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Happy Valley

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Happy Valley

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
Creative Writing

by

Robert Gray

B.S. Dixie State College of Utah, 2010

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The Spud Field

Tate drove up Old Butte Road in his new silver pick-up truck. He brushed the dust away from the instrument cluster. 4993 miles. Tate decided he would take the truck to Bradshaw Chevrolet on Saturday for his free oil change. Maybe he would take one of his kids with him. Get his wife off his back about spending more family time.

He slowed just before he hit the dirt road's washboard section. The truck fish-tailed, brown clouds spewing from the rear wheels. Sprinkler heads, bailing wire, and a pipe wrench rattled in the door-panel pocket. A pair of worn leather gloves fell from the dash, and several cases of Old Milwaukee trampoline behind the seat. "Jeez, I hate this road," he muttered, passing the Utah County line and the beginning of his property.

The road smoothed, and Tate stepped back on the gas. He scanned the barley field for the first sprouts. Nothing yet, but it was hard to tell looking into the morning sun. The speedometer needle passed 60 as he travelled by the 35 mile per hour sign Santaquin City had just installed. He hated that he had to make the 60 mile round trip into Wasatch County every Friday morning. It always put him behind schedule. He had to hurry to pick up his workers. He knew that when they finished moving pipes in the beet field, they would probably sit around and wait for him, all day if that's what it took. His crew worked hard, their callused hands twisting 60-foot-long sprinkler pipes to release each joint. Then they would hoist one end of the pipe in the air to

release gallons of water onto the ground so the pipe could be dead-lifted and walked ahead to the next rows of thirsty red beets. But when they finished the first field, they might not walk the mile to the spuds. Each man had his job, and at 9:00 every morning Tate's job was transportation. He looked at his watch and shook his head. 9:34.

Tate crested a small rise. He saw another truck stopped sideways in the middle of the road. He slammed his brakes. Tate pushed the button to roll up his window and stepped out. When the dust cleared, he could see it was George's white Ford, the driver's door wide open. George was a few years older than Tate, probably 50, so Tate's first thought was George may have had a heart attack. Tate rushed to the cab. No George. Around the back of the truck, he saw two long furrows the tires had plowed in the gravel past the stop sign and through the intersection.

Tate decided that maybe the engine had seized and George had walked home, so he went to the front of the truck again. He bent down to check for oil on the ground. No oil, but the twisted remains of a bicycle lay caught up in the undercarriage. As he stood, he saw the cracked grill, the broken left headlamp, and the dented front bumper, the damage almost hidden by a flouring of dirt.

Then Tate noticed George, 100 yards into the barley field, sitting motionless.

"George!" he yelled.

No response.

Tate sprinted across the road. The road became a ditch just before the field. Tate tripped. His body and face hit the dry soil, but his right hand sank into the ground. What the hell? It hasn't rained in a month, he thought as he pushed himself up to his knees. Turning to stand, he saw a worker's body lying next to him surrounded by an area of red mud.

* * *

Tate slowly drove George toward the Santaquin General Store to use the pay phone. Few of the farmers bothered with cell phones. For Tate there was no need. During the day, it was just him and his crew. None of his laborers had cell phones, so Tate didn't either. If his wife or one of his three children needed him, they would have to wait until evening. The crops were more important.

“What am I going to tell the sheriff?” George asked.

“What do you mean?”

George put his hands in the air. “Should I just tell him the truth, that I was doubling the speed limit, that I ran the stop sign because I always do? Then I'll go to jail and that Mexican will still be dead, so how's that story going to help anyone? We should just go back and get rid of the body, like I said at the barley field.”

“I told you I won't do anything illegal,” Tate said.

“Damn you Mormons. Always obeying the law. Always doing the right thing. That is when others are around to see. But you're a hypocrite. Your Mexicans are every bit as illegal as mine, and you pay them under the table just like I do.”

Tate hoped his three workers were now walking toward the spud field waterline. They had been with him for 12 years. He paid each of them the going rate of \$200.00 a week and let

them stay in his old camper-trailer, but he also gave them each weekend off, and he bought them enough beer to last until Monday when work started again.

He figured the beer was what kept them coming back season after season. They could work on anyone's farm for the same money he paid, but not many, at least not in Utah County, gave free beer.

A few years ago, a clerk at the general store told others Tate had been buying beer. Word made it back to Colleen, Tate's wife. When he explained that it wasn't for him, that it was for his workers, Colleen's face turned as red as her curly, auburn hair. She would rather that he had been drinking, she said, than contributing to the damnation of three others. She would leave him if she ever heard that rumor again.

For a farmer, labor is more important than anything. But for a Mormon, family and faith are most important. Tate was torn until he figured out a way that he wouldn't have to lose either his workforce or his wife. He simply made a trip every Friday to the next county to buy beer, to a store where nobody knew him.

"That was one of Danny's workers," Tate said. "What if someone killed one of yours?"

"Then I'd make do."

"You wouldn't feel bad? You wouldn't try to contact his family in Mexico, let them know how sorry you are?"

"Nobody's going to be contacting nobody. Danny's spics can let the family know there was an unfortunate accident when they return to Mexico after harvest. All the details in the world won't bring the dead back to life."

Tate thought of Colleen. She would never go along with this. She would tell the truth and then deal with the repercussions. She was a good woman, and Tate knew it. He pounded the steering wheel. “There has to be another way besides hiding a body or lying to the sheriff!”

“Listen, you need to help me. If word gets out—what happened—everyone’s Mexicans will protest. To them a farmer running a stop sign is no accident. They’ll call it murder. They’ll get drunk for a week and stop working. Without water, everyone’s crops will die. Now there’s something to feel bad about!”

Tate shook his head. His knuckles became white as he clenched his hands.

“I know where you go every Friday morning,” George said, looking behind the seat at the Old Milwaukee cases.

Tate pulled past the fuel pumps to the pay phone in front of the store. The diesel fumes mixing with the hot summer sun nauseated him. George dropped out of the truck. A dust devil caught his cap and sent it across the parking lot. A worker, carrying a 6 pack of Schaefers out of the store, stepped on the cap, stopping it. Without making eye contact, George rushed over, picked up the cap, and brushed it off. Then he dawdled toward the phone, a stream of sweat running down his forehead. He picked up the receiver, kicked a smashed cigarette carton, and dialed.

When George returned to the truck, Tate asked what he told the sheriff.

“I told him the city just put the stop signs up, and I didn’t know I needed to stop.”

“They just put up speed limit signs. Those stop signs have been there for years. You know that, and so does he.”

“The sheriff said he would try to help me. He understands that nobody’s gonna miss a wetback. I’ll give Danny one of mine if I need to. Only problem is that the Chief of Police from Provo will have to meet us back at my truck since the accident involved a death.”

Tate and George had known Sheriff Evans since they were kids. They were in the same scout troop. But the Sheriff’s Department did not have jurisdiction within the city limits. They normally patrolled only the county areas beyond the borders of towns and cities. Provo owned the contract to police Santaquin’s 3000 residents. But since the sheriff was a long-time resident of Santaquin, he took most of the resident’s calls. Tate knew that wasn’t the reason George had called him though. He called him because the sheriff’s father was a farmer. Sheriff Evans had grown up in the culture. He knew how farmers help each other, how workers are important yet insignificant at the same time.

Tate thought about his family at home. Maybe he should get a mobile phone, just for emergencies. He did miss Colleen’s voice during the day. Maybe instead of trading his truck in on a new one next year, he could hire a foreman, someone to buy the beer on Fridays. Or maybe he should get out of farming all together, find a cleaner career, one where he could be home more, one with fewer dilemmas.

“This isn’t right, George,” Tate said. “I want to help you, but I can’t lie. I just can’t.”

George looked straight ahead. He put his hand to his chin and pulled on his gray whiskers. “Sure would be a shame if Colleen found out about your beer runs. No telling what that woman might do.”

* * *

“What happened here boys?” the chief asked.

“I was driving up the road to move my Mexicans to the next field when that one darted in front of me,” George stated, pointing to the dead worker. “Nothing I could do.”

Sitting at mid-sky now, the sun had dried the mud around the worker. His stomach had swelled and the stench reminded Tate of the slaughter house where he would take his sheep at the end of the winter.

“How fast were you going?”

“The speed limit. I always do.”

The chief looked at the furrows leading up to the back tires of George’s truck. “The speed limit, huh? What about the stop sign? Looks like the victim was crossing the road.”

“Yeah, County just put those in,” George said. “I wish I would have known.”

Tate glared at George and moved toward the chief.

“What’s the victim’s name?” the chief asked.

“Illegal for sure,” said the sheriff, stepping in front of Tate. “Never can know those people’s real names.”

The chief paused then asked the sheriff if he could speak with him in private for a moment.

Tate watched the chief and sheriff wrangle. The chief looked at the stop sign, shook his head, and pointed toward the skid marks. He started pacing off the length of the marks when the sheriff walked over and put his arm around the chief. He pointed to the crops, to the distant water line, to the dead worker, then back to the crops.

The chief looked over to Tate and George. Tate thought of his family again, his workers, the crops, of Jesus. He stepped forward and cleared his throat.

“Do you have something to add?” the chief asked.

Tate kept his head straight forward, his line of sight away from George. But he felt the heavy glare. Tate took a deep breath, but the truth wouldn't come out. He couldn't shatter everyone's world. “No, there's nothing,” he said.

The chief kicked a rock and said a few words to the sheriff. After opening his car door and sitting on the seat, the chief pulled out a handkerchief and wiped the dust off his black boots. Then he nodded at the sheriff and drove away.

“So, let me get this right for the paperwork, George,” the sheriff said. “You were driving down the road minding your own business, and that little beaner darted right in front of you. Is that correct?”

“Yes, sir,” said George.

“What about the Chief of Police?” Tate asked.

“Oh him—he said we can handle the situation ourselves. He won't be a problem. Why don't you hop in my car, George? I'll run you home, so you can get your other truck. I'll get a tow company to pick up this truck and an ambulance to pick up the Mexican and clean up his mess. Don't you have some employees to see to, Tate?”

Tate walked to his truck while the sheriff and George talked. Tate stopped to look at the bloated worker. Over his shoulder, he heard George laugh. He listened. He knew that laugh would haunt him for the rest of his life if he didn't do something, anything. He started his truck but made a u-turn away from his workers, away from the spud field. His speed-o-meter needle hovered over the 35 mile per hour mark. He drove toward Provo, toward the police department to

tell what really happened, toward the county's job services building to find different employment. After, on the way back home, he would stop and buy a cell phone.

Fitting In

I knew only two or three of the thirty-five kids trying out for the high school track team. The rest were from other Lehi-area junior highs, all converging into the town's only high school. After some light calisthenics and stretching, Coach lined us up on the goal line of Pioneer Stadium's football field. He walked to the opposite end zone. When he blew his whistle, we were to sprint from one goal to the other, 100 yards. I stood and looked down at the white line in front of me. I placed my right foot on it awaiting the signal. "You have to be *behind* the line," a short, red-headed girl yelled. I jerked my foot back.

My only friend, Ric Clark, lined up next to me. In a predominately Mormon area, I was one of the few non-members. A lot of kids wouldn't associate with me because of this. Some of their parents even forbade it. So, I had a hard time making friends, a hard time fitting in with others. Ric placed both of his hands behind the white line, and he crouched down with one knee on the grass.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"Creating leverage," he said. "I wish we had starting blocks."

Coach put his arm up, readying us. Then he blew his whistle. Ric took off like a bullet. I jogged. In the finishing end zone, Ric grabbed me and told me what I already knew, that I came

in dead last. But I didn't care. I was there to kill time, not to win anything. My dad said either I got involved with a group after school and made more friends, or I would have to work with him at Stephen Wade Toyota each afternoon, turning wrenches. Jogging 100 yards seemed a lot easier.

Coach Smith divided us into groups. Ric made group one, the sprinters and hurdlers. Coach put me in group three, the distance runners. Group two was the big kids, those who would try field events like the discus, shot put, or javelin.

The distance coach was Mike Burl. He was a hometown podiatrist, going through a mid-life crisis. He tried to relive his glory days of high school track by winning his age group in local 5k races. No adult would train with him, so he volunteered as a coach and forced us to be his partners. He pointed out a course around the school grounds. "Three laps is three miles," he said. We started, and he ran with the leaders for a while, then he settled back with me. I ran hunched over, my left arm wrapped around my stomach. "What's wrong?" he asked. I told him the ends of my ribs were curled inward puncturing my vital organs.

"I'll let you stop," he said, "once blood starts running out of your ears. But not until." With that he picked up his pace to find someone else to encourage.

Mike's legs turned over twice as often as mine because he was faster and because he was very short. Frizzy, brown curls on his head bounced high with every stride. They made him look much taller than he really was. I'm sure that's why he got the perm.

He disappeared behind the tennis court's wind screen at the far end of the course. Instead of watching him, I focused on two girls trading backhands during a long rally. They seemed to move in slow motion, like ballerinas. They were more than pretty. Maybe Dad was right about joining a group. I was now an athlete just like them. By the time I reached the courts, they were

sitting on a bench drinking Gatorade and chatting. I thought about running over and talking to them, but I knew Mike wouldn't approve of that, so I straightened up and ran a bit quicker, hoping they would notice me. And they did. They stared right at me. I wasn't sure what to do, so I raised my hand a little and offered a bashful wave. They both started laughing and as I passed, the one wearing a pink skirt yelled, "You're a geek!"

I hated my dad for making me do this. What's wrong with not having many friends anyhow? At least when alone, there's no chance of being ridiculed.

On the other side of the courts, several backyards bordered the school grounds. I watched smoke float up and trail away from a black grill. The smell of pork ribs in the air brightened my mood a little. I kept running, slogging along, and eventually finished the three miles. Mike had already gone home. Apparently, having patience with the slow guy was not one of his better qualities.

A couple of months later, Ric tried out for and made the basketball team, so he quit track. He got a girlfriend too, a cheerleader. I called him up one day to hang out, but he said he was too busy, basketball practice and all. In November I went to watch Ric play in the first home basketball game of the season, a win by 18 points. After, I walked down the corridor leading from the gym to the vending machines by the cafeteria. I wasn't hungry, but I didn't want to go home either. Going home meant being alone. I stretched my arm out and rubbed my hand along the coarse brick wall as I went. I wasn't used to an empty hall, and I noticed the dull rumble of the A/C unit for the first time. I rounded the corner to the vending area and saw Ric and two of his basketball buddies. I was already six-feet two, but Sam Johnson towered over me. He hung up his cell phone and told Ric and Garrett his brother would drop them off in Provo. "He cleans a bank downtown each night. He'll finish around 1:00 AM, and then he can take us home."

“What are you going to do in Provo?” I asked, looking at Ric.

He turned and looked at me but didn’t answer.

“Do you know him?” Garrett asked Ric.

“He was on the track team with me before I quit.”

“A track nerd,” Garrett said, laughing and walking back toward the gym. “Probably a distance runner too.”

Sam walked by and bumped my shoulder with his forearm, pushing me back a step. Then Ric followed and mouthed the word “sorry.” I didn’t know then that would be the last time he would ever talk to me, but I started sliding quarters into the closest machine and bought every candy bar I had money for. And then I walked home alone.

Our first track meet was in early March, a dual meet against our biggest rival, the American Fork Cavemen. My conditioning had improved a lot from that first practice. I would double, running the mile and then anchoring the medley relay. Mike Burl took particular interest in me because those were the races he would run in high school. “Not just run but win,” he said. “If you’re anything like me, that’s what you’ll do too.”

There were only forty or fifty people in the stands, mostly parents. The American Fork JV cheerleaders broke an eerie silence with a cheer. “We’ve got spirit. Yes, we do. We’ve got spirit. How about you?” They pointed at our team. Our cheerleaders looked across the track but remained sitting on the grass, indifferent to the challenge. The American Fork squad shrugged their shoulders and walked back to the stands.

The mile was the first distance event. I had just used the bathroom ten minutes prior, but I was so nervous I needed to pee again. I wanted to win my races. Not to please Mike, but to make

the others on the team proud. The race official lined us up. I had inside position as the home team's best runner. Coach Smith gave me a thumbs up. "You've got this," he said.

Once the gun went off, I sprinted into the lead. Two American Fork runners passed me after the first turn. "Don't let those Cavemen go," Mike yelled. I settled in behind, drafting off from them. The wind had picked up a bit, and it pushed us down the homestretch. At the bell signaling one lap to go, Mike ran next to me on the infield grass. "You have another race after this," he said. "Let them do the work against the wind, and then take them after the final turn."

I followed his advice until I saw my cousin Alecia on the backstretch. Maybe she and her group were just track cheerleaders, second string, but they were cheerleaders nonetheless. I sprinted by the leaders. From the corner of my eye, I watched their red singlets fade. I was spent as I came out of the final turn, but I had a big enough lead that I lumbered down the homestretch and across the finish line in first place. Coach Smith gave me a high five, and others from the distance team patted me on the back. I looked for Mike, but he stayed at the far end of the track, apparently upset that I didn't heed his counsel.

