BAD POETRY AND OTHER SHORT STORIES

Terry Christopher Smith, B.A.

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APPROVED:

Barbara A. Rodman, Major Professor and
Program Coordinator for Creative
Writing
John Tait, Committee Member
Scott Simpkins, Committee Member
Brenda R. Sims, Director of English
Graduate Studies
James Tanner, Chair of the Department of
English
Sandra L. Terrell, Dean of the Robert B.
Toulouse School of Graduate
Studies
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*Bad Poetry and Other Short Stories* is a collection of social, political, and religious commentary. The last three stories are also commentary from a non-fiction perspective.
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PART I

PREFACE
At First, There Was the Word

During the summer when I was seven, my uncle gave me my first Encyclopedia Brown book because I joined the March of Dimes Read-a-Thon. My uncle as well as my parents sponsored me. For every page I read, they would donate a dime to the March of Dimes. I won first place that year.

By the end of the summer, I had collected and read all twelve books. By the summer of my eighth birthday, I had reread all of the books at least five times. On my eighth birthday, my uncle told me that the next book in the series was out, so I decided to ask my mom if she would take me to the book store.

My mom was canning everything that year. She had on her “Worlds Favorite Mother” apron, which was faded green and torn around the shoulder straps. One of the shoulder straps was held together with safety pins. The fact that she was wearing that apron was a good sign because she only wore it when she was in a good mood and feeling generally motherly. My mom noticed me watching her. “Terry, could you be nice to your mommy and help her clean the kitchen.”

The kitchen was a mess. When I say mess, I mean dirty Mason jars everywhere. It seemed to me that she did not fully understand the process of putting the food in the jars. Dried pickled peaches were on the floor by the sink. The range was covered in some kind of foul smelling goo that my mom called pickling pectin.

The sink was overflowing with all sorts of dirty dishes, and one of the counters was covered in homemade strawberry jam.

Well, this is was an unexpected obstacle to me getting my next book. No time to look back now, time for phase two.
“Mom, why do you call it canning when you’re putting the stuff in jars?”

“Because.” My mom said.

Uh oh, that’s not a good answer. I thought. “Quick, think of something.” I grabbed the stool and walked over to the sink, sat the stool down, and started washing dishes.

Better go straight to phase three of my get a new book plan.

“Mom, we should buy you a new apron.”

“With what money?” My mom asked.

“Well I have some birthday money left. Don’t I?” I asked.

“We had to use that for other things, and you know it.” My mom said.

“Well do I have enough to buy a new book?” I asked.

My mom slammed a pot down on the stove. “Do you think I’m made of money?”

I sat still and silent. I did that when I was yelled at. Still do. I sat there hoping that she wouldn’t notice me. Hoping that by not moving or making any noise, she would forget I was there.

“Terry, damn it. You’re not deaf. Answer me.” My mom said.

In my struggle to keep my eye on my goal, I had forgotten the question, or ignored it.

My mom took off her apron and stormed out of the kitchen yelling, “All you ever want from me is money. Buy me this. Give me that. Can’t you ever think of someone besides yourself?”

I quietly finished washing dishes trying to figure out a way to still get my new book. When the dishes were washed and dried and my hands were wrinkled like prunes, I slunk back to my bedroom and hid under my covers.
The next day, I decided to write my own Encyclopedia Brown story.

I found my mom watching the TV show Dallas and handed her my story. She muted the sound to the TV and read. My mom’s face softened. She looked at me and smiled. “Wow, this is pretty good. Did you write this?”

“Yes I did. If you like it, I’ll write another one.” I said. I later showed both stories to my grandmother.

“My little Terry is so smart.” My grandmother Mimi would say. She later bought me a little lapdesk. The kind that has a smooth wooden top made from white Formica and the bottom has a cushion attached so you can set it on your lap while you write. The top opened up into a secret tray where I could store my pens and paper. Inside was made from wood and particle board. I carved my name into the back wooden stock section with a small pocket knife that I got for Christmas. I later used a black marker to trace the carving so that the appearance now was my poorly carved name with a black marker outline.

One day while writing on my little lap desk, I was sitting on the couch while my dad was watching The Three Stooges. I wrote my own Three Stooges story and decided that they were too stupid to be in any of my stories. I needed more material, better material. I needed something that I could write about and that I wanted to write about.

Since the main character of my favorite book series, Encyclopedia Brown, got all his knowledge from encyclopedias, I decided to do the same. I borrowed my uncle’s Encyclopedia Britannica and read them all from front to back. I decided that I would use something from each section in a story. That way, I would have plenty to write about.
While sitting at the dinner table, I casually slid my plate over and placed my story on the table. “Mommy, this story is about how a zoo keeper kidnaps an aardvark.”

“That’s good, Terry, can I read it after dinner?” My mom asked.

“Did you know that an Aardvark lives in Africa and eats ants?” I asked.

The table was silent except for my older brother smacking his lips, which he did when he was really into his meal.

“Yeah, and the Aardvark is from a family called Tubulidentata. Do you suppose that that is his last name, Mr. Aardvark Tubulidentata?” I asked.

“Terry, could you pass me some butter?” My dad asked.

The next day, my grandmother read the story and said, “You’re such a smart little boy.”

I decided that I had gotten so good at writing these stories that I would do something totally different. I was going to draw the story scene by scene. I would change the way the world writes. Comic books be damned. My way was going to be better.

“Mommy, look at what I did.”

I let the pictures loose from my tight hug and handed them to my mom. She looked at the pictures and seemed pleased. “Uh, this is really nice, Terry.” Only her smile was slanted, awkward somehow.

“Cool. Do you know what it is?” I tried to show her that I was going to change the world with my new invention.

“Not right now. I’m not feeling well. Could you help your brother with the chores?”
She handed the pictures back to me. I could barely speak. I just nodded my head in agreement. I returned to my room with my drawings dragging the floor. I could not understand it. She loved my writing, but she didn’t like my picture story. So I decided to stick to just writing, and no need in embarrassing myself by showing these to my grandmother. After all, I still wanted to be “Smart Terry.”

When I was twelve, the pastor of my church took me aside. “Terry, you should be paying attention to the lessons and not writing during church. You are being disrespectful to God.”

“But, pastor Kendly, I can do both. I promise.”

Pastor Kendly nodded his head, “Perhaps you would like to play on our peewee softball team? The coach has been asking about you.”

“But I like writing these stories.” I pulled one from my folder and handed it to him. Without even looking at the story, he said, “If God wanted you to write, he would have told you so by now.” He paused and looked at me with his head cocked to one side. “How old are you?”

“Twelve.” I said.

“Well it’s time you put aside your childish ways and start thinking about becoming a young man.” He said.

I looked up and saw my grandmother standing off in the distance. She had on her lavender Sunday morning going to church dress and a smile that lit up the hallway. She would save me. “Grandma, I got a new story for you to read.”
My grandmother seemed embarrassed probably because I was talking so loud in the church hallway. She came up and thanked the pastor for talking to me. I tried to hand her the story, but she waived me off. “We don’t do these things in church.”

After I got home, I reread the last story my grandmother had read. It was perfect. I could not find a reason why she would not like it. I spent the next week rewriting that story, trying to make it better somehow. I even tried discussing the story at the dinner table.

My dad cut me off in mid sentence, “So, Michael, how was football practice today?”

“I hated it. The coach makes us run all the time.” Michael, my older brother, said.

“Well, you hang in there son. You’ll make a great football player someday.” My dad said.

I decided to edge sideways back into the topic of my story. “I’ve been rewriting this story, and I could use some help.”

“Terry, you’re almost old enough to join the team. Why don’t you go and watch your brother practice tomorrow?” My dad said.

“If I want to see Michael run, I’ll throw firecrackers at him.” I said.

That comment, along with my sully attitude, got me grounded for two weeks, and I still had to go watch my brother practice. And Michael was right. They made him run the whole time. Even though I was not allowed to bring my lapdesk, I still snuck some paper and a pen with me. While my brother ran, I sat in the bleachers and wrote, which was hard enough because of the uneven wooden bleachers.
The way my parents grounded me was to keep me out of my room and away from my writing. They usually accomplished this by keeping me outside of the house and away from my lapdesk. For the first few hours of my punishment, I would have to go along and try to hang out with my brothers.

My older brother did not want me hanging around him, so I went to hang around my younger brother Chris and his friends. It just so happens that Jason, one of Chris’ friends, took his dads pistol from under his parents bed. We all went down to the creek and shot off a whole box of shells. Out of everyone there, I got in the most trouble because I was older and should have known better. I overheard my pastor say to my grandmother, “Idle hands often do the Devil’s deeds.” And thought, “If I was allowed to write, this would have never happened.” But I just knew if I said anything like this to my parents, I would get a spanking and be grounded.

The next day, my mom tripled my chore list. One of my many chores was to help my dad repaint the house. My hands were so sore from scraping paint off the house that I could not write that night because my wrists kept cramping. Instead, I daydreamed myself to sleep. I was unable to write for a week because my arms were too tired and sore. Every time I went to write, I could barely push down on the pen and my handwriting was barely readable. But I did enjoy daydreaming about the stories I could write. I decided that I would make little notes the best I could and write the stories later. I kept a separate set of papers that just had story ideas on them.

The next week, we had to repaint the barn. I was doing pretty good daydreaming about my stories until my dad caught me sitting down daydreaming instead of working. “Damn it, Terry, you’re going to have to give up this silly shit. The next time I see you
writing or wondering off about your writing, I’m going to bust your ass but good. Comprende?”

Later that week, I wrote another story about a kid who was a genius and nobody cared. For some stupid reason probably relating to needing positive reinforcement, I showed the story to my mother.

“Why are you writing again?” My mom asked.

I stood motionless and silent. My eyes were opened wide and my mouth hung open. I did not want to breathe.

“I told you to take all the trash out.” My mom glared at me. “Why didn’t you do it?”

Again, I stood still and quiet.

“You were writing again. Weren’t you?”

I gave no answer.

“The dogs got into the garbage bin and you didn’t clean it up. I swear, Terry, if you don’t get your head out of your ass, I am going to.” She stomped out of the living room and left a room full of negativity.

For the rest of the summer, I was not allowed in my room during the day. I would climb in my bedroom window, sneak off with my writing desk, and write down by the creek. When I would come back in the evening, my mom would ask, “Terry, where have you been all day?”

“I was at the creek fishing.” This excuse worked pretty well until one day my older brother squealed on me. Earlier that same day, a friend I had known from school, Clyde, found me at the creek writing.

“What you doing?” Clyde asked.
“I’m just doodling.” I said.

Clyde picked up some of the papers sitting beside me and started reading them. I reached to yank them back and Clyde said, “Did you write these?”

I hesitated before answering.

“Why don’t we go and toss the baseball around?” Clyde asked.

“Let me finish writing this first.” I said.

“I have a cousin who likes to draw. My dad says he a no good fag.” Clyde said.

After long silence, Clyde said, “Why do you like to do this girly stuff anyway? Are you a fag?”

That evening after my brother told on me, I got in trouble for lying.

“Terry, I told you to stop this silly fucking shit, but you kept on.” My dad said. He jerked the writing desk from my hands. He gave me a look that I have never seen before, a look that would have surely set me on fire if he could have, a look that bore right down into me and made me feel totally and utterly worthless at that moment. My dad put one foot on the couch, raised my writing desk high in the air, and with one smooth motion, he brought the desk down smashing it on his thigh. Pieces went everywhere. A small piece of wood hit my mother in the face. She started screaming to the top of her lungs and stomped out of the living room.

“Maybe now you’ll play football like your brother and stop doing this sissy shit.” My dad said.

My mom stuck her head out of their bedroom door and yelled, “I don’t know what we’re going to do with your son? He’s going to end up being a retard like your brother.”

“Leave James out of this.” My dad said.
“Maybe if James would not have encouraged your son to start this stupid crap, your son wouldn’t be such a sissy.” My mom said.

I skulked to my room and tried to ignore them. I could hear everything that happened, but I could only make out a few of the words. What I dreamed I heard was this:

“If your son wasn’t such a loser, maybe we would have better lives.”

“If you weren’t such a bitch, maybe your son would be more of a man.”

“Maybe if you’d stop drinking and spend more time with your son, he wouldn’t be such a damn waste.”

That fight between my parents lasted for several hours. The fight ended when my dad passed out from drinking gin and tequila together. He called it his special mix.

Around midnight that night after everyone else was sound asleep; I sat in my room and looked over all the stories that I had written over the years. I snuck into the living room where my broken writing desk was and got all the pieces together. I put all my stories and my broken writing desk into my backpack and went down to the creek. My little lap writing desk was busted pretty good. I tried to read some of my stories, but the moon was not out that night making it hard to see. I pulled out the pieces of my lapdesk and tried gluing it back together to no avail. I carefully placed all the pieces into a nice wooden pile and lit it on fire. As I sat there watching my name that I had etched into the lapdesk burn, I wondered if I would have as much fun playing football as I had had writing.
Then There Was the Influences

To me, a premise driven story is a story that is primarily driven by an overall premise or idea instead of a character or plot. A premise driven story can and should have a strong character, but the character is not what the story is about. The story is usually about a moral or ethical dilemma that plagues the author’s life or culture. The author then chooses to write a story that will open expose the social, religious, or political problems that motivated the story idea.

Some other authors that write this way are Kurt Vonnegut Jr., George Orwell, O’Henry, Phillip K. Dick, Franz Kafka, and Jorge Luis Borges among others. These authors have all influenced me to write and my writing style. Most of these authors have a strong character or characters in their story, but the story is driven by the premise or point of the story. As for what drives a premise driven story, the story may or may not, and often does not, move forward in the plot driven sense. The story usually does not have a rise in action, to a climax, then a resolution in the end. Most premise driven stories are based upon the main character(s) struggle with the overlying theme or idea that the author is wants to publicize. The end may come to a resolution, but usually the end is some kind of significant statement about the problems addressed by the premise such as what happens in 1984 and the overall commentary about the problems with big government and communism.

I have found that most premise driven stories are often a type of speculative fiction such as Welcome to the Monkey House, The Man in the High Castle, and 1984 among others. I think that by doing this the reader can more easily be eased into the suspension of disbelief while being introduced to a set of ideals that may not be
otherwise easily discussed. Also by doing this, the story seems less preachy and more of a form of entertainment which is another way of making the story and the premise more reader friendly. Another reason for using speculative fiction for premise driven stories is to be able to take things to the extreme without seeming to be unbelievable. An author can introduce their ideology in such a way as to make the reader see the author’s opinions without offending the reader or turning away the reader because the premise is too direct.

In 2002, Michael Levan loaned me a copy of *Welcome to the Monkey House* by Kurt Vonnegut Jr. At first, I thought, “Great another book to read.” He suggested I read the story titled *Harrison Bergeron* first because of a discussion we had about excessive governmental control over what we think and believe. I finished the book in three days, which is saying much considering I was going to school at the time and had many other things to read and write.

*Harrison Bergeron* truly took the concepts of governmental control to the extreme. But the absurdity of it all seemed believable if not plausible. The characters in the story are constantly reacting to the idea of government control and to the objects of the control such as the loud noises, heavy chains around the neck etc. The story also addresses the issue of non-equality at birth and the governments pledge to make all peoples created equal. Yet, the story does this in a humorous and often benign way.

I am intrigued by Vonnegut’s dark humor, wry wit, and use of irony in his stories. His political and social commentary inspired several story ideas of mine such as *Civic Virtue* and *MetroCorp*. The short story Civic Virtue is an attempt to satirically reflect the problems that can occur with big government and too little consumer resources while
the story *MetroCorp* is an attempt to show the lack of human emotions and responsibility that often go with corporations.

I was forced to read *1984*, by George Orwell, during my senior year of high school. I say forced because the English teacher that taught the class disliked the book. I am not sure why she had to teach it, but had to teach it she did, and she negatively influenced my first opinions on the book. She would rant on about how the writing was bad, how the premise was all wrong, and the author was an idiot. Naturally, I did not waste much time reading the text and paid little attention in class. Years later in college, I took a Western Political Philosophy class, and for this class, I had to read *1984*. At first, I was reluctant to read the book or pay attention in class, but the professor teaching the class made the text interesting. He explained the nuances of the meanings and the history behind what was being said. We held class discussions on the text, and I felt engaged both as a reader and as a student. I still have my notes on the text that I took in the class and have learned a new appreciation for *1984*.

Orwell influenced my writing because I liked the complex nature in which his dystopia came to life. He tried to stay away from the science fiction and address what he considered real political issues of the time and imminent social problems with big government. He wanted to make the story as real as the problems. *1984* is partially the basis for the story *MetroCorp* where I wanted to explore the problems of corporations trying to control our everyday lives and what happens when an employee becomes a though criminal against the company. I wanted to open up the possibility that the corporate job is the 21st century form of slavery.
In eleventh grade, I read *Metamorphosis*, by Franz Kafka. The story captivated me right off. Thinking back on the first time I read the story, I am still not sure why I was so fascinated with it. I read the story several times and eagerly participated in the class discussions. When I read the text in college, I realized that I understood the reality of the alienation of the self due to one’s work and how a person can lose themselves and be replaced by their work, and by work I mean their job or occupation. In essence, the worker becomes the company and loses all sense of individualism. This theme shows up in several of my stories such as *MetroCorp*, *Moral Impotence*, and *Civic Virtue*. I do not feel that I have truly captured the subtleties of these problems because the stories are either too simple or too short.

I liked the use of layered themes in the story. On the surface, the story is about how Gregor is alienated from his family and his sense of self because of his job and his culture. On another level, the family is being alienated from their sense of themselves and being forced to face their fundamental nature that is not associated with the dehumanizing work or the controlling society. On yet on another level, Gregor and his family are faced with the sudden realization of the self and how they all seem to rail against this idea that the self is more important than the job. When I write, I try to think of putting these type layers in the story, but I never feel successful at doing this.

In 2001, I was given a large book that had a shortened five minute version of a story with a short commentary on the story. The book, titled GABB (*Great American Bathroom Book*), shortened stories from the Greeks to contemporary authors. In this book, several of O’Henry’s short stories were published in this shortened manner. I may have read O’Henry earlier in my life, but I most remember being influenced by O’Henry
when I read him in this book. I immediately went out and bought the full version of the short stories. I loved his twist at the end and the seemingly simply message that he tried to get across. The stories almost give the impression of being a fable or children’s lesson, but the content is often for more mature readers as well, which is fascinating to me because, in essence, he opens up the premise and offers the simplified version for the reader. This is good because it has fewer tendencies to confuse or misdirect the reader.

I enjoy the twist at the end because it often offers me the chance to reread the story and try to pick up on the signs that the ending was coming and well earned. I have tried unsuccessfully to use this style in my writing, and I feel that I have been unsuccessful because the ending appears to come out of nowhere or is somehow unearned. By unearned I mean the story has loose ends that never get answered or a device was used to make it all neat. This happens in the Narnia series of books by C.S. Lewis, or the ending sort of comes out of nowhere. When this happens to me, I rewrite the story to fix these problems, but eventually the frustration overcomes me and I let the story take on a life of its own and not try to force the ending and the ending seems to lose it twist at this point.

