could smell his Old Spice aftershave as my nose brushed against his cheek. It is the nicest memory I have of him.

We pull into the driveway, and I kill the sputtering engine before I remember that I was going to stop by *Boho Joe's*. Maybe some old music will help clear my head.

Sebastian is already out of the car, carefully removing the plastic bag from the back seat. I tell him I have an errand to run, and ask if he has a key. He nods, walks off, and easily unlocks the door with his free hand as he holds the bag in his other. I wait until he gets inside and then get back in the Taurus.

I'm only a few minutes from *Boho Joe's* when my cell rings. Marlene. She asks if I can meet her at the coffee shop down the street from Levon's practice. She wants to talk. It's important she says.

So much for listening to music. I just wanted half an hour to myself. I think about skipping the little meeting and going to Joe's anyway. Maybe if she hadn't said it was important. But she'd said we needed to talk. In a public place. She's finally going to tell me that she's been fucking that little weasel, Levon. Doesn't want me to make a scene.

As I drive, seemingly hitting every pothole in the city, I get worked up. How dare she pull this crap. She thinks I'm going to flip out and go crazy? And if I wanted to cause a scene, did she really think being in a coffee shop was going to stop me? What did I care what a bunch of hipsters and college kids thought about my crazy ass yelling at my wife? I park down the block on a one-way street, and push the door open carelessly. The bottom scrapes the curb as I get out. I cringe at the sound then kick the door hard to close it. The car's a piece of shit anyway.

Marlene is sitting alone at a table drinking some coffee concoction that's more whipped cream than coffee. She smiles at me, and I realize that just like with Sebastian, I haven't seen her smile in long time.

"Do you want anything?" she asks.

"I'm good," I say.

"Well thanks for coming. I thought it might be nice to get out of the house for a while. We used to meet for coffee all the time, remember?"

I do remember. When she worked the ER and something awful happened—some kid that didn't make it—she'd call me and tell me to meet her when she got a break. I would console her and think about how lucky I was to have a wife who cared so much. The tradition, like so many other things, drifted away.

"And there's something important I want to tell you," Marlene says and takes a sip of her coffee concoction.

I look into her eyes, searching for some glimmer, some twinkle of that passionate girl I married. And for a moment I see it. That fire dancing in her eyes. I wonder about the last time I had that passion, that fire, inside me. And seeing it in her now, I know I can't fault Marlene for

looking for that again, even if she had to find it with Levon. The indignation I felt in the drive over dissipates.

“It’s okay,” I say. “I already know.”

Marlene looks confused. “Know what?”

“About you and Levon.”

“Emmitt? And me? What about us?”

“Don’t even try to deny it. I can tell just by the way he looks at you.” I try to keep calm.

She doesn’t deserve a scene.

“Excuse me?” Marlene laughs.

“So you’re telling me you’re not sleeping with him?” I ask.

“Are you kidding me with this, Dale? Dr. Levon. Seriously, I don’t care how he looks at me. You think I would fall for him? He’s a child.”

I’m surprised. I’d been so sure. And now looking at her, seeing her react with her own surprise—I almost can’t believe it.

“You’re not having an affair?” I ask again.

“No, Dale,” she says, not amused. “Certainly not with Dr. Levon. Discounting for a moment his dandruff and his horrible halitosis, he’s barely over thirty. I already have one child to take care of. I don’t need another one.”

I sit there staring at her, the passion still gleaming from her eyes.

“I asked you here because I wanted to know how you felt about me taking a shift back in the ER?”

I wonder why I had been so sure. Why I had figured she had just moved on to a younger, more vibrant person? What else was I wrong about?

I sit in the Taurus a block away from the coffee shop, watching the people outside go about the business of life. Doing little daily things that fill the hours. Eating, getting gas, shopping, talking on the phone. I question if they stop and wonder why. If they ever think about what it all means.

Marlene and I had sat in the coffee shop for a while, talking. We talked about the things we'd let slide for years. We talked about why we didn't talk anymore. I told her I thought it was great she wanted to go back to the ER. She'd ended by asking me if I was happy. I didn't answer.

I start the car, revving the engine a bit so it won't die. David Byrne's voice scratches out from the speakers.

And you may find yourself in a beautiful house, with a beautiful wife

And you may ask yourself—Well...how did I get here?

And for a moment I think this is a practical joke. Then I theorize that maybe there is an order to everything. The very song I was thinking about to start this whole day is playing now, as if God, or the Universe, or some cosmic entity is trying to tell me something. Or in this case ask me something.