About an hour passed until the medley relay, the final event. Our boy's team was down by one point to American Fork. The winner of the medley would receive five points and the loser three, so the relay would determine the meet's winner. Coach Smith had me practice handoffs with the sprinters before the race. The first two sprinters would go 200 meters each, the next 400, then I would finish with an 800, a half mile. The sprinters kept loose and confident, joking around, patting me on the back. I was now the center of attention, an important part of the team.

Once the race began, I watched from the infield. Both teams came into the second exchange tied, but the Cavemen's 400 meter runner started too late. Their 200 meter runner ran up his back and dropped the baton, kicking it across the track. By the time he retrieved it, their

team was far behind. Mike ran over to give me advice. “You’ll be ahead by about ten seconds when you start your leg. That’s an eternity for a half mile. And their runner has never raced anything this long. He’s a decathlete preparing for the BYU Invitational. So I want you to take it really easy the first lap.”

“Easy?” I questioned.

“He’ll go all out to catch up. He’s used to the short races. By the end of the first lap, he’ll be exhausted, and you should have plenty left to win easily.”

Mike was right. I ran easy, and Mr. Decathlete caught up. He passed me right as the bell rang. I passed him back on the turn, a maneuver Mike had taught us never to do because we would have to run farther than the guy we were passing. It didn’t matter though. Decathlete should be spent. This race was mine. I couldn’t wait to cross the finish line and have the whole team congratulate me. Track might be for geeks, but at least I’ll be a popular one.

Entering the backstraight, I saw our cheerleaders again. They jumped up and down, shouting encouragement. All except Alecia. She noticed what I couldn’t. Decathlete was pulling up on my shoulder. When I saw him, I pushed to hold him off, but my legs were full of cement from my effort in the mile. I hadn’t followed Mike’s advice, and I paid the price. Decathlete went by and pulled away around the final turn and homestretch. He won the race by twenty seconds. He had beaten me by two eternities.

I watched American Fork’s sprinters dogpile Decathlete. My sprinters came over to me, but not to dogpile me, not to say nice try, you did your best. Instead, they grabbed the baton from my hand, their baton. Without a word, they turned around and walked off. That fast I was out of their group, never to return. I looked for Mike and finally found him. He was marching toward

the upper parking lot, shaking his head as he went. Without looking back, he got in his rusty Ford and drove away.

But not everyone was upset. Of all the distance runners, I was the only one to win a race, so the others decided to have a celebration for me. They said it was a Star Wars party, so I figured we would be watching the new Dolby-enhanced Trilogy, just released on DVD. That evening, my mom dropped me off at Mangum's place. I heard banging and laughing through the door. I was excited to hang out, something I hadn't done in quite a while. I rang the bell, and was greeted by Darth Vader, a lightsaber in hand. Inside I saw Han Solo, Princess Leia, Luke Skywalker, and Chewbacca, among others. The Star Wars theme song played from a boom box in the corner of the room. The others didn't seem to mind that I had no costume. In fact, they didn't seem to mind me at all. I was an outsider. I sat on the couch eating Pringles while they acted out various scenes from the movies. After they tired of this, they all sat at a large table and traded some sort of Japanese cards. I slipped out the front door and called my dad for a ride home.

My dad considered my running track a failure. Sure, I won a few races, but his hope was that I would make friends, finally start fitting in with others. "These aren't the type guys I want to fit in with," I said. "Do you want me to be a weirdo?"

"No, but you've still got to make friends. Maybe you should try a different activity."

Dad was right. Now that Ric had abandoned me, I was lonely. Track wasn't the answer because I didn't fit in, not even with the distance guys.

During one of our last long runs of the track season, Mike could no longer keep my running pace so he rode his mountain bike next to me as I ran on a dirt road adjacent to the Murdock Canal. "I think you should move down to the 400 and 800 next spring," he said.

“You’re growing too big now for the longer distances, and you’ve developed a lot of speed. The quarter and half are the distances I ran in as a junior and senior.”

“Actually, I’ve been thinking about something different. I…”

“So you’ll stay with the mile or even the two mile. I’m fine with that. I’m learning to let people make their own decisions. My ex-wife says I’m too controlling, says that’s why people don’t like me.” He stared off into the desert. “I’ll coach you over the summer. We’ll train together. I mean if you want to.”

“Sure, Mike,” I said. “How far can you throw a football?”

He gave me a puzzled look.

I explained to him that I was quitting track, that I would try out for receiver on the football team. And then I told him why. “I want to fit in with the popular kids, have a lot of friends, have something to do every night. I’m tired of being alone.”

Mike grabbed his hand brakes, and his bike slid to a stop. When the dust cleared, he told me I was off the team. If hanging out with the team and with him was not good enough for me, I didn’t deserve them.

“They don’t like me, Mike. I went to their party and they ignored me.”

“That was a misunderstanding. They thought you didn’t want to be there since you didn’t dress up. You’ll fit in. You just need to try a little harder.”

“I’ve already made up my mind. Next year I’m playing football.”

“Okay, but if you don’t make that team, you can’t come back to ours,” he said. “You can’t reject us then expect for us to take you back later.”

My summer was filled with two-a-days. In the morning, the football team did strength training; pushups, lunges, tire flips. In the afternoon, we would scrimmage. The assistant coaches

tried to make us puke. Every time one of us did, Coach Bluth put a mark on his clipboard pad. He said he was taking notes regarding the upcoming cuts. I never threw up and apparently received no unfavorable marks. Coach posted the first cuts on the field-house wall. We all ran over to check. One boy threw his helmet down in the dirt and yelled. Another walked off sobbing. I waited until last and scrolled my finger down the list. I found my name among the sixty and exhaled. Forty others left us that day.

“It’s only because you’re fast that you made the cut,” one of the assistants said. “If you don’t run crisper routes and learn to block on the edge, you won’t make the next one.”

I worked hard all summer, spent time each day after practice with the receiver’s coach. He said I had his vote, but all five assistants would decide, with Coach Bluth making the final call. I was much improved, but not playing as a freshman gave me a lot of ground to make up on the others.

The last cuts were one week before school started. Coach walked and wrote as we scrimmaged. The assistants straggled behind, creating their own notes. Afterwards, coach told us to take off our pads and meet back on the field in ten minutes. He, then, divided us into groups: linemen, defensive backs, quarterbacks and running backs, linebackers, and receivers. Each group competed in a forty-yard dash. The receivers were last. We all lined up on the fifty and were to run past Coach Bluth and his stopwatch at the ten. The assistants stood opposite coach to rank us according to finishing position.

I really liked the guys in my group. They were serious about football but lighthearted too. We had plans to hang out a lot once tryouts were over and after high school started again. But two of the seven wouldn’t be there. Coach limited the receiving core to five.

I stood in the middle and looked each way at my friends, bouncing around, staying loose. Each was well liked in high school, and I belonged with them. All I needed was a good forty, and I would remain. Coach waved for us to get set. I remembered back to my track tryout. I was only there because my dad wanted me to have friends, but I didn't care. This time was different. I had to make this team. I was tired of being alone. I had found the friends I needed. This time I was the one who wanted it.

Coach blew his whistle, and I felt runners off each of my shoulders, but my legs were light. I pushed and they responded. I leaned forward at the ten. I looked side to side. I had beaten everyone by two yards.

Coach told the team to hang out while he created the final roster, and he and the assistants walked toward the field house. I looked through the goal post to the upper parking lot and saw a man leaning against the chain-link fence. It was Mike. He was watching the practice, watching me practice. I waved. He nodded and turned his back and walked off.

We stood around the field, scratching and laughing for nearly an hour, releasing nervous energy. Finally, the linebacker coach appeared and hung the list. "For those who didn't make it," he said, "just leave your equipment in the locker room. The rest, I'll see you in the morning."

I hung back and watched, wondering which two from our group would be cut. There were forty-six total roster spots, so most players clenched their fists and smiled after scanning the list. Only a few walked slowly to the lockers. When a handful remained, I walked toward the list. Another receiver, Tom, walked past me on the way to his truck. "Sorry, man," he said. "It would have been nice hanging out with you." He was joking, of course. I was the tallest and the fastest. Maybe my routes weren't the best, but I could work on that. I jogged over to the list. I slowly went down each name. Mine wasn't there. Coach must have made a mistake. First, I counted all

the names. Forty-six. Then I counted all the receivers. Five. It was not joke. I didn't make it. I looked at the list one last time, but the names were too blurry now to read.

After dropping my equipment off, I wandered to my mom's Buick. I saw a florescent-orange card under the wiper blade. Maybe it's a note from coach. Maybe this was all a big joke. I looked around for people, for a video camera, under bushes, around cars. Nothing. I picked up the card. 673-0120. Why would coach leave his number? I sat down in the driver's seat and placed the card on the console, so I could grab my cell. I took the phone from its case and reached for the card. Only then did I see the other side. Mike Burl, M.D. Foot and Ankle Specialist. I let the card drop and threw my phone to the passenger seat.

When I got home, Alecia was there. "Heard you didn't make the team," she said. "One of the lineman's sisters called me." She gave me a big hug. "I'm really sorry."

"How do you like being a JV cheerleader?" I asked.

"It's pretty fun. Some of them are a little weird, but we have a good time."

"So, you fit right in from the start?"

"No, I had to work at it. Just like everything, I guess."

That evening, I asked my mom if I could clean her car. "I know you don't have a date," she said, while searching for her keys. I explained that I was just bored, wanted to help out. I wheeled out the shop vac and suctioned Mike's orange business card from under the seat. Mike was at my football practice because the team needed me back. Turns out I needed them too. I dialed my phone. There was no time to waste. Track season was only six months away.

Self Control

Dave sat by the phone, dreading the pending call. He grabbed another Swedish Fish from the crinkled bag and took a swig of Pepsi from the plastic bottle. His doctor had warned him to watch his diet, lower his cholesterol a bit, but stress always brought out his worst habits. Plus, he was only thirty-two, far too young to worry about doctors and their advice.

The joints of the stool creaked as Dave leaned back and surveyed the kitchen of his double-wide. Fingers of evening light reached in through the white metal blinds. His high-school diploma hung on the wall. Little Ryan's train lay in a heap on the industrial-carpet floor, some cars leaning against the tan-and-orange-flowered wallpaper. Before Ryan ate his Gerber split-pea dinner and headed to bed, the train had run smoothly on the track around a scraped and dented table leg and through the legs of two strategically-placed chairs. The clattering of wheels rolling over metal rails and the smell of smoke coming from the model's engine reminded Dave of the steamer that took the coal he mined around the mountain passes toward Provo. But Ryan had waddled over to the far corner of the track, against the wall, and placed an obstacle—a green Tyrannosaurus Rex—over the track, forever changing the lives of all the workers aboard the train.

Rags, the family's black lab, circled. He put his paw on Dave's leg and began to whine.

“What is it, girl? You worried about the call, too?” He led the dog to the door and let her out to run. “Be back before your curfew,” he shouted.

The ticking of the wall clock reminded Dave of the time. Five more minutes until seven p.m. He shook his head and stared at the open envelope and the formally-typed letter lying on the Formica counter. He moved his hand from under his chin to his forehead, and he began rubbing his temples. A pot of potatoes started boiling over on the stove. White foam seeped between the lid and the pan. Susan ran in and stopped the hissing. She walked over and put her arms around Dave’s neck.

“I’ll have dinner ready by the time you get off the phone,” she said.

Dave nodded.

“I still don’t understand why he didn’t just call,” she said. “He writes a letter to tell you he’s going to call on April 4th at seven and he has some important news for you. That’s just weird.”

“That’s Peyton. Always has to be in control.”

The phone rang. Dave looked away to the train wreck.

“You better answer or he’ll just write you another letter, certified next time.”

Dave laughed as he picked up the receiver.

“Hey, Peyton.”

“Listen, bro, you know I turned forty last month.”

“Happy birthday.”

“Here’s the point. I’ve been doing a lot of thinking, about me, about family. You know, the important things. So I’ve got an offer for you, but I don’t want to tell you over the phone.

Let's meet in the city. This Saturday would be good, Rubio's Diner, 9:00 a.m. We'll spend the whole day catching up. Does that work for you?"

"I guess I could get the day off, but..."

"Perfect. Rubio's is the place where I met Florence, right across from Lavelle Edwards Stadium on BYU's campus."

"I know the place."

* * *

Dave pulled into the parking lot south of Rubio's. He was twenty minutes early, so he stood outside of his Ford truck poking at the rust above the fender wheelhouse. The truck still ran well, and he was very happy with the ride of his new tires over the two-hour stretch from Heber to Provo. The salesman said he might hear some road whine on the highway, but he hadn't heard a whisper from the tires, at least nothing above the exhaust leak.

He moved to the side-view mirror and brushed his blond hair from his eyes. He adjusted the blue-and-white-striped collar on his second-hand Van Heusen shirt. Susan had picked it up at the Thrift Mart just for this trip. Dave knew Susan didn't care much for Peyton, but she understood Dave needed to see him, the brother he hadn't heard from in over five years. She wanted to buy Dave a new dress shirt, and maybe some new Levis, but if she did, they wouldn't be able to pay the rent next month.

While Dave waited near his twenty-five-year-old truck, he watched a Lexus pull up, followed by an Acura, a BMW, and another Lexus. He felt out of place. The city always made him feel that way. His brother made him feel that way.

The smell of crepes, fresh fruit, lobster, and sirloin blew by. Dave's mouth watered. Breakfast to him used to mean a donut and a cola at the convenience store on the way to the mine. Since he visited the doctor, Susan would give him a yogurt or a piece of fruit and a kiss to last until lunchtime. Never crepes. Never lobster.

A limo pulled up in front of Rubio's. Dave felt like Peyton was watching him through the black-tinted windows. Making him wait. After a few minutes, the driver opened the large white passenger door, and Peyton got out. He wore a nicely-pressed pinstripe suit. The sun glistened off his black hair. He feigned looking for Dave among the few well-to-do people walking into the restaurant. Dave waved then tipped his John Deer cap to the driver. As the brothers approached each other, Dave raised his arms to hug Peyton, but Peyton quickly offered his hand, and they shook.

"So good to see you, bro," Peyton said. "So, you remember this place."

Dave did. Since Peyton moved to Provo after high school graduation twenty-two years ago, he would meet Dave and their mother at Rubio's for dinner once a year, until five years ago when she lost her fight with breast cancer. Peyton attended the funeral in Heber but hasn't had contact with Dave since, until the letter and phone call.

Rubio's was always Peyton's favorite. When the Wasps won the 1A state championship, Peyton's high school coach took the entire team there. As usual, Peyton was the hero, the one in charge. He led the offense on a eighty-yard scoring drive with 1:42 left to play, throwing the game winner with five seconds left.

After moving, Peyton took a job cleaning at the stadium after games and events. Eating at Rubio's one night, he met Florence. Six weeks later, they told Florence's father, Mr. Arche, that he was expecting a grandchild. He was less than happy that a country-good-for-nothing would be his son-in-law. But after a month of listening to Florence cry, he finally agreed to a quick Vegas marriage. When Harrison was born, Mr. Arche put Peyton through college at BYU and gave him a management job at the corporate office of Arche, inc., holder of eight new car dealerships throughout the greater Provo area. A year later, Peyton and Florence were remarried in the Mormon temple, a marriage that was supposed to last throughout eternity.

Walking by the limo on the way to the restaurant, Dave noticed the limo driver crouched by the front tire.

"What's the problem?" asked Peyton, tightening his silk tie.

"Sir, we must have picked up a nail. Tire's flat."

"Just get it fixed right away. After breakfast, I want to show my brother the town, the nice areas he hasn't seen before."

Dave was glad he bought the all-terrain tires for his truck. It would take a sixteen-penny nail to penetrate that large tread.

Inside the restaurant, the waiter took their orders. Peyton ordered "the usual," and Dave splurged on a New York steak and a lobster omelet since Peyton was in charge of the bill. Once the food arrived, the conversation dwindled. Dave's eyes wandered from an Ansel Adams photograph to their waiter's black tuxedo to his own cracked knuckles. Peyton pulled on his collar and asked, "Do you like the omelet?"

"Yeah...it's real good."

“This place has sure changed over the years,” Peyton said. “Once upon a time, regular people could afford to eat here. Now it’s just for the privileged. Don’t you wish you could take Susan to a place like this, without spending an entire pay check?”

“I never thought about it. We do okay.”

“But wouldn’t it be nice to give Susan what she deserves? And Ryan too? I know how much you care for them.”

“Guess so.”

“Here’s the thing. Florence and I aren’t together anymore. She filed for divorce a couple of months ago. And Harrison is doing three years at The Point for dealing coke. He never cared for me much anyhow. So, I’m sitting in my office on my birthday, and I’m looking through the window at the city on one side of the room then through the glass at all my corporate employees on the other, and I realize nobody cares about me. Sure, my employees care that they have jobs, and the city people care that they can buy my cars, but they couldn’t care less about *me*. I stayed until well after dark, and not one person wished me happy birthday. I have enough money to buy any one of them, but not one birthday wish.”

Peyton was right. He had plenty of money. Mr. Arche died a few years back and left everything to him and Florence. And with the divorce, Florence didn’t care about the dealerships. She just wanted money, half of it. So, the lawyers were working tirelessly to reach an agreement that kept the dealerships in Peyton’s name and other assets in Florence’s. After giving up half, Peyton would still be worth tens of millions.

