

Pieces: A Collection of Short Stories and an Essay on
Humor as a Source of Engagement in Fiction

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Dedication

To Emerson Reed Guidry, I can't wait to meet you and wipe the poop off your butt.

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Critical Introduction

Why Humor, of All Things?

When I look back at my life, it is humor that I recall. It has always been that way. I am attracted to what is funny. I gravitate towards those books, films, and people that can make me laugh, especially when laughter isn't the obvious disposition of the room. I say humor, and not comedy, because I recognize a difference between the two—or maybe I only want the difference to exist because I find it useful for the purpose of this essay.

The distinction I will make in this essay is between comedy, the genre, and humor, the literary element. Comedy, the genre, is concerned with getting laughs. A successful comedy is one that will amuse the audience, and it is not necessary that it do anything else in order to be successful. There are variations to the comedic genre, but whether distinguishing between the varieties of comedic mediums, or the great variation that can be found in comedic styles, comedy can have an almost singular purpose. It is supposed to be funny. There are great talents within the genre of comedy. Steve Martin—who was forced on me by parents, a couple who always seemed at least 5 years behind the times—is a comedian. He deals in funny, and he is hysterical. I can remember bringing *Cruel Shoes* to my seventh-grade friends and trying to convince them that a book, and a guy older than their parents, could be funny. I failed to do any convincing, but I knew I was right.

Still, there was something about Steve Martin and his comedic peers that didn't quite do it for me in any way that lasted. I laughed while reading *Cruel Shoes* but forgot the jokes as soon as I put it down. Comedy, the genre, whether I was consuming it as a book (a medium that I generally avoided regardless of genre), film, television, or radio, simply wasn't my cup of tea. I wanted action—the first film I have a memory of watching is

Terminator 2. I wanted drama—I drove my parents to the point of insanity with a VHS copy of *Schindler's List*. I enjoyed *Dumb and Dumber*, but I only needed to see it once. With comedy, although I had no desire or ability to express it at the time, there was always something missing.

I appreciated a good joke, but placing it within comedy struck me as almost cheating. Of course someone can be funny when that's all they're trying to do. It seems easier to get your audience to laugh when they are expecting to. What impressed me, even before I was aware of it, was humor. By humor I mean a joke, or that oddly funny moment, that works but is surrounded by the decidedly unfunny. Humor, then, is a creative element that exists separate from any particular genre.

The jokes I am attracted to are the ones that happen in unexpected places. The comedic voice I tried to emulate as a child wasn't Steve Martin's, it was my grandfather's. My grandfather had the ability to make my grandmother laugh when she meant to be furious. He was unafraid to tell a joke about a touchy subject. At a funeral, he would be the one that reminded people it was okay to be happy, and he would do it with a comment and a smirk. My mother would call what my grandfather had "wit," and when she told me I possessed the same, it sent me over the moon.

By the time I was done stumbling my way through my undergrad studies, and realizing for the first time that I had some ability to write, the voice that I found as a writer couldn't help but contain the humor that I spent my life trying to emulate. If I sat down to write a funny story, I was setting myself up for failure. A premise that was funny from the start seemed impossible, and "jokes" never came to me. It took me years to learn that I could write something that was deadly-serious, but that might also contain moments of lightness—

perhaps that could even elicit a laugh. It took me years to be comfortable writing that kind of humor.

This realization about my own writing also led me to seek out writers who were doing the same. British comedy is often ascribed with that wit, so that is largely where my journey began. A work like Jonathan Swift's "A Modest Proposal" fascinated me. I was amazed that Swift could be scathing and hilarious at once. British writers like Stephen Fry and Douglas Adams had found ways to deal with existential questions, questions of faith, questions of morality, and many other topics to which entire tomes have been committed, and they did so in a way that was interesting to me. They did so with the use of humor.

It wasn't long before I was looking for American writers whose voices I could attempt to emulate in my own writing. My first discoveries became two of my favorites: Raymond Carver and Flannery O'Connor. Later on, I found George Saunders and Denis Johnson, who excited me with their humor as well.

I am now confident that I can point to what I like about these writers and the use of humor in fiction. As my own ability to implement humor in the stories I write has improved (I think), I have realized that I spent years admiring and working to emulate that humor without ever attempting to analyze and understand how humor is being used as a specific element within the works of these four writers, as well as my own work.