Dr. Tait first introduced me to Phillip K. Dick during a college Form and Theory class. We read *The Man in the High Castle*. Although the story is not primarily a social or political commentary, I do like the alternative history or speculative fiction type stories. As it turned out, I had seen several of Dick’s stories in movie format and did not know it. After I had learned that several movies were based upon the fiction by Dick, I went out and bought the books and read them. I have not attempted an alternative
history type story, but I am interested in trying to use this type of writing tool with a social or moral commentary. This would be much in the vein of Orwell’s *1984* where he offered an alternative style future in which he set his premise.

In the same class that I discovered Dick, I also discovered Jorge Luis Borges. We read a series of short stories in a collection called *Labyrinths*. I very much liked his writing style. He seemed to use language to create a rhythm or cadence. I have always been interested in speech writing where rhythm and cadence play an integral role. I also try to be aware of rhythm and cadence in my writing as well, but these things tend to come last in my list of writing priorities because I am usually focused on the semiotics of the language and the story itself. Sometimes in later drafts, I try to focus on rhythm and cadence, but I know I need to learn more about this style of writing before I can be good at it.

The story of *Tlon, Uqbar, Orbis Terius*, by Borges, fascinated me most with its discussion of language and the creation or recreation of a new language out of the failures of the old language. I was entranced at the notion that language comes out of the real, and in the story, the characters question the real and therefore begin questioning the language. Although this story is a formidable read, I found myself reading it over and over again. The story *Bad Poetry* is my attempt to imitate this story and Borges writing style. I wanted to attempt to create a similar scenario where a character would begin to open up his understanding of language and how that affects him as a person.

In the GABB book that I received as a gift in 2001, I read *Young Goodman Brown* and *Rappaccini’s Daughter*, by Nathaniel Hawthorne. I found a few websites with the
actual stories published on them and have since read the stories several times. I admire his use of names and symbolism in the stories. I try to make sure the names of my characters have more meaning than just a memorable name because so much can be transmitted to the reader just through the name of the character. For instance, the name Goodman Brown sets up the idea of the character without having to go into a long and soporific expository mode. Imagine if Hawthorne would have chosen a different name for the main character or for the main character’s wife. Many of the subtleties of the story would have been lost due to this change. But therein lies the problem with naming characters because I often find that either the name comes to me or it does not, and most likely it does not. Just when I think I have a good name picked out for a character, the name just does not seem to fit the character. Then I am in a quandary. I have to decide whether or not to try and rename the character or force the character into the previously chosen name.

As a writer, I am always reading new material and looking for the next author to help expand my horizons as a writer. One of the things I enjoy most about the classes at college is being introduced to new authors and new books. It may seem lazy, but going into a bookstore and trying to pick a book at random is expensive and often fails to produce the desired results. One thing I have noticed is that all of the authors that have influenced me in some way were introduced to me in a classroom setting or by another writer, which has saved me time and money and from having to spend endless and often fruitless hours in a bookstore. Do not get me wrong. I love a bookstore, but I love writing and reading even more.
Now My Stories: An Explication

From 1997 to 2000, I worked for Microsoft, and for several years thereafter, I worked for several other large computer corporations. The stories Your Friends at MetroCorp and Moral Impotence are based upon my experiences while working for these large corporations. I tried to show the daily tortures and mind games that supervisors play on the employees. I wanted to get across the philosophical idea that corporate drones are a modern day version of slavery that the worker does not just work for the company, but they must be the company itself. The company instills the ethics and morality into its employees, and in turn, the employees take this home to their families. I wanted to show the modernization and struggle of the 21st century nuclear family.

I chose to write these as premise driven fiction stories because I felt the tenets and views that I wanted to instill in the story were larger than myself. If I were to write a non-fiction account of my experiences at these corporations, the story would be about me and not about the failures of corporations and society to correct the problems with materialism and oppressive greed. By writing these stories in a premise driven fiction style, I feel I was able to open up these concepts and the story would be about something more than just me. Although the experiences were mine, I wanted to make sure that they were shown as more universal than just one person whining about bad luck and mistreatment.

Neither story has reached its full potential, but both stories has undergone several revisions. I have struggled with my peers wanting a character driven story. I have tried to shift the focus of the story, but somehow the main premise or idea seems
to get lost. When I rewrite these stories, I want to make the main character more
identifiable and sympathetic with the reader by showing some of the conflicts with these
decisions that employees are often forced to make. I would also try to achieve this by
letting the reader more into the head of the main character, and show more of the
internal struggle the main character is going through when trying to decide between
family, job, and duty, especially when each of those come into direct conflict as they
often do.

Reading Vonnegut inspired me to write *Civic Virtue* and *Circle Kiss*. I wanted to
be satirical about the issues of big brother trying to control everything, both in religion
and in politics. I thought that by being farcical I could make these issues more
humorous and identifiable with the reader. I also wanted to explore what it would be like
to have group rights over individual rights and how, if taken to the extreme, could be
portrayed.

The short story *Circle Kiss* started off as a scene. I had read on CNN’s website
that China was interested in possibly selling Tibet and the Southern Christian Initiative
was interested in purchasing the Tibetan’s freedom. I envisioned a scene where
someone, probably a flunky of some sort, was trying to convince the church elders to
help free the Tibetans. I decided to satire the fanaticism of the extremely religious
because I felt that this would not alienate the average reader’s religious beliefs and still
get the point of the story across. I wanted to explore some of the social anathemas of
the religious fanatics and in a way, bring about a sense of the realism of their actions
and beliefs that somehow the vocal minority truly has more power.
With both of these stories, I ran into the problem of being too absurd and being too preachy because of the content. By changing a few names and by making the characters’ actions more humorous, the stories would be less direct to the reader, but still get the message across. Verisimilitude is a bit tricky in these kind of stories, but by making a speculative style story, the suspension of disbelief in the dystopia is a little easier for the reader.

Bad poetry was my attempt at mimicking Borges’ story *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius*. I started the story around some deconstructionist language theory and proceeded to mimic the writing style. For reasons I still do not understand, I took the main character and the story idea to the extreme again and tried to make a kind of farce out of the whole idea of a one word poem. I feel I was partially successful because I was able to intertwine several language theories within the story without seeming to academic in nature. However, the story seems somewhat flat. To correct this, I need to breathe life into the main character and show his frustration with the language and the process of his linguistic discovery in the story. This story is partially based upon my discovery of the intricacies of both the Russian and the English language and the growth of my knowledge of language theory at the time of writing this story. Overall, this story may serve only as a marker in the growing pains of my writing career and understanding of the language in which I write.

Welcome to my world, Christmas in a bottle, and Matamoras were all my attempts at non-fiction. In each of the stories, I wanted to tell a true story from my perspective and make it interesting. I tried diligently to expose the demons that emerged from my upbringing or lack thereof. The problems that I ran into while writing these
stories were mostly memory based. I am not sure if I truly remember what really happened or if I care to, and the people that I wrote about are still alive, which seems to complicate the writing process for these types of story because I want to get their input and ask them how they remembered things that happened, things that are mostly the family taboo topics for my family. So naturally, no one wants to talk about them. Every time I sit down to rewrite these stories, I tend to remember something different or new that adds to and often changes scenes within the story.

In each of the stories, I wanted to convey the different emotions that I experienced by using objects and scenery to associate feelings. I wanted the reader to associate smells with memory, to let the five senses evoke a feeling or a thought. I did not want to tell the reader exactly what to feel or think, but rather show the reader a scene with explicit scenery and landscape that leads the reader into a strong emotional connection with the story. I am still learning how to pull this off in my writing.

My goals are to keep reading new material and to keep rereading the old material in hopes of a new perspective. I hope that something will sink in and help to open up my writing. I am also going to keep writing and keep learning about my craft. Sometimes I think I make writing harder than it has to be, and I am not sure why. But the more I seem to struggle with my writing and the process, the better I understand my writing and my process. Maybe that is why I like the process of the struggle so much because I feel that I learn more from it than anything else.
Bibliography


PART II

COLLECTION OF SHORT STORIES
Your Friends at MetroCorp

“Are you on any medication?” A man asked.

Cordell, a middle-aged, barrel chested man, closed his eyes and did not answer.

Cordell heard the deep grating voice speak again.

“In order to be processed, you must answer some questions.”

The man asking the question wore a white lab coat and around his neck was a stethoscope. He had on thick glasses, which made his eyes seem large and bug like.

“You will answer the question. Are you on any medication?”

Cordell focused his eyes to try and get a better look at the man asking the questions. He felt a sudden sting of a wooden paddle across his knuckles.

“Are you on any medication?”

Cordell shook his head.

“When is the last time you took—“

“Where am I?” Another sharp whap across his knuckles.

“I will ask the questions. You will answer. When is the last time you took any medication?”

“I—I’m not sure.” This time, the whack on his knuckles cracked his skin. Cordell jerked his restrained hand.

“When is the last time you took any medication?”

Cordell got a better outline of the man asking the questions. He was short and emaciated looking. He had wiry wisps of hair and a pallor complexion.

Cordell sat up as straight as he could, “I don’t remember.” He waited for the hit of the paddle, but it did not come.
“How long have you been here?”

Cordell remained sitting up. “How should I know?” This time, the rap on the back of his other hand and felt his knuckles crack.

“Perhaps this is why you don’t remember taking some aspirin this morning?”

Cordell slumped back down in his chair.

“How is your headache?”

Cordell remained silent

“When is the last time you took any medication?”

Cordell tried to burst out of his restraints. “I don’t know!” He felt the whack across his shoulders.

“When is the last time you took any medication?”

* * *

Cordell’s face hit the steel plate that covered the floor. He felt his front teeth scrape against the rough metal surface. A sharp pain in his side sent him reeling into the back wall. He still had the blindfold on and the plastic zip-ties were cutting into his wrists. In the foreground, he could hear only the beat of his own heart and the pulsing of his blood in his ears. In the background, he could barely make out the sounds of someone laughing and the clicking of boots on the cement. The intense heat in the room instantly melted the goose pimples on his flesh. Cordell could feel the sweat starting to trickle down his face.

Suddenly there was a flash of bright light as his eyes were uncovered. Cordell tried to roll over on his back to sit up, but another sharp kick in his side forced him to stay on his stomach. He felt a tug on his wrists, and his hands were free from the
bondage. With the cloth of the blindfold no longer covering his nose, he could smell the vile stench of feces and rotting carcasses. The smell reminded him of the time he discovered his next door neighbor dead in the trash dumpster behind their apartment complex.

Cordell squinted and rubbed his eyes. He felt something wet and slimy on his nose and realized he was lying on the toilet hole in the floor at the back of the room. The edges were crusted over, and the water spout just above the hole was trickling slowly with a kind of green funk hanging from the opening. He looked at the rusted plate above the water spout: Provided by your friends at MetroCorp.

With the crackling and a loud pop, the intercom system came back to life. “Today in the news, MetroCorp has funded the release of thousands of homeless children today. These children were being held in a Foster Care Detention facility outside of Fresno, California. The release of these innocent citizens was brokered by the CEO and humanitarian, Mr. John C. Baily III, M.A. Esquire. Upon the release of the children, our future hope for MetroCorp, Mr. Baily had these words to say, ‘MetroCorp is about peace and freedoms for all individuals. These children will help to prepare to pave the way into the next century with their loyalty and dedication. Without these things, we have no hope at all. Long live Metrocorp.’

Cordell stuck his fingers in his ears and started humming. He felt another sharp pain in his thigh. He turned just in time to see someone standing outside his cell. Only this time, what he heard was a weird clicking sound, like someone in tap-shoes walking on smooth concrete dancing a jig just slightly out of rhythm. His eyes closed and felt a sudden euphoric rush.
Reeling from the sudden taste of rotten cinnamon, Cordell suddenly noticed the blanket that he used to stop up the hole was now wrapped around him in all its nastiness and funk. He quickly threw off the blanket and tried to wipe the funk off along with the massive amounts of sweat that had pooled up around and on him. A rattling caught Cordell’s attention. His eyes were burning and itching so bad now that it hurt to keep them open or closed. Cordell worked his way over to the water spicket and rinsed his eyes off. The slimy water stung his face and hands. He looked at the feces covering the hole in the ground, and his stomach growled.

Cordell heard some voices coming from down the hall and he quickly dashed to the corner of the cell behind the cement block. The only problem was that he still did not have full control of his muscles and he ended up hitting the cement wall and block with a thud.

After a few minutes of unsuccessfully trying not to moan in pain, Cordell peeked around the edge of the cement block and noticed a man standing in front of the cell across from him. Cordell slowly stood making sure that each of his appendages worked. He cautiously approached the bars to investigate the commotion coming from across the way. He was extremely careful not to touch the electric bars.

In the cell across from him was a monkey. The monkey was gaunt and his skin was patchy with huge balding spots. His eyes were wild and his tongue seemed too big for its mouth. The man was holding a pack of bananas just outside the monkey’s reach. The monkey was going wild and trying everything he could to grab the bananas. The ruckus was deafening and Cordell had to put his swollen fingers in his ears. Then all of
a sudden, the mayhem stopped. The man held out his hand palm up. The monkey stood with its eyes unable to focus on any one thing, and his body wavering to and fro. The monkey reached in its mouth and jerked out a tooth. He handed the bloody tooth to the guard in exchange for the bananas.

When the monkey had the bananas, he immediately rushed to the back of his cell and started to devour his treat. Cordell did not realize that he was now touching the steel bars. In fact, he was leaning on them with his face against the cool bars. He felt the world go white.

* * *

A sudden surge of energy pulsated through Cordell’s left arm. He thought he was having a heart attack until he realized that the shock was coming from a couple of cattle prods being wielded by two men in black cotton jump suits with the silver MetroCorp emblem over the heart. Cordell sat up and felt a strong chill in the air. His blanket was missing, and it was so cold in the cell that his nipples were cramping from being erect for too long.

“Please do not resist.” A silky voice said.

Cordell swung his legs out to the floor only to find himself suddenly face down on the floor. He tried to look at his legs but the cattle prods just kept stinging him all over. He could barely make out some voices saying get up, or shut up, or what’s up. For the time being, he did not care what the voices were saying. He was more concerned with the bull prods stinging him and his legs not working correctly. Finally he got a sharp prod on the base of his skull, and he thought he was going to pass out again until he smelled the distinct aroma of Ammonia smelling salts.
“I think he likes this stuff,” Cordell heard one of the guards say.

Finally Cordell gained the functionality of his legs and slowly stood up with the assistance of an occasional bull prod in key locations. Cordell was now wearing a different set of boxer briefs that were provided by his friends at MetroCorp. This bothered him in that he did not remember changing his clothes from earlier. His genitals seemed to burn and itch at the same time. He reached down to scratch and realized that all of his pubic hair was gone. Cordell tried to act surprised but his body reacted too sluggish, he came off as a babbling idiot. He felt the breeze of a strong cold draft, and tried to stand as if everything was alright. He ran his fingers through his hair and looked at the trickling water near the hole.

“Are you thirsty?”

The voice came from somewhere to Cordell’s left. Cordell moved his head too fast and started to fall. One of the guards caught him and pushed him up against the brick wall.

“You should answer the question.” The voice was a controlled satin voice that seemed cultured and educated.

Cordell raised his head and tried to look at the man that was talking. All he got was this silhouetted outline of a small bald man. “Y—e, uhg, humph, y—es.” Cordell’s voice croaked more like a frog than sounding human. He felt a sharp piercing in his right arm. He looked back in the direction of the guard that was standing to his right. The guard was holding an empty needle and smiling. Cordell turned towards the bald man that was standing in the light.
“Some T.H.C. and steroids to improve your appetite,” the bald man looked Cordell up and down, “You are a mess.” The man waived his hand and the guard let Cordell sit down on the cement block.

“I am Mr. Tragus. Perhaps we should clean you up a bit before our meeting.” Tragus said.

Both of the guards left the cell as Cordell started to lie back down. Suddenly a blast of ice cold water hit Cordell, and instantly he was huddled in the corner behind the cement block. Finally the water stopped and Cordell sat huddled and shivering in the corner. Unable to move, he gazed at the blue tint of the skin on his arms.

“Take his clothes off of him. I don’t want him catching cold.”

Cordell remained curled up in the corner and started to doze off from hypothermia when the place suddenly looked like somebody had opened a window on a bright and sunny day. Cordell closed his eyes and covered them with his hands. The loud speaker started up again with some wild loud crash music, and the wall vibrated Cordell’s head with each pulsating beat of the bass. The music was occasionally interrupted by a commercial that informed Cordell that the inspirational music was provided by his friends at MetroCorp.

Cordell turned to see the monkey across the way rampaging around his cage. The louder the music got the more rambunctious the monkey got. Finally the music stopped and a guard walked up to the monkey with some bananas.

Cordell checked his teeth and felt his stomach start to growl. Instead of the shit stench that was coming from the hole, Cordell smelled freshly grilled steak. He could almost taste the light hint of garlic and butter with black pepper and cumin. There was
also a hint of salt and lemon with olive oil marinade. Cordell figured, or at least hoped, the steak to be about medium-well and still hot and steaming. In his mind, he pictured the steak to be lean and juicy almost falling off of the fork. Cordell put his arms around his legs and tried to ignore the smell and thoughts that permeated his being.

Cordell thought he was going to break in half from hunger the smell was so overwhelming, and now he could smell a baked potato with sour cream and cheese, peas sautéed in garlic butter, and steaming cherry cobbler. Cordell turned to see a guard standing outside his cell holding a plate full of this food another guard was standing behind the plate with a hand-held fan blowing the aroma into Cordell’s cell. Cordell turned away from the food and tried to think of other things besides food.

When the guards left with the food, Cordell quietly laughed at his small victory. But his celebration did not last long when two more guards returned with more food and the hand held fan. This time they brought lasagna and cannelloni covered in melted Swiss and provolone cheeses and baked garlic bread. The aroma of the hot ricotta cheese made Cordell’s stomach start to churn, and he could feel the acid in his stomach start to come up his throat. The guards also had a glass of iced tea, and they were clinking the ice to try and get Cordell’s attention. Cordell fought hard not to even look in the direction of the food. When those guards left, more guards came with lemon baked cod and freshly sautéed asparagus, still Cordell resisted. Then they brought roasted chicken with mash potatoes and cream gravy, and Cordell’s mouth finally began to salivate.

Cordell thought of the shit stench and the slimy green water trickling out of the faucet. He moved to the back of the cell and resigned himself to stay there until the
guards brought hot and steaming chicken and beef fajitas. He could taste the lightly marinated then grilled onions and bell peppers. The beef strips smelled so tender and juicy to Cordell he could not swallow his saliva fast enough. He looked at the mounds of cheese and sour cream on a thick bed of lettuce. And found himself leaning towards the front of the cell. The scent of the steaming hot buttery tortillas drove him to the edge with rapacious hunger. Before Cordell knew what he was doing, he was at the bars struggling for the food. He was so ravenous that he could barely focus his eyes on any one thing. One of the guards held out his hand palm up.

* * *

“Well, Mr. Amentler, it’s so nice to see you again.”

Cordell sat up and tried to get a better look at the bald man. Mr. Tragus’ face was old and haggard looking, but clean shaven. His eye brows were white and neatly trimmed and his thin lips were the light shade of blue almost invisible. His ears stuck out like open doors on a car and his turkey waddle looked like dead skin on a pig. He was wearing a suit with the blue and silver MetroCorp tie and stick-pin.