“So, I started thinking of who I really cared about, and all I could come up with was you, Susan, and Ryan, even though I’ve never met the boy,” Peyton said. “I want you to come work for me, Dave. I’ll pay you ten times what you make at the mine, a hundred times if I need to.

You can work in the corporate office, any position you want. I just need someone around me who cares about my birthdays. And you'll be able to give Susan and Ryan the things they deserve. What do you think about that?"

Dave looked down, poking at his omelet with his fork. "Maybe things are as they should be. You're a big shot. I'm a miner. Maybe that's how it's meant to be."

"Look at it like this. Mr. Arche took me in and gave me a chance to be a "big shot." I'm giving you the same chance. This is your fate, dammit!"

It wasn't fate Dave was concerned about. It was Peyton. He tried to control every situation, every person. Dave was tired of being controlled, tired of being in Peyton's shadow. He was actually happy when Peyton moved to Provo, happy that he hadn't heard from him in five years.

"You have to take this," Peyton said. "Think about Susan and Ryan. Don't they deserve to be happy? You love your wife, right?"

"More than anything."

"Then give her what she deserves. Make her happy."

* * *

On the way to Biltmore, Provo's high-class shopping area, the limo driver took off his cap and scratched his receding black hair. He explained to Peyton that the next shift driver had called in sick and there was no one to cover after 2:00 p.m.

“Then you’ll just have to stay, won’t you?” Peyton said.

“I would, sir. I really would. But I’m supposed to be off. I can stay till two, but then I’ve got to go with Momma to LaTosha’s spelling bee. She’s made it to district finals this year.”

A trickle of sweat ran down the driver’s neck.

“Listen, Calvin,” Peyton said. “How long has LaTosha been practicing for this?”

“Ever since last year, when she was the last eliminated. Four, five hours a day. She’s got a real good shot to make it to regionals in Dallas. A real good shot.”

“I see. Well, it would sure be a shame for her to win today and not be able to go to Dallas because her daddy didn’t have a job to pay for her trip, wouldn’t it? But if you drive all day for me, not only will you have the money to send LaTosha, but I’ll also give you the time off, and I’ll even pay for your trip. Plus, my brother’s here. You understand how important family is, right Calvin?”

“Yes, sir. I do.” Calvin said as his knuckles turned white against the dark steering wheel.

“We could drive my truck,” Dave interrupted.

“Nonsense, I pay good money for this limo and its driver,” Peyton said.

Calvin pulled the car up in front of Sak’s Fifth Avenue and let Peyton and Dave out.

As the two walked down the street, Peyton told Dave about the Monarch Country Club where Ryan could learn to play tennis and golf. Dave had bought his son a plastic golf set at Wal-Mart for his first birthday, and Ryan spent hours swinging at the white whiffle ball.

Peyton also told Dave about the Success Academy where pre-school through high-school age children can get an advanced education. So advanced, in fact, that eighty percent graduate from BYU concurrent with their graduation from the academy at eighteen years of age. Forty percent go on to Stanford or Ivy League graduate programs. Dave smiled. Although working at

the mine was fine for him, he certainly didn't want his children to work there. His father had said the same thing about his children though before the main shaft collapse took his life. Maybe it is best to get Ryan away from the mine before it's too late, he thought.

"Okay, I'm interested," Dave said. "But I've got to be honest. You've always been a controlling son of a bitch, and it doesn't look like that's changed. I can't work for someone like that. At the mine, I do my job well, and my boss leaves me alone."

"I have changed, Dave. You'll see. I'm just a little on edge because of my birthday and all. And since we're being honest here, I'll admit that I need you. But you need me too. And your family does too."

They walked by Dillard's, and Dave stared at a female mannequin dressed in a strapless teal Jovani evening gown, carrying a Coach black leather handbag with a price tag of \$1,899.00. The model was wearing black Marc Jacobs heels and had a strand of black pearls around her neck.

"How do you think Susan would look in that dress?" Peyton asked.

"Really nice. Wow!"

"I'll bet she would hold her own at the socials too. She's a classy woman."

"I'll bet she would," Dave said.

"You know as a company executive you'd have access to the limos," Peyton added. "And I own a Jaguar dealership, and we sell a shitload of Ford trucks. You and Susan could each pick out one next week. Let's walk to the toy store and pick out something for Ryan, then I'll call the driver, and I'll show you your new office."

Dave imagined Susan's black hair draped over that teal dress while she waved from the seat of a Jaguar convertible. He smiled. Maybe Peyton is right, he thought. Maybe he has

changed. It would be nice to get out of that mine and assure that Ryan got a quality education. And Susan, what a surprise this would be for her. No more shopping at second-hand stores. No more buying used shirts.

Walking toward The Doll House and Toy Store, an old dog followed the two men. They reached a crossing and while waiting for the light, Peyton tried to shoo the dog away. But the light turned green, and the dog continued to follow. The three walked toward the toy store while Peyton kept looking back at the yellow-haired mongrel.

“Who would bring a dog like that to the city?” Peyton asked.

They reached the toy store and Peyton tried to call the dog. “I’m going to take care of this,” he said.

“Don’t worry about it,” Dave said. “It’s just like the dogs at the mine. Ignore it for a few minutes, and it will go away.”

“No, then it will bother someone else. I’ll handle it.”

The collarless dog kept its distance. Peyton unlooped his tie and pulled it through his collar. The dog began to trot away, and Peyton jogged after it. Curious, Dave watched Peyton follow the dog down two blocks and across the street, barely missed by a delivery van. He wondered why Peyton couldn’t leave the dog alone, how the out-of-place dog got lured to the city. Dave was surprised how agile Peyton still was. Perhaps time at the country club and gym did help a person’s health. Peyton caught the creature and wrapped his tie around its neck. He signaled for a taxi, surely to have the animal taken to the pound or perhaps to the hills. Dave wondered why Peyton had to be control every situation.

Dave looked through the display glass at the toy store, first at his own reflection then at a train motoring around a track at the base of a large faux pine tree. The engine moved free and

unencumbered, not an obstacle in sight. He looked back at Peyton who was jogging toward Dave and waving, a big grin on his face. Ever the hero. When Peyton stopped at the walk to cross back to Dave's side of the road, two straight-trucks passed, blocking the line of sight. Dave quickly slid up an alley to another street and flagged himself a taxi.

Driving up Small Mouth Canyon, Dave listened for a whine from his new tires. Nothing. He turned the knob of his radio to find a station. Through the trees he noticed the Miltcalf Mine train, chugging its way back from Provo to Heber. It was making good time. He lowered the rearview to peek at his Van Heusen. The stripes did match his eyes, just like Susan had said. She was happy with his shirt, and so was he. He hoped Ryan was still awake so he could help him repair the wreck. He couldn't wait to get a kiss and a piece of fruit he missed that morning.

Walking Home

Tim and I walked home together after practice, lofting the football over cars on the two-lane road, reliving the winning touchdown from yesterday evening. It was pitch and catch, just like in the game.

“Can you come over?” I asked as we approached Tim’s house.

“No, Amy and I are going to the mall.”

“No worries. I’ll see you at scouts tonight then.”

“Sure, unless Amy buys something special at Victoria’s Secret.” He winked and jogged up his porch steps.

I turned the corner toward my house thinking of Tim and Amy. Why did Tim want to complicate his life with a girlfriend? Doesn’t he have enough going on: homework, chores, scouts, and football? My dad always says, “Keep it simple. Be a kid as long as you can. Adult life is not nearly as fun.” But simple wasn’t Tim’s way. Not with football, not with life. He knew he wasn’t supposed to date until he turned 16. That’s what we’d learned in church through the years. But Amy wasn’t a member of the Mormon church. She didn’t care about our rules. She only cared about dating the football team quarterback, and Tim loved the attention it brought him.

Suddenly, Dean Terry backed his '61 Ford Apache, freshly painted in the original gray color, out of his driveway and spun the tires as he sped toward me. I froze. White smoke surrounded me as he drove by. I could taste the burning rubber. The truck skidded to a stop, and Dean backed it up next to me, leaned out the window, and shouted, "Get in."

Dean already had on his scout leader's shirt, crowded with medals and merit badge patches. He wore an Atlanta Braves baseball cap, his graying hair curling around his ears. A freshly oiled, antique, 12 gauge Ithica shotgun stood between us on the bench seat.

We passed a metal garbage can laying on its side, house number 339 painted on it with black spray paint. Dean shook his head, and his face turned red. A dog knocking over garbage cans and scattering trash had become the neighborhood's latest crisis. Everyone complained about it. But no one took action.

Dean always reminded me of Grizzly Adams, a big, burly, yet quiet-spoken man. He didn't scare me at all, but the neighbors were divided about him. Some saw Dean as the area's vigilante, a dangerous man; others saw him as a problem solver, the neighborhood hero.

When four college students moved into the duplex down the street, everyone complained to each other about the loud music and the late night parties. Dean waited until one evening when most of the neighborhood was outside, weeding their flowerbeds, throwing the baseball with their kids. Dean walked down the street, looking straight ahead. He knocked on the duplex door as everyone watched. He towered above one of the student and explained the unwritten community rules—the way he saw them, at least—and the problem immediately stopped: no more music, no more cars traveling up and down the street after midnight. The students moved out three weeks later.

Dean rolled through the stop sign at the end of our street. He only obeyed laws he agreed with. Last fall, Dean, my dad, and I went pheasant hunting. Dean had no problem shooting seven birds when the limit was only two. But when he arrived back at home, he immediately placed his two Irish setters in their kennel because dogs could not legally roam the streets, although all the rest of the neighborhood's dogs did.

I knew Dean was unique, but I liked him anyhow. He always spent time with me when my dad was away on business. I wondered what adventure Dean was taking me on now.

Dean asked me about the big game. "Heard you were a hero," he said. Even though I wasn't really the hero, the one who took the gamble, I couldn't wait to recount the action.

We had broken the huddle with just over a minute to play. I was the strong-side wide out. Single coverage. I shouldn't have expected anything different. A field goal would win, and on third and one, who would risk a pass? American Fork's team loaded the box. A first down, and the game would be over. We'd run the clock down to nothing and Brandon would kick the gimme through. Tim had other plans though. He couldn't let Brandon get all the attention. When he saw my corner with no safety help, he gave me a little nod and quickly called an audible: "42, Austin, Stop." My stomach tightened. What the hell is he doing? A down, out, and up? He'll need seven seconds. If he's sacked, we lose. Brandon's never kicked one from forty.

I looked at American Fork's corner, a few scraggly orange hairs bending around his chin strap. We'd been matched up all game. I had five catches but all of them short. He must have noticed the nod, the shaking of my hands, or the sweat trickling down my cheek because I saw panic in his eyes too. The band went mute. The cheerleader's screams faded. Parents, cheerleaders, and a few students willing to sacrifice homework for a cold Thursday night JV

game went silent. It was me and him on an island. One would win, one would lose. I was angry at Tim. I hated being in a position where the game depended upon me.

“Being the one for others to depend upon is what makes life worthwhile,” Dean interrupted. I nodded and continued.

I wiped my hands on my jersey. My number 88 felt like sand paper. The corner backed up a couple of steps, blades of grass springing from his cleats. I looked in at Tim, crouched under the center. He looked left, then my way. His eyes said, Relax, we’ve done this a thousand times. True, but that corner was good. I had to sell this like swamp land in Florida to make him bite on the down and out.

Tim yelled, “Hike,” and the island disappeared. I went straight at the Caveman, putting my arms at shoulder level like I was preparing to block him. But, he wasn’t fooled. When I lowered my arms and cut toward the sideline, he was on top of me. My last resort was to pretend the ball was on its way. I looked back at Tim, stretched my arms out and cupped my hands. Caveman bought it. He cut in front of me, hoping to intercept the ball, hoping to be a hero. The rest was easy. I cut up-field. Tim lobbed the ball. I could have walked into the end zone. The corner watched as our team mobbed me. He moped toward the sideline.

I remembered Dean telling us scouts one time that he played corner in high school. I wanted to ask him what he would have done in Caveman’s position. But I didn’t because I already knew. He would have gone for the interception too. “You can’t be great in the eyes of others without taking chances,” he once said.

Dean pulled the truck over to the right side of the road. The Johnson’s cocker spaniel Raider stood across the street three rows deep in a corn field. The stalks were belly high to the dog. Raider would be having pups soon. Keith Johnson said his dad would sell the pups for

\$300.00 each, that they were AKC registered. They would use the money to buy Keith braces for his teeth. Maybe with his bite fixed, he wouldn't spit when he talked.

"Grab me my sunglasses out from the glove box," Dean said.

I leaned down promptly; although, I had never noticed Dean wearing sunglasses before. As I reached my hand for the glove box button, I noticed a sticker on the dashboard: "My child is an honor student at Lindon Elementary School." I found a Book of Mormon, a flashlight, a map, and an old can of Copenhagen, but no sunglasses. I wondered about the chew since Mormons weren't supposed to use tobacco.

My ears rang as the truck rocked to the side. I shot up in my seat. The smell of gun powder filled the truck. Dean placed the gun back between us and as he flipped a U-turn. I felt the hot, black barrel as the gun fell against my arm. I wondered what just happened until I looked at the corn field.

What the hell? What did Raider do to deserve that? So what if she knocked over a few garbage cans. And how did Dean know it was her? What about the puppies? What about Keith's braces? My hands quivered as they lay in my lap.

Dean drove home well under the speed limit. Why did you do that? I tried to scream out, but no words wouldn't come.

As Dean pulled into his driveway, he sat tall, a slight grin on his face. I forced opened the door to escape the man I thought I knew.

"Jimmy."

I stopped.

"I want you to tell everyone what you just saw, everyone! Tell them I fixed the problem."

"Okay, Mr. Terry." That was the first time I had called Dean by his last name.

I turned to walk away. Dean slouched a bit and stared at the floor-board. Is he upset that I called him Mr. Terry? Is he feeling bad about what he did? Surely, he didn't want to kill the dog, but no one else would fix the problem.

I finished walking home. My own garbage can lay on its side; a newspaper ripped into tiny pieces, a plastic Pepsi bottle, and several dirty diapers were scattered over my lawn. I slammed the can upright and began cleaning. Animal Control wouldn't have done anything. They're only concerned with skunks and raccoons. And it's unlikely that Mr. Johnson would have penned up his dog. They didn't have the money for a kennel. Dean did the only thing he could—now the problem is gone. He is the neighborhood hero. The only one who would risk criticism and ridicule to fix a problem.

I finished with the trash and walked to my front door when I heard scratching. The sound made a shiver travel up my back. I turned and watched my white sheepdog clawing at a trash can down the street, trying to knock the lid off.

“Come on Snowball!” I screamed.

As my dog and I walked through the front door, I took a quick glance back to see if Dean was watching.

Second Chances

There was a day when I loved the sun, loved the outdoors. Now I prefer the dark. My new cellmate starts asking questions. The usual stuff: how long you got, what'd ya do? In society similar questions start conversation. In here they're calculated. Although they sound innocent enough, each is a means of establishing dominance, of getting the bottom bunk. In the animal kingdom, the biggest or strongest is top dog. In here muscles don't matter. Storytelling establishes hierarchy. Sounds crazy, but it's true. Whoever has the most vicious tale wins. Everyone knows you can easily make weapons or have them smuggled in. Hell, you can even strangle your mate in his sleep with his own blanket. The most unstable loser is invariably the most dangerous. And I always get the lower bunk.

Larry stretches out on the bottom rack. The horizontal stripes on his jumpsuit clash with his bushy-blond unibrow and handlebar mustache. He's old and wrinkled, perhaps older than I. Wild eyes bulge from his sockets. I step from the light, lean against the cold concrete. Even the Utah summertime heat can't penetrate 12 inches of cement. I let him go first. It's always best to know what you're up against, to know how good your story needs to be.

He tells how he robbed a c-store, then shot up the place. For added effect, he slams his hand into the concrete. A trickle of blood flows down between his knuckles. He finishes with a scowl on his leathery face. A fine performance, really.

“So, what brought you here?” he asks.

I sit down on the floor, cross my skinny legs, ready to recount the story for the umpteenth time. “The scriptures,” I tell him. “The teachings in the scriptures.”

The clutch finally went out in my old Fiat, so Sylvia had to drop me off for work at the city-owned Harper’s Museum. The horizon showed a bluish-purple hue preparing for the sun’s arrival. For January the desert temperature was pleasant, around 45 degrees, so I took off my large coat and left it in my wife’s Saturn.

“How much longer do I have to do this, Oren?” she asked.

“Only until payday, I promise. Then I can get the car fixed.”

“Why so early? The museum’s dark. Nobody’s here.”

“If you’re not five minutes early, you’re late,” I joked. “Plus, Clyde will be here any time. If he ever gets to the point where he can give a raise, I want to be the one to get it.”

“Well, you better get one soon. We’re late on every bill. The Lord can only help us so much.”

“Keep believing,” I whispered in her ear and kissed her cheek.