The purpose of this essay, and the collection of short stories that follows, is to examine the use of humor as an element of fiction, especially in regards to how it can be used when a work of fiction has departed from the norm in regards to some other element that would generally be used as a metric for the successful execution of that story. The essay will examine the use of character in the works of Flannery O'Connor, the structural workings and

point of view in Denis Johnson's "Emergency," the function of story and the absurd in George Saunders's "The 400-Pound CEO," and style in some of Raymond Carver's works in order to better understand the effective use of humor by those writers.

Use of Character in Flannery O'Connor's "Revelation" and "A Good Man is Hard to Find"

In order for a short story to work, it is necessary that the character be believable in the context of the story. It is also useful, though not always necessary, that the character is someone that the reader can empathize with, if not like. Of course, a strong like would be best in terms of reader investment, but at least make them feel emotionally familiar to the reader.

These are rules that most beginning writers are taught, and like most rules they can be broken. Breaking them, however, can create problems that must be addressed. The most obvious problem with denying the audience a central character with whom they can relate, is that the reader will be lacking personal investment in the outcome of that character, and the catharsis that readers look for probably won't be achieved through a positive outcome for that character. Problems like these must be addressed if the story is to work, in an objective sense.

Flannery O'Connor's fiction is full of these types of unlikable characters. Mrs. Turpin, for instance, the central character of "Revelation," is sure that the waiting room in which she finds herself is "inadequate and ridiculous" as "Her little bright black eyes took in all the patients as she sized up the [...] situation." Mrs. Turpin is immediately made ridiculous by O'Connor. In the first paragraph the reader wishes to step away from the woman who is

only concerned with judging those around her and placing people into their “proper categories.”

This type of character, who is unlikable from the start, is seldom the central character of fiction. O’Connor said, in response to questions about her writing the grotesque, that her characters have an “inner coherence, if not always a coherence with their social framework” (“Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction” 40). She argued that by writing about these characters, she was writing actual realism.

There is no doubt that people like Mrs. Turpin exist, but the creation of “Revelation” is almost perfect in the way it forces the reader into this situation with her, and this choice of character is not all about realism; it is also about execution. The waiting room is described as being too small, so there’s no space to back away from Mrs. Turpin’s judgement. And we all know the torment of being stuck in a waiting room that we want desperately to escape from. The reader’s reaction in life would likely be to avoid Mrs. Turpin at all cost, but there’s nowhere to go in the pages of the story.

Instead, O’Connor has crafted a story that creates a perfect opportunity for the reader to experience what D.H. Monro, author of *Argument of Laughter*, called Superiority Theory. In that work, Monro breaks humor down into three basic categories: superiority, incongruity, and relief. His Superiority Theory fits the humorous aspects of “Revelation” very well. The reader has been afforded the opportunity to laugh at Mrs. Turpin and all of her flaws; the reader gets to bask in their own superiority. This comparison, according to Monro, creates a sense of enjoyment in being superior. Thomas Hobbes, in his *Of Man, Being the First Part of Leviathan*, calls it “sudden glory.” Laughter that is caused “by the apprehension of some deformed thing in another by comparison whereof they suddenly applaud themselves” (par.

41). It seems that by denying the reader a character that can be liked in any obvious way, O'Connor is providing the opportunity for humor in one of its most basic forms.

This Superiority Theory, this “sudden glory,” points directly to a common aspect of O'Connor's works, as well as many other works of American fiction—the bully. Regina Barreca, professor of English and Feminist Theory at the University of Connecticut and editor of the *Signet Book of American Humor*, says that bullies “cut through American humor...” and are attack by comedy (xxiv). This inclination of American humor to create the bully as a sort of effigy to be broken down can be seen to full effect in “Revelation” when Mary Grace throws a copy of *Human Development*, striking Mrs. Turpin in the head. Mary Grace's action is the perfect and hilarious answer to Mrs. Turpin. She gets what she deserved, at least for a moment. That reckoning, played out in a humorous way, is a central element of American Literature; the bully got what was coming to her, and the reader was allowed to be in on the joke. The reader was allowed the opportunity to bask in their own superiority to the character, as well as the character receiving their just deserts.

