

“MONEY ONLY PAYS FOR IT” AND OTHER STORIES

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This thesis includes a novel of eight short stories and a critical preface. The preface begins with a section placing the stories in their literary historical context in regards to masculinity theory. It goes on to discuss the craft of fictionalizing autobiographical stories. Finally, the preface talks about the choice of a first person narrator.

Each of the stories should stand alone, though they follow the narrator's life for a number of years. Todd Welles is the narrator of all the stories, with the exception of a few. In the stories where Todd does not do all of the narration, he is interrupted by the narration of his "friend," Percy 2 Hard Welles, III.

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## PREFACE

In the second foreword to Stephen King's *On Writing*, he writes: "This is a short book because most books about writing are filled with bullshit. Fiction writers, present company included, don't understand very much about what they do—not why it works when it's good, not why it doesn't work when it's bad" (xvii).

That's what I was thinking when I sat down at my desk to outline this thing. It was hot in my room that day, and I kept taking off clothes. None of the music I picked was working. There was a weird smell—something like garlic butter—coming out from under my bed. After taking the dirty clothes to laundry and lighting a candle, I found myself back at my desk, half naked, playing solitaire. I was wondering, much like my main character, Todd Welles, at the end of most stories, "How the hell did I got myself into this?"

I was told that a preface to a creative thesis should probably include something about my craft, possibly something about the choices I've made as a writer, what political/critical party I aligned myself with as a critic/writer, something about my place in literary history and the places I chose to depart from that tradition. The only thing I knew I wanted to talk about was masculinity theory. I figured that was a good place to start, because after looking back at all the stories, I realized that every one of them deals with the construction of white American masculinity. I also figured it would be a good idea to weave a discussion of the writers in my literary tradition in this section.

Thinking about the authors that influenced me the most, I walked into my living room, where all my books are, and started looking at the names, not wanting to leave anyone out. The first name I came to was Sherman Alexie. I love his stuff, but I'm only 1/16 Cherokee, so didn't think I could really say I was in the same tradition as he is. Ellison was the same. I came upon Fitzgerald next. This could definitely work. He's white. He writes about money and crazy chicks a lot. I pulled *The Great Gatsby* off the shelf and moved on. The next name that caught my eye was Lewis Grizzard. To tell the truth, he not only got me reading, but he is also the man most responsible for influencing me to start writing. Unfortunately, he's not a fiction writer. He was a southern humorist, and I'm not. He's also not very literary, and people in English departments look down on stuff like that. Sadly, I moved on. The next name on the shelf was Hemingway. Without a doubt, I would be using him. After I pulled his books off the shelf, I saw a couple of Nick Hornby novels. Though I loved his stuff, and have even been compared to him, I remembered that he's not exactly American. There goes Hornby. The next author to catch my eye was Matthew Klam. White. American. Writes about women and money. I snatched his book off the shelf and stacked it on top of Hemingway. The next choices were O'Brien and Salinger. I skipped Morrison because I'm not a black woman. I skipped Welsh because I'm not Scottish or colonized.

Finally I settled on using mostly Hemingway, O'Brien and Klam. I figured that having one man from my grandfather's generation, one man from my father's generation, and one man from my own would do the trick. Not only did I have nearly a hundred years of the literary tradition covered, I had a small group of men whose writing clearly shows the constructions of masculinity. It was time to go to the library to search for some more information on masculinity theory.

I was nervous when I got to the library. Ever since I was a freshman in college, the Willis Library had given me instant and violent diarrhea. (I realize that might not be appropriate, but this part is getting boring, and I really do get the diarrhea every time I go to the Willis Library.) Fortunately, I made it to the masculinity section with my stomach still intact. The first book I saw was *Refusing to Be a Man* by John Stoltenberg. The title sounded promising, but the book was all about not raping people and the evils of having a penis. Seeing as how the only other narrator in my collection is Todd's penis, Percy, I didn't think that Stoltenberg and I were a good match. I kept looking through his book anyway and found that he polishes it off with a section on how bad pornography is. Since Todd likes pornography, I figured his book wouldn't be of much use unless I wanted to disagree with him. I took it anyway.

The next book I found was *Some American Men* by Gloria Emerson. This seemed to be right up my alley, and I hoped that it would be a lot like Susan Faludi's *Stiffed*. Unfortunately, Emerson proved not to be as enlightened on the subject of American men as Faludi, but I quickly found a few good quotes and added her to my collection. Finally, I pulled *Male/Female Roles* off the shelf and headed to the check out. I had been in the library way too long without incident and didn't feel like tempting fate any longer.

I got home safely and started to look through my collection of stories for a few focal points. I didn't need to reread the collection because I had read it about five thousand times in the months before. I finally settled on three issues: relationships between fathers and sons, the inability of men to express emotion, and the role money plays in the lives of American men. I would start with examples of these issues from the tradition, show examples from my stories and spice it up by throwing some theory in there wherever I thought necessary. That section looks like this:

\* \* \*

In Susan Faludi's book, *Stiffed*, she discusses the gender roles that American men are trapped by. She shows that across the socio-economic board it is the fathers who teach these roles to their sons. Who else could teach you to be a man? Speaking of Vietnam veteran she'd interviewed she writes, "In any event, he was able to see what few others noticed: that the enemy was finally neither the father or the son; that there was, in fact no 'enemy'—only the dangerous prescriptions of manhood into which they all, fathers as well as sons, had been drafted" (358). For the sake of time and space I will focus on three issues of constructed masculinity: father's teaching their sons how to be a man, the inability to express emotion and money as a man's only worth.

The typical relationship between a father and a son is a complicated one. Without ever explaining what he's doing, a man teaches his son the guidelines that he must follow to be a man. In *Stiffed*, Faludi discusses what men teach their sons. After talking to vet mentioned above, Michael Bernhardt, she wrote: "Michael Bernhardt's father passed along to his son what he did know about being a man: how to build things, the importance of mastering a skill and of civic responsibility, the belief that masculinity had nothing to do with showboating" (296). That's pretty much what all American fathers teach their sons. Men build things, mastering a skill means getting a job and social or any other sort of responsibility usually requires money. The funny thing is that American men can teach these things—and a lot more—without saying much at all. Most of the times, the lessons are taught by example.

We see this in "Indian Camp" by Ernest Hemingway. Nick Adams' doctor father takes him to the Indian camp where he is going to help an Indian woman give birth, a kind of "Career Day" with dad. Dr. Adams commands the scene and the Indians—sorry Sherman—as any good male doctor should, giving orders to others and explaining to Nick exactly what's happening. Nick's father tells Nick that the woman is going to have a baby, and Nick says he knows. His

father responds in a typical fatherly fashion by saying, “You don’t know. Listen to me. What she is going through is called labor. The baby wants to be born and she wants it to be born. All her muscles are trying to get the baby born. That is what happens when she screams” (In Our Time 16). Dr. Adams goes as far as telling Nick how he should feel about the screams when he says, “But her screams are not important. I don’t hear them because they are not important” (16). In such a short space, Nick’s father shows him how a man behaves and how a man should feel about the things he sees. He should feel nothing

In my story, “Kissy Christmas,” Todd and his father show a different aspect of the father/son relationship. Todd and his father are both divorced, though Todd’s dad has remarried and gained an extensive stepfamily. When Todd returns from a trip to the gas station to get ice, he sees his father pulling a Santa suit out of his truck. Todd’s father tells Todd that his wife wanted him to wear it for the kids. Todd’s father is not the sort of man to do this—take orders from a woman or wear a Santa suit—and is embarrassed that his son has seen this side of him. He also feels a certain amount of guilt because he would have never done this when Todd was a kid or tried as hard to please Todd’s mother. They don’t say a word about any of this. They move on to the tasks at hand and get drunk, as any good man would do. Richard Cohen sums it up well in his article, “Men Need Liberating from Repressed Feelings.” “This is something that men learn early. I learned it from my father, who taught me, the way fathers teach sons, to keep my emotions to myself. I watched him and learned from him” (96).

Journalist, Gloria Emerson, describes the inability of men to express emotion in this way. “[Men] assume such deep disguises—they would be stoic and do their duty...” (13). In “The End of Things,” Hemingway shows us what a man must do when he is unable to be stoic and also unable to express his emotions. After Nick has just broken up with Marjorie and she leaves, his friend, Bill, comes up to find Nick lying down with his face in a blanket. Bill asks

him how he feels and Nick says, “Oh, go away, Bill! Go away for a while” (In Our Time 35). Bill understands the code and leaves him alone.

Throughout my collection, the men almost never speak of their problems. Todd’s friend, Chap, is probably the best example in the collection of a man who doesn’t speak of his problems; he only tells when Todd forces him. The best example of this is in “Chap’s Bachelor Party” when Chap finally admits that he feels trapped by his impending marriage. To get this admission, Todd has to stretch the boundaries of their friendship. It shouldn’t be overlooked that Chap doesn’t say anything until they are alone. He doesn’t want June or anyone besides Todd to know how he really feels about his situation.

Though Todd is very open with the reader, he never tells his friends, Chap and June, about the sexual problems he is having with Debbie. (I will discuss in a later section why Todd can be open with the reader and almost no one else.) The only people he does open up to in the narrative are the two seamen he meets in Georgia. Todd can speak to them because he knows they won’t be in his life for long. Cohen expresses this theme well, writing, “And I know others who never have sex with their wives, but talk to their friends as though they’re living in the Playboy Mansion, either pretending otherwise or saying nothing” (96).

The inability of men to express emotion causes many problems. First of all, if men were able to express themselves more freely about emotional issues, they would probably feel better. I know that’s simple and obvious, but it’s also true. Secondly, marriages would probably have a better chance of surviving if men could express their emotions. Unfortunately, I think many men feel as if they are caught in a *Catch 22*. For example, say a man is having some problems with his wife sexually. Specifically, she doesn’t want to do it anymore. The man probably feels pretty bad about that, but he doesn’t want to say anything because it will make him look weak and thus less attractive. His only choices are to go elsewhere for sex while still married, get a

divorce or feel totally miserable for the rest of his life. In Todd's case, we can see that he knows money and his ability to earn it also plays a role in the problems he has with Debbie and really himself.

Money is an essential issue my stories and the tradition they are a part of. Susan Faludi compares the gender constructions of men and women, pointing out the importance of being a breadwinner, writing, "If she was expected to play the perpetually submissive and pampered housewife, then he was expected to be the perpetually dominant and powerful breadwinner. Men, subjected to this ideal of superdominance, could as little live up to or escape it as women could the ideal of supermodel glamour" (602). Todd is a perfect example of a man who expects himself to be the breadwinner, and knows that everyone else does too. In "If I Ever Get Back to Texas, I'm Gonna Nail My Feet to the Ground," Todd is hired to be the sports writer for the *Augusta Chronicle*, though he knows nothing about sports—not a very manly thing. Little does he know, he will just be a collector of scores from little girls' soccer games and the like. He imagines how proud Debbie and his mother will be of him. He pictures his mother sending articles he's written to the rest of the family. Debbie makes him dinner, waits on him hand and foot and even has sex with him for the first time in months on the night she finds out her husband is a sportswriter. Everyone is watching, and everyone knows it. When she finds out what his job actually consists of, she no longer does any of those things. She retreats further when she finds out that his job pays less than hers does.

The narrator in "The Royal Palms" by Matthew Klam is fully aware how much money is a part of his life and role. "My life was going the way I always thought it should—I mean my job, and money" (68). He is confused because he's not broken the most important of the male rules, and he is still having problems. Later, we see his attitude toward men who don't

understand the rules. After playing blackjack with a male guest named Rick who loses all his money, the narrator says:

Rick asked me to give him his money back. It was five hundred dollars. He said, "Please, buddy." I tried to tell him that the money he lost was no longer his money—it was the bank's—and what I had was different money, not his. He started explaining: He said he'd been drunk, the rules were different here from the ones in the casino he played in, whatever. I said to him, "Why don't you go for a swim?" He said no. He begged me. I started laughing and pretended to play the violin. He told me Joanie had refused to let him take money for gambling, but he'd taken it anyway, and now he'd blown it, and he needed the money before we got back or she'd kill him. I said no. (83-84)

Obviously, the narrator feels no sympathy for Rick. Rick played a game very poorly, and he also asks for his money back from a winner. Rick doesn't have the money, and he doesn't know the rules. Not only that, but he's in trouble with his wife because of it. The narrator is a man who knows the rules he is supposed to live by. He looks down on men who don't know and doesn't understand how playing by the rules can cause problems.

In my first story, "Honeymoon, Heist," Todd pays his fiancée's bills. He doesn't do this because he's got a lot of money; he does it because he thinks he should. After things go bad on the honeymoon, the only time Debbie talks to Todd is when she wants money. In "Burying Hobie Cat," Todd works for a woman who makes him do emasculating errands. Though Todd is a grown man with a degree in "Kissy Christmas," his father still gives him money for going to the store to get ice.

Money is clearly the most important thing in "Money Only Pays for It." Todd works very hard, but because his job pays commissions only, he makes almost nothing. He feels bad

about this. He is not like the men who will do anything to get the sale, the men with money. When he gets the call from his girlfriend, Kissy, who thinks she's pregnant, the first question he asks himself is how he is going to pay for it. At the end of the story, Todd puts the final touches on his financial emasculation and uses his mother's gas credit card to buy himself beer.

One might ask why I deal with masculine issues in this way in my stories. To be totally honest, there is no reason at all, except for the fact that I'm a man and that's the kind of stuff I think about. I do hope that because of Todd's honesty about his situation some other men might feel a little less alone about theirs. I really hope that women can relate, too. Maybe some women who read the stories will get a new perspective on the men in their lives. Women who understand might help the situation quite a bit. I hope the men who read my stories realize that it's okay to talk about things. I hope that the men who read them stop worrying as much about the gender constructions.

These things are possibilities, but they weren't planned. I wrote stories about a man because I am one. Hemingway wrote about a hurting, macho guy who knows about bullfighting because he was one. I don't know about Matthew Klam, but I bet he's well received in the cool circles of the New York writing crowd, and much like his main characters. Tim O'Brien writes about guys who were in Vietnam because he is a guy who was in Vietnam. The list goes on and on, and I guess I really am part of the tradition. There's no need for analysis, because the American writers that I like write what they know.

Well, I finally finished the part about masculinity theory and literary tradition. After reading over it and a suggestion from my thesis director, I realized I needed a section on how my stories break from the tradition. Here goes.

\* \* \*

The difference between my stories and those of the tradition is that Todd at least tries to express himself, if only through his writing. Okay, that's not exactly true. Tim O'Brien's work is somewhat confessional, but Hemingway's Jake Barnes isn't telling us much more than he feels "bad." Todd tells the reader how bad he feels and why. He brings up his sexual insecurities and issues in a number of the stories. He also lets the reader know—most blatantly in "Money Only Pays for It"—that he's not even sure about his own sanity. The main difference between Todd and the main characters of the other authors I've mentioned is that he tries to tell the reader every single detail. Of course, he fails at this, but at least the attempt is made. He tries to tell the reader everything because he's looking for a friend, he's looking for forgiveness and he wants to feel better. He even goes as far as putting his email address in "No More Magic, No More Crazy" so readers can write and ask for details he has left out. If he's lucky they'll write him and say that they understand, that it's okay and that he's forgiven. The invitation to the reader to ask question functions in these ways, but it also adds to Todd's believability, or at least he thinks it does. On some level, he wants nothing more than to be believed.

Another way that my stories differ from the tradition is that Todd presents his male defects in a more open way. All of Matthew Klam's male characters have good jobs, a lot of money and beautiful girlfriends. The only flaws he mentions are things like zits or a small beer gut. Hemingway's characters only admit physical flaws as well, though they show others. His characters are *aficionados*. They know how to escape from POW camps. They know how to live off the land. They know how to set bombs and kill people in war. Todd knows none of these things and readily admits it. Even Tim O'Brien has the excuse of Vietnam for any of his mental short-comings or unmanly confessions and expression of emotion. What could be more manly of an excuse than serving your country? In contrast to all of these characters, Todd will admit that he doesn't know things. He admits that he doesn't know anything about sports in "If I

Ever Get Back to Texas, I'm Gonna Nail My Feet to the Ground.” In the same story, he admits his wife makes more money than he does. He never has a good job or enough money. He doesn't even know how to get a good job or if he even wants one. He tells the reader that his wife won't sleep with him. He obviously hasn't been to war or he would have mentioned it. The way my stories differ from the tradition is that there is less posturing.

*So what, you ask? Why did you break from the tradition in this way?* The truth is that I don't like pretentious people, and most of the male characters in the tradition are pretentious as hell. In that way, Todd and I are exactly the same. Todd never puts on airs. He's a confused and emotional guy with a crappy job and a wife who probably doesn't love him anymore, and he let's the reader know this from the very beginning. There are times when Todd pretends that his situation is better than it is, but he does this because he is trying as hard as he can to believe that things really will get better or really are better. In “Honeymoon, Heist,” he really wants to believe that things will be better with Debbie when they get to Georgia. At the beginning of “Money Only Pays for It,” he really believes he can will himself to sell. The only other times that he acts like the situation is better than it is, he is to save the feelings of some other character, as he does with the old couple in “Money Only Pays for It.”

The day after I finished the section on masculinity theory and my connection of the literary tradition, I decided to start writing about the craft of writing. I have learned a few things about what to do and what not to do while writing a story, so that seemed like a good place to go next. Here's what that looked like after I edited it a bunch of times:

The first Todd Welles story I wrote was called “Tennessee Whisky, South Dallas Pool & an Edinburgh Brothel,” which later became “Chap's Bachelor Party.” I wrote it for an advanced

fiction workshop while I was an undergraduate, and I was quite proud of it. The story was a prediction of what would happen on a trip I was about to take. I was Todd Welles. My two best friends were the other two characters, Chap and June. Though I'd made up the whole story, it was pretty much true, at least to who we were. I did as much as I could to make the characters speak just the way my friends and I did at the time. Todd even tells the story as if he was telling it to one of them or someone that close at a bar, where the alcohol makes it safe for a man to tell story without looking too unmanly.

I showed it to my roommate and my girlfriend, and they both loved it. I walked into class on the night that it was to be workshopped expecting to be praised. Maybe a typo or two would be pointed out. Possibly, some sheltered girl would say that she didn't like all the cussing. After class, people would ask me if they could keep their copies and offer to buy me a beer. They might even carry me out of the room on their shoulders. My instructor would probably forward my story to a literary agent in New York. Unfortunately, this was not the case; the students in my class didn't like it all, and neither did the instructor. One person said, "The narrator [Todd] is the biggest asshole on the planet." Another person said that Todd's ego was so big that it could block the sun. The girl sitting next to me said it was "nasty for the sake of being nasty." She obviously didn't know me very well. I stopped listening when someone asked how the three main characters of the story could be so well educated—they all speak two languages—and such dumbasses at the same time.

After class, I carried the fifteen copies of my story to the bar to look over the comments and drink away my first literary failure. With each comment I read, I became more pissed off. Finally, after I'd had enough beer, I decided that the other students in my class were a bunch of idiots. If they thought I'd written a nasty story just for the sake of being nasty, I would do just that, and it would be amazingly nasty. In my drunken state, this idea seemed like it would justify

my story and its author, while showing the rest of the class that they in fact were the dumbasses. When I sobered up, I decided against the hyper-nasty story in favor of a better grade. I tried to write the prettiest story I could with a bunch of references to things that only the teacher would get. I don't think I learned anything about writing that semester, and it wasn't the instructor's fault.

A few years later, I had a reading coming up and nothing new that was suitable to read, so I pulled out "Chap's Bachelor Party" to see what could be done with it. After reading it with fresh eyes, I started to think that Todd Welles really was an asshole, or at least he read that way. The voice I wrote it in was a voice you would use with only your closest male friends at a bar, and absolutely no one else. Your closest friends know when you're joking. Your closest friends know that you don't really hate women. They know that you don't do coke or have sex with hookers. Unlike your readers, your closest friends know you.

Though the story—all of the stories really—is confessional, the casual way that it is told is very masculine. As I've said before, Todd tells his stories as if he telling them to his closest friends at a bar, so he can't be seen as unmanly for his display of emotion. The imagined alcohol is one of his excuses. Another way Todd gets around the unmanly display of emotion is to add in as much humor as possible. The humor entertains and makes it worth the reader/listener's while. The humor takes away much of the sentimentality and shows that he's not taking the bad stuff in the story too bad. Taking it too bad and telling everyone about it wouldn't be manly at all. I realized that the humor was working and the voice wasn't.

With these things in mind, I cut "Chap's Bachelor Party," dialed back the voice, added as much humor as I could and all of a sudden Todd Welles was a big success. My first lesson in writing fiction was that your readers are not your friends yet, so you might want to charm them as if you had just met them.

\* \* \*

The next lesson came after writing a story closely based on the day I left my wife. In the story, Todd's wife, Debbie, throws a combat boot at his head. I thought this was a great detail, especially since my ex-wife had actually thrown a combat boot at my head as I was headed out the door. Once again though, my fellow students didn't like it. They said it was unbelievable and cliché. I wanted to stand up and say, "But that really happened. She really did throw a combat boot at my head." An hour and five beers later, I realized that they were right. Just because my ex-wife had actually thrown a boot at my head didn't make it good writing. My second lesson in writing fiction is that interjecting reality isn't always good for a fictional story. The story must come first.

Part of the reason that I ran into these problems was the fact that the fiction I was working on was so autobiographical. Luckily, as time went on and I kept writing, the stories started to distance themselves from what had really happened. Some of the things, situations mostly, stayed true to my life, but that is because I still believe that a writer should write what he knows. For the most part, making the decision on what to change and what to leave autobiographical is pretty easy. For example, in the story, "Money Only Pays for It," Todd is selling Medicare supplement insurance. I used this autobiographical job because I do know how to do it, and there is the possibility for a very stressful situation. I fictionalized the emotional quality and quantity of events in the story because a standard day in the life of an insurance salesman would be a pretty boring read. Of course, a salesman might run into one sad old man who carries a lot of emotional weight in real life, but probably not enough for a story. That story of one fictional day contains about a month of emotional weight in order to get the reader to feel the emotions a salesman might feel in one day.

Many writers have had to learn these lessons. In a letter to Charles A. Fenton, Ernest Hemingway writes about these lessons and the issues related to autobiographical fiction.

Here is the point. I had a wonderful novel to write about Oak Park and would never do it because I did not want to hurt living people...When I started I wrote some short stories about actual things and two of them hurt people. I felt bad about it. Later if I used actual people I used only those for whom I had completely lost respect and then I tried to give them a square shake. I know this all sounds very noble but it is not really horse-shit. The man who identifies himself as Cohn in *The Sun Also Rises* once said to me, "But why did you make me cry all the time?"

I said, "Listen, if that is you then the narrator must be me. Do you think that I had my prick shot off or that if you and I ever had a fight I would not have knocked the shit out of you? We boxed often enough so you know that. And I'll tell you a secret: you do cry an awful lot for a man." (Hemingway, On Writing 66-67)

Many people will ask a writer if what they wrote is true. I used to lie to them and tell them that it wasn't. Now that I've learned to separate myself from my stories, I can honestly tell the people who ask that those things didn't happen, except while I wrote them. Hopefully, those stories happened to the reader while they were reading. And hopefully I was Todd Welles in the process of writing all of those stories, but Todd Welles and I are no longer the same person. Real life events are rarely as interesting on the page as fictionalized events are.

On the other hand, maybe Hemingway and I are both full of shit. Sometimes, I write things just because it feels right. Sometimes I lie because I can't bare the truth. Sometimes I fictionalize things because no one would believe me. I really like this quote from "How to Tell a

True War Story” by Tim O’Brien: “Often the crazy stuff is true and the normal stuff isn’t, because the normal stuff is necessary to make you believe the truly incredible craziness” (79). So, sometimes I stick in a totally mundane detail to make the reader believe whatever crazy thing I have just written. In *Burying Hobie Cat*, I made Marilyn really lonely and had her cat die so the reader would be more likely to believe she would have sex with Todd. I wouldn’t think that a fifty-something female executive would normally have sex with her assistant, but who knows? At other times I have no idea why I wrote what I wrote. For example, in the same story, Todd gets diarrhea at the Cadillac dealership while getting the oil changed in Marilyn’s car. Why? I have no idea. The point of all this is that though I may contradict myself when talking about my process, it’s all true. Sometimes I say that something in one of my stories never happened to me, though it happened just like it does in the story. I might tell someone else that a scene from the story really happened, though it didn’t. Basically, I’m full of shit. Maybe that’s why I write stories. My only hope is that whether a story is fiction, non-fiction or a combination of the two, that they turn out true in the readers mind. By the way, all the “normal stuff” in this paper is to make it easier to swallow. I guess that works in fiction about love and war, as well as essays about your own fiction.

A few hours later, after many cigarette and coffee breaks, I finished the first draft of my craft section. I was somewhat pleased with it, or at least pleased to have gotten something down. (I should have thrown something in the craft section about the importance of “just getting something down,” but that didn’t really enter my mind until just now.) I was so pleased with myself for having done something that I decided I was done for the day. I drove to the beer store, got a six-pack of tall boys and started drinking on the way home.

You might be wondering when I am doing the writing of these sections that aren't really the preface and why there is stuff in the preface that isn't really the preface. I'm writing them later. I'm writing them because I like it when an essay about a certain text looks and feels like the text it discusses. I think it proves that the author of the essay really understands the text they are talking about. Since stupid names give validity to things in literary criticism, I will call this essay "Meta-Expository Writing."

The next day I got up and things were a little blurry. It was probably because I drank all that beer and didn't eat anything. After a couple of cups of coffee, I felt fine and went back to my room to begin my section on why I chose a first person narrator. I had plenty to say about that and didn't procrastinate at all. My section on narrators looks like this:

Some of the problems I mentioned in the craft section have arisen because I chose a first person narrator for this collection, and he is aware that he is writing the stories—within the fictional world of the story, of course. I chose Todd to write or tell his own story for a few different reasons.

To begin with, I chose a first person narrator was because I liked his voice. Though the voice was problematic at times, it was worth it. A writer using a third person narrator has less room to play with voice. A third person narrator with any degree of omniscience seems false because no human can know what another human is thinking or be in two or more places at once. A story lacking a human narrator distances the story from the reader, or at least a reader like me.

Another reason I chose a first person narrator is because I believe that all art should make a human connection, and a first person narrator can do this more easily. When people are feeling bad, they should be able to pick up a book and feel like they have a friend sitting in the room with them, telling them a story. When the reader relates to that story, they feel less alone. They

realize they are not the only ones going through bad times, that bad times are part of the human condition. Since I began writing, my goal has been to make people feel less alone, in the same way that some books have done that for me. The first person allows me to provide that feeling.

To add to the authenticity, and hopefully the ability for people to connect to the story, I made Todd aware that he was writing a story. At times, Todd will give signals to the reader that he is in the process of writing a story. In “Honeymoon, Heist,” after Todd and Chap have walked into the strip club, he says, “I’ll describe it later.” Not only is he signaling the fact that is writing a story, he does it because he wants to get on with the story. He could describe it, but it’s not really necessary. At other times, Todd mentions problems he is having with his computer as he writes the story, and then summarizes what the computer has taken. Not only does this bring the reader into the process, it also points to the artifice of the process. Having the narrator aware that he is writing a story makes it more real because we as readers know that someone, somewhere, at some time did sit down and write it.

