WEREWOLVES AND TIME MACHINES

Frisco Edwards

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APPROVED:

Miroslav Penkov, Major Professor
Bonnie Friedman, Committee Member
Barbara Rodman, Committee Member
David Holdeman, Chair of the Department of English
Mark Wardell, Dean of the Toulouse Graduate School

This collection consists of a critical preface and five short stories. The preface considers the use of the fantastical in fiction and how it works as a tool to reach readers in comparison with realistic fiction. The stories investigate this in by following several strange characters put in everyday human situations.
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PART I

A HOUSE BUILT FROM WORDS
Literature as a concept is forever changing and being broken up into genres, tarnishing the word “genre” to become a dirty word within academia. To the general faceless ‘they’ of the academy, “literary fiction” is the most commonly investigated genre of literature. This is not to say that other genres cannot be read or enjoyed, but they normally exist in a world beyond the classroom.

Just like houses, stories require more than one tool to be constructed successfully. When a contractor sets out to build a house, she does not show up with her bright red toolbox, open it up and pull out a hammer and start banging it against things. And what are stories, if not little homes that the reader is allowed to live within for a few moments, shanties to escape the heavy rain of a waiting room? Different writers build different types of stories and the best writers are aware that all their homes should not look alike if they want to affect the most readers possible. It takes a certain type of person to live in suburbia and likewise in a townhome in the city or a house designed by Frank Lloyd Wright. All of these people living in different homes still deal with the same human issues on a daily basis. I suggest that no structure is sturdier than another, but instead that a house should not be considered inhabitable simply because it is made of blankets strewed over the backs of chairs and always held down by delicate vases on tabletops. Just as some people may not feel nourished after listening to a classical composition, but can be soothed by jagged heavy metal, so may other people find realistic fiction boring and fantastic literature truly exciting. None of these houses are better than the other; however, some are more suited for certain types of people and it is time to stop pulling the blankets away and treating the structures as flimsy, because blankets are sometimes the only protection one has from the Bogeyman.
Elevating the allegedly real over the fantastic has forced authors like Stephen King and George R.R. Martin out of classrooms. In her book Respecting “The Stand”: A Critical Analysis of Stephen King’s Apocalyptic Novel, Jenifer Paquette discusses the faces and protests the faculty made when she presented the notion of her thesis. Established academics fought against the notion of examining Stephen King’s work critically. We do not read The Odyssey, Dracula, or Frankenstein and refuse to take the works seriously simply because they involve monsters and supernatural acts. J.M. van der Laan points out that “at the time of Frankenstein’s publication, the very idea of building a being from scavenged body parts and of such a creature’s real existence could hardly be conceived or received by the average contemporary reader as anything but a fiction” (1). The readers of the time could have read Frankenstein, been terrified, and moved on with their lives. It could easily be considered a simple horror story, but the novel has a much larger intent than solely making its readers fearful.

In Bagombo Snuff Box: Uncollected Short Fiction, Kurt Vonnegut’s first rule for writing fiction is “Use the time of a total stranger in such a way that he or she will not feel the time was wasted” (12). So, why must escape from the reader’s everyday reality have a negative connotation? Good literature could very well be escapist if it allows the reader to slip into the book. Literature should be offering readers a new world to visit while still teaching them about their own. It is meant to help readers face problems and teach them how to cope with their daily lives. There is nothing wrong with writing “serious” realistic fiction. Richard Yates’ Revolutionary Road is a marvelous novel; however, to unhappy readers living in suburbia, it does not offer an escape from their lives. In the same sense, because a George Saunders story may not take itself too seriously, does not mean that by including absurdist elements, the story is asking to be read and forgotten. While investigating Saunders, Pogell notes that “though it might
seem that only a frivolous writer would focus on something as silly as theme parks, Saunders is dead serious about them” (461). It is the manner in which the emotions are approached that is important and Saunders does not treat them lightly. I am not suggesting that realistic writing is in someway less effective than fantastical, but rather that they are both dramatically different tools in the same toolbox.

Just as people have different tastes in food and clothing, it is natural that they would have different tastes in art; but these separate genres of literature must be recognized as equal. Terry Eagleton recognizes the difficulties in distinguishing between “good” and “bad” literature, because it becomes a matter of taste. Jonathon Culler views the word literature to be like a weed in a garden. When “weeds” are pretty, are they still considered weeds? How is one to know the difference (Culler, 23). With this argument, it becomes a question of preference and what works for a reader on an individual level. Because of this, one form of literature cannot be trivialized because it uses a different tactic to achieve the same results. It is a fallacy to state that because something contains elements that outside of “literary fiction” it is not serious fiction. These elements can range from the borderline realistic to completely bizarre. Steve Almond’s story “Skull,” which deals with a woman who has a missing eye, is an example of an almost realistic use of this tactic. Her boyfriend, in a fashion, makes love to the socket and it is a wonderful tale of honest, disgusting, love. This is not necessarily magical realism, because, hypothetically speaking, it could happen, however it seems just beyond the natural world. On the complete opposite end of the spectrum, Stephen Graham Jones’s story “Zombie Sharks with Metal Teeth,” which is about a mouse with a super-brain. The mouse speaks eloquently and can move objects around in the room with his telekinetic powers, which, I believe it is safe to assume, most people will consider highly fantastical. The story does not fall under “literary fiction,” but it becomes a
story about a man dealing with the choices he has made in his life, which is a relatable human problem. The issue at hand is hidden beneath a fantastical story. Stephen King uses these elements to engage readers on multiple levels. Paquette notes that “unlike with other, more traditional literature, King does not force readers to contemplate life’s deepest mysteries, nor does he demand that readers dissect his prose to find hidden meanings, but he does offer this option to those who choose to look deeper into his work” (15). If escapist literature is defined as literature that offers a reader a glimpse into a different world than that of her own then all well written stories would be escapist, but if escapist comes to be another word for the stories which include the fantastical, then it becomes easier to manage. Few people will read Jeffery Eugenides’ *The Marriage Plot* and say that it was a specifically fun read; however, it can offer the reader an escape into the story. So, the question becomes: can fiction that does not offer a completely realistic treatment of life still be considered “serious” by readers and what purpose is served by including fantastical elements in a story?

It is curious to consider the difference in sales of literary fiction versus the fantastic, which always seems to be tossed away. Certainly there are realist authors who are able to make it to the best-sellers list, but not in the magnitude Stephen King and other authors who make use of the fantastic do. This is a notion that Paquette examines in her book.

This is not to advocate a complete abandonment of literary ideals, but certainly reader’s expectations of “a good read” have changed over the years; and is the responsibility of the literary critic to consider, if not condone, the needs and desires of a changing audience. If sales are any judge of popularity, which they ought to be because people choose to buy what they presumably want to read (books for school aside), and Stephen King is among the best-selling writers of his time, it makes sense that there ought to be something that so many readers find worthwhile in his work, just as J.K. Rowling and Stephenie Meyer have manager to touch a nerve in the American consciousness. In a country where people choose television over the printed word, it is significant that King’s books sell the way they do. (7)
It can be assumed that authors like Stephen King sell better because they are more accessible to the general public. Commercial fiction is intended to be easily consumed. With most products, with maybe the exception of puzzles, consumers purchase them based upon ease of use. Few people shopping for a new computer are looking for the most complicated to operate, so why is this what academic readers look for in literature?

The notion of escapism has become a pejorative, which creates the notion in readers, myself included, that if something is difficult to understand it must be good literature and if something is easy to read it must be bad literature. John Gardner attacks the academy’s notions of aesthetics in *The Art of Fiction* saying “subtly and insidious, standards become perverted. “Good” as in aesthetic judgment comes to mean “tricky,” “academic,” “obscure” (Gardner, 13). Because of this the fantastic becomes a lesser forum for addressing the reader. Again in *On Moral Fiction*, Gardner addresses the idea of escapism with this notion by saying “in general, escapist fiction has always been conservative and conformist, serious fiction, individualistic” (43). This idea is contradictory, but it is plain where Gardner is coming from. For him, escapist is a work that is seemingly template based and is created to sell copies, not to engage the reader. This is fallacious thinking. He does mention that he believes that this is changing and when he investigates the fantastic seems to be fond of it. In *The Art of Fiction* Gardner states:

Dragons, like bankers and candy-store owners, must have firm and predictable characters. A talking tree, a talking refrigerator, a talking clock must speak in a way we learn to recognize, must influence events in ways we can identify as flowing from some definite motivation; and since character can come only from one of two places, books or life, the writer’s aunt is as likely to show up in a fable as in a realistic story. (21-22)

In this, Gardner is correct. This is the only successful way to address such ridiculous characters, if success is to be gauged by how the piece in question affects the reader. Zombies and talking dogs must be treated with the same honesty as their human counterparts are and
while they do not have to desire human things they must behave in a fashion that seems reasonable to a human reader, at least until we can understand and build a dictionary for dog’s barking. In the introduction to *The Left Hand of Darkness* Ursula Le Guin says “this may explain why many people who do not read science fiction describe it as ‘escapist,’ but when questioned further, admit they do not read it because ‘it’s so depressing’” (xi). The fantastic has a way of setting up camp in a reader’s unconscious.

Both literary fiction and magical realism are attempting to expose a soft spot in the reader and prod it. Fiction is an attempt to understand the surrounding world and learn how to deal with the trials that humans face. The narrator of Oscar Wilde’s “The Portrait of Mr. W. H.” finds that “it is Art, and Art only, that reveals us to ourselves” (343). Kate Chopin and George Saunders are after the same thing, giving the reader a roof to hide beneath when the world becomes too difficult to manage alone. There are signs on the doors of these homes that remind the reader that someone else has been here before and someone will come after and though the path is hard, she is not alone.

While Chopin might use a realistic treatment to deal with these issues, Saunders uses the ridiculous as a tool to teach. In “Sea Oak,” Saunders makes use of zombies to deal with regret. A brother and his two sisters live in a cramped apartment with their impossibly sweet aunt. She incessantly smiles and refuses to see anything but the positive of every situation. They do not live in a nice neighborhood and a burglar breaks into their apartment, which scares the aunt to death, quite literally. The family buries her, but soon she comes back to their apartment to sit in her old rocking chair. The new aunt is angry with everyone as well as herself for living the way she had. She is violent and she curses, two things she was completely against in life. She is incredibly vulgar and the juxtaposition to her sweet, grandmotherly character is startling. She
tells her nieces and nephew of all of her plans about having lovers and going to France, because she regrets the way she lived. The aunt decomposes slowly as she barks out orders and uses her magical-zombie-powers to slam cabinets closed. The scene is ridiculous; the aunt is falling apart because of the way she has lived. Saunders uses the fantastic to display an exaggerated human issue, regret. The story is funny and charming and Saunders uses the ridiculous to his advantage. There is a sort of smokescreen being constructed and behind all of the disarming, pun unintended, humor within the story is a serious human concern. It is not specifically hidden nor do I believe it is intended to be, but some readers will walk away saying the story is about a zombie. Beneath this though, these same readers will be considering their own choices in life and what makes them happy.

Kate Chopin has a similar story called “Regret” in which an older woman who has never married, just as the aunt in Saunders’ story, is living alone and believes herself to have lived a happy life until she must take care of four children. Once the children leave she notices the calmness of her house, the quiet that she once enjoyed she realizes she now hates. At this moment, she knows she is not happy and wishes she could have lived differently. The story is treated in a completely realistic fashion.

Although Saunders and Chopin use different impetuses for the epiphany in their stories, both deal with the same issue in almost the same way. In Saunders’ story, it is only in death that the woman realizes she is unhappy and not ready to die. Her arms and fingers are falling off as she sits in the rocking chair talking about taking lovers. In Chopin’s story, the woman sees the liveliness and excitement of the children and it makes her wish she could start over and have her own. Both Chopin and Saunders are after the same reaction from the reader, but they are using different tools. They wish to makes the reader question her decision and her happiness. For the
women in these stories, it is too late, but for the reader it may not be. These stories are trying to save the reader by using different tactics. Both are considered literary, however Chopin uses realism while Saunders uses the fantastic, which, depending on the treatment of the subjects is sometimes called “magical realism.”

The genre “magic realism” floats around university hallways to define literature that takes the fantastic and treats it realistically or at least as realistically as possible. Magical realism and fantasy are sometimes confused. Fantasy may use the same tactic as magical realism, but normally fantasy exists in its own world, whereas magical realism exists in ours. It is a natural treatment of something that is unnatural. Both types of writing offer the reader something that literary fiction cannot and that is pure magic. It is often said that a person can only be hypnotized if they are willing and the same is true for fantastic stories, but if the reader will be patient the reward will be incalculable.

By using the fantastic, authors are enacting a concept known as defamiliarization, which allows the readers to step back away from their own problems and view them through someone else’s eyes. When he spoke at UNT, Steve Almond said that the best way to become a better writer is by reading the bad stories of other writers, because it is too difficult for people to see their own mistakes, but it is easy to see the mistakes of others. This is also true for many problems humans deal with. Defamiliarization allows readers this opportunity, as Shklovsky points out in “Art as Technique.”

The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects “unfamiliar,” to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. (778)

There is a certain amount of magic that goes on in Wells Tower’s and George Saunder’s stories. The reader is lulled into a strange world where there is no time to question the rules. In
the title story of Tower’s *Everything Ravaged, Everything Burned*, the narrator is a Viking living within a Viking community; however he speaks like an American living in the 21st century. The story is not at all realistic. Tower creates a world that allows the reader to suspend her disbelief. He offers an escape. Tower uses this wonderful world to address 21st century human problems. He sails the readers out into new territory where the Vikings sack a village and focuses on the plot. It is only at the end that Tower takes a turn and allows the narrator to reflect on a real human problem. The narrator realizes that he is almost incapacitated with fear of harm coming to his family. He loves them so much he must constantly be in fear of them being harmed. The magic here is defamiliarization. The readers can no longer recognize themselves in the characters, certainly because few of us have been a Viking except for maybe on Halloween. However they leave the story learning more about themselves and the world that they live in. By using defamiliarization, writers of the fantastic are able to seduce readers into letting their guards down long enough that the author can sneak into their subconscious and this is when the most work can be done.

At the end of *Gulliver’s Travels*, Gulliver returns to England and refuses to eat with his family because he sees them as the nasty Yahoos. Instead he takes his tea in the stable with his horses which closely resemble the Houynhm. In the closing remarks of the story Gulliver says “therefore I here entreat those who have any tincture of this absurd vice, that they will not presume to appear in my sight,” (Swift, 394). Gulliver is speaking of the pride in which the people of England have but is deaf to the fact that the very words in which he speaks are the embodiment of pride. Swift is satirizing those who cannot see their own flaws. People have a tendency to not recognize these problems in themselves; it is a defense mechanism to keep daily
life moving. It is an old idea and the fantastic is what defamiliarizes the reader from the mechanism.

It is an idea that has persisted in psychology, as well, since Jung. Carl Jung’s notion of the shadow is essentially a portion of an individual’s personality that the person is incapable of recognizing in himself or in others. This idea becomes specifically relevant when considering addictions. Most people, whether they have attended a support group meeting or not (perhaps they have seen *Fight Club*) are familiar with the idea of acceptance being the first step toward dealing with an addiction. This works with any personal issue. A problem must be recognized before it can be addressed. By using fantastical elements in a story, the author is able to allow this first step to take place.

This does not mean that a realistic writer of fiction cannot force a reader to reevaluate herself, but that the fantastic writing is taking the back door. Fantastical authors are hiding the medicine in candy. Gardner points out that “whereas the realist argues the reader into acceptance, the tale writer charms or lulls him into dropping objections; that is, persuades him to suspend disbelief,”(Gardner, 24). Children’s books and television shows have been doing this forever in a much more simplistic fashion. The Berenstain Bears taught a generation of children morals for everyday life, but adults are not given a handbook and human issues become highly complex as we age. This is where art steps in to offer suggestions and advice. In the case of children, if simply told not to do something, frequently they will not listen, but if they see the repercussions of their actions perpetrated on a family of adorable bears it becomes easier for them to learn. The same is certainly true of adults. It is with this in mind that I approach my own writing.

With my work I want people to escape. I want to be entertaining. I want readers to forget that they live in a world where a force is constantly pulling them back toward the earth; where
they have bills to pay and other things they should be doing besides reading. I want them to
forget all about the rules of their world and believe in monsters and magic as if they were little
children again. While their disbelief in the “unreal” is suspended the stories do their best work.
The use of this tactic allows the ideas of the story to sink into the reader’s unconscious.