Just after Sylvia left, Clyde arrived in his rusty Ford Explorer, a burly, white toolbox welded to its rear bumper. He explained that Provo had finished the year with a surplus: enough

cash to restore the city's oldest home, a historical site converted into a museum that dates back to the days of Brigham Young. We were the flooring guys, the last step in the renovation.

After unlocking the front door, he asked me which room I wanted. "I'll give the kitchen and bath to Pete. He's good with tearing up linoleum. But you can have the bedroom, study, or living room. Your choice for being here first."

I walked around, ready to stake my claim on the two-day job. Provo decided to pay for the job to be done right this time. With the first repair, the city had only paid enough for the contractor to lay cheap linoleum and carpet over the dilapidated hardwood. Any respectable contractor would have told the city no, but this one went ahead with the shoddy repair. Clyde said the original wood is still good. Provo was lucky. Not often does time allow for a second chance, especially with wood flooring. Our job was to tear up the mistake, repair and level the existing wood, and then seal it, transforming the floor to its original condition.

The house had newly refurbished, solid, plastered walls—about prison thickness, come to think of it—leading up to twelve-foot ceilings. Deer-antler chandeliers dangled in each room. Period-specific photos hung on the walls. One in the bedroom showed the old downtown area complete with stagecoaches and women walking the streets in western hoop dresses. I longed to live during that time—no son's college tuition to pay, no wife's chemotherapy. "I'll take the bedroom," I shouted, already pulling back the worn-out Berber from a corner.

"Wait a minute," Larry interrupts. "What does any of this have to do with your Mormon Bible?"

I stare at him until his eyes wander, across the floor, up the wall, out the window. He's not nearly as crazy as he appears.

“It’s not just the Book of Mormon,” I tell him. “It’s all scripture. In the Bible, the Apostle Paul explained that the natural man is an enemy to God. And God’s only enemy—as far as I know—is Satan. So the way I see it, every man has a bit of the devil in him, some more than others. And I kept my little devil repressed through the years—held inward with faith and patience—believing that someday God would come through for me, finally giving me the blessings a lifetime of obedience and hard work deserve. And he gave me that blessing all right. And then it was taken, ripped from my grasp when my head was turned. Turns out the devil has patience too. After 50 years of waiting, mine surfaced with a vengeance. You have no idea how large my devil became.”

Larry’s mouth hangs open, but no words come out. I’ve already won. I could ask him to kindly move to the top bed right now, and he would.

I walked toward the aroma of hot chocolate. Clyde couldn’t pay much, but he always did what he could for us like visiting my son in jail or showing up at my wife’s hospital bedside or just providing a little refreshment on an early Friday morning. Pete had just started working on the linoleum. His muscles popped through his t-shirt with every tug at the worn laminate. Despite his physique, he looked much older than his 35 years, probably because of his bald head. As I walked back toward the bedroom, sipping from my cup, Marcus made his grand appearance, an hour late as usual.

“What’s up, old man,” he said, slapping me on the back.

“Have you ever seen a sunrise?” I asked. “You just missed the best part of the day.”

“Whatever,” he mumbled, looking for Clyde so he could offer his well-rehearsed excuse.

Marcus reminded me a lot of my own son Porter. Same long hair. Same wiry build. Same complacent attitude. I always thought Porter was a good kid though. He finished high school, was attending college, and was living in the dorms. He was going to make something of himself. Something more than just a construction worker. Then came the letter addressed to him from BYU. I probably shouldn't have opened it, but I did. I thought it was his grades. I wanted to be proud of him. Turns out, the letter was a denial to his appeal for financial aid. The reason for the rejection was clear: he had collected his aid, then dropped out each of the previous two semesters. It said he would have to pay for at least one semester himself before he could get grants or loans again. I couldn't dial his number fast enough.

"Hey Dad."

"Why haven't you been going to school?"

"I was sick today. What do you mean?"

"Don't bullshit me. I got a letter from financial aid. You've been lying to me for at least a year."

"Dad, chill out. Look, I didn't want to lie. I've had some problems. Been to jail a couple of times. I couldn't tell you or Mom because of..."

"Because of what?"

"Because of your religion, okay. You wouldn't have understood. Listen, I had a drug problem: marijuana, cocaine, heroin, then painkillers. I'll admit to it all. But I've been through detox., and I've been clean now for four months. I just want to get back in school and start over. I just want a second chance."

I was angry. At first at him, then at BYU. If he had to pay for a semester, he would never be able to go back to school. He'd end up working sun up to sun down for two-thousand dollars a

month, hardly enough to live on. So, I called up the university and gave them my Visa number. Figured it would take several years to pay back, but I couldn't let him end up like me.

Larry sits up and gives a crooked grin. "So that's what you're in for: not paying your Visa bill? Didn't know the Bible said anything about debtor's prison."

I can tell he's gaining confidence. He thinks he might keep that bottom bunk, after all. "That and murder," I tell him. "Both the Bible and the Book of Mormon say to do evil to those who do evil to you. Ever heard of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth?"

His grin sinks, and he slinks back against the wall.

I finished pulling back the carpet and Pete and I carried it outside. Going down the white-washed porch stairs, I slipped and nearly fell. Marcus watched us, holding a magazine in one hand and a cigarette in the other. He nodded at us but didn't offer to help. Jack-ass. Back inside, I surveyed the old wood. No repairs needed, just sanding. Clyde had rented a walk-behind belt sander for the center areas and a hand-held, dual-action for the edges. He had already started with the dual, so I grabbed the belt and wheeled it into the bedroom. I opened the window for some ventilation. Marcus' smoke break had apparently turned into a lunch break. He sat on the tailgate of his old Chevy with his new girlfriend, third one this month. She was tall and thin. Couldn't weigh more than a buck twenty. She reminded me of my wife a few months back.

Sylvia was never happy with her weight—always dieting. She wasn't fat, just normal, maybe 140 pounds. Finally the diet started working. She was ecstatic. She hit 130, then 120, then

110. It never occurred to her that something might be wrong until she blacked out walking to the mailbox. It so happened that it wasn't her diet making her lose all that weight but her cancer. The lymphoma. After two weeks in the hospital running tests and six months of chemotherapy, she was in remission. The doctor said she could go back to work once she regained her strength, probably another six months from then. Meantime, the medical bills started coming. "You can't pay the entire bill?" they would ask. "No problem, just pay us a hundred dollars a month." A hundred for each doctor. A hundred for the lab. A hundred for the hospital. Twenty years of hundred-dollar-a-month payments, I figured. And of course, I made just over the maximum for Medicaid assistance. But I kept believing. God would provide a way, I thought. And he did, right there at the museum.

With my earplugs in, I heard only a dull buzz, less noticeable than the vibrations crawling up my arms. Streams of sun brightened the room, and dust particles played tag in the light. In my head, I added bills and searched for solutions: Faith? Bankruptcy? Suicide? I had been through it over and over, and it always came down to those three options. My only ways out. Clyde pulled me from my predicament with a tap on the shoulder.

"Thanks for your hard work, Oren," he said. "If Provo pays what they promised, and if we can finish by Monday night, there's a small bonus for you."

"Thanks, that will make Sylvia happy. And me too, really, thanks."

"How long has Marcus been at lunch?" Clyde asked, looking out the window.

"I'm not sure," I lied.

"I better go round him up, I guess."

When I looked down to switch the sander back on, I noticed a raised board in the floor. Shit! Now I've got to nail the board back, fill the mark, and sand again. I stooped down to begin

the repair, and I saw not one board coming up, but six boards, all next to each other and seemingly attached together. I hammered a thin lever between the raised boards and the fixed ones and slowly pried up. All at once, the six boards gave and popped up, hitting me in the forehead. At first I thought I was dazed because when I looked into the open space in the floor, I saw money, lots of money, dust and money. I pulled a bundle from the makeshift box and started counting. 100 bills, all hundreds. And there must have been 30 or 40 bundles. That's 300 or 400 thousand dollars. Holy sh...I mean, praise the Lord!

I quickly put the money back and placed the lid over the hole. I got up and stomped on it, wedging it back in place. The lid was hardly noticeable. My heart thumped in my chest. I breathed deeply, trying to calm my excitement. That's what I needed: some fresh air to clear my mind. I turned to walk outside and saw Marcus standing in the doorway.

"You finished with that sander?" he asked.

"A...yeah, go ahead. Here, I'll wheel it out for you."

"No man, I got it." And off he strolled with the belt.

Outside, my thoughts ran over each other. What did Marcus see? How will I get the money? I could pay off everything, including the house, and still have two-hundred thousand to buy stocks with. Or take a cruise. Or start my own business. If he saw, wouldn't he have said something? I'll come back for the money over the weekend. Can't wait to tell Sylvia. Of course, he would have said something. He didn't see anything. Wait, is this stealing?

"So, you ain't the bad-ass that you come across as," Larry says. "You stole the money, and you got caught. Same as half the inmates here."

“Did I say taking the money was stealing? If God gives you a gift, is it wrong to accept it? When Moses crossed the Red Sea, did God not close the waters on the army following him, murdering them all?” Moses didn’t complain, so why should I?

Larry slowly looks away, his eyes wide open. I’m yet to tell him any of my evil doings, and he’s already conceded. I’m half tempted to crawl on the lower bunk, wrap my arm around him, and finish my story.

I made sure I was last to leave besides Clyde. While he was locking and checking all the windows and doors, I snuck in behind him and slid the latch on the bedroom window. Sylvia pulled up at seven, just after dusk. The car sputtered and jerked when she took off. She was silent on the drive home, trying to reconcile income and bills, our ongoing dilemma. I was silent too, trying to reconcile right and wrong. If God didn’t mean for me to have the money, why would he give it? What would I tell Sylvia? What if she didn’t understand? How about Porter? He went to jail for much less. What would he think?

After a restless night’s sleep, I awoke to the smell of ham and eggs, normally my favorite meal.

“What’s wrong, Oren?” Sylvia asked. “You’re just picking at your food.”

“Just a little preoccupied, I guess. Thanks for making this though. Maybe, I’ll eat it a little later.”

My predicament or opportunity, depending upon how you look at it, was tearing me apart inside. I walked straight into the bathroom and threw up.

After a day-and-a-half struggle, I decided the money was mine. God had someone place it in that hidden box. He made them forget or die or something tragic. And then He led me to it. He wanted me to have it, and what better day to take it than the Sabbath, plus the entire town would be sleeping off their Saturday night. I drove the Saturn to the museum. I parked in the back. I walked straight to the window, with no thought of getting caught. After all, God was guiding me. I pushed up on the white frame. Some paint flaked off, but the window wouldn't give. I stood on my toes to see the latch. What the hell? It was locked. I looked in at the lid—still in place. I guessed my gift would come on Monday night instead of Sunday morning.

“What would you do with two-hundred thousand dollars, Sylvia?” I asked her after returning home.

“Pay off bills. What do you think?”

“No, I mean if everything was paid, even the house?”

“I would pay for all of Porter's education—make sure he has a good foundation. Then I would give the rest to the church, to repay God for giving me a second chance at life. Why, what would you do?”

“The same, I guess. But I don't know about the church. Everything comes from God, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, he wouldn't give us the money if he wanted it back. Wouldn't you want to go on a cruise?”

Monday morning Sylvia dropped me off at work early again. I checked all the windows and doors to the museum. Still locked. When Clyde arrived and opened up, I went straight to work. The sanding had been finished on Friday, so now we needed to clean up the dust and apply

a clear coat. I took the compressed air tank and hose and dragged it into the bedroom. I closed the door and set a small toolbox on the valve releasing the air. My ears throbbed with the sound, but outside the room, I'm sure it sounded like work going on. I immediately took the lever and pried at the six boards. I needed to see the money again, get that rush again. The lid flipped off abruptly just like on Friday, but this time there was no rush, only disappointment. The money was gone.

Despair overcame me. Faith hadn't worked. Bankruptcy wouldn't solve anything. It would take away the medical and credit-card bills but leave us homeless. Everything I had worked for would be gone. I had thought this out a hundred times. The only option left, my only way out, was suicide. I grabbed the utility knife from the toolbox and walked slowly outside. A shed sat on the back corner of the parking lot. I would sit down inside the shed, slit my wrists and slowly bleed to death. A fitting way to go, really: on a job site where I had spent most of my life using a carpet tool.

I made it half way across the dark parking lot, when a new, jacked-up, Toyota Tundra pulled in, the radio blasting. The engine killed and Marcus jumped out.

"Hey, old man. I got up early to watch the sunrise. Oh, and to quit this lousy job. Thanks for not taking that money. I figured stealing was beneath you, but it's not beneath me. I wasn't going to tell you I took it, but it's obvious nobody knows the money was there or they would have taken it, right? If there was no money, there couldn't have been a crime. Get it, Pops?"

Some would say that I snapped at that moment. But it wasn't me. I just let my devil take over. He ran at Marcus, cut him up bad. By the time he finished, there wasn't a part of Marcus' body that wasn't covered in red: 117 lacerations, they tell me.

I'm staring at the cement floor, deep in thought. When I look up, Larry is standing, ready to climb the ladder.

"That's a hell of a story. 117 slashes before you stopped? I guess the rumors are right: you are crazy."

I look back down at the floor. I've heard that the best storytellers are just over-paid liars. Unfortunately for my soul, I never was very good with stories. Maybe that's why I always get the bottom bunk—I always tell the truth.

"But it wasn't you, right? It was your devil," Larry says.

"Same thing. The devil is a part of the man."

"Yeah, maybe. So, how did it turn out?"

"What?"

"The renovation? How did the museum turn out?"

"Sylvia says it turned out great. It's been 20 years since, but she says it looks the same as the day Clyde finished, the same as it must have looked in Brigham Young's day. I'm due to get out of here next month, and Sylvia wants to take me there, even before we go home. Wants me to face what I did, and then forget about it. But I don't know. I'm scared to leave this place or see that place. There, I said it. I'm scared."

"It's nice that Provo had you guys fix the mistake that other contractor made."

"Guess so."

"I don't get philosophical. Hell, I ain't even religious. But doesn't your Bible say something about repentance, something about starting over?"

I just sit here for a minute. I nod my head slightly and stand up. I walk past Larry and climb the ladder. I move all the way to the top of the bed, into the rays of light, and I look out the small, barred window.

The Escape

The small SUV struggled up the first hill outside Harrisburg. The fuel pump was wearing out, so on any sort of incline, the car would sputter and hesitate as if it couldn't make up its mind about the trip it was on. But June had made up her mind. She was headed to Utah, even if she had to abandon the old Ford Escape and hitchhike to get there.

The truth was she loved the yellow Escape she had recently nicknamed "the mouse" for the squeak the belts made whenever she started the car. Her dad had given it to her for her sixteenth birthday, and together they had put a lot of miles on the reliable SUV. But that was two years ago. Recently, both June's life and the 2001 Ford had begun to fall apart.

The Pennsylvania Turnpike was beautiful in May. Wildflowers grew in the median. Vast meadows separated thick forests. The sun hovered above the treetops joining June on her trip west. She passed a freeway sign: Pittsburgh 160 mi. Once out of the Appalachians on the other side of Pittsburgh, she would have flat ground until the Rocky Mountains in Colorado. She planned to catch I-70 and make it to Wheeling, Ohio and stop before dark. She wanted to go further, but she couldn't bear the thought of traveling in the dark, doing anything in the dark. She wished she had started the trip earlier. But it wasn't until mid-afternoon at her family's home in

Philadelphia that her mother had pushed her over the edge, and June immediately had to get away.

June had never been very close to her mother. It's not that they didn't love each other; it's just her father was the one she went to whenever she had a problem. He always seemed to understand. Her mother stuck to making meals, doing laundry, and balancing the checkbook while her dad did the nurturing. But ever since June's father died, her mother was too busy to handle his role and hers. She did her best to be caring, but June's problems and feelings were often neglected.

Lately, June's mother was running on empty. She had to moonlight as a waitress at the Black Bear Diner after her nursing shift each day just to pay rent. Sam and Christy had to get themselves to and from school on their own, a difficult task for an eight and an eleven year old. When June's mother came home between jobs, she had piercing questions for June: "Why isn't the laundry done? Did Sam do her homework? When are you going grocery shopping for us? What the hell is wrong with you?"

The Escape was persistent up the hills and into Pittsburgh. And rolling down into Wheeling, it made good time. June started to fidget against the cloth seat when the sun fell beneath the darkening mountains. She looked down at the melted skin on her left arm and pressed the gas pedal to the floor.

It was just after dark six months ago when smoke started rolling in under June's bedroom door. Her dad came barreling in and without a word threw her on his shoulder and pressed through the smoke toward the living room. June's arm began to burn as her father ducked and ran through a wall of fire and out the front door. He coughed as he laid her on the neighbor's wet grass. She looked up at her mother and her two sisters, all shivering under blankets a neighbor

had quickly provided. The cloudy winter sky was orange from the flames shooting through the asphalt shingles. June heard sirens in the distance. “Where’s Rags?” she yelled. Her father looked at her tear-streaked face, turned, and headed back into the blaze.