The aware narrator is nothing new to American literature. J. D. Salinger does this in *The Catcher in the Rye* when we realize that Holden is writing the book from a mental institution (276). Jake Barnes lets the reader know that he is doing the writing in *The Sun Also Rises* when he writes, “Somehow I feel I have not shown Robert Cohn clearly” (Hemingway 52). Jake tells us again when he writes, “That has nothing to do with the story” (102). Some people would call these unnecessary digressions or interruptions, but I believe that they perform the function of making the work more authentic and reader friendly.

Another reason I chose a first person narrator is because it shows the control a man wants over his life and his story. Control over a person’s story is the control of a person’s memory. Todd and I both feel that we have almost no control over what happens to us, so we like to tell our own stories, so at least we can control our memories.

\* \* \*

Having finished the work as best I could with the knowledge I had of the subject and the time I was allowed, I saved and printed it. As my printer started to shoot out the pages, I stretched and walked out to the front porch to smoke a cigarette. Sitting on the porch I realized that my preface was just another story I had written. I started with a few ideas and not much of a clue as to how to get them down. I sat down and wrote anyway. I edited it as many times as I could and finally finished it. Maybe I will edit it again. Maybe it will sit untouched in a drawer for the rest of my life. Just like any story in this collection or any story I will ever write, it is the best thing I could write at the time, I learned something from writing it, it's true and I wrote it.

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## HONEYMOON, HEIST

Chap B. Cain was stealing between two and three grand a week from the upscale nightclub he worked at. It was one of those places with high-priced whores sitting at the bar, their pimps sitting in high-backed booths in the corner. Businessmen went there for pool on the side, or in some cases, just pool. Divorced women spent their alimony checks on drinks they hoped would fill their holes and make them loose enough to find men to do the same. Kiki's was in the basement of a hotel on I-35 on the north side of downtown Dallas. Chap worked the door and pocketed some of the cover charge.

I must add that Chap and I aren't really thieves. I'd never stolen anything in my life, and I don't think Chap had stolen more than a pack of cigarettes before this. We just weren't those kinds of guys. We went to church camp. We didn't go to parties in high school, and we were both virgins until we were eighteen. I don't like to admit this, but we even did volunteer work in our younger days. On the other hand, Chap always loved heist movies. I guess he finally saw his opportunity and took it.

The first time he ganked cash there, he called and asked if I wanted to go to the nudie bar.

"Dude, I can't afford that shit. I just sent Debbie a check for her car payment."

"Don't worry about the cash, *mi amigo*," he said. "I gaffled five hunsky from Kiki's last night."

"No shit? Aren't you worried you're going to get caught?" He assured me that there was no way he could get caught. The management didn't count heads and there was no way they would notice the difference in a hundred or so people over an eight-hour shift. I still wasn't sure.

“I got five mallards right here with some hot stripper’s name all over them, so stop worrying and come get me.” he said.

“That’s great for you, but what the fuck am I supposed to do?” I asked, knowing he meant strippers for both of us.

“If you had just ganked five hundred bucks from work and wanted to go to the nudie bar, but poor ol Chap didn’t have the money, you’d hook me up, right? Of course you would, so shut up and come pick a nigga up.” Chap was always calling himself nigga. Either that or Aryan God.

That was the middle of August, and by the middle of September, he had upped his take to close to fifteen hundred each night. It was becoming pretty serious loot. I sort of tried to get him to stop, but that wasn’t happening. After I couldn’t convince him to stop, I talked him into keeping the bulk of the money in the crawlspace under my house. That way, if the cops raided his place, they wouldn’t find shit. To be real honest, I was kind of glad I couldn’t talk him out of it.

We were rolling to the nudie bar five times a week. We had a special booth in the Casa Blanca room at The Lodge. We had it down to a science. We could tell by the way they walked if they would give good dances. Girls that walk fast will hurry through a lap dance, and you don’t want that. We could tell how much class they had by the amount of clothing they wore between stages. We could tell how good she was by how she sat down on your lap. If they sat sideways, across both legs, they wanted to stay and talk. This method of sitting is slower to cause your legs to go to sleep. Otherwise, they would be gone after one dance and didn’t want to hear a thing you had to say.

The point of all that shit about strippers is that this addiction to the nudie bar began in the months before Debbie and I got married. Debbie was in the Navy and living in Monterey,

California, neither of which was exactly good for the relationship. For some reason, she didn't want to have sex anymore. At this point, I hadn't really said anything about it because I was trying to appear confident and self-assured. If she saw me lose my confidence, there was no way I was ever having sex with her again. Chap was engaged to this crazy British bitch we called the Jiffler who still lived in England. I think they had plenty of sex when they were together, but she was a serious ballbuster. Anyway, we reconciled our somewhat shady behavior by telling ourselves that it was better that we go to the nudie bar where nothing really happens (besides the occasional make out session and a hand job) than a regular bar where we could pick up real chicks and take them home to bang. It made sense at the time.

The day Chap told me about the heist was November 11. The only way I remember that is November 11 is the anniversary of my first date with Debbie. The day was cold and cloudless, and I had taken the afternoon off from my office job to pack up some of the stuff in Debbie's storage unit to take to Goodwill. She wanted all that shit cleared out before we moved to Georgia, where she was to be stationed.

I walked into the office of the place to pay the rent, hoping to God that Mrs. Jenkins would be working the desk because she never charged me late fees. I had just enough money in my account for the rent. I don't know why I was paying it in the first place; I guess I just couldn't ever tell her "No." Luckily, Mrs. Jenkins was there, needle pointing a Dallas Cowboys pillow cover when I walked in.

I punched in the code at the gate and drove around the galvanized steel buildings to Debbie's unit. She had one of those climate controlled storage rooms, which I paid an extra twenty-five bucks for.

(I don't know what happened to the text here. My computer gaffled it, and I don't really have a clue what was there. I had a problem opening the door and then a big ass rack of clothes fell on me. That's all I remember.)

I started to get really sad looking at all her crap. There was a box of rolled posters, and framed prints leaned against one of the corrugated walls. There was an orange traffic cone that she had stolen with one of her friends in high school. Purses. Notebooks. College textbooks with yellow "used" stickers on the spines. A whole set of flower-print luggage. And four racks of shoes.

She had a plastic four-drawer thing that she'd bought at the Container Store, and it was full of panties. There were so many pairs of panties in it that I wondered if she was running around in Monterey commando style. I sat down in front of the panty dresser to do some inspecting. Knowing that the top drawer was the period panty drawer, I moved on to the second drawer. Every color in the panty rainbow was represented in cotton and satin. I pulled out a white pair that had little blue flowers on them and a tiny bowed ribbon on the frayed waistband. I put them to my nose though I knew there was nothing to smell. That was the first pair of panties that I had seen on her. We had been in my car, parked behind an elementary school. She had been wearing this short jean skirt. We were making out, and I was moving my hand slowly up her thigh, though I wasn't really trying to touch anything. Before I knew it, my finger stepped into a puddle. I guess I was closer than I thought.

Right then, I started to think, *I'm never going to feel that again. She's never going to be wet again unless she's just pissed herself drunk as hell. I'm never going to feel that on anyone else because we're getting married. Holy Shit, I'm totally fucked.*

See, when she got out of basic she was a totally different person. I couldn't hug her, couldn't kiss her, couldn't hold her hand. At first, she told me it was the "Cold Fish Syndrome," which happens to all chicks when they get out of basic. Supposedly, part of the training is to desexualize all the women. That's fucking fabulous for a dude who just proposed to one. I tried as hard as I could to act as if it didn't bother me. Anyway, a couple of months after that, she came home from Monterey and had been diagnosed with a new condition. She didn't even speak to me at the airport. She told me she wasn't supposed to be seen being affectionate in uniform. Later on that night, I sort of broke down and asked her what was wrong. She told me this new mental issue was caused by long distance relationships. Basically, a person in a long-distance relationship will close them selves off sexually because the only person they are supposed to be with is not there. This sort of made me feel better because it meant that she wasn't pimping dudes out there and that it would be better once we were together. Military doctors may not have graduated top in their classes, but they are fucking geniuses. That was March.

I saw her again in May, and from Friday night to Sunday afternoon, we fucked thirteen times. If there ever was such a thing as relief fucking, that was it. Everything is going to be fine, I thought. That was until I saw her again in July. I got to the San Francisco airport ready to bang. She got there ready to sleep. The next night was the same. Finally, on the third night, we went out drinking, and she tried to give me a blowjob in the back seat of the taxi. After we did it the first time, she asked me what took so long. Again, I saw her in October. She was in town to make some last minute arrangements for the wedding and she was hot and cold. Wondering what she would be like the next time I saw her, I put the panties away and turned to this rack of shoes. The goddamn panties were making me too sad, not that the shoes would be any better.

There was this one pair of sandals in particular that got me. They were fairly standard, just black leather with a chunky sole and a three-inch wide strap across the foot. There were

little indentions made by her toes. I loved those sandals and I couldn't imagine her giving them away. It wasn't because they were that great; it was because she had left something behind on them. I was crying a little bit at this point. I fingered the toe prints, and told myself that everything would be okay. We would be okay. Everything would be fine once we were together in Georgia.

All of a sudden, I realized I was sitting by myself in a storage building, crying over old panties and sandals, and I decided to stop being so retarded. I started grabbing handfuls of shit and stuffing it into big black trash bags. Minutes later, I was in the car headed towards the Goodwill store.

An old man was attending the trailer where people dropped off their old shit. I was glad I didn't have to go in because second hand stores like that make me sad as hell. He was wearing a John Deer hat like my uncle Herman always wore and a blue-collar shirt with a name patch that read "Charlie." He was unhappily helping a middle-eastern lady in a Mercedes when I drove up. I watched the people going in and out of the store while I waited. I wondered what kind of people would eventually buy Debbie's crap. Maybe a young Mexican girl would buy some of the shoes, happy as she could be with her purchase. Maybe a girl from a trailer park would buy one of those old prom dresses, hoping no one knew where she got it. I would have felt better about it if I would have known that second hand stores would become popular for rich kids a few years later. At the same time though, that makes me sad too. Maybe those rich little fuckers buy somebody's crap at the Goodwill and then somebody who really needs it can't get it.

"Howdy, Son," Charlie said, waking me from the dumbass, depressing train of thought. "Looks like you got quite a load there."

"Oh, yeah," I said. "My fiancée wants me to get rid of a bunch of her stuff before we get married."

“I understand. You know these damn women got more crap than they know what to do with, and then they’re always saying they ain’t got enough.” He picked up two of the bags and tossed them in the trailer. I didn’t exactly appreciate the way he was so careless with Debbie’s stuff, but I definitely agreed with him about women having too much crap and always wanting more.

“You sure are right about that,” I said, handing him the last of the bags from my trunk.

“You need a tax receipt for all this?”

“No thanks,” I said.

“Well, good luck with the marriage. You’re gonna need it.” He smiled and clapped me on the back.

“Alright, you too, man,” I said and got in my car.

*Why the fuck do people keep saying shit like that?* I wondered. I was just about tired of motherfuckers ruining my good time. I decided it was time for a drink and headed to the sports bar across the street.

On the way home from the bar, I started to freak out a little. I started to think that maybe I was going through all of that because of the bad stuff I had done. There was that time I accidentally banged Chap’s sister, Candy after Debbie left for the Navy. (Chap never found out about that either, by the way.) There was also that time that I broke up with her for Chris the stripper. I started to think I was paying off some kind of a Karmic debt. I was also lying to her a lot about how much Chap and I were going to the nudie bar. I tried to calculate how much pain I’d been through in the last year and figured that I’d at least paid off the Chris the Stripper thing. I finally decided that I should be as good as possible, and in time, my debt would be paid.

When I got home there was a message from Chap saying that he had something big to tell me. Big, big, he said. I figured it was just some dumbass scam he had thought up to get cash

from the ATM at the nudie bar without paying, or some way we could get free drinks by saying we were writing a novel about the place.

“Chap, what’s the big news?”

“I got this plan.”

“No shit? You always have a plan.” I lit a cigarette and walked out onto the porch.

“No, this isn’t one of those kinds of plans. I’m not talking about selling spooze on the black market to lesbos or any shit like that. This is the real deal.” He sounded quite serious, and though Chap’s plans usually aren’t worth a shit, I started to get a little excited.

“Alright then, tell me about it.”

“Can’t tell you over the phone. Just let me ask you, how does ten grand sound to you?”

“Pretty good, but where the fuck are we going to get ten grand?”

“That’s the part I can’t tell you over the phone.” He paused to blow smoke quite ceremoniously into the receiver. “You never know when the popos are listening.”

“When do I get to find out then?”

“Book the poker room at the Lodge tonight, and I’ll give you all the details there. Pick a nigga like me up at seven,” he said and hung up like he was in some fucking spy movie.

Hanging up the phone, I looked at my guitar and I looked at my computer. I needed to write or play, but my bed was calling my name. I promised myself that I would set my alarm clock early enough to write something or play for an hour or so before I had to get ready. I wasn’t really that tired, but the thought of doing something productive wasn’t quite as seductive as jacking off and taking a nap. So, that’s what I did.

My alarm went off at five and I hit the snooze button until six. Unfortunately, there would be no time to play or write a goddamn thing. I told myself that going to the nudie bar to

hear a scam of Chap's would probably lead to some pretty good shit to write about and maybe the strippers would inspire me to work harder at becoming a rock star.

When I finally got up, I walked outside to check the mail, and our tickets had come in. I was pretty excited and called Debbie to tell her. She wasn't excited at all, and then she started busting my balls about how I never asked what she was up to, and that I was totally self-centered. I asked her how calling her about our honeymoon was self-centered, and she told me that she didn't even want to go to Reno and Lake Tahoe, which was just fucking fabulous since I spent a couple grand that I didn't have on it. Trying to be extra nice, I asked about this friend of hers who had tried to kill herself. Unfortunately, I didn't remember her name and got raped for that. Still trying to be nice, I asked what she'd been up to that day. She said that she and some dude named Jason had gone out looking at new trucks. The fucked up thing is that they weren't even shopping for him; she decided she needed a new truck. I thought that was damn funny since I was making the goddamn payment. Then she told me they were going swing dancing, or some such gay ass shit, that night. *Who the fuck is this Jason fucker?* I thought. *I swear to god, if he's plowing her, I'll kill them both.* I didn't really say shit about that. I didn't want to look jealous. You start looking weak and jealous, you can guarantee she'll be out looking for wiener in no time.

I got off the phone damn near as confused and pissed off as I've ever been. Chap was waiting on the porch of his apartment, smoking like he was in a smoking contest and the judges were looking mainly for form. I admired this about Chap. I think his classy smoking style is a large part of the reason I started smoking in the first place. It took him six years to break me, but he finally did. He took one last drag as he walked down the stairs and then flicked the cigarette into the air with such suave force that the cherry split from the butt before it hit the ground.

"Alright, tell me the shit, Dude," I said as he got in the car.

“Hold your horses, V.T.” said Chap, lighting two cigarettes at the same time. “I think we need to wait til we get there in case your car is bugged.” He handed me one of the cigarettes.

“Are you fucking insane? My goddamn car is not bugged.”

“You never know,” he said.

He wouldn't tell me shit, so I stopped asking. From there, the conversation moved to this idea we'd been kicking around about a traveling retard choir. They would go around and sing and play bells for old people and we'd video the whole thing to sell on the internet. About this time we pulled into the parking lot across the street from The Lodge.

“I bet those little dankers get it on every once in a while. We'll have to have the camera rolling non-stop,” he said.

“Do you think people will pay for danker porn?” I asked.

We walked through the front doors, and unfortunately, the girl at the door knew us. I like it better when they don't know us. That way, they ask for our Ids and eight dollars, and I can pull out the VIP card. I don't really know why I like to pull it out so bad, but I guess I'm just a show-offy sort of fucker.

Out of habit, we stood at the railing where the waitresses stand right inside the door, and took in the room. I'll describe it later. I'll just say that The Lodge was aptly named. A girl in a leopard print wrap-around skirt walked up to us and asked if we needed help finding a table. Remembering that we had planned on going upstairs first, we said, “No thanks.” We usually get a table downstairs where the normal people have to stay before finding our girls and going up to the VIP room. This is because the girls aren't allowed to come upstairs uninvited. We could go straight there and have one of the managers procure our girls, but this is only to be used in an emergency. We like to do it the old fashioned way. That way, you know if the girl likes you or not. You know that she doesn't just see you as a high roller, looking for a handy in the Casa

Blanca room. Also, a manager will occasionally pick a struggler. Not that any of the girls at the Lodge are strugglers, but some are better than others. This time though, we had some serious business to discuss, so we went straight to the poker section of the VIP section. We would come back down for strippers when we had discussed whatever the hell it was that Chap wanted to discuss. I figured it wouldn't really take that long.

Once we were seated, a waitress came to get our order. Feeling particularly business-like, I ordered a single malt scotch. Chap, as usual, ordered a rum and coke. While she was getting our drinks, I asked Chap what the plan was. He told me to hold my horses, as he didn't want the waitress coming back during a particularly sensitive part in his plan. I was starting to believe that Chap really did have a big plan. I was already spending my chunk of the ten grand in my head. No more credit cards or ring payments. A new stereo and some CDs. A subscription to Playboy and the New Yorker. Maybe start a mutual fund. Finally, she got back with the drinks. I wasn't quite the drinker back then and thought the scotch must have gone bad. I drank it slowly anyway, not to look like a punk.

Chap lit two cigarettes and handed me one. "Why didn't you just get a Jack and Coke?"

"I like scotch. This shit's smooth," I said, taking a sip small enough to swallow without making a face. "What's the fucking plan?"

He fingered a pack of matches and looked around the room. Finally, he said, "Okay, you know how on an average night at the Kiki's they charge ten bucks a person to get in?"

"Yeah."

"And you know that even on a bad night, I can usually gaffle a grand, right?"

"Right?"

He took another long drag and blew the smoke into the small light that hung above the table. “The most crowded night of the year is New Year’s Eve and they’re charging a hundred bucks a person, meaning ten grand cash money in our pockets.”

“That’s all fucking great for you, and don’t get me wrong, I’m sure you’ll hook me up, but I don’t see how this really involves me.” I put out my cigarette and took another sip of the scotch.

“I knew you would say that, so I came up with a plan where you can have an even hand in the gaffling of the loot. Actually, you’ll be the one carrying it out, so I figure you can have six thousand and I’ll just take four. I’ll have the money before midnight.”

I know what you’re probably thinking. Chap only wanted me to take the money out so I would go to jail if we got caught. This was the furthest thing from my mind. If I would have been busted, Chap would have told the cops some crazy story so I could go free and he would go to jail. He probably would have convinced them that he had threatened to kill my mother if I didn’t help him, or something like that.

“I don’t know, Man. That’s a shit load of cash to be carrying out, and I seriously don’t want to go to jail and get ass raped,” I said. “And anyway, ten grand is a pretty big knot in twenties.”

“A hundred hundred-dollar bills is only about this big.” He held his thumb and forefinger about half an inch apart.

“How do you know you’re going to get hundreds?”

“I always get hundreds. You got to spend a lot more time exposed if you’re gankin twenties.”

“Okay then, how the fuck are you going to get me the money?”

“Well, you and Debbie come to the hotel, maybe have a drink with Candy upstairs, and then come down to the club to see me. We’ll say happy new years and all that shit, then we’ll go to the bathroom and I’ll hand it to you. Then we come out, I go back to work and y’all go home and fuck like monkeys. Perfect.”

“Hmm. I’m not sure.” The plan sounded too simple. It was nothing like the movies and I didn’t like that.

“What’s not to be sure about it? The math adds up. I gaffle the same amount every weekend when you look at it.”

“It’s just that I’ve never stolen that much money before. I mean, we could go to jail for a while. This isn’t just a pack of smokes.”

“Would ol Chap let you get into something that might jeopardize that cute little butthole of yours?”

“Shut up for a second and let me think.” I sat there staring at the table for second and wondered who the fuck ever actually plays poker at the nudie bar. “I need to go downstairs to clear my mind for second. I’ll be back in less than two minutes.”

“Take all the time you need.” Chap leaned back in the chair and looked as relaxed as if he was drinking a cup of coffee on the Champs Elysee on a Spring afternoon.

I walked down the stairs, past the door to the backstage area in the library and into the main room. Right then I heard “In the Still of the Night” and knew that Karen/Erin was about to be walking out on stage. Seconds later, she walked out of the faux cave, which opened onto the main stage. You might be wondering what the hell a cave would be doing in a nudie bar, but as I said before, The Lodge was aptly named. The inside is finished out with log cabin walls, rock formations, waterfalls, animal heads, and a cave. It’s probably the most magical place on earth.

Just as Coverdale started singing, Karen/Erin strutted out onto the stage like she had a Ph.D. in stripper and she was teaching a graduate level class to all the other girls there. I'll describe her in more detail later.

I strolled to the stage with a big stupid ass smile on my face. She still had her clothes on, which is the way to do it, especially if you already know what they have going on under there. Strippers love it when you act like you don't really want to see them naked. If you go up there before they've busted out their boobs, they think you care about what's on the inside, and then they're more likely to let you do stuff to the outside.

"Todd, oh my God," she said. "I haven't seen you in forever." It had maybe been two weeks.

"Yeah, I've been busy with work and stuff." At this point, she pulled down the top of her dress and pulled my face between her beautiful cantaloupe-like titties. She seductively scratched my head, totally fucking up my hair, but I didn't really give a shit because I knew she'd be on my lap the rest of the night. And then, just like magic, I came up with the plan that would allow Chap and I to steal the money with almost no chance of getting caught. She kissed me on the cheek, and I told her where we were. She had four more stages at two songs a piece. If you add time for a pee break afterwards, I figured I had about twenty-six minutes to explain my idea to Chap.

He had ordered more drinks and was sitting, calmly smoking, when I returned.

"Alright, Dude, I got it."

"I knew you did."

"See, if we go to the bathroom alone together, people have something to suspect if they're suspecting anything at all."

"They won't..."

“I don’t care. Here’s the plan.” I took a drink of the Jack and Coke he had ordered for me. “As soon as you got the money, you take a break to go up and talk to Candy in the lobby bar. On your way back, you have to take a dump, so you go to the bathroom up there.”

“What if I don’t have to take a dump?”

“I don’t give a flying fuck if you have to take a dump or not. You go to the far stall, put the money in the zip-lock bag you’ll be carrying in your wallet, then you put that shit in the tank behind the bowl. Debbie and I’ll get there an hour or so later. We’ll say hi to Candy, and then go downstairs to say hi to you. We’ll all hug and you’ll ask us about the honeymoon. We’ll wish you a good trip to England and tell you to send our love to the Jiffler. Then, we’ll leave. On the way out, I’ll tell Debbie that I gotta take a dump. I’ll go in, grunt and dump some play dough into the toilet, flush that motherfucker, take the scrilla out of the tank, while the loud ass flush will cover up the sound, just in case some nosy fucker is in there. I’ll clean off the water with TP, put the shit in my jacket pocket and we’ll be home free. What you got to say about that shit?”

Chap was looking at me as if I was the smartest motherfucker he’d ever met. Finally, he said, “You came up with that plan while you were downstairs?”

“Yep.”

“You see Karen/Erin?”

“Yep.”

“Goddamn, I love that girl.”

“Me too,” I said, polishing off the rest of the Jack. “And by the way, I think we should split the money down the middle.”

“You sure?”

“I’m sure.”

“Alright then, let’s go get some titties.”

Knowing I still had about twenty minutes before Karen/Erin would be off stage, I walked downstairs with Chap to help him find someone. We stood in the Library, leaning against the gun case, drinking our fresh drinks, and watched the girls go by. Plenty of girls passed by, but none of them seemed to be up to Chap’s standards. This was odd because Chap usually didn’t have any standards. Finally, a blond girl walked by wearing a blue jean skirt straight out of the eighties. “Watch this shit,” Chap said. He walked up behind her and tapped her on the shoulder. “*Wie geht’s, meine schatze?*”

“You speak Cherman?” she said.

“Swiss, right?” Chap looked back at me and winked.

“How did you know?”

“Lucky guess.” He took her hand and walked her up the stairs to the Casa Blanca room.

I have no idea how the hell he did that. He’d done nothing like that before and has done nothing like it since.

Because I’m a totally lazy bastard, I decided to look for this next part in my journal. My plan was to skim through until I found that night’s entry, but of course, that was impossible. Oscar Wilde knew what he was talking about when he said, “I never travel without my journal. One should always have something sensational to read.” I couldn’t put the motherfucker down. That is probably not healthy, but apparently, I don’t really give a fuck about that. Finally, I found what I was looking for. It looked like this:

11/12/98 Work 9:43AM

I think Dickens was talking symbolically about the nudie bar when he wrote: “It was the best of times. It was the worst of times.” I’m hung over as a

motherfucker, but I don't care. Chap and I have a heist planned that cannot be stopped. Not only that, but some crazy shit happened with K/E at the nudie bar last night. I could tell she was hammered when she sat down, but not so hammered as to detract from her beauty. She ordered us some drinks and started to tell me about the aforementioned boyfriend who also happens to be in the Navy. Finally, we moved to a more private seat in the back of the poker room and she started dancing. There was a serious make-out session in progress in no time, and I was feeling all over her cantaloupe titties. (She put my hands and mouth on them. I'm not the kind of dude who makes advances like that in a nudie bar.) After a couple shots of Patron, I told her that she had to stop or I was going to say something stupid. Then she said she was about to say something too. My little innocent heart jumped at the possibilities. My ego and attached penis were rising from the flames. I tried to get her to tell me first, but I ended up telling her that if she didn't stop I was going to ask her out. That was fucking stupid, but her response took my breath away. She said, "You really want to date someone as emotionally fucked up as I am? I'm thinking we could just FUCK! What do you think?" To this I responded, "Well, um we, uh, I, yeah, Jesus, aba..." She stopped all of this by putting her finger to my lips and then kissed me, putting her finger into my mouth as she did. I almost shit my fucking pants. Anyway, she asked me if that was okay with me. I couldn't do anything but shake my head. I had no idea what to say. You really can't prepare yourself for the moment when your favorite stripper of all time asks you straight out to fuck. Fuck. By the way, I had not given her one dime and she was buying the drinks. That's how I knew she meant business. After we stopped kissing, she said, "I swear that when I'm

sober, I'll still want to fuck you." When the lights came on she promised me she would email me the next day. Shit, I have to start working out and figure out the exact amount of Jack I can drink without getting too much of the whisky dick. I definitely want the whisky dick, but not the old softy that's not going anywhere. I need about a week to prepare.

I didn't get an email the next day or any time for that matter. To be totally honest, I was a little relieved that I didn't have to bang her. It was just too much pressure. My sexual self-esteem was in the toilet and a botched sex attempt with a cool, hot stripper might be the end of me. According to Debbie, I stank like cigarettes, I came too fast, and I didn't pay enough attention to her needs, so the last thing I needed was to have bad sex with a really hot chick.

A few weeks before the heist, I had a dream about going to jail. The prison was somewhere in Alabama or Georgia, and it was the nineteenth century. All the prisoners at this prison were forced to run around naked all the time. The guards had this magical stick that they could point at your pecker to make it fall off if you do something wrong. What's worse is that your pecker grows slowly back, so they can do it again. And while it's growing back, all the dudes with full-grown peckers can thump you on your little nub. I'm not really a new-age kind of dude, but that dream freaked me the fuck out. I called Chap and told him I didn't think I could do it. He assured me that the plan was rock solid. If anyone were going to get busted, he would have already been busted. Then he started talking about the money. No debt. New clothes. New guitar. Lifetime membership at The Lodge. It didn't take him five minutes before I was back on track with the heist.