So I think about the question. How did I get here? A wife I'm so out of sync with, I thought she was cheating on me. A job I'm no longer good at or passionate about. A son I can't relate to. And a tickling desire to just chuck it all, to forget my whole life and just run away like my father.

I've got no one to blame but me, myself, and I. My Dad isn't here now. I can't blame him forever. It is all me. At some point I just gave up. So my kid isn't going to be the next

Terry Bradshaw or Pete Maravich. So what? Maybe, what I need to do, is evaluate where *here* is. I was wrong about Marlene, I remind myself. Completely and utterly wrong.

“Beware of scorpions.” I can hear my old man say it, as if it were the greatest pearl of wisdom one could pass on. Beware of scorpions. What the fuck did that even mean? I didn’t know. But I do know one thing. If I am a scorpion, if I am destined to drown, I’m not going down without fighting my own nature. I’m not just going to give up and run like he did.

I remember that it’s the son who’s supposed to leave the father.

David Byrne’s now singing about water flowing underground.

I beat Marlene home and run inside. Sebastian has an intricate dress laid out on the dining room table. It looks like something out of a fairy tale, and although I still really don’t get why he spends so much time on a costume, I have to admit it’s pretty impressive.

“Sorry, Dad,” he starts, “I’ll have it out of here in a second.”

“No,” I say. “It’s fine. You can work in here.” I smile at him, and his eyes widen with surprise for a moment.

“You made this yourself?” I ask.

He nods.

I walk over to him and reach out to touch the dress. I feel the satiny fabric between my fingers, surprised at the strength of it. Then I reach behind Sebastian and give him a pat on the back. It feels strange. Awkward.

But it feels good.

Under an Overpass

The deep rumble of tires on pavement shook in Donnie Miner's ears. The cars sounded close. Donnie rolled on his side and wiped the corner of his mouth. He normally drooled when he slept on his stomach, so the crusted saliva on his chin did not surprise him. Still his mouth tasted funny, and his throat burned. He clicked his tongue on the back of his teeth, and after feeling the coarse grime that coated his enamel, he realized that at some point of the previous night he had thrown up. His head pounded as the sound of cars continued to rattle and roll. He yawned and stretched, feeling his muscles throb in protest. A charley-horse erupted in his calf, and he bit his lower lip to keep from crying out. Grass tickled his face, and Donnie finally realized his surroundings.

He wasn't in a bed. Donnie sat up and looked around. Dirt and dead, brown grass surrounded him. He had passed out under an overpass.

Fuck my life, he thought.

Donnie patted his pockets hoping to find his phone intact. Keys jingled when he hit his right leg, but no phone. Not in the front pockets. And not in the back. Great. Stuck under an overpass with no phone. He pulled his keys out and rubbed them as if doing so would make his car suddenly appear.

"Drive," he said slowly, pretending he was Batman and his car would drive itself to him. It didn't work. He had no idea where his car was. He was sure that he hadn't driven; he never did when he drank.

He also had no idea where he was. If he wasn't so out of it, he would have panicked. He would have crawled around the dirt and the grass looking for his cell phone and swearing that if

he made it home he would never drink again. But he was too hung over for that. Instead, he looked around.

Graffiti splattered across the concrete of the structure. There were the obligatory gang symbols marking the territory with jerky, angry tags. But there were also more personal messages. Drawings and names. Love letters and advice. Donnie zeroed in on one painted at the top of a support beam nearly twenty feet above him. Written in red paint were the words—*I love you, Belle*.

Donnie wondered how the writer had gotten up there. Had he brought a ladder? And why spray it there, underneath, where no one could see it? Maybe it had just been for himself. Maybe the guy simply needed to write it, to see it put down in permanence. Or maybe he had brought Belle to see it. Although Donnie couldn't imagine any girl getting weak kneed over a message that people were going to drive over a million times a day. But maybe Belle was different.

Donnie cleared his throat and spit out what was probably a mixture of booze and stomach acid. Images of the previous night came blasting into his brain as if overexposed snapshots from someone else's life. At first he simply flashed on what he had consumed. Beer. Beer. Maybe a shot of Jameson? Definitely some Crown. More Crown. Crown. Shot of tequila? And that was just what he could remember. He hadn't indulged like that in a long time. But his younger brother Travis didn't call him to hang out too often. When Travis called asking Donnie to come celebrate Travis' getting accepted into nursing school, Donnie felt he had to go. It was good at first, then things just got out of hand.

But Donnie felt he had deserved to blow off a little steam. Everyone was moving forward. His older brother Jake had his own dental practice. Now Travis was headed to nursing

school. All his friends were moving into careers and settling down in their private lives. New job. Better job. Promotion. Promotion. Marriage. Marriage. Engagement. Words Donnie had been hearing a lot lately.