“What am I doing here?” Cordell said. He felt a sharp whap on his upper back from a night-stick.

“I will ask the questions if you please.”

Cordell lowered his head.

“Why do you hate your job?” Tragus asked.

“But I don’t hate my job.” Cordell said. He felt another whap on his back. He sat up straight from the sting and contorted his face.
“Good, you are learning. Now tell me why you hate your job here at MetroCorp?” Tragus asked

“But I swear. I don’t.” Cordell said. Another quick whap.

“Yet you do not say that you love your job.” Tragus said.

Cordell was still smarting from the last blow. “But I—I do. “ Another hard whap.

“Disappointing,” the bald man returned to the door of the cell, “Not the answer I’d hoped for.” Mr. Tragus waived his hand, and the two guards proceeded to beat Cordell with the night-sticks.

* * *

Cordell was strapped into a steel chair with large holes. He had on no clothes, and he felt like he was in a walk in freezer. He looked around the room in a daze and tried to make out where he was. The overhead light that was shining right on him made it difficult for him to see anything, but the warmth from the light was pleasant. He felt his stomach rumble again, and he began rambling incoherently.

A zap of a cattle prod jerked Cordell out of his rambling.

“Good morning, Mr. Amentler.” Mr. Tragus said.

“It’s morning?” Cordell felt the sting of the bull prod.

“I will ask the questions.” Tragus said.

There was a moment of silence then Cordell felt another nip of the bull prod.

“You must agree with me. I will ask the questions. Yes?” Tragus asked.

Cordell looked up at the bald man and slurred, “Yes.” Cordell saw the bald man raise his hand to wave off something.

“Why do you say bad things about MetroCorp?” Tragus asked.
“But I don’t remember.” This remark was followed with an even stronger punch from the bull prod.

“Now you understand the process by which we must communicate.” The Bald man lit up a cigarette. “I wish to know why you said such nasty things about MetroCorp.”

Cordell shook his head, which was followed by another sting of the bull prod.

“I wish to know why you said such nasty things about MetroCorp.”

“I must’ve been confused.” Cordell said trying to bear out another hit from the bull prod.

“I wish to know why you said such nasty things about MetroCorp.”

“I only hoped to…” Bam!

“Why would you organize an employee’s union?”

“I only thought that…” Cordell said.

“We do not pay you to think. Do we, Mr. Amentler?” Tragus asked.

“What do you want me to say?” Cordell shuddered when he realized he just asked a question. He watched as the bald man waived his hand to the guards behind Cordell.

“Why do you hate us so much?” Tragus asked.

Cordell took a deep breath and started to answer when he felt the nip of the bull prod on his genitalia and rocked forward in his chair from the pain.

“Tell me why you hate us so much.” Tragus said.

Cordell groaned and tried to spit.

“Tell me why you hate us so much.” Tragus repeated
Cordell still did not answer.

Mr. Tragus walked over and grabbed a small leather case. He returned to the table and opened the case. “Tell me why you hate us so much.”

Cordell watched as the man pulled out various types of what looked like pliers. “Being obstinate will surely not help your situation, Mr. Amentler.” Mr. Tragus examined each of the pliers carefully.

“I don’t know what you want me to say.” Zap. Cordell arched his back in pain. “Why, the truth, Mr. Amentler. That’s all I require from you.” Mr. Tragus said.

Cordell watched in panic as Mr. Tragus pulled a chair up to where Cordell was sitting.

Cordell stuttered out something as his leg began to rise slowly until his foot was even with the bald man’s lap.

“We at MetroCorp have provided everything for you. A home, a car, food to eat, clothes to wear, a job, and this is how you treat us in return, by hating us.” The bald man gripped Cordell’s big toenail with the pliers. “We own you and everything you are. You must soon learn this for yourself, Mr. Amentler.”

* * *

The bald man smiled, got up, and wiped the blood from his fingers. He grabbed a piece of paper and held it in front of Cordell. “Sign this document showing your undying loyalty to MetroCorp, and all will be forgiven.”

Cordell turned his head away from the bald man.

“You can truly be happy in your job. All you have to do is sign. It is not very difficult. I assume you can write?” Tragus asked.
Cordell looked at the document and then at the bald man before shaking his head.

Mr. Tragus placed a pen in Cordell’s hand. “Please sign on the dotted line at the bottom of the page.”

Cordell intentionally dropped the pen.

Mr. Tragus picked up the pen, placed it in Cordell’s hand, and held it there. “Do you wish for some help in signing this document of truth in happiness?”

Cordell lowered his head.

“Let me pose another question to you, Mr. Amentler. How can a grand company such as MetroCorp survive in this world with the undying loyalty and dedication of its employees?” Tragus asked.

Cordell, head still lowered, sighed and shrugged.

“And if an employee must be sacrificed for the greater good, then so be it. Do you agree, Mr Amentler?” Tragus asked.

Cordell gripped the pen and dragged it across the page so hard that the page tore.

“Very well then, Mr. Amentler. You leave me no choice.” Tragus said.

* * *

The news came on the loud speaker: Today an employee of the sales division of MetroCorp brought a gun to work and executed sixteen coworkers. Cordell Thomas Amentler is thought to be mentally unstable and dangerous. If you should see him, please report him to MetroCorp security immediately for your safety and the safety of those around you. Again, sixteen slain as the result of a disgruntled employee’s
rampage. It is not known why Cordell Thomas Amentler went berserk and slaughtered so many innocent people. We will have more on this late breaking news as it comes in. On the lighter side of the news, MetroCorp has awarded the Meritorious Manager’s medal to several of its employees in recognition of—“

“I’m glad to see that you’re still with us.” Mr. Tragus said.

Cordell looked in the direction of the bald man.

“I’m sorry to hear about you on the news. Apparently, you are a violent and temperamental man.” Tragus said.

“I thought I was—.” Cordell said.

“Do you know why you are here?” Tragus asked.

“Because I hate my job?” Cordell asked.

Mr. Tragus pulled up a chair and sat in front of Cordell, “I wish it were that simple,” the bald man lit up a cigarette, “Think of a monkey. A monkey that is so willing to give freely of himself to MetroCorp that MetroCorp gives him food to eat, a place to stay, and other such amenities,” the bald man took a long drag, “You too could have such things beyond your wildest imagination if only you were loyal to the company that has been so loyal to you.”

Cordell smelled the fresh fajitas over the cigarette and doubled over from the hunger pangs.

“Think of something greater than yourself. Think of a company so large and with so many employees that we must all make sacrifices for the greater good.”

Cordell looked at the fajitas that were just a few inches from his face. One of the guards unstrapped Cordell’s right arm.
“Without MetroCorp, you simply cannot exist,” Mr. Tragus held out his hand palm up.

“I can make all this go away. Or perhaps you would prefer a visit to the Dedication Room?” Mr. Tragus asked.

“Dedication Room?” Cordell asked.

“Are you prepared to dedicate yourself to MetroCorp?” Mr. Tragus asked.

Cordell looked at the bald man with a sad puppy dog look. Mr. Tragus took a bite of the sizzling meat. Cordell looked at the hand that was still palm up. He reached up and touched his tooth, while keeping his gaze on the fajitas. He closed his eyes, gripped his tooth and tensed his body.

“I should forewarn you, Mr. Amentler. There are only two ways out of the Dedication Room. One requires the killing of your soul, and the other requires the killing of your body.” Mr. Tragus said.

“I want to be a good employee.” Cordell said his hand still near his mouth.

“Such a pity, Mr. Amentler, who hates us and is ungrateful.” Mr. Tragus sat eating the fajitas and drinking fresh made ice tea in front of Cordell. “I truly had high hopes for you,” Mr. Tragus wiped his lips with a napkin, “but I can see that you are not capable of seeing the bigger picture.” Mr. Tragus raised his hand and the guards left the room.

“You should have that toe looked at before it gets infected.” Mr. Tragus said before leaving the room.

* * *
The door opened slowly with a loud creaking noise before slamming shut with a metal on metal thud. Mr. Tragus entered the room with a small black bag, which had the MetroCorp symbol proudly displayed on the side. The guards took Cordell from the floor and strapped him to a gurney that was behind him. All the time, Cordell was begging for his life. The bald man approached Cordell with a needle. “It’s cocktail hour, Mr. Amentler. Welcome to the Dedication Room.”

“Please, please don’t do it.”

“I cannot save you, Mr. Amentler, only you can save yourself.”

Cordell squirmed at the sight of the huge needle with some green liquid inside.

“How? Please tell me how?”

The bald man shook his head. “I have already given you the answer,” he handed a tourniquet to one of the guards, “Think of a monkey.”

The guards strapped on the tourniquet and Mr. Tragus proceeded to find a vein.

“Please, I’ll give you all my teeth if you let me live.” Cordell said.

“I’m disappointed in you, Mr. Amentler,” the bald man thumped on Cordell’s arm, “perhaps this is for the best.”

Cordell began mumbling. “The monkey? The monkey he—he gave his tooth. But you don’t want my teeth. Why? What do you want?”

Mr. Tragus shot the air bubbles out of the large needle, “Think of the monkey, Mr. Amentler.”

Cordell thought long and hard about the monkey and the previous conversations with the bald man, “I will freely give myself to MetroCorp? Show me how.”
“Wrong again, Mr. Amentler,” the bald man put the needle up to Cordell’s arm, “That is only enough from a monkey. You must give more.”

“To give freely of myself is—it is not enough. I must give more? But what else? What else can I give?”

“You are on the right track, Mr. Amentler. Now transcend the monkey.”

“I could dedicate myself to MetroCorp. Yeah, that’s it. Do whatever MetroCorp wants. I could be a—“

“You must reach deeper, Mr. Amentler,” the bald man pushed the needle into the vein, “Eliminate the distinctions.”

“It is not enough. I must do more,” Cordell started feeling groggy, “more. But what else is there? I must—“Cordell gave a slight smile and a sigh, “I must be MetroCorp,” he nodded his head, “I am MetroCorp. Metrocorp is me. We are one.”

***

Cordell opened his eyes and realized he was sitting in his cubicle. He looked across the aisle and noticed Maynard leaning back talking on the phone. Maynard was close to retirement and his hair was gray and patchy from cancer treatments. His facial hair was equally patchy and gray. His eyes seemed to be wild and bouncing about in his head. His clothes were in disarray and his leather shoes had holes in the side.

Maynard was talking on the phone. “This damn place. If I do sue, can you guarantee I’ll win?”

Cordell watched Maynard look around suspiciously while trying to remain crouched.

“I see. And how much?” Maynard said into the phone.
Cordell looked up at the camera that was focusing directly at Maynard with the red light in front flashing furiously. Suddenly several people walked up to Maynard’s cubicle. Maynard quickly hung up the phone and stood trying to act innocent. Mr. Tragus walked up to Maynard’s cubicle turned and smiled at Cordell.

Mr. Tragus turned back towards Maynard and said, “Mr. Maynard Keyes, I wish to discuss with you the virtue of dedication and loyalty to one’s company.”
Moral Impotence

The light violin music that was playing in the background floated softly on the breeze. The delicate candlelight flickered in Jen’s brown eyes. The ambient noise of the restaurant was barely noticeable beyond the occasional clinking of dishes or pouring of tea. The rich scent of garlic bread and fresh butter would have been pleasing if not for Henry’s overpowering cologne. Jen raised her wine glass, “Congratulations to your new job.”

Henry raised his wine glass, “To my new job at Wickham, Darcy, and Bennet,” he took a sip of his wine, “with the money I’ll be making, I can quit my night job.”

“And maybe actually start paying off some of those school loans.” Jen said.

Henry took another sip of wine, “Ahh, money well spent,” he tore off a piece of garlic bread, “and the guy that interviewed me, Mike, he was so nice and helpful.”

“I’m so happy for you.”

“For us,” Henry said, “Today, I finally will start taking on the responsibilities of being a man. My father would have been proud of me.” He choked out the last part because his father’s recent passing away.

Jen gave Henry a consoling look.

“He worked for the same company for forty three years before retiring,” Henry sat looking over his inherited suit, “This was his favorite suit.”

“I know, dear, but it still doesn’t fit you.”

“Yeah, I know,” Henry said trying to lengthen his sleeves, “I’m going to have to get me one of my own.”

Jen put her hand on Henry’s, “I have a surprise too.”
“Really, what is it?”

Jen gave Henry a soft innocent look with an “I’m finally pregnant” smile.

“You’re serious?”

Jen nodded.

“You’re serious?”

Jen nodded with more enthusiasm.

“You mean I’m going to be a—“

“Yes!”

Charles stood and went to the table next to him and shook the man’s hand, “I’m going to be a father, just like my father.”

The man simply smiled and said congratulations. Henry proceeded to the next several tables in the same fashion before the waiter interrupted him, “Sorry, sorry. I’ll sit back down,” Henry raised his hands in the air like he was signaling a field goal in football, “Score, I’m going to be a dad.”

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Henry sat at his small grayish blue sectional desk staring at the mounds of uncompleted paperwork when Mike came around the corner to Henry’s cubicle. “Hey there, buddy, my man. Ready for lunch?”

“I wish I could Mike, but Mr. Fitzwaller wants these…”

“Ahh, the life of an Assistant Southwest Regional Director of Corporate Sales. Too bad, it’s a power lunch that smells of promotion for the new vacancy.” Mike said.
Henry simply smiled and went back to his paperwork. When he thought Mike was out of hearing distance, “Not everybody can marry the vice president’s daughter.”

“I heard that.” Mike said returning to Henry’s corner cubicle. Mike stared at Henry for a few moments while Henry sat twisting his hands together and tapping his right foot.

“What you need is a power tie.” Mike left almost as quickly as he came.

“Damn it.” Henry shook his head and gave a glazed look at the stacked papers on his desk. He reached for a report on declining corporate sales when Mike returned.

“What you need is a lucky power tie.” Mike handed Henry a tie that was lime green with silver diamond patterns. Henry looked at the tie and tried to not wince at the hideousness. Mike moved some papers over to make a spot to sit. “You need a secretary too.”

“I’ve been trying to tell you that for almost nine months now.” Henry said.

“Well, since my promotion from being your boss, I need someone in my old position I can trust to get the job done. Now put these papers away and let’s go to lunch.” Mike said.

Henry glared at the unfinished work on his desk and told Mike no thanks. About that time, Mr. Fitzwallar came around the corner of Henry’s cube. “Henry, glad I caught you. Listen, I need you to gather the information on the Farendore account along with the RPG files on the Manchester account. Don’t forget the LNA paperwork on the Midwestern Consumers Report is due in a meeting on Monday at the G.R.C. Oh, I want you to be at that meeting. Apparently, you’re giving a speech. Until I’ve assigned a new director over your department, I’ll need to personally hold you responsible for the
departmental priorities and workload distribution.” Mr. Fitzwaller turned to walk away and stopped after a few steps. “Oh yeah, you need to be at this power lunch with Mike. There are some key clients that need some numbers and reassurance that they are with the right company.” Mr. Fitzwaller looked at Mike and then back at Henry. “Budget being what it is, you'll have to spring for the lunch. I'll reimburse you next quarter.” Mr. Fitzwaller looked at his watch and walked off without any further discussion.

Henry closed a green folder that he had been looking at and stood up. He resisted the urge to push all the papers into the trashcan next to his desk.

“Hey, remember to wear that tie tomorrow. Give it a test run. Mr. Fitzwaller is keeping you in mind for my old job.” Mike said.

“But tomorrow is Saturday, and my son is in his first play.”

“Hey, buddy, I went out of my way to put you in line for this promotion. Don’t disappoint me now.”

As they rounded the corner to the elevators, Henry stopped, “Oh damn it, I forgot something at my desk. Go ahead, and I’ll catch up.” Henry returned to his small desk and made a call to his wife. “Jen, I’ve got to work late tonight to get this sales portfolio together and—"

“Another late night at the office?”

“Yeah, I’m not happy about it either.”

“I’ll keep dinner warm, and remember Billy’s play tomorrow.”

“Well, that’s another thing.”

“You’re not going to miss Billy’s play are you?”

“Can you take the video camera?”
“It’s not the same.” Jen said.

Henry noticed Mike standing by the corner to the elevators. Mike was looking at his watch and then looking at Henry.

“I’ll be home as soon as I can. As soon as I get this big promotion, things will get better. I’ll explain it to Billy later.”

“Well, I wish you luck on the promotion, and I’ll see you when you get home.”

Henry gave his love and hung up the phone.

***

Billy kept picking up the tools and trying to help put the new bicycle. When Henry would take the tools away from him, he would act like he was on a motorcycle and ride around the room. When he got tired of pretend riding, he would go and pick up another tool, and start the routine all over again.

Henry was finally checking the bolts and nuts to make sure they were all extra tight, “Ready for a test run?”

Billy’s enthusiasm was punctuated with his new bicycle song and dance. Henry started for the front door with the bicycle when his cell phone went off, “Damn, it’s Mike at work.”

Billy was still dancing and singing in the background. Henry ignored the call and proceeded outside with the bike. Billy had just mounted the bicycle when the phone rang again. After Henry gave Billy a push, he answered the phone, “Hello, Mike?”

“Hey, Henry, how’s your Saturday?”
“Billy, Stay on the sidewalk, on the sidewalk.” There was a slight pause while Henry watched Billy, “Yeah, it’s fine, just teaching my kid to ride.”

“Well I’m glad to see that you’re not too busy because the deadline for the Molly Banker account has been moved up to Monday.”

“Yeah, ok. Billy, you have to watch out for other people,” Henry winced at Billy almost running into an elderly couple, “Sorry about that.”

“Henry, I need you to pay attention to me, buddy.”

“Well the files are on my desk if you want to get Jim to work on it?” Henry said.

“No can do. Jim’s sailing with his new girlfriend. I need you to come in, buddy.”

“But my kid and—“

“Where’s the wife?”

“Billy, slow down, Son.” Henry switched ears with the phone, “She’s taking care of her mother for a few weeks.”

“Can’t you drop him off?”

“Not really. It’s about ten hours away.”

“What the hell, bring him with you.”

“Oh, damn it,” Henry ran over to where Billy just fell off of his training wheeled bike, “Billy, you ok, Son?”

“Great. Then see you in a few.” Mike hung up the phone

Henry looked at the phone then tossed it in the grass and looked at the scrape on Billy’s knee.

“I’m sorry, Daddy.”

“No. It’s ok. These things happen. Where are you hurt?”
Billy pointed to his knee and elbow. Henry kissed the elbow, “Come on, let’s get that scrape cleaned up.”

Every time Billy winced, Henry tried to be more careful, “Hey, I’ll call mommy later and tell her what a big boy you’ve been.”

“Can I talk to her?”

“Sure you can. And after that, we’ll get some ice cream.”

“Daddy?”

Henry looked perplexed at Billy’s awkward expression.

“Is grandma going to die?”

“Um, uh, I don’t know. What did mommy say?”

“She said that grandma is going to go to heaven.”

Henry finished bandaging up the scrape. “Well, yeah that’s right.” Good answer. He thought to himself.

“When will she come back?”

Henry looked at the phone, I wish they had a parents’ hotline. “Well, you see, Son, when she goes, she won’t be coming back.

“Then I don’t want her to go.”

Henry pulled out the cell phone and dialed his wife.