(I don't know what happened to the text here either. I guess my asshole computer felt like now would be a good time to fuck with me again. The next month went by very quickly and nothing very interesting happened. I almost puked on the altar at the rehearsal dinner. There was the crazy ass wedding. And there was the fucked up honeymoon, but I don't really want to talk about any of that shit. The only thing that mattered then was the heist.)

Debbie and I got back from Reno about six on New Year's Eve, and we weren't speaking. As I drove, I was thinking about ways that I could maybe fake my own death to get out of the horrible situation I had gotten myself into and possibly make myself a famous writer in the process. When I wasn't thinking about that, I was kind of hoping that Debbie might just keel over from some unknown disease, but I tried not to think about that too much. My mind kept returning to the money that Chap and I were about to boost. My debts would be paid in full. The horseshit honeymoon would be paid for. The thousands of dollars that we had lost at the casino wouldn't be a big deal. I would have enough money left over for a divorce. My credit cards would have zero balances, and maybe I could afford a new guitar or something too. I would have only the emotional destruction caused by this evil woman that I loved more than anything to deal with.

When we got back to my dad's house where I was staying at the time, the phone was ringing. It was Chap. "It's on," is all he said. At this point, I decided to try to be friendly to Debbie so we could at least pretend that our lives weren't down the toilet. This wasn't very hard because I'm pretty sure she didn't think her life was down the toilet. As she unpacked her sea bag, I told her I was sorry for acting the way I did, and that I would try to be more understanding of whatever she was going through. She almost started crying. I hugged her and told her

everything was going to be fine. As we hugged, I thought about ramming a big fucking sword through the both of us.

On the way to the hotel, I almost convinced myself that everything really was going to be fine. She looked really pretty in a “you’re never getting this pussy again” kind of way, and I told myself that maybe once we were living together in Georgia that everything would be okay.

The hotel was still decorated for Christmas, and I felt good being there in my suit, like I was Frank Sinatra, playing a gangster or badass thief. She was my beautiful mobster wife who thought her husband was in construction. She didn’t mind me banging other chicks because that’s just how it was. It was one less chore.

Candy was busy serving drinks in the lobby bar and didn’t see us walk by. She looked cute with her hair pulled behind her ears and her face flushed from the running back and forth.

Debbie and I got on the elevator to go down to Kiki’s, and right after the doors shut, she grabbed my hand. At this point, all the slick Sinatra left me. I didn’t remember the money or even where the fuck I was. Three days before, we were riding the elevator up to our room in Reno, and I tried to hold her hand. She pulled it away and said, “I hate it when you do that.”

“Hate it when I do what?” I looked at myself in the mirror on the ceiling.

“The only reason you’re holding my hand is because you want to fuck me.”

“What?”

“Yeah, and just because everyone thinks you’re supposed to have sex on your honeymoon doesn’t mean you have to. I can’t believe you.”

“Are you fucking serious?” I was done playing it cool. “You think that A, the only reason I want to hold your hand is because I want to fuck you, and B, you think that just because everyone thinks you’re supposed to fuck a lot on your honeymoon is why I want to fuck? You’re fucking nuts.” At this point, I noticed that we were wearing matching outfits. Both of us

were wearing green cargo pants, white t-shirts, and fuzzy, black fleece jackets. We looked like a goddamn Gap commercial. I wanted to strip and walk to the room naked. She was looking down at the ring that I'm still paying for. "I'll tell you why I was holding your hand. I was holding your hand because I love you. I sure as hell wasn't expecting anything in return, and the last thing I expect is for you to want to actually fuck your husband. And secondly, I don't want to fuck you because people think we should. I want to fuck you because I want to fuck you." The elevator stopped and an old couple got on. This made me happy because I wasn't stopping and she would be embarrassed. "I want to fuck you because I like how your pink nipples get hard when the room is a few degrees too cold. I want to fuck you because I like how you get so wet that it drips down the side of my balls." Debbie and the old lady were both totally appalled, but the old man seemed to be on my side. An almost imperceptible smile came to his lips, saying, "Give it to her good boy, or you won't be having sex with her ever again." I took off the fleece jacket and continued my rant. "I want to fuck you because you're my wife and I didn't marry you not to ever fuck again, but it looks like that's what's going happen." She didn't say shit.

The door opened, I walked out into the hall and hit the down button on the elevator. I needed a drink. She went back to our room to watch *Oprah*. I don't know if I was more pissed off or just hurt. We didn't do it on our wedding night or when we got to Reno the next day. I kind of figured we'd bust in the hotel room and go at it.

I carried her across the threshold and plopped her down on the bed. Then I pulled the bags inside and closed the door. I jumped on top of her and pinned her arms down, expecting a playful afternoon romp.

"You smell like cigarettes."

"I haven't smoked today," I said.

“I don’t know. I can smell it.”

I got up to go brush my teeth, feeling really disgusting.

“Come back in here. I have something for you.” Maybe she meant a blowjob.

Hopefully, that didn’t smell like smoke.

“What?”

“It’s a signed copy of *Indian Killer*. Sherman Alexie was at the Borders in Monterey, so I went and got it for you. I thought it would be a nice surprise.” She handed me the book.

“Thank you. That’s so nice, and I didn’t get you anything.”

“You go me this trip.”

“Yeah, but...”

“Don’t. I wanted to get it for you,” she said, putting her arms around me.

“Thanks.” She pecked me on the lips.

After I got done brushing my teeth, I headed downstairs to play blackjack feeling sort of guilty, and I think she took a nap.

On the way downstairs, I thought that maybe she had a big night planned with all sorts of sexy lingerie, and that’s why she didn’t want to do it. This of course didn’t happen either, so when she said that shit in the elevator, I just sort of lost it. I don’t think I’ve ever felt worse in my entire life up until that point. The girl I wanted to spend the rest of my life with didn’t want me to hold her hand.

Basically, the rest of the trip, we only spoke about food and bullshit like that. We gambled at separate tables, and the only time I saw her was when she lost all her money and came to me to get more. I would see her coming and hold out one of the hundreds we’d been given. Most nights, I stayed up gambling because I couldn’t sleep next to her unless I was drunk as shit. This was a bit of a problem because I think I had a bladder infection and had to pee

every five minutes. I drank cranberry and vodka to combat the problem but I don't think it worked. The only thing that got me through the whole thing was the heist. I wouldn't have to worry about all the money we'd blown, and I would try to figure out something when I got back. *Well, at least I've still got the heist*, I kept telling myself. *At least I've got the heist*.

Anyway, you could see how her holding my hand all of a sudden after all that shit would piss me off. I just pulled my hand out of hers and gave her a "are you fucking crazy?" look. Once again, she didn't say anything because I think she was starting to get scared of me, or at least my mouth.

Chap was at the cash register outside of the elevator, wearing a tuxedo that didn't fit too well. He was smiling and chatting up the regulars as they handed him hundred dollar bills. All of a sudden, I was feeling the weight of the money coming to me and I didn't give a shit about my marriage. Chap and I were going to have that money and there wasn't shit anyone could do about it.

"How you kids doing?" Chap asked, hugging Debbie.

"We're just great," she said, and she sounded totally serious. This was the one time that I was glad that she had the talent to bullshit everyone about how everything was going.

"Y'all win a lot of money at the tables?"

"Not really. We were both doing really bad," she said.

"Well, that's okay. It's only money, right?" Chap gave me a wink.

We shot the shit for a few more minutes, wished Chap a good trip and then went back upstairs. I couldn't wait to get to the money, and I think Debbie just wanted to go somewhere for a drink. I'm not sure where she thought we were going to get the money, since I had to tell the Paki at the airport that I would send him a check for the fourteen dollar parking fee.

Candy was still busy, so we sat down and waited for her to notice us. I was smoking and wondering if I should go get the money now when Debbie said, "I still love you." She had this sad look in her eyes, like I was going to leave her just like her father did. Maybe she was trying to force me to.

"That's good. You're stuck with me for a while."

Candy came up with three shots of Jager and kneeled down. "Is my manager looking?"

"I don't think so," I said.

"Alright then, let's drink. A girl like me get thirsty bein around all these drinks." We all took the shot, and Candy looked around again. "I'm sorry I can't stay to chat. It's busy as hell tonight." Then she hugged us both and left.

"You ready to go?" I asked.

"Sure. What do you want to do?"

"I'm not sure. I have to go to the bathroom, then we'll figure it out."

"Okay," she said, walking over to a mirror near the restroom to fix her lipstick. Her big thighs looked good in the white tights she was wearing and I started to think for the fiftieth time that year that she would get over whatever the fuck it was.

I walked in the bathroom and took a leak in one of the urinals. I wanted to make the anticipation last just a minute longer. I wasn't nervous at all. Zipping up my pants, I turned around and walked into the last stall. I heard the bathroom door open and someone step up to one of the urinals, so I decided to pull down my pants and pretend to be taking a dump. I forgot the playdough and tried to squeeze out a real turd. Unfortunately, I was a little too nervous and nothing happened. Whoever it was farted and made a noise of relief, which almost made me laugh. Finally, I heard the sink, footsteps back to the door, and then the door itself.

I stood up, pulling my pants back up and turned around. I started to lift the lid of the tank, and some weird feeling came over me. It wasn't exactly fear, though I could have been wrong because I think I had been scared for a year straight at that point. I think it felt more like I was being watched. *Stop being a retard*, I told myself, and set the lid down on the toilet seat. The money was there like a little green treasure in a Ziplock at the bottom of the Dookie Sea. I reached down into the cold clear water and pulled out the package. I cleaned it off with toilet paper and felt a love for Debbie come into my heart that hadn't been there in a long time. I put the money in my jacket pocket and opened the door, singing, "Just got paid today, got me a pocket full of..."

"Excuse me, Sir. I'm going to have to ask you to come with me," said a fat greasy security guard.

*Holy sweet goddamn, I'm fucked, I thought. I'm going to be taking all the big black dicks in the Huntsville pen all at once. I thought I was fucked when I couldn't bang my wife. Well, I'm literally fucked now. My parents will never speak to me again, and I'll never be able to get a regular job. Felony.*

The security guard, put his hand on my shoulder and followed me out of the bathroom. I never saw Debbie look prettier, and I figured it was the last time I was ever going to see her. "Baby, Chap asked this gentlemen to come get me. I think he needs to ask me something about getting his mail while he's gone or something. Go have a drink with Candy."

"Okay?" she said like she didn't exactly believe me.

The security guard then pointed to a door that said "Security." I opened it, and he followed me down a long hall. Walking down the hall, I wondered how long I would get. I thought about the looks on my parents' faces. Their good little boy scout had committed a felony. I thought about running, but the fat bastard security guard took up the whole hall, and

there was Debbie to think about. There was an open door at the end of this hall, which he pushed me through and then pushed me into a chair next to Chap. This was a relief because I figured we could guard each other's ass virginities better together than we could have alone. There was another dude in the room who didn't look much friendlier.

"Empty your pockets, S-for-brains," said the skinnier dude.

"This what you're looking for?" I said, pulling out a mint that I had stolen from the lobby, which was stupid as hell, but the only thing I could think of besides being gang raped in a prison shower.

"Billy Ray, this little punk thinks he's a G.D. comedian," the skinny one said to the fat one. He turned to me and said, "You ain't gonna think you're so f-ing funny when you got a twelve inch nigger dick in your A." He wouldn't cuss, but he didn't seem to mind using the word "Nigger" in such a nasty way.

"Might as well give it to him, Dude," Chap said. "They have both of us on tape."

"No shit?"

"Yeah, S-for-brains, we got it on tape, so hand over the money," he said, scratching his balls. "It'll go a lot easier on you if you give it up before the cops get here."

I pulled the money out of my pocket and pictured myself naked, bleeding and crying on the cold white tile of the shower. Billy Ray opened the Ziplock and started counting the money. Even though there was nothing but hundreds, he was counting pretty slowly.

Finally, he finished counting it and said, "Hot-shit-on-a-stick, Harry. These little fuckers got ten thousand dollars here."

"Billy Ray, I really wish you wouldn't use that kind of language around me, MFer."

"Sorry bout that, boss. Won't happen again."

The thought that we might be beaten started to enter my head and I actually got more scared. Chap was looking very frustrated and looked more like he was thinking of beating someone than getting a beating. He said, "So, what happens now?"

"S, Billy Ray, this little punk A thief wants to know what's going to happen now."

"That's funny, boss. Funny."

Harry leaned over the table into Chap's face. Chap was trying to look hard, and I was wishing he would stop. They were staring at each other, and I was still thinking about crying. I really wanted a drink and to hold Debbie the way I used to one last time before prison. One of the florescent lights was flickering. Billy Ray was looking at the other two.

Maybe Harry respected unflinching stare because after a while, he said, "I'm gonna tell you what. We are gonna take this here money and let you Fs go. But let me tell you one thing: If I ever catch you in my hotel again, both of you MFers are goin straight to jail. You understand me?"

"You know what, Harry? I think we're gonna let you keep the money, but only if we get the video tapes," Chap said.

"Like S, I'm gonna give you the tapes," he said. Then he turned to Billy Ray and said, "He wants the tapes," as if Billy Ray didn't hear him in the first place. I was still scared, but Chap was pissed and didn't seem to give a flying fuck what happened to either of us or our ass virginities.

"Chap, fuck the tapes. Let's go," I said. Chap wasn't listening to me.

"I'm gonna tell you something, Fuckstick" Chap said. "You just blackmailed us. You've stolen the money that we stole. So, if you want to go to jail, go ahead and keep the tapes. We don't give a shit either way."

"How're you gonna prove it?"

“We’ll call the cops ourselves and turn ourselves in. Then we’ll go to trial, and I’m pretty sure that the jury will take our word over yours any day of the week, considering neither of you can put together a complete sentence. What do you think? Nigger dicks for all of us.”

“Call em,” Harry said, turning the phone around to face Chap.

The silence in the room was fucking horrible, and I was planning on knocking Chap in the head with the base of the phone if he picked up the receiver. Billy Ray was pacing and rubbing his hands through his greasy hair. Finally, he turned to Harry and said, “Boss, I think we should give em the tapes. I don’t think I could handle no nigger dicks in my ass. Seriously, I think I’d rather die first.” He looked like he was about to cry.

“Fine. Give em the GD tapes. We got the money.”

Billy Ray didn’t waste any time. He walked to the wall of VCRs and hit all the eject buttons. Then he pulled out each tape and laid them on the table.

“Now, you got your tapes, so get the F out of my sight.”

“We need a bag. How the fuck are we supposed to carry all these fuckers?” Chap said.

“You don’t need no GD bag, MFer. Just get.”

I think Chap had come to his senses by the point, because he picked up half the tapes and walked out the door. Outside the door I felt relieved, but there was still that leftover sick feeling in my stomach.

“Can you take these?” Chap asked. “I have to go out the back way.”

“Yeah, fuck it. I’ll tell Debbie...Fuck it. I’ll just tell her to shut the fuck up.”

“Honeymoon wasn’t so peachy?”

“Fuck no, but what the fuck is wrong with you? You seriously could’ve gotten us sent to prison.”

“I don’t know. I just couldn’t stand thinking about those dipshits getting our money. I wasn’t even thinking. I’m sorry,” he said. “At least it worked out okay, besides not getting the money.”

“Yeah, well, have fun in England.”

“You sure Debbie’s not going to bust your balls too much about the tapes.”

“I really don’t give a flying fuck at this point.”

“That bad, huh?”

“That bad.”

“Tell me all about it when I get back.” We hugged and went our separate ways.

Oddly enough, Debbie didn’t ask about the tapes or what about Chap had wanted. I put the tapes in the trunk and walked around to open the door for her. I thought it would make her feel worse if I did something nice for her. Either that or she would say that I was just unlocking the door for her so I could get her in her panties.

(Goddamn computer stole some more of the text here, and I don’t have a clue what any of it said. Must not have been that important.)

Debbie suggested that we should go to this microbrew place where her friends were hanging out. I asked her how we were supposed to pay for it, and she told me that she still had a couple hundred in her purse. To which I responded, “Then why the fuck didn’t you give it to me when I couldn’t pay to get my car out of the parking lot at the airport.” To which she said nothing.

She danced with her friends, while I sat at the bar drinking really fast. The place closed an hour later, and I was trying to keep the room from spinning. It was time to let her have it.

I said all sorts of crazy shit. I told her that I wasn't putting up with her crazy ass anymore and that I wanted an annulment. I told her she was the craziest bitch on the planet and it was no wonder why her Dad left her when she was six. Whisky makes me extremely mean sometimes, but I didn't really care at the time. I finally told her that she better get the fuck over whatever her problems were or she was going to have to explain to her mom why she spent fifteen thousand dollars on a marriage that lasted five days.

I wasn't expecting the result I got. She cried. (I expected that.) But then she gave me the longest blubbing apology I've ever gotten. She told me she was a horrible wife. She told me that I shouldn't have married her. She said something about living up to wifely duties. Then she promised that she would get herself fixed. All of a sudden, I felt like a total asshole, and then I apologized. She said she'd been acting crazy and she sort of deserved getting yelled at.

She went straight into the bathroom when we got home, and figuring she'd be in there for at least thirty minutes, I brushed my teeth in my dad's bathroom and went to bed. She came out a minute later wearing a Victoria's Secret nightie that someone had given her. It was the last thing I expected her to do. She lit a candle next to the bed and sprayed perfume in the air. I was a little nervous about kissing her, though she'd been smoking all night. I started rubbing her stomach really softly. A couple of seconds later I was rubbing the skin near her panty line. She took a deep breath, and a train whistle blew in the distance. Instead of taking it really slow like I should have, I just sort of went for it. I hoped it would be good enough, and it wasn't. I didn't have to ask. Once again, worrying about the thing I feared most caused it to happen. She didn't seem to care. "Everything will be fine when we get to Georgia," She said. Though I knew it was bad, I went to sleep and hoped she was right.

## IF I EVER GET BACK TO TEXAS, I'M GONNA NAIL MY FEET TO THE GROUND

By the time I'd been in Georgia for seven days, I was working on my third job. The first job was at the Gap. It was the best paying, but I couldn't really handle saying hi to all those people all the time. The next job I had was at the Augusta Country Club, which paid shit, but at least I could play all the free golf I wanted to on Mondays. Being the new guy, I always had to work the morning shift, and that meant I had to get up at 5:30 in the morning. I did that once. I took a day off to rest up, and then I went to the career center at Augusta State University to find something more suitable to my tastes. After looking over my resume and seeing my experience in clerical work, the career guy sent me straight over to the Augusta Chronicle. I didn't know shit about newspapers.

The Chronicle was in an old gray building downtown. The editor met me at the security desk downstairs.

"You must be Todd," he said.

"Yes, Sir. And you must be Mr. Jefferson."

"Good to know ya."

Mr. Jefferson played the part of the newspaper man very well. His clothes were a bit disheveled, and he looked like he'd had at least two pots of coffee already. Despite his high stress position, he had an easy-going demeanor, and I could tell he would be a good man to work for. He didn't carry himself like a man who would abuse his authority.

When we got off the elevator on the tenth floor he told me to come back to his office after his assistant, Rose, gave me the tour. His assistant was a fat chick in her mid-twenties. She

was wearing acid washed jeans and a Pabst Blue Ribbon t-shirt. I felt a little overdressed in my suit, but then again, I was on a job interview.

The newsroom was filled with cubicles, and proper offices were along two walls. No one was sitting still. The constant movement reminded me of a mowed anthill. It was darker than any office I'd been in before, and everything was gray. It was as if a little of the ink had rubbed off on everything. She showed me a million in and out boxes and told me what they were for. She introduced me to a bunch of people who didn't seem to give a fuck about meeting me. Then she explained how the paper went from somebody's computer to somebody else's doorstep. She showed me this big ass machine, which I thought was responsible for printing the paper, but turned out to be the machine where they looked at the layout.

The tour took close to an hour and I was really stressed out. I had seen so much in a short period of time that I didn't remember any of it. I was very glad when she dropped me off at Mr. Jefferson's office. At that point, I was pretty sure I wanted nothing to do with a clerical job at the Augusta Chronicle.

"Have a seat, Son," he said. "So, what do think?"

"Pretty busy."

"Oh, you haven't seen nothin yet." He took a sip from the stained mug on his desk.

"Well, we're both busy men, so let's cut the bullshit. I've looked over your writing sample and it's pretty good. You've got a good handshake and you're a snazzy dresser."

"Thank you."

"Our sportswriter quit yesterday, so the job's yours if you want it."

Like I said before, I didn't know shit about newspapers. I also didn't really know shit about any sports besides soccer and women's tennis, and I didn't think that would get me too far. As I considered this though, I started to picture the mini bio on the back of my first novel.

“Began his career as a sports writer in Georgia.” I thought about my earliest influence, Lewis Grizzard, and how he had started out as a sports writer in Atlanta. I thought about how I’d read his book, *If I Ever Get Back to Georgia, I’m Gonna Nail My Feet to the Ground*, when I was thirteen and knew I wanted to be a writer. This was destiny, I thought.

“I’ll take it. Thank you,” I said.

“Alright then. Can you be here at seven in the morning?”

“Sure can.”

“See you then.” I was so excited, I almost skipped out of his office.

It was raining outside, but I decided to take a stroll down Broadway to look around. I thought about how Hunter S. Thompson had begun his career as a sports writer, and how Hemingway had also begun his career as a newspaper man. People back home would ask me what I was doing, and I would reply that I was a writer for the *Augusta Chronicle*. My mom would write letters to the family with my articles attached. My dad would tell me he knew I could do it all the time. My wife, Debbie, would throw her arms around me and tell me how proud she was of me. I had to stop and call her.

I found a pay phone a block down Broadway and pulled the piece of paper with our new phone number on it.

“Hey, Baby. Guess what?”

“What?”

“Guess who’s married to the new sportswriter for the *Augusta Chronicle*?”

“But you don’t know anything about sports besides soccer and women’s tennis.”

“Thanks for pissing on my parade.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean...”

“Why do you always do that? Can’t you just be happy for me for one second?”

“I’m really sorry, and I am proud of you. It’s just that I don’t want you to get in over your head.”

“I’ll be fine. Newspaper guys write on a third grade level or something like that. No problem.”

“Okay.”

“I’ll see you in thirty minutes,” I said. “How bout we go out to dinner tonight to celebrate.”

“Sounds good.”

Driving home in the rain, I started to get a little nervous. I really didn’t have any experience, and I really didn’t know shit about sports. *Why the fuck would that guy hire me? After I write my first story, he’ll know I’m a fraud and fire me. Then I’ll have to tell everyone that I’m not a sportswriter anymore. When I get home, I have to start studying. I’m a smart guy. I can learn all that shit. Hopefully, I can learn enough tonight to get by.*

I stopped at the Smile Gas on Peach Orchard road and bought all the newspapers they had. The lady behind the counter was sort of a bitch and ignored me, but finally I got my papers.

When I got home, Debbie was dressed and ready to go eat.

“Where do you want to go, Baby?” she asked. She gave me a kiss and her eyes crinkled.

“I don’t think I can go out to eat tonight.”

“Why not?”

“I started thinking about that shit you said on the phone and freaked out. I need to spend the night studying sportswriting.”

“Okay. I’ll make something. My sportswriter can’t start out on an empty stomach,” she said. “You go in there and get to work, and when dinner’s ready, I’ll come get you.”

“Sounds good.”

I walked into our spare bedroom where my clothes and computer were and began to read. I didn't make it through the first article before I realized that I knew even less about sports than I thought I did. What the fuck does a cornerback do? What is the NCAA? Why is every baseball team a certain number of games out of first? Why don't they just say what place they're in? There wasn't one single article about the English Premier League. I put the paper down on my desk, opened the window and lit a cigarette.

*Okay, this is what you have to do. You have to find out what the big sport around here is and learn about that. So, you write a couple of hockey stories or whatever while you're learning about all lesser sports.* It sounded like a good plan.

I looked through all the papers, and it turned out that I would not be writing about hockey. This town was all about college football. Georgia Tech this. University of Alabama that. I got on the internet and searched around for some web sites that would help me. I found one that listed where all the positions were and what they did. Then I found a site that listed recent stats. After much digging I found another website which had all the rules to both college and professional football. This would be quite helpful if whatever team they had made it to the playoffs. I printed all this stuff out and started to copy it into a small notebook I carried around with me. After I'd filled about two pages with notes, Debbie came in to tell me that dinner was ready.

She'd changed into sweat pants that were cut off at her calves and a Navy t-shirt. Usually, I don't like this look very much, but something about her wearing it while she cooked me dinner was different. She had taken her hair down and there was an indentation in it from the rubber band. She had made Shake and Bake chicken with macaroni and cheese and green beans. Thankfully, it wasn't something she could fuck up, because I was starving.

"How was work?" I asked as I forked a chicken breast.

“Fine. I’m still learning where everything is,” she said. “There are about a million different places I need to check in.”

“Sounds like a pain in the ass.” I noticed her nipples were showing through the shirt she was wearing.

“Holy shit, Debbie. I have a Playboy with the girls from the A.C.C. in it and I think that’s the group of colleges around here.”

“Great. You’ll be studying skinny college girls.”

“Stop it. I think it will help.” I ran into the bathroom and found the issue. “See look,” I said holding up the magazine.

“Todd, I’m trying to eat. Could you please put that away.”

“Fine. I just thought it was a good idea.”

“I’m sure it’s a good idea. ‘Red lacy panties, Georgia Tech. Big fake boobs, Florida State.’ If there’s one way you’re going to learn it fast, that’ll be it.”

“Okay. Sorry.” I put the magazine on the floor and finished dinner as fast as I could. I started to clean up the kitchen, but she told me she didn’t like how I did it. (It amazes me that women haven’t figured that trick out yet.)

Two hours and six beers later, I was still trying to learn about all the colleges and football and all that. The Playboy layout and article proved to be very informative, though it was making me a little horny. About ten Debbie came in to ask me if I needed another beer.

“No thanks. I don’t want to be all fucked up on the first day.”

“Maybe this will help,” she said and started rubbing my shoulders.

I turned around and saw that she was wearing a satin turquoise dress thing. “I like that uniform.”

“I thought you would,” she said. “Maybe you’ll remember something about Texas schools when you think about this.”

“I won’t forget that.”

She took my hand and ran it up from her calf to her thigh. She bent over and bit me on the ear. “Let’s go to bed.” She hadn’t said that since we’d moved to Georgia.

Actually, she hadn’t said that too many times since she had joined the Navy. The last year and a half had been filled with various conditions, both mental and physical which prohibited sex. There were vaginal issues, yeast, smells and discharge. Sometimes she was too fat. She had mental issues involved with top-secret training that she couldn’t tell me about. One time she told me she loved me too much to make love with me. (How I believed those last two whoppers, I have no idea.) There was also this fondling issue when she was a kid, but it hadn’t been a problem before. The most fucked up part of it all was that sometimes things would be fine and she’d be horny as hell once I put a move on her. The problem was that I couldn’t ever tell when she was going to be like that. I just had to take my chances, put it up so she could knock it down. Alcohol was usually helpful, but I didn’t really like the idea of getting my wife drunk so I could have sex with her. That night, and for the five hundredth time, I told myself that everything was going to be fine.