And he was happy for them. At least he tried to be.

But Donnie felt stuck. He was working as a bartender and helping an old friend write resumes for his Internet service. Neither job was a passion. The resumes helped make ends meet, but the writing was tedious. He enjoyed the bartending. Liked meeting new people and hearing interesting stories, but he wanted more.

Donnie's romantic front was even more frustrating. He hadn't had a serious girlfriend in two years, and the girl he broke up with then, Emily, had barely qualified as serious. Most girls he met had some annoying habit that he knew would drive him crazy eventually. So Donnie kept everything pretty casual. And again, he wanted more.

Basically his life was on a conveyor belt to a dead end. And at twenty-seven, he felt the clock ticking. Blowing off steam wouldn't help, but he needed to do it anyway.

He blew a little too much. He hoped he hadn't done anything too stupid. But who was he kidding; he had just woken up under an overpass.

He closed his eyes and tried to remember more of the night. He met Travis and some of his buddies at *Gordo's Brew House*. They were trying to see how many beers from different countries they could drink. Some kid Bruce made it to ten in a little over an hour and then promptly passed out. Fun times.

Michelle Nostrum. He had seen her last night. They had known each other for a while. Donnie hadn't picked up on any obnoxious habits. She didn't bite her fingernails, or talk too fast, or say "like" too much. So Donnie had long been intrigued enough to want a little more

than friendship. But he had never gotten any indication that she did, so he never made a move.

He had talked to her last night. At some point she had sat next to him. He'd patted the seat and asked her to sit, and she did. He'd said something witty or clever, and a little derogatory, because he'd come to believe beautiful girls were impressed with a guy who wasn't intimidated by them. The trick was not to be too mean. Donnie wasn't very good at playing the game. He usually screwed it up and said something that was too wounding, too true.

He pictured her laughing. He told her she had a crooked smile. That was it. She feigned shock and hurt, but she laughed. Then he added a little dig about her having a stroke when she was a kid so the right side of her face didn't work so well. It was a risky comment, the kind that he usually screwed up, but he delivered it with just the right amount of sarcasm to let her know he was joking. He further explained that it was cute.

And it was cute. It was so cute that he thought about it even when she wasn't smiling. When she was just sitting there doing something insignificant, drinking her beer or brushing hair away from her face, Donnie could picture that crooked half smile and feel his pulse quicken.

More of the night came back to him. At some point, she had started singing along to a Patty Griffin's "Heavenly Day." He remembered being surprised. She had a nice voice. And she knew Patty Griffin, one of his favorite songwriters.

Donnie thought about his own songs he had scribbled on crumpled papers, stashed away in his desk drawer. He had wanted to tell her about them. He'd been bursting to show her that he was more than just ordinary. That he was creative. He'd wanted to make a connection. He hadn't.

She wouldn't believe him he had reasoned. She would think he was a phony, or more likely that he wasn't any good. The songs *did* need more work.

But he had made a date. Just a lunch date, but still a date. For today, at noon. Donnie looked at his wrist. Blank. Hadn't worn his watch. Even if he had a couple hours to spare, there wasn't much of a chance he could get there in time. Probably for the best anyway. He'd only screw it up. Say something stupid at the wrong time.

Fuck my life he thought.

Donnie wished life could be like a Coors Light commercial. He loved the Silver Bullet Love Train. *People all over the world, join hands, start a love train, join hands.* And the Silver Bullet would cruise in amidst falling snow and swirling winds. He would jump on the train with bunnies in bikinis somehow unaffected by the perpetual cold of the train and ride off to find Michelle, who somehow would be totally cool with the bikini bunnies, and they would all ride off into the sunset.

He actually hated Coors Light. Tasted like water. He gagged a little. Shouldn't think about beer. He sighed and hung his head in his hands. The cars continued to rumble overhead. Could he hitch a ride?

Donnie looked around. There was a man under the overpass leaning against one of the concrete posts across from Donnie. He wore a dusty, tweed overcoat and red cotton gloves with the fingers cut out. Donnie wiped his eyes, sure that he was just seeing things. The man looked like a character straight out of a Dickens' Masterpiece Theater special. Except for the shopping cart at his side. They didn't have those in Dickens' stories.

The cart was full of seashells. There was a blanket too, but mostly seashells. Odd, because, although Donnie wasn't exactly sure of where he was at that current moment, he felt certain he wasn't anywhere near a beach.

A shiny, silver, bicycle bell was fastened to the handle of the cart. The man rang it three

times, the first two singing out robustly, while the last one was muffled by the cars overhead.