***

Henry walked in his home dragging his feet. He dropped his briefcase and overcoat on the cloth burgundy couch and made his way over to where Jen was sitting, “Sorry I’m late.”
Jen responded with silence.

“So, how was your day?”

She gave him a cold shoulder and maintained her gaze at the television. Henry sighed and sat on the couch closest to where she was sitting. She got up and moved to the matching love seat without looking at Henry.

“What's wrong now?” Henry said.

Jen sat still staring at the television not moving or recognizing that Henry was even alive. Henry stood up and started towards the kitchen, “I guess I'll eat dinner then.”

“You'll have to fight the dogs for it.” Jen said.

Henry returned to his previous spot on the couch and quietly and stared at the coffee table for a few seconds before asking again what was wrong.

“If you spent more time around here instead of at work, you’d know wouldn’t you?”

Henry sat there refusing to move in hopes that she would not go into a full blown raging fit.

Jen stood up and threw some papers at Henry before leaving the room. Henry looked at the credit card bills and reluctantly followed Jen to the bedroom, “I was going to tell you about this.”

“When? After we’ve gone so far in debt that you have to take a second or third job to—”

“It's just a lousy credit card. What’s the big deal?”
Jen gave Henry a look that made Henry back up a few feet. “You know we’re barely making our bills as it is.”

“That’s why I got both credit cards so that—”

“Two? You fucking got two new credit cards and didn’t even discuss this with me?”

Henry realized that he had almost backed himself out of the room and squared his shoulders to make a stand. “I’m up for my next promotion in three weeks, and I need to show that I can wine and dine the clients.”

“So you would screw your family over for another damn promotion?”

“When I get this promotion, I’ll make a lot more money, and I’ll—”

“You never got the last two promotions.”

“That’s why this one is guaranteed. Mr. Fitzwaller told me so.”

Henry watched as Jen’s face turned various shades of red and purple. His shoulders had drooped back down and his head was lowered. He started to speak when Jen seemed to grow about five feet. “Then why don’t you go and sleep with him because I don’t you anywhere near me.”

***

The house was dark except for the candles burning on the cake. “Make a wish, Billy.” Jen said setting the cake in front of Billy.

“I don’t want too until daddy comes home.”
Jen reached over and turned the camera off. “Now, Billy, I told you that daddy has to work late tonight.” Jen rewound the tape and picked up the cake. She hit play and started the scene all over again. Again, Billy refused. Jen rewound the tape and blew out the candles. As she went for more candles, she spoke, “We talked about this, and I told you that your daddy is going to have to miss your eighth birthday, and I promised him that I would film it.”

“But he missed my birthday last year too.”

Jen stopped dead in her tracks. “I think you’re wrong, Billy. Daddy was here for that one.”

“No he wasn’t. Cause I remember cause I got my first bicycle and I had to wait three days for daddy to come home and teach me how to ride it.”

Jen casually retrieved the candles and went back towards the cake. “I wish he was here too, but could you just make a wish and blow out the candles for daddy?”

Billy sat staunch in his conviction.

“Please, for mommy?”

At the last request, Billy conceded, and Jen replaced the candles on the cake and started the whole scene up again. When it came time for Billy to make a wish, he sat for a moment before speaking, “I wish daddy were here.” Then he blew out the candles.

***
Henry pulled up in his dinged up and worn out looking Ford Escort. When he got out of the car, he noticed Billy was playing catch with another boy. Henry noticed how much Billy looked like his mother with his brownish blond hair, high cheekbones, and almond shaped green eyes. Henry got caught up in the moment and asked if he could play ball with the boys. Billy gave his father a sideways glance and cocked his head.

“Dad, you don’t have a glove.”

“That's alright. Here throw me the ball.”

Billy gave a semi-smile and tossed his father the ball. After several minutes of playing catch, Billy was just starting to get excited about playing with his father. Billy’s friend had to leave because it was getting dark. After his friend left, Billy held the ball for a few seconds in order to speak without interruption. “Hey, Dad, you coming to my game on Saturday?”

“I wish I could Billy.” Henry said.

Billy put the ball in the glove and walked towards his dad. “You gotta work again?”

“I'm sorry, but mom is going to video tape it.”

“It’s not the same, Dad.”

“Hey, I'll bring you a present back from Ogallala.”

Billy walked past his dad with his head lowered. “Thanks, Dad.”

***
Henry picked up another pack of papers that had been neatly stacked on his new gray Formica desk. His new office was a small corner office with no window, but he was happily hoping that the new promotion to Corporate Sales Advocate Director would come with the new office. He looked at his watch and noticed it was getting close to seven o’clock. Henry picked up the phone and dialed his home. “Hey, I wanted to see how your doing.” Henry looked at the stacked paperwork on his desk.

He started to speak when Jen cut him off, “You’re still at work?”

Henry sat back in his chair and tried to find his daily planner calendar, “Yeah, I’ve got a lot of work to—”

“Henry, we’re supposed to be at the Grand Ballet in forty minutes.”

Henry sat motionless trying to move the paperwork on his desk so he could find his calendar.

“You don’t remember do you?”

“I remembered the Ballet thingy. I was just calling to tell you I’ll meet you there.”

“Henry, why are we going to the ballet?”

Henry finally uncovered his daily planner calendar and looked at today’s date. When he found it had no reference to his wife, he started searching for clues.

“Damn it, Henry, it’s our twelfth anniversary.”

“I promise I didn’t forget.”

“This is the third year in a row you’ve forgotten and you swore that you would—”

“Look, this is different. I’m up for the biggest promotion of my life, and—“

“Then don’t bother coming home.”

“Could you please leave me a…”
Jen hung up the phone, but Henry still continued, his voice trailing off. “A blanket on the couch…”

***

Henry sat at his desk finishing off his paperwork for the day. He checked his watch and turned off his desk lamp when Mike came in the room, “Hey, buddy, we need you in conference room four stat!”

“What’s up?”

“Lipscomb Insurance is trying to close their account with us.”

“I went to school with their CFO.”

“Yeah, that’s why we need you in there, buddy.”

Both started walking towards the conference room when Henry grabbed Mike’s arm, “You understand women don’t you?”

“Every weekend.” Mike said.

“I missed my wife’s birthday last week?”

“Buddy, you really stepped in it this time.”

Henry gave Mike a please help me look.

“Flowers. Start with at least a dozen roses. No, make it two dozen and dinner at that new Italian restaurant down town.”

“Damn, but that’s expensive.”

“If they can’t make love to you, they’ll make love to your money.”
Henry smiled at Mike’s attempt at humor, “Let me get my TSR file on this. I’ll be right back.” On his way back to his office, he stopped by his shared secretary’s desk, “Lisa, I need you to send two dozen flowers to my wife at my home address. And can you make a reservation for two at that new Italian restaurant downtown?”

“Guido’s?”

“Yeah sure.”

“What did you do this time?”

“Forgot her birthday.”

Lisa just shook her head, “Does your wife like opera?”

“Yes, yes she does.”

“Then I’ll get you two tickets.”

“Thanks, Lisa.”

Before Henry could get two steps from her desk, Lisa stopped him, “What you need to do is show her she’s the most important thing in your life and not this frilly crap.”

“Isn’t that what I’m doing?”

***

Henry was staring in the mirror at his new three-piece suit. The suit was a navy blue with an ivory shirt and his new power tie. He took the suit brush off of the bathroom counter and started brushing his shoulders, “Damn it, I think I’m getting dandruff.”
Even though she had just woken up, Jen appeared wide-eyed and ready to go, “I’m going to have to get a job.”

Henry shook his head, “I want you to stay home with Billy. Now, we talked about this.”

“But the insurance has sent us another bill and they’re going to cancel on us. Billy needs new clothes for school and you said the car is going to die any day now.”

Henry put the brush down on the counter rather hard and chipped off an edge, “I said I would take care of the insurance thing. I just hadn’t had time.”

“So what do we do if Billy hurts himself? Or me?”

“Well, buy him some new clothes then.”

“We have no money in the account.”

Henry grabbed the suit brush from the counter and started brushing the dandruff from his shoulders again, “Use one of the credit cards.”

“They’re maxed because of your power lunches.”

Henry checked himself out in the mirror and felt disgusted with his increasing pudginess. “Mr. Fitzwaller said he would reimburse me next quarter for those lunches.”

“What do we do until then?”

“I’ll borrowing from my next paycheck.”
“I’m tired of always borrowing and never getting ahead.”

“Times are tight, but we’re going to make it.”

“When? When are we finally going to ‘Make It’?”

“I’m up for a lateral promotion next month. It’ll have a little more—“

“You and your damn promotions,” Jen threw her brush on the counter and stormed out of the bathroom, “I hate this place. I hate that we have no money. I hate…”

***

Henry rushed down the hall at his work with a stack of papers in his hand. He knocked on Mr. Fitzwallar’s door and went in, “Here are the CNC files that you asked for. The Lewis accounts are still being tallied from the audit, and the RTL files from the Lillian account are on Henderson’s desk.”

Mr. Fitzwallar sat back in his chair and finished his phone call. “Henry, where do you think you’re going?”

Henry stood still hoping that he was still talking to someone named Henry on the phone. Henry’s boss repeated his question after he hung up the phone.

“Well, uh, I have to go to a thing with my wife.”

“I need the Mazewell paperwork by seven or we lose the account.”

Henry started slowly backing out of the room. “Uh, yeah, I think that’s on Henderson’s desk also. I’ll tell him—”
“Nonsense, I want you to personally handle it. In fact, I'm assigning you to go to the TNL meeting tomorrow.”

“But the thing with my wife?”

Mr. Fitzwaller stood and put his arm around Henry. “What could be more important than a multi-million dollar account that has your newest promotion to Vice President of Eastern Sales written all over it?”

Henry let his shoulders drop and he sauntered off to his desk. He called his wife to explain the situation.

“Henry, you miss this or any other marriage counseling meeting and I'm filing for a divorce.”

“Jen, can’t we reschedule for tomorrow. I promise—”

“It’s not about missing the meeting,” Jen said, “It’s about the commitment to our marriage. It’s about putting me above work. You promised.”

Henry noticed Mr. Fitzwaller coming down the hall towards his hole in the wall office. “I am committed to this marriage, but I really need you to understand that I’m under a lot of pressure here.”

“You’re always under a lot of pressure, Henry.”

Mr. Fitzwaller leaned into Henry’s office. “Henry, I’m glad you could stay. Tell the wife anything. I’m sure she’ll understand.”

Jen slammed the phone in Henry’s ear. Henry simply smiled at his boss and slowly hung up the phone.

***
Henry sat at his desk filing through some paperwork when his phone rang. “Hey, Son, how are you doing?”

“Fine, everything is just fine. I’m calling to ask if you and mom are still coming down for the holidays?”

Henry looked at his calendar on his desk, “Yeah, mom is coming on Tuesday. I’ll be taking a later flight.”

“How’s mom enjoying her stitch group?”

“Just fine. How’s the job doing?”

“Good I suppose. I quit last week.”

Henry almost dropped the phone. “Quit? Billy—“

“Bill!”

Henry picked some papers that fell on the floor. “Bill, you’ve got a daughter and wife to think about. You can’t just quit.”

“That’s why I did quit because I was spending more time at work than with the ones I love most.”

Henry’s secretary came in, and he motioned her to take some papers from his out bin. “But, Son, how are you going to provide for your family. How are you going to be the man of the house?”

“Linda is teaching at the local college, and she’s got me some part time work as an adjunct.”

“Son, that’s not respectable work. You need a job that you can hold your head up for.”
“I don’t expect you to understand."

Henry’s other line beeped. “That’s what we do in life. We provide for our families. We are the bread winners. My father did it before me, and his father before him,” Henry called to his secretary to take a message, “I’ll call Steve over at our firm near you. I’ll have to ask for a few favors but it’s—“

“No thanks, Dad. I know you’re just trying to be helpful, and I appreciate that. But I don’t want to be like you.”

***

Henry sat in the living room staring through his self-pity haze at what seemed like an empty house even though it was filled with furniture, family pictures, arts, crafts, and other knick knacks. He held his pink slip from work in one hand and his frustration balled up in the other. His head was pounding from an oncoming massive headache, and he was not quite sure why he was laid off the day before. He looked at the family portraits on the wall and noticed that he was in less than half of them. He looked down at the coffee table and noticed Jen’s wedding band sitting on top of a note. Henry picked up the ring and read the note that was obviously written by Jen.

“Play the VCR.”

Henry reached for the remote and turned on the TV. He squeezed the ring in the palm of his hand and pressed play.

On the screen was Jen sitting on the same couch with a solemn look on her face.

“Henry, by the time you see this, you will know that I have left you for good…”
Civic Virtue

The Covingtons wanted to live on the top floor in a moderately furnished mid-sized apartment in the outer part of town because that is where the good people lived. What they did live in was the middle floor of a miniature and worn out version of their dreams. The walls were the approved colors of gray on gray, however, the grays were officially called Official Gray Three and Official Gray Five. The number three color adorned the walls and the trim was painted with the other shade of gray. The furniture was shoddy at best, mostly hand-me-downs from others that had already received their social promotions to a slightly wider variety of gray. The couch’s tears were covered with the approved gray duct tape. Along the north wall was a huge window that took up most of the wall and gave a stunning view of the Grand Council Hall in downtown Metroville. A huge purple building with blue tinted windows.

There was a chill in the air from the lowered production of heating in their apartment building, lowered because of the failure of the city planner to plan for anyone but himself and his colleges. Which was ok most of the time because his planning was mostly for his mistresses. The current one having plenty of body fat to keep her warm, thus the reduction in the production of heat.

Darlene Covington finally succumbed to the droning of her alarm clock. With one eye half open, she looked at the time on the clock and banged on the off button. “Got to send Jimmy off,” she said as she forced her other eye open.

She finally hung her left leg out of the bed and put it on the floor. “Got to get up.” After a few minutes of arguing with herself, she finally made it out of bed. She found her fuzzy blue bunny house slippers under her side of the bed and tried to put them on.
Because she was still groggy from waking up, she lost her balance and fell with a soft thud. She lay there for a minute before sitting up and putting on her other slipper. She slowly stood so as to not loose her balance, carefully put on her favorite green house robe, and made her way to the kitchen.

Her husband, Charles, was about to sit down at the breakfast table to eat his prized sausage and eggs that he only gets an allotment for once a month. Even though Charles had the day off, he still wore the approved colors of a gray suit and ivory shirt due to his low social status. His tie was a cotton blend navy blue tie with burnt orange pinstripes. His thinning black hair was cut short and slicked back as prescribed by the Ruling Elder Council’s (R.E.C.) mandate on acceptable social behavior and appearances. His brown shoes were highly polished, and his nails and facial hair were neatly trimmed. He looked like his usual prissy old self.

Charles poured the rest of his only allotment of orange juice, which was four ounces, and stood from the only chair at the table to get the last biscuit. Darlene sat down in the chair, grabbed Charles’ glass, and drank the last of the orange juice.

“Where’s Jimmy?”

“They came early,” Charles said.

“You didn’t come and get me?” Darlene surprised herself by putting the empty glass down on the table too hard. The loud bang made her feel more alert. “Why didn’t you come and get me?”

Charles pouted his lips when he noticed the empty orange juice glass. “I heard you the first time.”

“Well?” Darlene said standing up rather quickly.
“And have them see you looking like that?” Charles said while waving Darlene out of the way so that he could sit down.

Darlene was wearing the unapproved and fading green bath robe that she had purchased on the black market. The robe came down to her mid calf and was barely held together by her shoddy sewing. It is not that she never learned how to sew. It is that she found so many other things more interesting. “I would’ve changed, you know.”

“What happened to the robe I bought you?” Charles said immediately raising his newspaper up between them.

Darlene stared at the back of the newspaper that Charles was reading. She stuck her tongue out at him and hissed at him before she realized he just was not paying attention. Out of the pocket of her bathrobe, she pulled out a dog eared book and started reading it. She watched out of the corner of her eye as Charles lowered his paper and almost had a heart attack. “Darlene, what the hell are you reading?”

Darlene flipped to the next page in the small pink book.

Charles stood, “Darlene Ann Covington, answer me right the hell now.”

“I bought Jimmy a new shirt,” Darlene said looking over the top of the book. She noticed the pulsating vein in his forehead. “You can read the title just as well as I can.”

“Where’d you get that book?”

“Where else could I buy a banned book?”

Charles grabbed the book from Darlene and walked towards the silver recycler. Darlene sat back in her wicker chair. “I’ll just buy me another one.”

Charles looked at Darlene and threw the book back at her. He put his plastic plate in the sink and left the kitchen. Darlene sat seething and trying to read the book
for a few more minutes. Finally, she got up and went into the living room and sat on the
love seat across from Charles. Darlene put her house fuzzy slippered feet on the coffee
table and starting clearing her throat. “You should’ve come and got me.”

Charles lowered his paper. “I do have to apologize.”

“I should say so.”

“Actually, I accidentally took a longer than usual shower this morning. You have
only about ten minutes of hot water allotment left,” Charles opened his paper to the next
section, “give or take a few, of course.”

“I don’t even know why I married you,” Darlene said.

Charles shook the crease out of his paper and said, “Perhaps you could’ve
married Robert Rangeland?”

Darlene grabbed the news paper and tore it up into little pieces before throwing it
back at Charles. “I hate you. I hate this shitty gray rat hole. I hate…” Darlene noticed
Charles smiling and stomped off into the bedroom. She stopped on the other side of
the door and watched Charles lift up the stained seat cushion next to him, pull out
another paper, and begin reading again. She kicked the door and tried to slam it, but
the door was so light all she got was a soft push of air and a slight click of the door
handle. She picked up Charles’ thick soled brown shoes. She took careful aim and
threw them at the door one at a time in order to create the slam she had intended.
When she got no reaction from Charles, she picked up her high healed shoes and threw
the first one at the door. She started to throw the second one when she heard Charles
say from the other room. “I do have some good news about the new furniture.”
Charles opened the door, and Darlene looked up from her present wrath of destruction. She started to throw the stiletto healed shoe at Charles when he stopped her with his hand. “I finally was able to get the approvals for new furniture. We can go later on and pick it up.”

Darlene lowered her deadly grey shoe, but still gripped it firmly. “Why do you have to treat me this way?”

“Because you act that way, besides I was joking about the hot water. The truth is the R.E.C. cut back on hot water production and we’re just going to have to make the best of it.”

“You know I hate it when you joke with me,” Darlene said.

“You want to go with me or not?”

“Why didn’t you come and get me when Jimmy left?”

“I’ll buy you a new bathrobe.”

“I don’t want a new bathrobe.”

“Then we’ll go down to the Fonctionnaire Mall and get you something nice and approved.”

“You should’ve come and got me when Jimmy left.”

Charles gave Darlene his sad puppy dog look, and Darlene relaxed her grip on the shoe. Darlene got, what she thought, was a bright idea about the furniture. She dropped the shoe in the pretense of over being angry and straightened her robe. She walked over and lay down on the bed with a sigh. Charles tried to comfortably sit on the edge of the bed. “Do you want to go with me to get the new furniture?”
“All they have is stupid gray,” Darlene sat up in the bed with a twinkle in her eye. “I did notice the other day a really nice light tan leather couch in the black market. It had these…”

“You have got to stop going down there. What will the neighbors think?”