When I approached this collection at the beginning of my MA, the largest problem that I
ran into was one of style. As a white male who grew up in Highland Village, Texas, which is
frequently awarded America’s Safest City, I realized that many of the stories I wanted to tell had
been told hundreds of times already. The first few stories I wrote in my early workshops were
dry stories about suburban households where husbands cheated on wives and battled with
addiction. I tried so hard to mimic the greats. I kept rereading Hemingway and Carver trying to
figure out how to do what they did. And it became not only about my lack of desire to tell the
same stories, but that I had become sick of reading the same story. In the three years I have spent
working on my Master’s I have become exhausted of reading the same story over and over again
with different titles, written by authors like Jonathon Franzen (The Corrections) and Jeffery
Euginides (The Marriage Plot). And while I found the writing beautiful in all of these and aspire
to be even one tenth as good as any of these authors I felt nauseated at the idea of reading the
same story told in the same fashion. I found myself renaming the novels Revolutionary Road 2:
The College Years and Revolutionary Road 3: The early 2000’s. Shklovsky notes that
“habitualization devours works, clothes, furniture, one’s wife, and the fear of war” (778). I
needed to get a fresh look at the stories I wanted to tell. I came to the realization that I needed to
get away from what I thought I was supposed to be writing and remind myself of why I started
writing in the first place.
When I was eleven, I started reading Stephen King and when I was eleven and a couple of days I started writing stories. King was the reason I wanted to write. As a child I found his stories entertaining and nothing more, but as an adult I know that there is far more happening behind the words. Paquette notes that “...[King] is both a popular writer and a literary writer—a sort of John Steinbeck (who was popular in his day as well) for the masses—who can keep readers turning pages while subtly allowing them to think about bigger issues” (15). It took me reading a novel solely for entertainment, as a break from work, in order to find my own style and a solution to the problem of telling the same story with the same tools.

While reading John Dies at the End by David Wong, I stumbled across a sentence that changed the way I thought about fiction. A couple of characters are examining a woman when “She burst into snakes” (13). It seems silly, but this one sentence made me understand that the reason I could not do what Hemingway was doing was because I was not Ernest Hemingway and it was a marvelous realization. I set out to tell my stories in a different way. Rather than putting normal characters in extraordinary situations I wanted to put extraordinary characters in ordinary situations.

In “The Same Thing That’s Wrong with All of Us,” the only story in the collection with a first person narrator, the main character is a college freshman. He has to face a world completely different from the one he grew up in, in a different city and realize that there are so many different views from the ones his parents raised him with. I think the first year of college is always a difficult journey for a young adult to make. It is as close as most American children come to a hero’s journey. The letter of acceptance is the call to adventure and the first night in the dorm is the crossing of the first threshold. Joseph Campbell tells the story of Prince Five-Weapons and how he must defeat the ogre. The prince has completed his training in all five
weapons and is a superior warrior, but none of the five weapons can defeat the ogre. It is the “invisible sixth: the divine thunderbolt of knowledge of the transcendent principle, which is beyond the phenomenal realm of names and forms” (Campbell, 73). The prince must step outside his known reality and cross the threshold in order to defeat the ogre. This is what Vern, the main character in “The Same Thing That’s Wrong with All of Us,” must do as well when he reaches college. He crosses the threshold of the dorms and is transformed by the knowledge that this new world offers. However, like Coriolanus, he must return home with this new wisdom. At home Vern must deal with new sight and reevaluate the home he has been living in. The story, in notion, is similar to “Good Country People” by Flannery O’Connor. Expect instead of being a normal person with a fake leg, Vern is a werewolf and this is the abnormality he does not want to accept.

Most stories have been told before. At least one of the steps of Campbell’s hero journey is visible in almost all stories. Short stories, given their brevity, tend to deal with one or two at maximum whereas novels deal can take on the journey in its entirety. Benjamin Percy’s The Wilding spends a majority of the novel dealing with a son who has never been manly enough to hunt successfully with his father. As an adult he returns to the hunting grounds of his childhood with his son and father and this is the atonement stage of the hero’s journey.

For the ogre aspect of the father is a reflex of the victim’s own ego— derived from the sensation nursery scene that has been left behind, but projected before; and the fixating idolatry of that pedagogical nonthing is itself the fault that keeps one steeped in a sense of sin, sealing the potentially adult spirit from a better balanced, more realistic view of the father, and therewith of the world. Atonement (at-one-ment) consists in no more than the abandonment of that self-generated double monster— that dragon thought to be God (superego) and the dragon thought to be Sin (repressed id). (Campbell, 109-110)

Percy is accessing human issues on a natural level in a natural setting that people can relate to or at least nod their head and say that they know what hunting looks like despite having
never done it. The main character of the novel must cross the threshold into a place he fears and deal with the image of his childhood father as an adult.

In two of the stories in this collection characters must confront their pedestaled ideas of their father as adults. In “The Magical Redemption Machine” Professor Addelson lives his adult life with the ghost of his dead father hanging in his memory. Addleson is constantly trying to live up to his father whom was an absolute success in everything during his life. Because Addelson’s father is dead, there is no returning to the hunting grounds with him in order prove to his father that he is now a man. A realistic story might have Addleson stumble across a box of old photos that showed his father as a child and perhaps it was an image Addleson had never seen. It would allow him to see his father in a different way and see their similarities, but in “The Magical Redemption Machine” Addleson confronts the image of his father in the most literal way possible, by traveling back in time to the moment he remembers his father being proud of him. Using the fantastic in the story offers a new way of dealing with an old human problem. Different techniques affect different readers. Many readers will prefer Benjamin Percy’s natural approach to the atonement of the father. This is, at least on an earthly level, relatable. No one will read the story and exclaim that the action that transpires is impossible. My story is impossible, but that is the mechanism that is working. Instead of using a hammer to secure the foundation, I have used a drill, but it is a drill from the future and it uses lasers instead of screws. By doing this, I want people to forget the rules they live by and simply laugh at the talking dog with the fake English accent. The story is ridiculous, but it is not a Leslie Nielsen movie. While the reader is busy chuckling at the talking dog, the human elements of the story are sneaking into the backdoor of their subconscious. When Addleson finally confronts his father it is just as serious as when Justin goes hunting with his in The Wilding, but perhaps even more so, because
the backdrop of humor has not prepared the reader for the interaction the way the continually serious tone of *The Wilding* has. This is not to say that either method is more successful than the other, because each may work better or worse, it is dependant upon the reader.

The story “Everything Can’t Always be Awful” follows a man living a boring life who is haunted by the ghost of his dog. At the beginning of the story the readers are introduced to Bernie by way of his accomplishments. When he looks back on his life, his most proud moments are the time he met Paulie Shore or when he went to the Grand Canyon. In reality, Bernie has never done anything meaningful or exciting, but it takes dealing with the death of his dog to realize this. For the most part, Bernie believes that he is happy, but when his dog dies, he realizes that he has never really experienced the world. There are so many places he has never been and things he has never tried.

Once again, it is easy to return to Chopin’s “Regret,” which is a similar tale of depressing realization; however Michelle Herman, in the title story of her collection *A New and Glorious Life*, makes a similar move. The main character, Gad, is a musician who attends an artist’s retreat where he meets a woman. His entire life he has felt happy, but it takes falling in love, for the first time, to make him realize that he has been unhappy his entire life up until this one moment. He thinks he has been happily married, but he experiences a striking realization that he is unhappy and nothing can be the same after this moment. Chekhov’s “The Lady with the Dog” is not dissimilar to this idea at all. Both of these stories use a new love interest in order to cause the epiphany. In my story, I use a ghost-dog.

While there is a mild love interest in “Everything Can’t Always be Awful,” the woman whom Bernie is interested in is nothing more than a first step. His house is haunted and it is spending time with his friends during a séance that forces him to realize he has never had fun.
Bernie falsely thinks of Susan, the love interest, as his escape from the boring life. Similarly, he thinks that by replacing his dead dog he would manage to move forward. Instead he is forced to come to the realization that he must make changes within himself before he can move forward. Bernie’s is a very relatable human problem; I just use extraordinary circumstances to examine it.

Campbell’s ideas, once again, show up in this story. We see Bernie at the very beginning of his hero’s journey and do not get to take it with him. Before a hero can begin his journey, he must receive the call to adventure. The call is frequently made by a supernatural being, a “Representative of the repressed instinctual fecundity within ourselves, or again a veiled mysterious figure—the unknown” (Campbell, 44). In the case of this story, Bernie’s supernatural aide is the ghost that haunts him. The haunting is the entire impetus for Bernie’s decision to accept the call, which he, like most heroes, denies at the beginning of the story. I believe that it is only at the end that Bernie accepts the call to adventure and his journey begins with the last sentence of the story.

My story “All the Little Lights” takes a milder approach, much like Steve Almond’s story “Skull,” discussed earlier. It is the most believable story in the collection, but it still pits an unusual character against a natural human problem. Bridgette is a dominatrix whose father committed suicide when she was a college freshman. This story once again deals with the atonement with the father portion of the hero’s journey. Bridgette is haunted by her father’s ideas on how life should be lived and cannot disassociate her own life from them. She grew up poor, but her father always spoke of money as the only means for obtaining happiness. As an adult, she turned to domination to make large amounts of money quickly. And yet her BMW and other nice things can never seem to please her. Because of her father’s actions, she is trapped in a stage of life and does not know how to escape.
Benjamin Percy’s story “Refresh, Refresh” is about a town filled with fathers in the army reserves when they are called to war. The town, at that time, is filled only with boys, women, and older men. Percy focuses on two boys who begin to box every day after school, because they want to be tough like their fathers. “That was all we wanted, to please our fathers, to make them proud, even though they had left us” (Percy, 4). As these boys become men, they continue to do childish, dangerous things, such as kidnapping and almost murdering the recruitment officer in their town, the only man under thirty, it would seem, who is not overseas.

In both stories, mine and Percy’s, the characters are deprived of their ability to cross the threshold into adulthood because their fathers have left. Campbell states that “whether he knows it or not and no matter what his position in society, the father is the initiating priest through whom the young being passes on into the larger world” (115).

Because of this, both characters are left to their own devices and both turn to violence. The narrator of “Refresh, Refresh” beats up his friends, steals guns from the football captain’s truck, and kidnaps a man. Bridgette turns to an entire life of sexualized violence where she can live out the desire of punishing her father over and over again for his abandonment of her.

In “Karma,” I address the poisonous nature of revenge. The main character in the story, Henry, refuses to forgive his ex for her negligence, which led to the death of their son. He turns to fighting small injustices in his city to make himself feel better, but this simply makes him a miserable shell of a human. His refusal to forgive seeps into everything he does and he cannot live happily.

Fitzgerald’s “Babylon Revisited” deals with a man trying to get custody of his daughter back from his sister-in-law. The sister-in-law believes that the main character, Charlie, is responsible for her sister’s death and no matter what Charlie does, she will not relinquish the
child to him. “Karma” offers the inverse of this. In Fitzgerald’s story the reader is given the sorrowful side of the one considered to be responsible for the death rather than the one unwilling to forgive. Both stories are working at the same thing, however. It is like the Eudora Welty story “Why I live at the P.O.” but with a more serious subject matter. In Welty’s story, the narrator gives the readers a misguided account of how she is treated and finally, at the end of the story, moves to the post office. The narrator pretends that she is happy when it is clear that she is not. It is a story that has been told over and over again.

All of these stories are trying to get at forgiveness and a desire for revenge and what it does to a human. Refusal to offer forgiveness, as it is clear in all three of these stories, is never a positive way to live. However, rather than dealing with it on realistic terms, such as keeping someone’s child from them, or moving out of the house, I allow my character to become a super hero. Even behind his silly purple mask and utility belt, his emotions are as real as anyone else’s. He still faces the same world that the readers face every day. Never does the silliness of the story affect the honesty of the emotions Henry feels. This is the way it must be treated, with complete honesty. The core is the same, I have just used a different tool to hack away at the ice surrounding it to get to the reader’s heart.

Certainly, there are readers out there who hate silliness and for whom it does nothing. They walk away from it with no reaction and do not enjoy it at all, but this should not be considered a standard simply because it is true for some. There are plenty of adults who still put out cookies and milk for Santa Claus and I happily consider myself one of them. Most of us can still be hypnotized by realistic fiction set in towns we know, but we are more susceptible to the fantastic and are far more likely to take advice from a talking dog than a man who just got back
from a realistic hunting trip with his father. After all, if a dog has learned to talk, he must have something important to say.

We are all out there, running through the rain looking for shelter on our hero’s journey and because each one of us is different we all require and expect different things from our lives. There is no reason fiction, or art as a whole, should be any different. In fiction anything is possible and for some of us reality is not enough. After a long workweek we want to come home to a castle built of blankets where werewolves exist, time travel is real and aunts can become zombies and return to haunt their relatives. I am not suggesting that schools everywhere open their doors and windows and let J.K. Rowling and Stephen King flood into their classrooms, but rather that they might, at least, crack the supply room door and let some of the monsters sneak out when no one is looking and show them a different way to look at the world, because those monsters have stories to tell too and some of them are quite wise.
Work Cited


PART II

WEREWOLVES AND TIME MACHINES
Everything Can’t Always be Awful

Bernie was the produce manager at Kroger’s. He had visited the Grand Canyon as a boy and had once met Paulie Shore at a Casino in Oklahoma. He had been wearing a Son In Law t-shirt at the time, Paulie Shore, not Bernie. When Margot died Bernie moved out of his mom’s house to a smaller one, because the memory of her weighted down the air like a dense, wet-dog-smelling fog. In the beginning he could hear the squeak-squeak of her blue and yellow hedgehog toy, so he had thrown it out, all of her toys, along with her bed and the plaid jacket she wore in the winter. Bernie was unhappy, but did not know how to change that.

On the day of the move, Bernie ordered 3 large pizzas for the crew. He watched as the two huge men carried in his couch, television, bed, and boxes. The boxes, filled with comics and dishes and his entire life up until this point went into the room at the end of the hall.

When they were finished, Bernie placed three slices of pizza onto three separate napkins and took three cold Budwiser cans out of the ice chest and opened them. He had been told never to turn a refrigerator on after moving unless 24 hours had passed. Something about the coolant liquid. At least, this is what Frank the deli manger said.

The movers said they had other gigs, sorry and left. Bernie ate two slices of pizza, drank his beer, and poured the other two down the drain. Then he went to bed, because there was nothing else to do.

In the morning he rolled over onto something and startled at the squeaking noise. Margot’s hedgehog, the one he had thrown away. He clutched it against his chest and stayed there, with his knees tucked until he was out of time.
The shower was almost scalding and filled the bathroom with steam. Bernie toweled off and stepped out onto the linoleum thinking that things would be different now that he had moved. New house, new Bernie. He had never been to Europe, maybe he would take his vacation early. He could call in sick today. Since he never called in, he had accrued almost two weeks of sick leave.

“Sure,” he said. “I’ll just pack a bag and leave tonight.” He laughed at the notion.

On the mirror, was a message. The letters ran like blood. “Get ouf of our house.”

“Ouf?” Bernie said. He shrugged and decided against calling in, better to not break his streak, save the days for when he really needed them.

Sometimes, when people asked Bernie about his job, he would tell them ‘it’s bananas.’ The highlights were the company mandated fifteen minute breaks and lunches. When Bernie first started, all he took was a half hour at lunch then Adrian Pierce, the district manager, informed him that the breaks were not optional, and wouldn’t he enjoy some time with his coworkers? After ten years at this location, Bernie looked forward to these moments the most.

“I think my house is haunted,” Bernie told William, the 17-year-old cart boy on break.

“We’re all haunted,” William said letting out a mushroom of smoke. They were not supposed to smoke inside, but Burns was managing. William probably would have smoked even if it was Patty, Bernie thought.

“But no,” Bernie said. “Like haunted, like really haunted. Like burial ground haunted.”

“This whole country is a burial ground,” William said.
“Jesus Christ. This kid,” Frank said. “Go write some poetry. Bernie, what you need is to get laid. Pussy. That’s what cures it.” Frank ruffled his paper. “Whole world’s gone mad, but some pussy? It’ll still make you right with God. Just read this here.” He shook the paper again.

“Print is dead,” William said.

“You’ll join it, if you don’t shut your dick sucker,” Frank said. “This lady here, goes through airport security with quarters shoved up here boo-hoo. Why? Sets off the—whateyacallit?” Frank motioned with his hands. “Metal finder.”

“Detector,” William said.

“Same thing. Anyway, TSA guy at DFW says she’s in twice a month. Is it illegal to waste taxpayer money every time to strip-search her? Says here it ain’t. Why’s she do such a thing?”

“Lonely,” Bernie said.

“Whole world’s gone mad, Bern. They got this thing now, you get cremated and they put you in this box and you turn into a tree. New type of burial. Pretty soon they’ll be making desks out of us. Food maybe.”

Bernie nodded. He wanted to bring up the ghosts again, but he did not know how.

