PULLING TANGLED STRINGS: "THE PUPPETEER" AND OTHER STORIES

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*Pulling Tangled Strings: “The Puppeteer” and Other Stories* is a collection of stories with strong thematic and emotional connections that includes an opening preface describing the process used when writing the stories. Each of the stories is united by a main character that desperately wants to gain control of his environment. From a character acting out a classic revenge tale on his friend to a comatose teenager victimized by an ambiguous tragedy, these are characters who have been put into difficult life situations and need to feel like they are pulling the strings in their lives again. In all cases, however, the characters come to find that control does not come easily and that the motivations for their behavior are never clear cut, even to themselves.
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PART I

PREFACE
Scaling the Tower

For a couple of months in the fall of 2005, I was set on climbing a water tower. Common
sense, logic, reason—none of these would curtail my mission. The tower hunt was on, and the
search for the perfect subject was meticulous. Driving home from work and school, my head
was on a swivel, the horizon laid out like a canvas before me as I searched for the right tower,
my tower. The tower that had been circling my mind, along with a handful of flawed characters,
ever since the summer, was out there somewhere; I knew it. The Bayhill Tower, with the criss-
crossing metal tubing connecting the structure and the faded, sad logo gracing the top, was
simply waiting to be found.

After narrowing the candidates down, marking spots on my mental map, the night came
to take action. Action was what this was all about, after all—pure, undiluted experience. The
right night finally came, meaning my wife left one October evening to sleep over at her friend’s
house. This was not cheating on her as much as it was cheating on my responsibility to her and
the baby we had just discovered she was carrying. Providers don’t climb water towers. Those
who do, for that matter, don’t hang on to their wives or their lives for as long as they would
want, I imagine.

Why such a ridiculous plan from someone who is thrown off when he has to take a
different route to work? Something snapped inside me when I realized that my life could never
be the subject of any fictional story. How could I ever turn my vanilla existence into anything
even remotely profound? A perfect, loving family, a trauma-free childhood, the best group of
friends one could ever have, a knack for making good grades, a mild enough amount of
athleticism to seem in shape, a fun college life segueing into a wonderful wife, a baby on the
way, and a full-time job waiting for me when I finished school; besides a few minor heartbreaks,
I made it into young adulthood mostly scar-free, and even worse, life-shaping experience-free. You read about my life in those career-path pamphlets they give you in the fifth grade, the ones that show the Aryan kid progressing from high school to college to professional utopia, with a wife and children surrounding him on the last page. Just a hunch, but nobody ever wrote anything of value about that guy.

How could I write anything near the profundity of Conrad and Melville, who each spent an enormous chunk of their lives at sea? In his only extended comment on his philosophy of fiction, Conrad talked of doing justice to the “visible universe” (11). “My task which I am trying to achieve,” Conrad continues, “is, by the power of the written word to make you hear, to make you feel—it is, before all, to make you see” (Conrad 13). His writing, of course, lives up to such a goal, as it is some of the most vivid, detailed, and convincing literature ever written. If I were to run across Jim from Conrad’s Lord Jim on the street tomorrow, I would feel like I knew him as well as I know any of my friends. Of course, Conrad did not just pull Jim out of a hat and bring him to life. Conrad did not begin writing seriously until his late thirties, after nearly 20 years spent at sea, during which time he lived through many of the situations that became material for his great novels. During one voyage, in fact, he met the man who became the inspiration for Lord Jim. In other words, Conrad experienced the material first-hand that he brilliantly and vividly conveyed in his novels, making it possible for his fictional philosophy and its fulfillment. In Conrad’s best work, he is merely making you see something that he has seen already in his life.

What could I make people see? Middle school band recitals? Birthday parties? Father-son outings? Hawaiian vacations? A writer closer to my familial subject matter than Conrad, Pat Conroy, lived in a dysfunctional family with an abusive father and made it through the torture of
military school. How could I ever transmit a similarly emotional experience with the same feeling as Conroy when my parents were the most kind, loving people a boy could wish for and my school experiences were just as positive? In his latest novel, *My Losing Season*, Conroy even comments that his greatest creative writing education was simply living through his own trials. During the fall that I searched for the water tower, the value of first-hand experience clicked, and I felt my lack of this quality more than ever before. I wanted to jump on a ship with Conrad, live in the woods with Thoreau, go on spy missions with Hemingway, and have all the enriching experiences that every great writer used to infuse their literature with such feeling and reality. The water tower wasn’t Walden Pond, but it was a start. As it stood, I was nowhere near Conrad; I was closer to the dad from *Leave it to Beaver*.

Driving towards my first destination that night, I yearned to supplant my imagination with experience. What is a great writer without great experiences to write about? The story in my head, the one about the emotionally scarred kid re-enacting Poe’s Amontillado tale by leading his enemy to the top of a water tower and pushing him off, would practically ooze with reality if I got my hands dirty and did some field research. The time to turn back had long passed; decked out in all black and my heavy-traction shoes, thirty minutes from home with the first tower in sight, I was ready for my eye-opening experience.

Suffice to say I learned a few things that night.

***

Years before this culmination, I had argued with myself about this very topic. Which is more important to a writer: experience or imagination? All I had discovered up until my tower experience was that this was a complex dilemma with no easy answer. I was certain I could find the most cultured person who had lived a fruitful, adventurous life but could make his
experiences read like a software manual due to a lack of imagination. By the same token, I knew that there were just as many flighty dreamers not far enough removed from the womb to tell stories of any substantial value. But how to delineate the importance of each quality when the line between them is gray, blurry, and ambiguous? After grappling with the tower, the answer came to me through taking a second look at some of my fiction.

On the subject of writing from experience, Burroway says that the trick is to find what is most “interesting, unique, and original in that experience” and use that as source material (10). To find the element of my own experiences that would most attract and interest readers, I had to go deeper than the physical realm. The word ‘experience’ normally signifies action, or actual physical experience. Running a marathon, riding a roller coaster, traveling to a foreign country—these are experiences in the most natural connotation of the word. However, I would argue that the word is much more flexible than it first appears, especially when considering experience pertaining to the writing process. While one’s physical experience may translate more directly into a story, the mental effects of that experience tend to have a more lasting result. More than any actual event I have experienced, it is the emotions from those events that endure and leave their mark on me. The emotions associated with any experience shape us and make us who we are, because if we never processed the things that happened to us, then how would an experience gain significance? After much thought, I discovered that it is the emotional side of experience that I use, and will continue to use, when writing stories.

Taking this approach, any situation can be story-worthy as long as the emotions involved make it interesting. I could never see myself writing about certain experiences I have gone through for fear of them being too mundane; however, if I extract the emotion that that situation evoked and frame a story around it, that experience then lives in the story through the
corresponding emotion. This is how I, a twenty-something Mr. Cleaver, get around my lack of worldly exposure, trials, and tribulations and still use my life in my fiction. The emotions exhibited by the characters, after all, are what give a story unique life. “Good writers may ‘tell’ about almost anything in fiction except the characters’ feelings,” says John Gardner. “…with rare exceptions the characters’ feelings must be demonstrated: fear, love, excitement, doubt, embarrassment, despair become real only when they take the form of events” (Burroway 80). I believe this quote from Gardner gives credence to the way I craft stories. I begin with an emotion, and I work to find the best situation, characters, and events to show that emotion rather than tell how my character is feeling. Due to my method, I feel that my emphasis is already in the right place: finding the best way to show emotions.

Take my story “Past Remains” as an example. The obstacles Roy Cower faces in the story—a new town in which he is the racial minority, the death of his father, and a step-father with whom he has trouble identifying—are ones that I have never come remotely close to facing. But the emotions that these experiences spawn in Roy draw from the same emotions markedly different events have caused in me. When Roy finds the dead body in the woods, he has an implicit need for ownership, something to call his own in a world that has given him nothing, which is something that every adolescent goes through. The power of a secret is almost never in the information the secret holds but in the simple fact that nobody else knows that information but you. “Every mystery involves secrets, and in Roy’s case, the mystery itself was a secret—the real secret. It belonged to him and nobody else, not even the pile of flesh splayed under the bush.” Roy found something to claim, held on to it, and used it to sublimate all of his submerged emotions. I have experienced Roy’s isolation, his need for something to call his own, and his uncertainty in dealing with other people, and I came up with the frame of “Past Remains” to best
bring out these emotions in an interesting situation through an interesting character. Of course, I did nothing of the sort consciously, but looking back, I can see what I was feeling at the time I wrote the story and how my emotions made their way on to the page without my even knowing that it was happening.

Burroway terms this method of crafting fiction “the transplant.” She describes the thought process behind the transplant method in the following passage:

You find yourself having to deal with a feeling that is either startlingly new to you or else obsessively old. You feel incapable of dealing with it. As a way of distancing yourself from that feeling and gaining some mastery over it, you write about the feelings as precisely as you can, but giving it to an imaginary someone in an imaginary situation.

What situation other than your own would produce such a feeling? Who would be caught in that situation? (14)

The transplant is a perfect way to extract the most interesting aspect of an experience—in many cases, the emotion it evokes—and craft a story around that emotion. Through the transplant, Roy Cower and other characters came into existence having emotions similar to my own experience but situations vastly different from mine.

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Returning to the night of the tower hunt, doubt began to creep in at a certain point. There is no larger detriment to my own comfort and vitality than a strong wind. This is a quirk I cannot explain, but the one element of my college experience I will shake my fist at long after I am finished is the gusty winds I had to put up with in Denton, Texas.

I had found my tower, and this was how the weather gods repaid me. It was one of the many older towers in Denton, and it was the closest approximation to the tower in my head that I
could find. The silver tubing and the thermometer shape seemed pulled from my imagination, even though the top of the tower was bare of any sign or logo. Exiting my car to face the tower, I remembered nearly being blown off of a ladder while climbing on to my roof as a kid to shoot a basketball. This wind was much stronger, and the tower much higher.

Standing next to the car, the wind tousling my hair and trying my patience, I imagined my climb up the tower, against wind and gravity and fear and common sense and every other pressingly viable factor telling me not to go through with this insane arrangement. With each handhold, the memory of that day would return, when I felt the subtle sway of the ladder beneath me without an ounce of control to stop it, when I had to scramble to the roof and grab the ladder before it stranded me as a rooftop castaway. I imagined making it halfway up the tower despite the wind and pausing to look down on the landscape before me. Would such a view be worth the danger? Of the whole journey, I thought, the heightened perspective, growing constantly with the physical height, would be the absolute highlight. Looking down on an entire town, an entire city, and knowing that yours is the widest, most enlightened perspective would feel like knowing everybody’s secrets. Forget Roy’s single burning secret; in a position of height and perspective like this, one would have access to the fiber of an entire community, the inner thoughts, the secret desires, the affairs, the fears, the unguarded moments…everything. This must be why people scale mountains or agree to go on space missions: to acquire that powerful, heightened perspective.

Still, on the tower, one unruly gust of wind and you are the victim of the elements, swept away from your position and punished for your ambition. Could one ever reach the true top of such a structure, or would the physical summit be nothing more than a mirage? In the quest for perspective, the slightest distraction, one wrong footfall, faulty architecture, any detail, really,
can leave you short of the summit. Feeling safe and cozy on solid ground as my conviction waffled, I thought that I may have already been in the middle of such a climb, although this one metaphorical in nature.

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What is more important to a story than finding that perfect perspective? One must take many elements into consideration when crafting a piece of fiction, but if missing the right point of view, the emotions expressed cannot reach their full potential. At this I believe is the root of my pre-occupation with point of view; using my method of story genesis—working from an emotion—finding the correct perspective is vital to the power of that emotion or emotions. And, like the journey up the tower, one wrong footfall or sentence can render the most careful construction moot. For example, I meant “Past Remains” to be told strictly from Roy’s point of view using a third person limited perspective. We would get to see the workings of Roy’s mind and remain shut off from all other thoughts and perspectives. However, when reviewing the effectiveness of the perspective in the story, I found two sentences that destroyed my desired perspective. One sentence looked like this: “…Roy could have been walking to school via the Ninth Circle of Hell, and the heads of the sinners imbedded in the icy ground would not have elicited a reaction—except for perhaps an imperceptible shiver.” The insights of the sentence are outside of Roy himself. An unnamed narrator is observing that Roy could have been in the Ninth Circle of Hell without noticing, and this unnamed, barely visible narrator ruined the credibility and effectiveness of the third person limited perspective. This line has been hard to part with for me, mainly because of the final phrase, the “imperceptible shiver.” While crafting the story, I wanted this to serve as an allusion to Roy’s repressed guilt for abandoning his dying father and not attending his funeral, and I saw this subtle touch as being more important than the
integrity of my perspective. Of course, when the story was work-shopped, my most common comment was, “Who is the narrator?” To best exhibit Roy’s changing emotions, I felt that I needed there to be no removal from the narration and his thoughts, and the sentences that drew attention to another person’s opinions stunted the emotional effect of the perspective. This exemplifies the thin line one must toe when creating a believable, successful point of view for a story. Although the aforementioned line still exists in “Past Remains,” it is in a form that (I hope) does not take away from the desired effect of the limited third person point of view.

In this collection, it is evident that I have tried on points of view like hats, looking for that right fit. Like hats, some perspectives are admittedly more comfortable, but in certain situations, others just look right. When writing prose, I feel most comfortable using a first person narrative perspective, yet I feel my best work is never done using this point of view, which is why there is only one story in the collection from this perspective. In writing “Writer’s Grave,” I found that Jonathan Richey’s story was best told with his own voice. This tortured, fraudulent man, who lived the lie that he could write exquisitely, had to be portrayed through his own writing and his own vulnerable voice, for as David Madden says, “the advantage of first person narration is that it is dramatically immediate, as all quoted speech is, and thus has great authority” (252). I felt this was the perfect medium to tell Richey’s story and convey his intriguing emotions: with his own voice and his immediate, close perspective. It is my experience that reading a story with a first person narrative brings you mentally closer to that character. The conversational nature of most first person narratives helps to create the immediacy that Madden speaks of and the closeness that I felt I needed to most effectively bring out the emotions that Richey’s character spurred in me. Richey has to stare failure in the face after running from it (and mostly escaping) for the better part of his life. “Writer’s Grave” is a story of denial, of facing failure, and of
ultimately accepting it rather than running. Having the failure narrated from the person who has failed was an invaluable part of the story, and it allowed readers to see the evolution of Jonathan’s thoughts more clearly than if the story were told from a different perspective. For feedback, I received several comments saying how pathetic readers felt Richey’s character was, which was the exact reaction I had hoped to evoke.

However, as is often the case when I try to tackle a first person story, I get carried away with the voice. It is easy to over-do this perspective and beat your readers over the head with narration that is too over-the-top and tangential. Predictably, I fell in love with Richey’s voice, which led to a page and a half of stream of consciousness rambling to begin the story that threw many readers off.

This time, I was blown off of the tower before I reached page three.

My most overt point of view experiment was in writing “The Puppeteer.” This story was first intended as a literal experiment with point of view more than an actual story. For a Form and Theory class, I set out to write a story using several different third person limited perspectives and discover if an effective piece like this could be written in a short story form.

Before starting the story, I looked through the Wayne Booth essay “Types of Narration” to further distinguish what I was looking for in my narration. Booth says, “Even the novel in which no narrator is dramatized creates an implicit picture of an author who stands behind the scenes, whether as stage manager, as puppeteer, or as an indifferent God, silently paring his fingernails” (154). I quickly decided that I did not want that implied author to show up in my story. The implied author’s ugly appearance was what slew my intended point of view in “Past Remains,” in fact. For this story, my ultimate goal was to kill that puppeteer and remove all
traces of the implied author behind the scenes pulling all the strings. (I ignored the suicidal irony of such a goal, of course).

But is killing the puppeteer even possible? Can one completely eliminate the sense of the implied author in fiction? Booth suggests that one can “undramatize” a narrator but never completely eradicate the implied author behind the narration. He gives Hemingway’s “The Killers” as an example of a story with an undramatized narrator (154). Hemingway accomplishes this by using a fly-on-the-wall effect, never inserting a narrative opinion or unique observation. However, Hemingway does not accomplish what I was looking to accomplish because he does not go into the minds of any of his characters, much less more than one. Therefore, the narrator is undramatized, but the implied author is evident because the story is not being told from the perspective of one of the characters. My concern was with eliminating the overriding sense of a puppeteer in a work that tells a story from several different perspectives. I did not want to see the person pulling the strings behind the scenes; I wanted to immerse readers in the minds of the characters without them thinking about who is telling the story.

Accomplishing a goal that many critics deem as impossible was admittedly a daunting task. By rule, most critics say the implied author is always present. Booth says that even in a novel with no overt authorial presence, “the inexperienced reader may make the mistake of thinking that the story comes to him unmediated. But no such mistake can be made from the moment the author explicitly places a narrator into the tale, even if he is given no personal characteristics whatever” (155). In other words, according to Booth, as long as a story is being told, the implied author exists, whether it can be detected or not.

The Structuralist movement, conversely, sought to eliminate the ‘author’ from the critical examination of literature. Roland Barthes makes the case for this elimination in his influential
essay “The Death of the Author.”” Barthes feels that the critical focus on the author and how he or she relates to his or her work is misguided; he instead urges one must remove all consideration of the author to most appreciate a text and truly become an active reader (1459). According to Barthes, “…it is language which speaks, not the author” (1467). This critical approach seeks the same result that I was seeking, but that does not mean eliminating any sense of an author in a work is actually plausible. Barthes stresses more of an ignorance of the presence of the author rather than suggesting that the presence does not exist.

Michel Foucault takes a different approach in _The Order of Things_, one that clued me in on why I could still sense the implied author after finishing “The Puppeteer” even after trying to diligently to eliminate this presence. Foucault looks at the different roles the concept of author plays in literary discourse. The author, Foucault says, is an organizational device to readers, on a large and small scale. One uses the author to organize all texts with a specific name attached to it, and one uses the author’s background as a background to the text (1616-17). Another reason (along with Booth’s correct reasoning) that I could not completely eliminate the implied author from “The Puppeteer” is the organizational nature of the work. Taking Foucault’s theory a step further, one would assume that any organizational qualities within a text were also created by the author. Therefore, a sense of the implied author was evident in “The Puppeteer” when thematic or phrasal similarities arose between different points of view. For example, Austin and Randy both come to the same conclusion regarding Derek’s condition (nobody will ever know what happened to him, and that’s the way he would have wanted it). Also, Austin and Helen both use a variation of the “everything happens for a reason” phrase, albeit with differing intentions. Readers recognize connections like these as authorial devices (which they are), and while they do bring the author to the surface, thematic connections are often essential to the meaning of a
text. While the implied author is recognizable in “The Puppeteer,” I felt that this presence was muted as much as could be expected, and it allowed for the multiple points of view to become the principle focus in the story.

My rationale in using multiple points of view was that since I had trouble establishing a strong third person voice with one character in stories like “Past Remains,” using several different points of view would help me to focus on developing a unique voice for each character. Developing voices for each character that would distinguish them from one another was an excellent exercise that helped me discover different nuances of point of view and voice.

One of my inspirations in undertaking such a project was William Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying*. Faulkner delves into the mind of sixteen different characters in his novel about the Bundren family’s journey to bury Addie. Each voice is distinguishable from all others, because the characters all have their own way of speaking as well as their own preoccupations. Anse is insistent on taking Addie to Jefferson, but he has his own self-serving motives. Darl uses the journey to reflect on his own confused existence, like Austin in “The Puppeteer.” Dewey Dell is preoccupied with her secret pregnancy, and all of her narration is told through this filter, just as all of Helen’s narration in “The Puppeteer” is told through her religious filter. Finally, Faulkner writes Vardaman’s language in a childlike manner with childlike thoughts, just as I attempted to do with Richie.

I immediately ran into problems with my Faulknerian task as I began to create multiple points of view. Writing with one point of view—and one voice—was so ingrained into me that I initially had trouble switching. I fell in love with the voice of the first narrator I created, Austin. Then, when I made myself switch to Helen, I became enamored with writing in her voice. In other words, I had to force myself to continually switch points of view because writing from one
perspective felt so natural. I was aware of the main danger of using multiple points of view in a short story: not having enough time to fully develop each character. My way to circumvent the problem was to have each narrator focus on one main character (Derek) who was barely present in the actual story. While I accomplished this to some extent, I discovered that writing from one character’s perspective immediately focuses the attention on that character. Each character did give important details about Derek, but I occasionally found the focus inadvertently shifting back to the narrators even when I didn’t want it to (examples: Austin’s flashback becoming more about him than Derek, Helen equating Derek’s situation with her and her plants, Randy wanting to use Derek’s roof story to mask his own shortcomings, etc.). I ultimately enjoyed using several points of view for the first time, but I recognize that the problems with taking this approach came out in my writing. However, I do believe this technique opened up my story by forcing me to think from several different perspectives. Each character, especially Derek, was more developed because of the different points of view.

The most surprising and pleasing part of the whole writing process was that the story almost inadvertently became a microcosm of my initial goals. Only halfway through did I realize that Derek was somewhat of a puppeteer himself: pulling the strings and dictating the behavior of the people around him. In addition, another general goal I have made lately, injecting more ambiguity and less neat and tidy endings, also contributed significantly to the theme of the story. I have no idea why Derek did what he did, or if he tried to kill himself or not, and neither do any of the characters (that’s the whole point, Austin would say). These are the issues I thought about when I set out writing, and although they were not initially part of the plot that I conceived, they found ways to inject themselves naturally into my story. I was pleased to add a new layer of depth and charge my story with more meaning than I imagined.
When putting the stories together for this collection, I also realized that almost all of the main characters have the puppeteer-like qualities that Derek possesses. Roy, Monty (“The Last Brick”), Blaine (“Audition By Fire”), and even Jonathan to a certain extent, all desire to gain control of situations that they do not find beneficial. They all want to rise above their shortcomings or the shortcomings of their situations and become the one who pulls the strings. The fact that the central connection between the stories (and the title of the collection, subsequently) spawned from what began as a simple point of view experiment shows the richness and complexity of the result when examining the nuances of point of view.