“I don’t care what they think. That’s why I’m reading A Pink Rose for Mommy. Anne, the main character in there doesn’t care what other people think.”

Charles noticed the book sitting on the edge of the night stand. He started to pick it up then said, “Never mind. I don’t want to know.”

“But, Charles, it’s about a world where people can think for themselves and buy whatever they can afford and take long hot showers and…”

“I don’t want to hear it. I said,” Charles tried to slam the plastic door of the bedroom on his way out. Darlene could hear Charles loud and clear when he shouted from the kitchen. “Did you at least get the cake mix for Jimmy’s party?”

Darlene got out of bed and looked at the now wrinkled grey and ivory spotted bed cover. She nonchalantly pulled the bed cover on to the floor. She walked to the kitchen where Charles was standing. Charles stood examining the box of banana walnut cake mix. “It’s not exactly German chocolate, but it’ll do,” Charles said.

“Mrs. Dungheim was the only person that was willing to trade for a rhubarb pie mix,” Darlene said.

“Well, you better get started on it. Then take your quick shower,” Charles said sitting at the table.

Darlene took the cake mix box from Charles and read the instructions. She turned on the oven and had to kick it in order to get it to preheat. She got out the
ingredients and starting mixing them together. While she was preparing the cake batter, she started whistling.

Charles stood. “Darlene, please!”

“Did the Goldmans stop by yet?”

Charles opened the tiny microwave and noticed that Darlene’s sausage links were still in there. “You going to eat these?”

“You know I won’t.” Darlene said.

“It’s not made from wild cat meat. Mark at the R.E.C. told me so the other day.”

“When’s the last time you saw a pig around here?” Darlene said.

“When’s the last time you saw a wild cat?” Charles said.

“Exactly my point.”

Charles sat at the table and moaned with great pleasure with each bite of the sausage links. He wiped the dripping grease from his face, and Darlene watched him sitting smug and satisfied. Charles had to lean out of the way while Darlene reached for a cake baking pan. “Why were the Goldmans coming by?” Charles said.

“To drop off Jimmy’s gifts.”

Charles finished off another sausage link. “Now you didn’t tell them to get that stupid louie shirt did you?”

“It’s called a Hawaiian luau shirt.”

“Whatever. He’s going to get laughed at by everyone.”

“You’re the only one who gets laughed at,” Darlene said.

“What about a sensible gift?”

“I wish you would have told me when Jimmy was leaving.” Darlene said.
Charles got up and fixed himself a glass of cold water. “Now, a matching pen and pencil set that’s a sensible gift.”

Darlene put the cake in the oven and put the dishes in the sink into the dish cleaner. “I just don’t think the new amendment to the exam rules is fair.”

“We don’t kill children. Besides, my friend, Roy, told me that’s just a rumor anyways.” Charles finished his glass of water and put his glass into the empty sink for Darlene to put into the dish machine. Darlene tried to hide her trembling hands. “You know I had a bad experience at the summer reeducation camps after my test.”

“But Jimmy is too smart for that. Now go take your shower.”

Darlene ran out of hot water after about nine minutes. She still had shampoo in her hair and was getting soap in her eyes. She screamed for Charles to reallocate the hot clothes washing water to the shower. Charles opened the bathroom door and let out all the steam and hot air. “I swear. I don’t understand why it takes you so long.”

“Shut that damn door,” Darlene said.

After Charles made the reallocation of hot water, Darlene finished her shower and got dressed in her approved sunflower yellow summer dress with gray polka dots. Just to be a little rebellious, she decided to paint her fingernails a light pink color in honor of the book. She fixed her hair according to the mandated social codes and stood in front of the mirror examining her figure. “This dress makes me look poochy and this hairstyle is just hideous.” She checked the few loose strands and decided that her long brown hair was going to have to look ugly for the trip to the furniture allocation warehouse. After that, she could let her hair down and change into something more daring like her favorite black slacks and ivory blouse with a black vest. When she
realized this might encourage Charles’ fancy, she thought better of it. “I’ll just have to remind him our S.E.X. permit has been revoked,” she said.

The small apartment now held the aroma of baked cinnamon and fresh cream butter. Darlene sat in the kitchen and almost hyperventilated trying to inhale all of the pleasing aroma. She retrieved her book that she had set on the scratched wooden kitchen counter and began looking at a black market fashion magazine. She carefully traced her fingers over each image of the colorfully dressed fashion models. She grabbed a pencil out of a drawer and began neatly marking the pages of the outfits that she liked most. She turned to the order page in the back of the magazine and began calculating the costs.

The buzzer went off and Darlene took the cake out of the oven and set it on a cooling pad. She looked back at the magazine and thought, *How wonderful to be able to dress that way.* She caught a glimpse of the yellow dress in a reflection off of the microwave. “I must look like soured cream butter rolled up in a nasty spotted tortilla.”

The doorbell rang its light and jovial tune, and Charles answered the door with Darlene standing right behind him. “Oh look, Charles, it’s the Wallaces.”

Mrs. Wallace was dressed just like Darlene, and in the face, she looked just like Darlene except for the extra weight. Mr. Wallace was tall and husky looking and he was dressed just as Charles was dressed. Mr. Wallace’s voice was a deep baritone, and Darlene could feel the vibrations as he talked.

“We stopped by to drop off our congratulations for Jimmy.”

“Oh, thanks. He’s not home yet,” Darlene said.
Charles gave Darlene a scowl for talking out of turn before addressing the Wallaces. “We thank you for you kindness, sir and madam, won’t you please come in?”

“Oh, no we possibly could not impose at this hour, but perhaps later we can stop by and see how Jimmy liked his new engraved matching pen and pencil set?” Mr. Wallace said.

Charles shook Mr. Wallace’s hand and gave a polite nod to Mrs. Wallace. “That would be wonderful.”

Charles closed and locked the door out of habit. He walked into the kitchen and stood smelling the enjoyable aroma from the cooling cake. “How’s the cake?”

Darlene walked in behind him. “It’ll be ready.” She was starting to feel excited about giving Jimmy his new red shirt. She figured Charles would put up a fight, but she thought Jimmy looked good in reds.

Charles sat at the table and motioned Darlene to pull down three plates and three forks. “You want to go with me to get the furniture or not? It took a lot of haggling to get this petition passed.”

Darlene half smiled and nodded her head. “Can Jimmy come too?”

“Of course Jimmy can come.” Charles said.

Darlene looked in the direction of the front door and felt the urge to check to see if the front door still worked.

Charles noticed this. “What’s wrong, dear?”

Darlene did not answer.

Charles stood to put his arm around his wife.
Darlene decided to check the front door to make sure it still worked anyway. After she checked it the first time, she checked it again, and this time, she stood staring out the door for a few moments. She closed the door and slowly returned to the kitchen table.

“Calm down before you--.”

Charles was interrupted by three distinct bell chimes one low, one middle, and one high. Charles and Darlene both stared at each other. “Did you lock the door?” Darlene said.

Charles softly smiled in relief and went to the door. Darlene was standing right behind him dressed in her full I-support-the R.E.C. regalia except for her light pink fingernail polish.

When Charles unlocked and opened the thick wooden door, the creaking of the hinges was the only thing that could be heard throughout the small apartment. “Congratulations Jimmy,” Darlene said before looking who was at the door.

Charles covered his mouth and gasped out loud at what he saw, one official assistant from the R.E.C. and two secret service agents were standing outside his door. There faces were stone cold, and their eyes were hidden behind officially mandated sunglasses. The official assistant was dressed in the approved manner, which was a burgundy robe with black slacks and an ivory tie. The two secret service agents were covered from neck to toe with a specially made long black leather overcoat. They were wearing the approved sunglasses with a large black felt yarmulke covering most of their head.
Darlene, without even knowing she was doing it, ran her fingers threw her hair, put on her best fake smile, and straightened her shoulders. She started to greet the visitors when the official assistant cut her off in the most unwavering monotone voice she had ever heard.

“Are you Mr. And Mrs. Charles David Covington?”

“Uh, yes, Bob, you know we are.”

“I am here on an official errand of the Ruling Elder Council. Mr. Jimmy Baxter Covington, your son, violated the new erudition allowance act. He was diagnosed with an acute progressive volatile excessive aptitude behavior disorder that is considered detrimental to the Ruling Elder Council. The proposed judgment, as required by section C line 48 of the 23rd amendment of the code of rights, means, ways, and procedures of the Ruling Elder Council’s policy on ethics and procedures, was carried out at approximately 12:47 hours. Subset B of said code states that you, as the parents of the deceased genius, have the right to view the body before interment. Do you wish to exercise that right at this time?”
Amachai returned to the Southern Histian Initiative (S.H.I.) headquarters from the Inese embassy with such joy that he danced, even though dancing was against his beliefs. “Forgive me, oh Greatness, for the joy in you gave me cause to dance.” With his first two fingers and thumb put together, to symbolize the inhabitance of his Greatness in the heart, mind, and soul, he made a circle over his heart and kissed his fingers. Amachai was tall and gangly, which stood out from the rest of the devotees, who were mostly short and pudgy. But, Amachai did keep his hair trimmed according to the standards, and his habit was always neatly pressed.

He noticed Brother Mordichai standing in front of the Devotee Center for Religious Purification. “Brother Mordichai, I have come upon you to ask a grand favor.”

“Devotee Amachai, you are late to services, and your duties have been ignored.”

Amachai pushed the papers into Mordichai’s hands. “But I’ve great news.”

Mordichai gave a look of unhappiness and eyed the papers. “What have you gotten yourself into now, young impetuous devotee?”

Amachai explained that he had just visited with the Inese embassy in regards to possibly purchasing the Ibetans freedom from the Inese for fifty million dollars. “You must present this to the council for me. We could save hundreds of thousands of lives from the very depths of hell.”

Mordichai looked above the upper rim of his glasses and shook his head.

“But you must. This is my ticket to becoming a third level acolyte.” Amachai had been trying, longer than any other devotee, to become an acolyte, a promotion that will
surely guarantee him a position on the Council of Representatives of the Lord’s Faith, a rank that had, until now, proven elusive because Amachai often acted without thinking.

“I’ve taken to mentoring you because I think you have good intentions, although they are somewhat misguided at times.”

The smile from Amachai’s face disappeared.

“Perhaps it would be best if you transferred to the Western Front’s headquarters?”

Amachai shook his head.

“I say this because it might be easier for you to make certain advancements in your—“

“Ohn 8:22, because I believe, I shall never be found wanting. My faith shall be my sustenance, and my cup ever runneth over with—“

“Yes, yes, I do understand that,” Mordichai paused, “but a devotee such as yourself has much need of proper guidance, and Brother Mortimer has the strength and will to funnel your passion into constructive,” Mordichai shook his hands searching for the right words, “practices.”

“But I do not wish to leave. My home is here. When I get a promotion to acolyte, I am set to marry young disciple Mary Clarence,” Amachai swallowed hard, “Then there is you. My greatest friend indeed.”

Mordichai nodded his head and smiled.

“No, no leaving simply will not do. If I cannot succeed here, then I will not succeed anywhere.”
“Perhaps our Lord God Almighty,” circle, kiss, “has other plans for you. You must leave yourself open to such possibilities.”

“That is why I’m so devoted to this cause with the Ibetans. I truly believe that my faith has given me the will and the way to save these peoples souls.”

“OK,” Mordichai shook his head and handed the papers back to Amachai, “Convince me this is a worthy cause.”

Amachai explained how the Inese were evil Atheists and how they were the propagators of great iniquities against the Believers of any faith. “We can save hundreds of thousands of Ibetans from the grips of Atan,” The smile returned to Amachai, “We could actually use the money to save lost souls.”

Mordichai gave Amachai a sideways glance, “This might even be worth second level acolyte, but these Ibetans aren’t Histian.”

“Uke 15:4 A Believer that shepherds the lost sheep back unto the fold and away from the tyranny of evil men shall have the blessing of the Lord God Almighty.” Both of them circled their heart and kissed their fingers at the mention of God. Amachai further explained how the Ibetans, under the Inese rule, can never know God, but with the help of the S.H.I., the Ibetans could have religious freedom to find their way to God.

“What about the Inese, and their wicked ways?”

“Athew 25:32, He will separate the faithful from the wicked as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.”

Mordichai grinned and nodded his head.

“I have faith that we can do this, Brother Mordichai.”

Mordichai folded his arms, “Where will we find the money?”
“I have thought about that,” Amachai shuffled through his paperwork and handed a piece of paper to Mordichai, “We spend fifty million dollars a year to try and save a few thousand Merican souls. We could use that money to save more than a hundred thousand Ibetan souls.”

“But we’d be given the money to Atan and his evil doers.”

“Ark 22:10, Whose face is upon the coin for it is their money? Such monies is not the path for the righteous, but a temptress for those willing to stray.”

Mordichai nodded his head. “You truly know your scripture. I cannot doubt you that.” Mordichai handed the paper back to Amachai, “We still have to convince the council that your cause is just.”

Amachai straightened his papers quickly. “Yes, but if this is truly our Lord God Almighty’s, they both circled their hearts and kissed their hands, “will, then the council is just a formality.” Amachai thanked Mordichai and turned to stride away.

“Devotee Amachai?”

Amachai slowly turned to hear the reservations that Mordichai surely had.

“Vanity is a mortal sin.”

Amachai hugged his papers to his chest. “I do this for the good of people, the lost lambs that seek the undying light.”

“Then would you be willing to forgo your promotion over this?”

Amachai lowered his shoulders. “I—I, uh, I only—“he lowered his head, “If it be our Lord God Almighty’s,” circle, kiss, “will.”

“Then you must accompany me to the council this very evening.”

Amachai picked up the papers. “But, a devotee in a council—“
“Yes, rare, but not unheard of.”

Amachai ran back to shake Mordichai’s hand, “I must prepare myself.” Amachai quickly shuffled off. “The Grand Council’s meeting! Oh, so many things to do. First I need to…”

Mordichai chuckled at Amachai’s enthusiasm.

The Grand Council’s hall was gilded in gold and the walls were covered with paintings that depicted biblical passages. The ornate crystal and bronze chandeliers lit up the room with a beautiful amber glow and made the solid marble floor radiate a golden hue. The furniture in the room was made from dark polished wood and the burgundy satin cushions and dark blue chenille throws, made by the Elders’ wives, were extremely comfortable. A large wooden cross was on the northern wall, and the huge rug in the center of the room bore the seal to the S.H.I. which was a gold cross over green bushes, and a light yellow circlet above the cross. Believers were standing around, and the light hum of conversation filled the air.

Amachai watched as the Elders and the Brothers bowed courteously to each other and spoke in formal tones. He eyed their insignias with envy and tried to make sure his was covered with the papers in his hands. He looked around the room for Brother Mordichai and spotted him talking to Elder James Jones. He watched them perform the circle—kiss and felt the urge to do the same. When he noticed that Mordichai was walking towards him, he began striding towards Mordichai. Amachai accidentally bumped into a few Elders along the way. After a few esteemed apologies and bows, he finally made his way to Mordichai.
“I have spoken with Elder Jones, and he is pleased with the possibilities.”

Amachai smiled, and his body trembled with excitement.

“He would be willing to take on the cause, but he is otherwise occupied with Brother David Oresh and their newly built sanctuary for believers.”

Amachai nodded his head. “Will I see Grand Elder Nona Sequiturian?”

“You must follow the rules while in the council.”

Amachai nodded his head. “Yes, of course, I went over the handbook.”

Mordichai put his hand on Amachai’s shoulder. “Relax and have faith, all will go according to His plan.”

Three loud booms from a large wooden staff filled the room, and the large oak doors to the inner sanctum opened up. A wrinkled elderly man stepped out onto the top of the marble stairs. “All ye of the Faith that have willingly come before his Exaltedness to exclaim their love for our Lord God Almighty,” circle, kiss, “enter now, so that ye may be heard.”

Everyone started towards the doors at the top of the stairs. Mordichai stopped Amachai. “There is one last thing you must remember.”

Amachai looked at the sweaty palm imprints on the papers.

“Never look directly at the Grand Martinet Elder. He is so close to our Lord God Almighty,” circle, kiss, “that you may become blinded by his true faith.”

Amachai nodded with his mouth agape.

Mordichai ushered Amachai into the Inner Sanctum. The huge wooden doors closed and the Elder Announcer stood at the head of the dais. “Please remain standing
for his greatness and holiness. The exalted Grand Martinet Elder of the Southern Histian Initiative. His lordship Elder Nona Sequiturian.”

Everyone bowed their heads. After Elder Sequiturian was seated, he led the invocation prayer and started the meeting. Amachai kept his eyes on his papers that he kept hugged tight to his chest. He listened to the other Elder’s quibble over things such as which color of pen best represents their faith, the exact wording of decrees, edicts, and warrants, and most importantly, who to give promotions to. Unfortunately, Amachai was still not on the list. But, with his new plan in hand; he hoped to finally secure himself a promotion.

After what seemed like hours of inane and boring repetition, Elder Sequiturian finally asked for concluding business. Elder Jones introduced Brother Mordichai, who stood and presented his business, Amachai’s plan for Ibet. After the proposal was laid out and all the documents passed around, the room was silent waiting for a word from Elder Sequiturian.

“Are there any questions amongst the Elder’s?”

The question was followed with more silence.

“Very well, are there any questions from the Brothers?”

Amachai watched as one hand rose in the air.

“Yes, Brother, Ezekiel?”

“Well, your, exaltedness, how do we know the Inese won’t take back Ibet once we’ve paid for it?”

A murmur of agreement filled the pause.
“When Avid fought against the Morites, did our Lord God Almighty,” circle, kiss, “abandon him?”

There was a resounding no from everyone in the room.

“If it is truly our Lord God Almighty’s,” circle, kiss, “will, then we must have faith that such things will not come to pass.”

Everyone nodded their head, and another hand went up.

“Yes, Brother Samuel?”

“But these are Udist, not Histians. Why are we saving them?”

Again the room was filled with a murmur of agreement before it went silent.

Amachai accidentally peeked out of the corner of his eye and looked at Elder Sequiturian. He looked like he had been in the bathtub for too long. His ivory robes were too big for him and they made him look like a kid wearing his parents’ clothes. His staff appeared huge next to him, and the golden cherub chair engulfed the little old man. From this great of a distance, he looked like an infant sitting in a chair hold a large ornate pencil.

Amachai tried to look away but could not. The more he tried to look away, the more he began looking straight at Elder Sequiturian. When he thought that Elder Sequiturian was looking directly at him, he tried to avert his eyes, but still could not.

Elder Sequiturian looked directly at Amachai, who was entranced, then spoke.

“There went a smoke out of his nostrils, and fire from his mouth, in which he feasted upon the iniquities of the land.”

Amachai muttered, “Evelations, 16:10.”
“Would thou Destroy them, O God; let them fall by their own counsels; cast them out in the multitude of their transgressions; for they have rebelled against thee and thy wisdom.”

Amachai smiled at the quoting of the passage.

“Though there is no faithfulness in their mouth; their inward part is very wickedness; their throat is an open sepulcher for the dens of evil; they flatter with their very tongue.”

Amachai stopped his gazing at Elder Sequiturian and shook his head.

“And they will know the way of righteousness. I shall proclaim to them my name is the Lord of the Heavens, the Guardian of the Faithful, and the Finder of Lost Souls.”