A sawdust factory filled with hamsters. That’s what the pet store smelled like. Bernie had swung by on his way home from work. He imagined big mounds of sawdust and tiny hamsters, scurrying about the mounds, pissing on everything. He thought it was a smell that would never wash out, like old cigarettes in a car or the vomit smell of dried beers in dank bars. Even if the walls were replaced and everyone who entered pretended it was a Starbucks, it would still smell the same, in the skeleton of the structure. Even when people forgot, the bones remembered.

Some memories needed more than a quick scrubbing.
“Hi,” a woman said from behind the counter. She walked from behind it and smiled and raised a hand in a sort of wave.

“Hello,” Bernie said. He stared at her breasts. They were like two big, heavy tombstones trapped inside a blue button down. Around her neck she wore a lanyard with buttons from tourist attractions: The Eiffel Tower, The Statue of Liberty, The Grand Canyon.

“How can I help you with anything?”

“I’m just here.”

She nodded and Bernie continued around to the dog and cat food aisle. Margot had always eaten canned food, never dry. As an adult, just barely thirty, it seemed weird to Bernie, that his mother had let him name the dog after his dead sister. Bernie was 9, his sister, 15. A little girl on the back of her daddy’s motorcycle. Going up for ice creams. Be right back. The bastard, his mom had said. She would have actually spit on his coffin, Bernie thought, if his grandma had not been right there, holding his mother’s shoulders and crying into a handkerchief. He promised her he would never buy a motorcycle. He had made many promises. The dog had been a sort of emotional replacement, he knew, and now he needed another. Could a replacement be replaced?

He had been holding a can of dog food, watching it like it might say something. Bernie walked around to the dogs, trapped inside small plastic windows. They reminded him of aliens in a sci-fi movie, held captive for later dissection.

HI my name is: Boris. Boris, a lethargic black thing with his tongue hanging out, drooping down through the square mesh of the floor. HI my name is: Cassie. Cassie, a strange looking white poodle with hungry eyes, bouncing around, electrified. HI my name is: Buddy. Buddy, a beautiful golden retriever. His eyes housed secrets, but Bernie thought, under the right
circumstances, he would share those secrets. His pink tongue hung out, slowly tasting the air, cautious, but also accepting.

“This one,” Bernie said. “He’s older than the others.”

“Buddy,” the woman said, coming over. “Yes. He’s almost a year, actually. Hard time finding a home for this fella for some reason.” Buddy spun in a circle as if in response.

Bernie once again found himself admiring the woman’s breasts, wondering what they might look like exhumed from their cottony prison. Perhaps Frank was right.

“How much for that doggie in the window?” Bernie said.

“I believe he is going for six hundred, after neutering and chipping.”

“No,” Bernie said. “Like the song.” He pointed at the window, but dropped his hand quickly. He felt stupid.

“Oh,” she said.

“I’m Bernie,”

“Susan.” She put her hand out and Bernie shook it.

“I saw the Grand Canyon,” he said.

“Well,” she said. She nodded her head up and down too quickly, jerking it back and forth. She tried to smile. “Would you like to see him?”

“Who?”

“Buddy.”

“That would be fine.”

Susan disappeared into a back room and Bernie stood there wondering what was wrong with him. In his head, William said “What’s wrong with any of us?” He needed to get out of the store. It was stuffy and he felt his lungs filling with sawdust.
It was not until he got home and put his keys on the counter that he realized he had taken the can of dog food. He must have put it in his jacket when he had shaken Susan’s hand. He would make it right tomorrow. He could take it by after work and apologize. He set the can down, heated up some pizza and stood in the kitchen, eating off the counter.

Bernie dreamed that he was in his mom’s house. He had been there for years. He wanted to leave, but something would not let him. His feet were wet and he slid around on the hardwood floor, from room to room, looking for a window. The room at the end of the hall was empty except for Margot, the dog, sitting in the center. “You’re infested,” she said. He woke up. It was 4am and his phone was ringing. It was his mom. She had her own ringtone.

“Ma,” he said.

What’s wrong she asked him. Wrong? he said. You called me. He sat up and rubbed the goo out of his eyes while she told him she knew that she called him, but if someone was up at 4AM it meant something was wrong. Bernie sighed. “You woke me up, Ma.” She just worried about him. That was all. Was it a crime to worry about her only son? He hadn’t invited her to his new place and she was only ten minutes away. If he brought her a key she could come by and have dinner ready before he got off work. Chicken and dumplings for her little dumpling with the whole biscuits, just how he liked. He told her goodnight and hung up. Then he called her back and apologized before she could start to drive over and told her he was just getting settled in and did not want her to see the place untidy. He assured her she would be his first guest. She relented and Bernie, unable to return to sleep went into the kitchen to brew coffee.
The can of dog food he’d stolen was open on the counter, with the serrated circular lid jutting away from it like a scab, unwilling to completely fall off.

“That’s creepy,” Bernie said and something about his own voice in the empty house made him shudder. Maybe this was some message. Margot the dog, trying to be understood. He dug two fingers down into the meat goo and scooped it out and into his mouth. It tasted like expired gravy and wet cardboard and blood. He gulped it. His eyes watered. “I need you, Margot,” he said. “I’m lonely.” He scooped another chunk out and shoved it into his mouth even as his throat closed the way it did when someone poured him a straight tequila. The idea that he was eating mashed up crickets fluttered into his brain and he gagged, spewing the meat paste and bile out onto his kitchen floor. Somewhere in the house something was laughing.

Work dragged by. Bernie needed to talk to Frank. He could not focus. A woman asked him “Papaya?” and he told her that he was “fine, thank you.” Bernie snuck back to the break room two whole minutes before break started. It was something everyone else did, normally up to five minutes early, but he never had before. Frank was sitting at the table with his newspaper.

“I’m haunted,” Bernie said. “Infested.”

“What is it?”

“Things move around. I hear weird noises, like laughter.”

Frank set his newspaper down and looked up at Bernie. “Had a friend of mine got himself a nice deal on a house out in Bonham. Nice big place. Keeps hearing weird noises, thumping. Second day, he goes into the attic to take up some boxes and it’s full a tarantulas. Whole nest of ‘em. All scampering around like they own the place. Could be what you got.” Frank nodded then picked his paper back up.
“It’s not tarantulas,” Bernie said. “Ghosts, I think.”

“I can help,” William said from behind Bernie, making him startle.

Bernie sat in the parking lot of the pet store looking at all of the people in the strip mall. Before leaving, he had picked up the same kind of canned food from Kroger. There was a young couple buying shoes, next door a baby supply store with cribs sitting out front. He thought about what Frank had said about people turning into trees after they died. He wondered if his mirror was recycled, if it had been something else before, like a coffee table maybe. Had people sat around it drinking beers and playing board games in the 70’s? A family. Was windshield glass recycled? He did not know. He had been sitting in the lot for ten minutes now.

When he walked in a short fat man with a thin mustache and thick glasses peered at him from behind the counter.

“Help you?” he said.

“Just looking,” Bernie said. He walked down the dog and cat food aisle with the can tucked into the hand warmer on his sweatshirt. The short man followed him.

“Let me know if you have any questions,” he said.

Bernie said that actually when he was here before there was a dog, Buddy, and he would like to see him. When the man left to get the dog, Bernie took the can from his sweatshirt and placed it with the others.

The man took him to a small booth with a stool and let Buddy in with him and told him to holler if he needed anything. Bernie scratched the dog behind the ears and told him that he was a good
boy. The dog was no longer a puppy. Bernie thought that people would pass over the dog.
Puppies were cute, more fun, but that did not mean that there was anything wrong with Buddy.

“You’re not so old,” Bernie said. The dog licked his knuckles. “I’m going to take you home with me. Would you like that? We can go somewhere together. I’ve never been to Colorado. If we like it, we could stay.”

“Excuse me, sir, but I’m going to have to ask you to leave.”

Bernie looked up. It was the short fat man from behind the counter. There was another man behind him in a different colored shirt, a manager maybe.

“I need you to leave immediately and for you to not come back, please, sir,” the man said.

“I,” Bernie said. “I don’t understand.”

“I hope you know,” the manager said stepping forward. “That this store has an immaculate record of catching shoplifters, sir. We’re asking you to leave, but we could also have you wait until the police arrive if that’s what you’d like.”

“I want to buy this dog,” Bernie said.

“Rupert,” the manager said. “Phone the police.”

“I want to buy this dog,” Bernie said. “Let me buy Buddy and I’ll be on my way.”

The manager shrugged.

“Please,” Bernie said. “I need this dog.”

They sat down at the kitchen table, Bernie and Frank, and had a glass each before William let himself in through the front door. He pulled items from his backpack with a certain ceremony. First was a Ouija board, then five black candles, incense, and an old red book. William asked for
their cell phones and placed them in a large pot he took from a cabinet. To keep out the interference, he said, like radiation.

Frank picked the book up and asked what it was. William said that it was the Roman Ritual, for possessions, burials, things like that.

“You weren’t fooling,” Frank said. “Where’d you get this anyhow?”

“Amazon.”

Frank nodded. Bernie was sipping his third whisky.

“What if I don’t want them to go away?” Bernie said. He did not look up when he spoke.

Frank asked him what he meant. Bernie said that maybe this was a mistake. Maybe they should all pack up and go home.

“Leave me with my ghosts,” he said.

“They’re not your friends, Bern,” he said. “We’re here. Flesh and blood. We’re your friends. Amigos. That’s what we are.” Frank patted Bernie on his back.


“Enough talk,” Frank said. He grabbed another glass from the cabinet and slammed it down on the table in front of William. “Let’s get drunk and fight ghosts.”

Bernie smiled. William lit the five black candles in the shape of a star on the kitchen table. Bernie thought how ridiculous they must look, two grown men allowing a child to lead them in a séance. He was feeling a little buzzed. Not drunk yet, but light headed, swimmy. He felt good.
Frank filled Bernie’s glass and William told them to sit down and hold hands. Frank complained that he could not hold both hands and a drink. William glared at him until he took Bernie’s hand and completed the circle.

William chanted for a couple of minutes with his eyes closed and Frank and Bernie glanced at each other with schoolboy eyes. Silently, they let go of each other’s hand to take a sip of their drinks while William kept chanting. They tried not to giggle.

Then William was quiet. He opened his eyes.

“If you assholes don’t relax, this will never work,” William said. He produced a small metal tin filled with joints.

Bernie had never smoked. He had been drunk, but something about breaking the law had given him anxiety in the past. He always wore his set belt and set his cruise control to the speed limit. He thought then that he was older now than his sister ever had been. Twice her age. Yet in his head she was always the older sister. Did the dead age? There were so many things she had never done and here he was at 30. He would not waste these moments.

He took the joint and plucked the lighter from the table. He lit and inhaled deeply, the way he imagined kids in the 60’s had done. The smoke burnt the back of his throat and tightened it, like there was something lodged there. His lungs ached and he let out a phantom of smoke in a fit of coughing. Frank laughed and said ‘big hit.’ Bernie gulped his whisky and sat back. His eyes drooped and he smiled. He thought that Frank and William would think he was weird for smiling, but he smiled. He had not thought he would feel something so quickly.

“It doesn’t come on like beer,” Bernie said, not realizing he had spoken out loud until he had and after he was still unsure. He laughed. William who was exhaling smoke laughed with
him and passed the joint to Frank. “It’s fast. It’s fast and—holy shit.” Bernie forgot what he was
going to say and laughed again.

The joint went around three more times and each time Bernie took a bigger hit and
coughed harder. When it was done, William lit the incense and they held hands again. It seemed
more serious; it seemed real. Bernie felt that they were not alone. He felt watched.

Bernie nodded his head while William spoke. William asked the spirits to give them a sign. The
men stared at each other, because while nothing happened they could all feel something shift in
the room and Bernie felt his skin prickling with goosebumps. Without realizing it they had all
leaned in. It was so quiet A cell phone buzzed from inside the metal, the noise amplified. Bernie
screamed. Frank banged his knees on the table, spilling whiskey down his pants.

“Jesus Christ,” Frank said. Before any of them could say anything, they were laughing.

When they had themselves under control, they poured shots. William produced a red
grinder from his bag and they all agreed that the séance was over. They huddled on Bernie’s
couch and passed a small transparent pipe and sipped whisky.

“If people can become a tree,” Bernie said breaking the silence, “I’m going to ask her
out. I’m going to march in there and demand to buy that dog and I’m going to ask her out.”

“What is it?” Frank said.

“I’m going to do it,” Bernie said and it came out sounding I’m’unna doit. “In the
morning. I’m going to do it.” He nodded. William and Frank nodded with him.

“This is alright, you know?” Frank said. “This is alright, just boys being boys. We’re
alive, all of us.”

“We’re alive,” Bernie agreed. Then he dozed.
He dreamt he was in a field with Margot the dog. Margot was running and catching something and bringing it back. It was the hedgehog. She dropped it at his feet and looked up at him and said I’m a dog. Bernie told her that he knew that but she shook her head and asked him if he really did. I hadn’t, he said, but I do now. Margot turned and ran from him and he understood that he could not follow her and he was okay with that.

Bernie awoke with his head in Frank’s lap. William was sprawled out on the floor, sleeping in the way only drunk teenagers can, a complete lack of concern for anything at all. There was something beautiful about that recklessness. Bernie admired it. It reminded him of the vow he had made last night.

He sat up and wiped the drool from his mouth and was surprised to find his head did not hurt. All that he felt was groggy awareness, a blurry sense of reality where all the decisions he made were the right ones and the only thing that mattered was that he was alive.

Frank shifted when he stood, but did not wake up. It was fifteen minutes past eleven when Bernie sat down in his car.

Bernie saw her behind the counter before he even walked through the door. He walked straight to her and smiled.

“I’d like to buy Buddy,” he said. “I want to take him home tonight and he can play outside while I cook you dinner, because I’d also like to ask you out, if that would be okay.” He showed her the palms of his hands in a nothing-up-my-sleeves gesture. “I know this sounds weird, but I.” He stopped and nodded. “I think you’re very petty and while I may not know anything about you, I’d like to change that. There will also be wine.” He laughed. He could not remember if he had ever asked a woman out since high school. He felt great.
Susan stared at him like a man with a guardrail sticking out of his chest, asking her if he would be alright. She opened her mouth then closed it.

She raised her hand up so he could see. “Flattered, but married.” She smiled.

“Right,” Bernie said. He nodded. “I’ll just take my dog and I’ll find another beautiful woman who works at a pet shop to ask out awkwardly.” They both laughed. Bernie thought he could do this again and he would. It was not so bad.

Susan winced. It was the face she might have made if someone almost spilled coffee on her. “I’m sorry,” she said. “But when you find another pet store you might need to find another dog.”

Bernie sat down on the small stool in the little cubical and waited. Susan led Buddy into the stall and left them alone. Yesterday a family had come in and purchased Buddy, they would pick him up later today. Bernie massaged the soft spots on either side of the dog’s neck and he licked at Bernie’s chin. Bernie looked down at the dog and smiled.

“It’s going to be great, Buddy,” he said. “It has to be. Everything can’t always be awful. Out the window, he could see the parking lot, empty now. But in two months it would fill with people, shopping for presents, living different lives. He looked past the glass that might have once been someone’s beer bottle, past the parking lot, at the world for what he thought was the first time in a long time. For a few moments it was just him and the world. He was alive. He could stand up and kick open the stall door and Buddy would follow him. They would burst out through those glass doors and out into that big world and maybe he would get caught, maybe he would be arrested, but it would not matter. Because once he started running nothing could stop him.
Karma

“When my son was three he drowned in a pool,” Karma said. He was perched on the retaining wall in the middle of Dallas City Hall Plaza, kicking his legs. The dark purple mask covered his entire face. The rest of his body was coated in a purple skintight suit so dark it was almost black. There was a slit in his mask that he could drink through, but it barely moved when he spoke. “His mother had him for the weekend; we had been separated since before he was born. They were outside, it was summer, June, he was playing and she was reading a book. She claims she hadn’t smoked, but the reports show a roach in the ashtray. She fell asleep and he fell into the pool. By the time she woke up, he was dead.”

“And that’s why you’re here?” Dave said from behind the camera.

“Sure,” Karma said. “I guess that’s my origin story.”

“So every night you’re out here fighting crime?”

Karma shrugged. “I’m not part of The Big D Super Hero League, if that’s what you mean. I’m not strolling the streets with Mr. Power or the Barista. I’m a different kind of super hero. I stop the fuckheads who think the rules don’t apply to them.”

Dave was in his fifties and worked full time as a cameraman at a Dallas news station. He had been trying to film with Mr. Power for months, but had given up because he kept refusing and settled with Karma.