Of course the implied author is impossible to eliminate in a story like “The Puppeteer,” or in any story for that matter, and as that implied author, I felt like I was standing on top of a tower while writing “The Puppeteer,” staring down at all the secrets of the universe I had created. Like the characters in the following five stories, I also desire to be in the best position to pull the strings (in my case, in my fictional worlds). I have found this ultimate position of power that I accomplished in “The Puppeteer” hard to duplicate, but when one finds success with such a tricky element as perspective, the feeling is more exhilarating than the physical ascent of a tower.

Not that I would know from first-hand experience, of course. I spent a long time staring at the tower that night, using my imagination, wondering what it would be like to reach the top. After examining my stories more closely, I realize that I have attempted this ascent several times, tried to reach the highest perspective in my own fictional worlds. Success is always the ultimate goal, just as reaching the top of the tower would be in a physical ascent, but one can succeed without reaching the summit. Writing from emotion and choosing the right perspective brings
varying degrees of success, and consistently mounting the tower and attempting the climb is more important than reaching the top every time.

The tower I chose in Denton was circled by a barbed wire fence, one not even a person of my height could scale without serious repercussions. Driving home that night without a tear in my clothes or a speck of dirt on my body, having not even attempted the climb I so desired to make, I had no idea how the failed journey could open up my mind and make the tower in what would become “The Last Brick” a more effective object.

I began to ask myself what emotions brought me to the conclusion that I needed to climb a water tower to become a better writer. For one, the feeling that I had to experience something to be able to effectively transmit it into words had been eating at me for years. The other main emotion, I think, was dissatisfaction with good fortune. I believe I was upset that I did not have many adverse experiences to write about, upset that I had it so easy growing up. After I took a closer look at my fiction, discovered that I had been using my own experiences through emotions for years, and realized the fallacy of this “I’m not experienced enough” line of thinking, I wrote “Audition By Fire.” The main character and the theme in this story are nothing more than a lampooning of the line of thinking I had adopted around the time of the attempted tower climb.

Blaine wants to start an acting career, but he wants to begin one from a position of poverty rather than the advantageous arrangement offered to him by his parents. His dilemma is the same as mine: can the artist create convincingly when he or she has had little turmoil in their lives? The whole story was an exercise in exposing how ludicrous such an attitude seems in the big picture. Blaine desires to act, but even Bart, a backwoods country resident who has never seen Hollywood, spots his farcical poverty and shoddy acting almost immediately. As Blaine flees from Bart at the end of the story, it comes to light that he has actually had several life-
shaping experiences that he chooses to ignore when thinking that he has nothing to draw from. Blaine is a ball of emotions: yearning, love, hate, anger, resentment, self-loathing, charm—at one point or another he exhibits all of these during the brief part of his journey that is pictured. The story does not progress to the point where Blaine can realize that it is only when he can tap into these emotions that he displays so readily that he will get in touch with the artist within and learn how to truly interpret and use his emotions to mold his talent. I can feel myself going through the same process, and the fact that I am aware of the situation at least puts me a step ahead of poor, clueless Blaine.

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Sometimes I see the tower I nearly attempted to scale while on the way to school, and it continually strikes me how different it looks from the tower that made it into the final version of “The Last Brick.” The Bayhill Tower spawned almost solely from my imagination, with the odd connecting poles the boys use to climb, the sheer volume of metal up and down the structure, and the cartoonish raccoon adorning the spherical apex. Yet when I had the story work-shopped, it was Bayhill Tower that felt most real to almost every reader, more real than any of the characters. Within this fact I believe lays the key to becoming the writer I want to be. I created Bayhill Tower as a symbol of the emotions that were the driving force behind Monty’s behavior in “The Last Brick”: family discord, failure, unsteadiness, and overall uncertainty. Monty believes that he desires to take revenge on his friend Todd for moving in on his crush, but in reality, he has no idea what he truly needs. Like Roy in “Past Remains,” the true motivation for his behavior lies beneath the surface—in Monty’s case, embarrassment at the legacy of failure in his family, veiled resentment for his parents, and self loathing. Bayhill Tower embodies all of
these emotions in the story. The key to the story lies in the tower—that same tower that I have never climbed or actually seen before.

I feel that each of the stories I have included in this collection has taught me something about my writing process, what is most important to me when I put together a story, and how I can continue to improve on my craft. Looking back, I can see a sort of evolution from one story to the next, but I also see places where I was blown off course. Perspective is perhaps the most serious consideration in my work, and finding that right perspective, the best position to pull all the strings, does wonders for the emotions I try to express in my fiction. The different perspectives I have used run the gamut of point of view, and I feel like this allows me to have a versatility that I did not have when I primarily wrote in first person. Also, my crisis with the tower during the writing process for “The Last Brick” taught me more about my own writing than I had ever known. While many incredible writers have crafted a wonderful legacy for themselves by drawing from their own personal experience, I write more from raw emotions, from the feelings I experience in everyday life. Before my stare down with the tower, I had no idea why I wrote “Writer’s Grave” during my most dire episode of writer’s block or why I crafted “Past Remains” during one of the loneliest times in my life. I have learned that a writer’s fiction is always dependent on his or her own life; what makes each author different and fresh is how they transform their own lives into an enduring piece of art. Some, like Conrad, transform their own experiences into fiction. Others employ countless different strategies; there is no standard. My trigger is my emotions, and I hope one day to stand atop the metaphorical tower, having found that perfect voice with which to pull the strings to express the emotions and the corresponding ideas running through my head.
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PART II

PULLING TANGLED STRINGS
The Puppeteer

Derek Gibbons was a unique dude—a real individual. A true blue, rip-roaring trailblazer, if you asked Austin. Not that these blurbs did his best friend any justice. Not one goddamn bit. But how could you come up with a suitable epitaph for such a character? Was it even possible to cover every idiosyncrasy that was Derek Gibbons? Could you ever pin down a guy who was everything if not unpredictable? A guy who would take on different personas for days, weeks at a time? One time he went mute for an entire weekend, didn’t make a peep, sold it flawlessly. Another time he took to wearing kimonos for two weeks. No one questioned him either. It was just Derek.

Trailblazer. Austin laughed. What a worthless joke of a salute. May as well honk up a colossal wad of spit and spray it on his grave. Assuming Derek really was dead at the age of twenty-three, of course.

Austin told himself to cut out the pessimism. Have a little hope. Look on the bright side. Everything happens for a reason, and so on. You know, the stuff the human race uses to numb the emotions they’re afraid to express, to shroud the truth with a warm, comforting quilt. The hell with that; Austin would take his grief without sugar and cream, thank you.

The waiting room reeked of Lysol and hastily applied perfume. The chairs formed an L shape around two walls of the room, with the other two walls reserved for the entrance and the receptionist. A fitting name, indeed—the waiting room—because if there was one solitary thing to do in this shit-hole besides wait, Austin would have stumbled across it by now. So he noticed the smells and details that normally would escape him, like the record player hum of the air conditioning, the varying sizes of the chairs, and the crack in the once-white linoleum floor under his feet that looked like the ragged outlines of the sandwiches his mother would prepare.
for him when he was a kid—ragged because he forced her to tear off the crust for him by hand.  
He never could eat a sandwich with that damn crust attached. What did that say about him?  
Were such details in one’s life important if you wanted to discover the true essence of that 
person? He stopped thinking long enough to realize it was all worthless; this pussified escapism,  
this pain numbing daydreaming. No sugar and cream, please; Austin wanted his emotions black,  
bitter, and unfiltered.

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Good heavens, what a mess. Mascara running down her cheeks in a race with her tears,  
hers Bible forgotten at home, her son fighting for his life in the hospital. Helen had expected a  
more fulfilling, worshipful, normal Sunday. She had expected anything but this, really.

Helen knew she was a strong woman, and that the graces of God would pull her through.  
Everything happens for a reason, you know. Still, only hours earlier, she had found her son  
unconscious and without a pulse slumped over the wheel of his car, so she hoped her  
enlightenment was imminent. If she could figure out how God would justify this, then she would  
know what real strength was. Until then, she tried to handle the burden as best as she could.

The heathenish character three chairs to her right would certainly give her no comfort.  
That boy was the source of all negative influence on her Derek. If he didn’t think it prudent to  
ever comb his unruly hair or even wear clothes without holes and tears in them, then what quality  
of character should you expect? Helen expected little and got little. This was the first time she  
had ever seen him without that devilish grin that normally enveloped his face. Now she saw his  
forced solemnity and felt sick to her stomach. What did he know about grief? Probably about as  
much as he knew about the book she had inexcusably left at home. What a luxury her Bible  
would be right now. Her travel Bible, the one with the golden-tasseled bookmark and the hard
covering fit for all conditions, lay on her kitchen counter, inexplicably forgotten. Instead of opening the travel Bible in this time of need, all she could do was pretend not to see Austin sneaking a cigarette and pray for her son.

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Smoking was an act of stealth espionage with Psycho Mom three seats down from Austin. But by this point, he had the ruse down to a foolproof routine. Discard the magazine on your lap you’re pretending to read, tilt your whole body to the coffee table on your right, pretending that you’re browsing for another mag to rot your brain, light up, enjoy, and inhale, damn it; inhale like your life depends on it. No reason to freak out God-lady in her time of grief. These moments, Austin thought—not throwaway college courses, certainly not Bible study, not hard work—these moments of triumphant spontaneous creativity were what ensured him a life of success and luxury.

Then the doctor walked in.

Austin put the cigarette out on his jeans, bore the smoldering pain, stuffed the butt in his pocket, and made sure the smoke escaped under his shirt (all in no more than three seconds).

The doctor approached Mrs. Gibbons first (of course) and held his hand out for her. Mrs. Gibbons’ hand trembled until he clasped it firmly and introduced himself as Dr. Watson. He looked more like a mechanic than someone who had spent a decade in college. If the nurses in this office told him his thin moustache looked becoming, then they had taken ass-kissing to an unacceptable level.

“Mrs. Gibbons—ok then, Helen—let me tell you first off that your son is alive,” Dr. Watson said. “That’s the good news.”
Mrs. Gibbons exhaled. “All right. Go on.” But before he could continue, Mrs. Gibbons broke down. How predictable.

As Dr. Watson gave Mrs. Gibbons a few minutes to collect her emotions, Austin wondered what the protocol was for reflecting on such an event. His best friend was on the edge of death, and he had no idea why. He also had little clue how to retrace his footsteps and find the answer.

Something had changed a few months ago when Derek fell in love with the arm; at least Austin knew that much. When Derek had told him of his new infatuation, as they sat in the old-fashioned country restaurant, nibbling on complimentary salt-less saltine crackers and planning to leave before they had to order a meal they would actually have to pay for, Austin laughed so hard he crushed one of the soft crackers in his hand, adding to the already considerable pile of crumbs in his lap. Of course he’d been skeptical, but this was Derek. He was more than just a half-assed flake; he went all the way with everything.

“Oh, it was love,” Derek said, answering the guffaws from the other side of the table.

“With a fucking arm,” Austin said, smirking.

“Not just the arm, dumbshit, the person it was attached to.” Derek never cursed, so Austin knew he was genuinely pissed. He laughed louder.

“No, no. You didn’t actually see the person, which technically means you’re in love with a fucking arm.”

“Fine, call it whatever you want.” A waitress stopped and hovered over the table. “Not ready yet,” Derek said quickly.
“Let him finish telling us,” Cynthia, Austin’s girlfriend said. She had sat next to Austin taking it in so far, not laughing or even reacting. Despite her holding his hand, Austin clearly saw where her interest lay.

“Thank you my dear. At least somebody here has a little patience,” Derek said. Austin nodded, did his best to ease his laughter, and motioned for Derek to continue. Might as well enjoy the joke.

“It was in class. There’s a water fountain right next to our door. The girl approached from the other side, so all I saw was her arm and part of her profile as she drank. But man, that arm.”

Grabbing Cynthia’s arm, Austin interrupted, “Did I ever tell you that you have incredible arms?” He laughed at his own joke, defiant to the silence of his two lunch mates.

“Anyways. Cynthia. That arm. Her shirt stopped about halfway up her upper arm, just tight enough for me to see the outline of her shoulder underneath. And her skin was so milky white I expected it to ooze off of her arm. It was absolutely unblemished, perfectly proportioned, hanging there weightless and graceful. I don’t remember another word my professor said the rest of the class. I was in love,” Derek said. He wore a faded plain gray shirt that was littered with holes, carelessly cut-off khaki shorts, impeccable shined loafers, and expensive glasses, making him look like a hybrid homeless and rich person.

“What about her profile? Did she have a nice body?” Cynthia asked.

“Sure, from what I saw, but it’s all blurry to me now except the arm.”

“So, hypothetically, since everything else was so ‘blurry’, you very well could have been drooling over a dude’s arm,” Austin said, unable to stop smiling at the absurdity of the situation.
“If so, then maybe it’s time to start swinging the other way,” Derek said. He crunched into another cracker, caught the crumbs with his free hand, and sucked them into his mouth.

It was exactly the answer Austin expected. He’d been Derek’s best friend long enough to know his capacity for flakiness and odd behavior better than anyone. He had sat in the driveway of a garage sale once for forty five minutes while Derek talked to the owner about buying the actual garage. The owner had laughed courteously until Derek had pulled out a calculator and started talking monthly figures. “It would be a cool hangout. Plus, it’s for sale,” Derek had said to Austin with a wink. He had haggled with the guy for nearly an hour, going back and forth on rent totals and times of access, actually piquing the owner’s interest, until he finally said, “You know…I like the garage next door a bit better. I think I’m going to keep looking. Thanks though,” and walked away.

What separated Derek from other weirdoes and flakes, Austin thought, was that he was aware of the absurdity of the things he did and said. Derek was actually a smart dude beneath all the shenanigans. He knew falling in love with an arm was half-insane, that going to a garage sale and trying to buy the garage was just plain stupid. Yet he still did these things, and he was damn serious about them. He was erratic in spite of his high intelligence.

Because of this fact, Austin never doubted for a second that Derek was sincere about the arm. What he doubted was love at first sight. Austin had known Cynthia for two years before she finally succumbed and agreed to go out with him. During that time she had several boyfriends and often outright ignored him. The way Austin saw it, if the woman he loved didn’t jump his bones the first time she saw him, then love at first sight was a fucking lie. Still—all in good fun—he played along with Derek.
“Here’s the real question,” Austin said. “So you saw this tantalizing, beautiful arm. Fine. What I want to know is, why the hell didn’t you dart out of class and chase the girl down once she walked away?”

“I thought about it, but something stopped me. Something about not spoiling such a wonderful revelation,” he said. “But that’s not quite right. I know the girl will be stunningly beautiful,” Derek said. He paused before continuing. “I guess—at least for now—all I wanted to see in my dreams was the one thing that caused me to fall in love with her in the first place. I wanted the chance to dream about the arm, and the arm only, you know? I know I’ll find her and make my move eventually, but right now I’m just as in love with the mystery as I am with her. We have all the time in the world for reality. Sometimes you have to take time to savor the kernel of fantasy that you extract from that reality.”

Cynthia finally asked the question that had somehow gone unspoken so far. “Are you going to tell Diana?”

“I suppose I’ll have to,” he said.

Only Derek, Austin thought. Only Derek would take a harmless feeling so seriously as to ‘fall in love.’ Not just that, only Derek would have the nerve to tell his girlfriend. Poor impulsive bastard. Diana was a soldier for putting up with Derek’s oddities, but Austin thought this one might turn out to be the deal breaker. Of course, there was no use trying to convince Derek otherwise.

Looking back, Austin realized that after that moment, Derek was never the same. He didn’t know if Derek’s sudden love for a simple arm was the first link in a chain of devastating events that now left him near-dead, but it sure as hell played a role. More likely, falling in love with an arm was one of the links in the middle; the means to a tragic end, but not the cause. The
real reason, the start of this whole shit storm, Austin thought it may end up being buried with his best friend.

But maybe that was what Derek wanted in the first place.

“We haven’t been able to revive him yet.” This was how Dr. Watson continued his slow let down. “Now that doesn’t mean all hope is lost. But this is as serious as it gets, Helen, I want you to know that.”

“You’re confusing me.” Mrs. Gibbons began to pace. “Will he make it or not?” She only looked at Watson out of the corner of her eye. Austin wanted to yell, “He’s the good guy, Mama!” but he figured it wouldn’t go over too well.

Dr. Watson raised his voice as Mrs. Gibbons walked looping circles around him. “When someone suffers carbon monoxide poisoning, when they breathe it in for too long, it starts circulating in their blood. It in effect replaces the oxygen your body needs. When the brain starts to lose oxygen, you get what is called anoxia. And we all know: go too long without oxygen, and you simply can’t survive.”

“Did I find him in time?”

“It’s possible. We’ve stabilized his condition for the moment, but he needs a respirator to survive. As it stands right now, Derek has fallen into a coma. He’s currently unresponsive.”

“Lord, no.” What a time to reference the Lord, Austin thought. “The Lord” had about as much control over this situation as the Gibbons family dog.

“Helen, this is good news when you consider the alternative. People come out of comas all the time. We just have to keep working, and I assure you that we will.” The doctor promised to come back when he had more information. As if there was anything left to hear.
Austin looked for another magazine.

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Pardon Randy Gibbons if he was finished trying to understand his son. Rummaging through Derek’s room, meticulously packing a suitcase of clothing so Derek would have something to wear at the hospital in case he didn’t die, Randy couldn’t help but want to throw up his hands and say, “I quit.”

This was a stranger’s room.

He saw the empty guitar case in the corner of the room and shrugged. He tried to remember when Derek painted his room a mixture of orange and green. A forest of mystery, he thought. Not long ago, it was a pleasurable, if not occasionally frustrating, experience trying to wrap his finger around such a special guy as Derek. Randy knew he had a special kid; the guys at the accounting firm teased him constantly about how such a unique kid had spawned from such a tepid numbers-counter. Now, packing shirts, underwear, toothpaste, deodorant, from a room he had seldom been allowed to enter, Randy felt like a landlord, not a dad. A landlord without a clue who he got a check from every month.

He folded each article of clothing to create the most amount of space in the one suitcase. A more impulsive man would be cramming the clothes and speeding to the hospital. His son was dying, but Randy could not bring himself to make a mess and cut a few minutes off of his time. Seeing his youngest son Richie standing in the doorway with big, brown uneasy eyes made Randy keep his calm. No need to scare one special boy only to have a better chance of witnessing the end of another.

Randy had always been proud to call Derek his son. Of course you have reservations about some of the antics your kids pull during the growing pains of adolescence (and beyond, in
Derek’s case), especially if those antics include sleeping on the roof of your house one summer night six years ago.

Randy had been leaving for work at dawn when he saw his son curled up with a pillow on the right side of the front gable of his house. How he managed to stay on all night without rolling off, Randy would never know.

When asked what in the world he was doing, Derek simply said, “I wanted to read by the moonlight, and I fell asleep.” At the time, Randy didn’t think to ask where the book was.

The fact that Randy couldn’t plug his son into a formula and decipher what he meant frustrated him to no end, but some thought on the way to work was all it took that time. Two days before, Randy had upbraided his son after receiving an exorbitant electric bill. Derek took forty minute showers, left his ceiling fan on when he wasn’t home, and practiced similar excesses that caused the bill to skyrocket. Randy didn’t scream at his son often; he knew it usually caused an outbreak of odd behavior. But this? Derek had implied that he slept on the roof because of the earlier chewing out. Then again, if Derek went a week without surprising Randy, that’s when Randy started to worry.

He normally took his son’s shenanigans in good spirits. Derek had all the potential in the world. Why not embrace him for his quirkiness? Randy had it all planned out: at Derek’s wedding, if he ever chose to get married and found someone who could actually put up with him, he would begin the toast by imploring everyone to tell their favorite Derek story. Randy would start the proceedings, of course, with the sleeping on the roof yarn. It would absolutely kill. After that last line—Derek’s explanation—the crowd would erupt in uproarious laughter. The straitlaced, play-it-safe accountant would turn into the hero, at least for a few seconds.
Randy would paint the tale as a positive, of course. Derek felt so terrible about inflating the electric bill that he couldn’t even bring himself to turn the lamp on at night. What a stand-up guy. The type of guy who would do something drastic like sleep on the roof to save the old man a few bucks. But, as Randy had discovered about his son long ago, there were always dueling interpretations to his actions. He feared this accident would end up the same way.

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Austin wanted to pray for his friend. Who cares if that makes me a hypocrite, he thought. But after listening to Dr. Watson, watching his mannerisms, Austin knew. No need for Doc to display such gravity if Derek was going to pull through. He wouldn’t need to pause for five seconds after every question if he wasn’t sugarcoating the truth for Mrs. Gibbons. Austin needed to accept the stone truth: Derek was beyond prayer.

“Let me get everything straight,” Dr. Watson continued. He had come back after ten minutes, not with any new information, but with more questions. The two had gravitated to the corner, Watson’s reassuring hand always on Mrs. Gibbons’ shoulder. Good news doesn’t require a reassuring hand. Even though he had every right to hear the conversation, Austin felt like an eavesdropper.

“You heard your son drive up, heard the garage open and close…how long after that did you find him?” Dr. Watson asked.

“I told the nurse, I went back to sleep. An hour and a half, two hours later, I woke up and the outside light was still on. Derek knows he has to turn off the outside light after he gets home. That’s when I checked the garage and found him.”