June laid her head on the oil-stained pillow at the Econo Lodge in Wheeling. The room had an odd, stale odor. It reminded her of curry, but the hotel did not have a restaurant. Her cell phone rang. She sent her mom to voice mail again. June knew her mother wouldn’t leave a message. Her mom was far too impatient to wait for a response. She would just try again in an hour. June turned her phone off, and staring at the lime-green curtains, she fell asleep.

The next day heading into St. Louis, the Escape began to shake. June’s cell phone rattled off the dash, and her jaw began to ache. She took her foot off the gas and started to pull off the road when she heard a loud pop, and the steering wheel turned hard left. She muscled the car to the roadside and got out of the SUV to a smell of hot rubber. Her left front tire was off the rim with the steel cord showing through all along the outer edge. Her father had shown her how to change a flat when she first got the vehicle, so she walked around to the lift gate to get to the spare. She pulled up the access panel and dragged the dusty tire from the wheel cutout. When she dropped the tire on the ground expecting a high bounce, her shoulders slumped. The spare was also flat.

Her father, Pops as June affectionately called him, had done all the maintenance on the Escape. He changed the oil, rotated the tires, and filled the washer reservoir, all while she watched. In fact, every weekend they did something together with the car. One weekend, they took it up to Paradise Lake to go fishing. Another, they took it to a trailhead in West Virginia to hike the Appalachian. If there was no excursion planned, they would wash the Escape and lay in

the seats talking or listening to the radio. Away from school, Pops was June's best friend. Rags and the Escape were close seconds.

A hundred cars passed June on I-70 West. None stopped. Finally, she called a tire shop on her cell phone, and they sent a tow truck to pick her up. The driver smelled like grease and sweat and had missing teeth. He spit when he talked, so June tried not to converse. As the awkward moments turned into an hour, June's mind began to play tricks on her. She watched the driver slowly move his hand from his leg to hers. He licked his lips as he stared at her blond hair. When June called Aunt Lucy to ask if she could stay with her and Uncle Bobby for a while, Lucy had warned her about the dangers of an eighteen-year-old woman travelling cross country. Actually, Lucy talked about the dangers, and June rolled her eyes. Now, June closed her eyes and held her breath. The tow truck rolled over a curb as it pulled into the Texaco station. June opened her eyes and exhaled. The driver's hand was on his leg, like it had always been. Relieved but still shaken, *next time I'll listen to Aunt Lucy*, she thought.

Bobby and Lucy were Mormons. That's why June asked to stay with them. She had heard they believed that life goes on after death and that families can live together forever. She wanted to know more. She wanted to see her father again, tell him she was sorry for sending him back into that fire.

June drove to Columbia, Missouri. She hadn't planned on paying for a tire, so she stayed in another cheap motel and skipped dinner. She showered to try to rid herself of the image of a naked tow truck driver licking his lips and spitting all over her. After settling into bed, she realized she had left Philadelphia in such a hurry that she hadn't called Aunt Lucy. June dialed her phone.

"How are you, sweetheart?" Lucy asked.

“Good, I’m on my way to your place.”

“Well, okay. What brought this on all of the sudden?”

“It was Mom. I couldn’t take her constant nagging any more. I had to get away.”

“Okay, we’ll talk more tomorrow when you arrive.”

“Wait! How do you know I’ll be there tomorrow? Mom called you didn’t she? Why can’t she just live her own life and stay out of mine?”

“Let’s talk tomorrow, honey. I can’t wait to see you.”

“Okay.” June took a deep breath. “But it will probably be Thursday. I had a little setback outside St. Louis.”

June had never been away from the East Coast, and she was astounded by the miles and miles of fields. Corn, alfalfa, beets, soybeans, potatoes, and wheat. Mile after mile. Each farmhouse looked like a cottage. She pictured a happy family having dinner. A father at the head of the table. Children talking and laughing. A mother serving a roast. No unreasonable expectations. No yelling. No remorse. She had escaped a bad situation. She would find out how to meet her father again. And she would start over.

After calculating the money gas would cost for the rest of the trip, June decided to sleep in her car, so she would have money for food on Thursday. She pulled over at a truck stop just west of Salina, Kansas. There were only two diesels in the lot, so she stopped near them for safety. She kept thinking about Aunt Lucy’s cautions. Even though the sun had barely gone down, June easily drifted to sleep. She and Pops, on occasion, would fold the rear seats of the Escape down and lay in the back, looking at star through the open moonroof. This time, June had the moonroof securely closed.

Salina, Kansas to Springville, Utah is a twelve-hour drive, so June got up at 6:00 to begin. She was making great time through the plains east of Denver. Then the Escape began to sputter. The fuel gauge read one quarter full, so she knew it must be the fuel pump finally giving up. The engine killed and June coasted to the shoulder. She heard gravel pop under her tires until the Escape came to a halt. She spun the starter several times without luck.

Three nights before she left home, June's mom asked to talk to her. They sat down on her bed. "Honey, you need to get over your father's death," her mom said, crossing her arms. "I know it's been hard, but it's been six months. I really need your help around here."

"You don't understand. He was everything to me. You couldn't possibly understand."

"He was my husband, June. Don't you think I miss him too?"

"Sure, but not like me. It's just different. I can't stop thinking that I should have gone after Rags. She was my dog after all."

"So you blame yourself for their deaths? That's why you can't function? That's why you stay in your room all day? That's why you won't lift a finger to help anyone?" Her voice rose with each question. "Don't you know we've all thought that we should have been the one to go in after Rags? June, I can't work two jobs and take care of your sisters without your help. You need to snap out of this!"

"Get out!" June screamed as she climbed under her bedspread.

June tried to start the Escape one last time. When it wouldn't, her first call was for a tow truck. Her second was for Aunt Lucy.

"I'm outside Denver at a shop getting my fuel pump replaced. Could I please borrow some money on your credit card? I'll get a job right away and pay you back," June said.

“You know, June. It will be so nice to see you and have you stay with us, but I think your question is better directed at your mother. Being an adult is stressful, isn’t it?”

June planned on fixing the Escape as soon as she repaired her own life. She thought she could get a job, go to college, all the things she had planned on before Pops died. But first, she needed to pay for a fuel pump.

June’s mother had finally left a voice message on June’s phone. June entered her code and listened. “June, I never wanted to hurt you. I’m just not good at expressing myself like your father was. I’m glad Aunt Lucy can help you since I couldn’t.”

June dialed her mother back.

“Oh June, thanks for calling. I’m so very sorry. I’m just doing the best I can. Someday you’ll understand how much I needed your help.”

“Mom,” June interrupted. “I...I...I’m stuck in Denver, and I need some money to get to Aunt Lucy’s. Could you give your credit card number to the repair shop owner? I promise to call you when I get to Utah.”

“Sure, honey. Whatever you need. Put him on.”

Around 7:00 p.m. June arrived at Lucy and Bobby’s. Bobby came out first and said, “Hi Baby,” then he opened the liftgate to grab June’s things.

“Let those be, Bobby,” Aunt Lucy said. “I’ll bet June’s starving. Let’s go to town and eat.”

They all piled into Bobby’s Town Car. The air conditioning pushed aside the hot Utah desert air. June took a deep breath and released the stress from the last six months. Finally she had made it. The beginning of her new life started now.

The town of Springville is filled with charming shops. The main street is a pedestrian-only alley, so Bobby parked on one end, and the three of them walked along the quaint store fronts to the other end of Main. “You’ll love this new place,” Aunt Lucy said. “A husband and wife own and operate it. A real Ma and Pa restaurant.

Inside, the smells of Italy made June’s mouth water. She could almost taste Minestrone soup, Linguini with Alfredo, and fresh oven-baked rolls from the air. They sat down, and an older woman approached. The woman took everyone’s order while June watched the chef. He reminded her of her father. Hard working. Handsome.

“Aunt Lucy, tell me about the hereafter,” June said. “What’s it like?”

“That’s why you travelled 3000 miles, to ask me that?”

“Sorry, I’ve just been thinking about my dad a lot lately, wondering where he is now, what he’s doing.”

“Sure you have, sweetheart. I think it’s a lot like this life. Maybe nicer. But I think we’ll still have problems we need to work together to overcome.”

“What about my dad? Will I ever see him again?”

“Our church believes that everyone will live forever with their earthly families. Not just you and your father but your sisters and mother too. Don’t you think your dad would want you all together?”

The chef rang a bell signaling that June’s order was ready. As he moved from the counter, he knocked over a jar spattering a liquid onto the grill. Flames shot up to the ceiling, and the man stumbled backwards, slapping at the fire on his apron. June watched the waitress run to the man to assure that he was okay. “Marcel,” she yelled. “Please come here!”

A teenage girl appeared from a back room, and after taking instructions from her mother, served Bobby, Lucy and June.

“Is the chef all right?” June asked.

“My father? Yes, he’s fine. My mom just freaks out some times.”

“Well, it’s a good thing you’re around to help,” Lucy said.

June stared outside at the darkening sky. She couldn’t stop the tears.

Walking back to Bobby’s car while browsing the shops, June watched families walking together, some hand in hand. She thought of her mother coming home to a dirty house late each night after 14 hours of work. She thought of her young sisters, making their own meals, getting themselves ready for school. Then she thought of her father. Surely, he was disappointed in her. He had taught her better. Everything, even a family, needs maintenance. And when something breaks, it needs to be fixed.

June sobbed the entire way to Lucy’s without saying a word. Getting out of the car, she looked at Uncle Bobby and Aunt Lucy and smiled. “You are the sweetest couple I know. Thank you so much.” Then June walked over to her Escape. It started right up. And she drove away.

Three miles up the dark road, away from the town’s lights, she dialed her mother’s number. This time *she* reached voice mail. “Mom, I’m coming home. Everything is going to be all right after all.” She paused. “Do you think I could get your credit card number? I’ll pay you back as soon as I get there and get a job. I promise.”

Making Arrangements

I peered down the sights of my Winchester 30-30. The rough redwood dug into my arms as I leaned into a rest between the deck's upper rail and its vertical support. The weight of my school backpack pushed me forward. The gun's cold, blue metal stung my hands and cheek. A breeze carried the scent of cleaning solvent and oil.

"Gotta adjust for that wind," my old man said in a low, raspy voice. "Wait till they stop, pick one, and squeeze the trigger. Just like huntin' deer."

The sun peeked over the hill just above my target. I squinted then focused again. A drop of sweat swelled on my forehead then trickled down the bridge of my nose. I lowered my head and rubbed the moisture away on my arm, my index finger still firm to the trigger. Refocusing down the barrel, I watch Mac Davidson and Tommy Jones crawling along a ridge just east of our house.

"You scared, boy?" the old man whispered. "They's trespassin' us. Gotta be done, else everyone and their dogs'll be comin' up here. Just pull the trigger, head to school, and I'll take care of the rest."

Papa was right. Most of the town had been up here at one time or another. Trying to get a peek at our house on the hill. Trying to settle their curiosity. Very few dared cross our fence

though. Those who did had no idea the risk they were taking. They had no idea what Pa was capable of. If I shot one today, word would get round. Sacrificing one now would save several in the future.

The two boys stopped and lay down in the sage, pointing and plotting their route to our home. Guess they figured I was already gone to school. Guess they hadn't heard about Pa. I knew both the boys from school, but that didn't matter. I knew all the animals around the house too. Didn't make no difference. When me and Papa got hungry, we'd kill one just the same.

I put my sights on Mac. Tommy Twelve Toes made a bigger target, but Mac was a bully and lately he had been flirting with Audrey, my girlfriend, or soon-to-be girlfriend I should say. And I wasn't about to let Mac screw that up. My old man said it didn't matter which boy I shot. Since it didn't matter, I chose Mac.

Mac's blond hair stopped blowing in the cool, fall breeze. And he sat up just a little, giving me a clear shot. I never missed anything under 200 yards, and he was about 165 away. Still, I'd never shot a person before.

"Wind's stopped," said Papa. "Don't worry about nothin'. Take a deep breath, let it out, and give her a slow squeeze."

"Yes, sir." And I was just about to when over Mac's shoulder, I saw someone else climbing our fence. It was Audrey, her floral dress snagging on a barb. Damn! I couldn't shoot Mac in front of her. A Mormon girl would never understand that some people just needed killed, that Pa needed to keep the town scared of him so they would keep their distance.

I lowered my front sight a few inches and squeezed off a round. The bullet hit the ground just below Mac's face, spraying him with sand. He looked toward the deck, and for just a moment our eyes met. I never saw an animal run after being shot at as fast as those boys ran. Of

course I never missed many to know. They ran towards Audrey, who had already crossed back over the wires, and they all disappeared into the budding, white aspens.

My old man grabbed the gun from me, cocking out the brass shell. “You’d best get to school,” he said. I knew I’d get a licking when I got back home. Had no idea I’d get one before that though.

I took my time getting to school, trying to think up an excuse Papa would believe for the missed shot. I slowly walked along the river trail, a straight path into Payson. The sound of the clear water tumbling over gray, rounded stones filled the air, and thoughts of Audrey started to fill my mind. What was she doing with Mac? He’s been after her for awhile, but she’s not his type. She’s quiet and pretty, just the opposite of him.

Papa warned me about girls, but I didn’t listen. Don’t let no woman distract you from what you’re doing, he would say. And he was right, ‘cause just when I was thinking about Audrey’s soft, brown hair and her deep green eyes, Mac and Tommy jumped me. Once they had me on the dirt, Tommy held my arms while Mac started kicking. The first blow from his steel-toed boots caught me in the ribs. I curled, so my legs would take the next few blows. Mac aimed higher and caught me with a couple good head shots. Everything seemed in slow motion, and I didn’t feel nothing, at least until the beating stopped. Funny thing was...I was still thinking about Audrey.

“That’s enough Mac. You’ll kill him,” Tommy said.

“And why shouldn’t I? He just tried to kill us,” Mac said, turning to leave.

“Stay away from the girl,” I yelled then spit blood onto the dark soil. “Next time she won’t be around to save you.”

Mac turned and stared at me, not saying nothing. But I could tell he knew there would be a next time.

It took me over an hour to make it to school. I dragged my left leg, plowing a small furrow from the river to the single-room schoolhouse along the trail and the gravel road. My right arm covered my ribs, that I was sure were broken. Before walking in, I saw my reflection in the door glass. I cringed. My straight black hair was matted with dried blood. I had a knot on my forehead the size of the door handle, and my left eye was swollen shut with a deep cut extending from its outer edge to my left ear. A laceration that my old man would later sew up with fishing line.

Everyone sat at their wooden desks eating lunch. The ruckus of adolescent voices turned to silence when the door slammed shut.

“Come on up here, Willy,” Mr. Marshal said. “I hear you had a run-in with a couple of your classmates this morning.”

I wasn’t about to say what happened. I knew that’s what he wanted, so he could tell everyone how I got what I had coming. “I didn’t get my homework done,” I said.

“I think that’s the least of your worries right now,” he said. “Get out of my class and don’t come back until you’re cleaned up. I hope you learned a lesson.”

I looked around the room. Streams of light stretched through cracks in the wooden walls. The clock on the wall stopped moving. I slowly stared at nineteen of the twenty faces in the room. No compassion. No sympathy. They were just like their parents, according to Papa. Nice

enough to each other, but when they came across someone who didn't believe in their book, their Mormon Bible, they would treat him like dirt. Then I noticed Audrey. She had tears running down her cheeks. I wanted to run to her. But Mr. Martin stood up from behind his big, dark desk. He pointed toward the door, his finger shaking like an oak leaf in a brisk wind. I silently vowed never to return to that school, and I walked outside.

It was a good quarter mile to Main Street where I could find the doctor. The gravel road turned to pavement as the country seem to change into civilization. As civilized as an isolated, mountain settlement in the middle of Utah could be. As I reached the diner on the edge of town, I started wobbling like I just got off a spin on a desert mustang. Guess I blacked out, 'cause next thing I remember, I was laying on the ground with a small crowd around me.

"The doctor is on his way," someone said.

"What's your name?" asked another.

I don't think I would have said even if I could have. Not to these people. These Mormons Papa had told me about. When the doctor arrived, he told the crowd he would not treat me. "Don't you know who this is?" he asked. "It's Darrell Parker's boy." The crowd suddenly lost its charity and slowly dispersed. Through one blurry eye, I watched Audrey approach.

She must have gotten her looks from her ma because her pa looked like most of the other miners: weathered, scruffy, and dirty. Audrey's momma died giving birth, so Audrey never met her outside the womb. Her pa revolted by working more, and then he started drinking, something most Mormons never did. Neighbors felt sorry for Audrey, not because her mamma died but because her pappa had fallen into transgression. They raised Audrey, passing her from home to home, always back to her intoxicated father at night. So, Audrey attached to no one. Maybe that was her bond to me. We both missed out on love from a caring mother. I probably should have

taken Pa's advice to stay away from her—from all women, really—but I couldn't resist Audrey's bright face, her soft skin, her developing curves.

She helped me to my feet and braced me as we walked away from Payson, promising each other we would never return.

* * *

The door to Papa's old Chevy truck squeaks as I tug on it. It takes all my weight to pull the rusty hinges apart. I drive the truck occasionally around my property, but I've never taken her into town. I haven't been to Payson in over twenty years, not since my encounter with Mac and Tommy. Still, I remember. I remember my promise to Mac, what I said I would do to him when Audrey wasn't around to save him.