Dave followed Karma past City Hall and down around through the one-way streets of Dallas. All the while Dave asked questions. Karma refused to give out his real identity or his occupation, but he told the camera that he was thirty-three and that he exercised every day.
“Dallas isn’t Detroit, but bad shit still happens,” Karma said. “Take this asshole for instance.” He pointed to a man with a dark blue polo tucked into tan slacks stepping out of a Land Rover, parked in a handicapped space at the gas station.

“This way, this way,” Karma said.

Dave, crouched behind the car with Karma. Then Dave stood and filmed the empty rearview mirror. Karma tugged him down by his belt and the camera knocked into the bumper on the way down. Dave said oops, but Karma told him to never mind.

“See,” Kama said to the camera. “Everyone complains that the world is unfair, but they always think they’re the exception. No one is special. Watch this.” Karma strutted around to the driver side of the car. Dave followed but Karma shoved him back and ducked behind the car again. “He’s still in there.” They waited a minute in silence. “Anyway,” Karma said. “Everyone wants to think they’re the center of the world and I’m here to—”

“Here he comes,” Dave said.

Karma leapt out from behind the car and Dave followed him.

“You don’t look handicapped to me, sir,” Karma said

“Excuse me?”

“I’m sorry, maybe you’re deaf.” Karma pulled a baton out from a sheath on his back that had been barely visible until now.

“Mind your own business, freako,” the man said and opened the door to his car.

“This is my business,” Karma said. “I’m here to remind you that everyone is equal. You don’t have a leg up.” As he said the last line, Karma dropped to his knees and swept the baton through the man’s shins. A crack like a small pistol going off echoed against the apartment complex on the other side of the parking lot. The man screamed and tumbled to the ground.
“How was that?” Karma said. “Pretty good? The leg up thing, I just came up with that just now. We need to go.”

“Go?” Dave said

Karma was already sprinting down the street.

Henry’s house was clean. There was a place for everything. A few years ago he had cut out a hole in his sheetrock and installed a safe behind the wall. This was where he kept the Karma costume.

Henry was at his computer now. He enjoyed scrolling Reddit, trying to find posts about Karma. Serendipity and Moirai, Henry’s Guinea Pigs, sat in a large two-level cage filled with yellowed grass specifically purchased for them. There were bright orange and yellow and pink chew cubes scattered around the cage along with the butts of carrots and cherry tomatoes, peeking up from the grass like some tiny scale Easter egg hunt.

Hanging from the coat rack in his closet was the purple Karma utility belt. Henry kept looking at it. There was a canister of thallium Henry had purchased from the darknet while using a VPN. He wanted to find the perfect time to use it. Maybe someone smoking in a no-smoking area. If they poison others, Karma would poison them. Henry smiled and looked back at the monitor. He felt like a child who received just what he wanted for Christmas.

One of the links Henry clicked took him to a video of a reporter in a wooded area. The reporter said that this alleged super hero had kidnapped a seventeen-year-old high school student named Simon Taylor. Henry thought the reported said super hero like the word had quotes around it.
“The masked man, referring to himself only as Karma, drove Taylor out into the middle of the woods and left him.” When the kid appeared on the screen, Henry remembered him from last week.

“He said if I wanted to go off-roading so bad, I could do it to get home. And just left,” Simon said.

“I said badly,” Henry told the monitor.

The feed cut back to the reporter. Dallas police were offering a reward for any information regarding the man known as Karma.

His Match.com profile had no new messages. He had traded a few with a woman whose screen name was PennyPenguin, but she had stopped responding once he had gone into a tirade over why Tony Stark should have been assassinated after the Marvel Civil War.

Henry shrugged, poured some food pellets into the Guinea Pig cage and got dressed for work. On Fridays he worked at three.

Henry managed a Tex-Mex restaurant on lower Greenville called El Presidente Café. In his backpack, slumped on the floor next to tortilla boxes filled with months of back-logged reports, the Karma mask waited to be used. Henry never took the costume off, except to shower.

“Good morning,” Burke said when he walked into the office. Burke thought this was funny, it was his way of suggesting that Henry slept all day and existed solely to work. No one knew Karma’s real identity.

Henry nodded. He had to meet Dave downtown tonight after work. He kept scouring his mind to come up with a good place to show him. Somewhere with action.
“Check this out,” Burke said. He held up a cracked phone screen for Henry to examine a blurry picture. “I laid down a new pebble walkway to the pool. Check out that lattice work on the back over there.” Burke pointed at the screen and accidentally changed the picture. Burke shrugged and told Henry that he got the idea.

Burke had an above ground pool in his backyard and every day, it seemed, he spoke to Henry about it. Henry frequently imagined Burke’s gorged white flesh floating in the water like a giant larva in the moonlight.

“Got a lady coming over tonight,” Burke said. “Met her at Charlie’s on Primrose. Real looker. She’s got them pooter-hooters on her.” Burke whistled and rested his intertwined hands on his protruding belly. “You know what they say about smokers.” This sent him into wheezing laughter. His chin jostled with his gasp.

“Don’t you want something more from your life?” Henry said.

“You need to lighten up, Henry. Go table-touch, it’s your turn. Bunch of fat-assholes out there tonight, but what else is new?”

The floor of the restaurant was wide open, like a warehouse with pink and yellow walls. The sweet smell of the handmade tortillas stuck to him like a thin film of dew. Henry doused himself in cologne before becoming Karma. A majority of his job consisted of asking strangers how their sour cream sauce tasted and making bad jokes when costumers had emptied their plate like ‘I guess you hated it?’ Occasionally someone would raise their hand like a student and ask him for something. Other times they simply shook their empty glass at him, the ice rattling like baby teeth, and assumed he knew what they were drinking.

Burke came up behind Henry and goosed him while he stood by the fountain in the middle of the restaurant.
“All of this, son,” Burke said. “When I die, it’s all yours.”

“What’s wrong with you?”

“I don’t know,” Burke said. “I’ve been thinking about making a list.”

Past one in the morning, on a busy street in Dallas, Karma sat next to Dave on the sidewalk with their backs against a black brick wall waiting for something to happen. Dave told Karma about his two daughters, Kendra and Kara. They were both in college now. Kendra was two years older and farther away. Kara was in Austin.

“How many times have you watched a car ride through the shoulder for a mile and wished you were a cop?” Karma said. He did not look at Dave when he spoke, but out at the city. “Or seen someone speeding? I decided to stop waiting for someone else to do what I knew needed to be done. There are too many good people playing by the rules and getting sent to the back of the line to sit around and watch all the assholes pull to the front. It’s a collective action...
problem, like recycling. Only you know if you’re doing it. I had a friend in college who threw
the recycling away, but he kept it separate. He wanted people to think he recycled. It just
amounts to what you’re okay with letting go and how well you sleep at night. I let nothing go.”

“I probably should have the camera going,” Dave said. “But who set up these rules? Who
says they are rules to begin with? I mean, what you did to that guy yesterday, you should go to
prison.”

“We agreed upon the rules, David,” Karma said. “We agreed upon them when we
decided to establish a society and live within the walls of that society with other human animals.
If rules are not enforced it is chaos and a society cannot function properly within the confines of
chaos.”

“Where’s the grey area?” Dave said. “I was an MP in Vietnam. Most of my job amounted
to arresting drunk soldiers who got into fights with locals. But we had this commanding office,
Randy his name was. Little squat of a man, always walked like he had to shit and Randy liked
them young, but the young ones, they didn’t always like Randy back. It was different over there.
They think different. My partner and I walked in on Randy one night and he had one of them
girls in this hotel bed, couldn’t have been twelve. We pulled him off, told the girl to get dressed
and leave and threw ole Randy in the shower, blasted him with the cold water then we went
home. Well, the next morning Randy didn’t report for duty and I found him in a dumpster behind
the mess-hall.

“Don’t think I didn’t know who done it. My partner, big black fella named Orange, he
was the squad leader at basic because the DI, on the first day asked, ‘who here thinks they can
kick my ass,’ and Orange raised his hand. That’s how he got to be squad leader, Orange.
Anyway, Orange had a sister back in Michigan, bout thirteen.”
“Did you confront him?” Karma said.

“Didn’t have to,” Dave said. “Both of us knew what he’d done. I could have turned him in, done the paperwork and let the machine have him, or I could’ve let it ride on. Lots of people wound up in dumpsters over there. No one was going to miss Randy.”

“But what he did was wrong,” Karma said.

“We’re all sinners, kid,” Dave said.

Karma nodded.

“Well,” Dave said and slapped Karma on the back. “Let’s go catch us some bad guys.”

But before they could do that, Dave spent fifteen minutes white balancing for the darkness.

The night trickled by in minutes. They had not gotten any useable footage and Dave suggested that they stop and grab some snacks and coffee.

“Some nights are boring,” Karma said to the camera. “But with my job, boring is good.”

Karma had to wait outside the giant gas station. The few times he had forgotten and gone in to purchase something with his costume on the employees always panicked and called the police. Karma stood outside and watched as a young woman turned her back to the man working the register, took something from the cooler and sneaked it into her purse. He watched her as she continued to plop items into her bag like she was on a shopping spree. Then she went to the counter, paid for a coke, and walked out.

Dave was still creaming his coffee inside. Karma clinched his fists as the woman walked past the shadow he hid in and down the street.
By the time the Dave came out, the woman had a lead, but Karma told him to turn on the camera and follow him. He charged down the street and Dave knelt and placed is coffee cup on the cement and followed him.

Karma managed to catch up to her two blocks down the street. They slunk behind her as she went to the second floor of a shitty apartment complex and went inside.

“I just watched this woman shoplift and get away with it,” Karma said to the camera. “There is a concept, that many consider to be outdated, it is an idea of justice called Hudud. Within Hudud there is the notion of Qisas or an eye for an eye. She has taken something that does not belong to her and now I will take something in return. Her life.”

“Whoa,” Dave said. “Jesus. Can’t we just talk to her first?”

“Hudud does not care for talking,” Karma said.

“Let’s interview her,” Dave said. “It will be good for the documentary.”

Karma nodded. “Okay,” he said. “Sure. We’ll just scare her. To death.” Karma stared at the camera. “I’m just kidding. We can edit that out right? I don’t think you can actually scare someone to death.”

In the bedroom they found the woman changing into stained purple sweatpants. Karma crept behind her and put a gloved hand over her mouth. She screamed into it and struggled, but Karma managed to ziptie her wrists behind her back and led her to the ripped couch where Dave was setting up his tripod. Karma told her they weren’t going to hurt her; they were working on a documentary and needed to interview her so please don’t scream.

She was younger than Karma had original thought, maybe twenty-six at the oldest. Her house smelled clean, like lemons, this also surprised Karma.
“This” Karma said pulling a vial from his utility belt. “Is sodium penathal.” He stabbed a needle into the vial and drew out the contents. “It’s truth serum.”

While the woman stared at it he jabbed it into her arm.

“Ouch,” she said. “I don’t feel comfortable with this.”

Karma perched on the coffee table so that his back was just barely in the shot as she sat in the center of the couch.

“Why did you steal from the store?” Karma asked.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she said.

“We have you on tape. What did you steal?”

The woman looked down at her lap. “Milk, cereal,” she said. “Some other stuff.”

“Why?”

“How is this any of your business?” The woman blew hair out of her face. “What are you, the police?”

“No,” Karma said. “I exist beyond the reach of the police.” He stood up on the table and a few magazines tumbled to the floor. “I exist to restore justice. I exist to battle the corrupt. Nothing goes unpunished. I am Karma.”

“Okay?” the woman said.

“Did you get that, Grey-Moose?” Karma said to Dave.

“What’s Grey-moose?”

“That’s you,” Karma said. “Code name.”

“Oh,” Dave said. “No. You stepped out of the shot. I don’t think your truth serum is working.”
Karma waved this away and addressed the woman. “What makes you think you should be able to break the law and get away with it?”

“If you’re not going to call the police on me will you please leave?” she said. “I’m tired.”

“Of course,” Dave said. “We just need you to sign this permission sheet to use you in the documentary.”

The next morning, Henry jolted awake from a nightmare. It was the same one he had at least once a week, but he would not think about it now. After his four-mile jog, one thousand crunches, and one hundred pushups, Henry made eggs. He let the Guinea Pigs scamper around the floor while he sat at his kitchen table drinking his coffee and reading the news. There was no mention of Amber, the girl from last night. For a few moments he looked at his utility belt and the half empty bottle of thallium. Tonight, he thought, he would have Dave go back over with him and they would speak to her again, get the story then give her the antidote. She might feel a little queasy, but she would be fine.

Henry brought the mail inside and flipped through it. It was mostly bills and coupons, another letter from his ex, post marked from the Dawson State Jail. This one would be asking the same thing as all the others throughout the years. Asking him to visit, just to let her look him in the eyes. He had not spoken to her since she had gone to prison seven years ago. He never wrote her back, but once every few months he would get a letter begging him to come see her. He would not give her the satisfaction. The state had failed to punish her justly, but she was out of Karma’s reach for now. He would punish her in the only way he could, until she was released. The state had given her ten years, with parole after six, but she had declined her first hearing. He would wait for her and when she was out, he would drown her.
At work, Henry could not stop thinking about Amber. There was a large birthday party taking up a majority of the floor and they seemed to be pleased so Henry went to the office and found Burke playing solitaire on the computer. To his left was a small styrofoam cup, which Henry knew was filled with whiskey and seven-up.

“Is this all you want?” Henry asked.

“What?” Burke said and turned around.

“Are you happy?”

“Are you?” Burke said. He had a small hernia on his bellybutton that he refused the take care of and he fingered it now, pressing it in and out. It looked like a golf ball tucked under his black polo.

Henry shook his head.

“I don’t think anyone is happy,” Burke said. “I’ve got athlete’s foot. Want to see?”

Henry said nothing and sat down on the edge of the desk.

“That’s the secret to life, Henry,” Burke said. “No one is happy. Someone said that, something about the human condition, suffering. Kids though, they’re happy. Only because they don’t know any better. Kids don’t have mortgages. You’re the one with the fancy degree. Did you think this is where you’d wind up?”

“There are a lot of facets to my life that I did not anticipate,” Henry said.

“You can’t prepare yourself for this world,” Burke said. “A lot of people tell me I’ve got a drinking problem, but I don’t.” He raised his cup and took a big swallow through the straw. “I’m good at drinking, it’s everything else I’ve got a problem with.”

“I just mean,” Henry said. “Do you ever feel like you’ve made a mistake along the way? Like when you took this job.” Henry rubbed his eyes. “But now you’re too far along to turn
around. Like, maybe, you should have left a long time ago, and you don’t want to be here, but you don’t know how you got here in the first place and now you’ve been here so long that you can’t leave, because it’s too big of a change. And we’re just stuck. If you leave now, if you let it go now, it would be like admitting you were in the wrong the entire time.”

“It’s okay to make mistakes though,” Burke said. “That’s why God invented the erasable pen.”

Karma and Dave met in the parking lot of Amber’s apartment complex a little after eight that night. Karma had told him on the phone it might be a good idea to check back in and get some B-roll. Dave had agreed.

They crept up to her window and let the camera peak in. Dave said he felt weird about peeking in the window and wished he had installed a nanny-cam and Karma said oh fuck.

Through the window, Karma could see small feet resting on the rug where just yesterday their tripod had stood. The feet were stationary. Occasionally a small hand would come into his view holding a Hot Wheels car, a jeep, bouncing it over the carpet like an old dirt road.

“I made a mistake,” Karma said. He went to work on the lock. Dave asked him what the hell he thought he was doing, but Karma shrugged him off and went into the apartment.

Inside, the house no longer smelled of lemons, but the sweet smell of baked goods, cookies or brownies. On the floor, surrounded by Hot Wheels, was a small boy, about six. His blond hair was shaggy and he had to twist his head to the side to get it out of his eyes.

“Hello,” he said.

“Oh, shit,” Karma said.

“Batman,” the kid said. He stood up and bounded to Karma.
Amber walked into the living room. She saw the men and raced toward her son and pulled him away from Karma’s legs.

“What are you doing here?” Amber said. “I gave you what you wanted. Leave.”

Karma saw that her hair had already begun to fall out in places. She looked like she had a horrible flu. The sinuses under her eyes were swollen and purple, like little mountain peaks far off in the background of a painting. She needed the anecdote. Karma put his hand on the container of Prussian blue in his belt and stepped toward her.

“Listen,” Karma said. “We need to talk. Maybe in the other room?”

“Get out of my house,” she said.

“Please,” Karma said. “There’s so much you don’t understand.”

“Who are you talking to?” Amber said. “You’re the one in the Halloween costume.”

“You have a son?”

“Every other weekend,” she said. “Please leave, I’m calling the police.”

Outside, Karma sat down on a curb in the parking lot and rubbed his eyes.

“I’ve made so many mistakes,” Karma said.