“And the garage was closed, and the car was running?”

“Yes. Derek was asleep on the wheel. He wasn’t breathing when I found him.”
Dr. Watson had another of those dramatic pauses. Like this wasn’t all so obvious. Spit it out, Doc. Wasn’t this one elementary?

“Mrs. Gibbons?” Another pause. “Did your son have anything to be depressed about?”

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None of this made sense; it just wasn’t possible. Derek Gibbons wasn’t a quitter; the one unforgivable sin was not an option for such a strong character. Helen Gibbons’ boy would never have turned to an alternative as weak as suicide.

Helen knew more than any of these ‘doctors.’ She had found her son slumped over the wheel of his rust-covered ’78 gray Camaro in the garage, not Dr. Watson or anybody else. She knew the forgivable sin at the root of it all. Only she had smelled the alcohol in her son’s vehicle, alcohol likely given to him by her God-less waiting room companion. Derek’s car had been parked at a wickedly crooked angle in the garage, the type of angle that would have fit perfectly in one of those diagonal mall parking spots. This sloppy job had probably been his last act until he had passed out drunk. If he had only made it a few more seconds, just made it inside of the house, Helen could have cared for him, rehabilitated him.

Redeemed him.

She sat down on the barely padded chair and placed her hands on her lap where her Bible would have lay. Everyone made such a ruckus about her son’s odd behavior, but really, the genesis of it all was so simple. Helen knew because of her plants.

A plant huddles in every corner of her house, practically begging for her kindness, begging for her to bring over her green transparent water pitcher and give them life. Twice a day, normally without fail, she did. Whenever a plant ceased to live for whatever reason, she reverently replaced it the next day. Her plants were her own miracle of creation, of life, of
control. We all desire to take on qualities of the savior, she thought. It can only bring us closer. No one knew this better than Derek.

Derek delighted in getting reactions, surprising people, keeping them off of their toes. But Helen knew the young man behind the façade. The real Derek had only the same desire she did: the desire to pull the strings; to set others’ lives in motion; to dictate the emotions—and the actions—of the people around you; to become more important than just a human. Like an expert puppeteer, Derek relished pulling the strings of the people around him and having them react just like he wanted them to. His miracle of creation, his sampling of control, became the world around him.

And that’s why all of this suicide mumbo jumbo made no sense. Because her boy was more than a man. He did have higher aspirations. All this control, these oddities, this strange behavior, it was all to get him closer to God. When Derek took three stuffed animals to his first grade class, cut them to pieces with scissors, and gave a body part to each of his classmates, God understood. It wasn’t “class clown foolishness” or a “cry for attention;” Derek was teaching them a lesson! “What lesson?” Randy would ask, always needing a tangible explanation to sink his teeth into. And of course she couldn’t say; even she had so much yet to learn from and to learn about such a special being. Every day he taught her something new.

Every day he came closer to true divinity.

So why in God’s name would the puppeteer take his own life? Would our wonderful creator, after watching over us and caring for us for years upon years, kill himself and hang his pupils out to dry? Everything happens for a reason; all of our actions are predetermined, from this unfortunate accident to forgetting her Bible. But what would happen to this life, this world, if the deity who set it all in motion ceased to exist?
How do the puppets function if their puppeteer poisons himself? Without the one who pulls the strings, are we lost in a spiritual paralysis?

In an orchestra, every note has meaning and purpose until the maestro ends his own life. Afterwards, does the music go on? Helen imagined the music did continue, life continued, but with no rhyme or reason. Unmediated, clueless chaos took over.

After calling her husband to make sure he was on the way, Helen began to pace, noticed a slight pulsing in the walls, shot a glance at Austin across the room, and started to tremble again.

She saw a potted plant in the corner of the waiting room and asked the receptionist for a bottle of water.

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Randy craned his neck to ensure that his suitcase and son were packed in the backseat. Check. He saw only one pair of headlights behind him for miles; the highway was a black cloak at four in the morning. Helen had explained to him the gravity of the situation. His firstborn son was in an unresponsive coma. And the poor ignorant doctor, that unfeeling bastard, had brought up the prospect of suicide. No matter that he was right; Helen could not handle such talk even in a sound frame of mind.

But Helen had it figured out; she’d told him during the phone call explaining Derek’s condition. Derek had driven home drunk after his non-alcoholic beverage was spiked by one of his devilish friends and passed out in the garage with his car running, causing the carbon monoxide poisoning. Never mind the fact that he was lucid enough to put the car in park, close the garage behind him, and roll down the window a crack before he passed out.

What a terrible string of gut-wrenching, life-ending, non-suicidal coincidences.
Like all of Derek’s actions, this stunt had a comfortable interpretation and an unsettling one. The suicide or the unfortunate, unwilling drunk. Damnation or the chance for redemption. Boy, was Randy tired of all this ambiguity.

“You alright, little man?” He looked in his rear view mirror back at Richie, straining to see in the black night with no cars behind him. Richie hadn’t said a word in an hour now; he just stared straight forward, oblivious to any happenings in this world. If only I could get inside his head, Randy thought. He wished he could have Richie in the front seat next to him, but Richie was only seven and could not yet bear the force of an airbag in the event of an accident. Randy decided to leave him with his thoughts for the moment. Just another case of ambiguity to deal with at a later juncture.

Randy had been dealing with ambiguity all his life. His firstborn son’s life was one ambiguous, unexplained haze. Hell, the kid literally lived in camouflage. What other reason could there be for that odd mixture of orange and green? His actions took on a similar hue. Even the roof incident, which was supposed to bring down the house at his wedding, had an alternate, less pleasing interpretation, one that Randy knew deep in his heart was true. It was all a power trip, a battle for control. Yell at Derek Gibbons, try to force anything on to him, and he will find some way to turn it back around and shove it in your face. Derek was hurt by Randy yelling at him about the electric bill, so what better way to regain control than to scare the daylights out of Dad to prove his point? Sleep on the roof, dangle your life on a string, and Daddy will cave. Randy never said another word about the electric bill after that night.

He knew his wife’s explanations for these types of things, even if it made him extremely uncomfortable. Derek was changing the world around him; he was exerting control over his
surroundings, becoming God-like himself. Randy wasn’t satisfied with speculation, so he had asked Derek flat out about a year ago who he wanted people to think he was.

Derek responded by saying, “If anybody could describe me in just one sentence, then I’d consider myself a failure.” He then flashed his expansive, broad smile—the one that always got him out of all of his mischief—and walked off.

That statement came much closer to the truth than his wife’s, Randy thought. Maybe the root of his behavior was insecurity, not Godliness. No matter how confident he looked, maybe Derek never felt comfortable in his own skin; so he changed that skin every week, even every day, like a chameleon taking comfort in camouflage. Maybe Derek just wanted to understand himself. Or maybe Randy was just as clueless as everybody else.

He reached back and patted Richie on the knee. Richie flinched underneath his hand and Randy withdrew. He wondered if Helen had told Diana yet. He decided not to call regardless; how could he inform someone else being as oblivious and disconnected as he was?

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Richie opened his car door a crack and peeked outside. No traces of green. He was safe. For now.

His dad’s hand felt sticky like a cinnamon roll. Walking towards the hospital, even the cool wind pried into his head.

Everyone and everything wanted to know his secret.

Derek was hurt bad. Richie wondered if he could talk to him and tell him why he was scared. Nobody else could know. Derek told him that. He wanted to ask his brother: were secrets the same thing as lies?

Because he had a great big, enormous secret.
Only you know, not anyone else.

Richie loved when his brother talked to him. What he didn’t love was the book his mom had read him a few weeks ago. The one about the big fat lie.

The book was about a boy who loved to lie. But one day, when he told a lie, a small green monster appeared. The monster was fat, and his big nose was always dripping snot. Every time the boy lied after that, the monster grew. After awhile, he was huge. The book used words like “enormous” and “humongous” and “gigantic” to describe the monster. Richie had to sound out each one for his mother to make sure he understood them.

His dad opened the glass double doors to the hospital for him. Richie’s eyes darted to both corners as he stepped inside. All he could hear were footsteps in the echoing white halls. None were squishy, though, like the monster’s would be. Still, Richie knew the great big, enormous lying monster was looking for him.

“Did Derek seem sad to you?” That was the question Richie’s dad had asked after explaining where Derek was. Richie hadn’t said a word since. Secrets are secrets.

You’re the only one I can talk to, buddy.

On the elevator, the numbers flashed green as it went from floor to floor. Green. Richie imagined the monster waiting on the other side when the doors slid open. No; just a woman wearing light blue paper.

“Did he seem sad to you?” They would all ask him the same question. If he kept his secrets, would the monster call that lying? Richie didn’t want the monster’s slimy snot dripping on him.

I can’t believe what she did to me. What did I do wrong? Can you believe it?
Richie couldn’t believe anyone would hurt his brother, either, even if he was a little silly sometimes. Still, even his mom let him cheat sometimes when they played board games, so he didn’t see why Derek was so hurt. But Richie didn’t talk back much; he liked to listen.

_No one else understands me. No one ever has. I don’t know what I’m going to do._

The hospital was enormous. Why couldn’t they just find Derek and bring him home? Shuffling down the hall, he spotted the monster hanging onto to an old man who walked the other way. When Richie looked again, the old man was wearing a green backpack, but the monster couldn’t fool him. He pulled his dad’s hand to make them move faster.

_No one else can know about this. It’s our big secret, right?_

They would try to make him tell. He knew it. Only Derek would understand his problem. He wanted to find Derek and wake him up and talk to him before it was too late. Before the humongous monster came and made him tell everybody.

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When the equilibrium changes in an area as static as a waiting room, it’s like waking up from a dream. When Mr. Gibbons and Richie entered the room, Richie pulling on his dad’s hand like a dog on a leash, Austin stirred from his daydreams.

Husband and wife embraced. What a pitiable situation. Your son is essentially dead, and you have to deal with the fact that your wife is a closet lunatic on top of that. Austin yawned and put down the magazine he was pretending to read. At least there was someone to buffer the tension between him and Miss Delusional now.

Mrs. Gibbons grabbed Richie and lifted him face to face with her. She sobbed at the sight of her child. Richie looked like a deer about to get splattered by a truck. Mr. Gibbons lumbered over to the other side of the room and offered Austin his hand.
“I appreciate you being here.”

“No prob.”

As they shook hands, Austin remembered Derek’s greeting ritual, the type of stunt only he could get away with. Oftentimes, whether you were shaking hands or hugging, Derek would playfully kick out one of your legs just when you got close enough to him. Then he’d make sure you didn’t fall, either by pulling you into a hug or gripping your hand tighter. Just his way of keeping you off balance.

One of his many ways.

Yet you never turned down a handshake or a hug from the guy. Like Charlie Brown returning time after time to try to kick a field goal, the interaction always outweighed the consequence. Austin sat down facing the corner of the room. No one needed to see him in this state.

Staring at the corner, he heard a door open and heard Dr. Watson start in again. Blah, blah, blah, still unresponsive, carbon monoxide poisoning, there’s still hope. He received the same questions and gave the same answers for a long time until he got to the newer developments.

“Mrs. Gibbons, we checked, and Derek had a blood alcohol content of twice the legal limit.” Austin heard a stomp on the floor.

“I knew it! Didn’t I tell you, Randy? Oh, thank you!” Austin didn’t want to see who she was thanking.

According to the doc, Derek was on full life support now. Pull the plug, and it’s bye bye best buddy. Oh, the ruckus this revelation caused.
“What we haven’t determined is the extent of his brain damage,” he heard Dr. Watson say over the din. This hushed Mrs. Gibbons for a tantalizing moment. “Derek’s brain went without oxygen for much too long. You have to consider the fact that, if you do decide to keep him on life support and he comes out of his coma at some point, he will probably never be the same person with the same abilities again.”

All this chaos was making Austin dizzy. His teary, blurred vision didn’t help, of course. The last sentence he made out was the doctor saying that the family didn’t have to make a decision right away. None of this made any sense. Richie screaming his brother’s name and yanking his dad’s arm halfway out of the socket, Mrs. Gibbons shaking her finger in Dr. Watson’s face (spouting something about the sanctity of life), Mr. Gibbons letting himself be pulled by his son and drowned out by his wife. It was all so worthless.

Austin walked out. He got no pleasure watching a train wreck.

Austin knew it now: Derek would take whatever truly happened that night—and the cause of it all—to his grave. Forget falling in love with an arm and forget everything else; Austin had no clue, and he never would.

But maybe this is what Derek wanted, he thought. Maybe he didn’t want anyone to know what the hell he was thinking. Maybe that was the point; find one last way to keep them all off balance. If so, mission accomplished.

No matter the motivation, Derek had kicked out everyone’s legs for the final time, given one last tug on the strings of his puppets, and maybe having no idea what that last tug meant was the most fitting final salute to Derek Gibbons of all.
Past Remains

On the morning that Roy found the body, he was thinking of Jacquie. He dreamt on his feet for a great deal of his morning walk through Glenhill Park about her dark curls cascading down her shoulders. Most Chicago-ites—especially those residing in the low income district of Stony Ridge—savored every sight, smell and sound in Glenhill Park. It was five square miles of forested fresh air in an otherwise bitter, gang-infested hellhole. Central Park wrapped in a Hell sandwich, some Stony Ridge residents called it.

Today, in his oblivious dreamlike trance, Roy Cower did not care to register the subtle beauties of the surrounding woods. Lifelike auburn leaves peppering his trail crackled like cap gun shots underneath his tattered mahogany boots, and the sun furrowed its morning rays through the thick canopy of trees. The noble oaks overhung the mottled grassy ground like a wooded overcoat. In his mood this morning, Roy figured he could walk straight down the middle of King Lane, the most vicious, gang-infested street of Stony Ridge, and not even hear the muffled sounds of gunfire and curses poisoning the already polluted air.

Today nothing mattered but his sweet Jacquie. He saw her resplendently dark mocha skin, smooth and tender to his touch, and her cinnamon eyes that flickered like diamonds when she smiled. Before he died, Roy’s father had told him that not even falling in love for the first time felt as agonizingly good as that first crush. Love was a wonderful feeling, a comforting feeling, he said, like a kind of weightlessness. You floated through life while you were in love, shrugging off the details. But that first crush…that was a blissful obsession, a high-powered, out of control emotional train wreck. He said you’ll never feel anything like that again.

Roy believed him now. According to his father, even though he was only thirteen years old, he was at the emotional peak of his life. He thought he might try to talk to her today.
It was the hand that broke his stupor. In the brilliant greens, browns and oranges of Glenhill Park in the fall, the creamy blur in the corner of Roy’s eye attracted attention like a white kid walking down the hall of his high school and caused him to jerk into full consciousness. He turned to his right and saw the stark white appendage lying palm down on the ground, unmoving, halfway obscured by a dense two-foot-tall bush whose various-colored leaves created a camouflage effect. The fingertips rested on the dewy ground, and the hand bridged upward into a flawed, gentle dome.

Roy made furtive glances around the area. When Roy had told his mother a couple weeks ago that he’d rather not take the bus anymore (he preferred the exercise of walking, he said), she told him to walk on King Lane, because the park was so deserted and dangerous that someone could snatch you up and take you away without any witnesses. Roy stayed off of the actual path through Glenhill Park, cutting through wooded areas where he had never seen another person, and since he often ran into bullies and drug dealers on King Lane, he did not quite grasp his mother’s logic and felt he was doing the right thing. Plus, maybe it was just him, but he preferred the symphony of the forest to deafening music and distant gunfire. Today—as usual—Roy saw no one. It was just him and the hand.

Roy made an obvious deduction—namely, that the hand was, in all likelihood, attached to a body—and froze at the implications. Better if it were just a hand. Must be a sleeping homeless guy, he thought—or hoped. Roy cleared his throat, waited, then cleared it again. He adjusted his backpack for no reason other than to break the silence. No movement.

“Hey.” His voice shook. The hand did not stir. “Excuse me.” Louder, but no response.
Cower steadied himself, took a breath, and nudged the hand with his boot. The limp hand gave no resistance and edged further under the bush. Despite the subtle shaking in his own hands, he could not bear to leave a mystery unsolved—it went against his very nature.

Roy took off his blue and yellow striped backpack—more a gift from his mother to the bullies at Stony Ridge Junior High than to him—and kneeled onto the damp ground. He caught a whiff of a strange smell: a hint of dew and pine with something unpleasant mixed in, a musky body odor funk.

He sat in that position—one knee on the dewy grass, staring at the bush and the few inanimate fingers still showing, the knees of his jeans absorbing the dew like a sponge—for several minutes. When he could delay no longer, Roy inched his backpack underneath the bush. After a deep inhale, he pulled the backpack, and the bush, upwards, and hooked a strap onto a hanging branch. At first, the extreme multiplication of the scent—like 100 sweaty shirts shoved in his face—obscured his other senses. He held in his breakfast with some effort and focused on the source of the stench.

There lay a body, not homeless and slumbering, but dead. It was a Hispanic man who looked in his early twenties. The stubble on his chin was dyed crimson with caked blood. One eye was shut while the other was half open, and his mouth was drawn back in a hopeless grimace. He almost looked to be squinting into the sunlight, but Roy knew better. He saw puddles of blood blooming from four different spots on the man’s button-up shirt. He lay there lifeless, a rigid non-entity in a lush haven for living things.

While taking in the details, Roy wondered where his father would have ranked seeing a dead body for the first time on his scale of events. Probably on the opposite end of the spectrum from your first crush.
After what seemed like an eternity, the fear took Roy and he yanked the backpack from the bush. It snapped downwards, angry at the disturbance, and obscured its resident. Roy scampered backwards, kicking the hand under the bush in the process, and turned and ran, leaving the body to rest in its foliated embrace.

Roy’s physical body arrived at school three minutes early, but his thoughts lingered with the inert mass at Glenhill. Had the man sensed him? Did an inkling of the spirit stay behind with the bodily remains, watching Roy?

Nothing of the daily school drivel bothered him today; he did not even notice when Jacquie entered. Roy, one of five white students in his entire school, was unaware of the undying pressure of simply being different, at least for one day.

Instead, he continued to wonder if the man was aware of his presence. Was his soul perched on top of the concealing bush, observing Roy observe him? If so, what did he make of Roy? Roy thought he was pissed. He just died, after all—was murdered, by the looks of it. He should be pissed, pissed at anybody who laid eyes on him.

Roy walked home on King Lane and braved the living dangers, which suddenly did not seem so vicious.

At home, Roy’s mother greeted him at the door in her usual custom: a kiss on the right cheek, a bone-crunching hug, a kiss on the left cheek, then a climatic smack on the lips, which he endured dutifully. Melanie Gonzales was a comfortably plump woman who wore loose clothes, did not blow dry her hair, and smiled way more than she should. Roy found his mother more overprotective and annoying every day, but as time passed he’d learned more tricks to avoid her.
“Tell me all about your exciting day at school,” she said. “I want to know everything.” Her face curved into a smile that was ghoulish in its absurdity.

“Oh…” Roy paused. He shuffled his feet and leaned backwards, stretching his back, to stall for time. He moved his floppy black hair out of his eyes. Acting natural was a lot like breathing. It was an unconscious function until you became aware of it, and once you did, it was near impossible to make yourself unaware again. “Just a normal day, nothing special.” A well practiced mumble. Roy thought one person might disagree with his comment, but the dead man’s bluish lips couldn’t protest. He forced a smile; a Melanie Gonzalez special.

His mother waved him inside. “I got you a new shirt at the shop today,” she said, in her sing song voice. On a bad day, Roy would hear this voice in the birds’ chirping in Glenhill Park.

The house was a one-story, two-bedroom shack that only escaped trailer distinction by its sub par foundation. It smelled like mold all through the rain season. The red brick had turned the color of rust with wear. Roy imagined the house was a remnant from a time long ago, when how you looked, what color you were, did not matter as much as that you were alive and adequate.

The garden saved the Gonzalez house from bleeding into the other low-income abodes stuffed into their tiny subdivision. Roy thought his mom spent more time at the garden than she did at her part time job at a local flower shop. Nevertheless, she had turned the garden into a miniature wonder in a dilapidated dump—much like Glenhill Park, but on a smaller scale. Roy didn’t suspect he would find any murdered men under a bush in his mother’s garden, though. She could not tolerate such monstrosities.

She showed Roy the shirt she brought him, which read, “See The Entire Spectrum of Beauty at Rainbow Flowers!” Each letter was a different color of the rainbow, and the
background looked like neon vomit. Roy nodded his head in approval; he could not have uttered a convincing response. Tell this entire spectrum crap to the kids at my school, he thought.

The inside of the house was a dull brown; it was a faded work of art that never attained mediocrity in the first place. Mom took pains to have a plant in every room in the house, but the dwelling still felt stagnant, deceased. Roy took his shirt and headed for his room near the back of the house without saying another word.

“Roy?” his mom said, her voice rising. Roy wheeled around and said nothing. “Hector’s almost home. I’ll call you when dinner’s ready.” Roy nodded and resumed his course. Lately, she had improved at leaving him alone; now she needed to send Hector the same memo.

Roy spent the night reading Hardy Boys novels. He devoured mystery novels in one sitting. Hector Gonzales, his step-father, had found a whole case of Hardy Boys books at a used book store for a dollar apiece and bought them all. Roy stashed all of his books in a cardboard box (he called it The Treasure Chest) underneath his bed, safely out of sight. God forbid a visiting schoolmate find his cache of non-school-related reading material and assign him to lifelong unpopularity. He was doing his best to dig his way out of that hole, even if he was immensely outnumbered.