I was a little groggy in the morning, but Debbie had set the alarm on the coffee maker to go off ten minutes before I got up. I sort of wondered why she was doing all of these nice things for me. Then again, that was a stupid question. Being with her was kind like showering in a motel room with someone constantly flushing the toilet. The water goes cold and then it gets hot again. You just don’t know how many times it is going to get cold before there is no more hot water in the tank.

When I got to the Chronicle, Mr. Jefferson directed me to the sports editor. He had the look of a guy who had played baseball in the past but never went pro. His name was Jimmy Bolton and he wouldn't let anyone call him anything but Jimmy. "My dad's Mr. Bolton," he told me. He took me to a cubicle and said, "This is where you'll be forty hours a week for the rest of your life." He laughed, and I could tell he didn't mean anything bad by what he'd said. "Here's what you do," he said and started to explain.

It turns out that I wasn't a sportswriter at all. My job was calling up high school football coaches, little league and soccer associations and all sorts of places like that to get scores and stats of all the games in the area. They even had a program on the computer where I would just fill in the blanks. There was absolutely no writing whatsoever. Any sports articles were taken from the A.P. and Jimmy picked those. Besides calling people for eight-year-old girl's softball scores, I was also sort of an inner office courier, taking stacks of paper and shit from one person's out box to someone else's in box. That was about it. It was nothing I couldn't handle, and I wouldn't be fired for not knowing the difference between University of Georgia and Georgia Tech, but I would also have a hard time telling anyone that I was actually a sportswriter. People want to see articles. Debbie was going to want to see articles. I bet myself five dollars that when she found out what I actually did that there would be no more Shake and Bake, no more beers brought to me in the office, and no more satin turquoise sexy dress thing. If she didn't have a husband she could brag about in some way, there was no way she was going to do any of that shit for me.

I was a little bit depressed on the way home, but I kept trying to tell myself that I could move up the newspaper ladder. I told myself that if I tried really hard everything would work out. I told myself that it probably wouldn't be more than a few months until I would be writing features for the paper.

The wind was blowing hard and drifts of pine needles were piling in the gutters. The sky looked like someone had taped white bubblewrap to it. Besides the chicken shacks on every corner and the LaQueesha's Tae Bo and Hairbraids Factory, Augusta really wasn't a bad place to be. I decided to stop at the Smile Gas to get a coke and some smokes to make for nice drive through town.

Walking by the coolers, I noticed that there was an amazing amount of peach soda, and I wondered if they even sold peach soda at home. There was big jar of pickled pigs feet sitting next to the fountain. They were smothered in some sort of red sauce that I hadn't seen before. My dad was always trying to get me to eat those when I was little, but I don't remember them being red. I finally found a cup that hadn't been splattered with the pickled pigs feet juice and got my coke. The young woman behind the counter was looking at a clipboard when I walked up. I expected her to ring me up when she got to a stopping point, but she just kept on making checks on the piece of paper.

I wasn't really in a hurry, but I started to get annoyed after a minute or so. I thought maybe she was so into what she was doing that she hadn't noticed that I'd come in. I shuffled around a little, but that didn't catch her attention either. I seemed to be invisible.

"Excuse me ma'am," I said finally.

She still didn't look up, and my patience was wearing a little thin by this point.

"Ma'am?"

She looked up at me with four hundred years of contempt and said, "This register be closed." Well, maybe it wasn't four hundred years of contempt; maybe she'd had a bad day.

"Maybe you could check me out on that one?" I was trying really hard to be nice.

"I don't be workin that register."

“Well, then, who is?” I seriously couldn’t believe this was happening. It was 1999, for Christ’s sake.

“She be outside messin with the pumps.”

I looked outside and the woman she was referring to was smoking a cigarette.

“She appear to be smoking a cigarette,” I said, accidentally taking on her dialect.

“You just gonna have to wait,” she said, looking back down at her clipboard.

That’s when I lost it. “Look, I’m taking the fucking coke. Call the cops. I’m sure Roscoe will be here to help your ass in no time.” I grabbed a pack of Marlboros off the counter and walked out the door. She yelled something as I walked out, but I didn’t catch it.

About a block away, I wondered if she had called the cops. Maybe she had written down my license plate number. I decided that if I got home without getting arrested, I would mail Smile Gas five dollars for the coke and cigarettes. I really didn’t need anything else bad to happen.

Debbie asked how my first day went and asked when my first article would be coming out. I told her I was going to be training for a while and wasn’t sure.

The next month pretty much sucked. My job was extremely boring, but I was learning a lot at school. My Art History teacher was really into Buddhism, and it sounded like something that would be good for me. At the same time, I didn’t want to get too calm. I might not be able to write anymore if I was too calm.

Debbie realized that she wasn’t going to be seeing anything I’d written in the paper, and she laughed at my first paycheck. More black people were mean to me, and I was starting to think all kinds of racist shit in my head. That scared me because I hadn’t been raised like that. I wasn’t really a big fan of the white people there either. I hadn’t gotten laid since the night I got

the job. I missed my friends at home, and I wanted a Shiner. I was pretty depressed, so I started running. I figured that might help.

The only good thing that happened was meeting these two Navy guys that Debbie worked with. All the other military people I'd met out there had gone through language school with Debbie, so they were old buddies, and I wasn't about to tell them shit. These guys didn't go to school with her, so I felt like I could trust them. They had no loyalty to her.

On the weekends, Josh, Adam and I went out drinking a lot, and Debbie didn't care how late I stayed out. Maybe she felt bad. Maybe she knew that if I was out with them, I wouldn't be home trying to get in her panties. Anyway, I had two good friends, and I figured that would help me feel better.

After the first two weeks, she started sleeping on top of the comforter with a sheet over her. She said it was too hot, but I'm pretty sure she didn't want to accidentally touch me. Every night became the same. After work or school, I would eat dinner alone at the Waffle House. Then I would pick up a six-pack on the way home. Debbie would be watching something stupid on TV when I got there, so I would go in the spare bedroom and read until she went to bed. Then I would watch *The Crocodile Hunter* or *The Howard Stern Show*. After that, I would usually masturbate in the other bathroom, thinking about her. Finally, I would go to bed and try to come up with plans to make things better until I eventually fell asleep. She was always asleep when I got to bed or at least she pretended to be. Basically, everything sucked donkey dicks, and I either wanted to be dead or home. Anyone who would write a book called *If I Ever Get Back to Georgia, I'm Gonna Nail My Feet to the Ground* must be insane. Fuck Georgia and fuck being a sportswriter. Fuck being married to a girl in the Navy.

One day late in October, I had a particularly shitty day at school and left before my film class. We had been discussing the negative effect that media has on women in my Mass Media class, and I really wasn't in the mood for any more schooling. I had been trying not to pressure Debbie about our fucked up sex life, but I really couldn't take it any more. I'm pretty sure that if I would have never said anything, she would have been just fine with it. That was pissing me off, too. She was home when I got there, folding towels in front of the TV.

"So, what's up with you anyway?" I said.

"What's up with what?"

"You know."

"I'm fine," she said, picking up a stack of towels to take to the bathroom.

"You know what, Debbie? You're not fine. We have the most fucked up marriage on the goddamn planet, and you don't even care."

"I do care, but I don't know what I'm supposed to do about." She came out of the bathroom and looked at me with her hand on her hip. "If you want to know the truth, Todd, it's just disgusting."

"What's disgusting?"

"Sex is disgusting, especially the end, and it always has been." She went and picked up another stack of towels.

I couldn't say anything. I walked outside and smoked a cigarette. It smelled like shit outside because we lived next to a paper mill. I thought the smell was making me sick and went back inside. She was still doing laundry.

"You need help. Mine's just like everyone else's. And, and you never said that before. You're just being fucking mean and you need counseling." I picked up my keys and left.

That night I got shit faced in the barracks with my buddies. I told them all the shit that was happening, which was a lot for people you've known for such a short time. I don't even think I would have told my best friend, Chap, all of that shit. They told me dump her and move in with them. They said they were pretty sure that they wouldn't get busted for having unauthorized personnel in their room. I told them if I dumped her, I would be going back to Dallas.

I called in sick the next day. When Mr. Jefferson's assistant answered, I pretended to be in the middle of a coughing fit so she would believe that I was actually sick. I really didn't want to lose my job.

Unfortunately, it was Debbie's day off, and she was home when I got there.

"Where have you been? I started to get worried when I got up this morning when you didn't come home." She didn't sound mad.

"I got drunk and stayed with Josh and Adam."

"That's good. You don't need to be driving like that," she said. "Do you want me to fix you something to eat?"

"No. I'm not hungry." I sat down on the couch.

"You know, you're probably right. We probably should go see a counselor."

We should go see a counselor. What the fuck is that supposed to mean? I'm not fucked up; I just want the goddamn pussy every once in a while.

"Oh?"

"Yeah, I made us an appointment on base for next Tuesday morning. Maybe you could skip your English class?"

"I guess so."

The next few days went quickly. I was feeling very optimistic about the whole thing. I figured we would go into the counselor's office, he'd take one look at us, and then he would tell her to make an appointment by herself. Next thing you know, she'd be fixed, and everything would be fine.

Of course, Tuesday came, and it didn't go a damn thing like I expected. The counseling office was in a building that looked like it used to be a barracks. Our particular counselor had pictures of his family all over the place, and they looked way too happy. It was almost like he was showing off.

Debbie told this asshole counselor how she'd been molested. She said how sex, especially the end, was totally disgusting. He told her to tell him exactly what had happened. I hadn't ever heard this part, so I was quite interested. As it turns out, her crazy ass step-uncle rubbed her little poon on the outside of her swimsuit when she was eight. I couldn't fucking believe that's all that happened. Of course, that's horrible and all, but seriously. She started crying and he handed her a box of Kleenex. She told us she had repressed it until she was fourteen. I thought this was an interesting fact since we'd been fucking pretty much constantly for the four years before she joined the Navy. By the way, I don't mean to sound unsympathetic, but it was a little hard to understand how a pseudo stinky pinky that happened fifteen years earlier could ruin my goddamn life. I was confused, but I figured that now that it was all out in the open and didn't have anything to do with me or my semen, they could fix her and everything would be cool.

I couldn't believe it, but after Colonel Asshole heard this, he turned on me. I guess he didn't think a pseudo stinky pinky was enough to cause such damage either. His eyes said, "You just ain't fuckin her right, Kid." I wanted to kill him. He asked me about my techniques. I seriously wanted to pull his goddamn head off and rape his family. He asked me why I wasn't

using condoms if I knew that I was causing her so much pain with my disgusting nut. I looked at Debbie, and she told him she was allergic to rubbers. I couldn't really talk anymore. About this time, he told us our time was up. "Todd, you should make an appointment with Sgt. Jones at the desk out front," he said. *I should make an appointment?* "Debbie, don't worry about all this. We'll get him straightened out. Everything is going to be fine." Then he gave her a lecherous hug, sort of massaging her back the whole time.

I didn't say anything because I needed time to figure it all out. I figured anything I said would hurt her, and I still didn't want to do that. I made an appointment with Sgt. Jones at the front desk for the next week. Maybe I did need to talk to someone. Maybe they had some of those "Better Sex" videos I could rent. Debbie hugged me in the parking lot and told me she was glad I was finally getting some help. I started to think that maybe I really was the one that needed help. Crazy people don't know they're crazy, do they?

I went to school and made it just in time for my Art Appreciation test. The cute girl in front of me touched my hand as she passed me the scantron, and I sort of started crying. No one noticed, thank God. After the test, I drove to Joe's Underground for lunch and a beer. Joe's usually made me feel better. It was in the basement of a building downtown, and it reminded me of this place back home. After lunch, I called my bank from the payphone, and figured I had enough money left in my account to get totally shit faced.

After five or six beers, I was feeling a little better and trying to figure out how much more I needed to drink before I could go home and sleep. About four o'clock, I saw Mr. Jefferson and Jimmy walk in the door.

"Todd. Just the man we were looking for," Jimmy said, shaking my hand.

"Sup, guys?"

"You drunk, Son?" Mr. Jefferson asked.

“No, well, maybe a little bit. Got problems at home.”

“Women?” Jimmy asked.

“Yep.”

“Nothing but trouble,” said Mr. Jefferson. “Anyway, we have a proposition for you.”

“What’s that?”

“North Augusta is playing Hephzibah High next Friday night, and we want you to cover it.”

“You mean I’ll get to write an actual story, with like sentences and shit?”

“A real story,” Jimmy said. “I was going to write it, but the wife’s sister is getting married that day, so I can’t.”

“Can you do it?” Mr. Jefferson asked.

“Sure. Seriously. And don’t worry about me being all drunk and all. I’ll do a good job. I promise.”

“Alright, Son. We trust you.”

I went to the restroom, and when I got back, Mr. Jefferson paid my tab. Then he gave me twenty bucks and told me to take a cab home.

I put the twenty in my pocket and walked to my car. I had a little bit of a hard time concentrating on the road, but the cruise control helped. I was really excited about the story and was kind of dancing around the car, singing along to the oldies on the radio. I couldn’t wait to tell Debbie the good news.

She wasn’t home when I got there. While I was waiting, I started to get a little thirsty and went to the fridge to see if we had anything. There weren’t any beers, so I had to settle for a berry wine cooler. Just as I sat down on the couch, she walked in. She was wearing her dress uniform and had her stupid fortune cookie hat under her arm.

“Baby, they gave me a story. I’m covering the district championship game next week.”

“When next week? Friday?”

“Yeah, I think so. Why?”

“Because that’s when the Navy ball is. How could you forget that?” She looked at me like I was her retarded stepchild.

“I guess I didn’t forget, but it’s work. It’s my first story.” I couldn’t understand why she wasn’t excited for me.

“If you write that story and don’t come to the ball, you might as well pack your shit and leave.”

“What?”

“I’m fucking serious, Todd. I’m tired of your shit.”

I fucking snapped. The stupid ass, positive pussy, Todd Welles was gone. “You’re tired of my shit? You’re fucking insane. You run around acting like nothing’s wrong, expecting me to do the same, and now you’re saying you’re tired of my shit. You know what I’m tired of? I’m tired of being married to a goddamn insane cuntbag.”

“Go then,” she said and walked into our bedroom. I could hear her throwing shit around in there, and I walked to my room to pack some clothes. Then I walked back into the living room to yell at her some more.

“Debbie. I’m sorry. I won’t write the story. You’re right. I should definitely go to your stupid ass ball instead of doing my job. How I even considered writing that story instead of hanging out with you and a bunch of other retards, I have no idea.” She was still in bedroom. I walked into the kitchen and grabbed a butcher knife. She came out as I was walking back through the living room.

“What the fuck are you doing?” she said. She didn’t really look scared, but I think she was looking for an escape route.

“Nothing. Just going to cut my nuts off,” I said unzipping my pants. “Maybe you can have them stuffed and make a fucking key chain.” I pulled out my junk and put the blade next to my sack. “That way you’ll have no problem showing all your little friends who’s the boss.”

“I think they already know. Put the knife down.”

“Fuck you. It’s not like you’re some sex goddess or anything,” I said. “Anyway, your pussy stinks sometimes.”

I walked back into the room with my shit in it still holding the knife. I opened my sock drawer, took out some socks and put the knife in the drawer. A minute or so later, I had a bag packed. Then, I looked around the room, and tried to figure out what she would break before I could get the rest of my shit. Definitely the Les Paul. And if she broke my guitar, I would seriously have to kill her. I put the guitar in its case and carried it with my bag out to the living room.

“Where are you going?” she asked. She was crying now, and I wasn’t the least bit surprised. The toilet was done flushing, and the water was hot again.

“What do you mean, ‘where am I going?’ I’m going back to Dallas.”

“You can’t leave me now.”

“I can’t leave you now? You know what? I’ve heard you say the last thing you didn’t mean. You’ve been saying shit to me for the last six years just to see what kind of a reaction you would get, or just to hurt me. I’m done.” I started walking towards the door, and she went back into the bedroom.

“I want to die,” she screamed. She was in theatre in high school.

“Good.”

Though I was probably eight drinks in, I didn't feel drunk at all anymore. After I stopped at a gas station to get cigarettes, I got on 20 and headed east. Four hours later, I was in Birmingham and sober. I think I had a fever.

## BURYING HOBIE CAT

The day I buried Marilyn's cat, I came in hung over as hell. Not that being hung over makes the day stand out, because I usually was, having recently left my bitch ex-wife. Marilyn's cat, Hobie, had died the day before, and she had been crying on and off since. I was a little more concerned with my own problems and didn't really give the slightest fuck about Hobie, though I knew it was a life-altering event for a fifty-year-old lady with no kids. I walked into my office about fifteen minutes late and found the post-it note stuck to my computer screen with my list of tasks written on it.

Take ebay to the post office.

Oil change in the Escalade.

Panties at Neiman's.

Dig Hobie grave.

The whole list pissed me off, but I sure as fuck was in no mood to dig a goddamn cat grave, especially since it was a hundred and ten goddamn degrees outside. I walked into her office to complain.

"Marilyn, are you serious about the panties?" I said, trying to be nice about the cat.

"Well, yes, Todd. I ordered them last week, and I'm running out," she said, grabbing a tissue to blow her pretty, fake nose.

"Okay, fine, but I got stuff to do after work, so I don't know if I'm going to be able to get to all that." I noticed that the new stuffed leopard she'd shot in Africa the previous winter had

come in, but decided against commenting. He was mounted to next to an eighteenth century French armoire that was painted pink and gold.

“Hobie Cat’s in the freezer.” She started bawling. “So I guess he can wait.”

“I’m sorry. I guess I can probably get it all done today.” I felt bad for her, even though on most days I hated her fucking guts. She handed me the keys to the Caddy and her American Express card, and I went to pack up the Ebay packages.

Marilyn Huckleberry was fifty years old, divorced and had no children. What she did have was a salary of close to two hundred thousand dollars a year and a huge set of fake knockers. She was a CPA by trade but spent most of her time at the office selling antiques on Ebay. You name it: milk glass, early twentieth century porcelain mummies, Wedgewood plates, Murano glass, Lalique crystal, the original Fiestaware and all sorts of other bullshit. She spent five hundred dollars a week on the lottery and thousands a year in plastic surgeries. She bought hundred dollar panties, five hundred dollar shoes, and jeans that cost a grand. I was privy to all these things because I was her personal assistant and the one who actually purchased most of them.

I was sweating my nuts off standing in line at the post office and getting more pissed off with every dipshit move of the customers in front of me. That’s when I saw her. She was a brunette with hair commercial hair and a cheerleader smile. Her tits were class A stripper and so was her ass. Her thong straps were poking out of her low-rider jeans, as if to say, “Hi, Todd. Pull us down.” She had a tiny curve to her stomach, making it all the more sexy, and her Playboy bunny belly button ring twinkled as the light through the blinds caught it in flashes.

“Hot damn, motherfucker. That’s a Sunday night fried chicken dinner with grease gravy, collard greens and cornbread. Percy 2 Hard Welles, III be starving,” my penis, said.

“I know, Percy, but what am I supposed to do?”

“You go pimp, motherfucker. That’s what you do,” Percy said. “We haven’t had no pussy in six months, and I can’t take this shit no more.”

“What about Katy from the bar three months ago?”

“She was fat as hell, and I don’t mean the pork chop, junk in the trunk, cushion for the pushin fat. She was ham hock, eatin nothin but fried twinkies, roll her in the flour kind of fat. Not only that, you was drunk as hell.”

“I didn’t see you complaining...”

“Sir, you’re next,” the guy behind me said.

“Oh, shit. Sorry about that.” By the time I got done at the counter, the girl was nowhere to be found, not that I would have done anything anyway.

I read an old issue of People magazine at the Sewell Cadillac dealership where I was getting the oil changed, and drank some burnt coffee. Right in the middle of reading an ad for some new prescription drug for allergies, which caused severe diarrhea in some patients similar to sugar pill, my stomach started churning. Seconds later, I knew that it wasn’t a false alarm. I walked straight to the bathroom and almost knocked over an old man as he came out of the stall. From the smell of it, he’d taken one of those allergy pills, but I didn’t give a damn. I almost didn’t get my drawers down before the mud train rolled out of the station. It came in waves, never fully satisfying. When I was finally done, I had to wash my face and my hands. The car was done, and I was on my way to Neiman Marcus at Prestonwood.

*Hey y’all. This is Percy 2 Hard Welles, III, and I come to do a little narratin. Todd’s such a dumbass sometimes, thinking people want to hear about takin a dump. That’s just plain ol disgustin and it don’t fit in the story no how. We was headed to the Neimans, and neither of*

*us was very excited about it. Don't get me wrong; I like lookin at the four hundred dollar alligator shoes and fox furs and all that, but doing a woman's errands was beneath us. You know what I'm saying? Not only that, but I sure as hell wasn't in the mood for no panty section.*

*We walked in, and Todd wouldn't even look at the alligator shoes or none of that. I think it was because that pole smokin, bone smuglin, homo salesman was hangin out in the shoe department, and he had been trying to get a piece of Percy since we started rollin to the Neimans. We went up the escalator to the second floor where they be keeping the panties. I could smell the perfume and make up from downstairs and it was already happenin. Goddamn, I was hornier than a convict, and they wasn't no pussy for miles.*

*I swear to the sweet baby Jesus, there must have been an acre of panties and bras and nighties and garters and all sorts of other shit. I just kept picturing hot ass North Dallas hos wearing that shit, takin a trip to the dirty south with Percy. I could picture us going to one of those big old houses off Preston, with her wearin some of the hundred dollar panties that we rip off like the animals we are.*

*Finally, we made it through the panty jungle, got Marilyn's shit and left. Thank God, cause I couldn't take that shit no more. When we got in the car, we peeped out all the panties that Marilyn got and damned if they weren't the tiniest little g-strings a couple of motherfuckers like us ever seen. The triangle part wasn't more than two inches all around and see through. I was bettin that Marilyn shaves that crazy old pie of hers, but Todd said he thinks that she lets that motherfucker grow in peace. We arranged the panties back in the box and headed to get lunch.*

*Percy 2 Hard, out.*

I went back to the office and ate lunch at my desk. When I finished, I went in to Marilyn's office to see if she wanted to talk. We had a weird relationship. Sometimes, I couldn't stand her ass. She would make me copy a whole antiques price book so she wouldn't have to carry the original to estate sales. After I would get done, she would tell me what a great job I'd done, like I was some fucking retard who just learned how to run a copier instead of a grown man in college.

Other times we got along pretty good. She would buy me lunch at some really nice place and we would talk about nothing in particular. She gave me odd jobs when I needed the money and paid for my groceries when I went shopping for her. Sometimes she gave me odd jobs when I didn't need the money. I would file stuff and she would work on the computer, and we'd watch Wheel of Fortune on the little TV in her office at home. After the first commercial break, she'd make Rotel cheese dip, which meant we didn't have to pretend to work anymore. Usually, after Wheel, I would go home, unless some particularly interesting movie was coming on. I guess she sort of paid me to hang out, but I was pretty lonely too and didn't mind. We were both divorced, so I guess I thought she understood, though we never talked about it. When I was going through tough times, she would send me on errands that lasted all day and amounted to almost nothing. One time she sent me to check every store in town for prices on this one Calphalon pot. I liked doing stuff like that most of the time, because I could just drive around and not have to talk to anyone.

She was on the phone with the company's attorney when I went in there, so I headed over to her house to start digging. She told me to dig it between the two big crepe myrtles next to the fence. Though it was a good five feet from where I had dug Winnie's grave a few years before, I was still worried that my shovel would find her little doggie coffin.

She had two shovels and a pick by the garage door, and a pair of women's gardening gloves sitting on the counter. I thought about looking at Hobie in the freezer, but decided against it. I guess I kind of loved that little sucker too. He was a sweet little bastard, the kind of cat that rubs on your leg when you come home and doesn't need too much. He was tough, too. One time, when he was chasing a bug through her house, he slammed his little head into the wall when he couldn't stop fast enough on the slick, hardwood floor. He looked over at us, shook his head and walked into the kitchen as if nothing had happened.

I thought I was sort of in the mood for digging when I got there. It would be nice to do something physical and get something done. I pictured the shovel going in easy, like in the movies, with barely any pressure from my foot. Maybe an hour's worth of work. That's what I was thinking when I took my shirt off and carried the stuff out back. Looking at the ground, I remembered that the soil was solid clay with some chunks of chalk mixed in.

I scraped off the top layer of St. Augustine and the soft soil an inch below that, making a neat rectangle that would fit the kitty casket. At that point the shovel became useless. I picked at the clay for about fifteen minutes, switching hands when one side of my back would start to hurt. It was hot as fuck and I could smell beer in my sweat. Blisters were forming on my hands. I shoveled the chunks of clay and chalk out the best I could, making a pile on Winnie's grave. I repeated this process for forty-five minutes or so.

I noticed myself in her window and wondered when my arms had become decent again. I had been working out, but I was drinking every day and eating almost nothing. Of course they were a little pumped from the digging, but they were even more cut than I thought. I was thinking I was looking pretty sexy, all tan and buff in my wife beater with dirt smudges on my arms and shirt.

“Todd, stop looking at yourself, motherfucker. You ain’t no goddamn Brad Pitt. It’s hot as a motherfucker in here. Peel me off the cousins,” Percy pleaded. “Let’s go for a swim.”

I peeled Percy from the cousins and told him that we didn’t have time for a swim. I continued picking and digging for another hour until Marilyn came home. As I stood looking at the hole that was now two feet deep, she brought me a bottle of Evian.

“How’s it going?”

“I’m about half way there,” I said. “You wouldn’t happen to have any more gloves?” I showed her the bloody spots on my palms, hoping she would decide to give me a raise.

“I sure don’t,” she said, taking my hands. “I’m sorry.”

“How about tape?”

“Tape, I have,” she said and rubbed a smudge of clay from my forehead.

I followed her inside, wondering why she was being so touchy with me. Percy made a comment about her tits looking good, and I quietly told him to shut up. She pulled out the first aid kit from under the kitchen sink and handed me the tape.

“Do you need any gauze?”

“No thanks.” I put the tape across the palms of both hands and rings of it around my thumbs.

As I started back outside, she said, “If you need anything, just let me know.” She was giving me this look that she’d only given me once before when I’d changed the battery on her Vette, like there was something she wanted to say, but had already decided not to. It was one of those looks you give a person to get them to ask you why you are looking at them like that. I wasn’t asking a damn thing.

The sun felt good after being in the house. I picked up the pick and continued busting up the clay. I looked up at the window again and noticed that Marilyn was watching me through the

glass. I looked back down and kept digging. She was arranging small porcelain antique Santas in a display case.

“I wish she would stop looking at me, Percy. That shit’s just weird.”

“She wants up in these draws, motherfucker, and you know what? I’m just about hungry enough to let her.”

“She doesn’t want in the drawers, dude. She’s probably just lonely.”

“Sheeit.”

I kept digging for another hour or so, trying not to look up at the window, except when I had to adjust Percy. I waited until she wasn’t looking to do that. My arms and back weren’t hurting anymore, and it felt good. Finally, the hole was deep enough and I went inside to tell her. This was the part that I wasn’t looking forward to. I would rather dig a thousand cat graves than watch one lonely woman put her kitty in one.

I walked in the door leading to the kitchen, but before I could say anything, she called my name. I told her to hold on while I took my boots off. I walked into her sunken living room and she wasn’t there.

“Marilyn, where are you?”