About a half-mile down the dirt road, I come to my outer gate. I push the shifter up into park and get out of the truck. It takes a minute for the dust to clear enough to see. It settles on the truck, and I can hardly see the faded blue color. I had the gate installed just after my old man's heart attack. Sometimes I think it was good that he died. Like me, he had revenge plans for Mac. But he had plans for Mr. Marshal and the town doc too. Better dead than in jail, he used to say. And I agree with that.

Papa's buried under a big oak near the river. I made him a small headstone. Mama's grave is a few paces away, but no one knows. It's unmarked. I don't remember Mama much. I

was about five when she had her accident. Pa said she was good as any woman could be. But a woman shouldn't push a man to do what shouldn't be done. That was Ma's problem and Audrey's too.

Nobody trespasses anymore. I scare them, I guess. At least that's what Uncle Buck says. He's actually not my uncle. I got no family left. Buck's the town drunk. Stumbled onto my property one day and been coming up here ever since. The Mormons won't have much to do with him, so I try to help out. He brings me supplies and tells me about the people in Payson, the people from my class. I give him whiskey money. That keeps him coming back. Besides him, only a few people have been at the ranch: the sheriff, a lawyer, my insurance man, and Audrey, of course.

After the gate, the road turns to switch-backs then to a half-mile section with steep cliffs on each side. I used to walk to school in thirty minutes, following the creek-side trail. It will take me longer to get into town in this rickety old truck, but I have to make the trip. Sure wish I didn't.

The washboard road rattles an old, glass medicine bottle from under the seat. I reach down to grab it, and I stuff it in the door-panel pocket. I push the town map Uncle Buck drew for me between the seat bottom and back. The gray vinyl is cracked. I see more foam than covering. I think about the sequence of my visits, exactly what I'll say. Never planned to visit Payson again. Never thought I'd have to make funeral arrangements so soon.

The town is not exactly like I remember, but it's just like Uncle Buck's map, so I'll be okay. There are a couple new buildings and some have been torn down. Most have been remodeled

sometime along the way. The old schoolhouse has been replaced by a new brick building. Payson Elementary, a sign says. I pull into the first parking stall on Main Street, look at my map. Guess I better go see the sheriff. Get the toughest out of the way first. I back the truck out and continue into the center of town. The sheriff's office sits on the corner of Main and Center. It's an old building, but it's been freshly painted. Tan with blue trim. The windows are tinted, so I can't see in. Still, I know who's inside.

I walk up to the front door. The window is clean, not a streak. The doorknob is brass. It reminds me more of a candy store than a jail front. Entering, I see the sheriff first, sitting behind a large desk.

"Well, I'll be damned. Willy Parker," he says. "What brings you into town?"

"Coffee was old, so I ran across to the deli," interrupts a voice from the back room. Following his voice into the room is Mac, the sheriff's deputy. He sees me and drops two cups of coffee, one splashing on his neatly-pressed pant leg. His ring-less hand covers his gun. "What the hell is going on here, Sheriff?" he stammers.

"I think Willy is just about to tell us. Let's all have a seat and relax." The sheriff points to two single leather chairs in front of his desk.

"I'll stand," says Mac.

I sit down and tell them I need to report a death. My wife Audrey's.

"You son of a bitch!" Mac yells. "What did you do to her?"

The sheriff stands, moves between me and Mac.

"Didn't do nothing," I say.

"Why don't you tell us what happened?" the sheriff says.

I look around at the room. It's every bit as pretty inside as out. Spotless white walls. Freshly vacuumed carpet. Even a new television set in the corner. I guess there's not much crime to fight in Payson since Papa passed.

"You know how I have those long, steep stairs leading off my porch down to the driveway."

"Yeah, I remember carrying your father's body down those. Took four men. One walking down and three pushing up."

"Papa and I built them ourselves. Made from the slate in our canyon. Should have had someone else do it, I guess. Well, Audrey must have slipped and fallen down them. Hit her head at the bottom. Blood all over."

"I'm very sorry," Sheriff says.

"Why don't you tell us how you coerced her into marrying you in the first place," Mac says. "And why neither of you have been to town since."

"Don't like the people here much," I say, looking straight at him.

"Did I ever tell you, Sheriff, how Willy here tried to kill me? He would have too, had he not been such a shitty shot."

I smile. Can't help it. Little does he know it was Audrey, not my shitty shooting, that saved his life. But that won't happen again.

"Willy, I'm going to need to see the body. I'll start the paperwork now. Can I stop by this evening? I'll bring the funeral boys with me. They'll arrange everything for you."

"Sure Sheriff. I've got business in town. Is after six okay?"

"Yup. See you then."

Outside, I pull the map and a pen from my pocket and put an “X” across the sheriff’s office. I also cross out the funeral home. I walk past the deli and across the street to the newspaper building. Audrey doesn’t have family left. Her old man died a few years ago. But I want those from school to know she’s passed. When I walk in, the smell of ink overwhelms me. Smells just like those nasty newspapers Uncle Buck swipes off from doorsteps and brings me.

“How do you stand that stench?” I ask the big-busted receptionist.

“Excuse me?” she snaps, eyeing me from head to toe.

“I need to place an obituary.”

“Fill this out.” She pushes a clipboard at me. “And it’s ten dollars.”

I pull out my wallet, take out an old bill. Then I unfold an old newspaper page. “I don’t need the form.” I hand her back the clipboard and give her my money. “I want it to read just like this one, with the name changed of course.” I slide the page, with a circle around a large ad, across the counter. I had already written “Audrey Parker” above the obituary. “Really beautiful writing,” I say as I walk out.

I didn’t know Papa could write until he placed Mama’s ad. After we came onto our money, I remember a big argument. Pa loved Mamma just like I loved Audrey, but a woman’s got to know her place. Ma wanted to go to town to see their friends. Like they used to. Pa wouldn’t allow it after what the town had done to him. Mama started yelling and throwing things. Pa calmly led her outside, and that was the last I ever saw of her.

I draw an “X” over the newspaper building and start walking toward my insurance agent’s building at the end of town. The sun is about mid-sky now, and I’m beginning to sweat. I notice some spring tulips in front of City Hall: red, yellow, orange. A flock of geese fly overhead forming a “V” in the sky. Their barks break the country silence. This really is a beautiful town,

besides the people. The people who wouldn't help me after my beating. The people who beat Papa after the encounter.

Funny how men never forget anything, but women always do. Pa never forgot those who beat him, but Mama did. I'll never forget Mac and Tommy's beating, but just last week Audrey wanted to go in to town to patch things up. Patch things up with Mac after twenty years.

"Never," I told her.

"We can't go on living like this," she said.

"Living like what?"

"In isolation. I need people to talk to. Friends to see."

"You didn't need friends when I brought you here. All you needed was me. Now you want more?" I asked.

"I need more. And you need more too. I've seen what living alone did to your father—and what it's doing to you. If you still love me, the way I still love you, you'll fix things, so we can go to town like regular people."

I was about to set her straight—tell her how regular we are compared to those Mormons—when Uncle Buck drove up with supplies for the week.

"You're a day early," I said.

"Had to. I'm out of whiskey. Can you pay me today? That damned Deputy Mac took my last bottle. Said I was setting a bad example. Gad, I hate that guy."

"Really?" I said. "Let's go for a walk and talk about things."

A newer Buick slowly drives by. The man driving it stares at me until he's passed and then he looks at me in his rearview mirror. I don't recognize him, but he must know me. Then I look around. People are everywhere, outside each shop and building, but no one is moving. They are staring, and some of them are pointing. I feel important. I feel odd. I rub the scar between my left eye and ear, trying to figure out why everyone is watching. Then I realize it's my eye twitch and the limp. They know I'm Darrell Parker's son.

As I arrive at one of the only new buildings in town, I double check my agent's name. Blaine Jorgenson is not listed on the directory outside the building, but All Property and Casualty is. So, I find suite four and walk inside.

When I ask to see Blaine Jorgenson, the woman says, "Oh, I'm sorry. Mr. Jorgenson passed away several years ago. His brother Tommy now runs the agency."

"Tommy Twelve Toes?" I ask.

"Excuse me?"

"Can I speak with him?"

The secretary picks up the phone and tells Tommy he has a client waiting.

Can't believe Uncle Buck didn't tell me that Blaine died. I guess you can't trust a drunk for everything. Blaine was a good man. Never pushed his religion on me like others in my class. Never made fun of me like Mac did for not going to church. When I bought the life insurance for Audrey and didn't buy a policy for myself, he never asked no questions. I told him I needed the insurance on her just in case things went bad, and that was good enough for him.

The secretary leads me into Tommy's office and closes the door behind me.

"What can I do for you?" Tommy asks, looking up from his paperwork. When he sees me, a sick look creeps across his face. I smile.

“Hello, Twelve Toes.”

“Willy...Willy Parker. I haven't seen you since...I mean...heard you married Audrey.”

“That's why I'm here. She's dead. Audrey's dead.”

“What happened?”

“She hit her head on some rocks. A terrible, terrible accident.”

Tommy relaxes a bit and his color starts to come back. He seems to be doing well. His office is trimmed in hardwood. A bookcase full of hardbacks against the wall. Window overlooking the town. A photo of him, a woman, and three kids, all boys. But he's already got gray hair. Thirty-six, thirty-seven maybe and gray hair? Must be terrible dealing with the Mormons in this town.

Papa couldn't deal with them. When that genius engineer from Salt Lake City knocked on Pa's door to sign a land lease to drill for natural gas, the town wanted a piece of the action. Most everyone worked in the town's coal mines and figured anything under the ground was everybody's. When Pa wouldn't budge, the City Council tried to annex his land into the town's boundary so they could at least tax the drilling company. Payson had thoughts of new parks, a swimming pool, and fireworks on the Fourth of July. But the company only had so much money to offer, and Papa wanted it all.

“Why you here to see me, Willy?”

“I'm not. I'm here to see Blaine. But seeing he's buried somewhere, you'll have to do. I've come after my money. Blaine set me up with one of those policies on Audrey. I want to cash in.”

“Do you have the death certificate? I'll have to see that, then fill out some paperwork.”

“Sheriff and funeral boys are coming to my place today. Figure they’ll fill out the certificate.”

“Oh, this just happened.”

I just nod. I’m already tired of Tommy. He hasn’t changed a bit. Always following. Doing his best to please others instead of pleasing himself. I get up and start to walk out. “I’ll get you that certificate you need,” I say.

“It’ll take about a month before you get a check. The paperwork and all. Hope that’s okay.”

I nod again.

“Willy...why’d you shoot at us all those years ago? We were just kids.”

“Well, you and Mac was trespassing me. Why did you beat me up? I was just a kid too, remember.” I walk out and close the door behind me. “Sure like Blaine a lot better,” I mutter as I pass the secretary. I can see in her eyes she agrees.

One more stop. Outside, I check the directory again. George Yost, Suite 301. I look up at the only window on the third floor. Sure is a pretty building. Maybe I should’ve stayed in school to be a lawyer or an insurance man instead of some damned rancher. Nah, wouldn’t want to work here, not with these people.

When Papa refused to have his land annexed, Payson had a big meeting to decide what to do, how to get a piece of the action. Mormons pay one tenth of their wages to the church as tithing, but everyone knew the church wouldn’t get a penny from Pa. So, most of the town attended, trying to figure out a way to get some of our money. Pa and his shotgun showed up late but made a big entrance. He looked down the barrel at the city administrators. Told them to back off or they’d be sorry. Scared them pretty good. That was the last he heard from the town for a

while. He signed a twenty-year lease with the drilling company, all the money up front. The town got nothing, and after the first well dried up, so did the company from Salt Lake. Papa built a big house and the town got jealous. One evening about twenty men ambushed him while he rode pushing cattle. They beat him bad. Mama took him to the doctor, but he refused to treat Pa. Later, several of the men came up missing, but nothing could be proven. Recon they're buried somewhere up in the hills.

I go back inside and walk up the staircase. These stairs are rubbery. Not slick like slate stone. George's door is hardwood. No window. The knob is locked, so I knock. George opens. He's a big man. The size of two of me. He's old but strong.

"Come on in, boy," he says.

Reminds me of Papa. Doesn't smile much. Doesn't have to. He's honest, so he doesn't have to fool anyone.

"I was going to see you next week," he says. "You know your old man's fund is running out. Next month will be your last payment."

"I figured as much."

"What you gonna do? Those cattle you run won't support you. They're as skinny as you are."

I don't tell him about Audrey. He loves her like I did. Everyone who knows her does. Anyways, he'll find out from the newspaper.

"Not sure. But if I come onto some more money, would you manage it for me?" I ask.

"That's not really my line of business. But if you want me to—if you trust me—I will."

"Papa always said you were the only good man in Payson. And I agree. Can you come to my place next month?"

“I’ll stop by,” he says. “And one more thing...your father was a good man, but he couldn’t let things go. He could never forgive. There are a lot of good people in this town, many of them Mormons. I hope you’ll see that someday. Take care of yourself and your woman too.”

He slaps me on the back, knocking the wind out. I stumble out the door and lean over the rail until the air comes back. Hurts like hell. Guess he doesn’t know the how the Mormons treat outsiders like me and Papa. Can’t believe he’s one of them.

I hurry down the stairs, across the street, and along the walk back to Papa’s truck. Got a lot of work to do before six p.m. Not much time to stage an accident. I tug on the truck’s door, slide inside, and fire up the straight six. I yank the lever into reverse, turn my head, and back out. When I turn to pull ahead, I see Mac, standing in front of my truck, his left hand still covering his revolver. Perfect timing. I look down at the last item on my list: “Call Mac.” He walks up next to the truck, and I roll down the window.

“You didn’t deserve her,” he says. “I’ll never understand why she chose a loner like you.”

I roll my eyes. How could he not see the difference between me and him? No wonder he’s never married.

“Sheriff wants me to ask you—for the paperwork—what time you found her...when did Audrey die?”

“What if you could save her, Mac? What if her accident hasn’t happened yet? Would you come alone?” I put the tranny into drive and speed away. In the rearview, I see Mac searching his pockets, grabbing for his car keys. If Uncle Buck’s earned his paycheck, he’s cut Mac’s radio wires, and he’ll herd cattle into the cliff section of the washboard road as soon as I across. I need thirty minutes, that’s all. Hope I can trust that drunk.

DUI

Dispatch advised that they had received two reports of a reckless driver, and they were asking for both on-duty officers, me and Scully, to respond to the area in an effort to locate the vehicle. They relayed that a late model, green Saturn sedan was swerving in and out of traffic and had gone off the road, on one occasion almost hitting a parked truck. I notified dispatch that I was heading that way and started to thread my car through traffic. Scully was checking on a rowdy bachelor's party, his brothers. I told him to stay, that I would call him if I needed help. I began to visualize the area around where the driver was reported, and I tried to anticipate a route the suspect vehicle would probably take. I knew where the vehicle was headed because the suspect was more than likely my son.

* * *

Alec and I had fought that evening. He was only seventeen and just getting back from football practice when I confronted him. I had found a six pack of Old Milwaukee in the trunk of his

Saturn while looking for a wrench to fit the lugs on my Jeep. His friend Braden dropped him off. Stepping down from the front porch in my uniform, I waved, and waited for Braden to leave.

When Alec came closer, I brought the cans from behind my back.

“What’s that?” he asked, his face turning red.

“You know damn well what this is.” I reached my other hand into my pocket and pulled out his car key. “You won’t need this for the next two weeks.”

“You searched my room to find my key?” he yelled, walking closer.

He lunged at the silver-colored key, knocking it out of my hand. We both looked at it sitting on the dry grass, sparkling in the late afternoon sun. I made the first move, dropping the six pack and pushing both of my fists into his chest just below the name “Vikings” and above the number “32.” Two years ago, such force would have landed him on his ass, but all it caused this time was for him to catch his balance by putting a leg back. He straight armed me to the side, picked up his key, and walked toward the house.

“You get caught with beer, and BYU will withdraw their scholarship offer,” I yelled.

He stopped on the porch and turned around. “And who would tell them?”

I looked away and slowly shook my head. I wanted him to play college football. I wanted him to keep the scholarship I wasn’t offered. But playing for Brigham Young was unlike playing for any other university. They have an honor code, which means students cannot have pre-marital sex, cannot drink alcohol, and cannot use tobacco, among other things. A committee reviews any reported infractions, which usually lead to the student’s dismissal from the university. Dismissal from the team. And in a crowd, somebody will always report. He needed to understand this. “I will,” I said. “I’ll tell them.”

He smirked. “Just like last time?”

He was right. Two months ago, Alec was arrested for a DUI. He was driving home from a party at some girl's house. At least that's what Alec said. Cooper called me and said he would have let Alec go, but Smith had already started the paperwork. Smith was new and did not yet understand favors among officers. Luckily, the city attorney attended BYU law school and was a football season ticket holder. He understood favors. But he made it clear he wouldn't dismiss charges next time. BYU did not receive a report.

"If it happens again, I'll tell," I said. "Why can't you just obey the rules? Someone needs to teach you a lesson, and if that someone has to be me, then so be it." I shifted my eyes, and I could feel my thumb twitching.