Dave set down the camera and lit a cigarette. “When I was in my thirties working at the station wasn’t enough to pay the bills,” Dave said. “I moonlighted on a dock, unloading freight. One night I’m on my lunch break and I see this little dog running up between the boxes. He stops at one, drains his lizard, and moves on to the next. So, I whistled at him and he came over to me, just as happy as you please, his little collar jangling. He let me scoop him right up. On one side of the collar was his name, I don’t remember that, but on the other side there was this woman’s
name and a phone number. I called from the payphone, but no one answered, so I put the little guy in my car, gave him the ham from my sandwich, and finished my shift.

“In those days, my shift ended around seven AM and I would go home, eat dinner, sleep until about two in the afternoon then get ready to head into the station. When I got home I tried the number again and this time got an answer. The woman was panicked, angry, asking me why I stole her dog, but she sounded pretty, you know the way you can tell sometimes on the phone. I told her to calm down and give me her address and I’d bring him over directly. She lived right by the docks. I showed up at her door with the pooch and boy was she pretty. A real beauty. Long, curly, blond hair, short with a little rump on her. I’m hoping she’ll invite me in for breakfast or coffee, but instead she just starts yelling. Telling me I shouldn’t go around stealing stuff. Don’t go around picking up other people’s dogs she tells me. Slammed the door in my face.” Dave nodded. He reached down and picked up his thermos and poured coffee into the lid and sipped at it.

“Okay?” Karma said.

“The point is, sometimes the way we see things and the way other people see them are different,” Dave said. “I know I’m not cracking open a vault of knowledge, this is nothing new, but it’s a good thing to remember. Sometimes you think you’re being a hero, but really you were just stealing someone’s dog.”

“I don’t want to do this anymore,” Karma said.

“Do what?” Dave said.
Karma ran, wishing that beneath the Karma costume was his Henry costume. For years, he had felt that Karma was his real identity and Henry was just his cover up, but now he was not sure who he was or where he was going. He just ran.

At his house, he shed his Karma costume and put on jeans and a button up. It was almost ten by the time he made it back to Amber’s apartment and knocked on the door. Dave was nowhere in sight.

“What do you want?” Amber said from behind the door.

“I need to speak with you.” Henry said. He used his fake English accent that a Londoner he met in a bar once told him sounded Australian. “Someone has wronged you and I’m here to fix it.”

“Go away,” Amber said.

Henry ran his hands through his hair and tugged on the ends until his eyes watered.

“Please,” he said forgetting the accent. “I know you have no reason to believe me, but you’ve been poisoned. Last night, a man injected you with Thallium. It’s the reason you feel sick. Your hair is falling out. Please just let me give you that antidote.”

The door opened and Amber stood there in the same stained sweats from last night.

“I know who you are,” she said. “Your accent is shit.”

Henry nodded. He pulled the Prussian blue from his pocket and handed it to her.

“This will fix everything?”

“No one can fix everything,” Henry said.

“What?”
“It–yes, just take it,” Henry said. “You can still go to the hospital if you’d like. Here.” He pulled out his wallet and gave her five one hundred dollar bills. She took them and shoved them into her front pocket without looking away from Henry.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “If you take that you’ll be fine, but if you want to arrest me, my name is Henry Ryan Bishop and I’m the guy the news is talking about.”

“You’re the killer,” she said. “The Karma.”

“I’ve never killed anyone,” Henry said. “My name is Henry.” He could tell she was looking directly into his eyes. He felt naked. “You should call the police. I’ll wait outside.”

“Why did you come back?”

“The kid,” Henry said.

“You said last night you were serving justice,” she said. “How does he change that?”

“I don’t know,” Henry said. He rubbed his eyes. “I think maybe I’ve changed.”

“Okay,” She said.

“You’re going to call the police?” Henry said. “I tried to kill you.”

Amber shrugged. “This world tries to kill me every day,” she said. “But I’m not going to arrest it.”

Henry wore a brown suit, his only suit, to the jail. Even the parking lot was frightening. He had to sign in and there were so many buzzing doors. The inside of the jail was loud and echoing. It smelled clean like a hospital, but with a faint smell of old wet metal, like pennies.

They led him to a room that reminded him of his middle school cafeteria. There were small round tables everywhere and groups of people sat at them talking. Some people cried and others laughed and slapped each other on the back. Natalie was sitting at one of the tables and
when he saw her he stopped. Her hair was shorter than he had ever seen her wear it, cut a few inches above her shoulders. She was two years younger than him, but if he did not know her, he would have guessed that she was in her early forties. Henry sat down.

“Henry,” she said. “I didn’t know it would be you.”

“It’s me,” Henry said.

“I haven’t seen you in over seven years,” she said.

“I have a calendar.” Henry looked around the room and watched the other people. He wondered which ones belonged here.

“Will you look at me,” Amber said. “All I’ve ever wanted was to apologize to you.”

“I wanted to drown you,” Henry said. “I wanted to hold you under there until your face was black and rotted. I wanted to watch your skin sluff off and be taken by the river. I wanted to hold you under until there was nothing left of either of us.”

“I accept that,” she said.

Henry closed his eyes and rubbed at them until he saw explosions against the dark lids. He still wanted all of those things, but when he opened his eyes and looked at her he saw that there was nothing left. The woman sitting across from him had died long ago. This thing in front of him was a husk, a shell. Whatever Natalie had been before, she was no longer.

“Your mom visits me,” Natalie said. “She tells me you’re doing well.”

“Is that what you call this?”

“I finally learned French,” Natalie said. “I’m going to visit when I get out. Maybe I’ll stay there.”

“You can’t run from it,” Henry said.

“I’ve had a lot of time to think,” Amber said.
“I have this reoccurring dream,” Henry said. “I’m a wolf. It’s always a full moon and I go around killing people and eating them. They taste awful, people, but I can’t stop myself. It always ends with me running through the snow and there’s this bunny there. She looks at me and hops towards me and she knows what’s going to happen, but she keeps hopping. She hops right up to me and no matter how hard I try to wake up or fight it, I always eat her.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

“I don’t want to eat the goddamned bunny. There’s a whole forest right there. She could run. Why doesn’t she run?”

“Maybe she knows there will always be another wolf,” Natalie said.

“Maybe I’m the bunny,” Henry said. “I don’t know.”

“Is this why you came down? To tell me about your dream?”

Henry looked at the woman and knew that he would never kill her. He blamed her for the way his life had turned out, but he knew that was not completely fair. Some of these decisions he had made on his own.

“No,” Henry said. “I came down here because some old asshole told me a story that I thought made sense. I came down here to forgive you, but I don’t. God didn’t invent erasable pens, humans did.”

“What?”

Henry stood up and walked away. He walked through the three sets of buzzing doors and out into the parking lot. He stood at his car and watched a squirrel in the grass on the edge of the lot until it ran into the bushes. He stood there staring and thinking about Natalie and Amber and her son and Dave and his stupid fucking stories. He thought he could call Dave and tell him there
was a different story to tell, a story that would land him in prison. Or he could visit Amber, or drink beer with Burke in his pool. No matter what he did, he had to be at work in two hours.

He looked down and saw himself looking back in the reflection of the car window. Without thinking, Henry reared back and swung his fist at the window. He hit it again and then again, but the glass refused to even crack.
The Magical Redemption Machine

Today Professor Addleson was planning to travel back in time. At twenty, his father had died of enlarged everything from accidentally turning himself into a hulk before managing to build a successful time machine. Addleson had dedicated his life to besting his father.

Dr. Dr. Rex Addleson was a bastard, at least as far as his son was concerned. Most of the world thought he was a hero, considering that he had patched the hole in the ozone using the skin of a giant space jellyfish he had recreated in his laboratory. Rex had earned PhD’s in most of the hard sciences in addition to medical and law degrees. He referred to himself as Dr. Dr. Rex jokingly. “We’d have to add quite a few more doctors to be precise,” he would boast at cocktail parties around a mouth filled with half-chewed almonds, “but I’m a scientist, not an accountant.” Addleson would stand at the stairs in his pajamas before he was old enough to attend these prestigious parties, mouthing the words to his father’s jokes like a fish swimming around in a laboratory tank working its mouth.

Addleson had not inherited his father’s footballer shoulders or massive hairy hands, but he had received his father’s genius. By six he had mastered five languages and built a small robot that baked cookies from scratch and at eleven he had won his high school science fair by bringing a dinosaur to life using DNA inside dried bone marrow and this was before Jurassic Park, a movie which Addleson detested due to its inaccuracies. The small flying lizard creature soared up into the gym’s rafters and starved to death. This was the day Addleson wanted to travel back to. It was the only day he could remember his father being proud of him.

Brains, the English Bulldog, walked into Addleson’s study and startled him when he said “top of the morning to ya.” Addleson shook his head without looking at the animal and reminded Brains
that was an Irish phrase. The dog spoke with a fake English accent, which Addleson knew was fake because the dog had never left Alaska, despite claiming to possess a degree in astro-physics and rocket science from MIT. Addleson constantly reminded him that MIT did not offer a program in rocket science and more importantly dogs were not allowed to go to college.

“Today’s the day then is it?” Brains said. He sniffed around at the corners of the room like he did every morning. “What would Mareen say?” Addleson hated the dog. He assumed that at some point his experiments in time travel had created him, but the dog seemed to remember most of Addleson’s life. The connection to Mr. Peabody was not lost on Addleson.

“Mareen would want me to be happy,” Addleson said, angry at himself for even humoring the creature.


“I am the better man,” Addleson said. “I just need him to know.”

Brains snorted and walked to where the trap door would open when Addleson stopped staring out the window. Addleson wondered what Maureen might think, if she were here instead of out there working on medical robots, drinking coffee in the mornings with her husband, Captain, pretending to laugh at his stupid jokes. He thought about her sitting on the couch, doing regular everyday things like marathoning shows on Netflix. Leaning back into his arm and showing her crooked bottom teeth when she laughed. They used to laugh about Captain together, the way his name without an article sounded like a dog’s name. He could have gone with her. She had asked him.
When she had smiled at him from her display, across the crappy hotel lobby at the robot convention, Addleson felt like someone had zapped him with a Combust-O-Ray. She had been off to the right of a robot that was mixing drinks for people while onlookers chuckled and sipped cocktails. She was the redhead with freckles darting across the bridge of her nose like hundreds of red dwarf stars. Living a life of super science since childhood and growing up without a mother had left Addleson poorly prepared to talk to strangers if he was not trying to pitch them to commission a Death Beam. He sent L.E.A.D.H.e.A.D., his lab assistant robot, over with an encrypted note thinking he would never receive a response. By the time L.E.A.D.H.e.A.D. traversed the lobby, another super scientist had approached Maureen. It was Dr. Cooper Pythagoras Thompkins, known in the science community simply as “Captain,” because he had captured the Lochness monster and had since spent his career attempting to find an animal egg the monster’s sperm could fertilize successfully. In the process he had created a new variety of Komodo dragon, the venom of which had turned out to be the cure for cancer.

Big deal, Addleson thought, he cured cancer. He still hasn’t figured out what the hell the monster is. Maureen laughed at something Captain had said. All while talking to Captain, Maureen managed to decode Addleson’s message and sent a reply back with L.E.A.D.H.e.A.D. That night she came back to his lab where he showed her his anti-gavity bedchamber. It was designed to help people sleep without getting wrinkles or back problems. They found that attempting to have anything that resembled sex in the chamber was a failed experiment. Six months later, she agreed to move in.

Out in the winding roads of Girdwood, driving through the woods and maneuvering slowly around angry moose, Maureen taught Addleson to drive. Maureen was the type of person who
counted to six before accelerating into an intersection. Addleson asked her why and she shrugged and said “it’s precious.” Addleson nodded, but was not sure what she meant. He thought driving was a waste of time. She took him out into the forests of Girdwood. After a few days of practice Addleson drove her Jeep wildly down dirt roads, not stopping even when he bit his tongue from the jostling.

They parked the car and hiked to HAARP, a sort of Area 51 for the locals. Addleson stood at the metal fence while Mareen spread a blanket over the barbed wire and shimmed over. He told her if he had known, he would have brought a laser and she shook her head.

“I thought it was supposed to be precious,” Addleson said.

“Sometimes you have to remind yourself.” She sprinted away from the fence and Addleson was forced to climb to catch up. As he sat with his legs on either side of the barbed wire, preparing to trespass on government property, he realized he had never felt this way before. Excited and terrified. He hated Mareen for bringing him here, but loved her because he could not help but follow. Sometimes, in the lab he felt excitement and fear that the experiment might go wrong, but out here the fear was tangible. It was the electric fence she had powered down and the barbed wire just beneath the blanket, threatening at any moment to puncture through the soft fabric and dig into his skin.

In the trees, small squirrels were using webbing to swing between large gaps in branches. Maureen sat on the ground looking up at them. At the base of each tree, large nets had been constructed out of the webbing. Nuts dropped down into them as the squirrels shook the branches furiously. Addleson thought these creatures were a side effect of the testing here. The equipment was a few miles away and probably only he and Maureen knew these guys existed.
“We have to catch one,” Addleson said. “I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“Sit down,” she said. “Not everything needs to be prodded.”

Addleson put his arm around her and they leaned back against one of the thick trunks.

For a few moments, Addleson did not think. He felt his back against the tree and the weight of Maureen’s body against his arm and that was all.

If Dad could see me now, Addleson thought. In literature, characters reveled in moments where everything burst through the walls of reality and became clear. In novels these moments were called epiphanies, but in science they were hypotheses. Addleson kissed Maureen’s cheek and stared up at the webbing wrapped through the branches.

They fell into a routine. Maureen would wake first and make coffee and bring it to Addleson, something L.E.A.D.H.e.A.D. had once done. They would sit in bed and read the news together and once they had each had two cups of coffee they headed to the labs. Some days, they worked together, but most days were spent apart, until dinner.

Addleson was trapped, staring at diagrams and charts. He spent all day at his desk and his mind kept returning to the squirrels and their webs.

One night, Addleson could not sleep. When Maureen began to breathe heavily he crept from the bed and dressed. He threw a blanket into the passenger seat of the Jeep and turned the key. This was his first time driving by himself. He felt charged. He was a new man with new priorities. His father had been obsessed with science rather than living his life. He would show his father that he could excel where the mighty Rex Addleson could not. Unlike his father, Addleson understood love.
The night was cold and the strange squirrels were groggy and slow. Addleson captured four of them before jogging back to the Jeep. In his laboratory, beneath the structure of his home, he strapped the first one down and ran a scalpel across its soft belly.

The squirrels lugged small gray sacs filled with sticky white fluid at the base of their tails. Addleson presumed the webbing came from there. By dawn, Addleson, with the help of L.E.A.D.H.e.A.D., had constructed a habitat for the remaining three squirrels.

Watching them circle the base of the small tree in their glass home, spewing web and pulling it with their tiny back feet had given Addleson an idea about the constructs of time. Traveling into the future was simple, because of the rotations of the earth. The human conception of time was only relevant to the spinning of their planet. Addleson recognized the connections between squirrels and time travel was illogical. When you’re in love, he thought, anything was possible.

He was frantically running algorithms through a new application he had created and did not hear Maureen when she came down the stairs.

“What did you do?”

Addleson turned and smiled at her. “Baby,” he said. “Have you ever wondered when the first hovercraft will be available for consumer purchase?” He stood up and took her hands. “Or—or something small. Maybe you want to read a book that doesn’t come out until next month.”

“What did you do?”

“Baby,” Addleson said. He told her he had discovered the algorithm for time travel into the future. He would perfect it then he could move on to traveling into the past. She could meet his dad. “And it’s all because of you.”

“I love you, Victor. Do you love me?”
“Of course,” Addleson said.

She asked him to look her in the eyes and tell her. He did.

“No,” she said. “But you think you do.”

Addleson’s breakthrough had landed him on the cover of SCIENCE! Maureen moved out, but continued to visit, though as Addleson drew closer to understanding backwards time travel her visits became more sporadic. He spent hours sitting at his father’s desk reading the deadman’s journals, eating only when Maureen showed up with takeout.

The morning she came into his father’s old office to tell him she was leaving she found him holding a picture of his father with the Adventure Club. The glass and frame were broken and Addelson’s hands were bleeding. In the photo, his father stood with his foot on the head of a manticore, smiling, surrounded by three other men, once of whom was Ernest Hemingway.

“You’re bleeding everywhere,” Maureen said kneeling and taking his hands in hers.

“I know,” he said.

“We can stop this. We can fix this,” she said. “We’ll leave and forget all about super science.” She had purchased a cabin in the mountains. There was well water, candles and a furnace and nothing else.

“I was just another experiment,” Addleson said. He did not look at her when he spoke. “He wanted to be god.” He told her what he had told no one else, that his father had created synthetic sperm and eggs, programmed the genetic code, created an artificial womb. What took God nine months had taken Rex three. Rex was not his father, but his creator.