The mysteries in these books were simple, but that was part of the appeal. Roy felt comforted by knowing the culprit thirty pages in. Now he had his own mystery, and even though he was scared, he drew strength from his reading. Frank and Joe Hardy never shied away from danger. They were beacons for it, in fact. Behind the body in Glenhill Park, there was a Hardy Boys mystery waiting to be solved—and written.
Roy’s fear of the day’s events dissipated when he realized that the dead body in Glenhill was just that: dead. No soul accompanied the body; the soul flickered out of existence like a spiritual off-switch the second the man was killed. Dead is dead, he thought, and the book in my hands has as much life as the inert pile in the woods.

Roy pictured Frank and Joe combing every wooded corner of Glenhill Park, finding a shred of a man’s shirt here, a drip of blood there, footprints leading away from the bush.

The more Roy thought, the more tantalizing his new secret became. None of the bullies at school could take this away from him. Neither could his mom or his step-dad. Every mystery involves secrets, and in Roy’s case, the mystery itself was a secret—the real secret. It belonged to him and nobody else, not even the pile of flesh splayed under the bush. Or the police.

The devilish wind enveloped Roy as soon as he darted out of the house the next morning. He left thirty minutes early, evading Hector to avoid telling him why. He jogged around his block to the edge of Glenhill Park, his backpack flopping up and down like a superhero’s cape. Today he wore a plain brown shirt, jeans with a hole at his right knee, and the same boots from yesterday—his only pair. He stopped before entering the park and smoothed back his hair. Even a coward could laugh at danger or death from the safety of his own room, but facing it was a different animal. He repeated the same mantra in his head over and over. He can’t hurt you. You already know what he looks like. Somebody else probably found him anyways.

“He can’t hurt you,” he whispered, soft enough to meld with the wind, and continued on.

Every tree had a face. The lines of the bark became wrinkles, wiry mouths, and sharp noses. Eyes, too. Roy saw the faces, and even though he knew his mind had created them, they were real nonetheless. He walked with his head down, the wind almost lifting his Chicago Bulls
hat off of his head and flapping his thin black windbreaker. The wooded path had no faces, but he could still feel the eyes on the trees piercing his skin. An overriding gloom bathed Glenhill Park this morning, but Roy figured it was all in his head.

One hundred yards away, he knew. The wind in his face stole the suspense. It carried the pungent stench like an airborne virus. Slowing his pace as he neared the bush, Roy saw no signs of disturbance. He had kicked the hand out of sight when he panicked and ran yesterday. Add this to the fact that he had never run into anybody who took the same uncharted path that he did every day, and the man was as concealed and forgotten as any properly buried dead person.

Roy searched for clues as far away from the body as possible. Maybe I’ll find footprints a little further out, he thought. During this charade, Roy actually found his first clue, straight out of the Hardy Boys. Off the path in a grassy area, about forty feet away from the concealing bush, started a faint red trail leading all the way to the hidden body. The morning dew had rendered the blood translucent, milky, and near undetectable.

Ten minutes later, after unnecessary meticulous examination of the trail, Roy shoved his backpack under the bush and yanked upward. Once again, he tied one of the straps to a tree branch above the bush and had himself an unobstructed view of his mystery.

At school, Roy sat alone in the cafeteria—not at a table with other kids to create the illusion of friendship or with the other four white kids at the school, whom he did not associate with (strength in numbers was not a possibility anyways)—and reviewed his notes from the park.

Roy had three full pages of notes about the dead man, whom he now realized he barely caught a glimpse of that first morning. He recorded the notes in a diary given to him by his father four years ago. Until now, the diary was blank besides the inside of the front cover, where
his dad had written *Don’t let your memories die.* As always, he’d signed Martin James Cower, not Dad. It was his way of saying that he and Roy were equals. A nice gesture, Roy thought.

He cleared his head. Back to important matters.

The man was of Hispanic descent, approximately 5’11”, 180 pounds, late twenties. Why he felt the need to record these details, Roy didn’t know; they were unimportant in the big picture. The man wore a thin button-up shirt, no undershirt beneath, that was white on one side of the buttons and black on the other side. Roy could tell the color only by the unblemished bottom of the shirt; the rest of the yin and yang was united by the blood. He wore khaki shorts down to his shins and unwashed socks on his feet. The murderers had stolen his shoes and probably his wallet, too. On the khaki shorts he found a piece of red construction paper attached by a safety pin. An elaborate logo adorned the paper, drawn by a genius of an artist, Roy thought. Beautiful black letters in sprawling cursive obscured what the emblem actually said. Roy tore off the paper and kept it for evidence. A key to the investigation, he thought.

Roy recorded copious descriptions of the man’s wounds. One hole, larger and messier than the others, gaped from his right breast. The skin and inner muscle was charred and flaky, like the bark of a burnt tree; Roy assumed this was a gunshot wound. Two smaller holes, more like slits, were positioned diagonally from the larger wound. Roy remembered those two red squinting eyes staring at him and shuddered. To the right of the slits, which he identified as stab wounds, a more prominent gash began and continued diagonally upwards, creating a morbid triangle with the charred wound. A knife still sat imbedded in the man’s chest at the end of the gash, only its butt showing. Dark crimson blood covered his chin and trickled from each corner of his half-open mouth down his pallor cheeks, across the sides of his neck, and onto the ground in two ink-like pools.
Roy recorded these details like he was taking notes in history class. He was a detective now, and impassivity was for the weak. Frank and Joe would be proud. A group of students passed by his table and Roy closed his binder as if he were packing it away. When they passed, he opened it again. He had a reason for sitting alone now, but he was still alone nevertheless. At least he had a secret, though.

After making a perfunctory after-school check to ensure his secret still belonged to him, Roy headed home to further investigate.

When he opened the door of his house and spotted Hector watching TV in the living room, Roy was happy to see him for once. He was just the man to interview.

“Hey Roy, come sit down buddy,” Hector said and motioned Roy onto the brown vinyl couch next to him. Roy’s mother married Hector one year ago, two years after his father’s death, and they had to move to Hector’s hometown because he had a steady job as a translator at a middle school and Roy’s father had always refused to buy life insurance. For the half-dead, he would always say. Hector wore business suits when he did not have to, was clean-shaven, and worked out three times a week. He was two years older than Roy’s mother but looked ten years younger. Hector pretended to like Roy, but Roy knew better. When Roy needed new jeans before the school year began, Hector had already spent their monthly budget on bulletproof glass for Melanie’s flower delivery van. When Roy wanted to invite a kid from class, Benton Davies, over for dinner, Hector had said no, the kid was bad news; stay away from him. Yes, Roy knew how Hector really felt about him.
“Do you know what this means?” Roy asked, cutting to the chase. He handed Hector the paper and watched as his face contorted into a surprised rage. He tapped the paper with his fingers and looked away, composing himself.

“Where the hell did you get this?”

“I found it on the floor at school. I didn’t know what it was.”

“You getting mixed up in this stuff? Huh?” Hector said, raising his voice.

“I don’t know what you mean. I just-”

“This stands for Stony Ridge, Roy.” Hector traced the interlaced S and R with his finger and Roy saw the symbols that had eluded him. “The Stony Ridge Gang. He paused, looking for a crack in Roy’s demeanor. “How did you really get this?”

Roy fidgeted with his backpack, focused on the gash in the couch’s vinyl rather than Hector’s eyes. “I told you the truth.”

Hector sighed and sat up. “You can’t lie to me; I grew up here, Roy. I know these people. This is the gang’s mark of death. They either put it on a person they’ve killed or give it to somebody they’re going to kill. So either you’re somehow telling the truth…or you’re next on their hit list.”

Roy shrugged. He moved to take the paper back from Hector, but Hector tore it in half and put it in his suit pocket.

“OK, I don’t care how you got it,” Hector said. “But you’d better stay away from these guys. If you get hurt, your mother will lose it.” He lifted Roy’s chin to look him in the eye. “Understand?”

“I understand,” Roy said. He smirked and patted Hector on the shoulder. “Thanks for looking after me.” Another piece of the puzzle uncovered.
With Hector’s annoying suspicion looming over his head, Roy decided to lay low with his sleuthing for awhile. For a couple days he made no other significant efforts to advance the investigation. Also, Hector notwithstanding, Roy enjoyed a mystery, and he didn’t want to solve anything until he got extended satisfaction from it. He didn’t bite into his hard candy; he sucked it for all it was worth until it became a slivery icicle. Plus, the next step of the investigation would involve touching the body. Roy had heard that at funerals, sometimes the body was on display for relatives to look at, kiss, touch, etc. He thought touching a corpse would be like laying your hand on a hanging slab of steak in a meat freezer—not traumatic, but certainly not pleasant. He would eventually do what was necessary though; all good detectives did.

Roy made sure to protect his secret during his hiatus. Every morning and night, he visited the bush and doused it and the body with the potpourri his mother used for their one bathroom. Despite the remoteness of the body’s location, you could never be too careful. Due to the gathering crowd of flies, he tried bug spray on the man as well, but apparently you needed a bubble—or a coffin—to keep a fly from such an enticing meal. One morning during this ritual he wondered for a split second if this body once had a family, but he quickly dismissed the thought. A good detective had to detach himself from his emotions.

With one obsession on break, he turned his attention to another. His days at Stony Ridge Junior High, while still solitary, were improving. Confidence springs from unlikely fountains, even lifeless ones. He still didn’t speak to the other white kids at school, but that wasn’t necessary. Roy did not want camaraderie with his own race; he wanted advancement on the popularity ladder, and he figured the black kids at the school would see his shunning the other
white kids as a virtue. The majority of the kids at school, no matter what color, accepted him without discrimination, but Roy wanted adulation or solitude. So he bided his time, worked his way up. In the meantime, his courage had risen sufficiently enough to strike up a friendship with Jacquie.

On the day he made his big move, Roy wore his best shirt, an unblemished blue polo, his only pair of khakis, and his aged boots with a fresh polish job. Two days before, he had taken his savings and got a haircut at the classy barber shop downtown. His hair was now short and gelled into spikes, the fashionable style. As he sat down for lunch in the grungy cafeteria, he saw her. He sucked in his breath and found none. She was beyond description. Her black hair cascaded in curled ringlets to her shoulders. Her cream colored dress fell six inches above her knee—the school’s exact limit—and flaunted the richness of her skin. Her dimples rested on her face like unplanted seeds and bloomed outwards when she smiled. Roy thought he would give anything just to have her hand brush up against his leg, her hair close enough for him to smell. He would give his whole body for her…even his soul, if required.

As she came out of the lunch line and neared his table, Roy made a low grunting sound, clearing his throat and ensuring his voice would not crack. Jacquie’s dress swayed in rhythm with her hips and legs like a thin white dance partner while she walked. Maybe there’s hope for me after all, Roy thought. He half stood when she reached his position.

“Hey Jacquie,” he said, his face contorting into a bright smile. He struggled to maintain eye contact.

“Hi Roy.” Jacquie mumbled the words under her breath and looked away. Strange. Over the past week, he had spoken to her several times, and she always illuminated his face with a smile that would buckle a blind man’s knees. Now she was treating him like a nuisance.
“Want to sit down?” Roy motioned to the seat next to him, blushing.

Jacquie turned and ducked, like she was hiding from a pursuer or traveling through a low cave. Her eyes shined with an urgency Roy had never seen in her usual easygoing manner.

“Roy, we shouldn’t talk anymore.” She paused, pulled the end of her dress over her knees. “If Benton knew, he’d kill you. Me too, probably.”

“You don’t like me. You like Benton,” Roy said. A statement, not a question. He felt the sweat pooling on his forehead. Mixing with excess hair gel, the globular drops congealed on his hairline.

“No, no, Benton’s awful. I like you, Roy. That’s why we can’t talk anymore.” She swallowed hard. “I want you to be safe.” Roy saw a tear forming at the corner of Jacquie’s eye.

“Please don’t tell anyone. I’m sorry.” She turned around and resumed her former pace, head up and hips swaying.

So she knew. Roy thought back to that day on the bus three weeks ago and clenched his fists so hard that they ached.

On the bus Roy could never isolate himself. The crowds necessitated him sitting with other kids. One day he was delighted to sit in the proximity of a few of the Stony Ridge gang members. Today they were boasting about which girl at Stony Ridge they wanted to screw and laughing wildly at everybody else’s choices.

The vocal leader, Andre Barnes, went up and down the seats around the gang, eliciting answers and finding a way to degrade every girl mentioned. “Erica? You kidding? Her ass could double as the tenth planet!” Gales of laughter. Roy laughed, too, and Andre saw him and
pointed, working the crowd. “Thinks that’s funny. What about you, kid? Who do you think about when you’re on a date with your hand?”

Roy struggled with words. “I…don’t know.” Andre smiled and looked at his audience.

“Aw, come on. I know there’s someone. You can’t laugh until we know your girl.”

Roy tried to suppress a smile and failed. Ever since arriving at Stony Ridge, he knew that joining a gang was his gateway to popularity. Never mind that all the members of the Stony Ridge gang were black; Roy still wanted in. Now he had a chance to impress. “Okay, okay…I’ll tell you. It’s Jacque Holmes. She’s my girl.” Roy folded his arms and nodded.

Silence took over. All eyes turned not to Roy, but to a lurching, groaning noise that sounded like the bus leaning one way. When Roy saw where his peers’ eyes were focused, he realized that the sound came from Benton Davies. Roy had never heard him speak before. Rumor had it that his voice was the low rumble of an avalanche. Benton was fifteen, two years older than most seventh graders, over six feet tall, and had arms bigger than Roy’s neck. Legends around the school about Benton Davies ranged from his throwing a Volkswagen Beetle parked in front of his house across the street with his bare hands to his taking a bullet to the shoulder in a fight with an eighteen year old and still putting him in the hospital without any weapons. This was an inner-city Davy Crockett, except meaner.

“You say Jacque Holmes?” The bus floor vibrated with his deep bass.

“Yeah, that’s my girl,” Roy said. The passengers gasped at his audacity.

Benton, carrying a binder that was tattered to the point of no recognition, stood up, rumbled two rows down to Roy’s seat, motioned for Roy’s seating partner to get up, and plopped next to him. After a few seconds, Benton turned his back to Roy, raised his hand as if to stretch, swiveled and smacked Roy in the cheek with his tattered binder. The slap reverberated in Roy’s
head for an eternity. He felt like the plastic was embedded in his face. The swelling came in a rush.

“She’s mine, you little fucker. You better not forget.” Benton sneered. “Last guy who came onto her, I broke a window of this bus and slit his goddamn throat.” Murmurs from the passengers, some saying, “it’s true.”

Benton grabbed Roy’s shoulder blade with one hand and squeezed. Roy felt it on the verge of snapping and opened his mouth in silent agony. His face stung like hell, and tears pressed on his eyelids, intent on escaping. “She’ll never go for you anyways,” Benton said, “so I’ll let you live. But you have to eat that.” He pointed to a hardened piece of gum that had been stuck to the window ever since school started.

So Roy did. Now, sitting in the lunchroom and stinging with rejection, he remembered the taste. When he put it in his mouth, he felt long hairs separate from the gum and tickle his tongue like feather dusters. It wasn’t until he bit down that he retched. The gum resisted, then molded itself to the shape of his front teeth. Classmates looked away when they heard him retch, acted like they were occupied with other matters. A grinding, sandy sound accompanied every bite as his teeth fought through the dust and other particles in the gum. Beneath it all was a remnant of the sweetness that used to exist in the tiny wad. Far beneath, though. When Benton made him swallow, the dirt-ridden gum made the abrasive slide down his throat like sandpaper.

How foolish, Roy thought. A white guy dating a pretty black girl at this school was tying your own noose. And Benton was right; like she would want him anyways. Benton’s lips had curved into a rare smile, and, seemingly satisfied, he patted Roy on the knee. Smile never faltering, Benton told him he was dead if said a word to Jacquie. That night Roy told his mother he’d like to walk to school from now on. For the exercise, of course.
Back in the cafeteria, Roy gritted his teeth—he was thirsty for some reason—and devised a plan. Maybe he would turn the tables on Benton.

That night, standing naked and dripping wet in his bathroom, Roy wondered if it were possible to have devised a more idiotic plan. After lunch, he had approached Craig Peterson, the leader of The Strays, Stony Ridge’s rival gang, and demanded entry into the gang. He was too angry to feel his normal apprehension. Roy had always wished he could get into one of the gangs as a sort of historian—a recorder of their tradition—rather than a killer or drug dealer, no matter how foolish it sounded. Now he wanted in The Strays to kill Benton Davies, plain and simple. Roy desired for his gang-mates hold Benton down so he could get some retribution on the ogre. Then nobody would stand in the way of himself and the object of his affection.

He had expected the laughter that followed from Craig, so—in the name of love, of course—he divulged his secret. He told them about the body, what he found attached to it. Craig acted impressed, pacified Roy for a few seconds, then said that he found a couple quarters in the cushion of his couch once, but that didn’t mean anybody gave a shit. Stop taking credit for other peoples’ work, he said. If you want to impress us, bring proof of a crime you committed.

Roy had nodded and made a beeline for Glenhill Park. As he approached the bush, his sense of purpose overwhelmed all other emotions. He threw down his backpack, lifted up the bush, and fumbled inside the decaying man’s pocket. His hands worked into the pocket without hesitation, but he still made sure not to look the corpse in the face. In the second pocket he checked, he found the proof he was looking for. There was a credit card and a driver’s license, proof enough that Roy had committed the crime that would get him in the Strays. He looked at
the license, at the man this carcass once was, put it in his pocket, covered and sprayed the body, and walked home feeling too confused to run.

The man’s license now lay face up on his bathroom sink. He looked at Roy, not with pale, dirty skin and a bloodied mouth, but with groomed short facial hair, eyes that gleamed instead of purposelessly stared, and an impatient smirk.

The man had a name. Miguel Juan Cornejo. He was 5’10” and weighed 178 pounds. He was twenty-seven years old. These details, although many mirrored Roy’s inconsequential recordings from before, now mattered in a way Roy could not comprehend.

Standing naked in front of his bathroom mirror, which was a haze of fog from his recent hot shower, the pit in his stomach expanded like a filling balloon. Through the mirror’s condensation, he could see his skeletal body and pasty skin, and he thought he could not be any whiter even if he were dead—like Miguel Juan Cornejo.

Without knowing why, Roy approached the mirror and touched it with one finger, creating a dot in the middle near the top. He then lifted his finger and traced the shape of an upside down hook underneath the dot. After drawing to the left and the right of the hook, Roy looked at his creation in awe. MJC, it read. His eyes glazed over and transported him to a world between consciousness and dreaming, a thoughtless, death-like, but somehow sweet limbo.

When he came to, he did not know how much time had passed, but since the drip, drip of water off of his body to a growing puddle on the tiled floor stirred him from his daze, he figured it had not been long. He looked up to see the letters on the bathroom mirror, faded but still legible. A shadow flicked in and out of the corner of his view, hinting that the dripping had not woken him. Moving hastily, he wiped the bathroom mirror clean and covered himself with a
towel on the sink, but the presence was gone. He needed sleep, or a clear conscience. Sleep would do.

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He awoke to distant voices.

“…not for three whole months?” It was Hector.

Hector. He brought Roy and his mom to this disgusting town, and every day he shoveled a new layer of dirt on their shallow graves. He faintly heard his mother respond. They were shouting behind closed doors. Roy tried to listen, swimming in and out of consciousness.

“He looked awful…the leukemia…” Mom. “Roy just couldn’t bear it seeing his dad like that.”

Hector responded, but the only word Roy could understand was “funeral.”

“No, not even that.” Muffled conversation. “He was too distraught.”

Hector started to yell, and Roy heard, “I could have helped!”

Roy covered his ears and pretended he was elsewhere, in another world, with no step-fathers and no diseases and no bullies and no murders and no dying.

Don’t let your memories die.

He closed his eyes—they were so adjusted to the blackness that he could see his Michael Jordan posters on his walls—tried to block out the noise, and thought about the quirkiness of death. The act itself was simple, instantaneous. One minute you sucked in a breath…then boom, show’s over. In fact, the only reason death was such a big deal was the build up and the aftermath. Death was just a snap of the fingers sandwiched by fear on one side and mourning on the other. Roy despised both. Why all this baggage for such a transitory event?
Memories were the same way. When they died, they died. But the remains of dead memories crept back into your head at the most unexpected and inopportune times. Right now, lying in his bed with his hands covering his ears, and in light of the conversation in the next room, Roy remembered that he had never been to a funeral before. They were such fruitless endeavors. But maybe he was missing something; maybe a funeral would tell him something he didn’t know about death—the secret to the mystery that had remained unsolved in his head for over three years now. He decided to find out.

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The real world had no story sense, no dramatic flair. In a Hardy Boys tale or in a movie, on a night like this, the rain would come down in waves. Flashes of lightning would provide an intermittent illumination of the adolescent boy in the black hooded sweatshirt slithering through the dark outdoors, the shovel slung over his shoulder gleaming in the moonlight. Instead, the night was spotless, and the moon was a waning fingernail in the clear night sky. What a letdown. Roy ignored cars parked along the street and sub-woofers pounding in the distance and entered Glenhill Park.

The oaks transformed at night. Walking the familiar pebbled path, Roy saw not branches but writhing creatures lunging at him from the darkness. He continued on, undaunted, until he reached the dense bush, whose various leaves seemed to sparkle when Roy shined his flashlight on them. With gloved hands—Hector’s gloves—Roy propped up the bush with the shovel and gazed upon Miguel Cornejo—rather than ‘the dead man’—for the first time. Decay had changed him in such subtle ways. The dried, plaster-like blood on his cheeks and chin now had the appearance of faded red dye on an Easter egg. Roy lowered the bush and got to work. He found the softest spot on the ground he could, about ten feet from the bush, and began to dig.
Rain would have amplified his digging as well as the drama of the moment. In its softest spot, the ground still gave little quarter to Roy’s feeble strokes. His peers had never accused him of strength or athleticism, and they were right. After ten strokes of unsatisfying amounts of dirt, Roy’s muscles screamed for an end, yet Roy continued. He spurred himself on by thoughts of giving Miguel a real resting place and giving himself the funeral he had never attended, the one he had missed.