"Whatever, Dad, you want me to play football more than I do," he said, walking into the house.

I heard his football pads hit the living-room wall. Then I noticed Mr. Smith watering the roses in his front yard, eyeing me and surely judging my parenting skills. I nodded, took a deep breath, and walked through the open door.

I went to his bedroom. It was locked. I said, "Alec, Let's sit down and talk about this," I was hoping to calm him down in the five minutes I had before radioing that I'm on duty. After a minute of silence, I heard his Saturn start and spin the tires out of the driveway. I ran from the hall to the carport, but it was too late. He was gone.

I turned off Main Street and decided to parallel the roadway along the less traveled and less populated side streets. The information coming from dispatch confirmed the vehicle was headed toward my general area. Pleasant Grove had recently renovated their town center to resemble a

scene in a Sherlock Holmes movie. Each building got a nineteenth-century facelift. Tulips and roses lined the walks. And kerosene lamps lighted each corner. A small circle of haze surrounded each blue flame giving me an eerie feeling. Dispatch continued to relay information about the vehicle. They had a description of the car but not of the driver, and no one had noticed a license plate number for dispatch to know an address where the driver was headed. At 3:15 a.m., DUI drivers are always traveling home. But I knew where he was going, and he would have to pass where I now was, Canyon Road, to get there. I pulled to the shoulder and advised dispatch I was stationary and was going to wait to see if the vehicle came my way. I needed to stop him and get him home before anyone could figure his identity. As I waited, I noticed steam coming off the hood of my car. A light drizzle had just stopped. The light of a full moon shone down, only occasionally obstructed by passing clouds.

I decided to call Alec, tell him to pull over before someone saw him. When he didn't answer, I texted my wife Susan. She was working a graveyard shift at the University Medical Center in Provo. Nurses weren't allowed to call while on duty, but when they weren't busy they could text. She said she hadn't heard from him, that she was sure he was home in bed. But I wasn't so sure. I figured he went to Braden's after our argument, to complain about parents. He didn't have a girlfriend, at least not that I knew of, so now he was probably travelling across town from Braden's place.

As I waited, I remembered playing football for the Pleasant Grove Vikings. I was a wide receiver, not as talented as Alec, but I still got noticed. I had talked to BYU about playing for them, but they never offered a scholarship. I decided to walk on until the second to last game of the high school season when I tore my ACL. After that I put my hopes with Alec. He played receiver through Pee Wee and junior high. Then he put on thirty pounds in high school, and

coaches converted him to tailback. BYU offered him a scholarship on the first day of the recruiting season, and Alec verbally committed. Other schools rarely recruited Utah County boys, and Alec was no exception. In a ninety-eight percent Mormon area, nearly all the best players went to Brigham Young. I planned a small party for him that evening, complete with some extended family, a few church members, and a cheesecake. But Alec didn't show up. He had become more and more unreliable over the past few months. Ever since he started drinking, I suppose.

I had just about given up waiting for the Saturn when my radar began its tone in a quickly rising pitch indicating a vehicle coming toward me at a high rate of speed. I watched as the oncoming headlights got closer. My foot moved onto my brake in a mental effort to slow the speeding car as I realized the chance of it making the approaching turn was impossible. The bank was gradual, but the car was traveling at 88 miles per hour. Unless the driver braked soon, he would never make it. I flipped on my rooftop lights to warn him. But He didn't slow. I could only wait there and watch as the crash unfolded. The vehicle slid on the road oils released by the light rain. It hit the curb and flipped a complete revolution into the trees and thick bushes that lined the turn. A hubcap split off in one direction, and a portion of the front bumper was ripped loose and flew in the opposite direction as the car mashed into the rain-soaked foliage and came to an abrupt stop against one of the tree trunks. The sounds of screaming metal and the popping of breaking of glass were made even more sickening as I witnessed the driver slam forward into the steering wheel and windshield, an arm twisting out the broken driver's door window at an impossible angle.

"Nooooo!" I yelled. I had been trained to quickly react in situations such as this. But it's different when it's your own kid. Different when the accident is your fault. I should have been

harder on Alec. If I hadn't asked the city attorney to drop his DUI case, this wouldn't have happened.

After a minute of regret, I called for an ambulance. Forcing control into my voice, I reported to dispatch my location and a brief description of the accident. I drove to the turn, and I began to mentally prepare myself for what I would see in the coming seconds. I ran toward the driver's door where I could still see the arm protruding through the broken glass. I called out hoping that my initial thoughts were wrong and that I would hear a response. I reached for the hand and peered into the opening of the car. Over the years, similar scenes were all too familiar, and yet they had never gotten easier to deal with. My senses were briefly acute by the scene, the smell of blood, the night's silence, and the thin floating dust from the airbags.

To this day, I hate what I did next. I laughed. It wasn't Alec. It wasn't my son. The driver was a young girl. The car turned out to be her father's. There was no need for CPR. Her neck was lacerated nearly in half. And I laughed. For several moments, I laughed. And then I cried.

Wiping tears with my arm, I stared at her again, so young and fragile. She had long dark hair that was now matted against a torn and bloody cheek. She had on a Pleasant Grove High School letterman's jacket, ripped and imbedded with glass shards, no longer an object of pride and hope. I looked away, and let go of her lifeless hand. Her condition was obvious and my hopes of saving anyone were so quickly torn from me that for the briefest time I just stood there not knowing what to do, the feeling of helplessness taking over. So many scenes of violence and tragedy over the years had trained me to block out emotion and forced me to focus. I turned back to the car one last time and confirmed that she was beyond help. My eyes began to roam, and I mentally started recording all I saw, dictating things to remember. Several beer cans were strewn about the interior of the car, along with books and papers trapped here and there. After my

mental inventory and assessment, I returned to my car and began to pull out my cones and accident gear, listening to the approaching sounds of sirens.

Firefighters cut the vehicle to allow the removal of her body, and I reluctantly watched and tried to keep my mind busy by writing down information I would need for the report. I was given a small pink wallet and told that they had found it pushed between the door and front seat. I opened it up and clenched my teeth as I looked at the driver's license photo smiling back at me. It confirmed what I had already guessed. She was only sixteen years old. Swallowing the lump in my throat, I returned to my car and began to enter the license information into my laptop and tried to keep focused on the accident forms. It was useless. Besides the conflicting emotion that my son was alive, the only thought that kept returning to my mind over and over again was that someone was going to have to go and tell a parent that their child would not be making it home tonight, or ever.

After a couple hours, Sgt. Leichter arrived and began talking with one of the tow truck operators and an EMT. I closed my laptop screen and exited my car heading to meet up with him, knowing he would want to hear everything. A drizzle had begun again and the clouds were darkening, creating a surreal feeling surrounding the scene still highlighted in flashing lights. I relayed to Sgt. Leichter all that I had seen, supplementing information I had received from dispatch to depict the course of events. When I was done, he simply shook his head once and watched silently as Scully snapped photos. Rain dripped off Leichter's slicker into his already-soaked boots.

Continuing to look away, he asked me if I was doing okay. I knew the question was coming. He was the only sergeant on the force who always asked each officer, no matter how long they had been on the job. No matter how traumatic or routine an event, he always asked

how we were doing. I lied and told him I was okay. He had been doing this job a decade longer than I, and he already knew what should have been going on in my head. Little did he know this time the feelings were more complicated than usual. All cops wrestle with emotions but usually the face we portray to the public always wins out. But this time it was harder. Sgt. Leichter told me he would take Scully to make the notification. I told him I needed to be the one to go with him. It was what I had been dreading from the moment I stopped laughing, but I had to do it. I felt guilty that the victim was not my son. After eleven years on the job, still the hardest thing for me to do was making a death notification, and this one would be the most difficult yet.

Around six a.m., we pulled into the driveway of a small home only two miles from mine. I took in the look of the home trying to gain any insight of what the parents might be like. A single porch bulb lit up a front yard with a few toys clumped into a pile. A long curving concrete walkway led from the driveway to the door, bordered by a forgotten flower bed, puddled and dark. Sgt. Leichter rang the doorbell and each of us stepped to opposite sides of the door and waited. After what seemed like an hour and a second ring of the bell, a light came on from within, casting shadows from the front window onto the grass. We watched as a short, heavy-set man with a receding hair line and an acne-pocked face pulled on a t-shirt walking down the hallway toward the front door. I took a deep breath as he swung the door open and stood there without saying anything, blinking repeatedly, squinting out at us as if trying to read our faces.

I extended my hand and introduced myself and Sgt. Leichter. I asked him if he was James Colden. He shook his head affirming that he was. I asked him if he had a daughter by the name of Natalie. Instead of answering with a yes or no, he folded his arms and leaned back against the hallway and asked, "What has she done now?" Before I could answer, we were joined by a tall, slender woman in her mid-forties. I noted how much she resembled the face of her daughter.

James pointed to the woman and said, “This is my wife Karen.” He continued by turning to her and saying, “Natalie has done something, and now the cops are here. I told you sooner or later she was going to end up in trouble.” He looked at us. “She broke up with her boyfriend yesterday, so whatever she did is probably because of that.” I gave a quick glance at Sgt. Leichter and saw that he was looking directly at Karen. He then looked over to James, as if he was mentally trying to fortify them for what was to come, and then he looked deliberately back to me. Karen’s eye’s got wide, and I knew at that moment she sensed something bad had happened. It’s always the women who pick up on it first.

I asked if we could come in, then I motioned for both of them to sit down. I began the speech I had rehearsed in my head on the drive to their home. “There’s been accident, and Natalie was involved.” I paused as Karen threw one hand to her mouth with a gasp and thrust her other hand into James. I felt the lump in my throat begin to rise, and my heart began pounding. I always assumed that sooner or later this would get easier, but it never does. As I opened my mouth to speak, nothing came out, and I had to swallow hard before continuing with words that would tear their world apart, “I am sorry, Natalie did not survive the accident.”

As I drove home, I continuously saw the look in Karen’s and James’s faces as they realized what they had just been told. I replayed the moment over and over again: their questions, disbelief, denial, anger, and pain.

Arriving, I saw Alec’s Saturn in the driveway. I passed by my bedroom and saw Susan curled up under her grandmother’s comforter. I hurried to Alec’s room. The door was closed but unlocked. He was asleep on his bed. Alive on his bed. I saw his football jersey lying on the floor in its usual spot. Everything was okay. I approached to kiss his cheek, accidentally kicking his wallet from his Levis lying on the floor. A ripped half of a picture slid out. I grabbed the wallet

and found the other half, piecing them together. It was a photo of a young girl, a campfire in the background. The girl was Natalie.

I walked out to the kitchen. I sat down, and my head sagged onto the table. After several moments, I grabbed my cell phone and the phone book. I opened the book to the B's. Brigham Young University: Infractions Office.

The Wallflower

My cousin Alecia and I were always close through elementary. The only child in each of our families, we were an anomaly for Utah County. So instead of hanging out with our brothers and sisters, we hung out with neighborhood groups, other's brothers and sisters. As children, she and I were always around each other but rarely alone together. But in high school it was different. Since neither of us fit in with our extracurricular groups, we shared a lot of time, just the two of us.

After my first track practice, I staggered down the street toward my home. Alecia ran up behind me wearing a skirt far too mini for her chubby thighs. Up top she had on a tight-fitting vest revealing rolls and bulges, except where her breasts should be, a purple "Pioneer" written across the fabric in cursive. She lived just down the street from me. I once commented in front of Aunt Carol, Alecia's mother, that maybe Alecia was just late developing. Unlike many Mormons in the area, we were pretty liberal, and commenting about body parts was not normally off limits. But later that evening my mom told me my comment was inappropriate. Apparently, boob size was a touchy subject to Alecia's equally-flat mother.

"I watched the end of your practice," Alecia said, pushing up her heavy glasses. "You were pretty far behind most of the others."

“How was cheerleading?” I asked.

“Good, we divided into four groups: football, basketball, wrestling, and track. I’ll be cheering for the track team.” She smiled, showing a mouth full of crooked teeth, pointed and jagged, some directly behind others. “All my group kept talking about was their calculus homework though.”

Although Alecia looked like a scholarly nerd, she didn’t play the part very well. I remember one evening when Aunt Carol and Alecia were eating dinner with our family because Uncle Steve was away on business. Alecia was depressed because she hadn’t been asked to dance at the Mormon church’s Golden Ball, which a girlfriend had invited her to. My mom in an attempt to cheer her up told Alecia how beautiful she was becoming. “You’re a wallflower nearly ready to bloom.”

The next day, Miss Ellison asked our fifth-grade class what the name of the boat was Columbus sailed on. Alecia lifted her hand high in the air, only lowering it once to wipe her nose with the backside. I thought this might be another of Miss Ellison’s trick questions, so I tucked my hands under my desk. No one else raised theirs. After searching each row, each student, for another option, Miss Ellison said, “Okay, Alecia. What’s the answer?”

“The Wallflower. Columbus sailed the ocean on the Wallflower!”

The classroom erupted with laughter. Even Miss Ellison smiled.

“I didn’t know you were so funny,” Darby Parker said.

As we continued home from practice, I travelled on the sidewalk and Alecia walked on the front-yard grass of the homes lining the street. “Watch this,” she said, as she sprinted across someone’s lawn. She did some type of a handspring then a flip that ended mid-rotation. She landed hard on the grass. I ran over to help her, but she had already gotten up. Her face was red

and she limped along side me, wiping the green blades from her outfit. “Why did you try out for the track team, anyhow?” she asked.

“My dad made me. Said I needed some friends. Why did you try out for cheer?”

“To be popular. Everyone loves cheerleaders! A few bumps and bruises along the way will be worth it for popularity.”

“If you were popular, you would have no reason to hang out with me,” I said, looking at the ground.

“Not if you became popular too,” she joked. “Of course I would still hang with you. You’ll always be my best friend.”

Late one evening after practices and dinner, Alecia told me she had some bad news. We walked through the old cemetery by the mill. She was pretty quiet, so I shone my flashlight on tombstones and made up stories about each dead person. Alecia tripped on a headstone, which was lying flat and covered with leaves and brown grass trimmings. She brushed them aside.

Martina Shultz. Born 1947. Died 1964.

“That’s too young to die,” Alecia said. “Only nineteen.”

“Seventeen,” I corrected her.

“Martina was tall and thin,” Alecia said. “And pretty, of course. With large breasts, size Ds. And she was captain of the volleyball team. Her boyfriend was also tall and very athletic. He played basketball in high school. He had blond hair, down to his shoulders and big blue eyes.”

“Who cares about her boyfriend?” I said. “What about Martina. How did she die?”

“That’s just it. Her boyfriend killed her. Mr. Basketball parked his car by the water tower one Friday night. He reclined the driver’s seat, and he and Martina started making out. They got a little heated and pretty soon all their clothes were on the floorboards. After a few minutes, she

clenched the rear door handle and the backseat belt. Basketball laid there until his breathing calmed. That's when he noticed her breathing. She wasn't. He pushed her off him and ran naked to the main road, flagging down a car."

"You're a pervert!"

"Hey, I'm just telling the story. The coroner said she would have died soon anyway. She had an enlarged heart. Probably born with it. Anyhow, the entire school attended her funeral, and most of the town's residents."

"You wish you were her don't you?" I asked.

"Sure, but not to have a basketball player boyfriend. I just want more people at my funeral than your family and mine. Right now, that's all who would attend."

"But how do you change that? I want more people to like me too."

I looked at my watch. 11:52. We started walking home. The air was cool and dry, a light breeze blowing. I looked up to the sky thinking about Alecia's question. How does a person become liked? I just wanted a few friends, a group to fit in with. But I knew Alecia wanted more. She wanted to stand out. I saw thousands of stars twinkling above, some dim and some bright. Alecia needed to be bright, a star among stars.

"Why don't you try out for the volleyball team?" I asked.

She looked up at me. "At 5 foot 4?"

"What about the head cheerleading team then? You should try out for that."

"I can't."

"Sure you can. Take some tumbling lessons. Watch what you eat. Um...you know what I mean. You could really do it."

“No I can’t.” she said. “That’s what I’ve needed to tell you all evening. My dad took a job with an engineering firm in California for triple his salary. We’re moving in two months.”

I kept contact with Alecia over the next two years, mostly through an occasional text or Facebook message, but I never saw her. Uncle Steve worked sixty-hour weeks my mom said, and with gas at \$3.00 a gallon, we didn’t have the money for such a long trip. Alecia said she was working on becoming a head cheerleader, that she had made a bunch of changes. She even changed her name to Alie. She said it made her feel more important, more noticed.

I had made changes too. I continued to run track, but my focus was football. I lifted weights at Gold’s Gym every evening after dinner. Finishing ninth grade, I was six feet four inches tall and weighed 205 pounds.

That summer, I tried out for the football team. I was sure I would make it. Alecia had inspired me. And I had worked very hard. I fit in with the football players. I had finally found a group of friends. But when the coaches hung the final roster, I wasn’t on it. I didn’t make the team.

I got home, and my mom could see my disappointment. “I wasn’t supposed to tell you this,” she said. “It was to be a surprise. But Alecia is moving back. Uncle Steve got a transfer to Salt Lake City, and he’s buying one of the houses in Pebble Creek, that subdivision up on the bench. She’ll be flying in the day before school begins.”