“I’m not even a real person,” Addleson said.
“But you are,” Maureen said. “You’re real and I love you. It doesn’t matter how you got here, because you’re here. Come with me.”

“I will, but not yet.”

“Stop fighting ghosts and deal with the living.”

“Please, Maureen,” Addleson said. “We’re super scientists. We both know ghosts aren’t real.”

“Really?” she said. “Because you seem pretty fucking haunted.”

Now Addleson stood in the laboratory while Brains sniffed at the machine. Four mirrors created a sort of square, each facing the center of the room. There were also mirrors on the ceiling and floor directly where the four mirrors met. Three machine, which looked like engines were spaced in places about the room and there was a small, podium like control table by the center.

Addleson and Brains had both reviewed the evidence significantly and understood the dangers of the trip. Time rifts did not create parallel realities as Addleson had once worried. When they had realized this, Brains looked up from the data sheet and barked, though it sounded more like a man with an English accent saying the word bark.

“You mean to tell me,” he had said, “that due to the subjectivity of reality, any individual who undergoes time travel runs the risk of no longer being able to comprehend his or her own existence within time?”

Addleson had smiled. “He would cease to exist within the reality of that specific individual.”

It was this, Addleson was thinking about when he stepped into the center of the room where the time vortex was created.
“Bloody hell,” Brains said. “You’ve gone balmy.”

“Do you have a book of English phrases somewhere?”

The dog barked in response and Addleson turned on the machine. Brains ran forward and chomped into Addleson’s slacks. The dog pulled. The machine whirred. At first it sounded like a helicopter warming up for take off, then, as the laser grew brighter, like a bad sound effect from an 80’s sci-fi movie. Brains was still growling when the white light beamed between all of the mirrors.

Blinded, they closed their eyes and when Addleson opened them he was standing in the middle of his father’s laboratory. Brains released Addleson’s pants and looked about.

“Oh, bollocks,” he said.

Addleson smiled and headed to the exit. His apartment had not yet been built around the lab. His father lived in a mansion on Paradise Peninsula and flew his jet into work. They would have to walk to the school, as Addleson had done when he was young.

Brains looked around, jerking his head frantically, as he trotted beside Addleson. When he asked Addleson where the time machine had gone the scientist stopped walking.

“We won’t need it any more.”

The school was just as Addleson remembered. He came in through the back door and the cafeteria stank of old hot dogs and new paint. Boys used to take the hotdogs from their buns and chunk them at the floor where they would bounce up like flubber. It became a game to see who could catch the wiener in the bun. Addleson had tried on his own, but was never involved in the games. Dr. Dr. Rex forbade Addleson from making friends. Friends are distractions, he often said, and distractions ruin lives.
Addleson walked down the dimly lit halls, passing lockers that seemed tiny to him now to reach the gym. Inside, it was similar to most of the exposes he had attended. All the children had a little tables where they laid out their projects. The bleachers had been cascaded into one solid wall of wooden seating to make room for all the smiling, proud parents. Addleson knew, if he walked around behind the big bleachers he could hide, or climb to the top and look down on everyone. All those idiots excited to hear the hero Rex Addleson speak. Filled with hopes that he might tussle their child’s hair or even wink at them. It was almost comical, to Addleson, how perfect his father was. He was a large, handsome man with a constant tan from hunting in strange jungles. In four days, Addleson knew, Rex’s friends would throw him a surprise birthday party, despite Rex telling his son that birthday celebrations were vain, disgusting things for persons whose highest achievement was not dying another year. Uninvited celebrities would be overlooked at the Oscar’s this year. It was the party to be at. In the following year, many literature professors would angrily argue that William Kennedy’s invitation had kept Raymond Carver from ever winning a Pulitzer.

Today, Rex wore a tan suit with a dark brown tie. His hair slicked back with pomade. He stood surrounded by a group of giggling women as Addleson approached and asked if he could have a word.

“Just a quick autograph, my good man, I’m to speak in just a few moments.”

Addleson stared at his father. “I don’t want your autograph.”

Rex looked puzzled. He cocked his head to the side and smiled. Behind him, Addleson could see his English teacher watching.

“Well, if that will be all, son, this fine young lady is begging me to show her my Jord Jim.” Rex winked and started to turn, but Addleson grabbed his sleeve and spun him.
“Do you know who I am?”

“Naturally,” Rex said. Addleson thought he looked bored. “You’re my son.”

“Then don’t you see,” Addleson said. “I’ve done it. I’ve done what you couldn’t.”


The world looked as thought someone had thrown a discombobulation bomb at it and Addleson swayed with the motion. All he could think about was sitting with his back against the tree watching the squirrels.

“Come on, Addleson,” Brains said.

“There’s still something I’ve to do.” Behind Addleson, Brains could see the eleven-year-old Addleson’s display and young Addleson, standing beside it, waiting for the egg to hatch.

“You can’t,” Brains said. He yelped. “If you cease to exist all of your work will go with you.”

Addleson nodded.

“All of your work, Addleson,” Brains said.

“I know, Brains.”

“No, you bloody fool. I’m not worried about your sodding time machines, I’m worried about me.”

Addleson knelt. He told the dog to go back to the lab. The future time box would be there. He had sent it back a few days ago. Go back to the time before I discovered past time travel, he said. Find me.

“Bark,” Brains said. “Come with me.”

“I can’t.”
Brains looked at him and saw what was in his eyes. “You cheeky bastard,” he said. “You
planned this. It was about her wasn’t it? You knew all along.”

“No,” Addleson said. “But I know now.”

Addleson turned and walked up to himself. His head felt like a cage filled with angry robot bees.

“Hello,” Addleson said. “Do you know who I am?” His nose dripped blood onto his white coat.

The young Addleson shook his head and looked up at himself. The world wavered and it felt as if Addleson’s eyes were zooming in and out separately from each other.

“Good,” Addleson said. “I’m a friend.” Addleson put his hands on either side of his young face. He wanted to tell the boy to leave the squirrels alone, to go with her. He wanted to tell him that all of the testing, all of the magazine covers, they were all worthless without her weight on his arm. He wanted to tell him that his father did not matter. For a few moments he saw the future as it should have been. He could see Maureen laughing at him as he tried to milk a goat in their giant open backyard that backed up to all of those woods, where the squirrels scampered across tree branches and never spun webs. She would make fun of him, you can build an anti-gravity chamber, she would say, but you can’t milk a goat. He would look up and then chase her all around the woods, both of them laughing until their stomachs ached and they gasped for air. The air would be sweet and the entire world would be theirs. But this was not his future. That life belonged to this other Addleson, this stranger.

She had been wrong, when she said they could fix it. There were some things for which science had no solution. Mistakes, Addleson thought, must be lived through.

“Good luck,” Addleson told his younger self.
His head was pounding as he walked back through the cafeteria to the exit. He stood there looking at the empty tables then noticed the food sitting out on the line. Addleson grabbed a day-old hotdog. He threw it at the floor and it splattered against it, but did not bounce back up. He tried again to the same result. He turned to the doors as the screams came from the cafeteria. He knew they screamed because of his pteradactal. It flew as high as it would ever fly and, terrified, roosted in the crossbeams at the top of the gym. In the cafeteria, the A/C had been turned off for the weekend and the hot thick air wrapped around his face like a sweaty Halloween mask. The inside of his mouth tasted stale and recycled. He pocketed a few of yesterday’s hotdogs and headed back to the gym.

Addleson sneaked around behind the bleachers without anyone seeing him and began his climb. The gaps between the wooden seats were smaller than he remembered and the toe of his shoe barely fit.

At the top, he slung his legs over and reached up for the rafters. He could see, beneath him, all of those people watching as his father cleared his throat and began his speech and above him, the small, green frightened creator whom did not belong in this time.

He had to launch himself over onto a crossbeam to reach it. It was not comfortable. Addleson sat with his legs dangling and looked at his creation. The tiny thing cowered as he neared it and hunkered down behind its wings, but Addleson ripped a piece of hotdog off the tip and reached it out. The thing waited then snatched it away and gulped. Addleson gave it another piece and then another until he was out of the stale meat, but the thing still would not come to his lap where he beckoned it. Sitting up above all of those families, listening to the same speech he had heard thousands of times, Addleson put his head in his hands and closed his eyes and tried not to explode.
All the Little Lights

The forest swallowed her BMW like a blue M&M. With the windows rolled down the sweet smell of the woods rushed in like a river. Bridgette wished she could bottle the smell and take it everywhere, but she thought that somehow that seemed like cheating, like living in Disney World. If she breathed only this air eventually it would lose its sweetness. She thought love was like that too. It was great for a time, but too much of it could rot away at you like old wood out in the damp.

She parked in the circular drive and stepped out onto the cement thinking it looked out of place around all of these woods. The house was massive. Even the guesthouse was larger than the house she had grown up in. Her father had purchased the house when he and her mother were still together, but had never been able to afford it. He had spent the rest of his life paying for it, until he gave up with two swift slashes down his wrists. She had sold the house and everything in it and everything that ever reminded her of him. But the things he had said always floated to the top of her memories and they lingered like the smell of smoke in that old house.

Mr. Clarke opened the door and said ‘greetings, mistress.’ He was in his fifties and had been a client for over two years, which was longer than most. He was short, but in shape for his age. His company had a gym at their headquarters and he claimed to swim five days a week. He kept himself fairly tan. Most of the time, when he was not naked, he wore a suit.

Bridgette told him to bring in her bags and let herself into the house. It looked the way she imagined a Disney hunting lodge would look. Everything had either fur or antlers or both. The floors were a beautiful finished hard wood. Sharla would get a kick out of this place,
Bridgette thought. She could call it ‘camptastic.’ Sharla was her weed dealer and most likely her only friend. Then there were Bridgette’s fish, but she was not sure those counted as friends.

She walked through the vast living room, running her fingers along the edges of furniture. The couches were nice dark brown leather. There were no spots where the leather cracked from the pressure of elbows, like the old couches that had been passed down to her father. Her father had been right; she should have gotten a business degree. When Mr. Clarke had arranged her bags in the master bedroom he came out and stared at her. She asked if they would be alone for the weekend and he said they might as well be. There was a cook and a maid, but they would be invisible as far as she was concerned.

“You’re not worried they’ll tell your wife?” Bridgette said.

“They are compensated very well. Besides,” Mr. Clarke said and licked his lips. “For all intents and purposes, she knows.”

“And she doesn’t care?” Bridgette said.

Mr. Clarke shrugged. “Sex doesn’t equal love and money doesn’t equal happiness,” he said. “We love each other, but sometimes we both get tired of eating pizza. You think, when you’re young, that in order to fall in love you have to give yourself over to someone completely, but you’re wrong. There are certain sides of yourself you must hide in order to maintain respect. Respect.” Mr. Clarke waggled his finger in the air. “That is the foundation upon which relationships are built.”

Mr. Clarke continued into a lecture that Bridgette tuned out as she followed the hallways around to the master bedroom. She had driven twelve hours to get here from Texas and wanted to sleep. She sat on the bed and told him to takeoff her shoes. He knelt and slipped the black converse off her feet.
The sun had set and Bridgette thought, as she stared out the huge window in the master bedroom that everything seemed more intense here. The darks were darker. The window looked out over the bluff, but in the night all she could see were little lights sprouting up out of the darkness. She knew in the day those lights would become homes where ordinary people lived their ordinary lives, but for now they were just more stars in an already crowded sky.

“How did you get here?” Bridgette said without looking away from the window.

“I flew in,” Mr. Clarke said. “I could have arranged a flight for you but you insisted up—“

“That’s not what I meant,” Bridgette said. “I mean, what makes you different? Why do you deserve all of this?”

“Work,” Mr. Clarke said. “A lot of luck. Waking up in the morning and telling the mirror today is the day.”

“What if it isn’t the day?” Bridgette said.

Mr. Clarke smiled. “Then you do it again tomorrow.”

Bridgette placed her hand against the class and pinched one of the tiny lights between her index finger and thumb as though she could extinguish it from here. “But all the little lights down there,” she said. “Those are all homes, kitchens. There are people looking out their window down there at this big light on this big hill and they want to know how you got here and you can’t tell them?”

“My father used to say,” Mr. Clarke said. “That living in the north makes your bones stronger. The cold hardens them. I think, ultimately, every decision you make comes down to what you’re willing to do to get what you want. And some people can live with a lot more.”

“You’re saying your skeletal structure made you rich?” Bridgette said without looking away from the sky.
“I’ve never broken anything,” Mr. Clarke said. He pressed up behind her and let his hands slide down from her elbows to her wrists. “Have you?”

Bridgette felt him smell her neck and she shrugged. She slowly arched her back so that her butt pressed into his crotch. Then she turned and shoved him backward onto the bed. He smiled. She asked him if that was the best answer he had for all those people in the valley.

“I bought a watch,” Mr. Clarke said. “I couldn’t afford it, but I was sick of nothing happening. I woke up every morning excited and went to sleep exhausted. Nothing changed. I told myself if I bought this watch everything would be different, because it had to be, because I gave myself no choice.”

“How much did it cost?”

“It cost me everything,” Mr. Clarke said.

Mr. Clarke led her up a winding flight of stairs into a master bathroom. After instructing her on the dials and buttons of the shower, he left her and went back down the stairs. She turned all of the nozzles on and plunged her head and neck into the heat. She felt worn down.

Sharla would make fun of this place, but Bridgette’s father would have loved it. He was the type of man who valued solid construction and spending money. He frequently said ‘you get what you pay for,’ but he had also said ‘life seems great until you realize it’s a fuck ton of lies covered in icing, but that the icing is really just dog shit with food coloring,’ so it was hard to place value in anything the man had done. He had raised Bridgette, though she gave him that. She had been three when her mom left and she knew the woman only in pictures, though of those there were few. Her father had been the one that taught her to ride a bike and even before that would knee down and tie her shoes, telling her of the bunny, the tree, and the bunnyhole so that
she could learn. From time to time, when she tied her own shoes, Bridgette still mouthed the words.

By the time she was in high school he had become bitter and had taken to drinking more nights than not. Bridgette would go to her room and lock the door while he yelled at the television, broadcasting college football games, which always cost him money. In her room, she would trace her favorite comic book characters and sometimes she would draw them visiting her. Spiderman swooping in through the window and taking her somewhere else. She had to hide them between her mattress and the box springs the way boys she knew hid nudie magazines. The few times her father found the drawings laying around he threw them away and told her to stop flushing her future down the toilet.

When she left for college, he told her to be careful out there. At his request she had gone into business. He told her drawing pictures was for children and sooner or later she needed to grow up, otherwise the world would grow her up without her permission. Once she left there was no one at home to clean up his bottles or throw a blanket over him after he passed out in his chair with the television tuned to some obscure sport, like the world championship of dominos on ESPN 3. Three weeks before winter break he called her and told her he was done and for whatever it was worth he was sorry. Bridgette was sure he had been waiting for her to move out, which, in some weird way, was kind of sweet.

‘Please,’ she had said, ‘you don’t have to do this.’

‘I’m chained down, Bumble-B,’ he had said. ‘This is the only way out.’

She had switched her major to visual arts after the break, but there were frequent moments when she saw what other people had and wished that she had not.
Bridgette washed away as much as she could and toweled herself off. The bathroom tiles were heated and she stood on them, crinkling and uncrinkling her toes until the huge mirror was no longer foggy.

Bridgette found Mr. Clarke in bed reading. She dropped her towel to the floor and climbed on top of him. She did not kiss him on the mouth and when he tried, she slapped him. Once he was aroused she told him to calm himself unless he wanted to wear a chastity belt. She rolled off of him and told him goodnight.

Bridgette never had sex with clients; normally she never even touched their genitalia once in a session. Ultimately they just wanted to relinquish control of themselves for up to an hour at a time.

In the morning, Mr. Clarke was not in bed. Bridgette tugged on her jeans and a clean t-shirt and slunk down the hall to where she smelled coffee. She found Mr. Clarke at the table with an iPad. He looked up and told her good morning. She waved her hand and went to the coffee pot and poured a mug.

“Are you hungry?” Mr. Clarke said.

“For what?”

Mr. Clarke smiled. “Marshal,” he said. “Can make you whatever you would like.”

“Froot Loops,” Bridgette said. “You got Froot Loops?”

“You can eat whatever you want and you want a children’s cereal?” Mr. Clarke smirked in a way that Bridgette knew meant he found her cute.

“I was never allowed to eat cereal for breakfast,” Bridgette said. “My dad called it shit-soup. One of his less vulgar coinages. So now, as an adult, I eat it every day.”
“It’s not good for you,” Mr. Clarke said.

“What is?”

Mr. Clarke stood up and came back with a bowl filled with milk and a box of Froot Loops.