Only thirty minutes later, motivation no longer sufficed. Roy’s arms felt detached from his body, and a beam of constant pain traveled up his back. It was a pathetic hole, a grave fit for a feline, not a man, but Roy could go no longer. He propped up the bush and looked at Miguel. The air and sun had not been kind to him.

Neither had Roy.

He thought he should say something.

“Miguel Juan Cornejo was a good ma-,” He stopped and shook his head. What a stupid idea. He touched one of Miguel’s arms, yanked his hand away, and then grabbed the arm again and started to drag him towards the small indentation in the ground. He made it halfway there before tripping. As Roy fell, Miguel’s arm landed contorted above his head at an awkward angle. Roy remembered how his dad used to nap in his chair, with both arms raised and draped backwards over the back of the recliner. At this moment, he felt his first bit of sympathy for Miguel, who—dead or alive, no matter what color or age—was Roy’s equal, and likely somebody’s father. Somewhere, Miguel’s family mourned a missing man. Roy’s muscles ached so prominently that he couldn’t move. Roy lay slack on the ground, relaxed his body, quit squeezing back tears, and gave in.
When the tears came, Roy provided his own shower to the rainless night. Large, convulsive sobs interrupted the flow of tears pelting the dampening ground. Roy was a failure again. A failure at popularity, at love, at detective work, at digging, even at family.

“What the hell is going on?” Roy sat up to keep from choking and looked behind him. He could not discern the shape approaching him, but he knew that voice from anywhere. Hector. “My God. Roy?” Hector broke into a run and lifted Roy to a standing position. “We’ve been looking for-,” Hector stopped when he saw the shovel, the hole, and the body. He struggled to keep his balance. Roy panicked.

“Don’t tell anyone,” Roy implored between sobs. They’ll think I did it. I just found him. I just found him, and I wanted to find out who did it. I just found him, Hector.”

Hector looked at Miguel’s body. He saw the safety pin in Miguel’s shorts with a remnant of torn red construction paper hanging off. “The Stony Ridge sign. This is where you got it. Roy, you should have told me. And the police!”

“I—,” Roy struggled through tears. “I wanted to give him a funeral.” He buried his head in the grass. “I’ve never been to one. His name was Miguel.”

Hector moved Roy away from Miguel’s body and put a hand on his shoulder. “Roy, you’re not alone. I’ve always been on your side,” Hector said. “I’ve had police watching the house every night since you showed me that paper. I want you to be safe. I care about you.” Hector lifted Roy’s chin to look at him. “Because of the paper, the police will know you didn’t do this. But you still messed up. Big time. This man has a family, I bet. He’s just like us, Roy.”

Roy nodded. All three of them were equals. “He deserves a real funeral. Not this. I tried to give him a nice one. I’m sorry.” Heaving sobs obscured the rest of his words.
“I think you’re at the wrong funeral, son. Once we get this all straightened out, I’ll take you to a different grave. One you’re long overdue in visiting. Maybe that’ll help.”

Hector put his arm around Roy. Roy allowed himself to be hugged. He wanted to apologize to Hector, to Miguel, to Martin James Cower, with whom he had over three years of catching up to do, but he could not speak. Hector patted Roy on the head and began punching numbers on his cell phone. Roy moved away, distant from his step-father but closer than ever before, ready to face the consequences of his actions, the realities of his new life, and the forgotten remains of his past.
Audition By Fire

When Blaine decided to hitchhike his way from East Texas to Los Angeles to finally pursue his acting dream, he had to turn down his parents’ offer to buy him a moving van and drive him there more times than he could count. Still, he stood strong in his convictions, and as his reward, a beaten down 1960’s Ford truck sat idling loudly in front of him just inside the New Mexico border, the truck’s exhaust whipping him in the face due to the wind blowing in an unfortunate direction.

Wind in the New Mexico desert meant dust, and even a Ford at least a decade older than him was a sanctuary compared to stinging eyes and dirt seeping under your clothes.

The truck’s color, if you forced Blaine to name one, was half brown, half null. It was so colorless and dirty, it forced your eyes to shut down. The driver, a deeply tanned man who kept his eyes on the road even as his car idled, nodded as an invitation inside. Blaine depressed the button on the rust-covered steel door handle and opened the door to an excruciating creak.

The man signaled for Blaine to put the gym bag he carried into the bed of the truck. This bag held everything he would need for his new life: five changes of clothes, a toothbrush, an old picture of him and his sister jumping on the trampoline taken 15 years ago, last week’s Entertainment Weekly, a ten year old Hustler—the only dirty magazine he had ever owned—and a good luck letter from his parents, which was currently a bookmark in the Hustler. Already in the truck bed was an empty animal cage with some unknown substance smeared on the bars, a crowbar, a boom-box with both tape decks ripped out, and a blanket covering a head-shaped lump in the corner near the driver. Blaine hurled his bag to the opposite side and hoped his belongings would not turn into junk by osmosis.

“Thanks,” he shouted to the driver over the roaring engine as he stepped into the car.
A few seconds passed before the driver turned his face Blaine’s way and said, “Don’t mention it.” Blaine barely heard the acknowledgement, for he had turned his head immediately after seeing the man’s face and looked out the grimy window.

The driver’s skin was the permanent red of a man who had spent a few too many afternoons under the sun. Or baking in an oven. All down his neck, the flesh was cracked and covered with white flakes. His thin cotton tee shirt stopped at his belly button, and the skin on his stomach was the same way—cracked, dying. Like a snake about to shed its skin. The stomach stuck out in a round paunch and traveled over his waistline.

His nose was raw meat, a red stump sticking out from his face. A giant leaking blister, or sore, or something, covered a good amount of the left side of his face, the reason for Blaine’s quick look away. The thing seemed to spread across his cheek, and higher up, near his left ear, stood another smaller forming sore. Fluid sat on the peak of the large sore, not heavy enough to drip down, but fresh in the afternoon sun. The man’s flat brimmed dark blue hat read “I Love Your Wife.”

Blaine shuddered involuntarily and tried to focus on the horizon outside the passenger window. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the driver’s left arm twist towards him in a fluid motion, and he jumped half out of his seat. Instead of reaching over and breaking Blaine’s neck with the movement, the man shifted gears. It was then Blaine realized that the driver’s right arm was non-functional; it lay paralyzed in his lap, limp as a sleeping animal. Each time he shifted was an aerobic twist. Blaine broke the silence.

“I’m Blaine.” Several seconds passed.
“Bart.” Bart scratched at his right cheek with his one functional hand until the car began to drift over the center line. Blaine saw flakes of dead skin floating down and sticking to Bart’s shirt. He wondered how long it took for the sun to turn a man into a reptile like this.

Blaine remembered his dad’s proposal clearer and more painfully now as he sat in the rusted truck with the rusted man. “We’ll go there in a nice, air conditioned moving truck,” he had said. Roger Collins ran marathon when he was Blaine’s age, yet he was still determined to deny his only son any sense of adventure or journey. Still, drowning in sweat, Blaine fought against lamenting his decision.

“Headed somewhere specific?” Bart said, toneless, all the while watching the road. Blaine could barely hear his mumbling southern drawl over the loud hum of the engine.

Blaine then steeled himself and remembered his intentions for this trip. Doesn’t matter how hideous this guy was; he was practice. He put his head down for several seconds, rose up with a thoughtful look on his face, and said, “Not so sure, Bart. Wherever the wind takes me…” He trailed off, the entire statement no more than a breath.

Bart seemed unfazed. He turned his head and faced Blaine for a moment, raised both of his eyebrows, looked back at the lone gym bag in the bed, shook his head and smiled. He faced the road ahead again, and Blaine noticed the long thin wisps of light brown hair peeking out from Bart’s hat.

Blaine continued, enunciating each word carefully, paying attention to his body language. “Well, I guess I can tell you. You seem like a trustworthy guy. You did pick me up after all, right?”

Bart shrugged, although with his disability shrugging consisted of raising one shoulder slightly. Blaine got the point, though.
“Ok,” he said, looking down again, like he was calculating something. “I’m looking for
my sister. She’s been missing for a year now.” Blaine paused, ran his right hand through his
thick red hair to show agitation and worry.

“That so.”

“She was—she—she was hitchhiking to California from Texas last year. Never made it
to L.A., though.”

“Gonna hunt her down?” Blaine shifted to fourth gear.

“You could say that.” Blaine put his head down and held it up with his left hand,
stroking his forehead to show his anguish at such a situation. “I get the feeling she…that
someone who picked her up did something to her.” He swallowed the last word, almost didn’t
get it out.

“Ain’t that a fuckin’ shame,” Bart said. He tapped the wheel to a silent rhythm.

“Sure is. I can’t rest until I find her.”

“Got a cape in that bag of tricks back there?” Bart pointed backwards at the gym bag.

“What?”

“Well, you deserve a cape. Hero that you are.” Bart flashed a wide smile at Blaine, and
Blaine was shocked to see that he had all his teeth.

“Hey. Show a little respect.”

“I’m a suspect, right? I coulda kept lil sis of yours in that animal cage. Right?”

“What the hell are you trying to do?”

“Think you can get me to buy the horseshit you’re feeding me, son? I’d just as soon
believe your pasty ass was here to find your Navajo brothers.” Bart let out a deep laugh.
“It’s true. Her name was Claire. I need some leads. You’re my only hope.” Blaine pleaded to the half man, half reptile with large eyes.

“Hah. One of them pathetic actor types. I can spot ‘em right away.”

“Listen! I see her in my dreams.”

“Jesus Christ…” Bart shook his head between laughs. “I know your kind, kid. Trying to make it to the skinny state to get you some big bucks, some nice drugs, and a pair of big, fake titties to play with.”

Blaine left his character and responded. “You don’t know one thing about me, old man.”

Bart continued unimpeded. “So you start on your way, you get a few hundred miles, you realize you spent your last dime on face cream, and all of a sudden you need ole Bart’s help to get to the promised land.”

“You could stand to use some face cream yourself.” In the New Mexico desert, when a car passed by every 20 minutes or so, it took real balls to make such a statement.

“You know what this is proof of,” Bart said, pointing to his blister then quickly shifting and gripping the wheel again, “it’s proof that I’ve lived. People like you…you haven’t lived a day in your lives.” Bart laughed again. “An actor.”

“The closest you’ll ever get to an audition is lying to my blistered face and seeing if I buy it.” Bart slapped the wheel with finality. “Seen your kind a million times. Try acting like a real human being; now there’s a challenge for you.”

Blaine needed a way out, and quick. So he said: “Isn’t the leper usually the hitchhiker, not the driver?”
The right side of Bart’s face twitched, and then a smirk returned. “Maybe you should spend a while in the nice New Mexico sun, see if insulting Bart was the best idea. Too long out there, and you may need even more makeup to cover your face.”

“Let me out.”

Bart pulled the vehicle to a stop, and Blaine got out and slammed the door. He grabbed his gym bag and began to walk.

“Good luck, De Niro,” Bart yelled as he put his car in first gear.

“Wash your car, asshole!” The roar of the truck’s accelerating engine blurred out Blaine’s screams. “And your face!” The sound died down, and Blaine watched Bart until the truck slipped out of sight. Blaine walked on.

In a New Mexico afternoon, it didn’t take long to make enemies with the sun; as soon as you stepped outside, you prayed for a cloud to stop its onslaught. Blaine ambled forward on the shoulder one step at a time, motivated by the gas station he could make out in the distance. He went back over his dismal performance in the car with Bart to take his mind off of the heat.

He couldn’t even convince an old reptilian half-wit with his acting. Old Bart was baked, half crazy from sun exposure, and even he was able to sniff out his bum acting job; although Blaine’s insults proved his one talent; he sure as hell knew the art of annoyance. He was about as far from an actor as you could get, though. Blaine’s friend Dave had dropped him off in West Texas; since then, out of three pick ups, Blaine had managed to lull his first two audiences into uncaring nods and his third one into outright laughter.

“I see her in my dreams,” Blaine said in self mocking misery. His shoulder slumped and the gym bag dragged on the asphalt.
What made Blaine hate the old bastard even more—and envy him in a way—is that he was right. Blaine hadn’t lived a day in his life. But that was the point of going out here on his own. Blaine could have hitched a ride with Mom and Dad to California and had them shack him up in an apartment until he found work to hold him over while he went to auditions. Dad offered to pay for the moving truck, pay for the gas, even pay for movers to load and unload the truck so Blaine would not have to lift a finger. This all sounded appealing at the moment, but at the same time it made him sick.

Blaine heard the distant hum of a motor behind him and turned to see a red station wagon approaching. After six hours of hitchhiking—three pick ups and twenty times as many rejections—Blaine had already discovered that thumbs-up shit was tired and outdated. Sticking your thumb in the air said creepy, said killer, or homeless. Instead, Blaine knew to wave by this point. Wave in a gigantic arc above your head. This motion served as more urgent than the thumb and also friendlier. With this in mind, he waved vigorously at the station wagon as it neared. As the car passed, only slowing down to get a better look at his face—a different kind of rubbernecking—the female driver pointed at him, mouthing words Blaine couldn’t make out. When Blaine could see the back of the car, two young girls stared out of the back window and waved at him in the exact same motion. “Wave back to the nice man, that’s right,” he imagined the mother saying. Apparently he needed to work on his hitchhiker act, as well.

None of this persuaded him he had done wrong by turning down his parents’ overtures, though. Sometimes he hated them for being such great providers. He thought he was the perfect example of too much provision, too much shelter. Constant supervision, church every week, getting everything he wanted and paying for none of it—some would call it a perfect childhood.
Over the past couple years, Blaine had wanted to say to his dad, “Why couldn’t you have beaten me at least a little bit?”

“Would a little starvation have hurt me that much?”

“Couldn’t you at least have locked me in a closet overnight, even on accident?”

Bart was right. To be an actor, you needed experience, you needed adversity, which turns into motivation. The only life experience Blaine had was lost in a haze of contentment and complacency. The only tough decisions he ever had to make were ‘what should I ask Mom to make for dinner tonight?’ or ‘what type of car should I get Dad to buy for me?’

This was the revenge of all the victims of crappy childhoods, poverty, abuse, hunger: built-in motivation. All Blaine had was helplessness, dependence, and a lack of perspective, and it all came from his parents, from privilege.

So Blaine was faced with the challenge of acquiring a lifetime’s worth of true life experience—adversity, pain, challenge, rejection—in one cross country trip. Each fellow who picked him up gave him an opportunity to practice his acting skills, and each minute spent without transportation, without parents, without a fall-back, would thicken his skin and give him the perspective he needed to make it in Hollywood. Eliminate the privilege, and maybe he would find a new part of himself.

Continuing his journey towards the gas station ahead, Blaine wondered once again how long he would have to stay under the beating sun to end up looking like Bart. He wished he had remembered to bring face cream.

When he reached the gas station an hour later, he felt the boiling sensation on the back of his neck that foretold a sunburn. Due to his red hair and light complexion, Blaine’s parents had
forbid him from being in the sun for more than 10 minutes at a time without a layer of sunscreen on his entire body. He relished the burn even though he knew he would pay for it later.

The gas station looked like a building version of Bart’s Ford: colorless, rusted, yet alive. The gas pumps looked like the newest piece of the establishment, and they were at least a decade old. The station was everything you would expect from one in the middle of the desert, except for the fact that the cashier was one of the most gorgeous women Blaine had ever seen.

The girl stood behind the counter and smiled as she saw him walk inside. She had full blond hair down past her shoulders. Her eyelashes were so prominent that when she blinked he thought he would be able to feel the air displaced by them were he standing closer. Against all odds, the girl had a light complexion like his; how she upheld it in this scorching area was a mystery Blaine would never understand. Her clothing (a button-up brown plaid shirt tucked in to tear-less jeans) was just tight enough to show a perfect figure beneath. In such a dull atmosphere, this woman glowed brighter than the lights hanging from the ceiling.

Blaine played it cool—a thin smile, reserved wave, then the appearance of browsing through the alcohol freezers. He debated whether the girl was so stunning simply because of the heinous appearance of her surroundings. He snuck another glance, saw that fresh, pretty, unblemished face again, and knew he didn’t have to make any excuses for such beauty. He made plans—if the girl accepted the proposal he had prepared while browsing—to discard his Hustler in the station’s trash can.

Blaine began his approach—deliberate, but not hurried—and made direct eye contact the whole way. This was just another type of acting, he told himself.

“Hi there, I’m Blaine, and I’ve never been happier to find a gas station in my life.”

The girl put a hand on her hip and laughed. “Quite a scorcher out there, huh?”

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“You’re telling me.” Blaine leaned on the counter and kept his eyes locked on hers.

“We have plenty to get those New Mexico summers out of your blood. Bottled water in the back, ice over there in the corner, all the drinks you could want, really.”

“I was thinking…I need to escape these summers forever. And you’re the perfect person to help me do that.”

Nervous laughter. “I don’t understand.”

Blaine laid it on as thick as he knew how. He was headed to Hollywood to become a famous actor, and all he needed was a ride. With her looks and charm, of course, she would fit in instantly if she decided to stick around. She could leave this store behind. A girl like her deserved bigger and better things.

Right?

“Well…I don’t know. I don’t have a car. My dad comes to pick me up at the end of my shift every day.”

“Even better. You go home, pack a suitcase, slip out once Mom and Dad are asleep and meet me back here with the wheels. Then we’re off to better things.”

“But I don’t know how to drive. You have to be sixteen years old to drive, and I’m still two years short.”

Blaine braced his body against the counter and began to sweat.

“Excuse me for a second.” When the need to be sick passed, he made a quiet exit and sat against the opposite outside wall of the station. If this whole trip continued along the path of unmitigated failure, at least Blaine could take solace in one fact: if any director in Hollywood needing a convincing pedophile, well, they had their man.
Blaine felt like quitting before he even had the opportunity to start. This hitchhiking idea was more misguided than his acting techniques. The first two good Samaritans who picked him up were simply clueless; it was Bart that stuck in his head. More than anything, he wanted to meet Bart again, get in his face, say, well, he wanted the perfect line to throw back in the old man’s face, one to shut up that toothy grin. But who was he kidding? Why punish a guy for speaking the truth? Even Blaine’s real emotions were a scam. Not only was his acting atrocious; the man behind the words was just as blank.

Blaine saw a familiar car pull into the gas station from the opposite direction.

Bart.

He stayed crouched, hidden by the outer wall of the station, as Bart entered whistling a tune, a John Denver song Blaine couldn’t name.

He chuckled when he thought about warning Bart that she was fourteen.

Blaine heard friendly, unguarded conversation from inside the store, and then the word he least wanted to hear.

Daddy.

From what Blaine could piece together, the girl was telling her dad about her recent encounter with a strange red-haired boy. Blaine began walking away briskly when he heard her mention something about Bart’s car and picking someone up.

His trot turned into a sprint when he heard Bart’s voice raise to thunderous levels inside the station. Blaine took off, looking for the next sign of civilization and seeing none, thinking that this is the closest to a marathon he will ever have to run. Hearing the station door fly open, Blaine wondered how he could act his way out of this one, or if he should just take off into the desert and forget his fictional and real self never existed. With the sound of the truck’s ignition
momentarily drowning out his loud footfalls, Blaine suddenly desired to tell Bart who he really was, that his sister really did get kidnapped five years ago, that he broke his leg in a soccer game when he was eight years old, that he ran away from home for a night five years ago to protest a grounding, that he could remember more times in his childhood that his dad was out of town than in town. Anything to at least let the old man know that he *exists*, that some part of him, deep below all the privilege and fortune and face cream and two story houses and trust funds, some part of him was real.

Was playing dead the best role he could play in this situation, or would Bart sniff out that bogus acting job, too?

Blaine tore off the side of the highway and into the desert, and he heard the old Ford anywhere from 100-200 feet behind him slide on to the rougher, dirt-covered surface. For a precious few seconds before he could run no longer, Blaine saw a trailer to the right with his name and an unnecessarily large star on the door. To his left in the distance, a camera rolled, following his every movement. A man in a brown beret next to the camera setup gesticulated enthusiastically, imploring him to continue, that this was great stuff. As the exhaustion overtook him, the last image his fading eyes registered before the world went black and the heat enveloped him was the distant specter of the Hollywood sign staring at him from the end of the horizon.
The Last Brick

Climbing Bayhill Tower was not as physically strenuous as all the kids said. Jason Redman had told Monty that the climb was like doing 100 pull ups with your life riding on each one. Halfway up the tower himself, Monty wondered what tower Jason had climbed, or what victory had done to his perception. Currently, five feet above Monty, his climbing partner Todd, still half-drunk, moved from handhold to handhold without the slightest difficulty, exposing the fallacy in the comments of all who had supposedly scaled Bayhill Tower.

From 100 feet in the air, in the middle of the night, the town of Bayhill was a black canvas smattered with lights. If you weren’t careful, you could get disoriented and think that the sky had turned upside down.

“Is any girl worth this?” Todd shouted from above.

“We wouldn’t be halfway up if she wasn’t,” Monty said.

“Not like we don’t already know who she picked,” Todd said, and, looking up, Monty caught a wink meant for his eyes.

Just one pull on the ankle was all it would take; they were almost high enough to do the job. Monty had learned a lot about revenge, about pride, from his English class; one isolated tale had told him all he needed to know. In retribution for such an audacious insult—moving in on Tiffany, the only girl Monty ever had any interest in—he would punish Todd with impunity. And at the culmination of the revenge, Todd would know exactly who caused his demise.

“Have you ever been into an art student before?” Monty called out.