Amachai turned towards Mordichai and mouthed the words, “Why the whole thing?”

Mordichai waived him off and turned his attention back to Elder Sequiturian.

“I am the Lord God Almighty” circle, kiss, “when I shall lay my vengeance upon you.”

Amachai nodded his head and whispered finally. The room was deathly silent, and Amachai fought the urge to look to see if he was getting any supporting glances from the others.

“Devotee Amachai?” Elder Sequiturian said.

Amachai dropped some papers as he bowed. “Yes, your grand exaltedness?”

“Are you a shepherd of the week?”
“Uh, ye—ye, Yes, your grand exaltedness.” Amachai said dropping more pages while trying to pick up the ones on the floor.

“Are you your brother’s keeper?”

“I am your grand exaltedness.” Amachai glanced around and noticed everyone in the room staring at him. He looked at Mordichai, who nodded his head and put his hands together like he was about to pray.

Amachai smiled at Mordichai, and crumpled some of the pages he was holding.

Elder Sequiturian thumped his large staff. “Then so be it—with one minor adjustment.”

Amachai resisted the urge to look at Elder Sequiturian. Instead, he looked at Mordichai for moral support.

“These Ibetans will never truly be free while they are allowed to practice the heathen faith of Udism. We must endeavor to show them the error of their beliefs and convert them to the one true faith of our Lord God Almighty,” circle, kiss, “When we have converted enough of them to warrant the expenditure of such monies derived from our faithful, we will then, and only then, purchase their freedom from the bonds of the iniquities of the Inese.”

Amachai’s face went blank. He watched as Mordichai shrugged. He put the rest of his papers on the large table and looked at the others. They were looking through him. Amachai’s confused look and trembling must have been evident to everyone else in the room because Mordichai came to his aid.
Mordichai started to speak, but he was cut off by Elder Josiah. “Grand Exalted one, I propose that Devotee Amachai be sponsored as a Missionary Servant level one so that he may be allowed to continue his fine work with the Ibetans.”

Amachai started to speak but Mordichai put his hand over Amachai’s mouth. Amachai jerked his face away from Mordichai’s hand and whispered, “This is a demotion, and I won’t—“

“You will do what you must.” Mordichai said.

“But what about Mary Clarence? I can’t leave.”

Both Amachai and Mordichai turned towards Elder Sequiturian when they heard the loud thumping of his staff.

“Does Devotee Amachai wish to address the Grand Council?”

Amachai stepped forward, “Yes, your Grand Exaltedness, I simply—“

Mordichai quickly rushed forward and spoke over Amachai. “He is simply not feeling up to the task, your Grand Greatness of most Holy Worship.”

Amachai gave Mordichai an evil stare.

Mordichai shrugged his shoulders. “Perhaps this is for the best?”

“Devotee Amachai, do you wish to question (he pointed to the sky) His Will?”

Amachai’s face turned pale and his eyes narrowed. He shook his head and muttered no.

“For all who are present, this is the Will of our Lord God Almighty,” circle, kiss, “so it is done. Three days hence, Devotee Amachai will leave for Ibet to continue his calling there. May he be blessed with the strength to accomplish the prodigious task set before him.”
Amachai was still shaking his head and wanted to speak, but Mordichai gave him a look that stopped him instantly. Amachai’s eyes dropped and his shoulders slumped forward.

Mordichai put his hand on Amachai’s shoulder, “Perhaps this is for the best.” Amachai gave him a defeated glance and sauntered off.

After three loud thumps of the staff, the Elder Announcer spoke, “That concludes our business for today. All rise for the benediction.”
Bad Poetry

It rained the night my friend, Mark Ingday, introduced me to the doggerel of David Gamstein. I mentioned the rain because I love the smell of freshly rained on cement. The way aroma of the mixture of nature and man hovers about reminds me of my youth. I spent weeks, prior to the meeting with Mark, researching new forms of avant-garde poetry for the *New Englander Journal*. The editor wished to run an article on up and coming poets, and he felt the best way to do this was for me to search for poets using unusual artistic styles. As to why the unusual artistic styles were necessary, I cannot say. But, I must confess that the assignment did seem rather ersatz at first. However, these were the requirements set forth by my boss. In as much as I consider myself a connoisseur of fine poetry, I deemed the search futile as was due to the very nature of poetry. Any little instance of words spewed out on a page is often called poetry by some of the most undistinguished artists. As it turns out, I originally put Mr. Gamstein in the same category as the other poet hopefuls.

The work Mark had brought was scribbled on a piece of torn parchment paper that appeared to be of fine quality. Although the paper was of an exceptional grade and the words appeared to be written with a calligraphy pen in rushed penmanship, the work was wet and difficult to read due to the water stains from the rain. This smell, however, was most unpleasant in that it had that certain canine quality to it. Mark, a professor I had met while attending the university, was not beyond playing a practical joke, and he knew that I was in dire need of something to please my superiors at work. In as much as I like to humor my friends, I preferred to pass on taking the works of Gamstein seriously. The poem simply consisted of a one-word title and a single one-word stanza.
I truly found this type of poetry most egregious and laughed at Mark, not with him, for he is a literature professor that indeed loves good poetry as well. I argued that to consider one word as a poem was not only in poor taste; it was offensive. Mark, however, assured me that this was not to be taken lightly, and we continued this tennis-like discussion for several hours.

As was due his nature, Mark continuously and vehemently protested my dislike of Gamstein and later told me that he had found the poem in an older German poetry journal that had been recently translated into English. I politely asked if he could bring me the journal so that I might better judge the poetry for myself. This appeased Mark, and allowed him to gracefully leave my home with the option of returning sometime in the future. After that, I easily put Gamstein out of my mind and went on to look for, what I considered to be, better works of poetry that fit within the requirements set forth. Forgetting Gamstein was easy in that I had yet to develop a like for him or his works.

I did, however, have a passing thought that I should possibly take Mark seriously as he is currently the acting chair of the English department and has graciously allowed me to call him Mark instead of Dr. Ingday, not to mention his qualities as a poet laureate. I met him at the university during one of my episodes with another professor that I affectionately gave the moniker of Professor “kill em with homework” Needleman. As it turned out, Dr. Needleman is an old college buddy of Mark’s, and they had recently became pub buddies as well. So naturally when Mark overheard my few choice words about Dr. Needleman, he felt somewhat compelled to intervene. We held a somewhat philosophical discussion about education for several hours in his office before retiring to a local pub. I assumed that because I was somewhat older than the average college
senior he felt a sense of camaraderie with me, but I cannot wholly testify to the truth in
this. I have, since my graduation with a BA in Journalism with a minor in Literature, of
course, become one of their pub buddies as well. In as much as I have regretted a few
things that I said about Dr. Needleman, I did formally apologize to him for several of my
remarks. He accepted my request for forgiveness and that is all I am going to say about
him as he had no further dealings with me on the subject of Gamstein.

A week had passed since our rainy meeting before I hit upon something that I
had not expected. I say not expected for, in truth, I had hoped that Mark would have
forgotten about the incident, and allow me to continue forth with my assignment without
further degradation. Mark had indeed brought the journal in question by the house and
left it on my doorstep. In as much as Mark felt the urge to loan me this copy of the
journal, I felt obliged to thumb through it and take notes for further discussions with
Mark as it is unusual for him to take such an interest in my doings. In fact, I must
confess that I my curiosity was peaked by his interest in the matter. The journal,
however, was in dreadful shape as most of its pages had been dog-eared or torn, and
there were numerous pages missing as well. The binding was all but gone, and the
pages were held together with leather strings through holes that had been punched
through the outermost left edge of the paper and cover. The paper smelled of mildew
and other such repulsive odors that I care not to discuss it for, in truth, it makes me
nauseous to even mention it now. The contents page and the cover of the journal were
obviously missing (I later found out that the German journal was titled *Schlechte Poesie*)
so that I could not determine such necessary facts as to the validity of the publication.
In as much as I do not know German, I failed to understand the meaning of the title of
the journal at the time. I was more interested in the poems themselves than I was the
title, so for the time being, I forgot about the title and concentrated on the poetry.

I quickly flipped through the pages to find any of the poems by David Gamstein --
in as much as they were considered to be poetry by the staff of this particular magazine.
I simply will not recognize it as such at this time. There was only one page that clearly
mentioned the name of the poet in question, and on that page was the poem that Mark
had introduced to me on that fateful rainy night. The poem was titled “Faith,” which was
in bold black letters that appeared rather gothic in form. This was promising as the title
itself seemed to leave the poem open for some interpretation as faith could be either
religious, political, or social in nature and connotation. Just below the title was one word
“Believe” in simple Arial bold letters. This, however, was not promising in that the title
implied the first word in the first and only stanza. If this was going to be the only word in
the poem, then perhaps a loftier word could have been chosen or created such as “Non-
Question.” This was merely a suggestion on my part as I felt that it may, at some point,
have enhanced the structure of the so called poem. At the very least, this would have
given some dimension to the poem instead of relying on a simple definition to carry the
weight and energy of the poem. But I digress as this is not my poem, and I am simply in
the capacity of reviewing such works for a small journal.

On an interesting note, Mark may have carelessly overlooked the rest of the
page in his haste to provide me with some uninteresting poetry. Directly below the word
Believe, the page was torn, and the remainder of the page was completely missing. As
this was difficult to discern due to the nature of the paper itself, this lead me to believe
that there was more to the “poem” than just a one-word stanza. Perhaps Mark was too
injudicious in his effort to be helpful to notice the half torn page. As a result, he swiftly wrote down the information and the so-called poem on a handy piece of scrap paper. I found this intriguing, and I allowed myself to gain interest, so that I could possibly further my research into this particular foreign artist. In truth, I was becoming desperate at this point in that I had been unable to acquire anything that remotely fit the requirements set forth by my boss. However unfortunate, this was the only promising piece of poetry that I had to offer at this time. I could only hope that my boss would agree with my most esteem assessment.

Much to my relief, the poetry article was put off another six weeks due a very understanding and agreeable boss. As it were, he concurred with my original opinion of Gamstein’s poetry and graciously extended my deadline so that I may further look into other possible avenues. During this time, I permitted myself the opportunity and enthusiasm needed to research into the Gamstein mystery. The reason that I came to appreciate Gamstein at this point was based on pure languor on my part in that I felt the need to relax, and in truth, most of the work on Gamstein had been done for me. Who am I to look such a gift horse in the mouth? After much deliberate inquiry, I found an antique bookstore on the south side of town that claimed to be able to get back dated copies of the Schlechte Poesie. The shop was, in fact, referred to me by my chief editor, who informed me that my deadline was quickly approaching. As I had seen the antique book peddler, Emil, in the public library before, I trusted his character and allowed him to order me to copy of the journal in question at a considerable expense, of course. He seemed quite interested in my purchase, and after many mindless questions, he allowed me to put in my request and almost a hundred dollars in deposit
in order to secure myself a complete copy of the journal Schlechte Poesie. My enthusiasm was somewhat vanquished by this event and the amount of money required to perform a task for monetary gains. But I steadied myself as any good man should and decided that a round of fine scotch would relieve some of my tensions. As promised, the journal arrived packaged in cellophane six weeks later.

Curious as I was about David Gamstein and his poetry, I did not immediately open the package which, in truth, would have been preferred at the time. I had been inundated with work for some time on a new project for the journal that was passed down from my employer, and the deadline for this new project was two weeks away, and I was no closure to finishing this venture than the poetry assignment. This allowed me to put off the Gamstein mystery for another two months as one project bled into another and so on as it usually does in the publishing world. As my Bachelor of Arts is in journalism, I still find it quite astonishing how much work goes into a quad-annual journal compared to the amount of work displayed in the outcome. It is unfortunate that during this time I had forgotten all about David Gamstein and his poetry due to the very nature of being at the economical bottom of my coworkers, and the need to continuously prove my worth to the company. A task that I do not take lightly and pursue any opportunity to appraise myself of such fine quality work.

It did occur from time to time that Gamstein should cross my mind for a brief and fluttering instant, but beyond that, I did not further pursue the knowledge of him or his poetry for reasons I cannot remember; until one day, quite by accident, I came across the good copy of the Schlechte Poesie journal while cleaning. In as much as I had almost forgotten all about the whole thing, I decided to stop cleaning and open the
package for, in truth, I was bored with the cleaning process and failed to notice any progress in the matter anyway. I promptly fingered through the pages to the section that had Gamstein’s poems. There were about seven pages in all that were dedicated to Gamstein, and in fact; he had the most published poetry out of all the other poets in this particular copy of the journal. The rest of the journal consisted of advertisements and short stories that were of equal poor quality. I must admit that a pet peeve of mine is the use of sneer or smirk while describing someone’s dialogue, but that is a story for another day in that Gamstein did not write any of the short stories.

Much to my astonishment, all the poems consisted of a one-word title and a single one-word stanza. At the top of the first page, was the poem that I had originally seen that was titled “Faith.” The next poem was titled “Pain” that appeared in red flame like letters, and the only word in the poem was the word “Hurting” that appeared to droop towards the right side of the page with some form of substance appearing to drip from the letters. This seemed more like a type of definition than it did a poem. If I considered this a poem, then perhaps I would have to consider Webster as the greatest poet that ever lived. That would mean that every dictionary would be nothing but page upon page of poetry. Since defining words is not an exact science (I say this in that there often are multiple ways of defining a single word. For example the word Believe is defined in the New World Dictionary as: 1. To consider to be true or honest: 2. To accept the word or evidence of. The Great American Dictionary defines Believe as: 1. To accept that something is true or real: 2. To accept that somebody or something has a particular quality or ability) defining a word is then dynamic in nature. This type of poetic work would have to be considered living poetry in that it can change in order to
better fit the social language constructs. So, in essence, this type of poetry did, in fact, challenge the contemporary paradigms of poetics, which is one of the requirements for the article that the editor wished to run in the *New Englander Journal*. This being the case, I decided that I would present my arguments to Mark for proofing and then write the article based on Gamstein’s poetry. I found this course of action acceptable and proceeded post haste.

It is important to note that none of the above definitions are of one word. This indicated to me that, conceivably, the works of Gamstein might have some value as a poem that existed beyond the one word given. Even though the title is often considered a part of the poem, I considered these to be one-word poems as I have stated before because this helps my argument. Thus, I was forced to ask myself these questions: Why title the poem *Faith* and use the single word of Believe? Could I then change the title or the one word and get the same effect? As to the first question, it did follow that a definition of faith is to believe. Would it then follow (and get the same poetic effect) if the words were to be switched? So that the title would then be “Believe” and the single one-word stanza would be “Faith.” As much as I considered both aspects of the poem, I concluded that the possibility of interchanging the words in the poem added to the value of the poem. Either way, I felt this would certainly revolutionize contemporary poetry and decided to present it to Mark as such. Of course, I could not theorize as to the length or breadth of his appreciation of my new model for poetry, but I proceeded nonetheless.

Now to the question of, is it good poetry or bad poetry? I decided to visit Mark at the university in order to get the title *Schlechte Poesie* possibly translated. As it turned
out, the title translated from German to English as *Bad Poetry*. In effect, someone had already labeled the poetry as “Bad” and published it as such. I discussed this with Mark for some time, and as he feels more educated than I on the matter, he asked me to look at the poem from a semiotic perspective. I agreed that semiotics was one way of determining a methodology in which to interpret the poem, but according Aristotle, the poem was simply too short to be a poem in that there was simply not enough of the poem to get across the meaning or beauty or truth if, in fact, these things are possible. He again asked me to look at the word “believe” in the form of a metonymy or metaphor instead of a definition. I understood that his motivations were to open my eyes to new possibilities, and as a journalist, I felt it necessary to comply in that it is important to be able to see certain things from others perspectives before I record for posterity the futility of their views. In as much as he did not appreciate my patronizing, he stated that he had given me enough to write the article, and he had meetings to attend and that I must go. I did as he requested even though it was most impractical.

As much as I failed to see the point, I decided that Mark may have my best interest in mind, and therefore, pondered the possibilities that he presented. If, in fact, the word “believe” was a metonymy or a metaphor for something else, then the poem is not a one-word poem with a title. Instead, it is a poem of undetermined amount of words that is simply represented by one word with a title that can exercise the point of beauty or truth at any given moment. This being the case, what possible forms could the poem take? Could I then write an interpretation of the poem? I say this, in as much as, it is only an interpretation in that the poem is essentially already written, and any further writing of the poem, then becomes a rewrite. As a rewrite, the poem has
changed and the original author’s intentions or desires have been lost. It is even more conceivable that the sincerity of the poem could be misinterpreted, and as such, the poem becomes useless as a form of art if it can be called such. As I enjoy reading fine poetry, I find myself unable to produce such quality work as needed to fulfill my desires. This being the case, I decided not to try and write out the poem in that this undertaking might prove fruitless, and I am not one to waste time unnecessarily. This quality about me I appreciate above all others.

As it were, the next task at hand is to write the article. The question then becomes, why waste money, time, and paper space publishing such “bad” poetry? I even considered that the German journal was an offbeat type of journal that sprouted from a mainstream brand. The editor of the Schlechte Poesie may have had so many submissions of bad poetry that he decided to publish a new journal, and title it Bad Poetry. I even came to the conclusion that ridiculing David Gamstein was the main purpose of this particular copy of the Schlechte Poesie due to the sheer number of his poems that were in this edition. Or perhaps, the editor wanted to give some new poets a chance at being published. If this was the case, then what could be accomplished by titling the journal Bad Poetry? Would it not be more prudent to use a title like Amateur Poetry? This would seem more promising for budding poets. It would be almost a joke to include in a C.V. that one had been published in a copy of the Bad Poetry journal. What incentive could any other editor have in even reviewing new works by the same poet? I might add that these types of questions were much on the mind of my editor when I introduced the idea of publishing these poems instead of the article. I argued that perhaps the word bad actually meant good; in that it was in such bad taste that it
was essentially wonderful and artistic. This was a concept that my editor refused to accept and, therefore, was not willing to publish these poems under any circumstance. I stomped about and refused to accept no for an answer, but all this was for not as I desired to keep my employment. As much as I might begin to admire Gamstein, I felt that it was more important to be able to maintain a certain sense of dignity, which could be obtained through gainful employment.

The chief editor did however find the humor to disclose to me that he, indeed, did know Mark Ingday from the university, and that he, Mark, Needleman, and Emil were all pub buddies and old college pals. This, as it turned out, was somewhat of a practical joke at my expense, and as much as I enjoy practical jokes, I decided that this was my boss' way of putting me off so that I will not pursue the matter any further. This being the case, I decided to approach Mark about the subject and was much surprised to find him and Emil having lunch together. Mark decided to divulge that the joke was all in good "Faith" and no harm was done. In fact, he argued that I had had a lesson in poetry that I would not soon forget. I thanked Mark and Emil for their generosity in considering me for the butt of their joke, and I decided that it would be best if I left them to their own devices. For the best advice to someone who is outnumbered is to walk away and get revenge another day.