“I didn’t let my daughters eat this kind of stuff when they were children,” Mr. Clarke said. “You think they’re out there, craving Froot Loops now?”

“You have daughters?” Bridgette said around a mouth filled with bright colors.

“Two of them,” Mr. Clarke said. “One is thirty and the other is twenty-six, as of five days ago.”

“Cancer,” Bridgette said.

“Yes,” Mr. Clarke said. “Well. Girls can be a handful, but I wouldn’t go as far as that.”

“No,” Bridgette said. She laughed and a red loop launched from her mouth and out onto the table. “She’s a cancer, your daughter. Zodialogically speaking. What did you get her? A hovercraft?”

“My daughter and I aren’t on as good of terms as I would like,” Mr. Clarke said. “I’d prefer not to talk about it.”

Bridgette nodded. “Let’s do something fun today,” she said.

They left before the sun was halfway across the sky and followed the slow slope that continued up beside the house. Mr. Clarke had filled two backpacks with sandwiches and a few snacks as well as two bottles of water each. After they walked a bit in silence Mr. Clarke told Bridgette that he sometimes left his phone at the house and jaunted up here. There were times when he needed to think and he didn’t know of any place better than nature. His first wife, the one he
married before he had money, the mother of his daughters, had loved camping. She had come from a large family, he said, so their vacations had to be cheap.

“She associated nature with love,” Mr. Clarke said.

“Nature is Satan’s church,” Bridgette said.

Mr. Clarke sat down in the grass. “She said money changed me,” he said. “The problem with changing is that you don’t feel any different.”

“You always feel like you,” Bridgette said. She plopped down onto the grass next to him. It was almost dark where they were, like a thin dusk. The trees surrounding them were so tall their leaves blotted out the sun. Bridgette looked up at them. Vines twisted in and out and ran across the canopy of leaves like the tentacles of giant brown octopuses.

“In the mornings she used to tell me I was cranky before I had my coffee,” Mr. Clarke said. “But I never felt cranky. I always felt like I was being sweet.” With a stick he drew in a patch of dirt beneath his boots. “After a while I got frustrated because she kept telling me I was cranky and I think it always made me cranky.”

Bridgette said nothing. In college she had learned that most men just want to talk and they never wanted opinion or advice. Men worked out their own problems while they spoke, but had become too aware of their own masculinity to talk to themselves.

“I think you expect money to change someone, so you see changes that aren’t there. She kept pointing out little things, after the IPO went well. We became millionaires over night. This house,” Mr. Clarke said. “It was supposed to be an anniversary gift, but she was gone before I closed on the land and started construction.”

“You miss her,” Bridgette said.
“I think I miss what it meant to be with her,” Mr. Clarke said. He stood up and, without
warning, began walking again.

They had only walked for another ten minutes when they heard a whaling sound. It reminded
Bridgette of the stray cats in Denton and the sound they made outside her dorm room window
when they were in heat. Through the trees something was moving. They could hear the crunch
crunching of leaves like some giant eating a bag of potato chips. The steps were panicked and
Mr. Clarke told Bridgette to stay behind him.

At first, Bridgette thought it was a donkey, which did not make sense to her. Then they
came through the clearing and saw that it was a small deer calf.

“My god,” Bridgette said bringing a hand to her mouth. “It’s beautiful.”

“It’s dying,” Mr. Clarke said.

The deer’s front left leg was closed inside the gnashing metal teeth of a bear trap. It
braced itself on its knees, but kept trying to stand and pull away. Every time the deer attempted
to pull away, it screamed.

Bridgette shuddered. The sound made her feel the same way unbaked clay made her feel
when her nails even so much as grazed it. “We have to let it out,” she said.

When Mr. Clarke stepped toward it, the deer bucked forward at him and the chain on the
trap rattled. Mr. Clark jumped backward. The deer howled. Its eyes were wide and white with
panic. It bucked forward again, but Mr. Clarke was well out of reach. He stepped back again
anyway.

“We have to kill it,” Mr. Clarke said.

“With what,” Bridgette said. “A gun?”
Mr. Clarke reached back into his pack and pulled out a large buck knife. It glinted in the sun and sent light darting back into the sky. He made a face, a grimace, like he was in pain when he turned it to each side and looked at it.

“Christ,” Bridgette said. “We can’t even get near it. Isn’t there someone we can call?”

“Animal control,” Mr. Clarke said. “But it would be tomorrow before they could get out here and even then they’re going to do the same thing, except with a needle.”

Bridgette sat down on the ground and put her head in her hands.

“I can do this,” Mr. Clarke said. “You don’t have to watch.”

“Wait,” Bridgette said. She unzipped her bag and pulled out a metal cigarette tin. She pulled a joint from it and stood up.

“I don’t think you’re supposed to do that,” Mr. Clarke said.

“It’s legal,” Bridgette said, exhaling a mushroom of smoke.

“I don’t mean that,” Mr. Clarke said. “I mean you can’t just get an animal stoned.”

“My fish love it,” Bridgette said and took another step toward the animal. He bucked at her and she stepped back. Her right foot caught in a root and she twisted and fell forward to the right of the deer.

Her face was wet and she wiped away at the water.

“Of all the places to fall,” she said. “And I fall in the only water I’ve seen since we left the house.”

“I don’t think that’s water,” Mr. Clarke said.

Bridgette smelled her hand and gagged. “Jesus,” she said. “My life’s a wreck. I think I twisted my ankle.”

“Let me see,” Mr. Clarke said and knelt in front of her.
The deer moaned. It kept yanking on its ankle. In some places, Bridgette could see the bright white of bone.

Bridgette put her boot in Mr. Clarke’s lap and he unlaced it. It stung as he slid it off. He squeezed in places and asked her what hurt. She asked how he knew what the pain meant and he shrugged.

“No one knows what they’re doing,” he said. “You make it up as you go along.” He slid the boot back on and carefully laced it up for her. It was tighter. He said this would help it from getting worse. He started to stand up, but Bridgette grabbed the sides of his face, beneath his chin, and tugged. She kissed him.

They both pulled away looking startled. “We have to deal with this,” Mr. Clarke said. He picked the joint off the ground and lit it. He stood and blew the smoke out into the deer’s face.

They smoked two joints like that, passing them back and forth until the deer sat down in the dirt, its eyes red-rimmed and sleepy.

“Are you still up for this,” Bridgette said.

“No,” Mr. Clarke said. “But I’m going to do it.” He went to the deer and put a hand on his head. The deer watched him, but gave no impression that he would move. “Come here,” Mr. Clarke said. “Feel this.”

Bridgette put her hand on the deer’s back. She could feel its slow breaths as he dragged them in from the air.

“Maybe we could save it,” she said. “If we let it out, maybe it can heal.”

“There are some wounds that don’t heal,” Mr. Clarke said.

“Okay,” Bridgette said. “I want to watch.”
Mr. Clarke knelt in front of the deer and held the large knife in his hands. The deer watched him. Mr. Clarke raised the knife and held it where he thought the deer’s heart would be then he let his hands fall away.

“I can’t,” he said.

Bridgette stood breathing through her mouth while the deer looked back and forth between them. It might have been the weed, but she felt like the deer trusted them now and she stood up and went to it. She ran her hand down its neck and over its back and listened to its breathing.

“Everything will be okay,” she told the deer. Not because it was true, Bridgette thought, but because that was what you told people you loved when they were afraid. You lied to them and told them everything would be great even when you knew it would not be.

At the house, sitting at the kitchen table, Bridgette drank from her glass of Pinot Noir. The cook had prepared pasta primavera at their request, because Bridgette said she could not eat meat for the rest of the year. They had already finished a bottle before dinner was served and were on their second when the cook disappeared to his quarters telling them there was tiramisu in the fridge, if they were so inclined.

Mr. Clarke had clamped a thick plastic leg brace about Bridgette’s ankle and she clinked it against the wood of the breakfast table. It did not fit inside her shoes, so her right foot was bare. She felt the weight of it when she picked it up off the ground. It would be worse tomorrow.

Bridgette could not keep herself from staring at the buck knife sitting by the coffee machine on the counter. It made her think of the deer, standing out there in the cooling evening, abandoned.
Bridgette wondered what her father had used, that was something the police never told her. It was probably a razor. He kept blades around for scraping off the old inspection stickers on his car. She wondered if it had been that simple, as scraping off an old sticker. She knew he was drunk, she could tell when he called. She imagined him sitting in that old house, using envelopes filled with repo notices as coasters for his whisky.

“Good luck,” he had said over the phone. “I’m done.”

“Daddy, you’re scaring me,” she had said.

“You should be scared, bumble-B. It comes on quiet, but once it gets a-hold of you, there’s no fighting it. You’ll get stuck in the gears and those cogs will turn right over crush you. Your blood is just oil for the machine.”

He told her that he loved her and hung up.

At the kitchen table, with pasta steaming before her, Bridgette blinked at the knife and hoped that whatever he had used had been painful. For a moment, she wanted to tell Mr. Clarke about her father, but she decided she would rather focus on someone else’s misery.

“Why did she leave you?” Bridgette said. “Your first wife? The money?”

“That’s what she said,” Mr. Clarke said. “But that’s not the part I miss. She took Michael and Terry with her.”

“Michael?”

“It was her idea,” Mr. Clarke said. “She said that she wouldn’t raise her girls in a house that believed some names were for men and others for women.”

“Michael is the cancer,” Bridgette said. She took a gulp of wine. It was too big and some trailed down her chin.
“Yes,” Mr. Clarke said. He pretended to not notice when she mopped her chin with a napkin. “I get updates from Terry, but they’re more infrequent than I would like. They both blame me for their mother’s health, Michael more than Terry. I haven’t spoken to her in three years. She won’t even let me pay for her grad school. She’s gone into debt out of pride. I don’t understand it.”

“Maybe you’ve forgotten what it means to not have anything,” Bridgette said. “You can’t buy everything.”

“Does it look like I’m happy?” Mr. Clarke said. “What do you think about at night before you go to sleep when all of your fantasies have come true? Everything that you can buy you already have. All that is left is worry. Instead of fantasizing you stay up thinking about how it can all be taken away from you. The more you have, the more there is to be taken away or destroyed. If you’re on top of the mountain, someone always wants to kick you off even if they don’t know why they want to be up there. It’s a miserable place to live.”

“It’s already been taken away,” Bridgette said. “Your daughter doesn’t talk to you.”

“But I can still protect her,” Mr. Clarke said. “Even if she won’t take my money, I can always protect her with it.”

“You can’t protect her from what’s out there,” Bridgette said. “You don’t even know what’s out there. You’re cooped up in your fortress while the rest of us are out in the trenches everyday and nothing you do will keep her safe.”

“She can do anything she wants,” Mr. Clarke said. “She can travel to Tibet, buy a rare painting.”
“Money,” Bridgette said. “Money. What about what she wants? She doesn’t care about money. She just wants you to accept her. She just wants you to say she’s good at what she loves to do. Just let her be who she is and stop trying to tell that money will make everything better.”

Bridgette threw her fork down at the table and stomped out of the room. She grabbed her bag and went out onto the large deck in the backyard. Mr. Clarke did not follow her. She took out her sketchbook and went to work. She did not need a model, because the image was still etched on the inside of her eyelids.

She breathed in all that air, that smell she remembered from the drive up yesterday, and drew. Her hand cramped and her fingers closed around the pencil like frozen branches, but she could not stop. The world around her slowly faded to nothing and she could hear the whaling sound the deer had made, she smelled the mix of blood and urine like a bunch of pennies mashed into the stink bait her father had used for catfish. She did not notice Mr. Clarke standing behind her until he spoke.

“That’s amazing,” he said.

Bridgette looked down at the drawing. It was the deer stuck in the bear trap, but she was running. The trap was still around her ankle. She had tugged it loose from the ground and was sprinting out into the dense forest that disappeared into sharp lines of charcoal where she would live the rest of her life with the weight of the world around her ankle.

“I didn’t realize you were an artist,” Mr. Clarke said.

“I don’t normally draw realism,” Bridgette said.

Mr. Clarke knelt down next to her chair and put an arm on her knee. “You have more?”

Bridgette flipped through the pages and showed him. There was Karma, a super anti-hero with a skewed sense of justice. Mr. Power, an economics teacher who fought crime along side
The Barista in the streets of Dallas. She had one full comic of Mr. Power and Mr. Clarke read it and chuckled all throughout.

“These are fantastic,” he said. “Why don’t you publish them?”

“No one has ever really seen them,” Bridgette said. “Except my dealer.”

“I can make some phone calls,” Mr. Clarke said. “We’ll get these read. They’re absolutely marvelous, dear.”

Bridgette looked at the old man. She took the sketchbook away from him and kissed him. This time neither of them broke away. They kissed, stumbling their way to the wooden floor of the deck that creaked beneath their weight. They tugged at buttons and zippers until, beneath the light of the moon, they were both naked. She climbed on top and lowered herself down onto him.

It was the first time Bridgette had had sex in over two years and she climaxed almost immediately. Mr. Clarke stood and tucked her legs beneath his right arm and cradled her shoulders with his left and carried her to bed.

He laid her down on the bed and took her again, but she fought him. She slapped and clawed him until she found her way on top. From her bag, she took thick blue rope and laced it around first his wrists then his ankles. Each knot she tied, she thought of the bunny running around the tree and down into his hole.

She had to remove his expensive watch to bind his left wrist and Mr. Clarke protested, but she covered his mouth with her hand and when he had calmed she put the watch on her own wrist.

He moaned as she mounted him again and the second time they climaxed together, then she lay her head upon his chest and breathed in slowly, tasting the air like a snake.
“I think I love you,” Mr. Clarke said. “I don’t want you to do this anymore. You can be an artist, you don’t have to do this anymore.”

In the kitchen, Bridgette poured herself a glass of water and drank it in three gulps then refilled it and drank again. She was exhausted and exhilarated. Down the hall, she could hear Mr. Clarke bleating, begging her to come back. She knew what was in that room, but she needed to leave. Leave him there like they had left the poor deer, scared and alone. She needed to get into her car and drive the twelve hours back to Sharla and her fish. She needed to run, but the weight of that expensive watch weighed on her wrist like a coil of chains. She would do what they had not the courage to do in the woods.

She slinked back into the room.

“I thought you weren’t coming back,” Mr. Clarke said. He pulled on the ropes and they made a thick stretching sound like old rotting wood.

Bridgette said nothing, but straddled him and pulled the buck knife out from behind her back.

“What are you doing?”

Bridgette dragged the blade down his chest without cutting him. His breaths were tiny and sharp.

“Please,” he said. “You don’t have to do this.”

“This is the only way out,” Bridgette said. She ran the blade from his armpit, sliding it up past his elbow and circled it sensually then up still, past his forearm and stopped at his wrist.

Some clients in the past had asked for this, cut-play, but she had always refused. She danced the blade in lazy circles around his wrist then stopped. She let the blade linger there and she
imagined the tip digging into the soft flesh and the stream of blood that would follow. Then she
sat up and cut the brace off of her ankle.

The knife made a thud when it dropped onto the floor. Bridgette dressed and walked out
of the room while Mr. Clarke repeatedly asked her what she was doing. As she walked through
the hallways toward the front door, she could hear him become more and more angry, no longer
concerned for her, but only for himself.

Outside there was a chill and it felt cleansing against her skin. She stood by her car for a
moment listening to see if she could hear the deer, but she could not. The trees made their own
sounds as the wind rushed through them and they bent to ease its passage. It sounded like a deep
moaning. She sat in the car and rolled down all the windows. She took one last look out over the
bluff through the open window. There were thousands of lights and from where she sat it was
impossible to tell which were stars and which were homes. All of them fought for space in the
night sky.
The Same Thing That’s Wrong with All Of Us

This is my sister’s second suicide attempt since she ate her 6-month-old baby. The first was a warning sign, but she never went to the hospital. Instead she sat on the wood-looking laminate floor of her trailer bathroom throwing up with my mom on the other end of a cell phone. Now we’re all gathered here in the waiting room. It smells like copper and smoke and worry. It won’t be long before my big hairy dad gives me a wolves-stick-together speech and pats me on the back too hard with his paws. I once saw him kill two humans over a parking spot and drink the blood as it spurted from their necks like sugary candy. He’ll tell me that when the pack is together, nothing else matters, not my finals, my problems, or my broken heart. Werewolves, he’ll tell me, were made to survive.

There’s a cooler sitting next to my father, because he can’t go 15 minutes without a snack. The chairs in the waiting room are light greens and pinks and tans. They look like they could have been stolen from a motel outside of Desoto, Texas. My brother, Tobias, stares at me and I watch my dad peel a fatty strip of uncooked bacon from a pack. It jiggles in the air before his mouth like a flat, greasy parasite then it drops. It smushes against his too-sharp teeth and the sound makes me shake, like I’m wet. It makes me nauseous.