“No, but I’ll be into Tiffany before you even get your hands on her.” Todd’s laughs echoed and carried in the swirling night wind.
This type of pride could get you bricked in—or thrown off—quicker than Todd could imagine.

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Two hours earlier, the pair of teenagers had set out. Across the horizon, the Bayhill water tower stood out like an awkward giant frowning upon the jumble of juvenile suburban abodes below. Monty and Todd walked along the farm road leading to the back of Bayhill High School and to the tower. The bulbous white spherical summit gleamed at the adolescents in the night like an eyeball suspended in the air by five rigid, parallel stalks. The top was round with a light misty color, and even from the ground one could tell its surface was rough and crater-like; on nights like these, the moon illuminated its earthly mirror image. Twenty minutes it had been since the last car whooshed by. All the pair could hear were the occasional chirp of crickets and the hypnotic hum of the streetlights leading the way.

“Check it out,” Todd said worshipfully as they closed the distance to the tower. “It’s like the town nightbulb…night…night light.” Monty thanked beer number four for doing its job. Quite a heist, stealing four beers from his dad’s fridge, but Monty figured his dad would just assume he had drank them all and forgot about it. Monty looked a few paces behind him and saw the wind blow Todd’s “Viva Texas!” trucker’s cap up his scalp, exposing stalk-like gelled hair. His thick, black eyebrows above lead-colored eyes absorbed the darkness around him. The moon lit a stupefied grin across his charismatic mug that boiled Monty’s blood.

Ah, the myriad of injuries poor Monty had borne from this buffoon.

“Dude…do you see that?”

Monty did not answer. He imagined someone was watching, anyone, from a third story window, guessing at his next action. “Yep. That’s where we’re headed,” he finally said.
Monty stayed in the lead, enclosed by a black hoodie and black pants, colorless in the veil of the night. He wondered if his garb was a give-away, looked at Todd tracing a ring in the air around his fourth beer can, and perished the thought.

He saw the tower, all right. Raccoon Tower, Bayhill Tower--whichever name you preferred, he saw it, narrow in the ground and ballooning out at the top like the point of a thermometer. Monty always looked at structures in the context of art, always searching for inspiration for his next masterpiece, but he had trouble fathoming Bayhill tower as having any sort of artistic bent. As he looked back again at Todd grinning up at his ‘nightbulb’, all Monty could think about was the pending sound of Todd’s body connecting with the gravel after a 250 foot fall.

“Proceed herein,” Monty whispered, although he could have screamed the last rites without Todd becoming aware in his current state.

***

Every town has its water tower, its universal symbol of community—of oneness—and Rick Varken took pains to ensure his son understood the importance of such a monolithic symbol. “Anywhere you are, look around you, I betcha you’ll see a water tower somewhere or another in your sightline,” he had told his son. Monty, enjoying the comfort of the soft passenger seat in his dad’s Volkswagen after a day of morning kindergarten, squinted his eyes and swiveled his head until he saw a tower sprouting out of the ground near the edge of the horizon like a distant white radish.

“See?” Rick pointed to the same tower, stroking his thin mustache in thought. “Far away…but it’s there. And if you can’t find one, where you’re at probably ain’t worth a damn.”
Monty performed this litmus test often over the next eleven years. Normally, almost without fail, he would spot a tower peeking out from the horizon. Even in the cell phone age, with cell towers consistently outnumbering water towers, angry stick figures contrasting—and often overshadowing—the smooth, unassuming shape of a water tower, he still noticed one almost everywhere he looked. When he didn’t, he felt uneasy, unsupervised…free.

“The water tower is the true essence of any town, son; don’t let anyone deny that. A fact.” About a week earlier, his father had landed the gig of a lifetime for a lifelong odd-jobber; he was to build a new town water tower at the back of the high school which Bayhill had just begun construction on. Remembering that car ride after the fact, Monty heard the gloating and self inflation in his father’s voice as he spoke to his son about his only professional accomplishment of any value; a five year old who attached no bravado to such demonstrations must have been the perfect vessel for such bellowing pride.

Monty’s father then lowered his voice, spoke slowly, almost reverentially. “The water tower holds all of the town’s most precious secrets; did you know that, Monty? Its heart and soul, too, if you’re asking me.”

As the construction site of the tower came into view, Monty had looked at his father and wondered if his dad would build him a planet if he asked for one. “I want to help build it,” he said, a firm demand.

“I can promise you this. One day…I’ll take you to the top.”

***

As they reached their destination after a two-mile half hour walk from Monty’s house, one look up at Bayhill Tower in the night sky told Monty all he needed to know about his family
heritage. The structure creaked in the wind like a tree branch about to snap, and the tower’s roots had the same rust that resided on the hood of his dad’s Volkswagen.

From the ground, the tower was a latticework of pipe swirling upward to a round apex. The middle of the structure sprouted from the ground and then rounded out at the top like the head of a thermometer. Around the central root in a circle were five thick metal supporting poles. These poles ascended to a circular walkway halfway up the domed top. In between the supports were the means for climbing. Hundreds of thin pipes crossed the chasms between the supports at various angles. They intersected with each other at points to form a mixture of triangles, diamonds, and rhombuses on the way up. Monty put his hand on the closest supporting pipe and felt the cold transmitting through his black batting gloves like the tower was attempting communication. He hoped his hands wouldn’t go numb halfway into the ascent.

The wind carried the sharp smell of decay to the teenagers’ noses, and both knew it came from this inert structure. This tower was Monty’s father’s most prestigious job and most humiliating failure. Above all, Monty was an artist, and above all, Monty could find no semblance of art in this disaster. Monty heard a sharp creak and ushered Todd to the first pipe to use as a handhold.

His friend was just drunk enough to climb this rickety, stinking mess, just drunk enough to believe that Tiffany, the object of both of their affections, had written the name of the winner of her heart at the top of the tower. The plan—Monty’s crowning artistic masterpiece—was in motion.

“Some climb we’re headed for.” Monty broke the silence.

“Yeah,” said Todd. Monty thought Todd’s sentences averaged about three words each.

“How in the world did she make it up there?”
“If she can, then so can we,” Monty answered. “Plus, I’ve been up here before. I know the exact place she wrote it.”

Ah, the brilliance of such a plan. Focus on Todd’s main weakness—women—and watch things march along without a hiccup. With a couple beers as a helping hand, Todd bought the lie hook, line, and sinker. He did not exactly scream “Tiffany!” again and again after Monty broke the news to him, but here he was nonetheless. Tiffany was a thin blonde girl with round, full cheeks and khaki colored skin. She was not without her quirks (she made it a point to sit at a different lunch table every day, for example), so this lie, that Tiffany had written the winner of her heart below the raccoon’s tail at the top of Bayhill Tower, was not so far-fetched. Time to reel in the bait.

“You know,” Monty said, turning away from the tower, motioning towards the back of the high school, and enunciating each syllable as if he was talking to a child, “maybe we shouldn’t risk it. The tower isn’t sturdy anymore, and you’ve had a bit to drink…”

“OK, let’s get out of here and go score some more of these babies.” Todd finished his statement on a high note, downed the rest of the fourth beer in a triumphant slurp, tossed the empty can to the side, and began walking away from the tower back towards the dirt trail. So maybe Monty’s bait was not as enticing as he had assumed. Damn light beers.

As his mother used to say about Rick Varken, “He never could stand anything with a little bite to it.”

Monty couldn’t stand his mother, but the point was well made.

“Hey.” Monty grabbed Todd’s arm to stop him, and Todd shrugged. “What if her writing fades? We’ll never know…”
“Whatever you say, Chief.” Todd advanced to the foot of the tower. “I know she chose me—and so do you,” he whispered audibly, breaking out into a grin and winking in the moonlight.

An aura of failure overwhelmed Monty as he followed Todd. This miserable structure more closely resembled a piece of wannabe modern art than a piece of craftsmanship. To finally accept that fact, years ago, as the paint began to decay, the metal rusted twice as fast as normal, the connecting bars acquiring a slight tilt, felt like a type of revenge all its own.

Monty’s father had ordered twice as much pipe as one normally needs for a tower of this size because he was afraid of heights and wanted a safe environment for himself as well as his workers; more pipe placed closer together made for more secure working conditions. The town gave Rick a shoestring budget—little to no use of vehicles of any sort to help scale the tower, only top-flight ladders. Years down the road, when the pipes began to wither under the heat, turn a dull yellow under the influence of the sun rather than the stark white they began as, Rick discovered the consequences of buying cheaper materials in bulk for safety’s sake.

Monty’s dad never had a chance. Failure is a hard weight to bear when it stares down at you from any point in town.

“Gloves?” Todd raised one bushy eyebrow, smiled, and pointed to Monty’s hands.

Monty gripped the closest piece of pipe ascending in a diagonal line, and felt it almost give under his pull. “Grip, dude. When you fall, you’ll be wishing I brought you an extra pair.”

“You are just so safe,” Todd replied in his most pacifying voice. “Wanna hold onto your blankie on the way up, too?”

“Fuck off.” Monty stepped aside and waved his friend forward. “Lead the way. Since you’re so confident and all.”
Todd stepped forward—Monty saw his eyeballs subtly shaking like they were on springs—kicked one of the tower poles to rid his shoes of mud, threw his arms to the side to adjust his sleeves, and began to climb—in perfect position for the act to come.

Todd’s naïveté was damn near endearing. The gloves were easily explainable: no fingerprints, no connection to the site. Not only must Monty never receive the slightest repercussion for putting this joke of a teenager in his place—ten feet under the ground, in this case—Todd, in his dying moments, must come to the lucid realization of his supposed friend’s grand plan. All these details held more importance as the act itself; the master of revenge had taught him well.

While he knew his plan was not perfect, Monty’s interests lay in the feeling, the black, heartless, passion-fed, feeling of the act. Monty never planned his artwork, and what little he had contrived for this night already was painful. Climbing the rickety tower, Monty yearned for the spontaneity of his other works, such as his drawings that unfolded onto the paper without any prior thought; he was always most comfortable when his intellect was one step behind his instincts.

Anytime he knew what he wanted out of a drawing before he finished, failure resulted. If he had one chance to change the past, he would go back in time and tell his father to tear up his plans, his fucking worthless, idiotic plans, and just start building. Monty’s plans for this night, this act, this piece, were malformed but existent, and that existence, that being, made him shiver. Would it be the worst possible occurrence if Monty was forced to ad lib to eliminate this ghoul five feet above him who was trying to steal his only love? If his plans turned out to be as useless as his father’s ten years ago, would this not prove advantageous? Monty smiled at the thought. Maybe the night would end with an entirely different type of punishment.
They climbed to a soundtrack of babble.

With each moment, Todd talked—an unfortunate side effect to the method of luring—and Monty endured. He spewed excitement of scratching his notch into the dome of Bayhill Tower. All the cool kids scaled the tower at some point (with only one having fallen—a fifth grader—legend has it he slipped, landed hard, and lumbered home, screaming, “I broke my ass” the whole way), and they etched a notch into the side of the summit to symbolize their triumph. “I’ll be the hero and get the girl. All in one climb,” Todd said, and Monty sensed that smile blooming above him. At least another 150 feet until he could silence this thief.

Monty remembered a video game he had spent the last three months mastering, one of those blood and gore-fests that suited his tastes. As his character climbed the face of a mountain, enemies would climb beside, above, and below him, and Monty would grab them by their necks, slam them into the rock, and toss them off screen to their deaths. Push a button, end a life. A grab at Todd’s ankle at the right time, the right height, followed by an outwards pull, and game over.

Life imitating art.

As they continued to make progress, Monty tried valiantly to tune out his droning friend and focus on the climb. The ascent was not unlike climbing a ladder, but the pipes were almost never horizontal. The trick was to conform your feet to the angle of the foothold and then leverage your weight in the opposite direction of the tilt to keep your balance as you reached for the next pipe above. The intermittent clanking of their feet hitting the pipes sounded like someone ascending a staircase in a deserted, cavernous building.

Monty could feel the grime on each pipe as he pulled himself closer to the top, to his friend, to his revenge. He would feel a loose pipe periodically, like a Jenga block ripe for
plucking. He never lost to his mom at this game during his childhood; she would wreck the structure before ten moves.

From a distance, Monty imagined the two climbers looked like a black widow spider without the hourglass (Monty, in his cat burglar garb) chasing the colorful insect prey who had become entangled in his web. This image pleased Monty; he made a mental note to use this for his next drawing. Even this outdated pile of trash held some inspiration deep within.

Once you learned to tilt your foot subtly to meet the contour of the diagonal footholds, a hypnotizing rhythm ensued. Monty found that he internalized even this precarious climb after a certain number of grabs, pulls, and footholds. After too much repetition, even the most dangerous of situations fades into the background of one’s mind (Although he did alert Todd to a cracked pipe above later and immediately wondered where this insight came from). The flaws, the fears, and the method behind them all, they took their places in the background.

Of course, hiding your fears and flaws, Monty reasoned, was a building block of human survival. And humans—above all—were survivors. Survival required the occasional repression of flaws, shameful sins, and secret motivations. We’re as unaware of this, Monty realized, as clicking the turn signal on while driving, yet so proficient that we forget these feelings ever existed. Passing him on the street, Monty reasoned he would give his true self the finger and immediately disavow all knowledge of such an encounter.

He grabbed the pipe above him, found a foothold, and looked back to take in the view above the top of the school. He tried to pick out Tiffany’s house, ignoring that he had never been there or seen it. The fantasy went like this: she sat at her second story window, in a white lacy nightgown, watching with binoculars the two competitors for her affection ascending. This delusion aside, she would discover the victor soon enough. Todd broke in again.
“Does your dad have a thing for raccoons?”

“You’re acting like my dad actually had the power to choose our mascot.”

“Seriously, can you think of a more idiotic mascot? They must have chosen a raccoon over a slug, a cockroach, and O.J. Simpson. A raccoon,” he said with a scoff.

“Who knows why someone chose a raccoon,” Monty said. You could fault Rick for the rust, for the creaking, for the cracks in the pipes, but the town made the raccoon decision for him. His hand was forced. Sure, he had cheaped out on the artist, ended up with a part-time cartoonist who drew the mascot like a Looney Tunes character, but could you really fault him? Wide, bulging eyes, tail upturned like a skunk, and front legs outstretched like the thing was flying, the ridiculous image was the punch line to the joke. The school wised up and changed mascot two years later, but no one bothered to give Rick a ten-foot-wide stick of white out.

Rick wrote the tower slogan—what he wanted to become the town slogan—in swooping cursive on either side of the cartoon raccoon on the side of the dome.

“Raccoon Pride,” the tower read.

Being in its infancy, Bayhill High had no accomplishments to advertise on their tower, no “1992 State Champions!” to shout to the skies. Still…Raccoon Pride?

“If this town needs anything, it’s some old-fashioned pride,” Rick reasoned at the time. “Pride of ownership, pride of residence, self pride…Who cares about the past, what you did that you regret, or what you haven’t done? Live proud. Walk with your chest out. Spit without shame. You get the idea.”

Two years after making that statement, Rick Varken started drinking.

Monty paused, pulled the water bottle out of his back pocket, and took a swig. Seeing Todd’s ankles moving ten feet out of reach, he resumed the climb.
More than halfway up the tower, the pace slowed down, and Monty heard Todd’s heavy breathing in sync with his own. With fatigue setting in, the conversation had decreased to a minimum, but Todd could not resist another jab at his competitor.

“Boy will it be anti-climatic when we get to the top. As if there’s any doubt who she chose.” He chuckled. “You think any girl is really worth this climb, though?” Todd asked, his speech hitching with each breath.

This only proved his unworthiness. “Wasn’t this a question you should have asked yourself 100 feet ago?”

“Yeah, well your mind clears when you’re this high.” Monty wasn’t sure what he meant by high. “But the body on that girl…I’d climb a few of these babies to get my hands on that.”

“I just can’t see you of all people with an art student.”

“She’s God’s work of art,” Todd said, and threw back his head in laughter. “Should I use that one on her?”

Tiffany told Monty once that his drawing of his childhood basement was “moving.” She picked him as her partner for a cooperative clay project last April. Their hands touched once by accident; Monty felt that same charged transmission he did when touching Bayhill Tower. Tiffany probably just felt a clammy appendage.

“Remember that?” Todd was still laughing.

“What?”

“When you invited Tiffany over and I showed up? Remember her face when I brought out the Carmen Electra calendar you hid in your closet? And when I told her you put up all that artsy shit just to impress her?”

“Thanks again for that, pal.”
He took Todd’s ribbing as well as he could, but this fiend had ventured upon insult with Tiffany. The one girl he felt like he had a sliver of a shot with, and he swoops in with that grin, that gelled hair, that charm. Then he had the gall to call it “friendly competition.” What he knew about Tiffany you could capture in one photograph. What Monty knew would require volumes of art.

“She told me I was cute the other day,” Todd continued. “And gave me the smile.”

“The smile?”

“You know what I’m talking about. Or wish you do. She looked at me in the hall one day, and I could tell she was imagining what it would be like…you know…to get on top of me and—“

Todd shrieked as both feet slipped on a diagonal pole. His body fell sideways as his legs contorted to the left, and he was able to grab the pole ascending in the opposite diagonal direction despite his head slamming against it during the fall. He pressed one hand reflexively to his forehead, leaving only a tenuous grip with his left hand between him and a 100-foot fall. He scrambled with both feet to find a hold, and Monty began to close the distance between them.

“Oh shit. I can’t fall. Too far. Monty where are you.” These phrases came out as one breathless incantation. Because of the diagonal nature of the pole that he gripped, his hand slipped gradually to the right, pushing him closer to where the gripped pole and the pole on which he had slipped intersected. His feet flailed in the air like stalks of grass blowing in the wind, finding no footholds.

Pulling himself up to the leftwards-tilting diagonal pole on which Todd slipped and having to consciously avoid being kicked in the head, Monty grabbed Todd’s right ankle out of the air with his free hand. Just one pull…
“Oh thank God. Help me out, bro.”

Sweat soaked through Todd’s sock onto Monty’s palm. Keeping a firm grip on the ankle, Monty steadied instead of pulled, guided instead of jerked. He helped his friend find the foothold he had slipped on only moments earlier.

“I don’t know if I can make it,” Todd said, his breathing not slowing.

“Want to turn back now?”

“I’d like to get my feet on the fucking ground. So yes.”

“You know we’re closer to the top than the ground, right?”

“Jesus. Give me a second. I need to sober up.”

Monty saw the sweat pouring down his friend’s face. He had no choice but to assent and give Todd time. Besides, no amount of time was too long for the perfect conclusion to this plan. He preferred not to cash in on blind luck, thank you; so he had saved the guy he eventually intended to eliminate. The art lay not in the act of revenge, but in the execution. Discount timing and correct implementation, and you commit mere murder. The artists creates; nobody traces a masterpiece for him to fulfill.

A breeze caressed the two resting climbers, eliciting a moan above from Todd. Monty extracted the water bottle from his back pocket and drank deep.

“Raccoon Pride,” Todd shouted from five feet above. This time his laugh darkened the area around the two boys like the lights dimming in a movie theater. Drunken stupidity now a memory, he repeated the two word slogan, devoid of any type of emotion. “Raccoon Pride.”

Why this mediocre slogan reminded him of father, Monty had no clue. He squeezed the pipe above his head until his knuckles turned the white of the watching moon. A few feet to the
right was a cracked pipe, metal severed in the middle and hanging limply in the cold air, and this only enhanced the remembrance.

“I stood on the pinnacle before.” Monty said as a reminder to himself. In a rare lucid moment, Todd seemed to know this statement was not meant for him and kept quiet.

A few more moments, and Monty lost all awareness of standing exposed on an unstable structure.

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Dad pulled on the rope attached to the structure, and the scaffolding which held Monty and his father rose in fits and jerks. Monty gripped the rail of the scaffolding and tried not to look down, just like Dad told him. His eyes made him look down, though, and he felt more comfortable seeing the ground below him than pretending it wasn’t there.

Two months of pleading, of Dad waffling between yes and no, of Mom insisting that he never go near the tower, and finally, on the afternoon of his last day of kindergarten, unbeknownst to Mom (three hours away on business), Dad was taking him to the top of Bayhill Tower. He felt like a king being taken to his throne. The air was fresh in the late spring afternoon, and the sun covered the whole of Bayhill with consistent yet tolerable and even welcome warmth. Bayhill Tower in its infancy, complete yet still undergoing minor construction, was still a beacon of hope, of town pride.

“Pride, son,” Dad said as he pulled on the scaffolding rope, raising them higher still. “This tower should be the hub of the town’s pride, its heart at the center of all activity. That’s the reason for the slogan.”

“Raccoon Pride!” Monty looked up at his father and grinned. He took his own sense of pride in memorizing the tower slogan running underneath the raccoon on the top. Remembering
what his dad had told him in a previous speech, the one about sticking his chest out, and spitting without shame, Monty craned his head over the rail of the scaffolding, cleared his throat and launched a wad of spit down to the ground below. He smiled and pointed down at what he had done.

“That’s what I’m talking about!” Dad said, punctuated by a strong pat on the head.

“Someday, when you’re on the football team, that sort of pride will get your name on this tower, you know that?”

Soon the town began to resemble the diorama Monty had built a few weeks ago for his class, the houses made out of small pieces of cardboard and the streets strips of trimmed black construction paper. Mom had helped, but it was Dad who drove him around, marking off streets for him to create, and giving him several different views of Bayhill Tower. Monty built his tower out of legos, but because it poked out above the shoebox that held his diorama, when he brought it to class, the top half of the tower snapped off as he tried to put it in his locker. The tears ceased eventually, but he never put the tower back together. This was the real thing, though; Monty would get to walk on the top area that his faulty design had snapped off.