I have since come to the conclusion that the joke was, indeed, on Mark, my editor, and Emil in that the poetry did have some merit as art, and I was able to discover it as such. Their lack of interest increased my fervor in the project to interpret such poetry as art. I have since decided that my purpose is to expose this type of poetry to the rest of the world so that others may agree with me. In as much as I feel the rest of
the world will agree with me, my true motivations, I must admit, lie in the need for vindication. This being the case, I have elected to use David Gamstein as a pseudonym for Mark Ingday and send these poems out to other journals for possible publication. In as much as Mark likes to play practical jokes, I know that he will not find this humorous in the least, but it will be done in good “Faith”, and I am assured that no harm will be brought upon Mark in any fashion. Although he may disagree, I will give him the opportunity to save face by my acting the dilettante and show that I was simply trying to perpetuate the myth of Gamstein and his one word poetry.
Christmas Eve in a Bottle

I always wondered who my father was as a person and as a father. The day I came home from college on Christmas break was to be the beginning of something that I would soon not regret. Every year on Christmas Eve since I left home to go to college, I had to decide on whether or not to stay with my parents or stay with some old high school buddies in town. I usually stayed with my buddies because, well, because it was better than being at home on Christmas Eve. My mom would heckle me about not calling and not visiting as often as I supposedly should, and my dad would stumble around the house saying, “I love you boys.” The sad part is I am an only son. I guess he was talking to his friends Jose Cuervo, Jack Daniels, and Jim Beam.

I could tell the mood my father was in by what he drank. If he was drinking tequila, it was an average night and he did not have much money. If he was drinking gin, he had just gotten some money from somewhere and was celebrating something. If he was drinking Southern Comfort, he was pissed about something. Now it is fair to say that he was not a violent drunk. No, he was a want-to-be-lovable drunk. Hence the expression, “I love you boys,” and “Give me one of them big ole hugs.” Annoying as it is, that was my father. If he was drinking vodka, my father was depressed and hoped to pass out and wake up in a better mood. I guess he was a connoisseur of sorts for hard liquor. He even once had me blindfold him and give him different shots of hard liquor to see if he could guess which one I had served him. I learned not to water down his hard liquor. It was a feeble attempt on my part to see if I could trick my father. Instead, I got an hour-long lecture, at least, on how that is rude and just plain wrong to water down anyone’s hard liquor.
But that is my father. Even now as I watch him shuffle along the fence line in his torn jeans and dirty t-shirt, I can still see the bottle dangle from his hands, a permanent attachment. His slight stagger to the left, an old war wound if you can believe it, although it seemed to be more of a stumble than a stagger, or maybe a combination like a stambler or something. My father was a cook in the army. A cook. What kind of kitchen combat could possibly cause that kind of life long injury? Rebel chickens? Rogue vegetables? Pastry snipers? If I watched long enough, he would have eventually come around full circle to the right if the fence weren’t in the way. I wondered how he managed to get through the army drinking as much as he did. Maybe that is why he was a cook because they did not trust him with a gun.

My father is always making up stories. Not just any old boring story, real whoppers that are easily unbelievable, and for the most part, nonsensical. Like the time he was stationed in Okinawa. He and several of his buddies got a three-day pass to go to Tokyo. My dad bumped into the Japanese premier and was insulted by the premier’s comment, which my dad could not remember. It turns out the premier’s name was Tidro Busidro from the local commonidro. I never found out what that meant exactly. I just assumed, which was the right thing to do, that it was some funky jargon that my father made up. My father then proceeded, with the other guys from his party, to kick some Japanese ass. They almost ended up in jail, but an international incident was averted when my father offered to buy Tidro some sake, which, by the way, is something my father hates to drink. He says it is too “foo fooey” for a real man to drink. Jimmy, one of the guys that stayed friends with my dad after their army days, told me that my dad could not distinguish the Japanese from the Chinese and ended up offending about
fifteen Japanese solders in a local bar and almost got them all either killed or thrown in jail. What saved the day was when one of the other guys from my dad’s platoon smashed him over the head with a beer bottle and apologized to the others for my dad’s stupidity. After a few rounds of drinks on the Americans, all was forgiven, and my dad woke up the next day in the hotel room none the wiser. If stories like that don’t take away from the respect for your father, nothing will.

I’m glad that Jimmy told me the truth about some of the stories my father told me because sometimes I wonder what really happened. It sounds like he had an incredible youth. All of his good stories seem to take place before his marriage. There is no doubt that he loves my mom in his own way, although he has a weird way of showing his love sometimes. He’ll unintentionally embarrass her at the most inopportune times usually with a key word or phrase that he knows will get the greatest rise out of her. On occasion, he likes to show off his mastery of bodily functions. This usually also occurs precisely when company is around. I do have to admit my mother finally cured my father of his inane comments after passing gas by constantly telling him that she was going to lock him outside the house. She proved her point one night when she left my father passed out in the car and locked all the house doors and windows. My father did not have any keys on him and was freezing when he woke up at five in the morning. He ended up locking himself out of the car and could not get into the house. That next morning, my mom found him in the barn snuggled in the hay under a tarp snoring away. After several more of these incidents, my father, somehow, learned his lesson.

These are the things I remember about my father. When I was younger, I used to idolize him.
When I was about seven, I remember getting into a fight at school over my father. Bennie Marshal felt his father could beat my father up in a fight. Well, I strongly disagreed:

It was a typical fall day in Texas, humid and sunny. It had rained the day before, and the playground was still wet. The wind carried a stale scent of mud, and the jungle gym was still damp and rusty. I was minding my own business and enjoying the freedom away from the classroom. I had only one friend, Clyde. Clyde was absent that day. I hated that I did not have any other friends, but as I was poor and lived on a farm with a drunkard for a dad, I was a social outcast, although I did not understand all of this at the time. Clyde was my next-door neighbor, who was at least five miles away, and he was poor, too. My nemesis, Bennie Marshal, was there that day. He somehow found my loneliness too tempting to resist. The fact that his four “associates” were all there that day did not discourage him at all.

“Mrs. Holsten says your father looks like Willie Nelson,” Bennie said.

“Does not.” I did not realize at the time that this was exactly the response Bennie wanted.

“I’m gonna tell Mrs. Holsten that you called her a liar.”

“I’m gonna tell her that you called her ugly.” Well, it was true. Two days before, he had done exactly that.

“You do, and I’ll hit you.”
“My momma says that only stupid people hit other people.” This was true as well. However, on an elementary playground, this is not one of the strongest possible arguments to avoid a fight.

After a few minutes of “My dad is gonna beat up your dad” and some egging on by Bennie’s cohorts, we proceeded to the main event. Later on, my dad seemed more excited about the outcome than my mom. I still got a spanking for fighting. I like to think that I won because I put Bennie’s face in the mud and sat on his head, but then I remember the story about my dad and Tidro.

* * *

Most normal people have cats or dogs as pets. My dad has cows. He only has about fifty, but each one is his favorite. I figure that he likes them so much because they do not judge him. I watch as my dad stops by an old gray fence post to pull a few overgrown weeds. He does not pull all the weeds that are there. It looks like just enough to tempt the cows closer. Amazing enough, he does not even put down his whisky bottle, and manages a swig between balancing himself on the post and pulling the weeds. He has drinking down to an art. Sad part is, I just finally realized that about him. For the past several years, I used to think that he was another sloppy embarrassing drunk because I never stopped to take a real look at him.

I am not sure if I should let my father see me laughing at his falling down. He would be embarrassed and end up drinking and talking to his “buddies” all night, which were nothing more than his hard liquor bottles. His war wound must have tripped him up again. It could not possibly have been the dog or the liquor that caused his fall. Yet, he did not spill a drop of the spirits. He did bruise his elbow pretty good and scratch his
leg up pretty good too, but not a drop of whisky was wasted in the fall. I often wonder why my dad chooses Jack Daniels, Jose Cuervo, and Jim Beam to be his best friends. I’m almost certain the bottles talk back. I wonder if it sounds like they are down in a well when they speak. They probably each have a distinctive personality, depending on the mood of my dad of course.

* * *

Once when I was about twelve, I accidentally overheard my dad talking to himself/his buddies. I was sent by my mother to tell my father that dinner was ready. I was deep into playing with Lego’s and was irritated at being disrupted during my moment of Lego Land genius, which was mostly me being king of my Lego Land Kingdom. As I approached the barn, I heard my father talking. I did not hear any other voices, just my father’s. At first, I did not understand what he was talking about, but eventually, I heard enough to make me wish I had never heard what he said because it made me miserable to think that I could hurt my dad.

He was talking about the time that I won the local spelling bee. He was telling the bottles how proud he was of me, and how I would not even give him a hug after I won. He kept saying over and over “I love my boys, but my boys just don’t know.” It really did not have anything to do with my father. I just did not want the other kids see me be publicly affectionate with my parents. Something my father did not notice was I did not hug my mother either. She did not take it as personal, or at least, I never knew that she did. After that, I tried to be more considerate of my father’s feelings, but most of the time, I simply did not know how because I was never shown by my mother or my father how to be respectful of my father something that I have always regretted.
As I help him up, the stench from his sweating alcohol makes me nauseous. The best I can do is hold my breath and hope he does not notice. Then I get a direct smell of his caustic breath.

“Damn, you’re getting fat, but I still love you boys. That’s just your momma feeding you too much good cooking. One time when I was in the army, I had to cook extra food for a fat sergeant. And he always wanted the nastiest, greasiest food I could come up with.”

I usually tune him out after that. I’m surprised I actually let myself hear as much before ignoring him. I was overweight, but I did not want to be reminded. I always hoped when he mentioned me being overweight that it was him trying to suggest that I lose weight. It never worked that way, and I detested him for it.

The day Debra met my father ranked as one of the most embarrassing days of my life, and a day I will always regret not chiding my father for what he did. It was two days before my junior homecoming. I played on the highly uncelebrated football team, and I had wanted to date Debra since my freshman year. She was popular, good looking, and had a charming personality, (or so I thought at the time). She often wore this perfume that I thought was laced with pheromones, because the closer she got to me the greater effect she had on me physically. She always wore the latest fashions and was always surrounded by a group of male admirers that were far superior than I. The interesting part is, looking back, I wonder how much of her was just my imagination? But oh what an imagination I had and still have. She filled my adolescent
nights with such fantasies that I am too embarrassed to think about them now, much less mention them here. I may have not known what love was, but I lusted after her, eager for her to teach me.

That Wednesday after school, my car would not start, and I called my mom to come and pick me up. Unfortunately, she sent my dad instead, which took hours instead of minutes. At first, I was wondering what was taking so long, but after Debra came out from cheerleader practice and started talking to me, I forgot all about the time. We talked about things, nothing specific, just things. Love must have shown in my eyes because when my dad showed up I barely recognized him in his beat up rusty Ford pickup truck, his hair all messed up as usual, a cigarette hanging out of the right side of his mouth, and the stench of whiskey that preceded him. I decided to do the noble thing.

“Hey Dad, this is Debra. Debra, (slight pause to swallow my embarrassment/pride) this is my dad.” After the pleasantries were over, I had hoped that Debra would casually leave, and my dad would help me get my car started.

But instead, Debra gets the remark, “You’re a cutie pie. If I was my son’s age, I would sure like to date you. Hell, I’d like to date you now. Want a drink?”

Debra just smiled and started to say goodbye, which was a bit late, but I could do damage control later. But my dad had to open his mouth and destroy every last bit of dignity I had left.

“How long does it take you to shave those long sexy legs of yours?”

To say the least, Debra was unimpressed. I could not even look at her. To this day, I do not know the expression that was on her face. Since then, she seemed to
disappear off of the face of the earth. I can’t say I really blame her. I wish I could have
done the same.

* * *

As I help my father into the house, I realize he is embarrassed about falling down
because he starts making excuses as soon as he gets within earshot of me. I can’t
keep myself from staring at his thinning hair and the leather-like skin on his face. His
fingers are gnarled and tar-stained, and he looks like he has not changed clothes in a
week. His whiskey bottle is almost empty, but somehow, he manages to milk it and will
continue to do so until he can convince someone to either give him some money or buy
him another bottle. Or he may have other bottles stashed somewhere around the
house or barn. Having another bottle stashed is not likely because he cannot stop
drinking, but he may have half the mind to plan ahead at some point in time and forgot
about the hidden bottle. I’ve probably found more of these hidden bottles by accident
than he has on purpose. When I find them, I pour the contents on the ground and
smash the bottle. As it turns out, it is great therapy, but much like drinking, it only lasts
so long.

After I tell Mom about Dad falling, she prattles on for about thirty minutes on how
next time he is going to break something and end up in a hospital again. My father
hates the idea of going into a hospital. And frankly, I hate the idea of him going into a
hospital as well. Because he goes through detoxification and, frankly, that is scary as
hell to experience the first time, and after that, it can almost be amusing. I even find
myself making fun of my dad while he is in DT’s by mimicking him or using him as the
butt of a joke.
I had worked the previous night at a local restaurant near the university, cooking until four in the morning. It was summer time, and I had taken the liberty of sleeping late. About nine thirty, I received a call from my mom, which I let the answering machine pick up.

“Hey, it’s me, your mom. Are you there? Your dad is in the hospital. He tried riding Beefer, the big stud bull that he’s so proud of. You remember? Anyway, he was thrown and broke his collarbone and got a concussion. We’re in emergency now, but they plan on keeping him overnight. I’ll talk to you later.”

That was my mom in all her concern. As long as the doctor said he was going to be OK, my mom usually feigned concern. I later discovered that this is because she grew tired of the stupid stunts that my father pulled, and as a result, would get hurt and rely on my mom to “nurse” him until he healed. I can understand how she feels about this, and I’m glad that it is not me that has to take care of my father because that is backwards from the way it is supposed to be. Ultimately, this reinforced my disrespect for my father.

After a two-hour drive, I found myself in the hospital room with my dad. His face was scratched up, and his arm was in a sling. His clothes were actually clean and not torn and hanging in the nearby closet. My mom must have brought him some of his Sunday going to church clothes, and he smelled clean. He must have taken a bath before going to the emergency room. My mom stood there beside him and held his hand while he slept in the hospital gown. When she noticed me in the room, she looked at me with a frown and shook her head slowly. I think the oddest thing I could have
ever felt happened in the hospital room. My dad looked so real to me. He looked fragile and lost. I wanted to hold him and comfort him. Then the sleep medicine must have started wearing off because he started the DT’s.

He starts by trying to sit up and asking for his plumbing tools. The doctor asked us to try and keep him still, so we tried to restrain him, which only made things worse. Eventually, I asked him what he was trying to do, and he replied, “I got a busted pipe coming out of the ground over there, and I need to get my monkey and wrench the water off.”

I told him that I had already turned the water off, that he needed to let me know what else to do, and I would do it. He pointed off in some direction and said, “My truck’s over there; I need my pipe tobacco.”

I told him that he was out of pipe tobacco and I would have to get him some more. It was at this time that I decided to try and take his mind off of getting up, so I asked him if he wanted a cup of coffee to which his reply was yes. I cupped my hand into a fist and pretended to hand it to him like a cup of coffee. He cupped my hand with the both of his, and just as he was about to take a sip, I told him that the coffee was hot and to be careful. He puckered his lips together and blew on my hand trying to cool the coffee down. He put his lips to my hand and quickly pushed my hand away saying, “Dam, that coffee’s too hot.” With his eyes still closed, he looked in the direction of my mother, “Momma, I’m hungry.”

My mom looked up from her knitting and shook her head, “Ask him if he wants his ham sandwich?”
I did just that and my dad smiled and immediately grabbed my hand (that was previously the coffee cup) and tried to take a bite. Before he could take a bite, I told him that there was mayonnaise on the ham sandwich and that I would have to remake it for him. He gave a sour look and explained, in gibberish, his disdain for mayonnaise. He tried to get up again, so I decided to ask him to sing me a song. He said he could not remember any old song, but if I could get him his harmonica, he would play me a tune. Again, he grabbed my hand (that was previously the coffee cup and the ham sandwich) and putting it to his mouth, he blew into it. He gave an inquisitive look (like he always does when he is trying to think), and shook my hand saying, “This one is broken.” He then reached into his pretend shirt pocket and pulled out a cigarette. He put his lips together like he was trying to hold the cigarette in and suck in at the same time. He took his left hand and started making a slight snapping noise with his fingers.

I was confused at this and immediately looked at my mom. Feeling my eyes upon her, she looked up and noticed what my dad was doing. She shook her head and smiled. I was still a bit confused by the snapping of the fingers, and my mom, sensing the source of my perplexity, told me that he was trying to light his cigarette. It was at this point that the nurse came in and gave my dad some more sleeping medicine. I was relieved and hoped that I would never have to go through this again because I was already having lack of respect issues for my father. Now I would have to deal with this as well when all I wanted to do was find a way to avoid him all together.

My dad woke up several hours later and asked for help to get to the restroom. I watched as my mom carefully helped him out of bed and across the room. That is when it suddenly hit me; she was going to be taking care of him for the rest of his life. Even
though it made her angry to hear about it, I still felt sorry for her situation. It was more of a glad kind of sorrow because at least I would not be shouldered with the responsibility of having to take of him, but he would still get taken care of and not neglected.

When they returned from the restroom, my mom left for some food. My dad motioned me over to the bed. It was amazing. He was sober. I could still smell a faint scent of alcohol on his breath, but his somber eyes said the rest. They burrowed a sense of guilt into me that I have never been able to shake off. No one should have to look at their father with downcast eyes. They should be able to look at their father as a respectable and wonderful person someone who they could look up to and trust to be there in times of need. I guess he could tell that I was disappointed in him. Whether he could or not did not matter. I felt like he did and that is an awful feeling.

After I gave him a cup of ice water, he told me not to try and ride Beefer that it was too dangerous.

“So what ever encouraged you to ride him, dad?”

His lack of reply told me that his “friends” had given him the notion and persuaded him to do the deed.

After a few minutes of silence, he asked me where my mother was. When he heard that she was not in the room, he asked, “Would you get my keys out of my pants pocket and go down to the car and get my bottle out of the trunk? It is under the spare tire. And if it’s not there, it may be taped under the hood of the car.”

I went down to the car, found the hidden bottle, poured out the contents in a nearby street drain, and threw the bottle away in the trash. When I returned to the
room, I told him that there was no bottle there. He gave me a puzzled look and started to ask me something else when my mom walked in. I left shortly thereafter asking my mom to call me if she needed anything else.

* * *

My dad left the house that night after my mom threatened him with the hospital. I went searching for my dad. The sound of water splashing meant he was at the pond. Sitting on a nearby wooden fence, I watch as he sat there talking to himself. I could barely make out what he was saying, but he seemed to be arguing with himself. I watched curiously as he pulled on a string that was tied to the dock. Out comes a bottle of tequila wrapped in a plastic bag. Maybe I can talk to him, ask him, why he does this to himself, to me. As I approached him, he spoke to me without even looking at me.

“Careful, there’s big rocks around here, and you might trip on one like I did.”

Sitting down beside him, I picked up his fishing pole. “The hooks empty? Where’s your bait?”

Offering me a drink, he replies, “won’t do you any good. There’s no fish in here.”