“I’m in here.” The sound was coming from her bedroom.

I walked in and saw her in the bathroom. She had changed out of her blue silk tank top and dress slacks and was now wearing a t-shirt tied in the back and blue jean shorts. There were tiny blue veins near her ankles, but everything else looked okay. She smelled like baby powder. Nasty shit was about to go down, and there wasn’t a damn thing I could do about it.

*Hey y’all, this is Percy 2 Hard...*

No it’s not. You’re too nasty to tell this part. Anyway...

“Can you get that plant down?” she said, pointing to an ivy above her bathtub. “I can’t reach it.” I stepped into the tub and up onto the edge near the wall. As I reached up for the pot, I felt her hand on my back. “I don’t want you to fall,” she said. Then her other hand was on my stomach where my shirt had come up. I grabbed the small pot, and her hand went down the front of my pants. My stomach went with it like it does every time a new chick sticks her hand down there. Percy was ready. I stepped down and put my head against the tile, letting her keep going as long as she wanted to. I looked into her closet and focused on pair of pink high-heeled shoes. She was kissing my back and still rubbing. The air conditioner was blowing on my back, evaporating the sweat and giving me goosebumps. I was a little freaked out, but didn’t know how to stop it, and it felt nice to be touched again.

“Lay down,” she said. I think I said okay and laid down in the tub. She pulled my tank top off and then my pants. She put a condom on me and took the tape off my hands. She gently kissed my blisters, and put me inside her. That sounds dumb, but I don’t want to say we started fucking or banging or she started to ride this dick. She simply put it in there and lay down on me. I rubbed her back as softly as I could. She was crying quietly and the tears tickled as they rolled down the side of my chest. I don’t know why she was crying, but I don’t really think it was Hobie. Maybe she wanted someone to be with. Maybe she needed to be touched too.

Finally, she got up and walked to the little toilet room next to her closet without saying anything. I didn’t know what the hell to do at this point, so I put my clothes back on and the semi-used rubber into my pocket. I walked into the kitchen and got a beer out of the refrigerator.

Hey y’all, this is Percy again, and I just want to tell you that the reason I didn’t get the dessert on that one was because it was so damn sad. She was crying like a

motherfucker the whole time. I think Todd was thinking about that dirty old bitch he was married to and all the shit she said about us. Anyway, the whole damn thing was sad as a motherfucker, and I wanted to go on back to the crib, watch MASH, drink a couple of forties and go the fuck to sleep, but Todd said we had to stay til that little cat motherfucker, Hobie, was up in the ground. Since he's my ride, I stayed.

*Peace and I'm out, Percy 2 Hard*

I put my boots back on sitting on the kitchen floor and wondered what the fuck would happen next. I decided to start the funeral by myself and walked out into the garage to grab Hobie out of the freezer. His fur felt crispy through the bag, like cold Christmas decorations. I carried him out to the gravesite and laid him down in the coffin still in the bag. His little head was poking out of the bag now, and the frost on his whiskers was melting fast. I smoked a cigarette, finished the beer and waited for Marilyn.

Finally, she came out, looking like nothing had happened.

"You got him ready?" she asked putting her hair in a scrunchy.

"Yeah."

"I don't want to look at him any more."

"Okay," I said and put the lid on the casket and the Velcro straps around it.

"Todd, can you say something?"

"Say something?" I asked.

"You know, like something to Jesus about Hobie going to heaven."

I couldn't remember a damn thing to say to Jesus about Hobie going to heaven. Not even that ashes to ashes stuff. Finally, I remembered my grandmother saying, "Just talk to him."

“Uh, Jesus,” I said, grabbing Marilyn’s hand. “We hope that you will see to it that little Hobie here has a good time in kitty heaven.” I paused. “He was a good kitty, and he never crapped on the floor. He was more than just a kitty though. He was our friend. And, Jesus, can you please help us through this tough time? I know that you and your old man do stuff that we can’t understand, like taking young Hobie, but please help us to work through whatever pain we have. We may not know why it hurts, but it sure as hell does. Thank you, Jesus. Amen.”

I started to cover Hobie’s casket with dirt, and Marilyn went in to make Rotel dip. I got as much dirt on top of him as I could, put her tools away and walked inside to say bye.

“Marilyn, I’m gonna head home. You need anything else?”

“No, thank you. I’ll be fine,” she said, dipping a plain Dorito into the cheese dip.

I was halfway out the door when she stopped me.

“Todd?”

“Yes?”

“None of this ever happened.”

“I know.”

“No, I mean none of it. None of it ever happened.”

“I hope not,” I said. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

I think she meant something about the nature of reality, like nothing ever really happens, but I’m not sure. Maybe that’s what gets her through. I wondered if I should give up writing and start selling antiques.

## CHAP'S BACHELOR PARTY

I was getting pretty nervous as we got closer to the hookers. It was like the first time I went to the nudie bar. I wanted to know the rules and how much everything cost. I wanted to know how the girls would look, and I was hoping there would be drinks.

After fifteen minutes in a cab that smelled like beer and puke, we pulled up to the house, and I thought I was going to shit my pants. The house was old and looked like those little cottages you see down the road from big country mansions in movies about England, except this one didn't have a thatched roof. I checked my face in the rearview mirror of the cab, and I looked pretty fucked up from the fight. I'm not sure why I cared. Habit, I guess. We walked in and it was very homey inside. They even had doilies and shit. There were three pasty-looking girls sitting on couches, wearing ill-fitting lingerie and watching *Cold Feet*. The "Madame" took a fifty quid from each of us and told us to pick one. I watched her put the money in a tea tin, not wanting to turn around to face the girls.

"Go on then," she said. I turned around and saw Chap, already walking down the hall with a straight-calved red head. One of the other girls, who looked like a cross between Olive Oil with big tits and Mr. Ed, was walking up to June, smiling. The last girl—the most attractive of the bunch—was still sitting on the couch, looking at me.

She said her name was Mary, though I really doubted it. I told her my name was Todd Welles, but I don't think she believed me either. "Mary" was dirty blond with a bob, and she looked about thirty. She wasn't really pretty, but she was sexy as hell. It wasn't because she was a whore or anything either. She was one of those girls you'd really like to bang, but you

sure as hell wouldn't take to prom. Anyway, she got up and led me down the hall, through about fifty fire doors, to a small bedroom with a single bed, which, to my surprise, was made and looked clean. It smelled like yellow Listerene in there.

“You're a fit one, you are,” she said, closing the door behind her.

“Thanks, so are you. Um, so, what do. . .”

“Wash up, if you don't mind,” she said pointing to a sink that I hadn't noticed. I pulled my pants down before taking off my shoes and made quite a show of trying to get everything off. As I stood next to the sink, I started to realize that it must have been made for giants or something because I had to stand on my tiptoes to get my dick, Percy, anywhere near the water, and I'm not a particularly short guy. While I was doing this, she was sitting on the edge of the bed lubing herself up with a tube of generic KY. This method wasn't quite a confidence builder. Not only that, but the freshly washed Percy was about the smallest I'd ever seen him.

She grabbed a condom from a cereal bowl on the nightstand, and I mentioned that my dick wasn't exactly in display mode and she said getting it there was her job. She was very clinical and cold, like nurse taking your pulse. It was not at all what I'd pictured from the old west movies I'd watched as a kid with those saloon hookers with those big skirts that seem to love their jobs. She directed me to lay down on the bed, and then she put the condom on that bad boy, all one inch of it. Nothing was really happening. She sort of slobbered on it for a minute, while I stared at the circular patterns in the ceiling and prayed to the boner gods. Finally, I just sat up.

“Fuck,” I said. “Jesus H. Christ. You'd think I wouldn't be so nervous, considering. I mean, I didn't mean that in a bad way, it's just that, well you know. And it always takes so long to bust out the goddamn condoms you know they really don't need to be child proof I mean they should make them like those pill bottles for old people not that it's your fault I don't know what

happened I'm really sorry Jesus it's not you I promise where in the hell are all those math class boners now that I need one Fuck you're so cute I swear I can't believe this shit I'm sorry this hasn't ever happened before well there was that one time. . ."

"Sshhh," she said. "It's okay. It happens to everyone. Come here." She pulled me down on top of her and hugged me, rubbing my back softly, shushing in my ear. For some reason I started crying. Maybe I was coming down too fast and too hard from the coke. Somehow, Percy's lack of cooperation brought all my sexual defeats of the past to the front of my mind like a shit storm, like that first hand job I got when I busted a nut before she even touched it. Or when I lost my virginity, or almost didn't lose it actually because of another premature ejaculation. There was also this time that I was trying to do it with this girl that was a little on the stinky side down there and I think Percy pecker could smell it too, because he decided there was no way in hell he was going in there. Add all of that to another hundred stories involving my bitch ex-wife, Debbie.

I know what you're thinking. You're thinking that my buddies and I are some pitiful, hooker-banging bastards, but that's not the really the case. Most of the time, I'm quite the prude. I never even kissed a girl until I was sixteen. The reason I was up to this kind of shenanigan was it was Chap's bachelor party. We had been friends since the third grade or some shit like that, and we'd been through everything together: first kisses, the divorces of both sets of parents, first loves, the loss of our virginities, first times drunk, my marriage and divorce and everything else you could possibly imagine. We knew how to lie to cover for each other. Like if we'd been to the nudie bar, and then his girlfriend asked me where we'd been, I'd tell her we'd been to the Wild Turkey, because that's exactly what he would have told her. I'd lie and he'd swear to it.

But above all that, we always told each other the truth, even when the other didn't want to hear it. That was the way it was.

Anyway, to get back to the question of "Why hookers?" Chap wanted it that way, and since I didn't like his fiancée, whom we called the Jiffler, a goddamn bit, I wasn't about to stop it. I wanted to see him with that old look in his eye, the one where all your buddies know you're in love. I've seen it on him before, with this girl he dated in high school, but she was long gone and a psycho anyway. The point is that he didn't have the look and I didn't think he should be marrying someone without it. I thought if he might meet some sweet little hooker that would make him think twice. I've seen it happen at the nudie bar, and he didn't even bone any of those chicks. Why couldn't it happen in a whorehouse?

Another reason I didn't want him to marry her was that she was a ruthless ballbuster from the old school. I mean Imperial ballbusting. The sun never sets ballbusting. Not only was she the kind of girl that's always telling you what to do and how to do it, but she does it in front of your friends like you're some kind of retarded child. This one time they were in town visiting Chap's parents, and Chap's sister, Candy, and I went out to dinner with them. As it turns out she'd come up with a system of taps on his shoulder for when she wanted to correct his driving while other people were in the car. One tap for too fast. Two taps too slow. Etc. Etc. I didn't really notice what was going on until Candy pointed it out. I felt like slapping her upside the goddamn head myself, and finally Chap pulled the car over and said, "If you got a fucking problem with how I'm driving, how bout you fucking take over? Oh, wait a minute. You don't know how to drive. I'm sorry. How did I forget?" We all knew that she couldn't drive and she started crying. Chap got out of the car and smoked two cigarettes, and the three of us waited there in the car in that total fucked up silence that happens when a couple gets into a nasty fight and the other people have no way to escape. I almost felt bad for her. At least she was trying not

to bust his balls in front of everybody, but fuck that. Finally Chap got back in, put the car into gear and pulled back into traffic. There were no more taps that night, but Candy assured me that Chap would've have just taken it if I hadn't been there, and I think she's probably right.

The reason I think he put up with that kind of shit was that his mom was kind of a ballbuster too. Also, he figured she'd kill herself if he broke it off. I think she threatened to one time, but I'm not sure. He had this weird sense of responsibility for everyone else that I never understood. I've seen him work three jobs to pay his parents' bills when his mother had "mis-managed" his father's more-than-adequate salary. I guess I would have too, but my parents would have probably shot themselves before asking.

So, that's how a nice guy like me ended up in the situation I was in. The plan was for the three of us, including my roommate and other best friend, June, to go to a whorehouse, bang some hos and hope to god that it would knock some sense into Chap's head. If not, I was going to have to talk him out of it, which is exactly what I was trying to avoid.

Chap had met June and me at Gatwick on a Wednesday morning. London was just as you would expect it, cool and rainy. Chap was wearing a blue Adidas hat that had turned grey with wear, and he'd gained a little weight. He was also sporting some new "trainers" that I knew she must have bought for him, because there's no way in hell Chap would've paid seventy five quid for a pair of shoes. I guess the ones he bought at Wal-Mart before he left weren't good enough.

Anyway, we took the train to Victoria, and the line we arrived on was underground and looked like it would be a good place to be if a bomb went off. We ate at the Burger King to ease into our new cultural surroundings and then we started to look for our train to King's Cross. You

would think Chap would know where the hell he was going since he'd just come from that train an hour or so earlier, but hell no. I had to find the damn thing for us.

We finally found the stairs down to the tubes and I would have been more comfortable in a sardine can. The smell was godawful and people I didn't know were touching me. After about fifteen minutes of me trying not to kill everyone, we finally got to King's Cross and found our train. It was old as hell, but I liked it anyway. June looked like a little kid, having never been on a real train before. It was very cute and I wanted to give the wack bastard a hug.

There wasn't much catching up to do as far as Chap was concerned. He said his biggest problem was being around all the cucumber sandwich eatin Brits all the time, but everything else was fine. *Wife? Fine. Job? Fine.* He said almost nothing and then asked about us. That was his way of avoiding the shit that was on all of our minds. So there we were, sitting on a train to Cleethorpes, the teenage pregnancy capitol of Europe by the way, chain-smoking Marlboros, not saying a damn thing.

Chap and I were reading, and June was sleeping. Finally, I decided to see if he would tell me what was really going on with the Jiffler.

"I hate to bring this kind of shit up," I said. Chap looked up from his German translation of *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. "Are you sure about this?"

"Sure about what?" He knew damn well what I was talking about.

"You know. You and the Jiffler getting married."

"Yeah, sure. She's great." He turned back to his book.

"What about how you called me last week and said that shit about how she'd been riding your scroat since you moved to England to be with her? What about how she said she'd never move to the States because it's all shite?" I said. "She's not giving you a thing. Do you think

that shit's going to just go away after you get married? I can tell you right now, it's only going to get worse."

"She's not Debbie, for fuck's sake," he said lighting a cigarette. "And not everyone's marriage goes down the toilet in less than a year like yours did." He turned back to his book.

"Sorry. Jesus. I just don't want you to get screwed over, that's all."

I guess I'd pissed him off pretty bad if he had to go and say some mean shit about Debbie and me like that, but also it just confirmed what I already knew. Chap was fucked and there probably wasn't a fucking thing we could do to unfuck him, though that didn't mean I wasn't going to try. We sat there in silence for an hour until we pulled up at a stop somewhere in the middle of England. June woke up asked where we were. I pointed to the sign out the window and kept reading.

An hour later, we arrived in Cleethorpes. Chap lived in the neighboring town called Grimsby, but the train didn't stop there. Anyway, our train pulled in early that evening, and it smelled like fish had been rotting there since the Romans had invaded. We took a taxi from the train station and checked into an over priced shithole they called a hotel. It was in some area of town that Chap said was the red-light district, though it turned out to be the gay district. I guess the little woman didn't let him out of the house very often. Our room was a foot wider on all sides than the double bed, which looked like a trampoline with an invisible fat chick sitting on it. There was a dirty sink that hung over the foot of the bed which made it necessary to kneel on the bed while brushing your teeth. We made the mistake of paying an extra ten quid for a room with a shower in it, which turned out to be more of a science project. There seemed to be a film over everything, but I guess it didn't matter because we weren't planning on sleeping there anyway. We just wanted somewhere to keep our shit.

We got ready quickly, being so uncomfortable in the tiny room. One of us had to stand in the hall the whole time to keep from having our dicks up each other's asses as we changed.

Chap suggested a small pizza place he knew about nearby and we went there to eat.

“So, Chap, you gettin nervous yet?” I asked, as the waiter brought our beers. He said he wasn't and asked me if I'd heard from Debbie. Chap didn't want to talk about it.

Then June piped up, “Hey, enough of all this bullshit. We got some hookers to bang!” June, the eternal bachelor, never liked it when we talked about that shit. He'd had one girlfriend his whole life, and I think she sort of fucked him in the head. He wasn't really so excited about the hookers, but it was a better subject than marriage.

It was still early, so we decided to go to a bar closer to the whores to drink ourselves up to it. I thought about Chap's father telling us about his first time. Chap's grandfather had taken all of his sons to Boy's Town in Mexico when they turned thirteen as some sick rite of passage. I didn't particularly like hearing the story, but I was starting to understand how it must have felt, all dirty and exciting, not to mention a weird sense of guilt that comes on before you do something bad. I thought about my first time. I thought about dirty ass sex and was getting a little turned on. Just think about it: Pussy with no strings attached. It was going to be the only pussy I ever paid for and probably the free-est pussy I ever got. I don't think Chap was thinking about it at all, or at least he wasn't nervous. Though two or three drinks later he was singing a Chap B. Cain classic that goes a little something like this, *I'm gonna get some pussy! I'm gonna get some pussy! Cha-cha-cha!* June didn't look nervous, but Chap and I both knew he was going to freak out when the time came.

The next bar we went to was called “Americana.” The bar had, as you could imagine, an American theme. They had American pool tables, so we decided to play cutthroat. There framed American football jerseys, signed baseballs on a shelf behind the bar, and pictures of Elvis everywhere. I don’t really think the Brits appreciated this concept because the bar was empty, except for these three thuggish Scots and the ugliest dude I’d ever seen tending bar.

The game was about even until I finally hit a streak and knocked all the balls in except one of June’s. During my streak, Chap pointed at the Scottish fuckers with his eyes. They were standing around their table, looking at us like we had just anally raped their grandmothers. I gave Chap a nod and lined up my last shot. Right as I pushed the cue over my knuckles, one of the Scottish guys next to us bumped into me and looked at me as if it was my fault. I kind of ignored it, reset the cue ball and took my shot. I missed the shot. Chap adjusted the cue in his hand and smiled at me. They were still staring at us. I’m pretty sure Chap had some pre-marriage aggression he was ready to use, and I was chock full of post-marriage aggression. June was in a nutty mood, so we weren’t worried about him not being much of a fighter. June was looking down the table at his next shot, when another one of them bumped into me.

“You got a fucking problem, Man?” I said. I must add here that for some reason in the past few years, I’ve been filled with this crazy violent streak. I don’t go around punching people for no reason or anything like that; it’s just that there are certain times that I am not to be fucked with. I’m not saying I’m hard either, because I’m not. There are just certain times that I don’t care about getting hurt, and I can’t think straight. Being in another country doesn’t help matters either. It just seems like people in Europe talk shit and expect you to back down, but that’s not how it is in Texas. If you bump someone in Texas, you apologize, and if you talk shit, you expect a fight. I not only expected a fight, I wanted one.

So the Scottish guy just stood there, looking surprised. Finally, he said, “Git tae fuck Cunt,” and punched me in the face.

The next thing you know, a three-on-three slugfest broke out. Pool cues were splintered and pint glasses were shattered. Everything turned gray. My body felt hard. The blood in my mouth tasted salty and I spit it in his face. I couldn’t distinguish between the thuds of the punches I was throwing and receiving and those happening around me. I couldn’t feel any of them. Finally one of the guys said something about shagging June’s sister in the choc-box, and he freaked out and ended it with a swirl of punches and kicks, leaving none of us unscathed. June fought a lot like he danced, like a monkey on crack, and I think it sort of scared the Scottish dudes. It was all over after that, and we were buddies. Amazing how fights can do that to you sometimes. The ugly bastard behind the bar was on the phone, so we went down the street to another pub to avoid any unwanted police intervention. The Scots bought the first round.

They ended up being pretty cool and said they knew of a place we could go to get some “tidy lassies.” As we sat down at a table, one of the dudes told us he had some coke. It ended up being a little less than an eight ball, and the six of us took turns going to the dirty-ass bathroom to do it. I couldn’t wait to get back to the table and wash away that sour cocaine/snot mix running down the back of my throat with a cold beer.

The six of us sat around, drinking our beers and talking about football and the up-coming World Cup. I was feeling very alive from the intermingling buzzes. After a couple of rounds, we decided it was time, but the sorry excuse for a cab driver wouldn’t let the six of us in one cab, so the Scottish boys called him a doss cunt and told him to fuck off. We went alone, and though I liked them and all, they weren’t exactly the kind of dudes you exchange email addresses with.

My ego was deflated by the horrible behavior of Percy and I was crying. I think she felt the tears on her shoulder and felt bad for me. “It’s okay. It’s really no problem. I’ll make it better.” She reached down and started stroking with the softest hands I’d ever felt. The next thing you know, I was going to town, bareback. I went to town like that for a solid fifteen seconds before it was all over with. After I finished, I was so pissed at myself, I wanted to punch a hole in the wall.

“Fuck. I’m sorry,” I said, as if lasting just a little bit longer would have satisfied her. It was kind of like being married again, but I think I had a better shot with the hooker. Debbie couldn’t give herself an orgasm if her life depended on it, but I figured an expert like Mary could probably work one up without too much of a problem if she had to.

“Stop worrying. You’re really nice,” she said. “Really—I think you needed that. Don’t you feel better now?”

“Yeah, I guess so. Thank you. You’ve been really nice about everything you didn’t have to do all that seriously you are probably the nicest girl I’ve ever met Oh yeah I’m sorry about going bareback I’m clean as hell I really am and I have low sperm count due to soccer or I guess football injury when I was like sixteen seriously you don’t. . .”

“You’re babbling again.”

“Oh, sorry. I—I’ll shut up now.” For some reason I was really happy all of a sudden and ready to go see Chap and June. I cleaned myself up with my boxers, put the rest of my clothes on and the boxers in my back pocket. I gave her another fifty quid, which she tried to give back, but I wouldn’t hear of it. I’m not saying that I was so hot in the sack that she didn’t want the money. I think she just felt sorry for me.

Chap and June were outside and Chap was smoking. I smiled and gave them the “What’s up?” nod that guys tend to give each other at such moments. The cab they’d called was pulling up and we got in. Once again, it smelled like ass in the fucking cab, but what can you expect?

To my surprise, it was only a little after ten, though it felt like about three in the morning.

“Y’all feel like drankin?” Chap asked as we sped down the road.

“*Bien sur, mon ami,*” I said. “So, how was it?”

“You go first, Ju Ju,” Chap said.

“It was a total wackfest in there. Her feet looked just like Tia’s feet and I freaked the fuck out. I kind of started thinking about her and crying a little bit, and the bitch kicked me out. I told the old hooker in the kitchen what happened, but she said, ‘No refunds.’ Can you believe that shit?”

“That sucks, man,” I said.

“Yeah.”

“What about you?” Chap asked, delaying the telling of his own story, as he always did. I told the story with all the gory details, and they listened intently, occasionally asking questions for clarification. They clapped and cheered when I was done. It was Chap’s turn, but he said he needed to wait until we got a couple of Jack and Cokes.

The cab dropped us in front of the Shithole Inn, and we walked to our fourth pub of the night, which happened to be a gay bar called “The Jolly Wanker.” It was like a stylized version of a British pub that you might find in the states, except every beer sign was pink. There was pink Guinness sign, a pink Carlsberg sign, a pink Heineken sign, and a pink Tenet’s sign. It was also the cleanest pub I’d ever seen.

Chap came back from the bar with three double Jack and Cokes and lit two cigarettes. He handed me one and offered the other to June, even though he didn’t smoke.

“Y’all see all the bufties in here. Jesus Christ. I haven’t seen this many since we took those hos to that homo dance club a few years ago.”

“All right, cut the bullshit and tell us what happened,” I said.

“There’s nothing much to tell, really.” June looked down at his drink as Chap said this, and the room seemed to get darker though there was really no change in the lighting.

“What the fuck do you mean there’s nothing much to tell?” I asked.

“Tell him,” June said.

“Tell me what?”

“I didn’t do it.” He took a long drag off his cigarette.

“What the fuck do you mean you didn’t do it?” I was getting pissed.

“It just didn’t seem right to do that to the Jiffler.”

“But you’ve cheated on every girlfriend you’ve ever had, including her. And anyway, this whole thing was your idea. It’s not like we were the one’s who suggested going to a whorehouse,” I said.

“I thought that’s what you wanted to hear.”

“All I ever wanted to hear from you was the truth.” I said.

“Everything’s different now. I really want to make this thing work. I want to show my parents how it is supposed to be.”

“You’ve got to be kidding,” I said, pushing out my cigarette. “You’re fucking kidding, right?”

“Serious as a heart attack,” he said all smug, like I was just some dumbass beer swilling child who needed to be shut up.

“You’re a fucking maniac if you think you’re going to show your parents a goddamn thing. You don’t even love her,” I said.

“Who the fuck are you? Mr. Marriage?”

“Good one,” I said. “You’re just pissed because you know I’m right.”

“This would be the first time you were right about a relationship.”

“Yeah, and you know what else I’m right about? In six months, you’re going to hate her. You’re going to hate her for making you come here, always telling you what to do, how to drive and all the rest of that shit. You’re going to hate her for making you wear those shoes, and you’re going to hate her from taking you away from your family.”

“Fuck you,” he said.

Chap stood up and walked out the door. Surprisingly, June lit a cigarette and started smoking it. I guess the stress was getting to him.

After a minute, June said, “Where do you think he went?”

“I don’t know. Fuck. I guess I shouldn’t have said all that shit to him.”

“He would have said it to you.”

“He didn’t say it when I got married.”

“Yeah, but he hadn’t gone through it either. You have and you just don’t want him to be stuck.”

“Maybe I should go find him,” I said.

“You want me to come?”

“Probably better if you didn’t. You mind waiting here?”

“No. Maybe I’ll get one of these sexy homos to buy me a drink.”

Chap and I had been in three fights in twenty years and this somehow seemed the dirtiest. I walked outside and found him leaning against a mailbox, smoking.

“You got a cigarette?” I asked. He handed me his pack and lighter and didn’t look at me. I lit a cigarette and stared at a can of Carling in the gutter. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said any

of that. It's just that I worry about you over here. You just don't sound happy ever, and that's all I want."

"It's okay. We're drunk. Everyone gets in stupid fights when they're drunk," he said. "I'm sorry about saying that shit about you and Debbie."

"You know, I'm sure everything will be fine when you get used to it. Things will definitely get better after all this marriage planning is over. That always puts a lot of stress on a relationship." A cab stopped to see if we needed a ride.

He looked at me for the first time since I'd come outside and said, "You were right the first time. Everything's fucked. Everything's totally fucked, and I can't get out of it." He lit another cigarette. "It's kind of like when we all sort of knew it was fucked before you got married and you couldn't stop it either."

"I guess not."

"All the arrangements have been made. People are flying halfway around the world for this thing. Her parents have already spent an assload of cash. I just couldn't do it to her. She would be so embarrassed in front of everybody. I mean the shit's tomorrow for Christ's sake."

"I know what you mean. I guess I wasn't thinking about that."

"And shit, maybe something will happen and everything really will get better."

"I hope so."

"Me too." We both knew that it probably wasn't going to get better, but I finally realized that he was right. There wasn't shit he could do about it now.

When we got back inside, June was chatting up a big group of homos. Everything was okay again. We told some old stories and let some nice gay dudes buy us some more drinks. I felt kind of like a chick, letting those guys buy us drinks and knowing damn well we weren't going to bang any of them, but fuck it.