“Not dreaming,” the man said. His voice was gravelly, like he had smoked too many cigarettes. Like Tom Waits.

Donnie thought about his mother. She had always told him that if he didn’t work hard he’d wind up a bum living under a bridge.

Something moved in the man’s coat. Then a ferret crawled out from under the man’s shoulder. Donnie again thought about the night before. He hadn’t taken any hallucinogens. He recalled an interesting conversation he’d had with Travis about starting a peyote bar somewhere in the desert. They’d call it *Peyote Ugly*. A haven for wandering souls looking to hallucinate. Instead of hot female bartenders dancing on the bar, there would be rough-looking medicine men pow-wowing and conjuring animal spirits.

But he hadn’t smoked anything. Not even a cigarette. No mushrooms, no LSD. Just a lot of booze. So this gravelly voiced Dickens’ character, this Tom Waits complete with a shopping cart and a ferret, was real.

Dickens Waits mumbled something. Donnie couldn’t make it out. Something about a state of grace. Find your state of grace, maybe?

Donnie didn’t know what he was talking about. He stared at the man, waiting for him to speak again.

“I wake up in mud sometimes.”

Donnie believed him. Looking at the guy, “sometimes” was probably a lot.

The comment was only an observation. Donnie had woken up in the mud; the guy was just acknowledging that fact. But for some reason the comment seemed like more. Donnie couldn’t figure it out, but the way the dude had said it—like he was implying that the getting out

of the mud was the important part.

Donnie just nodded in response.

“Find something to put in.”

What the shit was this crazy guy talking about? Find what to put in where?

Donnie didn't answer.

The man had a melancholy demeanor. For a second, Donnie wondered if maybe he *was* Tom Waits. He certainly looked like Tom Waits. And Tom Waits was weird. Perhaps even ferret weird.

“Bartlett's the name.” The man stepped forward and waved. He moved gracefully, and Donnie thought he was going to break into a soft shoe.

“This here is Figgy the Ferret.” Bartlett held something up to the ferret's mouth; Donnie couldn't see what. Figgy's little paws snatched it quickly; then the ferret disappeared under the coat.

Donnie gave a little wave back. “Donnie the Drunk. Nice to meet you.” He thought about getting up to shake Bartlett's hand, but the effort seemed too great. And he still wasn't completely sure if Bartlett and his ferret were real.

Bartlett threw a bottle over to him. It landed with a soft thud in the mud. Johnnie Walker Green. Donnie had to be dreaming. Didn't homeless guys go for the cheap stuff like Mad Dog.

“Little hair of the ferret.”

“What?”

“Figgy gets jealous when I mention D-O-G-S.”

“Oh, no thanks. I think I had enough last night. Not much of a Scotch drinker, anyway.”

“Then you're not much of a drinker.”

The ferret again peeked out, wiggling its nose. Donnie could have sworn the animal was agreeing with the old man.

Donnie looked down at his puke-stained shirt. “No, I guess not.” He reached over and touched the bottle just to see if it was real. It was.

Bartlett picked up a seashell from his cart and flipped it in the air. “They’re never the same you know. Like snowflakes. That’s why I have so many.”

“Cause they’re never the same?” Donnie repeated.

“That’s right.”

“Like people?” Donnie offered.

“Huh? People?”

Donnie was about to explain what he meant, then thought better of it. Why was he even talking to this loon?

“Sometimes it can be a dead-end,” Bartlett half spoke, half sang.

Donnie waited, thinking Bartlett might have been quoting song lyrics or something. But Bartlett leaned back against a concrete beam and smiled, as if he had just uttered life-altering words.

The guy had a short attention span, Donnie thought. And liked vagueness. Most likely because he was crazy. But there was something in his eyes. Nothing he said made sense, but there seemed be more that he was saying than what he was actually saying.

Donnie looked around. He tried to think of an explanation for his situation. Was this a hidden camera show? Had Travis dumped him here on purpose last night, and called Howie Mandel or Ashton Kutcher or MTV or somebody? What the fuck was going on?

“What are you talking about?” Donnie demanded.

Bartlett pointed above Donnie to the graffiti message—*I love you, Belle*.

“Graffiti?” Donnie asked.

Bartlett shook his head and pointed again at the message.

Donnie grimaced. Just what he needed. A lecture on love, from a homeless guy with a ferret and a cart full of seashells. Donnie started to get up, but Bartlett’s voice scratched out, and he stayed seated.

“It only takes one time to find the thruway.”

Donnie patted his pocket again, hoping that his phone had materialized. “Is any of this going to get me home?”

“Is home where you want to be?” Figgy crept out from the coat, crawled down Bartlett’s stomach and perched himself on the handle of the shopping cart.