“The doctor says,” Dad says around a mouth of meat, not bothering to wait until he has finished. “We’ll be able to see her tonight.” He punctuates the sentence with raised eyebrows and reaches down for another piece of bacon. “Want some?” he asks, jiggling the strip about. I shudder.

“Now, Dad,” Mom says. “You know Vern is a vegetarian now.” She winks at him like they’re in on some joke together. My father shrugs and lets the meat flop down into his mouth.
“It’s not healthy,” my brother says. At Syracuse he’s working on his Master’s in sociology and he thinks his views are the only ones informed enough to be considered. “We’re not made to be vegetarians. It’s against the laws of nature.”

“So is eating your own kid,” I say. Before I even finish the sentence I regret it. My dad whacks my face and my eyes tear up. “I’m sorry,” I say and I close my eyes.

A few months ago we weren’t like this. Before baby Abraham’s death we were a tight little pack. I had come home from my freshman year in Missouri for Thanksgiving. In the four months I had been at school, I had become a vegetarian, fallen in love, had my heart broken, and decided I didn’t want to be a werewolf anymore. It was a busy year for me. I had taken to shaving my arms and legs. I plucked my eyebrows twice a day.

I met Sarah in one of those English composition class that every freshman had to take. She had dyed silver hair that seemed exotic to me and the first time I spoke with her my voice kept catching in my throat. I was in love after two dates and when we had sex on the fourth, I thought I knew what I wanted to do with the rest of my life. I had found her and nothing else mattered. At first I tried to hide my curse from her. But I needed someone to know.

I told her after we had gotten back from a Halloween party and were a little tipsy. She had gone as Sarah Connor from Terminator and she had taken her boots off and was sitting on my bed. I still remember the way her feet smelled. It wasn’t pleasant, but it was comforting somehow.

“I’m a werewolf, you know,” I said and sat down next to her on the small bed. She giggled.

“Uh-huh,” she said.
“No,” I said. “Like seriously, I’m actually a werewolf.” I shrugged. “I thought you should know.”


I started at her. “I can’t just go. It doesn’t work that way. It’s only on full moons.”

“My weird, cute boyfriend,” she said and fell forward when she tried to kiss me.

She didn’t stay over that night. It was only a few days away from the next full moon. I went to a hardware store and bought silver chains. When she came over I asked her to help chain me up.

“Vern,” she said. “This is stupid and it’s starting to annoy me.” I told her to give it time. I could feel the moon pulling on me, my hairs standing on end. In movies it’s always painful, but in real life it’s like stretching after a particularly nice nap. It’s scratching an itch that you haven’t been able to reach in a long time. Once the chains were on, I couldn’t hold it any longer, I arched my back and let the moon take me. I tried not to howl, because if my RA thought I had a dog he might come up to check, but it was like fighting sleep in the middle of a boring class. I gave in. It started in my chest and ached up my throat then everything turned hazy. I remember smelling her shampoo as her hair bounced in the air and then she was gone.

I tried to call her the next day and a few times after that, but it was over and I knew it. I don’t blame her. I think she thought it was some elaborate prank.

We’re still in this shit-smelling room with its pastels, but they won’t let us see her. We have waited so long that my father ran out of snacks and sent my mom to a burger place up the road. He sits with his big hairy legs jutting out of his green shorts, eating a massive cheeseburger, ketchup oozing from the sides like blood from a scab that has been picked off and dropping onto
his Hawaiian shirt. I pick at a couple of french-fries, but I’m not hungry and they taste like chalk. The rest of my family chows down like we weren’t sitting in a hospital waiting room. My brother reaches back into the sack to grab another burger and my father growls at him. On the ride over, Tobias hung his head out the window. I don’t want to be her. I don’t belong with these animals.

The doctor comes out and we all stand, he has no idea that we can smell Becca on him.

“Mr. Braunders,” he says and takes my father’s hand and winces, my father, always trying alpha someone. “I’m Dr. Caswell.” He pulls his hand away and shakes it like he’s knocked it against something. “The procedure was successful, but before I say anything about what has happened today I would like to take a moment and explain to you what is going to happen. Your daughter is going to be held for a week on a psych-evaluation. She—“

“When do we get to see her,” my dad interrupts, stepping closer to the small doctor. Dr. Caswell raises his hands calmly.

“I’m getting to that. As I was saying, your daughter will—“

“Can we just fucking see her?”

“Fair enough. Follow me.”

We follow the doctor down the hall to an elevator and ride it to the 4th floor. Our ears scrunch down; a drill is buzzing somewhere down the hall.

In her tiny room, my sister is gaunt and her hair is glued to her forehead by sweat. She lays in a bed with teal sheets and a white blanket draped over her. The room smells like alcohol and latex. My sister looks at us and smiles. Her eyes only open half way, but she looks legitimately happy. This may be due to the fact that she looks like she’s been hitting a bong for the past four hours straight.
“Well you really fucked up this time, didn’t you?” my dad says.

“Keith!” my mom says, but he growls at her and she falls silent.

“I’m sorry,” she says. Her voice is slow and dreamy and she says it like she just knocked over someone’s beer instead of ate their grandchild. “I think I quit,” she says. “I don’t want to do this anymore.” Her voice is so quiet our ears twitch. “A few days ago I got so hungry for meat that I ate someone’s cat. I think. I didn’t even turn, I just ate him, raw.”

“Oh, sweetie,” my mom says. She leans down and scratches behind my sister’s ear to sooth her. “It was just a cat.”

“You can’t be what you’re not,” Tobias says.

Before I went home for Christmas, I saw Sarah. She was at Shakespeare’s laughing at some goofy looking goon over the top of a pizza. I waited for them to leave and I remembering his scent, tracked him down later that night.

He was older and lived off campus in a small house. In the backyard there was a trampoline with a thin layer of ice coating it like glass. In the reflected light, the trampoline glowed like a full moon. The pull was weak and even without looking up I knew the moon was less than half full.

I adjusted my Halloween mask. It was a brown dogface made out of plastic I had picked up at a drug store. I kicked the door in and went straight for his room. No one else was home; I would have smelled them. He was watching television when I pulled him out of his chair. He was bigger than me, but that didn’t keep him from pissing his pants. This piss patted against the floor like someone slowly pouring out a warm beer.
“Please! Just take whatever you want. Anything,” he said. “Just take it.” He was on the ground, scooting away from me until he hit his back against his bed.

“Be quiet,” I said.

“Money? It’s–I have money in my drawer–cash.” He looked like he might cry. He was in his underwear, expensive boxers from Jcrew or Express, an athletic guy with a big cross on his arm. He wasn’t even her type.

I had never killed a human before, but I knew how they tasted. When I was young, my parents used to take me hunting; they killed plenty. Now I wished I could turn, forget, lean down and bite off his face. But I couldn’t turn whenever I wanted. An old superstition tells of a type of werewolf, a nagual. They tell it to us when we’re little pups to scare us. A nagual was a wolf who had killed and eaten another wolf and could turn at will. It was a horrible thing to be, a nagual, but I wanted to be one right then. Until I really saw the guy on the ground, his expensive boxers yellowed with his own urine. I thought about my dad, years ago in the parking lot with those two guys that had darted into the spot he had his blinker on for. I was too young to recognize it then, but they were drunk and my dad had edged them into a fight. They were bigger than him, but he told them they could have hurt someone, driving like that. He had his son with him and what were they thinking. When they started circling him, he told them to back off or he would rip their arms off and beat them to death with them. He actually did this to one of them as I watched. The other guy got his throat ripped open and my dad held him high in the air as the blood spewed out and it looked like someone had shaken a can of Big Red then tried to open it and my father shook his head like a dog sprayed with a hose, biting at the water. Most pups would have been proud or impressed, but all I could think about were the two guys and the people waiting for them to come home.
And now, at this dude’s house, I turned and ran out the way I had come in. I ran all the way back to campus with my tongue flapping against the plastic mask, cutting it on the sharp edges.

At the hospital, my sister sends everyone from the room, says she wants to talk to me. My dad has to be dragged from the room by my mom and Tobias, but it’s mostly for show. For a few moments we look at each other, my sister and I, sniffing the air. We’ve never been close. She always seemed to resent Tobias and me, because we went to college. It was like she thought we were the reason she lived in a broken down trailer that didn’t have cable. She used to call me when I was younger and ask me to go fishing with her, but she never understood how much I hated fishing.

Now she asks me if I think Tobias is right, that we can’t fight it. Not me with my vegetarianism nor her with her shit-attempts at suicide. I open my mouth then close it.

“Maybe now isn’t such a good time to have this talk,” I say.

“Stop hiding,” she says. Her head droops forward for a second like she’s about to fall asleep, but she jerks it back up. “I’m sick of it, Vern,” she says. It sounds like an idea that just occurred to her. “I’m exhausted. I used to think I would grow up and marry outside the pack, but now I feel like maybe it’s not such a bad thing.”

“Don’t,” I say. I pull my chair forward and take her paws in mine. I can feel my eyes darting around the room, wildly, like I might find some logic there to explain this. “There has to be someway out. We’re unnatural. Humans don’t go around just killing one another.”

She raises her eyebrows at me and I’m already feeling stupid for the comment. This conversation is tumbling down the stairs and I don’t know how to get hold of it.
“What if it wasn’t an accident?” she says.

“If what wasn’t?”

“I wanted to be a nagual,” she says. “I thought, the next time Irving pushed me against
the wall, I’d turn and we’d see who the alpha was.”

“Those are just children’s stories,” I say.

“We’re just children’s stories,” she says. “Once I turned, I,” she looks down at our paws.
“I didn’t have control. I wanted to kill him and it felt great. I broke his wrist. He moved out. And
I love it. I don’t want to, but I love it.”

“Why didn’t he turn?”

“I did it on purpose,” she says.

“Did what?”
She leans forward and props herself up on her elbows in the bed.

“Abraham,” she says. “I ate him. It wasn’t a mistake.”

“It was absolutely a mistake,” I say. I scoot back. The chair squeals like a dying field
mouse and I can imagine my family, in the waiting room, perking their ears and sniffing the air.

“What’s wrong with you?”

“The same thing that’s wrong with all of us.”

In the week before Thanksgiving break I kept running over different nights in my head. The
night Sarah and I were at a party and some dude grabbed her ass and tried to start a fight with
me, but I walked away. I was sitting on top of a dryer and she was between my legs. I could have
killed him. I thought about snapping him in half and loading him in to the permanent press cycle.
Sarah hadn’t wanted to leave the party. Maybe if I had been more of an alpha, she would have
understood. I could have sniffed out her phone when she lost it, instead of calling it on my own. I ate enough wolfsbane to make myself sick, trying to get rid of this curse, but it didn’t work.

I came home at Thanksgiving, dejected, beaten, and practically suicidal. My family is one of those packs that think being a wolf is something to be proud of. My parents get together with a small community of other wolves on the weekends and ride motorcycles. They call themselves The Lobos and the rides normally end with frozen margaritas from a plastic tub out of someone’s freezer and games of spades. My brother is worse. Being the first in my family to go to college, he spends his time working on theories about the animalistic side of man. Becca, on the other hand, is a redneck. No one was surprised when, a little over a year ago, she told us she was pregnant and wasn’t quite sure who the papa was. It could have been any of the studs in her area, the kind of wolves that wear camo year round. Thanksgiving was the first time I had seen Abraham since he had been covered in goo. I still remember my father licking his lips and asking my sister if she had decided what she would do with the placenta.

The house smelled hideous, like chili and ham. Only wolves would make chili as a side dish for another meat. All of that was for tomorrow though; tonight was a hunting night. It was a family tradition to plan Thanksgiving around the full moon in November. This year the full moon was on a Sunday before the holiday. I didn’t want to take the chance of killing a human so I volunteered to stay back and be chained down, so that I would be there if Abraham needed something. Wolves don’t turn until they’re five or six normally. Teething is the worst.

They pulled Abraham’s crib into the room so he could see me and be comforted then they hopped in the big SUV and rode out to their hunting spot a few miles away. I felt the moon tugging at me and I tried, not for the first time, to see if I could fight it. At first it seemed possible, but eventually it was like a 16-year-old boy trying not to cum from his first hand job.
My hair stood on end and I arched my back and then came that awesome feeling and I gave in.

What happened next, I couldn’t stop.

Becca came in and she went straight for Abraham and picked him up like a little butterball chicken. He cooed at her. His sense of smell was strong enough to recognize his mother as she dug her nails into his little eyes and popped them out like olive pits. The rest happened quickly, but Abraham was gone by the time I broke my chains. I didn’t bite her, because I refused to even taste another wolf for fear that it might make me even more monstrous.

When everyone returned, there were questions, but neither of my parents were too concerned. Some 18 percent of pups die in the first four years because they turn too early and their little hearts can’t take the strain. Others are eaten, sometimes by family. My dad patted Becca on the back and asked her if she wanted some chili.

In the bathroom at the hospital it is cold. My penis looks small, just like everyone else’s. I can feel this dude when he comes in behind me. On his breath I can smell the garlic from his dinner. He’s breathing out heavy mists of red wine and I can smell it even under the gum he’s chomping. Why doesn’t he close his mouth?

Then he stands right beside me, like there aren’t five other urinals to choose and I’m wondering if anyone ever told him about the general sociological practices that take place in a men’s restroom. One of the rules being, do not piss next to another man unless that is the only available urinal, but we’re the only ones in here.

I’m done peeing, but for some reason I haven’t put myself back up. I’ve been too busy listening to this dude breath in and out like it’s a sport. He whistles a tune that has no rhythm and it echoes back against the empty tile like old memories.
When I finally look at him, I see the brace around his wrist. This is Irving, the father of my sister’s dead baby. He’s a human. Something my sister somehow failed to mention during all of this. He’s wearing a stupid hunting shirt with giant red crosshairs around a bunny.

“You got a problem, boss?” he says to me.

I’ve been staring. Without thinking I take the back of his head in my hand and slam it into the wall. The sound his nose makes as it crunches into the tile makes my hairs stand on end. I let him fall back a bit with his head cradled in my hand and then I give him another one. This time I let him fall to the floor.

He’s looking up at me and he tries to speak, but he chokes and coughs. He swallows gum and teeth.

“This is your warning, Irving,” I tell him. “Stay away from my pack.”

“Irving?” he says around a mouthful of blood.

I drop my knees into his chest and drive the breathe from him like I’m trying to save his life. It’s instinctual for me to go for the neck. I bite and tear away. The blood tastes like hot wine.

He might be dead. He’s still twitching when I stand up so it’s hard to be sure. I check myself in the mirror for blood. I’m shaking all over. I already have a scruffy beard, but I shaved this morning. I drink from the facet then leave the bathroom.

In the waiting room my parents stand as I walk past them.

“Son,” my dad says.

Outside the air is crisp. The moon is not quite full, but it is only a few days away. I can feel the pull, like the static coming off of a thin cotton shirt just out of the dyer. There are so many scents out here. There is a large wooded area off to the right of the hospital park where there are some benches. I can smell all of the animals out there and beyond it, the dirty smells of
the city. A few feet to my left there is a mouse, who, if he’s not careful, is going to be snagged by the owl in the tree above me.

It’s my brother they send after me. I can hear him coming up behind me. He asks me what happened, if I’m okay.

“None of us are okay,” I say.

I was born at this hospital. A thousand miles away, boring textbooks and girls who will never like me await my return. There is a dorm room there and another life.

“Outside of Tulsa, on 44, there is a dinner that has the best coffee,” I say. Tobias just stares. “I think it has something to do with the water. I stop there every time I make the drive.”

“Okay?”

“There’s nothing else there, just this dinner. It works well, because it’s about the halfway point. I can stop and get some food and kind of take a break. But sometimes, sometimes I pass it, because it’s easy to miss. I have to turn around when I realize I’ve passed it. But it’s always there. The sign says it’s been open since 1963. ‘Best Chicken Fried Everything Since 1963’ that’s what the sign says.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

“I think,” I say. “Some day, maybe I’d like to live there, or somewhere like it.”

Right then, from inside the hospital, my sister starts to howl. It cuts through the night like an air raid siren and our ears perk at it. My parents join her. They’re not worried about the attention it might draw. They never have been.

Tobias cocks his head to the side like he’s waiting to see what I’ll do, but then he can’t take it any longer and he drops to his knees and howls with the rest of them.
I pull my car keys out and shove them into the door and unlock it. Inside it smells like burgers and cigarettes. I used to let Sarah smoke in my car and now I can’t get the smell out. Even with the door closed I can hear them howl. The engine cannot drown it out so I yell and mash the accelerator down. I scream so hard my face runs hot with blood, but I can still hear them. So I roll down the windows and take in one huge sniff of fresh air and open my mouth to let out everything inside.