High school started and I hadn’t heard from Alecia. The next morning, Mom dropped me off at the front entrance. I walked down a crowded locker hall and fiddled with my combination. Sixteen, around twice to thirty-two, back to...

“Ta da.” a thin, blond girl shouted. She stood next to me, both of her arms up in the air, her hips pushed to one side. “It’s me, Alie.”

“Alecia Dotie?” I yelled.

The locker hall went silent, and everyone stared.

“No way. Look at you,” I said. “You have blond hair, and, and blue eyes, and you’re skinny, and...”

I stared directly into her breasts.

“C cup,” she said.

Everyone converged. “Is that really you, Alecia?” from one. “Where have you been?” from another. “Are you a model?” from a third.

I zigzagged through the crowd to English, my first period class. Halfway there I realized my hand was covering my open mouth.

We had dinner with Alie’s family that evening. Afterward, she and I walked the streets of Lehi’s richest neighborhood. She only wanted to talk about me, about my goal of making the football team. A man drove past us in a red Porsche. “That’s Brock Bennett,” she said.

“You know your neighbors already?”

She put her finger to her lips.

“When he was younger, he made a promise to his cousin that he would change his life,” she said. “He would play football instead of run track. That change led to other changes, and now look at him, the Governor of Utah. He drives a Carrera, wears a Rolex, and signs checks with a Montblanc. And he boinked the entire volleyball team in high school.”

“Alie,” I said, grabbing her arm. “I didn’t make the team.”

She pulled away and kept on walking, looking to the other side of the street. When she finally turned her head back, I saw two trails of mascara leading down her cheeks.

“Sorry,” she said. “I’m a boob.”

She wiped her face and faked a smile. I had forgotten about her gnarly teeth until then. Now she had beautiful, straight pearls.

“Tell me about you,” I said. “How did you change so much?”

“You inspired me that night in the cemetery. I decided to go for it.”

I nodded.

“When we moved, I started going to the gym, to a dietician, to a tanning booth. My dad bought me braces, gymnastic lessons, contacts, misty-blue ones. Oh, and these.” She pushed her breasts together. She seemed so proud and confident. “Yesterday, I skipped class. I met with Miss Donna, the cheer instructor. She showed me a few Lehi cheers, then I practiced all day. After school, she let me try out.”

“I thought try outs were a couple of days ago.”

“They were, but she hadn’t released the list yet, so she allowed me to try. I found out today that I made the team.”

“You did it then. You made your goal,” I said.

“Yes, thanks to you.” She gave me a big hug.

I was so happy for her but also for me. If she was popular, I would be too. We were best friends, and she would make sure I was included in her groups. Not making the football team was not the end of the world after all.

At the beginning of my American history class the following morning, Alie walked in. The whole class stared. She wore a mini skirt, just the right length for her fabulous legs; a tight, white vest; and a red hair feather behind her right ear, the exact color of her shoes and skirt. She took a blue note card up to Mr. Allred. The classroom was filled with chatter. Several of the ten cheerleaders were in the class. Rumors flew that Alie was the best tumbler in the school, maybe

the region. Other students couldn't remember an Alecia Dotie from freshman year. Still others were mesmerized by Alecia and her transformation. One girl asked me how it was possible that I was related.

Mr. Allred announced that Alie Dotie had joined the class, and he walked her to an empty desk. He began a discussion about the first inhabitants of America, the native-American Indian tribes. He told of their customs and habits, their nomadic ways. Then he told about European culture, how it differed. He said when Spanish ships arrived on the Central American shores, there was bound to be conflict.

Alecia stood up. "I know all about this," she said. "Columbus was the leader and his ship was named..."

She glowed and I cringed. I hoped she wouldn't say it. I prayed she had learned better. But Alie had devoted all her time to her appearance, her outward beauty, and no time developing her mind. She hadn't cracked open a textbook since elementary school she had told me. She had practice cheering, worked her ass off, and she was now popular. She had everything she had ever wanted. Now, if everyone thought that Alie was dumb, she would lose her sparkle. I couldn't let that happen to her. I couldn't let that happen to me.

"The Wallflower!" I yelled.

Silence ensued. Everyone turned their heads, their eyes big. Alie put her hand on her hip, tilted her head, and stared at me.

"I think you mean the Mayflower," Mr. Allred said to me. "Please stay after class. We need to talk about you interrupting others. And Miss Dotie, Alie, I mean. Thank you for your valuable insight."

After school, Alie pulled into my driveway in her mom's Volvo. "I'm so happy to be back," she yelled, running from her car and giving me another hug.

"You're terrific," I said.

"I don't know what happened in history today, but I don't think you're a dork like everyone says."

I asked her if we could hang out later, maybe go check out the new mall in Provo. "Sure," she said. But then her phone rang. It was Ric, point guard on the basketball team. "Tonight? Two tickets for a concert in Salt Lake? Yeah, I'm free," she told him.

When she drove away, I didn't know she would only talk to me at the occasional family gathering in the future, that she and I would not reconstruct our own little group, that I wouldn't be able to ride her coat-tail to popularity. But that was okay. I had a lot of work to do. I had a track team to try to fit in with.

Tattered Angel

I'm one of the last remaining at the cemetery. I look at my watch: 5:45 p.m. Uncle Blair is talking to his wife and some other people I don't recognize. Another group of church members is lingering. An old man wearing shabby clothing walks around some headstones in the distance. I'm spent from the emotional trauma of losing my father and from the day's activities. As an only child, I had the chore of greeting my father's extended family and friends, all 500 of them. I walk toward my car, hoping the others will take a hint and start toward theirs. In my trunk sits the reason I'm still here: a shovel and a brass box containing my parent's most prized possessions, some of them worthless like two ticket stubs to an Elvis Presley concert, their first date, I suppose. Others have value like their wedding rings and the pearl necklace my father bought Mom for their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary. Saratoga Springs isn't exactly a hot spot for crime. Still, I would rather nobody sees me bury the box. I look back into the setting sun. The old man has disappeared, but the others haven't budged.

I'm on the corner of University Avenue and 400 South in Provo, at exactly 12:05 p.m. I'm on my lunch break, but I'm not hungry. Actually, I am a little hungry, but I'm more curious. Each day

for the last week, I've seen the same odd sight. I face south, outside the corner store, where I'm the assistant manager. I take in a smell of pastrami on rye coming from James' Deli down the street. There he comes again, around the corner, the man I've been waiting for. He's wearing the same old suit, Converse shoes, and well-worn New York Yankees cap. For the past week, I've been trying to place him, trying to figure out where I know him from. Until this morning. Sitting behind the candy counter, I realized he's the old man from my father's funeral. Same ragged, tweed jacket. Same soiled, white high-tops.

Besides his attire and the fact that he walks the same route every day at exactly the same time, what always strikes me and captures my attention is what's inside his jacket. This rough looking man strolls around the corner each day carrying a bottle of liquor, a sight you don't often see three blocks from the BYU campus.

He stops in front of the newsstand. The same thing he's done every day this week. He pulls out his bottle of juice and stares at me while he takes a long swallow. But today is different. He doesn't tip his cap and continue walking. This time he crosses the street, deliberately, coming right at me.

"Sir?" he says.

I wonder what he's going to do, why he's stalking me.

"Um, sir?"

I want to know why he was at my dad's funeral. Why he's here.

"Sir? Excuse me, sir?"

He still has the whiskey in his hand. Jim Bean, the label says.

"Excuse me, sir. Could I take your attention from my bottle for a moment?"

I look into the dark eyes of the man talking to me.

“Yeah . . . sorry. I was just. . .” The man is about my height, probably in his late 60’s or early 70’s. The whiskey on his breath reaches me before he does. I raise my hands slightly, not knowing if he’s dangerous. Not knowing what he is. He stops a few feet short, just as I was preparing to push him away. “Sorry,” I say. “I have a lot on my mind.”

“No apology needed, young man.” He carefully pulls his tan and brown jacket back and slides the liquor into a hidden pocket. I notice the fray of the jacket’s inner liner as the bottle disappears. “I see you standing here every day, at this exact time, on this very street corner. May I ask you why? It’s a very curious thing.”

“You think that *I’m* curious. You pass by here daily, heading toward campus, with a bottle of booze. And I’ve seen you before, about a year ago in a cemetery across the valley. So, what’s *your* story, old man?”

I see his smile fall, then his head along with it. He’s apparently deep in thought. Then he raises his head, the corners of his mouth creeping upward. “Well, you see,” he begins before stopping to feel for his whiskey. He grabs the bottle and turns off the cap. “I killed my wife not too long ago.” I suddenly have the urge to run, to get as far away from this maniac as possible. But I can’t. I’m already enthralled with this unusual man and his odd tale. And I have to find out why he’s been following me. It’s all I’ve been thinking about this week.

“It happened last fall,” he continues. It was our fortieth anniversary. I went to chop some wood for the cabin’s fire place, and when I came back, I crept up behind her.” His eyes open wide. He draws his finger across the gray stubble on his neck. “I chopped her head right off.” His eyes drop to the ground, showing the path her head took. Then he looks back up with the same crooked smile I’ve seen over and over this week. “After stacking the wood, I drank half a bottle of whiskey and had a very lovely weekend.”

I'm not scared anymore. I'm not running anywhere. Not only is this weirdo full of it, his feeble body couldn't possibly have the strength to lift an ax, let alone swing it through the neck of his wife. But I feel the need to humor him. "Why'd you do it?"

His gray eyes brighten. "I was hoping you would ask. I was waiting for her to come home from work, and I had fallen asleep on our couch. A romantic dream reminded me of the reasons I married her. From her soft, long black hair to her jovial personality, I saw everything that made me want her forever. As I'm sure you can imagine, I was quite excited when I woke up. I immediately called her at work to tell of my love." He stops and peers into my eyes. "Young man, this is when everything went so terribly wrong."

At this point, I'm rattled. His story is not believable, but he acts the part of a murderer so well. He's obviously disturbed, and I'm beginning to feel the same.

"Her shift wasn't to end for another thirty minutes, but the secretary said she had left over an hour ago. I hung up and dialed her cell phone as fast as I could. I couldn't wait to talk to her, to tell her about my dream. I did, however, question why she hadn't arrived at home yet. I began to wonder if her car had broken down since she worked only ten minutes away.

"'Hello, dear,' she answered. She sounded happy, but she never was very good at hiding her true feelings. I knew there was something wrong.

"I tried to hide the irritation in my voice. 'Darling,' I said. 'Why are you not home yet? Your work said you left over an hour ago.'

"'It was a long day at work. I went for a drive and a walk along the river. I just need to be alone. I'll be home in a few hours, okay?'

"'All right, dear, I'll let you go. I love you. Goodbye.' I didn't want to start a fight—especially after that wonderful dream—so I ended the call. She told me bye, and the phone made

a rattle, but there was still noise, not the silence I anticipated. Then, I heard her voice again. But softer, more romantic. And then another voice. A deep, rough voice. I knew exactly who it was. It was her former boss, the one she had a fling with ten years before. *So much for being alone*, I thought.”

He takes a swig of his whiskey and stares off at the mountains in the distance.

“I heard her say something like Gosh, he's so controlling. I wish he would leave me alone. Her ex-boss said something, but my phone was already on its way to the coffee table, about to break into several pieces. Part of me hoped she didn't hear the crash of plastic, but the other part wanted her to know how angry I was. I pretended to be asleep when she finally arrived home, the smell of cheap cologne on her dress. The next morning when she didn't mention the phone call, I didn't either. The remainder of the summer leading up to that glorious vacation, I tempered my rage and drowned myself in this.” He raised his bottle of Jack. “I waited for the ideal moment where I could kill that woman and not get caught.”

I'm silent as he loosens the bottle's cap yet again and drinks some more. He alternates glances at the clouds hanging over Mount Timpanogos and at me. He finishes the liquid, all except one finger left at the bottom, and quickly places it back in his jacket. I find myself now believing his story, but strangely, I'm not scared. In fact, I begin to wonder if my father loved my mother the way this man loved his wife, enough that he couldn't share her with anyone. After Mom's car accident and death, I wonder if Dad was happy. Happy and relieved that no one could ever come between them. I question what he would have done had Mom not been so loyal.

“So, what now?” The old man's breath has a bigger impact on me than his inquiry.

“I don't know. I'm not going to tell anyone, if you're worried about that.”

“How about this, Dave. As you can probably tell, I’m an alcoholic. At first, it was because of my wife’s unfaithfulness, but more and more it’s been a way of coping with my regret and guilt over what I did. Maybe you help me find peace with myself? God knows I could use some of that about now.”

“Wait a minute! How do you know my name? What’s going on here?” I look around to see if anyone from the store is in on this, if this is some kind of joke, but we’re all alone. *How does this psycho know me?*

“You told me your name. David, David Johansen. You must have forgotten.” I feel my head trembling as I notice the dirt imbedded in the wrinkles on his neck. “To help me overcome the greatest regret of my life, how about you tell me your biggest regret?”

“That sounds good.” I can’t believe what I’m saying. I’m sure I didn’t mention my name, but that no longer seems important. “Where should I begin?”

Just before Dad passed, he told me of a little box he had that contained my parents’ most valued possessions. He asked that I bury the box between their graves, but after the funeral, I became tired and went home. I was afraid that someone would unearth the box for its contents’ value, so I decided that I would make the trip out to the countryside the following week. Despite the cemetery being only a twenty minute drive outside Provo, I’ve constantly made excuses to avoid the finalization of the loss of my father last year and my mother two years prior.

I tell this to the man, and without a word, his mind is made up. He grabs my arm and we’re off.

He drags me to my car and urges me to get in. I don’t bother asking how he knows which vehicle is mine. I just do exactly as he says—I can’t help myself at this point—and we drive toward my house and then the graveyard.

“Please tell me about your father, Dave. I'd like to know a little of the man we're doing this favor for.”

“He is the greatest man that I have ever known. Like everyone, he had his problems and guilt—nothing to your extent, mind you—but he never let regret get the best of him. To the last day on earth, he treated me with unquestioning love and respect. I remember when I was a teenager and was hard to deal with. He was always patient and never once raised his voice. He cared for me and made me feel important. When I lost a job or a girlfriend, he was always there to tell me everything would be all right. He was a beautiful man, and I owe everything I am to him.”

The old man wipes a tear from his eye. His rough hand against his leathery face sounds like sandpaper. “That is touching. Your father—Brigham, right?—reminds me of my Dad. He always made me feel safe and comfortable when I lived with him. I haven't experienced that kind of peace in quite a while.”

“You would have liked my dad, mister. The two of you would've gotten along just fine, despite your obvious differences, him being a Mormon, and all.”

“I wish I'd had the chance to meet him before the cancer took him. Any man whose son would hold him with such high esteem is a man worth meeting.” He wiped both his eyes with his jacket. “And I'm very pleased to help you fulfill his dying wish.”

“Thank you. It's very nice to have your help.”

“Don't thank me. No, no, no.” He shook his finger repeatedly. “I'm simply taking advantage of this to help with my own problem. Helping you is just the first step in my own repentance. So, Dave, I should be thanking you.”

“Maybe we should settle for thanking each other then.”

I offered my hand, and he shook it for an uncomfortable amount of time.

“Fair enough, my boy. Fair enough.”

We arrive at my parent’s graves. I stand between the headstones, the old man at my side. I am overcome with a sense of peace. It’s like I’m paying my father back for all his sacrifices. Just then, the old guy pulls a hand shovel from another of his hidden coat pockets. He peels back a square of grass, then begins to dig the soil. When he's finished, I set the lock box in the hole. We push the dirt over the box, and I replace the sod, careful to not leave any evidence of the burial.

“How do you feel?” he asks, wiping the spade on his slacks and returning it to his pocket.

“I feel great, like I can move forward with my life now. Thanks a million.”

“No, thank you. Shall we get you back home then?”

“Can I have one more moment? I want to breathe in this feeling a bit longer.”

“Certainly, I’ll be over there by that great oak tree.” He points to the spot I saw him at my father’s funeral. As he walks away, he takes the bottle from his jacket again, and drinks the last swallow.

I bend down and talk to my father, thanking him for my upbringing, telling him I’m sorry it took so long to fulfill his dying wish. When I stand up, I know he’s proud of me. I’ve finally come to terms with my loss. I’m ready to leave now, and I look for the gentleman, but he’s nowhere to be found. I drive the only road out of the cemetery, thinking maybe he’s walking ahead. But I don’t come across him.

I'm back at the street corner. It's only been one day, but I can't wait to help my new friend find his peace. I look at my watch: 12:05 p.m. Maybe we'll visit his wife's grave in the mountains above Heber. Maybe we'll go see her former boss. Maybe my friend just needs to find someone else and start over. I look down at my watch again: 12:07. It's just then I realize I'll never see that old man again.

Vita

The author was born in Pocatello, Idaho. He obtained his Bachelor's degree in English from Dixie State College of Utah in 2010. He joined the University of New Orleans's graduate English program to pursue an MFA degree in Creative Writing. M.O. Walsh was his thesis chair in 2012.