The three of us finally stumbled back to the shithole about 4:30 that morning and passed out all snuggled up. In the minutes before falling asleep, I thought about how nice it felt to be sleeping between my two best friends. It's too bad we're not a little more gay.

## MONEY ONLY PAYS FOR IT

I'm getting ready carefully this morning. I'm using my last good razor and shaving slowly. I keep looking at myself, saying all this positive crap, like I am some self-help guru. I am going to sell at least three policies. I'm not coming home until I have three checks paper clipped to three applications. The Medicare prospects are going to love me like a grandson, bake me cookies, and then write me a fat check for their first month's premium. I'm going to take the fear out of their hearts, even if I have to put a little of it there first.

The traffic on the highway is moving, and I am calm. I watch the other people going to work, talking on cell phones, listening to the radio, watching their in-dash TVs and putting on make-up. They're all prospects to me. I will some day be at their doors, selling them Long-term Care insurance or Universal Life policies. I will protect them from financial ruin, save their houses for the wives and children left behind. Pretty soon, I'll be making enough money to go back to school and only have to sell a couple days a week.

I'm trying to be positive because things aren't going too good for me right now. I haven't sold anything but one burial plan, and a hospitalization plan for some dude with diabetes, both of which earn me a grand total of twenty-three dollars a month in commissions, and commissions are all I get. That was twenty-eight days ago, so I have about three days to sell something or I will lose my contract. If I lose my contract, I will not be getting that whopping twenty-three dollar check. I will have to ask my parents for rent, which is a little bit embarrassing for a twenty-six-year old college graduate. This sounds bad, but I'm trying to think about it in a positive way. Necessity is the mother of invention, right? I think about this

guy at the sales meeting yesterday. His name is Dale and he's a big football-coach-looking bastard. He has a flattop and everything he wears is monogrammed, down to his monogrammed cufflinks through his monogrammed cuffs. Anyway, he tells us how when he finally got his license in the mail, his wife and kids were starving to death and they were going to repossess his house, his truck and probably even his dog. "I didn't have no choice. I had to sell," he told us. "And I did."

So, I think about Dale and his children, starving like baby birds, mouths open to the momma bird's empty mouth. I'm almost that desperate. I don't have kids or anything, but I don't want to ask my parents for any more money, and I ran out of corn dogs last week. I'm going to use my desperation to help me sell. I have to sell today. I don't have a choice. I'm actually glad I haven't sold anything. This is just the kick in the ass I need. I can do it. I hope.

As I'm passing under the George Bush Expressway, my right front tire pops and my car pulls hard to the right. Surprisingly, there is no one in that lane, so I guide my car to the shoulder. Fuck. This is all I need. Here I am in my expensive suit, trying to be positive and this shit happens. I don't have enough money to buy a new tire and I have to drive all the time for this job. Like a couple hundred miles a day at least, and I can't do it on the little donut piece of shit. Fuck. Not only that, some dumbass will probably crash into my car and kill me, or worse, I'll just get my goddamn hand cut off and be a gimpy amputee the rest of my life. No one's going to buy insurance from an amputee. What am I supposed to sell? Death and Dismemberment plans? That'll be great. I'll just say, "Look at me. I don't have a hand anymore but I got twenty grand for it. Trust me, it's totally worth it." I shouldn't have broken up with Kissy. She would still love me with only one hand. Now I'm not ever getting laid again. I get out of my car and kick the shit out of the fender. I'm seriously about cry, just sit down on the side of the highway in my two hundred dollar pants and cry my ass off.

No. I can't do it. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. I can't give up. Shit happens, right? I can't let this get me down. This is actually a good thing. Necessity is what I need. I take off my jacket, tie and shirt and carefully lay them on the seat. I change the tire with no problems. No dumbasses crash into me. I get back into my car, and I move my clothes to the passenger seat with my elbows to keep them from getting dirty. Then I start the car and merge back into traffic. Everything is going to be fine. I find a gas station to wash my hands. I put my clothes back on, and I'm on the road again.

The rest of the forty-five minute drive down to Cedar Hill is okay, though I worry about my tire from time to time. I pull into the Dairy Queen parking lot to plot out my day. I have nine leads cards that people got in the mail, filled out and sent back to us. The cards don't exactly say that the people want a salesman to come out to their house; they just say that the people want information on the recent changes in Medicare. I get out my Mapsco and plot my course for the day, an odd circle through town. I think about having lunch at the Dairy Queen and then I realize that I don't have any money except the change in my ashtray. I'll count it later.

To get to the first house, I drive through a crappy neighborhood. It is very hilly and has a lot of trees, which I like, but the prospect of selling a two hundred fifty dollar a month policy to someone who lives in a fifty thousand dollar house isn't very encouraging. One of the houses is painted a weird shade of turquoise and I'm glad I'm not going there. Those people are always freaks. I get to the top of a hill and the black top street turns to concrete. I'm suddenly in a different neighborhood and the houses are big and new with beautifully manicured, time-sprinkled lawns. I think about buying one like this in a few years.

A minute later, I pull up in front my first prospect's house. I get out with my sales material, which consists of a binder with color-copied pages of my presentation and applications

in the back flap. I knock on the door because old people can't always hear the bell. No one comes. I think I hear a noise inside and knock again. No one comes again, so I walk around back to see if anyone is out there because Jim, the guy who trained me, told me never to give up.

"Mrs. Huckabee?" I call through the fence. There is no one there and I'm pissed off again. The next house will probably be in the ghetto. An old lady with Alzheimer's trying to live off six hundred bucks a month. I don't have enough money for lunch and there's that piece of shit spare on my piece of shit car. I kick the shit out of the fender again, and now it has two Kenneth Cole dents in it, the piece of shit.

Okay. Calm down and breathe. Count to ten. I'm not going to sell anything in this mood. Things could be a lot worse, and I'm not really going to starve to death. I could live in Africa with one of those saggy-titty, bone-lipped bitches and a bunch of kids with distended stomachs and undisturbed flies on their eyelashes. I could have gotten my hand cut off when I was changing my tire. I'll come back to see Mrs. Huckabee later and sell her a plan F.

I drive a few blocks back through the ghetto to a house with new vinyl siding and a bunch of crafty shit in the yard, cowboy silhouettes cut out of plywood and shit like that. These people are someone's grandparents. They will love me, and buy everything I'm selling. I knock on the door.

"Mrs. Jones?" I ask as she opens the door.

"Yes," she says.

"My name is Todd Welles and I'm with United American. We got this card back from you that says you wanted someone to come out and explain the recent changes in Medicare." I smile.

"I sent no such card." She doesn't smile.

“Ma’am, this isn’t you?” I say, handing her the card with her handwriting and signature on it.

She takes the glasses that had been hanging on a gold chain around her neck, puts them on the end of her nose, and looks at the card. “Well, I suppose it is,” she says. “I’m sorry about that. Come on in.” Old people are always embarrassed about having forgotten something and will usually be pretty nice after something like that. The house smells like new carpet and paint. Her husband is sitting in the redone kitchen, reading the paper. There is a cup full of insulin syringes sitting on table next to a blood sugar machine. This means one of them is probably uninsurable.

“Hon, this is—What did you say your name was?”

“Todd Welles. Nice to meet you.” I shake his hand.

“He’s come by to explain the changes in Medicare,” she says. “Remember that card we sent in a couple of months ago?” He says he remembers, but I think we’re all pretending.

“Would you like some coffee, Mr. Welles?” he asks.

“I’d love some. And call me Todd.” She starts to make the coffee and I start to tell her not to because I thought they already had some made, but think better of it. We all sit down around the kitchen table, I go through my presentation, explaining what Medicare does, and more importantly, doesn’t cover. Finally, I ask them if they’d like to fill out an application, and Mrs. Jones says they already have a policy. Then I blurt out, “Your good health buys insurance, Mr. and Mrs. Jones; money only pays for it.” This is what you’re supposed to say when they say they want to think about it. It means that they might not qualify later on if their health goes down the toilet. This is not what you’re supposed to say when they say they already have a plan. *Shit, I think. Why the hell did I say that?* Mrs. Jones goes and gets their cards, and it turns out

they are with United American, so I can't even tell them that the company they have is a bunch of crooks and try to get them to switch.

"That's great. Y'all have the best protection money can buy," I say, pretending to be happy as hell about it. They ask me if they can get needles through the mail. I tell them I will look into it, which I will. I write down their number in my notebook and tell them I'll call them. They look like I've saved them from something bad. I walk towards the door.

"It's getting pretty close to lunch time, Todd. Would you like to stick around? Nothing special, just ham sandwiches." It is 10:30.

"I would love to, Ma'am, but I've got a bunch of other people to talk to today."

"Well, okay, but you're more than welcome any time."

"I might just take you up on that. Thank you."

I get in my car a little disappointed and my cell phone rings. The caller ID blinks "Unknown," and I answer it. It's those motherfuckers from Citibank Mastercard whom I haven't paid in two months calling with their "you haven't paid your bill, you loser" message. I tell the recording to fuck off and hang up. It rings again and it's Kissy. Against my better judgement, I answer it.

"Todd?" She's crying.

"What's wrong?" I ask.

"I think I'm pregnant."

"It's not mine," I say quite defiantly. "We didn't even do it last month."

"I haven't been with anyone, and we did do it that one time after the bar."

"Oh yeah," I say. "Sorry." I ask why she thinks she's pregnant, and she says she's a week late and her boobs hurt. I pull into the parking lot of an abandoned florist. I ask about her pills and do some quick period math and am pretty sure she wasn't ovulating the last time we did

it. She says I'm probably right. I tell her it's probably stress. She says I'm probably right. I tell her everything will probably be fine and I'll call her when I get home. I hang up, and feel myself lose any control I have left.

Fuckfuckfuckfuckfuck. I keep punching the passenger side seat. Goddamnit. I bang my head on the steering wheel and get out of the car. This is it. This is the fucking end of my goddamn life. I'm going to be managing the goddamn Whataburger just to pay for diapers and baby food and all the fucked up shit that Kissy's going to be eating while she's pregnant. I'm never getting laid again. I have to quit smoking and drinking. I can't go back to school. I have to quit my rock band, and I'll never be a writer. I jump up and down banging my fists on the hood of my car. Even if she wants to get rid of baby, I'd have to borrow the money to pay for it. That is if anyone I know has the money to loan. A car stops to look at me. "Fuck the fuck off, motherfucker," I yell. I wish I was never fucking born and fuck this bullshit English degree. *Go to college. Make good grades. Get a job. You can be anything you put your mind to. This is America. Drive a Cadillac, join the country club, retire at fifty. Summer homes in Colorado, beautiful wife who loves to fuck, beautiful happy children. Never have to worry about food, never have to worry about shit.*

My bootstraps just broke the fuck off. Okay, calm the fuck down. Other people have it worse. You're going to be fine. You're just feeling sorry for yourself. Stop feeling sorry for yourself. Thanks Dad. Why don't you just tell me that boys don't cry? Why don't you just tell me to walk it the fuck off, you son of a bitch. Stop. This isn't helping. Starving children in Africa. She's not pregnant. Breathe. Count to ten.

I get in my car and pull out my notebook. I quickly draw a calendar with the days of the week, the dates, and number them starting thirty-five days ago when Kissy started her last period. I get to day twelve of the cycle and realize that my period math was right in the first

place. It was a full seven days after she was ovulating that we did it. Anyway, I'm pretty sure my sperms would have gotten pulled over for drunk driving on the way to the egg. She's just stressed out over the breakup, and that's why she hasn't started yet. If she is, Chap will send me the money from England with no questions asked. I start to breathe. It is sometime after eleven and I am getting hungry.

I drive to a 7/11 and count my change. I have exactly fifty-four cents. This is going to require some serious budget shopping. I walk around the store for a few minutes, checking out the options. Finally, I decide on two twenty-five cent packs of peanut butter crackers. Protein and carbs. I pull around the side of the 7/11 because I don't want anyone watching me eat. After the first two crackers, my mouth is like the fucking desert. I see a water spout on the side of the building and a beer can in floorboard. I rinse out the can a few times and fill it with water. It's warm and tastes like stale beer, but it washes away the crackers.

I'm sitting sideways out of my car, trying to enjoy the breeze and not waste gas on air conditioning. I open the second pack of crackers and a cop pulls up beside me. Fuck.

"Sir," he says. "You know it is illegal to consume alcohol on these premises, right?"

"Oh this," I laugh. "I'm drinking water. I couldn't afford anything to drink, so I found this can, washed it out and filled it up with water."

"Sir, let me see the can," he says, taking it from me. He sniffs it as if it's a dog turd. "Smells like beer to me."

"I promise it's not. Take a drink, or pour some out."

"License and proof of insurance, please," he says, handing me back the can, which I throw away. He goes back to the cruiser, occasionally looking at me like I might try to run. I finish my crackers and then cup my hands under the faucet to get more water. Finally, he gets out of his car and walks back over to me. "You don't seem to have any warrants or anything, so

I'm going to let you go this time, but don't let me catch you drinking beer out here again or you'll be taking a ride with me."

"Sir, I promise, I wasn't drinking beer."

"Son, it would be wise for you to just keep your mouth shut," he says, handing me back my stuff.

"Yes, sir." I want to salute the stupid bastard but decide against it.

I get lost about fifty times on the way to the next prospect's house, but I finally get there. No one is home. I try to get back on the highway, but all the ramps are closed down, which is what got me lost in the first place. I put in an old *311* tape because it's the happiest music I have. I think about the good karma coming my way. I think I must have been Hitler in a previous life. I finally get on the highway going the wrong way, towards home and have a hard time not continuing in that direction. Don't give up. This will be the sale. This next prospect will probably want to buy the plan F, a burial plan, and send me to his kids for all their health and life needs. Off of this one person, I will probably make thousands of dollars in residual income, not to mention the fact that I will be saving him and his family from financial ruin.

I arrive at the next house, which is extremely middle-class, just like the one I grew up in. I think the prospect's name is Henry Scheusterheim, but I'm not exactly sure how to pronounce it. I decide to use another old trick that Jim taught me and call him Mr. Henry. I straighten my tie, gather my materials, and walk to the door. I knock. No one comes, but I can hear the TV. I knock again loud as hell, hurting my knuckles. Finally, Mr. Henry comes to the door—in a wheel chair. No sale. Mr. Henry is uninsurable.

I go through the introduction anyway and he let's me right in. His eyelids are red like he's been rubbing them with fine sand paper and he's got a full head of white hair. He's wearing striped pajamas. I start to show him my Medicare presentation, trying not to accentuate the fact

that Medicare doesn't really pay much of shit, since I don't want to scare him and then not be able to save him. He sits quietly and listens, looking at the pages, looking at me. I hope he doesn't see the part where it says that Medicare runs out completely after only one hundred and twenty days in the hospital.

His son walks through on his way out and says, "I'm leavin'."

"Billy, this young man is just here telling me about Medicare."

"I'll be back," the son says. I am extremely pissed off at this son. If some low-life salesman bastard was trying to sell my old man some shit, I would kick him the hell out of my house. This guy just left.

I keep going with the presentation until I look over to see that Mr. Henry looks scared as hell. "Sir, are you okay?"

"I guess you're selling insurance for this right? How much is the one that covers everything?" He drives his mobilized wheelchair to the kitchen and gets his checkbook. He has tears in his eyes.

"Do you have insurance right now, sir?" I ask.

"I just couldn't stand the thought of losing something else." *Oh shit.* "My wife died two months ago, and I feel..." He can't keep going.

"I'm sorry to hear that." It is really awkward, and I don't know what I should do. I think I should leave, but he's got his checkbook in his hand. Maybe this is the fear that Dale was talking about. He might just be crying because he's scared of the medical bills. I have no idea. "Let's fill out an application and see what we can do."

I take out my pen and open a Plan F application to the back page. I ask him his full name, age and address. The next section on the form is about pre-existing conditions, and to my surprise, he doesn't have any of the one's listed. I'm feeling pretty excited thinking I'm about to

get my first plan F. When I bring this to the office, Jim is going to write me my first advance check, which happens to be 100% of the first month's premium. It'll probably be 275 bucks for this old bastard. Mr. Henry seems to be doing a little bit better too. His voice is steady as he answers the questions. *He's going to be just fine, and tonight while he's dozing in front of Wheel of Fortune, I'll be heading to The Lodge. Cold beer. Naked women. Neon lights. I can taste the ten-dollar steak and Lobster right now. The sweet, screeching sounds of late-eighties hair band guitars are already ringing in my ears.*

That's when I fucking see it. It's the fucking question about the goddamn wheelchair. How could I forget?

"Well, Mr. Henry, it looks like this next question disqualifies you," I said, standing up. I'm leaving.

"What's it say?"

"It asks if you can get around without a wheelchair?"

"I can walk," he says, looking desperate as hell. "Hold on a second." He attempts to stand up, but I can't watch.

"I have to go, Mr. Henry." I start walking towards the door, and I hear him fall back into the chair with a grunt.

I'm almost to the door when I hear him say, "Todd, you can't leave me like this." I turn around, and he's wheeling after me. "I need your help."

"I'm sorry I can't help you with this shitty insurance, and I'm sorry I can't bring your wife back. I'm sorry I can't stay here, and I'm sorry your son's an asshole." Now, I'm just looking at him, thinking, *You just don't understand. I've fucked myself with this job and every other decision I've ever made, but I'm not your grandson. I don't want your sandwiches or a card at Christmas with a five-dollar bill in it because that's all you can afford. I don't care about your kids and all*

*their fucking pictures. I don't want to know about all your medications and ailments, and how you flew bombers in World War II and this is how your country has paid you back. I just want a fucking job where I don't have to ask my parents for money, and I can afford a two-dollar hamburger for lunch.*

Mr. Henry looks scared, like I might hit him, and I realize I'm crying. I'm not sure when I started.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to say that."

"Todd, can I ask you a question?" He looks like a scolded child who just now realizes he's not getting a spanking.

"What?"

"Do you believe in Jesus?"

"Yes," I say, but it's a lie.

"Good, cause he's the only thing that gets me through these days without her," he says. "I know she's up there with Jesus waiting for me to come home."

"I'm sure she is." I'm not crying anymore; I'm just looking at a red stain in the carpet.

"Are you married?" he asks.

"Yes, I am." I lie again, and I don't know why. Debbie pops into my head, and I miss her really bad all of a sudden.

"You need to tell that girl you love her every single day. Even if you got in a fight. You never know when she's gonna be gone."

"I will," I say, and I'm tearing up bad again.

"I just miss my Charlotte so bad," he says.

"Me too," I say, and I think he knows what I mean.

He's crying, and I'm on the verge, and I say something that I can't believe is coming out of my mouth. "I'm going to pray for you, Mr. Henry. Will you pray for me?"

"Yes," he says. "I surely will."

I want to hug him and bring his wife back. I wish I would have been strong enough to stay with Debbie. I think about Kissy and our baby. "Well, I've got to be going now, Mr. Henry."

"Okay," he says, not trying to slow me down. I can tell he's embarrassed that he has broken down in front of a complete stranger, and I want to leave him with as much dignity as possible. I'm crying before I make it to the door.

I sit down on the curb in front of his house and cry like I haven't since I was a kid. My face is in my hands. I miss Debbie and Kissy both so much I can't stand it. I was so selfish. I need to ask Kissy to take me back. Part of me hopes she is pregnant. Part of me hopes she doesn't want to get rid of it. I hope there is a God, so that one old man can see his wife again. For the first time in my life, I want to be wrong. We love each other and the baby will help us to not give up. I miss them both so bad. I can't do this anymore today. I can't do this job anymore ever.

I finally get in my car and start to drive home. I start to think that maybe it's not such a good idea if Kissy is pregnant. I want her back anyway. I miss the little things she decorates her apartment with, painted clay wall decorations from Mexico and all those little dragonflies. I miss drinking beer and watching movies with her. I miss the way we used to talk, and I miss how bad she needs me. I'll be better. I think about the note she wrote me when we first got together with the quote from *Beloved* about how the Thirty-Mile Woman puts Sixo's pieces back together.

I stop at the first Exxon station that sells beer and buy a twelve pack on my mom's credit card. I drink five before I get home, thinking about Kissy, wondering if it's a good idea. My heart's lied to me before. I don't care.

I get home and call her. She's started her period, and I'm relieved and sad, and wish I wasn't. I'm insane. I tell her we need to get together to talk. She says okay.

## KISSY CHRISTMAS

Christmas had come again and I wasn't pleased about it. The holidays always remind me of shit I don't really want to be reminded of. My parents always give me shit about who I'm going to spend more time with, though I'd rather just tell them both to fuck off. I have to deliver pizzas, while everyone else is going to parties and having a fucking blast. I also got married the day after Christmas to that dirty ass whore who said she never loved me and never gave me one goddamn blowjob, so that usually enters my mind at some point. Seriously, all you see around Christmas time is a bunch of shallow consumer bastards running around stressed and happy, and there I am, without a damn dime, pissed and sad. Not to mention the fact that everyone gets more stuff than me, which is entirely childish and stupid, but I guess I am pretty much childish and stupid. The only consolation about the holidays is that there is always plenty of free booze.

I think my dad was working on his second rum and coke when I got to his house at five on Christmas Eve. My stepmother, Betty, was buzzing around the kitchen and my father, fiddling with dishes that were to be served precisely at six. Knowing the two of them, this meant that dinner would be served no earlier than seven, though I didn't really give a shit. I was going to have dinner with my mom. The shit Betty was making was weird. There were these Chinese things that looked like eyeballs, and some crazy whole fishes that I figured would cause my dad flashbacks about Nam. Even the shit that wasn't that weird was different. None of it looked or smelled like anything my mom or grandmother would have cooked. Betty's stuffing was from a box and the green bean casserole was made with green beans from a can.

"Make yourself a drink, Todd," my dad said, pointing to the liquor cabinet.

“Don’t mind if I do,” I said. There was half a bottle of Johnny Walker Red Label, the bottle of Bacardi that my dad was working on, and a bottle of I.W. Harper. My maternal grandfather drank Harper, always calling it “One Dub.” My dad always kept a bottle of it in the cabinet even though my grandfather had been dead for twenty-three years. I made a stiff bourbon and ginger ale went to sit on the couch.

Looking around, I realized that the house had really come together. The last time I was there, the whole place was filled with dust, tools and Dad’s old furniture. For the past few years, we had been remodeling it, uncovering the hardwood floors, re-doing the bathrooms and windows, and replacing every piece of cracked dry wall in the place. Because of the shitty foundation, not one of the walls was even close to square, so we had to measure all four sides. But then again, maybe a tax attorney and a grad school writer aren’t really meant to do that kind of work. Maybe that’s why it took us so long. Now the house had all this new, old lady furniture in it, which must have cost my old man a fortune. The walls were painted in old lady shades that matched the furniture. There was even this crazy Asian silk covering on the box of Kleenex. I sort of missed the garage sale couches and old office furniture that used to be there, but I guess we can’t be bachelors forever.

Betty’s kids and grandkids started to show up about thirty minutes later, and I was working on my second drink. They brought toys and baby bags and all sorts of other shit with them, and I thought about birth control. As I sat in the living room, trying to be friendly, I noticed a look on my dad’s face that I hadn’t seen since he’d left my mother. It was a look of resignation. It was a look of finally realizing way too late that he’d fucked something up. *Who the fuck are these people and why the fuck are they in my house?* I think I’d seen the look before on myself. Maybe that’s the look of manhood. If that’s the case, I think I’ll try not to be one.

Seriously, I could just teach at some community college and bang eighteen year-old girls for the rest of my life.

“Honey, we’re out of ice,” Betty said to my dad. “Do you think Todd would mind going?” She had an annoying way of using my dad as my agent or secretary when she wanted to ask me to do something.

“I’ll go, Betty,” I said, glad as hell to get out of the house. I refreshed my drink and headed out the door. My dad surreptitiously handed me a twenty on the way by.

It wasn’t cold enough for a jacket outside. The wind was blowing hard, and there was a little tornado of leaves curling on the north side of the house. My dad had one pitiful strand of those big colored lights running the roof of the porch, and there was this little metal sign, which read, “Santa Stop Here!” This must have been for the grandkids, and I wasn’t the least bit resentful. I’m sure Betty bought it.

I got in the car ready to smoke, hoping I would hear that one Christmas song by U2 on the radio. I think it is called “Baby, Please Come Home.” I flipped through the stations, smoking as hard as I could. I paused on the station most likely to be playing it and heard the DJ say, “Here’s ‘Holly Jolly Christmas’ by local boy, Riki Derek and his Vegas Five. On 102.1.” Long pause. “The Edge.”

I sure as hell didn’t expect to hear Riki Derek on the radio. He was a local singer that could only be described as a crooner. Think “Vegas Five.” I had seen him sing once a few years ago. It was the weekend before Christmas, and he was playing at this weird hotel bar called “The Tiki Lounge.” My girlfriend at the time, Kissy, had seen him play at one of her friend’s weddings and suggested we go. We had been dating about two months, so I would have gone anywhere with her.

She showed up to my apartment in a late-for-a-first-date sort of frenzy with half a bottle of Bud Light in her hand. She was wearing black pants, a tight, silver and black sweater that showed off her tits, and a scarf that looked like a boa. The best part of her outfit was the pair of black leather, high-heeled, baby doll shoes. I've always been a fiend for a girl with good shoes, and Kissy always had the best.

"Are you ready, Baby? We have to go or we're gonna be late," she said. "I have to use the bathroom, and I have more beer in the car."

"Okay," I said, sitting back down on the couch. I didn't mind waiting, and I didn't care if we were late.

She insisted on driving since she knew right where it was and didn't want to be late. I was a little nervous about that and drank a beer as fast as I could, handing her the bottle when she asked. Driving through the middle of Dallas, we passed all the shit that I'd been passing for twenty-five years and it all looked warm and familiar, like coming home from a long trip, though I hadn't been anywhere. The Galleria Mall, with its three towers and up-scale department stores, always reminded me of Christmas. Shopping there for just about anything made me feel like everything was okay. Everyone there is pretty, and they all have money. We passed by a big office building where Chap and I had been employed by a temp agency to move office furniture. Chap stole a chair that day, just to see if he could. The billboards advertised Christmas. Strings of lights blinked everywhere. Everyone was going somewhere festive in their SUVs. Every commercial sold happy, and every song played nostalgia. For once, I felt sort of both. Kissy didn't seem to notice anything except the cars getting in our way, keeping us from the Tiki Lounge and Riki Derek. I tried to concentrate on scenery because her driving was scaring the shit out of me. She weaved back and forth through three lanes of traffic like she was in a police chase.

We finally got there, and Riki Derek hadn't started playing yet. "I need a drink," she said with a laugh and a cute little snort. It was about the cutest thing I'd ever heard.

The Tiki Lounge was decorated, as you might imagine, like some crazy Hawaiian bar from the eighties where you might find Magnum P. I. looking for the bad guy. It was really my kind of joint. Being somewhere I'd never been in my hometown made me feel like I was somewhere else. The booths were dark and intimate; the only light in the room came from tiny candles in frosted red glass and smoky torches spread throughout the bar. We sat in a corner with good view of the stage.

For a while, we sat quietly, watching people mill around the room. Most of them were dressed in this weird ass rockabilly style, which may have fit the time period, but not the music. The men were worse about the mismatch than the women. Kissy's eyes looked crazy dark blue in the candlelight as she watched everyone, and a strand of hair had fallen from its bobby pin, making a long, slow curl on her cheek.