“Oh man, I would love to be home. I would really love to be home.”

“Home ain’t nothing but skin and bones. Organs too. Skin and bones and organs.”

Donnie knew Bartlett was crazy. But when he thought about what Bartlett had just said, it seemed logical. To a homeless man. He was too hung over to go anywhere anyway, he told himself. At the very least it would be an interesting story to tell people. He could hold it over Travis for letting him wake up under a bridge, he reasoned. But actually, Bartlett’s words were the deciding factor. He wasn’t quite sure what they meant, but they stung with truth.

Bartlett seemed to know that Donnie was going to stay put. He didn’t seem surprised.

Bartlett pointed at the line of graffiti for a third time. “That guy was pretty smart. Knew it in his bones.”

Donnie wasn’t exactly sure what “it” was, but he stared at the graffiti, again thinking about the guy who sprayed the words. It would have to be somebody a little crazy. Somebody

like Bartlett. Donnie thought about Michelle. He saw that crooked smile, smiling at him and imagined himself doing something silly and crazy. Painting graffiti under an overpass.

He thought about putting himself out there like that. What was holding him back? Hadn't Bartlett said to put something in? He'd been talking about life. Putting in some goddamned effort. Donnie hadn't been doing much of that. Hadn't been actively participating in his own damn life. Been too busy seeing every possible roadblock, every dead-end street.

Donnie began to understand. Bartlett was telling Donnie to stop focusing on the impediments and just try. Be vulnerable. Be a little crazy. Quit floating.

Ideas splashed into his head. Getting his songs out there, no matter what. Maybe they weren't quite good enough yet. But they were better than some of the cookie-cutter crap that was on the radio. He could see himself in front of a crowd singing his own words. And not holding back with Michelle. Sitting across from her on a date, not worried about messing up. Making that connection. Finding that thruway.

Donnie had a strange feeling that Bartlett had known exactly what he was thinking. That Bartlett had somehow read his thoughts. He racked his brain, trying to remember everything Bartlett had said. What was that thing about a state of grace? Donnie was trying to piece it together when Bartlett coughed, and pointed out to the waiting day. Out from under the overpass, the sun shone bright and hot.

Donnie smiled, got up and turned away from Bartlett to look out into the day. He could feel the sun on his face even though he was still standing in the shade. He could see the clouds drifting in the sky, but what's more, he felt he could hear them move. Even with the cars constantly humming above. All his senses were heightened, as if he were in some higher state of consciousness. Slowly a feeling crept over him. Strange, but good.

The feeling wasn't completely unfamiliar. It crept up on him when he had certain thoughts. Thoughts, that when he was in the middle of them, he believed were profound and original. Thoughts that he felt no one else had, even though he knew they did. He would think about how everyone was made of stardust, or how infinitely small they all were, or how it made logical sense that there was a creator—a start to everything. In those moments he thought he could change the world. But the feeling usually faded.

He got the same kind of feeling standing there in the shade, somehow feeling the sun and hearing the clouds. Bartlett's words echoed in his head—look for the thruway. The feeling wasn't fading.

The ring of the bell interrupted his thoughts, and Donnie turned back to Bartlett. But he was gone. Not a single trace of him. Not a single seashell. No sign of Figgy. Even the Johnnie Walker bottle was gone.

Donnie heard another ring. But it wasn't a bell. He scanned the dead grass and looked over to where Bartlett and Figgy had been standing. His cell phone was resting right up against the concrete beam as if it had been placed there.

He ran over and picked it up, but not in time to answer it. Donnie had six missed calls. They were all from Travis; he must have gotten worried. Maybe he could tell Donnie how the hell he ended up under an overpass. Donnie scrolled through the list noting the various times, preparing to call his little brother back. But just before he hit his call back button, he changed his mind, and scrolled through his contacts. He smiled when he found the right one, and then quickly hit the call button.

He listened as the line rang once, twice, three times and then clicked alive.

“Hello, Donnie?” a soothing voice asked tentatively.

“Michelle,” he said and walked out into the day.

Vita

Mark Babin has been mistaken for Harry Potter exactly seventy-seven times, despite the fact that Harry Potter is a fictional character, making the possibility of Mark actually being Harry Potter impossible. Mark has lived most of his life in Metairie, LA. He is extremely superstitious, a bit of an insomniac, and suffers from a random nature. This combination once caused to him to stay awake for two consecutive days, grow a beard, and watch the orange-mocha-frappacino-gas-fight scene from *Zoolander* twenty times in order to cure writer's block. When he gets published he is thinking about going by M.J. Babin. He believes it sounds "writerly."