He ran his fingers across the intersecting metal poles as they ascended. Heat from the sun emanated from each dark green pole, and Monty could only let his hand run along the diagonal poles for a few seconds at a time.

“How do they feel?” Dad asking, watching Monty’s hands. Then, before he had a chance to answer, “Firm, right? Mighty sturdy. And my consultants warned me that going cheaper on the poles was a health hazard for the workers. Exactly the opposite, actually.” He rapped on one of the poles with his free hand while he continued to pull the scaffolding higher. “But I wanted more volume, Monty. And look.” He pointed at a worker now parallel to their scaffolding, a
dark-skinned man wearing a white hat, a blue tank top, and jeans. “Now my workers—Hola Hector!—can feel comfortable working standing on the poles, not teetering off of a scaffolding. Beautiful, ain’t it?”

The man waved back at Dad. He stood a few steps away from his scaffolding, standing on one of the diagonal connecting poles while he painted the next pole up. Monty nodded and smiled. He looked up and hopped impatiently, ready to see the top. Ten minutes later he got his wish.

Dad pulled the scaffolding parallel with the metal walkway around the circular top of the tower and tied it to the rail around the walkway. He lifted Monty over the rail, and his feet made a clanging noise as they connected with metal. Monty heard a creak below, like the wail of one of his whiny classmates, but it soon went away. Dad vaulted himself over the railing in one fluid motion, outstretched both arms at the town of Bayhill, and watched Monty’s impressed stare.

Only Monty heard the amplified creak after Dad landed, but this also went away soon. He stared out at the town below and wondered if he would ever be able to create something so pretty. He wanted to bring a tent up here and spend the night so he could see what the night sky did to the town from a distance.

Next he heard a snap, not a creak, and a man’s scream. Something like “You duh!” His tower had snapped, too, when the top broke off. Monty looked at Dad, who had already vaulted back over the railing on to the scaffolding.

“I’m coming, Hector!” he shouted.

Monty knew what Mom would have said about this situation. Never leave Dad; don’t even let go of his hand. Stay with him no matter what. Monty decided to listen to Mom. He ran
after Dad as he was untying the scaffolding from the top railing. The man’s wails from below pierced Monty’s ears. The scaffolding began to lower just as Monty reached the railing.

“Stay there!” shouted Dad.

Monty backed up, took a breath, ran towards the railing, and attempted the same vault Dad successfully landed. The railing struck his right kneecap during his jump attempt, causing him to flip over the edge. One of his hands caught the metal walkway on the way down, and he gripped the railing with that hand as tight as he should have been gripping Dad’s hand if he had listened to Mom.

Monty heard a shout of “No” from below, and the sound of the moving scaffolding neared instead of distanced. The railing burned his hand more painfully every second that he held on. Creaks from the tower, a whining sound from the now rising scaffolding, low moans from below, and his own screams filled Monty’s ears. He tried to open his eyes, but he only saw black stars in his vision.

Suddenly, he felt two large hands grip his waist on either side and pull. His hand came free, and he landed with a crash on the scaffolding. When he opened his eyes, Dad was lying parallel to him on the scaffolding, blood pooling on the area near his head. Dad put his hand on Monty’s chest, signaling for him not to move, and shot up again. Monty saw no blood on Dad’s head as he stood, realized the blood was coming from him, and lost consciousness.

When he came to, he could not find Dad. The houses of Bayhill in his peripheral vision were larger, and the scaffolding was not moving. As he looked up, Monty saw Dad swinging from diagonal pipe to diagonal pipe, like a frantic monkey, before reaching Hector, who was hanging from a pipe that was cracked in half and barely connected to the tower. Dad grabbed
Hector, took his entire weight in his right hand, and swung him to the next set of pipes. Monty closed his eyes again.

When Monty awoke again, Dad was rubbing his head, and the dark skinned man was smiling at him from across the scaffolding.

“OK?” the man said.

Monty gripped Dad’s arm tighter than even Mom would have expected. Around him, Bayhill throbbed to the beat of his head. Descending the snapped tower—just like his own version—Monty asked Dad if he would build a different tower before passing out for good.

“So I have everything straight, right? I’m making absolutely sure of that first.”

“Yes, Karen, that’s everything.”

“I never thought you could be so stupid.”

Hearing this statement trickling under the closed door of his bedroom, Monty wondered whether he should cover his ears. After all, Mom and Dad both thought he was asleep again because of the pills they kept giving him for the cut on his head.

“What would you have done?” Monty had to strain to hear Dad’s voice, but not Mom’s.

“I wouldn’t have taken him up there in the first place! And neither would any other sane parent.”

“The tower was perfectly safe--”

“Perfectly safe! Look at the gash in your son’s forehead and tell me it was perfectly safe.”
Monty tried to focus his attention on the tower. He could see it jutting out from the line of houses outside his windows. Only the top protruded into his vision, but it was enough for him to wonder how long until that top half broke off—or if it had already when he had almost fallen.

“I swear, you’re just like a child, Rick. I have to watch you as closely as I watch him.”

You’re being ridiculous. We’re all OK! Including Hector.”

“If you had done a halfway decent job building that piece of shit out there, nobody would have needed saving.”

Silence from the living room. Monty slipped out of bed soundlessly and opened his faded blue bucket of legos. He stacked one lego on top of the other in five vertical stalks. Once again, the volume increased outside his door. He caught words like failure, disgrace, disappointment, and pathetic—all Mom’s voice.

Ten minutes later, with yells still reverberating in his ears, he began work on the top of his tower.

“I’ve had enough of this.” Dad.

“Go sleep under the tower, then. It’s safe enough for that, right?”

He caught the sound of glass shattering and pulled his comforter off of his bed, draped it over his head, and worked on rounding out the top of his tower. Five minutes later, when the sound had finally ceased outside his door, he fitted the final lego into place. Here it was; the structure both him and his father had failed to build.

Monty looked outside, saw the top of Bayhill Tower jutting out again, the raccoon tail just entering into his view from the curve. Raccoon Pride.

Then, before he could think otherwise, he wound back with his right hand and smacked the top of his lego tower with all his force. The tower shattered into hundreds of pieces, littering
the ground with blues, yellows, and reds. The man he had placed on top of the tower lay face
down at the foot of the closed bedroom door.

Hearing footsteps, Monty jumped into bed, pulling the comforter with him, and closed his eyes. He heard his door open a crack, felt someone looking in. The door closed without a word. Whoever it was, Mom or Dad, it didn’t matter.

He dreamt in sounds that night: snapping, more snapping, then a deafening crumble.

***

Monty returned to reality and saw the top rail within thirty feet. His muscles screamed, and he realized all this escapism, thinking of Dad’s black eyes and lowered head the morning after the accident, the broken vase in his parents’ bedroom, the way Dad began to walk with downcast eyes, the divorce, the decision they made Monty make, all this sheltered him from the more immediate problem: he felt he could go no further.

Todd climbed without speaking. He breathed in long wheezes, like a car struggling to start. Monty looked down—intentionally tempting fate—and knew they were high enough. The houses were dioramas, the streets strips of duct tape. Monty sought out his enemy’s ankle for that penultimate pull, but his muscles defied his intentions. His literary inspiration never had to deal with this type of fatigue.

Before he could make up sufficient ground, Monty saw Todd make one last effort with his arms and crawl onto the circular walkway around the tower summit. Monty had run out of bricks.

“You can do it,” Todd spoke in a low voice above. Monty ignored the idiot and pulled himself onto solid ground one minute later. His body convulsed in a series of unified throbs as he lay on the cold but comforting metal.
“Here we are.” Monty opened his eyes and saw Todd standing upright three feet away from him. Exhibiting perfect posture, he raised one hand to his head in a precise movement and saluted the town spread out below them, his face a picture of mock pride.

Monty nodded.

Todd leaned on the rail, and Monty heard his breathing began to slow.

Monty trudged to his feet, took the water bottle out of his back pocket, put the bottle to his lips, and sucked. The water poured from both corners of his mouth, and Monty then emptied the rest of the bottle over his head, creating a spreading puddle of liquid on the metal surface below. He tossed the bottle over the rail and waited. Not quite the thump he had anticipated.

Standing near the spot he had nearly plunged from ten years earlier, Monty took in the lights and homes of Bayhill. His watchful eyes saw nothing, no patterns, not even a pencil drawing out of the shapes below. He saw a light flick off in a distant house and wondered if it was Tiffany’s. Show’s over; she’s right about that. Monty realized he knew as little about Tiffany as Todd did.

Monty had expected some sort of déjà vu standing on the spot of his near demise, but instead his mind returned him to the first time his dad hit him.

Most of all, he remembered the silence surrounding the event. As he doubled over, collapsed to the ground, and held his convulsing stomach—approximately one year after the divorce was finalized—the air turned to molasses, and time proceeded accordingly. From his perspective on the magenta carpet (a leftover from Mom), dust particles illuminated by the setting sun floated on the air. The air conditioning kicked in with an interruptive huff. Through his left ear, his head throbbed to the rhythm of his heart. The scent of spilled alcohol emanated from the soaking carpet.
His dad stood on the opposite side of the room, motionless except for his weapon. His mouth hinged open and froze, and his eyes focused on his hand. With his right arm outstretched in front of him, he made a fist, then spread his fingers, made a fist, then spread his fingers.

Barely audible, he said, “Go to your room.”

One of the walls in the room let out a loud and spontaneous crack, and Monty obeyed.

Monty felt now much like he did then: humiliated and ashamed. The journey, the climb, the trials, Todd’s stupid salute, this whole thing was a joke. If anything, he should have reached over and thrown his friend and enemy over the railing as he leaned over it, catching his breath. He searched for a parting line as the fool would plunge to his death, and decided “Rest in Peace” (translated from his inspiration) would have worked just fine. But this moment, this interval of perfect timing—just a memory now. His last chance of fulfillment, and he wasted it thinking about his dad. He found he had little taste left for plots and games, anyways.

“Hey!” He saw a hand waving in front of his face.

“Huh?”

“About time. You were in another world.”

Monty said nothing.

“We going to check for this name you claim’s under the tail?”

Monty shrugged.

“Whatever. I don’t care anymore. Go yourself; I’m going to lay down,” Todd said, followed by “freak” muttered under his breath. He stepped over the puddle of water and sat up against the dome. Monty wondered how many of Todd’s comments had gone unanswered in the last half-hour.
Monty walked counterclockwise towards the raccoon pictured above the word “Raccoon” (they had surfaced adjacent to the e in Pride). If Todd didn’t believe his lie anymore, at least he would keep up appearances and “check” for the phantom name; he had nothing better to do. His footfalls clanked like the beating rhythm of a heart, and he heard Poe laughing, wherever he was. In hindsight, he knew the flaws in his plan: imitation spawns garbage, for one; and he was too close to the subject matter.

The only work of art that had ever come out of his favorite piece of writing, his inspiration for this convoluted plan, was an abortive dot painting of a wall of bricks, from the top of the paper to the bottom, with white mortar filled in at each connection point. One space remained in the middle of the page, and a hand held the last brick, ready to insert it into place. The outline of a face hid behind the hand, with no features drawn in. One night, using his bathroom mirror as a reference, he painted his own eyes on this featureless face—one dot at a time. He then ripped the paper into finger-sized shreds and buried them in the wastebasket. Once again, much too close to the subject matter.

Walking towards the raccoon tail now in view, the notions of lurer and lured dimmed. Monty wondered if they could be one and the same.

Under the raccoon tail: nothing, no names; only three notches in chalk signifying three conquerors of old Bayhill tower (scores less than the number of students who claimed to have scaled it). Monty turned his attention to the “OO” in “Racoon” underneath the faded tail. Someone had drawn a set of eyes into these o’s with white chalk. The artist had drawn a pupil, an iris, and bloodshot squiggles to the edges of the o’s—all in white. Monty scrubbed the o’s with his gloved right hand in a panic. He scrubbed until all remnants of these eyes (not the observer he desired) vanished.
Walking back in Todd’s direction (why, he had no idea), Monty stared at the white chalk embedded in the glove on his right hand. He swished his fingers back and forth and followed the swaying movement

“What’s with your hand?” Todd said.

What Monty heard: “Was this your plan?”

And then it hit him.

The reintroduction of the notion of plan froze Monty in his tracks. For the second time in his life, time froze, and the silence returned. Monty saw the slick puddle of water undulating in the wind close to his feet, close enough for one step to cause an accident, a seemingly unplanned plunge. He lowered his chalk-covered gloved hand and felt how it slid unimpeded across the metal surface of the rail, like sliding the last brick into place. Despite having given up hope, Monty’s masterpiece took shape. A sound like the clinking of bells in the background caused a momentary tilt of his head—Todd’s cell phone. He ignored the racket; Monty had others to punish, destinies and plans to fulfill.

He took one step toward the puddle and closed his eyes.
Writer’s Grave

The blank page—which I’ve spent the last three hours (and the better part of the last ten years) staring down—represents both the life and the death of a writer. Infinite possibilities abound for success—and also for failure. Let the page sit blank for long enough, and that empty white immensity will start to play tricks with your psyche. There are countless different reasons to record your thoughts on a page. In the past I’ve written for fun, for money, for fame, to fulfill a contract, and for therapy, among other reasons. Now, I’m writing again simply as a last resort.

Three weeks ago my schedule was rudely interrupted. Of course, when you’re a respected writer who hasn’t written a word in three years, how major of a setback is an interruption? Or is an interruption even possible? It doesn’t surprise me that the death of a friend—no, a partner—has so affected me; the surprise is that I’m turning to writing to cope. Can this really be my best medicine if it was also the poison that polluted my life in the first place?

That interruption came as a card I received in the mail informing me of the death of James Verdan. Of course, my agent had called me three days earlier to break the news of Verdan’s heart attack, which was sudden and unexpected for such a healthy man of sixty-three years old. But it was the card that drove home the grave reality of the situation. The flowery cursive kindly informed me of the passing of James Wilkinson Verdan, sixty-three, of a heart attack at his home. Funeral services were to be held in three days, on a Saturday.

All this I expected. Beneath the printed writing, however, was a message scrawled in pen:
YOU ARE NOT WELCOME!
-GV

In my hands I held an announcement, an invitation, and a denunciation all in one. I called my agent, and he advised that I honor James’ poor widow’s wishes. He was sorry, but Gail Verdan would not change her mind.

I was not welcome.

From all accounts, and from scarce personal experience, James Verdan was a private and simple man who was perfectly happy to write great novels that the publishing company put my name on. Writing was his passion; ghostwriting was his profession. He felt no jealousy towards the admiration and acclaim I garnered for his work, no resentment at his obscure existence, and no desire to become anything more than the anonymous family man who loved to write incredible, award-winning stories and novels.

I met James only once during our eighteen-year working relationship. One of the few times the company was able to drag James away from his small town existence and into their building to sign some paper work, I happened to be there on other business as well. The minute we ran into each other in the hall, I knew it was him. James wore a saggy brown faded tank top and loose khaki pants that came up past his ankles. His thin sandals flapped against the marble floor with every step like drumsticks on a snare. He was bald as a doorknob but had a full brown beard spanning the lower half of his face. The head of the company introduced us, and we both noticed the awkward hush that fell over the handful of gathered executives. James smiled, offered his hand, and said, “Love your stories, Mr. Richey.” I detected no sarcasm, surprisingly.

I accepted his handshake and his compliment and returned his smile. “I hear yours aren’t bad either.” The executives laughed courteously to fill the silence. That was the extent of the
meeting; we both went on our way. I discovered later that the petite, sour-faced blonde woman standing next to James was his wife. She didn’t say a word to me, and James didn’t go to the trouble of introducing us.

I admired James Verdan for his literary genius; and I was grateful to him for allowing me to retain the profession (I did write one great novel, you know) and the wealth I had dreamed of since an early age. Still, I didn’t think his death would tear me up like it did. Looking back, what bothered me was not knowing whether I was more upset over the death of a good man or the death of my ghostwriter. I knew both played a factor, but I hoped my pride and my wallet would take a backseat to my sympathy. I decided to honor his wife’s wishes and not attend the funeral. Instead I would visit his grave—and his home—the next week to pay my respects. Besides, it had also been too long since I’d visited my family. This was the type of occasion to force me to pay that long delayed visit, too.

Turning my car through the open gated entrance, I immediately knew the neighborhood as well as I had the last time I lived there eight years ago. I recognized the country club on the right, with the golf course spanning acres of beautiful land. There was the fork in the road that led to my old house—and my ex-wife’s current home.

My old front yard looked like a miniature rain forest, so I wasn’t surprised when I saw my ex-wife working in her garden. She was hunched over parallel to her station wagon and my BMW as I pulled into the driveway. She peered through both windows of her car from her place in the garden, spotted me, and managed a quick wave before she went back to work. I saw her lips moving to a silent rhythm; she was probably singing a tune as she weeded.
The house was a two-story red brick gem. We had bought it and moved in shortly after
the release of my fourth novel. I moved out two years later after Susan filed for divorce.

As I got out of my car and approached her, Susan waved again and then used the same
hand to stall me. Looking away, she mumbled, “Hey…hold on one sec, OK?”

“Alright—,” I began before she cut me off.

“Hi, Jonathan.”

“Hey Suze. How are you?”

“Fine.” She dropped her gardening tool and wiped her hands on her black stretch pants.

“Special occasion?” In her tone I felt the familiar indifference that had kept me from visiting for
two years. I only live two hours away, and I knew our daughter Tina had been dying to see me,
but I somehow managed to tell myself I would visit next week for 104 weeks in a row. And so
the end of one man’s life jumpstarts another’s.

“I wanted to see you guys.” I smoothed out my black silk shirt and managed a faltering
smile. “And James died,” I said, trying to sound melancholy.

“James?” All of a sudden Susan turned her head away again in annoyance. She
whispered audibly, “Not you. Is your name James?” She cocked her head to the side, giving her
the appearance of listening to the house. “No, it’s Jonathan. Seriously…can I talk to my ex-
husband?” I stood with my arms at my side as my ex-wife seemingly carried on a conversation
with herself. She burst into seductive giggles. “Stop it,” she cooed. At forty-five, Susan was
still shapely, blond, and vibrant. Talking to that mystery person in her head, she retained her
past beauty; but when she addressed me, she became an aging phantom of herself.

“I can go-,”
“No, no, sorry.” She paused, furrowing her brow. “James,” she said, deep in thought. She shushed the invisible person at her side. I made a writing motion with my thumb and forefinger. “The writer? James. Oh. Oh! My gosh.” She covered her mouth in her first show of genuine emotion towards me. I heard a deep voice coming from the side of her head. Susan covered the earpiece I had not seen over her left ear and the voice trailed off.

“What are you going to do?” she asked. This question took me back to eight years ago. When I had asked her who she was leaving me for—all the while keeping my emotions in check—she had said for herself and for her daughter. Because, coincidentally, we happened to live only an hour from James Verdan, a jealous, irrational part of me could not help from thinking that she was leaving me for James. The talented one. For the record, she told me I hadn’t been a good husband and father for years, that I just didn’t care about anything anymore. I was lazy and aimless; it had nothing to do with my fraudulent profession. My professional free ride turned me into a sloth in all walks of life. If she had asked what I was going to do eight years ago, I still wouldn’t have an answer for her now.

“It’s…hard to think of myself at a time like this,” I finally replied, oozing gravity.

Susan burst into laughter again. Whoever she was talking to on the phone (I now noticed a small microphone clipped to her shirt), he was quite the charmer. “Ron, stop.” The laughter trailed off and her attention returned my way. “Yeah. I know. So…what are you going to do, though?”

“I’m going to drive to his house to pay respects and then come back here to visit Tina. Beyond that, I have no clue,” I said. After a couple more minutes of vying for attention with Irresistible Ron, I informed her I was leaving. She nodded and I shuffled to my car.

At this point I feel obligated to mount some sort of defense for myself. You see, my reputation was not always unearned. In my twenties, when life was a smorgasbord of possibilities, when energy and inspiration were infinite resources, when the threat of poverty drove me to action, I was a writer in the truest sense of the term. Words flew onto the page through my mid-twenties and even after my marriage to Susan at twenty-eight. My first (and only self-written) novel, *Straddling the Fence*, even sold enough to secure me a book deal. From the blurbs the publishing company put on that first book, you’d think I was the second coming of Faulkner. Suddenly I was thirty-two years old, financially set, husband of a perfect wife and father of a beautiful little girl. I had found utopia, but a utopia that only lasted until my next deadline approached. What the hell did I have to write about now that I was happy and wealthy?

The answer was nothing. I stared at the blank page for hours, days, weeks. The cursor blinked and blinked like a clock waiting to be set, but it would not yield any words. The blank screen became the physical embodiment of my hollow, vacant mind. I missed deadlines, lost sleep, and let self-doubt take over. Writer’s block is one thing, but if you stare at that empty page for too long, you enter into a writer’s grave. Try digging out of a three year unproductive hole with your agent, your publishing company, and your anxious family breathing down your neck. Suddenly I was in danger of losing my wealth and happiness, but it was too late; my grave was already too deep.
In a way, James and I were a perfect match. From what I’ve been told, he deplored the fame that I cherished, was content with a simple life while I loved the collective stare of the public eye, had no marketing appeal while I was young and attractive with an established name, and could write better in his sleep than I could at my most inspired. From what I’ve been told, James Verdan wanted no part of any type of public life whatsoever. I can’t fathom why. When my agent pitched the idea to me—James would write my novels, I would keep my book deal (with a portion going to James, of course), the publishing company would get to promote my name and face, and we would all carry on as if nothing changed—I had to accept. I was creative dead weight; and the second I read James’ writing, I knew the guy was incredible, almost superhuman. Who could have turned it down? Not me; especially with the unspoken threat that my book deal—and my new-found wealth and comfort—was history if I did not assent. Plus, I figured the arrangement was beneficial for all parties. Of course, if I had known then the pain the deal would cause to the people around us, maybe I would have thought twice. From what I’ve been told, James Verdan was happy in our arrangement. That may have been true—probably was—but now I know that his happiness—and mine as well—were not all that the arrangement hinged upon.