The band finally approached the stage, which was on the far side of the dance floor and began to tune. The tuning slowly shifted into a big band/small band jazz riff. That's when Riki Derek strolled out. "There he is," she said. "You're gonna love this." He had a martini in one hand, and he gripped the old school chrome microphone with the other. His timing was perfect. His voice, his hands, and his song were all perfect Sinatra, though he was a bigger man and had a better voice.

After the second song, I pulled Kissy on to the dance floor.

"I can't dance to this kind of music," she said, smiling with embarrassment.

"Don't worry about it," I said. "Just follow me." Honestly, I couldn't really dance to that kind of music either, but I knew enough to fake it. Mainly, I just wanted to hold her and move with her.

Her hands were cold and smooth. At first, we were going back and forth pretty well, considering our lack of skill, but finally she dropped my hands and said she felt stupid. “Okay, we’ll stop,” I said and pulled her to me. We danced this fucked up two-step, swing thing, and with her nose pressed into my chest, I think she felt a little less self-conscious. The tops of her thighs rubbed mine, and her boobs were warm and soft, resting on the space between my chest and stomach.

The song ended and we sat back down in our booth and ordered more drinks. After the waitress left, Kissy started to rub my extreme upper thigh. The thin wool pants of my suit were perfect for this. Jesus H. Christ, she knew how to touch me. Even as we held hands, the tips of the fingers on her other hand played in the space between mine.

After about forty-five minutes the band took their first break. Kissy looked over at me really excited all of a sudden and said, “I just finished that book I was reading, *Morvern Caller*, and I have this really cool idea for a paper I could write.”

“Tell me again what that one’s about,” I said.

“Okay, there’s this couple and the guy is a writer. He dies and she publishes his manuscript under her name.”

“Well, I hope you wouldn’t do that to me.”

“I would never do that, but shut up and let me tell you this idea,” she said, slapping my leg.

“Go ahead.”

“The paper will be all about how she represents the British and how they are always colonizing, killing, and then appropriating those people’s narratives,” she said. “What do you think?”

“That sounds good to me so far, but I haven’t read it.”

“It really works, and I think I could use it later for part of my thesis. And you know what?”

“What?”

“I love you so much,” she said, leaning over to hug me.

“Me too,” I said. “Me too.”

We snuck out in the middle of the second set, and I drove us home faster than she’d driven us there. We barely made it in the house...

“I hope everybody’s having a great Christmas Eve out there in radio-land...” the DJ interrupted my stupid flashback. *Why the fuck do I keep thinking about shit like that? I’m totally fucking insane. I’m going to spend the rest of my life in love with girls from my past that I shouldn’t be in love with. They’re all crazy. It didn’t work. I just want to know why I keep thinking about them when I know they’re bad for me. I just want to forget everything. I wouldn’t have one goddamn issue if I would have been born without a memory. I wouldn’t remember how we went to that stupid show. I wouldn’t remember her stupid shoes and her cute little laugh. Fuck it. I’m just going get hammered and figure it out tomorrow. Maybe I’ll get some medication.*

I bought two bags of ice at the Chevron on the corner and drove slowly back to my dad’s house.

He was pulling a garment bag out his truck when I got there.

“What you got in there?” I asked.

“Oh, it’s the goddamn Santa suit Betty wants me to wear for the kids,” he said.

He looked embarrassed, and there was something on his face that said he was sorry. I don’t know if this was for me or for my mother, though I suspect maybe both. Luckily, I had

gotten myself so wack that I didn't really give a shit. I guess I felt sorry for him more than anything else.

We walked in the back door, and I made us a drink as he put the suit away in the closet. Betty put the turkey on the table for my dad to carve and I wondered if I would ever be in charge of carving a turkey. I sort of doubted it. Betty's kids were in the living room having an intense discussion about Paris Hilton's vagina, and the little boys were trying to see who could slam their little heads into the wall the hardest. I'm pretty sure I could have kicked all their asses.

"I'm going to get going before y'all start eating," I told him as he walked back in the kitchen.

"You'll be missing out on some good grub," he said, smiling and a little drunk.

"I know, Dad. I know."

They both hugged me, and I waved goodbye to everyone else.

Half in the bag, I drove to my mom's.

## SPOONFUL OF SUGAR, MOUTHFUL OF REGRET

I don't know how the hell I get myself into these things. It all started about a year ago. Well, no, it probably all started about twenty-eight years ago when my dad had a few too many bourbon and ginger ales, and my mom forgot to take her pill. Anyway, there I was about a year ago, sitting on the couch, drinking beer and staring at the blue TV screen. I wasn't really that drunk, and I hadn't smoked any weed, but I had been watching *Sweet and Lowdown* and the movie was over and I just didn't feel like getting up or even reaching for the remote. Actually, I was feeling much like I am right now, wondering how the fuck I got here, which seems to be the constant state of mind since I lost my virginity back in 95. Sitting there, staring at the blue screen, I had no money, I was in love with about ten girls, none of whom were my girlfriend, and I hadn't written a song or a story in at least six months.

So there I was when my wacky roommate, June, came in from delivering pizzas and said, "Buddy, get up. We're goin to pimp hos." He grabbed his crotch and did a dance, so I couldn't really turn him down. He had met this chick in one of his education classes and was pretty pumped about it. Her name was Nikki and we called her "Nikki160" because of her email address. Everyone we know has a nickname. I got ready the best I could, which meant brushing my teeth and putting on my good hat. It was a warm February night that felt like spring. You know it's going to be a scary night the first time every year it feels like spring. You know that spring-time wackness is *en route* and you should consider yourself fucked at least until May.

She worked at this college bar that only hired hot ass, sorority-type chicks. Not the kind of place we usually hang out, but we would go just about anywhere for a new chick. She was

excited to see us and sat us down in her section. Then she came back with two free beers in red plastic Coke glasses. I can't say how much I love getting free beer from a hot chick. Nikki had blond hair and blue eyes, though it doesn't really matter. She looked like all the rest of the girls who worked there, but according to her, she couldn't stand any of them.

June and I really shouldn't have been going out that night, especially to see her. June had a girlfriend, and things weren't going too good with them. Actually, June's girlfriend, Tia, was quickly becoming the biggest bitch on the planet. I had a girlfriend too, and things weren't going too good with us either. Kissy wasn't really a bitch; she just didn't seem to give a shit anymore. Basically, June was going out, trying to cheat, and I was feeling so fucking wack I would have done just about anything. June called Tia and told her we were going to the Jolly Roger, a place she wouldn't go in a million years. I didn't call Kissy at all.

I liked Nikki instantly and started pulling out whatever magic I had to get them together. I told her how great I thought she was and how I really thought they should be together. I told June that he needed to dump that bitch girlfriend of his and get with Nikki. Over the next two weeks, we went to that shitty bar six times.

One night about two in the morning, after I had just broken up with Kissy, I pulled into our apartment complex and saw June walking across the parking lot. We were both drunk as shit.

"What's up, Buddy? Thought you were staying at Kissy's tonight." He unlocked the door.

"Won't be staying at Kissy's anymore. Had to let that one go." I walked into the kitchen and pulled out our emergency beers.

"How many times you broken up with her now?"

"I don't know. Maybe two."

“Shit. It’s at least four,” he said.

“Anyway, thought you were staying at Tia’s.”

“Yeah, well, had to let that one go too.”

We both thought it was pretty cool that we had simultaneously broke up with our girlfriends without any previous plan.

By the next week, June and Nikki were officially dating, and over the next few months, the three of us were inseparable. I think Nikki just felt sorry for me and invited me to tag along to whatever they did, because everything that could go wrong for me went wrong. My insurance job sucked, and I couldn’t even find a pizza man job to make ends meet. My car broke down, and I obviously didn’t have the money to fix it. Kissy and I got back together for two days, and then she dumped me. Nikki was there for all of this, always giving me a hug or making me talk about my problems. We probably talked more than they did, which should have been a sign. Many nights, we would go out without June if he didn’t feel like drinking or something like that.

One day, Nikki and I were sitting on her porch smoking, and Nikki’s sister, Christan, came over to work out. She was wearing a tank top and a pair of blue shorts with “Cheer” written across the ass, and she looked fucking hot. She also looked a hell of a lot like her sister. From the back, you couldn’t tell them apart. They had just made up from a nasty, two month long fight, so it was the first time I had met her. She shook my hand, didn’t say much and then walked down to the workout room. As she walked across the courtyard, I couldn’t keep my eyes off her legs.

“How old is she?” I asked.

“She’s nineteen. Why do you want to know?”

“Just wondering.” *Nineteen. Jesus, that’s way to young for me, and she didn’t seem to least bit interested in my old ass. Anyway there’s no way in hell I’ll ever get a hot little piece of ass like that ever again.*

“Don’t even think about it. That’s my little sister.”

“I wasn’t thinking about anything,” I said.

Over the next few weeks, I saw Christan a few times at Nikki’s apartment, but didn’t really think anything about it. I got a job at Xerox listening to Canadians speaking something like French about busted copiers, and I was also trying to get myself into grad school. Things were looking up, I guess. Anyway, things were looking up until June came home one night and said that Christan liked me. This might not sound like bad news, but I wasn’t really in a position mentally to be around hot ass nineteen-year-old girls who liked me. That was just too much pressure. Her dad would murder me if I hooked up with her and so would Nikki. There was also the fact that I didn’t really know her at all. Not to mention, what the hell would I talk to a nineteen-year-old girl about? Do they read? Do they know big words? Do they have jobs? Do they shit? A lot had changed in the seven years since I was nineteen.

“So, Buddy, you gonna bang her?” June asked.

“Hell no. Jesus. What do you think I’m kind of pervert?”

“Dude, there’s nothing perverted about that shit,” he said. “That shit’s fucking bad.”

“Well, yes. It is bad, but I’m not touching it.”

“Please touch it. Just promise me you’ll let me sniff your dong afterwards.”

“There not going to be anything to sniff.” I walked into the kitchen to make myself a sandwich.

“Can I lick your finger then?”

“Shut up.”

“Fine, but my parents are going out of town for the forth, we’re having a pool party, and guess who Nikki’s bringing.” June walked up behind me and started humping me.

“No.”

“Yes.”

“I’m not going.”

“Yes, you are.”

“I’m not drinking then.”

“Shit.”

The first hour of the party, Christan didn’t say a word to me. That was fine with me. I was having a fine time sitting by the pool, watching fireworks and drinking beer. Then Nikki came and sat down next to me.

“June told you about my sister, right?”

“Yeah, he sort of mentioned that.”

“I think you should talk to her.”

“I don’t know if that’s a good idea. Anyway, you said I shouldn’t even think about it.”

“I know I said that, but I changed my mind,” she said. “You’re the nicest guy I know, so why wouldn’t I want you to be with my sister. My parents think it would be good idea. She’d have someone in Denton to look out for her, and the four of us could hang out together all the time.”

“I hope I’m not the nicest guy you know. And why are you discussing this with your parents?”

“We talk to our parents about everything. Go talk to her.”

“She’s too young.” I really wanted to go talk to her now, but I was trying to be good.

“It’s only seven years. My parents are eight years apart.”

“Fine, but I don’t think this is a good idea.”

Christan was sitting on the edge of the couch talking to June’s sister when I walked in.

“Can I get y’all something to drink while I’m up?” They both said no, and I went to the fridge and got a beer. I turned around and Christan was standing next to me.

“Todd, I, well, I want to tell you something.” She was drunk.

“What’s that?”

“No, it’s stupid.”

“Tell me.”

“It’s just that I sort of...like you.” She was looking down at her toes. “I know you would never like me or anything like that. It’s just that I think you are so awesome, and Nikki’s always telling what a good person you are and you’re so cute. And, oh my God, I’m going to shut up now and go kill myself.”

“If you went and killed yourself who would I talk to the rest of the night?”

“You still want to talk to me after I just made complete idiot of myself?”

“Yeah, and anyway, you didn’t make a complete idiot of yourself. I feel the same way.”

“You feel the same way.” She reached up and put her arms around me neck. “Come with me. I have to pee.”

“I wish I was younger,” I said, following her to the bathroom. She pulled her dress up and her panties down. I didn’t really see her stuff, but I did the tiny white string against her tan muscular thigh. *I’m going straight to hell.*

“I wish I was older, too, but you know my parents are eight years apart and they’re just fine.”

“Nikki told me that.”

She stood and pulled her panties up. I turned to open the door, but she grabbed me by the shoulder and turned me around. She looked up at me with “kiss me” face, and there was nothing I could do. We kissed for a while until June started banging on the door. “What y’all doin in there, Buddies?”

“Nothing.”

We walked out back to the pool and the rest of the party. I know this sounds cheesy, but my innocent black heart was doing back flips. “Back in Black” was playing in my head. The real fireworks had stopped, but the ones in my head were going full blast. I think I had that twinkle in my eyes that Davie Jones from The Monkees had when he saw a pretty girl. It wouldn’t have surprised me anyway.

We all got into our swimsuits and jumped in the pool. Actually, June and I threw our girls in, and then jumped on top of them. I couldn’t believe how light she felt and how strong it made me feel.

About two in the morning, everyone else left, and we all went to bed. Christan was wearing a pair of boxers and a t-shirt she’d borrowed from June. I stripped down to my underwear and hopped in bed. We made out for a while, and I was trying really hard to be good. The only thing I did was feel her boob through the t-shirt, and goddamn, it was nice. She hadn’t really touched me at all, which led me to believe that she didn’t want to do anything else. That is until she looked at me and said, “Do you want to do something else?”

“Like what?” I asked. I really had no idea what she was talking about.

“Like this.” She took off the t-shirt and boxers.

*Holy sweet goddamn. That’s the most amazing shit I’ve ever seen. I really think I’m going to marry her. This is like a fucking movie. Jesus H. Christ, look at those. Don’t do anything. Don’t poke it, no matter what. It’s hot in hell and there is no beer or pussy. Don’t do*

*anything. But at the same time, she is a grown woman. She knows what she wants and it would almost be wrong not to.*

“You’re not saying anything,” she said. “Oh no, you think I’m a slut, don’t you?”

“No, no. I was just, um, uh, surprised.” I pulled my boxers off and got on top of her.

I’m not going to go in to all the porno details, because this isn’t one of those kinds of stories. Not to mention the fact that I’ve already written myself a boner and don’t think I would make it through another paragraph of foreplay.

Things got really close to happening a few times, at which point, I would roll off of her and bang my head against the pillow. Then we would start again.

Finally, she said, “I want you to do it.”

“No. We really shouldn’t.”

“I want you to.”

“We should probably wait.”

“Please?”

I’m ashamed to admit that this was all it took, though if I would have known what was going to happen next, she probably would have had to ask a few more times.

Okay, this next part is nasty, but you have to know. I’ll describe in the most innocent terms possible.

The hot dog was ready to go in the bun, and the bun was covered in all the mustard that you would ever need. The hot dog went in easily enough at first, but then there seemed to be some part of the bun that hadn’t been cut all the way through. (By the way, I had never experienced this because my ex-wife, Debbie, had had a bicycle seat accident as a child.) Anyway, I started to pull the hot dog out, but she grabbed me by the ass and pulled me towards her. Fuck it, I thought. The hot dog is going in. And then, BAM! The place in the bun where it

hadn't been cut busted wide open and ketchup went everywhere. I immediately pulled out the wiener and said, "Holy Jesus, you're a... You're thingie was still there. I just..."

"I thought you knew."

"Hell no, I didn't know." I hopped up on my knees.

"Are you mad at me?"

"Well, no, but I wish you would have given me the heads up."

"Sorry. I thought Nikki told you."

"Nope, she sure didn't."

"Come here." She pulled me back down on top of her.

"Are you okay? Does it hurt or whatever?"

"A little, but you can keep going."

I don't know what the fuck I was thinking at this point. "Are you sure?"

"Yeah."

So the next thing you know, the hot dog was back in the newly devirginated bun. I rolled it around in there for a few minutes and then I figured she'd had enough. After what had just happened there was no way the hot dog was going to, well, you know.

The next morning there was all kinds of crazy messes to clean up. I had to get the sheets home without Nikki seeing them because Christan begged me not to say anything. I also had to decide what I was going to do about Christan and me. I needed to go to church and beg for forgiveness. I needed to go to donate blood and maybe some of my old jackets. Unfortunately, I also needed to go to work.

While I was at work, I decided that I had to date her. I know that doesn't sound very positive, but the whole experience freaked me out a little. She gave me her virginity, so the least I could do is be her boyfriend.

Things with her were okay. She wanted to have sex a lot, though I don't really think she enjoyed it. She was sweet as hell and always wanted me to call her right before I went to bed or when I got home, just to make sure I made it there okay. When we had conversations, it was sort of like teaching class. She asked me if terrorists might fly a plane into her dorm room, and I had to explain without hurting her feelings that the terrorist probably had more important shit to blow up than Kerr Hall. Her roommates were a bunch of idiots, but we hung out with June and Nikki a lot, so it was okay. At one point during this time my mom said, "Are you sure you know what you're doing? Don't you think that the only reason you're with her is because she's the closest thing you can get to her sister?" I, of course, said, "Hell no. Don't be crazy." At the same time though, Mom was probably right. I used to think all that bullshit about listening to your mother was just a bunch of crap. My band was playing a show in Deep Ellum when I finally realized she was right.

About three songs in, I got the worst fucking headache ever. The fucked up thing is that I don't ever get headaches, but this shit hurt so bad that I couldn't move. Singing was the worst pain I've ever felt and I let most of the harmonies go and only sang when I had absolutely had to. When we got done, Nikki ran up to the stage and handed me three Aleve and the rest of her beer to wash them down with. No woman, not even my mom, had ever taken care of me that way. She knew what I needed her to do and she did it without thinking. I packed all my shit up and went up to the bar to thank her. Christan just sat there, pissed off at Nikki for knowing what to do. Right in the middle of my gratitude, I realized I was about to start crying like a bastard and excused myself to the bathroom where I cried like hell and punched the stall door until I cut my hand on a goddamn screw. Then I sat down on the disgusting shitter and cried into my bloody fists. There was nothing I could do; she was June's girlfriend. I felt like I was breaking the code just by thinking about her. I wanted to be happy. I wanted everyone to be happy, and I was

trying really hard. I was trying really hard and it still got fucked up. My mom was definitely right, but I still couldn't totally admit the Nikki part to myself. Finally, our drummer, Brennan came in to look for me. He hugged me and told me to get cleaned up so we could go eat.

It wasn't more than a week before I got to a point where I knew I couldn't do it anymore. I called her so we could get together to talk.

"Are you going to break up with me?" she said.

"Well, um, shit."

"You are. You are going to break up with me."

"It's just that I don't think this is really going to work out," I said. "You're a sweet girl, but I'm just too old for you. You need to be running around, being nineteen and dating different boys."

"You're right." She started crying. "I'll talk to you later, okay?"

"Okay. I'm sorry." She hung up, and I felt like shit. Knowing I was going straight to hell, I drove to a sports bar by our apartment to get drunk.

When I got home, June was there. He had broken up with Nikki and was feeling guilty about it. I wasn't really surprised. We went back to the bar. He told me that besides the religious differences and all of that, she needed someone that was close to her as I was. "She'll be calling you," he said.

"Probably so. I broke up with Christan tonight."

"This is getting weird."

"What do you want me to say when she calls?"

"Just talk to her," he said. "Be her friend. That's what she needs."

Later on that night, she did call. She was pissed at me for breaking up with Christan over the phone, even though I didn't have a choice. She told me that she wasn't that upset about June

breaking up with her, but she was worried that we wouldn't be hanging out anymore. I lied to her and told her that nothing would change. After that, we maybe talked once a month. We got together for lunch one Sunday in October, and she yelled at me when she found out I was back together with Kissy. There was tension between us that hadn't been there before. I wanted to tell her I was in love with her. But then again, what did I know?

One day, a few months later, she called and we decided to get together at the Inwood for drinks. The Inwood is this crazy old theater with one of those old vertical, art deco neon signs out front. A wall of glass bricks about seven feet high separates the lobby from the bar. From either side you can see the pastel mural on the ceiling. The bar is one of those bars that where artsy-fartsy types hang out and deconstruct the films they've just seen. On the way there, I promised myself I wouldn't say anything about how I felt about her, or how much I missed her, or any of that shit. We probably shouldn't have met at the Inwood, or anywhere with drinks, for that matter. The reason that we shouldn't have met there is because it's in this ritzy, romantic shopping center in the middle of Highland Park. Being the materialistic, capitalist bastard that I am, shopping centers like that are romantic as shit, as far as I'm concerned. People with that much money are always happy and beautiful. I always believed that some of that good luck, money and happiness would rub off on me if I were around it enough.

It was 4 days after Christmas and I guess I needed her because I opened up and told her everything. I told her about how Kissy and I were having problems. I told her about the Christmas wackness around the Welles house and all kinds of other shit. Talking to her again felt really great. She had a way of being there for a person. Maybe it was the way her eyes looked like they were listening. Maybe it was the way she never judged me no matter what I'd done. She was kind of like the sexy mother I never had. She would know how to make soup and how to make you eat it.

After the second beer she blurted out that it was always me.

“What do you mean it was always me?” I asked.

“Do you remember that first time you and June came to see me at the bar?”

“Yeah, you gave us free beer in Coke cups.”

“I was looking at you that night, not him.” She shifted in her chair and lit a cigarette.

“Are you serious?”

“Yeah. You looked so cute in your hat, and you were just such a surprise.”

“I had no idea.”

“Obviously not, or you wouldn’t have tried so hard to get June and I together,” she said.

“And by the way, it’s not like I didn’t like him. I guess I knew that you had a girlfriend, and I figured you had a girlfriend, so it was sort of pointless.”

“Wow. I wish I would have known.”

“And why the hell did you have to have sex with my sister?”

“I’m sorry,” I said. “Anyway, you had sex with my best friend, so we’re both screwed, so to speak.”

The waitress came over with two more beers. The neon in the glass bricks flickered. Nikki put her cigarette out and lit another one.

“Maybe we should just kiss, just to see, and then not tell anyone about it,” she said.

“Jesus H. Christ, that’s exactly what I was thinking.”

“We can’t though. What would we do if it was really good?”

“Yeah, the fucked up thing is that the easiest thing for both of us would be if it sucked.”

“What if it just sucked for one of us and the other one was totally into it?”

“Four possible outcomes and none of them are particularly good,” I said. “We’ll be good.”

We were both feeling guilty as shit and drank the third beer almost in silence. I was never the sort of dude to mack on one of my buddy's girlfriends, but there we were. I didn't even see it coming. I guess I felt something the whole time, but never really realized it. She was the same way, except for the fact that she knew she liked me first and I really didn't have a clue about anything. When it comes to women, I'm basically retarded. If a girl doesn't basically pull up her shirt, showing her boobs with the words "I love Todd Welles" on them, then I have no idea. God, I wish I wasn't so fucking stupid.

Pretty soon, two o'clock came and we had to leave. It was Sunday and we were the last two people in the bar. The parking lot was deserted. We walked outside and both had songs to play for each other, which we did in my car. To tell you the truth I wasn't even paying attention; I was just trying to keep myself from kissing her. After the songs were over, we got out to hug and go home. We hugged for about 5 hours and she felt amazing. I mean like perfect and I wanted to squoosh myself into her and sleep there. Occasionally, June would enter my mind, and I would feel a sharp poke of guilt. But then I would smell her hair and forget he ever existed. Finally, she just sat down on the ground and said, "Todd, I can't take it. This is too hard. How did something like this happen?"

"I have no idea. I...shit...I don't know...fuck."

Then she reached up and grabbed my jeans and told me to sit with her. We were sitting almost Indian style next to each other facing opposite directions and hugging. "I don't ever want to go home," she said. "Just sit here with me until the sun comes up."

"Okay," I said, and then we decided not to say another word. As we sat there, I started to hear some sort of music coming from somewhere. I was pretty sure it was Christmas music.

"You hear that?" I said.

"Where's it coming from?"

“I think it’s coming from those Christmas trees over there.” I took her hand and we walked over to the twenty-foot tall tree in front of the GAP Kids and sat down on the bench underneath it. There were speakers in the tree playing Christmas tunes and they were the old school kind that still get you when you listen to them, big band Bing Crosby kind of shit.

The next thing you know, she stands up and says, “Dance with me.” We danced, barely moving for god knows how many songs. I wondered if people ever felt like that while they were dancing at their own wedding. It wasn’t exactly a pleasant thought. I couldn’t look her in the eye because I knew I would lose control and kiss the shit out of her. I knew that I be wouldn’t stopping either. I thought of June. It would have gotten real nasty and might have even ruined what we decided was the most perfect night of our lives. Instead, I just said the first cheesy thing that entered my head.

“I haven’t felt like Christmas in a long time, and dancing with you under this tree, four days later, I finally do.”

“Me too,” she said. I think she was about to cry. We sat down on the bench again, holding hands. We sat there for a while and I was thinking all kinds of crazy shit. I was thinking that I hadn’t felt like that in a long time. I was thinking I actually hadn’t ever felt like that. I was also getting antsy. I wanted to go home because it was too good. I wanted to think back on it, but fuck that. I wasn’t about to leave her. Then I thought of a place where we could go.

“Hey, I know this place. It’s bad ass, and I think you’ll love it,” I said, hoping she hadn’t been there.

“Where?” she asked.

“Celestial Park. It’s my favorite place in Dallas.”

“I’ve heard about that place.”

We got in my car and I put in an old Harry Connick Jr. CD. That was just the ticket and I couldn't believe that I just happened to have that shit in my car. After she told me again how perfect everything was, she just sat there with her pretty blue eyes closed and rubbed my hand. 15 minutes later we pulled into the neighborhood where the park was and got out of the car.

Every house in this neighborhood is worth well over a million dollars, and so the park that they have really kicks a lot of ass. It's probably a 20 acres worth of land and kind of oval shaped. There are steps up from the street with quotes from various badasses, like Whitman and Thoreau, about nature and shit like that. She ate it up. After the first set of steps there is a gravel path that rings the thing, and after another set of steps through some trees, is a big oval shaped field of grass. Across the field and up a steeper set of steps, there is a sundial and if you stand on opposite ends of it, your voice echoes in the other person's ears.

She was just about shitting herself when she saw the place. She wanted to read every word, just like I did the first time I was there. I wasn't impatient at all and read along, thinking about the last time I was there when I was 19 and still basically innocent and clueless. We got to the top and I told her where to stand. I walked over to my spot and said, "Is this cool or what?" Her face lit up when she heard my whisper echo all around her. She asked me how it worked and I told her I didn't know. I'm pretty sure I would have come up with bullshit if it was any other girl on the planet, but I didn't need to with her. I showed her how the sundial worked and then we walked back down the steps, holding hands again.

We sat down on a bench beside the gravel path and didn't say anything. The whole time we're still talking about how fucked up everything was and how we didn't realize that any of this was happening while I was with her sister and she was with June. We kept talking about how we're not bad people and would never have done anything like that if we had a clue. We also kept talking about not kissing. The funny shit is that usually if I really like a girl it's just about

impossible for me to kiss her, but not Nikki. I've never had a harder time not kissing someone in my entire life.

After a minute or two, I told her we should leave since the cops come by all the time and I was a little bit drunk. I was then to a point where I could leave her. It was either leave then, or never leave. On the ride home, Harry C still rocking in the background, she rubbed my hands as if she was blind and wanted to know how they looked. I'm a little bit self-conscious about my hands, and I said, "Are you feeling my crazy wrinkly hands?" People have been giving me shit about them since I was a little kid, so you can understand why I might ask such a stupid question.