Another of O'Connor's works, “A Good Man is Hard to Find,” features the grandmother, who from the beginning seems incapable of compromise or uttering a nice word. Similarly to Mrs. Turpin, the grandmother makes a habit of judging the people she encounters, but she is even less adept at keeping her thoughts to herself, and just like Mrs. Turpin, the grandmother seems to be oblivious to her own shortcomings. She even goes so far as to say, “People are certainly not nice like they used to be,” in between judgmental statements. Again, much of the pleasure of reading the story is to be found in the humor, the delight the reader can experience as a result of their own superiority over this flawed character.

The end of both of these stories also provides opportunity for humor. Mrs. Turpin and the grandmother both experience an epiphany as an apparent result of the events they have undergone in the stories, but even the physical placement of Mrs. Turpin's revelation (next to the pig parlor) can be read as humorous. There is an obvious juxtaposition between the seeming seriousness of the character's religious awakening and the mud floor and stink of a pig-pen. The grandmother's epiphany is likewise undercut:

The grandmother found that she had lost her voice. There was not a cloud in the sky nor any sun. There was nothing around her but woods. She wanted to tell him that he must pray. She opened and closed her mouth several times before anything came out. Finally she found herself saying, "Jesus. Jesus," meaning, Jesus will help you, but the way she was saying it, it sounded as if she might be cursing. (O'Connor 151)

The grandmother's attitude and behavior shift suddenly in these lines. This woman, who was so recently judgmental and willing to lie simply to prove her point, is unable to find any word except "Jesus." Following her execution, The Misfit reminds the reader of who the grandmother had been when he says, "She would of been a good woman, if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life" (152). The reader, in that moment, is reminded of their own superiority to the grandmother, even as she lie dead, and the reader is given one last opportunity to laugh, even amidst the aftermath of such a vicious encounter. In "Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction," O'Connor said, "there is something in us as story-tellers, and as listeners to stories, that demands the redemptive act, that demands that what falls at least be offered the chance of restoration" (48). I wonder that these moments of restoration are so often undercut by some element in O'Connor's works. The

reader is given the opportunity to accept the revelation or not, and as a result can continue their position of humorous superiority even after the last line.

O'Connor has even gone so far as to describe her work as humorous; "Mine is a comic art, but that does not detract from its seriousness" (*Conversations with Flannery O'Connor* 54). This statement indicates clear intent in the implementation of humor within her works. O'Connor understands the usefulness and presence of humor in her works, and is unabashed about its existence. According to O'Connor's own understanding of writing and her writing process, humor must simply be a part of the reality she is trying to create. The goal isn't to be funny, it is to be honest. It happens to be the case that O'Connor's version of reality is one full of grotesque and deplorable, and as a result funny, characters.

Style in Raymond Carver's "Fat" and "Neighbors"

In the same way that writers are taught to use relatable characters in order to engage the audience, they are also taught to use the various aspects of style for the same purpose. Style refers to the way that something is written and can include elements like diction, tone, and voice. One common element in young adult literature, for instance, is the use of stylistic choices that engage the reader quickly. The Harry Potter series, which has sold hundreds-of-millions of copies, opens:

Mr. and Mrs. Dursley, of number four, Privet Drive, were proud to say that they were perfectly normal, thank you very much. They were the last people you'd expect to be involved in anything strange or mysterious, because they just didn't hold with such nonsense. (Rowling 1)

Many readers were pulled into this fiction without realizing exactly why, but a simple examination can point to many aspects of these lines that may engage a reader. The first and

most obvious of these aspects is the promise of the “strange and mysterious” that the Dursleys do their best to avoid. Similarly, stylistic choices like beginning a short story in media res, which helps to engage the reader quickly and then keep them engaged; the use of clear imagery to interest the readers imagination; and selecting vivid verbs to place the reader in the action are all useful strategies for engaging the reader.

The purposeful abandonment of these types of practices, as is the case in many of the works of Raymond Carver, must be offset by some other element if the reader is to continue being engaged in the story. In “Fat,” for instance, Carver opens with:

I am sitting over coffee and cigarets at my friend Rita’s and I am telling her about it.

Here is what I tell her.

It is a slow Wednesday when Herb seats the fat man at my station. (Carver 3)

These lines don’t seem to take advantage of any of the methods I have mentioned. There is no clear imagery. The verbs “sitting” and “telling” create no action for the reader, and makes clear that we are so far from media res that actually occurred some days ago. These stylistic choices don’t change as the story progresses. The story continues, and the narrator serves the fat patron his dinner and dessert. The style of the story, as is often the case in Carver’s short fiction, seems designed to lull its reader; the tone of the story won’t be described as exciting. Still, the story manages to be engaging through its humor, even if that humor is as quiet and sparse as the prose.