Shaking my head, I lay down the pole and examine the tequila bottle wondering if I should toss it in the pond. A cold breeze causes my skin to prickle up, and I notice the sun setting on the horizon and marvel at all the beautiful colors that one can see in the country. I stare at my dad for a few minutes speculating if he feels the cold as well. The stench of the pond doesn’t seem to bother him, and the Texas mosquitoes won’t bite him for some reason. Laughing at this, I decide to go back inside because I sense that my dad wants to be alone.
Going into my old room, which is now my mom’s sewing room, I think about my dad for along time. I think about who he is and what he has done to me. I try to come up with reasons why he would treat his son that way. When I finally decide to leave, my dad comes in my old room and sits down. He offers me a glass of home brewed ice tea and a plate of my moms special home made peanut butter cookies. He asks me something that he has never asked before. He asks how school is going. He asks if I’m dating anybody. He starts to actually talk to me and not at me.

Somewhere in there, I start to think maybe I had known my dad all these years. The bottle in his hand appearance is a part of who he is. It is as much a part of his image as a hairstyle. When he says he loves me, I think that is the real him deep down inside trying to surface, even if just for an instant, to show me that he is still there and that he cares. For all his faults, he is my dad. My dad. I guess a part of me would have liked to been angry at him a little longer to hate him for all the things he had done wrong. Then I look at him and realize that maybe I am more ashamed of myself for trying to see my dad, as I wanted to see him, instead of who he really is.

Today is Christmas Eve, and I am glad I came. I think for the first time since I moved out, I am going to stay the night.
Welcome to My World

“My dad’s sick today.” Clyde said as he casually tossed me the baseball. Even at the age of nine, Clyde was like a lost puppy. I couldn’t believe how someone could ever need so much attention. I had known Clyde since we both could walk, and he had always been this way. But Clyde and I had played, fought, built things, destroyed things, got in trouble, and hung out together every summer. I rather enjoyed his friendship and looked forward to messing around all summer.

“Who do you want to pitch to us?” I said tossing Clyde the ball. We had just joined a Pee Wee league baseball team. This was my first time ever at playing a sport or on a team. And even though Clyde and I were the same age, he was the better fielder, and I was the better batter, at least that is what Clyde’s father told us. Clyde’s father was our personal trainer. He loved baseball and promised to spend all summer helping us to become better players.

My father came around the end of the barn behind the house where Clyde and I were standing. My father was clutching his daily Beefeater gin bottle in one hand and an orange in the other. He looked like a cat or a dog that had just been woken up with that half annoyed eye half closed look. When he saw Clyde and me standing there, he looked aggravated at first. Then he started to try to take a swig of his gin but the cap was still on. The confused look on his face when he tried to figure out how to unscrew the cap without losing the orange explained to me that he had probably been drinking all night.

“Could you pitch to us?” Clyde asked my father tossing him the ball.
The ball thumped my dad in the chest before falling to the ground with a thud. My dad looked at the ball, looked at us, and took a bite of the orange with the skin still on. When he realized that he had not peeled the orange yet, he spat out the peel and said, “I hate that when that happens.”

“That’s ok, Clyde, I don’t feel like practicing today anyway.” I said.

“That settles it. Let’s all go fishing then,” my dad said while trying to figure out how to peel the orange without losing his gin bottle.

I tried to make myself sick. I wished I could have thrown up violently, but instead, I just stood there dumbfounded when my dad offered Clyde the gin bottle. I thought for sure that my dad was going to get Clyde drunk. I was positive that Clyde would get in trouble and I would never get to play with him again. Because I lived on a farm, he was my only friend for miles around. I would not have anybody to play with, and even worse, I would be stuck with the embarrassment of having everyone in school know that my father got Clyde drunk. My life was over at the age of nine.

But much to my relief, my dad said, “Hold this while I peel this here o’-range.” My father had a habit of stressing each syllable in a word like some goober who could not figure out how to pronounce words properly. At least he found it amusing.

Then it happened. My dad offered Clyde a swig of his gin and a slice of his orange. Clyde’s eyes went big like two big radar dishes searching out the truth. He eyed the gin bottle and sniffed at it like it was some kind of forbidden fruit and he was about to cross that threshold of no return. “Are you sure?” Clyde asked.

“Sure, just don’t go bo’-garting it. That bottle’s got to last me the whole day.” My dad said.
Clyde struggled with the cap of the gin bottle. Apparently, my dad takes his gin seriously. He screws the cap on tight so he won't lose any gin to evaporation, not that anyone could tell him any differently. After fumbling with the cap that looked like it was welded into place, Clyde dropped the bottle.

I have never seen a drunk man move as fast as my dad did. He caught the gin bottle before it hit the ground. My dad dropped his orange and landed face first in the dirt, but the gin bottle never touched the ground. I felt like yelling the word “Safe” like umpires do in baseball.

My dad stood up and brushed himself off. “You got to be more careful there.” My dad examined the bottle. “This here is liquid gold. We don’t want to waste liquid gold now do we, kids?” My dad unscrewed the cap and gently handed the bottle to Clyde like the bottle was filled with nitro glycerin. “Cause a fine gin is like a good wo’-man. First she will seduce you; then she'll make you want to drink some more of this fine Con’-conct’-ion.”

Clyde took a sip, and his eyes started to water. He tried to swallow it before he spit it out. He made some of the strangest faces I have ever seen. Somehow, he had managed to contort his face so that his lips were literally even with his eyebrows. His eyelids were so scrunched tight that they looked melded together. Clyde shook his whole body and gave a raucous cough, which sounded like some wild beast was choking on their dinner.

“That’s right. Good stuff right there.” My dad said. He took the bottle from Clyde, looked at me, and offered me the bottle. “Now, you kids don’t go telling your mother now.”
I shook my head and backed up. I wanted to tell my mother, but all that would do was start them fighting again. I guess I was going to have to handle this one on my own.

Clyde reached for the bottle again. After his second sip, he made the same piercing noise as before, but he did not spit any out. The smile on his face told me he was hooked.

“How about you boys going fishing with me down at yonder pond?” My dad asked.

I refused, but Clyde graciously accepted.

My dad put his arm around Clyde and said, “I love them boys.”

This was a phrase that I had grown to hate, and every time I heard him say that line, I could feel the revulsion growing inside of me like a volcano waiting to explode. I decided to go inside and watch television, among other things to keep myself from visibly pouting. I wanted to sit there and soak in my own disillusionment and frustration. I wanted to hate the world and everyone in it. I wanted to scream and tear the house apart. I wanted to launch nuclear weapons and blow everything up. But ultimately, I just wanted my friend back.

This is one section of a larger seven section piece. That is why it is so short. Among your other comments, I would also like to know if this section can stand on its own.
Matamoras

It’s important to remember that Jim, Mike, and I had been drunk for a day and a half. When you’re twenty and in South Padre Island on spring break, you have only two goals: get drunk and get laid. Seeing as none of us were the suave, debonair, dashing types or any good at all associating with the opposite sex, getting drunk was it. It’s not that we were gay. Jim was simply overbearing, and Mike, my older brother, clammed up and just stood there giggling softly like an idiot, and I, well as much as I hate to admit it even now, I was just not the ladies man. Instead of clamping up like my brother, I would just start talking. I didn’t say much, but I did have the gift of gab. I did learn years later that most girls at that age like to talk about themselves. I considered that an important piece of information that I should have had a lot earlier in life.

Of course, my male role models were an alcoholic father, a drug addict for an uncle that hung around all the time trying to teach me about life and women, women mostly and usually the skanky ones at that, and a friend of my fathers that was also an alcoholic. The friend of my fathers, uncle Robby, liked to hold farting and burping contests. My mom once told me that on Robby’s second divorce, his wife actually listed as a reason for the divorce that he would pick his boogers and casually wipe them on her. With that being said, I think the cat’s out of the bag on what kind of early social skills I had. So I learned what not to do and what not to say to a girl that interested me, so I compensated my lack of a proper upbringing with other such garrulous interests.

So now, we know why Jim, Mike, and I had been drunk for a day and a half since we arrived in South Padre Island. Man, South Padre Island during spring break. I’ve never seen so many beautiful drunk women in my life. The funny part about being
loquacious to a young drunk girl is as long as someone keeps handing them alcohol, they still could not care less about what was being said. No matter how much I knew or how many facts I spurted out, she would never be interested. So back to plan B, get drunk.

I know it’s somehow weird, but I had never been drunk before going to South Padre Island. With a father for an alcoholic, I was never interested in drinking because I saw what it did to people. But something was different this time, this place. The atmosphere was charged with a sense of greater energy that flowed with everyone winding down and having a good time. There was something about South Padre Island. Aw hell, who am I kidding? The place was South Padre Island and the time was spring break. What more reason did a young man need?

It is important to note that I’ve met Jim a few times before South Padre Island, but I didn’t know him well. He hung out with and worked with my brother at a Mr. Jim’s Pizza. What little I did know of Jim was that Jim was like a pit bull. Not so much mean and ornery, but aggressive. He owned the sidewalk. And I mean he stood there taking up the sidewalk. Even though he is six foot nothing and barely weighs 200 pounds, people still walked around him with a few feet to spare. He spoke to everyone as if they automatically understood English, and when the other person would reply in a foreign tongue, Jim would reiterate, in English with large hand gestures. To Jim, everyone understood English. It was the way of the world.

But we had been drunk for a day and a half and now, we were out of all the alcohol we had brought with us: two liters of rock gut tequila, a case of Negro Modelo, a
fifth of Southern Comfort, and a flat, left over, two liter bottle of coke mixed with Crown Royal. But the good news, these things were extremely cheap in Matamoras, Mexico.

The smell is the hardest part to describe about Matamoras. Imagine a musty swamp smell, wet dirty concrete, car exhaust, halitosis, and just plain flatulence all mixed together to create a unique and overwhelming aroma. The hotter the weather the stronger the smell, only it starts to get a sun baked staleness to it around noon. I mention the smell of Matamoras because that is the first thing that hit me as I started to cross the border into Mexico. A smell that either made me sick, not physically, or made me feel all warm and fuzzy. I will always associate that particular smell with the feeling of entering another country, of always being in a foreign place.

The view of Matamoras, as I crossed the bridge over the trickling Rio Grande, was stunning, not completely amazing in the sense that it was gorgeous or a must see for everyone. But a visual complexity that made me wonder how long the buildings could remain standing. Dull white-washed colors of green, red, yellow, tan, and dirt brown created a mosaic masterpiece of dilapidated domiciles, even the trees seem to struggle against the backdrop of man-made nature. Everything had a yellowish cigarette tar ting to it like the city had been home to an annual smoke out and no one thought to clean the dingy tar stains from the walls. Every little nook and cranny was filled with some form of living compartment, be it cardboard boxes, old road signs, lost clothing, or a conglomeration of local flora strewn together to fashion a makeshift roof. Waste not want not must have been the locals’ motto because even the pieces of trash were used to clog up leeks in the ceiling or walls.
Once I got past all of this super sensory information, the sounds started to seep in. The sound of foreign syllables being bandied about like a tennis ball on speed rang through the streets like a bad chorus. Even if I did speak the local language, it would have all still sounded like gibberish. A thousand voices trying to trample a thousand running motors that were trying to outdo a thousand clickity-clack noises that were creating the subtle rhythm of the streets. I stood still for a moment trying to recognize the song that the sounds were playing.

But I became nauseous, too much sound, too much commotion, and a queasiness like eating rancid eggs with a hangover. I stumbled backwards into a wall and checked to see where my older brother was. I looked around and shapes blurred into crayon figures. I wasn’t sure if it was the sobering up or what, but I felt I did not belong here. None of us belonged here. I finally saw my brother and glared at him trying to make out his facial expression. What was he saying? His teeth were bigger than his mouth, but they weren’t. His head appeared swollen, but not. His nose pulsed larger with each of my heartbeats. Suddenly, I felt the solid touch of a brick wall from behind and shook my head. I glanced at the short pudgy man on the corner. He was staring at me and not just a standard stare. It was more of a glower that said, “You sorry ass fucking Americans who come down here with all your money, take everything, and treat us like shit.” Yeah, that kind of stare. The kind of stare that made me think that if he had a gun, I wouldn’t be telling this story right now.

What kind of Americans, people, did that guy have to deal with every day to make him so look so angry? What shitty lot in life made him so enraged that he had to look at me in that way? Then I realized what kind of arrogant American would make this
guy feel so much loathing towards all Americans. I realized it because my brother’s friend, Jim, is that kind of person.

I took a deep breath and coughed up the disgust. Then the unexpected happened. Jim, for some reason still unknown to me, felt the urge to walk up to this guy with the pissed off look on his face and ask for a ride. Jim’s shoulders were laid back and his face a calm eager. He looked like he was about to tell the pissed off guy a joke, put his arm around the pissed off guy, and toss back a few beers with him.

I thought, “Great, our first day in Matamoras, and Jim is already causing trouble.”

But as it turns out, the angry man was actually a taxi driver. What really threw me was that the car he was standing next to had several major trophies from the local junkyard rally. By trophies, I mean parts of the car were paper and bubble gum. I could have done a better job with duct tape and kite string. It looked more like a Hollywood prop than a real car. I guess the neat part was that if the car was used in a robbery, it would have been hard to pinpoint the exact color of the car.

“You a cabbie?” Jim said.

The angry guy cocked his head and his lips actually got thinner and whiter. I thought he had stopped breathing for a moment and was about to have an aneurism. The angry guy narrowed his eyes and spoke in a thick Spanish accent, “Si. 15 dollars to market.”

I noticed several other locals standing nearby. They stopped talking and glanced at Jim like on the investment commercials where everyone stops to listen to one person talk. Without so much as a flinch, Jim said, “Great. Ten Dollars now and five when we
get there.” He reached for his wallet. I later found out that the cabbie would have done it for five dollars instead of fifteen, but what did we know? We were stupid Americans.

Jim reached for the door handle, and I though the angry guy, the cabbie, was going to become even angrier because Jim was touching his car, his prized possession. Instead, Angry Guy surprised me; he cracked a smile, and ran to the driver’s side door. He slid in like the car was the General Lee on the Dukes of Hazard and started the car up with several loud bangs and a gear grinding. He turned around towards the back seat while he was driving and started talking to us like we were his best friend, not that we understood him. All the while, he held on to the ten dollar bill like it was his scrotum, gentle yet firmly secure.

The market was a worn out maze littered with broken signs, scattered refuse, and constant bantering from the local salesmen, “Come to my store,” “I have jewelry for you,” or “You like my shirts?” The whole thing was like wading through the eighth level of hell in Dante’s Inferno. The damned wanted our attention, our money, or souls. We were being grabbed at, bandied about, doused with the smells of the coming last level. The devil himself invited us to stay awhile and dine with him and his three cohorts.

I fell to my knees and started to succumb to the temptation when I came upon one of the most savory scents I have ever experienced. It was like in the cartoons where the smell forms a hand and carries the person to the source. The aroma was a long soft note played by an alto violin, a lone voice coming from the pulpit, reaching down to save me. It was the smell of garlic sautéed in butter, fresh cumin, oregano, hickory smoked herb encrusted meat, crushed black pepper in a sweet fajita marinade. I could taste the soft mellow flavor of corn on the cob being deep fat fried, the deep rich
flavor of slightly seasoned queso and salsa. Suddenly, a damned soul, a merchant, seized my arm and started begging me to come into his store. Now all I could smell was sun baked body funk, the odor of an overweight guy sweating garlic bologna, the stench of sweaty feet and brown crusty teeth. My mind sunk into confusion and disarray. I struggled to overcome the immersion into bewilderment.

I fought through the green haze surrounding me in search of the incredible aroma from only moments earlier. It was then that I heard Jim exclaim, “Look! I told you they eat dogs.”

I looked, and in the window was, not a dog, but a skinned goat being smoked in a windowed smoker. It was the source of the extraordinary scent that had captivated me like a swami mesmerizes his devotees. The moment of truth had come. My redemption lie on the other side of that glass. I began walking towards the smoked goat like a bug flying towards a light.

Jim grabbed my arm, “You aren’t going to eat dog are you?”

“Dog, smells good, dog—yes—must eat.” I said.

Jim whacked me with the back of his hand. “Wake up, dude, you’re about to eat dog. You’re going to become one of them.”

Later than night at two am, the policia lined up at the bottom of Central Avenue. They were dressed in full black riot gear with the word “Policia” in big white letters across the front and back of their bullet proof jackets. They had plastic face shields pulled down over their faces and their AK47’s formed a perfect straight line tip of the barrel to butt of the next gun. There must have been a good thirty or so, and behind them was a paddy wagon with bullet proof glass and armed guards escorting from the
sides. On the top of the vehicle were two more guards laying prone with guns at the ready.

“Look! It’s the Mexican President’s motorcade.” Jim said.

Suddenly, I was shoved into the people in front of me. I heard a guy to my right say, “Hey, stop touching me you fucking spic.” I turned to see some guy turn and deck one of the policia. Out of nowhere, twenty more policia came and tackled the guy and several people around him. In mere seconds, like a finely tuned pit team for a NASCAR race, the policia put the guys in the paddy wagon and returned to pushing everyone down the street. I looked for Mike and Jim. They were ahead of me, and Jim was turned around. “Hey, you can’t treat Americans like that. We have rights.”

I watched as my brother grabbed Jim by the arms and began dragging him towards the border.

I could hear Jim screaming, “Let me go, that’s not right. They can’t treat Americans that way.”

When I finally caught up to my brother and Jim, my brother stopped and pushed Jim into a dead tree, “Shut the fuck up, and you just might make it across the border in one peace. You dumb ass.”

Jim stood with his mouth and left eye cocked for a few moments, his standard I’m not sure what to say right now look. Then Jim said, “It’s just not right, that’s all.”

It was then that Jim noticed a taco stand selling ten tacos for a dollar. Like a bear fresh out of hibernation and smelling a camper cooking breakfast, Jim made a bee line to the front of the taco stand, cutting off several other hungry drunk patrons. He slapped
his money on the counter, “Give them to me fresh, and I don’t want no dam peños either.”

The guy behind the counter reached underneath and pulled out a small wicker basket full of tacos. Jim handed a couple to me and my brother. Like a savage beast, I devoured every last crumb and drop of juice from that taco. I stood sucking the juices from my finger tips and looked at Jim like a homeless child begging for more. Jim put more money on the counter and turned towards me, “Have no fear, dude, I got you covered.”

It was then that I noticed, purely by coincidence and out of the corner of my eye, a three legged dog attached to a metal stake in the ground. Surely, the dog had been in an accident and lost his leg somehow. I thought nothing of it.

Jim placed a taco in my cupped hands and looked where I was looking. “Dog! Were eating dog. Damn Mexicans feeding us dog.” In a loud and boisterous roar, Jim instantaneously puked up every ounce of alcohol and tacos right in front of the taco stand.

I turned to see what my brother was going to do about it. Mike had this look on his face like he was an active volcano about to explode. He looked like a zit that was primed and ready to be popped. And without any great pomp or circumstance, he sided with Jim.

Because I felt left out, really because of the smell and thought that others were puking right in front of me, I decided, had no choice. I did not want to be the odd man out.
Here we are three drunk American guys puking in front of this poor Mexican’s taco stand. I imagined him going home that night and crying because he could not by his child a new pair of shoes or buy something nice for wife or pay for the operation that his mother so desperately needed. No, tonight he would go home a broken man because of three drunk American kids puked in front of his taco stand and ran off his other customers. The owner tried to shoo us away to no avail. All that did was somehow make us puke even more. The long line that was in front of the taco stand had turned into a cheering section, a peanut gallery really, and all the poor Mexican owner could do was sit and sob like we had just killed his dog.