"No, I just want to remember how they feel so I can pretend we are holding hands any time I need to."

When we got back to the Inwood Village, it was almost four. I got out of the car to hug her one more time, and we stayed like that for a long time. At some point we realized that we'd already been about as intimate as possible, and we hadn't done a damn thing. I'd had already broken the guy code by being there and feeling that way. I'm sure there's a sister code that she broke as well that night. We still thought it was best not to kiss.

I stole a look into her eyes. I know that's some cheesy shit, "stole a look into her eyes," but I really did. Maybe it was more like—fuck, I don't know. I just couldn't look at them for long without kissing her. It was like seeing how long I could hold my hand over a flame without getting burned. (Another fine, never-seen-before image from V. Todd Welles. Thanks.)

"You better go," I said,

"Yeah," she said. "Thank you. I really needed this night to happen."

"Me too." I hugged her tightly one last time and kissed her on the side of the head. I got back to my car and heard her say my name.

“Come back. Hug me one more time.” I’m good at taking orders from women I’m dying to bang, so I pretty much ran back to her. (I also wanted to do a bunch of romantic shit with her, but you know what I mean.) We hugged again, but this time, she stuck her hands up my shirt and rubbed my back and sides. She better stop that shit right now, I thought, except there was no way I was going to tell her that. “I just wanted to touch you. I’ve been dying to all night long.”

“Me too,” I said, verbal skills at their peak. The she started kissing my neck, and goddamn it, it was one of those neck kisses that mean something, not like those neck kisses that the strippers do to sell you another lap dance. This was honeymoon in Paris. This was making love on a train and slow dancing in an empty ballroom, black tie with no shoes on.

“You are really strong,” she said, looking up at me. “I’m trying so hard to get you to do it, and you’re not budging.” She was still touching my torso. “That’s the way it’s supposed to be. You be the strong one for both of us, okay?” The whole time, I felt the heat coming. I felt the guilt and regret.

“I’ll see what I can do, but you better, you know, give me a break cause there’s only so much I can take.”

“Okay. We can go now.” We both got in our cars, and she followed me out to the toll-way. My brain was fucked. I would think of her or something she said for one or two seconds, and then I would think what an evil bastard I was for having a night like that with one of my buddy’s ex-girlfriends. Then I would kick myself for giving in to her stupid ass little sister. Before long, I was back slow dancing with her under that Christmas tree. *Maybe I’ll ask June about it tomorrow*, I thought. *He said she needed someone like me in her life. It’s not breaking the code if you ask, right?* I’m seriously a horrible person.

## NO MORE MAGIC, NO MORE CRAZY

I've written this story a bunch of times—four times to be exact, not including the ones in my head. This being the last story of the book, I wanted it to be about some resolution between me and my ex-wife, Debbie. In this story, we would meet again after all these years. We would talk. We would apologize. We would hopefully understand. Maybe, we would fuck one last time, and I would either regain what I'd lost or I'd finally be destroyed me forever. (If it really happened, I imagine destruction would be the case.)

The first story I wrote is called, "To Have It Still." I wrote this one drunk as hell after I'd found out that she was engaged. The story starts when my mom calls me and asks me to call Debbie and ask her to come over to my grandmother's house for Mother's day. We are divorced and have been for a year or so, but we haven't told my grandma because the whole family thinks the shock will kill her. Debbie accepts the invitation, and my mom and I go to pick her up the following Sunday. She's looking hot as shit and smelling like a motherfucker, but I play it cool. Various story bullshit happens, and then after lunch, Debbie tells me that she's engaged. I pretend not to give a shit, of course. Then she starts crying and says she doesn't know. After that, we kiss for a second, stop, and go home. It turns out that my half blind, half deaf grandmother knows the whole time. At the end, you are supposed to figure that Debbie and I won't be seeing each other again. Nothing changes. Nothing happens.

"To Have It Still" was an okay story, but it wasn't true and I couldn't figure out how to make it true. So after failing with that one, I tried to write "My Ex-Wife's Wedding." There are two versions of that one, though both of them suck and are unfinished. In the first version, I am

not invited to the wedding, but a buddy of mine tells me all the details. I call up my favorite stripper, Karen/Erin, and ask her to come with me. Both of us get totally plowed beforehand. We sneak in, and just as people are giving speeches, I walk up to the microphone and give a crazy ass speech, a warning to Debbie's new husband and an admonition to Debbie's mother. This was definitely not true.

In the other version of that story, I borrow June's girlfriend, Nikki, and go with her. Though I was with Kissy at this point in the longer narrative before it magically changed, I knew I needed someone stronger and someone I was not fucking. This story was such a bunch of horseshit that I didn't make it much past the first few pages.

"So what, dipshit?" you might be saying. "Why the fuck are telling me this? Are you writing this bullshit metafiction story because you don't really know what the fuck you're doing?" Well, Dear Reader, I'm not actually 100% sure. I guess I just thought you should know it all. (By the way, if I've left something out and you have a question, please feel free to drop me a line at [ToddWelles@hotmail.com](mailto:ToddWelles@hotmail.com).) Anyway, here's what really happened. The truth.

A few months ago, Debbie sent me an email through Classmates.com. I was at *my* girlfriend, Nikki's apartment when I got it, and since we'd just had a discussion about me being more honest and her busting fewer balls, I decided to show it to her. (I must add here that she was in the shower when I got it, so I could have totally gotten away without telling her shit.)

Nikki was shocked. She had been lucky enough to not have to think about Debbie as much more than a character from my pseudo-fiction. Kissy was, until then, a much bigger, flesh and blood concern. But now the evil character of my past had shown herself to be real, if only electronically.

"So, what are you going to do?" she asked, lighting a cigarette. She had quit two days earlier.

“Shit, I don’t know,” I said. And, to be totally honest, I was a swirling bag of excitement, fear, expectation and disbelief. “What would you do?”

“Well, I’d...I’d...I’d be really curious is what I’d do,” she said. “Aren’t you?”

“Yeah, but...”

“Yeah, but what?”

“Fuck, I don’t know.”

We both sat there looking at the screen and smoking hard. I was quite proud of my honesty and feeling very close to Nikki, and at the same time, turning on the liar inside to respond correctly to whatever she said next.

“I don’t want you to write her back,” she finally said.

“Okay, I won’t,” I said. “I really don’t have shit to say to that bitch anyway.” I was very convincing. God knows I had plenty to say to her stupid ass. I could tell her what a miserable, sorry excuse for a person she was. And how she’d smashed my heart and everything else I had beyond smithereens. I could also tell her how none of that sexual shit was my fault and that I had documentation to prove it. I could tell her that a small piece of me would always love her and that most of me hoped she would someday get better. But then again, I hadn’t seen her in four years, so maybe she was already better. There was no way in fuck I wasn’t emailing her back. After I had whatever closure I was going to get, I would never lie to sweet, sweet Nikki again, and we would live happily ever after.

Nikki and I fucked like monkeys that night, and I was almost drunk enough to believe that she’d had two orgasms. Once this thought kicked in, I was totally fucked in the head and didn’t sleep worth a fuck the rest of the night.

Documentation. Maybe along with that email, I could send her signed affidavits from Kissy and Nikki about my sexual prowess.

The next morning, I drove as fast as I could to my office to send the email I had been writing in my head the whole time. I included all the positive details of my life (inflated, of course), and asked a bunch of questions about her to disguise my inflated positive details. *How's your job? How's our cat?* Bullshit like that.

Waiting for the reply was fucking grueling. After two days, I thought that maybe I'd remembered her address wrong, but there was no way in hell I was going to send her another message. Maybe, I thought, she's decided against corresponding with me. Maybe, she was drunk when she sent it. Maybe she was on a secret Navy mission and had been blown to bits by some terrorist fuckers. I was pretty sure this wasn't the case because her email address looked pretty residential and her home address was at the bottom. (Her last name was still Welles, by the way, which made me think maybe her engagement had gone down the toilet and she was trying to rekindle something. This was actually June's theory, but I thought it was good one.)

Finally, a week after my response, she wrote back, and it was the most fucked up shit I'd ever read. She bought a house. She said the Navy is great. She gave our cat away. She said Augusta is as peachy as ever. (She really talks like that.) Blah, blah, blah. In the second paragraph, she told me how she'd "accepted Jesus Christ as her Lord and personal Savior." Then she went on: Love of Jesus this. Love of Christ that. On and on. It sounded like she'd gone from the cute little atheist I knew and loved to a bible beating Christian in seconds flat. Of course, I hadn't spoken to her about anything of a religious nature in over four years, so who knows? She even signed the fucker "In His name, Debbie."

As I sat there in my basement office, staring at the computer screen, my officemate, McNasty rolled in.

"What are you up to, Todd?" he said, shaking my hand. (McNasty is always either shaking your hand or grabbing your balls upon meeting up with you.)

“Dude, I just got this email from my bitch ex-wife,” I told him. “The bitch has turned into a bible beater.”

“Fuck her. Let Jesus have her,” he said, setting a group of student papers down on his desk. “If my ex-wife emailed me, I’d write the cunt back and tell her to leave me the fuck alone. Then I would change my email address.”

“That sounds like a good idea.”

“You’re going to write her back aren’t you?”

“Yeah, probably.”

“Come have a pint with me first,” he said, snapping off the computer.

“Better idea.”

McNasty and I got good and hammered at the bar across from campus and bitched about what psycho, whore, cunt bag, bitches our ex-wives were.

The next morning, I wrote Debbie back and told her I was glad she’d found something. I did not tell her that I thought she was fooling herself, yet again. Not that I think Jesus is a bunch of bullshit, but the crazy bitch was always tricking herself into believing whatever thing would allow her not to have to face the truth. Now that I think about it, we are much the same; I’ve accepted Beer as my Lord and personal Savior.

That night I got hammered and sent her another email, telling her that we should get together next time she’s in town. I also sent my phone number. I seriously need to get a breathalizer on my computer. I tried to unsend the motherfucker in the morning but I couldn’t figure out how to do that, or even if that was possible. Much to my surprise, she called me that night. Luckily, I had picked up a twelve pack on the way home from work.

It wasn’t really a very interesting conversation. She sounded as bullshit happy as she ever did, and she talked a lot about the Jesus. I was glad I had taken that Bible as Literature class

so I could keep up with the crap she was talking about. She also threw in the fact that she'd lost forty pounds. Maybe at hearing this, I was supposed to conjure up images of her seventeen year old body and get a monster hard on. Of course I did just that, but then I started thinking about a bunch of crazy shit, like how she'd almost caused me to be permanently impotent, and that was the end of that. At the end of the conversation I mentioned us getting together the next time she came in town, thinking that it would be months away.

“Actually, I'll be in town next week for Thanksgiving,” she said.

“That sounds good. Give me a call when you get in town. I got another call coming in. I'll talk to you then. Bye.”

You're not going to believe this next part. I walked out of my room, wondering what the fuck I was going to do. June was sitting on the couch watching a special on Ernest Hemingway. He knew who I had been talking to and started giggling when I walked in and saw old Papa on the TV. I'm not one for signs, but this couldn't be ignored. Among my friends, Hemingway is considered to be the king of the wackness, so seeing him on TV after talking to her, I had to go. There was fuck all I could do about it.

About this time, Nikki called. She could tell I was feeling wack, but I told her that I was just drunk and thinking about my stupid book and how I had writer's block. None of that was exactly a lie, but it wasn't the thing causing the wackness. I told her I was going to bed so I didn't have to talk to her anymore and started feeling guilty as hell. I think I was eight or nine beers in when I finally stopped feeling guilty.

The next day, I decided that I was a total loser. I drank too much. I smoked too much. I didn't have enough money, and I was a crappy writer. It was time for a change. I drove to the gym and bought a membership. I was far too hungover to work out at that point, but I was definitely going the next day. After that, I decided that I couldn't meet up with Debbie. It

wasn't that I was worried about what would happen, but I didn't want to lie to Nikki anymore. I emailed Debbie and told her that I would be out of town for the whole week of Thanksgiving and that I was sorry. She wrote back immediately and told me that was fine and we'd hook up next time.

Unfortunately, there was a shitload of beer left in the fridge when I got home from work and I couldn't help but drink it. After I was good and hammered, I hopped on the computer and emailed Debbie to tell her that my trip had been cancelled and we could meet up after all.

Much like this story, time was passing slow as shit. Finally, the day after Thanksgiving came, which was the day we had decided to get together. This was also the same day our divorce had been finalized. She really was full of magic coincidence, the tricky bitch. I did nothing but pace the entire afternoon, pace and smoke cigarettes. I tried to read. I got one sentence in before I realized that I didn't even remember the first half of the sentence. After that, I tried to write, but only stared at the computer screen for ten minutes before I decided I needed another cigarette. I made coffee. I drank it all and made another pot. I walked out front and smoked another cigarette. I walked out back and smoked another cigarette. At two that afternoon, I decided I needed to eat, so I drove to the Smoothie Factory and bought a meal replacement smoothie. There was no way I could actually eat anything. After the smoothie, I added shitting to the pacing and cigarette smoking. I must have smelled like hell. Finally, about four o'clock she called.

"Hey, are we still meeting up?" she asked.

"Yeah, sure."

"When is good for you?"

"I guess about seven. Is that alright?"

"Yeah, that's fine. Do you want to eat or just meet for coffee?"

This is where it gets a little tricky. I couldn't go eat because there would be alcohol there, and god knows what would happen if I got drunk while I was talking to her. On the other hand, seven is really the perfect dinnertime. To buy myself some time, I said, "Um." *I'm having an early dinner with my mom at five.* "Well, I'm having an early dinner with my mom at five, so I guess just coffee."

"Okay. Seven at the Starbucks in Carrollton it is."

"See ya there." That was a close one. After I hung up the phone I was shaking like a bastard. It could have been the two pots of coffee, the carton of cigarettes and no food, but I doubt it.

I continued on pacing until I decided it would be a good idea to spank it and have a little nap. The first thing I pictured was the first time Debbie and I did it. We are both eighteen, in my dad's bed, and the sun is coming through the blinds, making white stripes across her tan skin. That was working pretty good, but then the Debbie in the picture put her stupid Navy hat on, and that pretty much killed it. Finally, I finished looking at this picture of Carmen Electra and Dave Navarro in Playboy. I think I was accidentally looking at him when it happened, but I guess there are worse looking guys to finish to than him. The nap wasn't really any better. I just sort of lie there with my heart beating like hell until my arm fell asleep. Then I got up.

Finally, I figured the only way to calm down my crazy beating heart would be to drink some bourbon. I poured two fingers of Jack Daniels in one of the complimentary glasses that came with the bottle. I slammed that and decided I should pour the rest down the drain. That's when I remembered Nikki.

Nikki was definitely going to call and ask what I was doing that night. I couldn't really say I was going out with the boys because the boys would be home if she called to talk, and she always called to talk. I sure as fuck couldn't tell her what I was really doing because she would

shit fifteen bricks. After she got done with that she would probably go over to her mother's house to steal Xanax, and I didn't really want to be responsible for that. Anything I told her was going to be a lie, and she was going to ask a lot of questions. It's not that I'm not that good at lying, but I like to do it on the spot. I'm actually better at it, and I feel less guilty about it. It's like it's not really my fault that I lied if I get cornered all of a sudden and have bust out a whopper. And fuck her asking a bunch of questions. That shit was about to piss me off as it was.

Walking out of the kitchen, I saw my answer. It was the Bikini Bitches calendar I'd bought from Karen/Erin at The Lodge. I would call Nikki and tell her that I was going to the nudie bar with this guy from work. She'd be so pissed off at me for going, she wouldn't dare ask any questions. What could she ask? She couldn't ask what I'd done, and I wouldn't really have to think of any crazy lies. When she asks what I did, I just tell her I drank a bunch of expensive beer and looked at naked chicks. I called her.

She was so pissed off about me going to the nudie bar with no special occasion, she hung up on me. It was seriously the perfect plan. No questions. And maybe, after I got done with Debbie, I could pick the boys up from the house and really go to the nudie bar.

I don't really think I've ever spent the amount of time getting ready as I did that day. I started out the process by coiffing Percy. This is always very tricky, and it took about thirty minutes to get the natural but shaped look I was going for. I got in the shower and scrubbed every inch of my body until I was red. I think I washed my ass and balls five times each. I hadn't shaved in a week just so I could get a good shave. I even shaved the top of my chest so I wouldn't have any crazy 1978 chest hairs flying out over the coffee. I plucked my eyebrows and nose hairs way past the point of tears. I put lotion all over my body. I clipped my fingernails

and toenails and then filed them. I got dressed carefully, powdering the cousins before locking them up in my underwear.

You might be wondering why the fuck I was doing all this crazy shit to Percy and the cousins. Well, the truth is that I like to come prepared. If she was going to see all that crazy shit, I wanted it to look as good as possible. That's also why I had been doing my sexual kung fu. If me and Percy had one more shot at that goddamn poon, we were going to fuck the living dog shit out of her ass. Hopefully, she wouldn't be walking right for a week. She could go back to Georgia and show one of those shitty Navy doctors what a kung fued poon looks like. On the other hand, I didn't really want to bang her. The thing is that I didn't know how I was going to feel when I got there. (That's about the only thing I've learned about myself in the last few years; I never know how I'm going to feel.) Anyway, if she wanted to get banged and I felt like banging her, I was going bang her ass so goddamn hard, she could hopefully never fuck again, or at least wouldn't want to.

After fiddling with myself quite a bit longer, I was finally ready to roll out the door. My roommates looked at me like I had just gone through some homo make-over, but I knew that chicks like that kind of shit. I touched the picture of Hemingway on my fridge for good luck and walked out the door.

It was cold as a motherfucker outside, and I had forgotten my jacket. I could barely smoke because I was shaking so bad. About the time the car warmed up, I had to pull over to a gas station to get some Altoids. I didn't really want to blow a big cloud of Marlboro into her face when she got there.

—Todd, shut the fuck up about the Altoids and the ball trimmin. People want to hear if you had yo bullshit closure. They want to hear if we got to eat it. They don't give a fuck about yo stank breaf or yo pussy ass being cold in the car.

—Fine, Percy. I'll get to it.

Sorry about the interruption.

I got to the Starbucks early as hell and she wasn't there yet. At first I sat in my car listening to Dwight Yoakam. Then I went inside. I thought about ordering, and then I thought about waiting for her. *Fuck that.* I walked back out to my car and drove around the parking lot so I wouldn't look like I got there early. I parked again and got out with an old copy of the New Yorker to make myself look literary. I got a cup of coffee and sat down to look at the cartoons; there was no way I was going to be reading any of that shit. After staring at the first one for about five minutes, I walked outside for a cigarette. I needed one and there weren't enough Altoids on the planet to cover up the stink I had created with the hundred packs I'd smoked that day. *I don't give a fuck if that bitch says I stink,* I thought.

About two drags in, she pulled up in her new SUV, the one that should be half mine. I felt like I was going to shit. She got out all smiley and fresh. I should have known she was going to do that.

"Todd, how are you?" she asked. "It's great seeing you again." She was palpably full of shit, but then again, she always was. We hugged, and contrary to what I had been expecting, I didn't feel a thing.

"I'm great," I said. "You look nice."

She did look really good, too. She was wearing jeans and a tan leather jacket. She also had a fuzzy pink scarf, a fuzzy pink sweater, and a fuzzy pink purse. Her mom must have

bought that shit. I actually think she was thinner than she was when I met her. Stomach flat. Ass and thighs, thick and tight. I couldn't really see her titties, but there wasn't ever much to look at there anyway. The weird thing was that I had no desire whatsoever to poke her. I didn't really believe that I was feeling that way and figured it would probably kick in later.

She ordered some tea and sat down across the table from me. I felt like everyone there knew what we were doing and were staring at us. Everyone there was wondering if we were going to bang or get back together or start screaming at each other. Everyone there was making bets on us. Over and under. Point spread on the leg spread.

“So?” she said. She was smiling like she was carrying a gun that I didn't know about.

“So.” I said, noticing an engagement ring on the wrong that I didn't buy.

“What's new?” She smiled like she was thinking about using it.

“Not much really. Just teaching and finishing up school.” Enough about me. Let's talk about you and your psychosis, I wanted to say. “What's new with you?”

“Oh, same old stuff really. Saving the world from terrorists and all that.” I think she meant that as a joke.

“Sounds a lot more fun than saving the world from misplaced commas.”

“I bet that's about equally exciting.”

We kept shooting the shit and drinking coffee, not saying shit. There was that thick tension that people talk about cutting with a knife, but this was more bouncy. Nothing was getting through it for a while. She excused herself to go to the bathroom and Percy and I checked out her ass.

“Percy, what do you think of that ass?”

“Todd, to be real honest with you, I’m scared as a motherfucker. I thank I’m goin to vomic and I don’t mean in the fun way. Please don’t get me anywhere near that thang. I thank I would probably die right there on the spot. She tried to kill me before. Please don’t let her do it ag...”

“Percy? Percy?”

I guess he passed out. Looking at her ass was making me a little queezy too, so I stopped. I was shaking from the cold still and hoping she didn’t notice. She was sure to think that it was her. Oh, by the way. I can’t believe I forgot to tell you this part. She was wearing the old school perfume, the shit that killed me. I don’t know where she got it because they don’t make it any more and she was out when I left. During our shit shooting, while I was trying to cut the tension, she told me about how she had broken up with the dude who she had been engaged to. I assume he bought her the ring, but she also said that there was no way she was getting back together with him. She didn’t make sense. I needed a smoke and asked if she wanted one when she got back to the table.

“No, thanks. I quit two weeks ago, but I’ll go with you.”

“Was it hard?”

“Easiest thing, thank God,” she said, looking up at the ceiling. “I just asked Jesus if he would deliver me from my addiction, and that was it. Haven’t wanted one since.” She was totally serious.

“Maybe I should ask the Jesus about that,” I said, opening the door for her.

“It doesn’t work if you don’t have faith.”

“Oh yeah.”

All of a sudden her face took on this look that was more serious, and I was expecting the gun to come out any time.

“There’s something I think you should know about certain things.”

“Oh yeah?” *This is going to hurt.*

“You know the problem we had?”

“I think so,” I said.

“The Problem,” she said.

“I think I know the one you’re talking about.” I bent down to tie my shoe.

“It turns out that my cervix is inside out, so it causes extreme pain when I have sex.”

“Oh?”

“I went to about a million doctors before they finally figured out what the problem was. It wasn’t just you, though I didn’t really experiment that much in case you’re wondering.” It was really cold and she was sort of hugging herself.

“I wasn’t, but…” I guess she told me that to be nice. That was nice. I was fucking shocked.

“I just thought you should know it wasn’t you.”

“I appreciate that, but I had kind of figured out that it wasn’t me before you told me about your thing.” She could take from that whatever she wanted.

We went back inside and I was noticeably shivering. She told me I should have worn a coat. I ordered us a couple more drinks and paid for it. *Why the fuck did I do that? I have negative money in my bank account.*

There was a lot more shit-shooting that didn’t amount to shit. I think both of us wanted to talk about it, but neither of us were going to do it first. I sure as fuck wasn’t going to. I wanted to leave, and I kind of wanted to stay. I wanted to talk about it, and I sort of didn’t want

to talk about it. She told me about boats she'd been on. I told her I published a story in *The Antioch Review*. I decided to ask her about her new thing with Jesus.

“So, how did you all of a sudden get, um, saved?”

“It wasn't really all of a sudden at all,” she said. Her confidence seemed to beam as she spoke about the Jesus. “About four months ago, I was all fat and depressed and my ex hugged me and told me that Jesus loved me no matter what. The next thing you know, He was in my heart, and I knew that He loved me.” She said this with a straight face.

“That's good.”

“It's just a good feeling to know that you are worth loving.”

“Jesus or no Jesus, you've always been worth loving.” *Oh fuck, I'm about to say some crazy shit.* “Plenty of people have loved you and plenty of people still do.”

“Yeah, but I didn't think anyone did, and I couldn't love anyone either because I didn't love myself.” She took off her glasses and rubbed her eyes, but I'm pretty sure she wasn't even close to crying. “I'm sorry I never loved you. I'm really sorry.” She pulled the trigger.

“That's alright. I guess I sort of knew the whole time.” That's the cheesiest, dumbest thing I'd ever said, but it was kind of true. The bullet hurt, but not as bad as I had expected. I was getting thirsty and went to get more coffee.

“You know how you asked me in that email why I married you?” I asked when I got back to the table. “I'm not exactly sure what you meant.”

“I just wanted to know why,” she said. “I don't know. You know?”

“I asked you to marry me because I loved you. That's all.” I was getting confused and a little bit pissed off. “So, if you never loved me, why did you say yes.”

She seemed quite ready to answer this, which pissed me off a little more. “I said yes because you seemed like you really wanted to.”

“I see,” I said, not seeing a goddamn thing. “You know, when someone asks me what happened, I’m still not exactly sure what to tell them. I mean, there have been probably five or ten different stories I’ve told, but I’m not sure if any of them are right. I don’t even think I really know.”

“I know what you mean. At first when you’re mad, you tell a bad one, but later on, when you’re not so mad, you tell a different kind of story.”

I wanted to ask what stories she told. I hoped she would ask me. Neither of us did.

We were quiet for while, but it wasn’t really awkward. I think my brain would have to have been working better for me to feel anything awkward. I asked her about her little brother, and she told me he was in rehab. I felt pretty guilty about that. I told her I feel like it wouldn’t have happened if I still would have been there for him.

“We all feel a little guilty about it.”

I couldn’t take it anymore. I looked at my watch.

“Well, I guess I better get going. The boys are all in town for the holidays and I need to go see em.”

“Yeah, my mom’s probably already pissed that I stayed this long.”

We walked out the door and hugged in front of her car. Still nothing, but this time I was glad.

“Speaking of your mom. That’s one of my favorite stories to tell about why we’re not together anymore.”

“I bet it is.” She laughed and said take care. I could tell she was a little bit pissed off about that last comment, and I felt pretty good about it.

I got in the car and put on “Guitars, Cadillacs” and listened to it over and over again. “Girl, you taught me how to hurt real bad and cry myself to sleep.” I guess she taught me

something else, too. I hold on to shit that I know isn't true to make myself feel bad, and she believes shit she knows isn't true to make herself feel better. Maybe I'm the crazy one.

When I got back to the house, everyone wanted to know how it went. I couldn't really tell them anything. I didn't know how it went. All I knew was that I wanted to get drunk. After a couple beers, I told them about her up pussy, but that was all I could think of. For the rest of the night, I just sat there drinking, while they all talked about music and other bullshit.

The next morning, I woke up and my head was magically clear. She was big ass bag of contradiction. Engagement ring on the wrong hand from a guy she doesn't love. Wearing the old perfume she knew I loved. Saying she never loved me, when I still have the letters she'd written with circled tear stains because she missed me so bad. Busted up vagina, but she never said one thing about it hurting. She said it was disgusting, not painful. She's still lying to herself and everybody else about everything. I honestly felt sorry for her. I was glad that I had loved her, but I was done. I felt done for the first time since I met her. That's when I came up with the most fucked up conclusion ever.

I shouldn't be looking for a girl with all that magic. Maybe I should be looking for a girl that doesn't make me crazy one way or another. That's how you make a marriage last. Maybe I should marry Nikki. No magic, not anymore, at least. No crazy, not yet, at least.