In his essay, “Speaking Seriously About Humor,” Peter Farb breaks humor down into what he refers to as its “grammatical parts.” Grammar refers to rules and expectations that exist within a language, and Farb argues that humor can be broken down into constituent

parts based on its internal rules and expectations. He places those parts into ten rough categories:

1. Any alteration in the familiar order of things.
2. A forbidden breach of behavior.
3. Obscenity.
4. Placing in one situation that which belongs in another.
5. Anything that masquerades as what it is not.
6. Word play.
7. Nonsense and the absurd.
8. Misfortunes.
9. Ignorance in other people.
10. Hidden Insults. (Farb 768-770)

“Fat,” seems to take advantage of many of these grammatical parts. To begin, the setting and happenings of the story are entirely domestic in nature. The diner could be absolutely any diner, and the reader can easily imagine that the narrator is a waitress they themselves have been served by. Even the strangest element of the story, this fat man who seems to eat forever, is mundane when measured against wizards or even murderers on backcountry roads. This type of story is the perfect place for what Farb calls “The familiar order of things.” “Fat” has been rendered with an almost surreal familiarity and accessibility, and as a result the use of “we,” just a small alteration in what is familiar, becomes humorous. The fat patron continually refers to himself as “we” throughout the story. The narrator, however, never adjusts pronouns or acknowledges the use of the odd word. That alteration creates humor, even if the reader isn’t exactly clear on the how or why.

This ability to stylistically capture the mundaneness of life is undoubtedly one of the strengths of Carver's writing. Carver's quiet examination of a neighbor's house when it is empty illuminates realities of life that are surprising and new. In his story, "Neighbors," Carver tells of a husband and wife who have the pleasure of invading their neighbor's privacy while the neighbors are away on vacation. This story is about feeding a cat and watering some plants, and the prose are written in the same quiet style as "Fat," but "Neighbors" is filled with quiet and funny scenes of Bill and Arlene Miller trying on their neighbor's clothes, rummaging through their fridge, and finding "some pictures" hidden away in a drawer. Again, to borrow Farb's language, Bill and Marlene are playing with the "familiar order of things." Carver has created a situation that is humorous.

In addition to playing with what is familiar, and central to the success of the quiet style of "Neighbors," is another of the grammatical parts that Farb described: "A forbidden breach of behavior." Whether it's stealing half a pack of cigarettes from the nightstand, putting on the neighbor's Hawaiian shirt and some bermudas to enjoy his drink, or giving up on the woman's shoes because Bill knows they will not fit, Bill regularly crosses the line into the unexpected and unallowed. This in itself, according to Farb, is a humorous element. Think of the class clown. The important thing isn't what he says; all that matters is that he speaks when he isn't supposed to. The same is true for Bill and Marlene, and it works perfectly with Carver's style. He could have written a story about Bill and Marlene buying twenty more cats for Kitty to play with, or a story of a couple selling an apartment that isn't theirs to sell. The problem is that both of those are broad, to use a comedy term, and Carver style isn't broad comedy. But by employing this breach of behavior in such a mundane way,

Carver manages to effectively employ humor in a story that doesn't obviously call for a laugh.

In these examples, Carver perfectly illustrates humor as a means of engagement. The stories are difficult to imagine without their quiet humor, because it is truly central to how they work. There is something about Carver's fiction that draws people in. In many cases, this draw isn't based on the engagement that a reader might find elsewhere. Jingqiong Zhou, in *Raymond Carver's Short Fiction in the History of Black Humor*, writes that in Carver's works there, "is not much plot [... and] openness in the endings" (98). According to Zhou, what is interesting is the exacting use of language, one of the hallmarks of Carver's fiction. It is in this use of language that much of Carver's humor lives. In the case of "Neighbors," the use of specific detail creates some of the most humorous moments in the story. The simple line, "I found some pictures," does the work of leaving the reader to interpret, and at the same times leaves no doubts about what Arlene has been up to in the neighbor's apartment (12). The line is humorous for what goes unsaid, and that is often the case with humor in Carver; it is exactly that humor that carries the reader through the story, above anything else.