“That your car?”

A random question was the last thing I expected to hear from Gail Verdan as she stepped into view. I stood on her front porch a good three feet from the screen door that separated us. The faded sepia threaded welcome mat was torn through the middle; I didn’t feel comfortable standing on such an omen.

“What?” I said. I didn’t understand her purpose.
Gail raised her voice to an excessive volume behind the screen. “Did you come in your car?” She stood with one hand propped on the frame of the screen door. I stared into her gray eyes and truly saw the gaze of one who considered me an enemy for the first time.

“I heard you,” I said. “Yeah, it’s mine.” She didn’t wait a second to respond, still unnecessarily loud.

“Did you buy it?”

I saw where this was headed. I never expected a cordial greeting, yet I still hadn’t decided how I would respond to her animosity. She would try to burrow under my skin; I knew from the day I met James that she was her husband’s biggest fan and, consequently, my worst enemy. Still, what degree of degradation does mourning forgive? I could take her punishment, become subservient to this domineering, bitter little old woman, but what would come of it? Would she make me her guilty slave, obsequious to her every need, just because her husband had died unknown? I deserved plenty of retribution for my fraudulence, but taking it from this hateful woman felt like overkill. Instead of answering, I nodded curtly.

“Did you buy that fancy house you live in?” she asked. Again, a quick nod, waiting for the moral to take its course. Gail resumed, “Mr. Richey, when you think about it, do you truly own anything?”

“Do you?” I answered. Gail reeled backwards at my response and grabbed the protruding handle of the screen door to steady herself. Part of me rejoiced, while the other recoiled at my insensitivity. I had put down this grieving woman by accusing her of my own crime: living off of James Verdan. I felt simultaneous triumph and agony, although I’m not sure which predominated. A long silence ensued. Gail looked away and ran her hand absently through the right side of her gray-streaked sandy blonde hair. I remembered she was only in her
fifties, but she looked twenty years older with the wrinkles folding her face like origami and her uneven slouch. She bit her lip and met my eyes.

“I wouldn’t expect you of all people to understand human relations, especially loving relationships,” she said.

“I came to pay respects,” I said. Gail stared me down. Her face was a model of stoicism, but I sensed her inner turmoil. Her eyes pulsed with uncertainty.

“Some way of showing it.” She turned the handle of the screen door and gently pushed it open. She walked away without holding the door and it whooshed shut. I knew I had been grudgingly invited in, but I stood in front of the welcome mat for some time. The inside of the modest house shimmered through the transparent screen like a mirage. I imagined entering would feel like stepping through a portal into a parallel dimension of my life, or like gaining entrance into a fantasy of the man I wished I was. I traipsed over the mat and through the dream cloud.

I noticed the awards first. All around the living room, which was an amalgamation of dark and light greens, the brown wooden plaques served as a border, a sort of sweat-and-blood wallpaper. They were ordered from left to right—like words on a written page—from one surrounding wall over the television in the middle of the room to the adjacent surrounding wall, in order of ascending importance. Here was my 1985 Young Writer’s Award on the left side. Next to it was my Notable Book Honor for Kaleidoscope in 1987. They all identified James Verdan as the author instead of Jonathan Richey, of course. I wondered if these were authentic—sent to the Verdans by the publishing company as tokens of appreciation—or if Gail had created them for James’ (or her own) benefit. I followed the train of James’
accomplishments until I reached the outermost plaque on the right, which almost touched the front door frame. “Pulitzer Prize, 2005,” it read.

I have to admit, my first thought upon seeing the mock award was, ‘Holy shit, I won the Pulitzer Prize!’ When rationality prevailed, I realized Gail had created it for James. She worshipped her husband more than I had imagined. The title of the book that won the award was Truth—which was non-existent, of course. I felt the presence of another and turned around to see Gail staring at me inquisitively. Her mouth turned into an expectant frown as she waited for a response.

“I-. W- Uh, He never won a Pulitzer Prize.”

“No. I suppose James never won any awards, now, did he?” Gail cocked her head and waited. She had an assassin’s eyes. I felt equally sorry for her and scared of her. I knew it was a brave face she was putting on, but my knowledge did not dampen its effectiveness.

“I’m sorry about your husband.” It was my first conciliatory remark of the day, but she gave it no credence. During the silence I heard an antique air conditioner kick in with a laboring roar. I knew they received more than enough in royalties to update the place. I had heard stories of James’ antiquity, but I never believed it spanned this far. Did James really have no interest in upgrading his lifestyle, in using the money he earned to reward his hard work? Gail motioned for me to follow and headed down the house’s one narrow hallway. She stopped at the second door on the right, smoothed out her apron, and turned the doorknob. One glance told me that this was James’ workplace.

“This is where he lived,” Gail said as I entered the room behind her. I saw a colorless typewriter on a child-sized wooden desk at the left of the room. Papers were stacked high and scattered with no rhyme or reason on each side of the typewriter and on the floor underneath the
desk. Crumpled paper overflowed the tin trashcan. Somehow I knew James never let Gail touch this small sanctuary. He liked things ugly, cluttered, genuine. “He refused to throw away that darn typewriter,” Gail continued. “I had to type his novels myself on the computer before sending them off.” This was a lie. A typewritten manuscript was fine to submit, but I guess we all have our methods of contribution. I could not find the computer she spoke of. I didn’t realize it then, but now I know that James would never have let her set up shop in his office. When she said, “This is where he lived,” she meant it.

“He had his heart attack there,” she said, pointing at his smallish desk. I looked at the uneven-legged chair at the workstation and shuddered. “Worked until his last breath.”

I walked closer to the quaint desk and saw a piece of paper still in the typewriter. *Truth,* it was titled. The Pulitzer winner. He had completed one sentence, which I read several times in my head in succession, letting the words reverberate in my mind. “Too many times, in the overcomplicated, unpredictable plight of human existence, truth and suffering go hand in hand, like a brilliant flash of lightning in the sky and the enduring boom of thunder that follows shortly after.” Catching myself in a trance, I shook off my daze with a wobble of the head and turned to see Gail holding a voluminous stapled packet of paper.

She absently flipped the pages as I returned my attention to her. I glimpsed the title page and saw that this was a copy of the manuscript of *Slow Drain,* my fourth novel. She examined the pages with reverence, as if, in the split second each one came into view, she took in some life-altering nugget of wisdom. “He never wanted anyone to know,” she said. “Hated recognition, acclaim.”

“He was brilliant,” she said in a raspy half-whisper. She dropped his manuscript, which landed face down on the scratched wood floor. “James Verdan. Is brilliant.” Gail picked up the manuscript and placed it back on her desk. *Slow Drain* was one of my favorites. I wondered if the beautiful, tragic woman in the story was based on the sad creature I saw now. “The world deserved to know him like I did,” she continued. “But he always made me swear…”

A sound interrupted the silence of her tapering voice; and at first I thought I had heard the dying click of the ancient air conditioner. Instead, when the sound repeated, I realized it was a light rapping on the screen door.

As Gail left the room to answer the door, she jerked her gaze sideways at me. He eyes narrowed and she shot a sharp scowl my way. “Don’t. Touch. Anything,” she said, each word slow, deliberate, and deserving of its own cruel emphasis. I tapped a tune on James’ desk and waited. I was drawn intermittently to the first sentence of *Truth*. I heard mild consolations and subdued appreciation uttered from the front of the house and decided to make my exit.

As I strolled into the living room, a young man in black looked at me inquisitively and offered his hand. “Gabe Brand, Mrs. Verdan’s pastor.” I shook his hand and said hello. An awkward silence followed.

Gail broke the silence with a soft voice. “Oh…Gabe, this is, i-it’s just, this is John. A…f-friend of James and I.” Her face contorted and she turned her back. She was able to choke out, “He was just leaving. Excuse me,” before bursting into tears and running back to the study.

Nothing in the world can equal the despair and sadness evoked in an old woman’s sobs. They sound like such an expenditure of effort for such a fragile elderly being; when you think about it, not much different than an antique air conditioner’s dying groan. I imagined her explaining the awards in the living room to visitors and trying to remain composed. “Jonathan
Richey is my James’ favorite author.” Unable to cope any longer, I nodded at the pastor and exited through the screen door and back into my own life. The pastor looked at me as if to say “how rude,” but he didn’t realize that the greatest consolation I could give the Verdan widow was to leave her alone from now to eternity.

After the arrangement with James, I became a fraud—I can concede that much—but my work never stopped. I turned into a researcher, a voracious reader. Reading was what I loved to do in the first place, so my new job was nothing more than returning to the womb. Of course the fact that I had to read and understand my own stories struck me as odd, but sometimes you have to play with the hand you’re dealt. I played the hand, and no matter how it made me feel, I trudged on. I always thought I was being strong, making the best of my predicament; I never even considered the opposite.

I’m sure you’re wondering if this whole thing takes a toll on you. This lying. Living as a fake. The only way you would know is to go through what I have. You could only find out by attending book signings and putting your signature on a piece of work you had no part in creating. You couldn’t understand unless you heard the adulation of your fans, those colossal suckers who attributed genius to your name. Try answering their eager questions, or attending press conferences to accept your latest reward. Try lying to the people who admire you most every day for the next eighteen years. Then, maybe you’ll be able to identify with me. Until then, just use your imagination and empathize and/or despise as best you can.

But at least I could take solace in my loving family. Right?
It’s not like I lied to them. My wife knew from the beginning. But Tina, my adoring
daughter, she was born into the lie. Try explaining this situation to your little girl and then
telling her to finish her homework the next day.

So the lie seeped into my every day life, and I did the only thing I could do: I withdrew.
I retreated to my study for whole nights at a time—never doing actual work, mind you—just
reading my own stories, watching sitcoms, playing computer games, or drinking myself into a
stupor. I stayed on tour for months in a row, even went overseas a couple times. Even lying to
millions of strangers became less painful than deceiving my only child.

Susan was right in divorcing me, but there was nothing I could change. It was all too
late; I couldn’t fess up to my daughter, and therefore I couldn’t face her. That’s how an absentee
writer becomes an absentee father. An absentee human. None of this was in the contract I
signed. I guess this is what I get for never reading between the lines.

Harper Lee was rumored to have a ghostwriter because she never wrote a follow-up to *To
Kill a Mockingbird*. What her doubters don’t understand is that a true authentic doesn’t *need* a
follow-up. A true authentic lives with the ebbs and flows of creative genius, for better or worse.
I wrote only one novel, too, but, because of my supposedly large body of work, have never heard
a peep of suspicion. Funny how that works.

I’d give back all the acclaim, all the awards, all the money, for the chance to be Harper
Lee, scrutiny or not. And for the chance to have a family.

James Verdan’s final words, about the brotherhood of truth and suffering, volleyed
around in my head as I drove into the parking lot of my daughter’s high school that afternoon.
During our farewell mutterings, Susan had said that Tina’s car was in the shop and that I could
pick her up from school. As I pulled up to a curb and waited, I hoped I wasn’t picking up a younger, more uncaring version of my ex-wife. In other words, I hoped I wasn’t getting what I deserved.

With teenagers, you have to soak up the subtleties of their affection; because they will give you nothing more. What they gain in experience and intelligence, they lose in honesty and enthusiasm. I wasn’t expecting my seventeen year-old daughter to dash to my car, backpack flapping in the wind, rip open my front door and plaster me with hugs and kisses. As Tina Richey exited the school and noticed me waving, I rejoiced after catching her brief half-smile before she resumed her cool veneer. That flash of suppressed emotion was a bliss all its own. It was certainly more than I expected—and deserved. However, after a few minutes, I realized I must have imagined any type of positive reaction from her.

She stepped into the vehicle without saying a word. I leaned over and kissed her cheek. She looked like her mother. I started the car and headed for her home.

I wasn’t even brave enough to break the silence. Suddenly, not only could I not tell her the truth, I felt like I couldn’t say a word to her without lying. Even “hello” was a lie. Tina stared straight ahead, lips pursed in irritation. When you’re a washed up, mid-forties loser, two years is like a quick, forgettable dream. When you’re a teenager, I realized, two years without your dad is a lifetime. Did I know her at all anymore?

“Did you read the stories I sent you?” she said, finally addressing me after five minutes of silence. It wasn’t the question I wanted to hear.

“Of course,” I said. She stopped writing me over a year ago. I kept writing her letters, imploring her for a response, but all I got from here were fat nine by twelve business envelopes with stories enclosed. Sure, I had looked at them, but I didn’t remember a word. I hadn’t truly
read a page of the stories my ambitious daughter had sent me. I had a hard enough time digesting my own work.

“Which one did you like best?” she continued. Looking at her face, I wasn’t sure if she was baiting me or actually interested. I paused, feigning thought, mapping out my next untruth. Just like old times.

“Well…”

“What about ‘The Narrowing Tunnel’?” she asked.

“Great stuff. Reminded me of Kaleidoscope,” I said. “So, what’s new in school?”

“How so?”

“Grades, sports, boys…”

“No. How did it remind you of Kaleidoscope?” She had me cornered. She raised her eyebrows and waited for a response. I turned right on to a narrow two lane road which led to the entrance to my old neighborhood.

“Oh…you know. The mood, the tone. I get the same sort of feel, you know. I have a list of written critiques that I’ll send to you when I get back home.”

“What about Darren?”

“Darren.”

“Yeah. The main character.”

“Well-drawn, believable-,”

“Did it never occur to you that he was based on you?”

I didn’t respond. I had walked into her trap.
“It never registered with you that all the shitty things he did to his daughter, you’ve done to me tenfold. You never made the connection that that pig was my indictment of you, my plea to you to change.” She paused and narrowed her eyes. “Or maybe you didn’t read it at all.”

She rolled down her window and watched the world fly past her. I knew our communication was at an end. I felt the apathy setting in, the kind Susan had driven me away with. When she looked back my way, for an instant I saw Susan staring at me. Tina opened her mouth, pointed to my left, and screamed at me.

I felt a thump near the left front tire of my BMW and disregarded a brown blur twirling in the air behind us. “Sorry,” I said to Tina. “Stupid curb,” I muttered.

“It wasn’t a curb.”

I sighed and looked in my side mirror. A brown sack lay on the median, probably dropped into my path by some moving truck. Remembering the sound of the thump, I hoped it didn’t dent my car. Out of the corner of my eye, the sack stirred, raised its leg, yelped.

“It was a dog,” Tina said. I smacked my forehead with the palm of my hand and hit my dashboard. “Aren’t you going to turn around?” I put on my left turn signal. The road was narrow. Traffic flew by in the opposite direction. I waited for over a minute, gave Tina a frustrated shrug, and started moving forward again. “Dad, turn around!” she yelled.

“Tina-,”

“Now!”

I attempted a u-turn at the slightest opening in traffic, but the road was too narrow to complete the turn without going over the curb. As I stopped and reversed, the cars looming behind me honked their horns. Flustered, sweating, and frantic, I floored my car after reversing,
reached the writhing dog, and drove onto the median. Tina dashed out and cradled the wounded animal’s head.

“Oh my gosh. It’ll be ok,” she said in a soothing tone. The dog’s back end was mangled. His rear left leg hung limp at a grotesque angle. It foamed at the mouth and cried, a constant piercing scream. “We need to get him somewhere,” she told me. “He might be ok. I think he only has a couple broken bones.”

On the way to the animal hospital, the dog quieted with the help of Tina’s comforting. In between cooing to the injured animal, she found time to talk to me.

“If you were alone, this dog would have died on the median.”

“That’s not true; I would have turned around, but you saw how narrow the road was. And I risked getting us hurt by pulling out into traffic like that.”

“Yeah, yeah.” I turned and saw her stroking the dog’s head, whispering in its ear. The dog’s planetary brown eyes looked at me—through me—as it received its tender medicine.

“You have to understand,” I said. “It would have been almost impossible to turn around right away. Sometimes, when you make a mistake like that, it’s not easy to just flip a switch and make it right. This time I had to wait for the traffic to pass, make sure I didn’t do any more damage. But you know I would have done the right thing eventually.”

“Whatever. Just get us to the hospital quick.” She patted the dog’s head. It looked at her like she was a savior. For him, that was the truth.

Personally, all I could think of was the mantra that kept replaying in my head. There was no way to avoid this indictment like I had the one in her story.

I would have kept going.

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“Too many times, in the overcomplicated, unpredictable plight of human existence, truth and suffering go hand in hand, like a brilliant flash of lightning in the sky and the enduring boom of thunder that follows shortly after.”

I went home with the disgusting truth about myself swirling and polluting the air around me. I never found out what happened to that poor dog I ran over. As soon as Susan arrived at the hospital, I hugged my stone-faced daughter and departed in a rush.

*I would have kept going.* James Verdan was right. I know the truth about myself, and now I sit here suffering. The reason living a lie was so much more palatable is because lies stay on the surface. But truth finds your every weakness and displays it to the world, and more importantly, to yourself.

I came home and began to write what you’re reading now two days later. I originally titled it *Truth.* It was to be my final tribute to the genius of the late James Verdan. Maybe I would win him that Pulitzer Prize his wife had imagined for him. Maybe I would rediscover my own talents. What could have been a more fitting eulogy for James than his final masterpiece seen to fruition by his public face?

I never got past that first sentence—the one he provided for me. I shouldn’t have even tried; my writers’ grave was already dug, occupied, and filled in. After waiting so long, I could never escape my self-made burial. How will anyone even know for sure that I wrote this?

What did James mean to tell me with those last words? Was he stating the theme of his novel in a nutshell in the first sentence? No, not even I would write with such clumsy forthrightness. Was he trying to solve my problems for me with his last words, or was it just a sick joke? Or an eerie coincidence? Whatever the reason, those words resonated with me like
none I had ever read before. Now that I know the truth about myself, continuing to live a lie is impossible.

_I would have kept going._

If not for the events of two days ago, I would be lounging in my living room, having a beer, watching a sitcom, and planning the latest weekend party at my place. Yes, I would have kept right on with my meaningless, languid existence. But an old man died and woke me up. Then my daughter showed me the monster I really am. They helped make the sad truth perfectly clear, but why change now when I couldn’t figure all of this out for myself? Can’t I even author my own epiphanies without the help of another?

My only consolation right now is that the page in front of me isn’t blank anymore. At least I have that small victory. I know the truth, and now you do as well. Better to suffer for the truth of my past than the lies that I’ve clung to all this time. After ten years, the enduring boom of thunder has finally bestowed authenticity on that original brilliant flash of lightning.

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A week after writing the above confession—a week that I spent in an apathetic, suicidal stupor—I received a letter in the mail that interrupted my self loathing. Another letter, another interruption.

It was from a woman who I didn’t think I knew at the time. Of course, now I know that we were always intimately acquainted. She had always wanted to meet me, but did not think it was appropriate until now. Her name was Tiffany Stuart; and she was a close friend of James Verdan. She was the only person besides myself, Gail, my ex-wife, and the publishers who knew the fake that I really was. Not caring either way, I agreed to meet.
The first time I met her, Tiffany let me into her house and told me about James. She had been James’ best friend, his sounding board. He had bounced his ideas off of her, shared his problems with her, and revealed his deepest feelings to her, but never beyond the bounds of friendship; she pointed this out to me several times. James would never have cheated on his wife. But Gail didn’t understand him sometimes; she wanted the world to know James when all he wanted was for her to truly know him—nobody else. She wanted the luxuries that went with fame when all James wanted was his loving wife without all the expensive junk cluttering his life up. When the couple argued, when their differences became too much to bear, James confided in Tiffany. He showed his true self to her.

She contacted me because she wanted to see the other side. She wanted to understand the other half of James, believe it or not. What she expected to learn from the polar opposite of such a wonderful man, I have no idea, but I can’t complain. It was me who needed her wisdom—James’ wisdom—and she happily obliged.

So Tiffany told me about James. Still is telling me. Every day, every time I learn something new about him, I come closer to discovering the real truth. There are some mistakes you can’t reverse just by learning from them; sometimes you have to learn another way before you’re able to turn things around.

The first day I met Tiffany, learning from her and listening to her felt natural. This was because she had already taught me so much. She was the basis of my fourth novel Slow Drain. She, not Gail, was the woman I read about eight years ago and wept over. She was the woman James Verdan made me fall in love with before I had ever met her.

Finding love is not what our relationship is about, though. If James could be platonic with such an incredible woman, I feel obligated to do the same, no matter what I feel stirring
inside me when I’m with her. Our relationship is about discovering the right way. It’s about finding where the truth really lies. James Verdan had the answers; and the more I learn from his apostle, the closer I come to fixing the mess I’ve made for myself.

I have such a long way to go. Every Tuesday and Thursday, after I get home from our bi-weekly lunches, I return home and try to write. I haven’t written anything worth a damn, but that’s ok, because I know that I’m burrowing my way out now, not digging myself under. I know there’s a world above my writer’s grave, a world I’ve neglected for the better part of two decades. When I return to that world, whether it’s tomorrow or two years from now, I’ll be prepared for whatever lies ahead, including facing my daughter with the truth I have kept from her since the day she was born. I’m not ready yet, but I cannot wait until the day that I introduce Tina Richey to her father for the first time.

Day by day, James Verdan is showing me the truth. My lessons are far from over; a man with his wisdom has much to teach. Although I see no rainbow materializing yet, the boom of thunder has subsided. The storm is over, and all I can do is keep digging my way out, keep reaching for the surface, until one day I break out and find a calm, sunny day waiting for me on the other side.