For Carver and O'Connor, humor isn't the goal. Neither claim to set out to write a story that is funny. Instead, they intend to write stories that are entirely true according to their own understandings and voices. I believe this is a very interesting distinction to make in regards to the usefulness of humor in literature. I wonder, in the case of this humor that happens organically, whether it isn't Carver's and O'Connor's innate humor that simply bleeds through into their work. They are both funny; whether you listen to them speak or read their nonfiction writings, there are jokes made that appear to genuinely reflect the person making them.

In *The Humor Code: A Global Search for What Makes Things Funny* Peter McGraw and Joel Warner examine many aspects of humor in order to better understand how and when it works. One of the topics they attempt to tackle is whether or not there is an innate ability that manifests in someone who is funny. Throughout the text, McGraw and Warner discuss this very question with a variety of writers, talent managers, and comedians, and what they end up with are a variety of answers. The central point seems to be that everyone knows funny when they see it; that is a surprisingly unhelpful notion. *The Humor Code* even examines some studies conducted at Texas A&M and UC Berkeley, which come to similarly unhelpful conclusions. Apparently, a single individual can possess huge variation in their ability to understand, create and participate in different types of humor. The UCB study surveyed 650 improv actors and comics; that survey did return one result that may correlate to writers, in particular. It found that identifying as introverted was a common among those surveyed, and the ability to exist alone is certainly useful when a deadline is looming.

In the end, McGraw and Warner weren't able to come to any definite conclusions about what makes one individual funnier than another. Instead, they decided, "It's not about whether or not you're funny, it's *how* you're funny [...] how you develop your comic perspective, how you mix honesty and humor" (40). Perhaps the humor in the works of Carver and O'Connor are innate, and an expression of "comic perspective." Certainly, it's a mixture of honesty and humor.

In "On Writing," Carver admires how O'Connor is surprised by her own stories as she writes them. He says that the same was true of his own writing, but he was afraid that to admit it because it might "somehow revealed [his] own shortcoming" (1609). This freedom from intention is one of the reasons that both of these writers are able to use humor so freely

and surprisingly in their fiction, as a seemingly separate part of the whole, which can be unaffected, or even strengthened, by a potentially story-ruining character or a quiet prose style. The engagement and interest created by humor in Carver and O'Connor's work is a manifestation of the writers' voices, rather than a purposeful aspect of the story, according to a plan. In the case of Carver and O'Connor, humor is only one aspect of their fiction. It is this, in combination with their spontaneous writing style that creates the engaging and humorous works that they are each known for.

Function of Story and the Absurd in George Saunders's "The 400-Pound CEO"

The same exploration of plot and character can also be conducted for the more absurd and fantastical writings of an author like George Saunders. Certainly, Saunders is a very different writer than Carver. Where Carver often writes quiet stories that are very much grounded in a Domestic reality, Saunders leans toward the absurd and exaggerated in his works. His ability to warp reality in a story like "The 400-Pound CEO," and do so in a truly funny way, demonstrates the usefulness of humor as a means of engaging readers in stories. Jeffrey, the central character of the story, has no real redeeming qualities, and as a result the outcome of the story may be of little concern to many readers. Jeffrey seems to be defined by a self-pity from the very start, and the abuse he receives strikes the reader as almost par-for-the-course:

These days, commissions are my main joy. I'm too large to attract female company. I weigh 400. I don't like it, but it's beyond my control. I've tried running and rowing the stationary canoe and Hatha yoga and belly staples and even a muzzle back in the dark days when I had it bad for Frieda, our document placement and retrieval specialist. When I was merely portly, it was

easy to see myself as a kind of exuberant sportsman who overate out of lust for life. Now, no one could possibly mistake me for a sportsman. (Saunders 46)

It is unclear why the reader should care what happens to Jeffrey, as he seems to have given up on himself. There's very little to like about him, except how well the reader will compare when measured against Jeffrey. Surely, then, Saunders has created Jeffrey to take advantage of the Superiority Theory, similarly to how O'Connor did in "Revelation" and "A Good Man is Hard to Find." The side characters too, who are either yes-men or their own kind of disgusting, are easy to feel superior to. However, the humor of "The 400-Pound CEO" doesn't stop there.

"The 400-Pound CEO," is also humorous and engaging as a result of the particular world and story that Saunders has created for these characters to exist within. From the opening lines of the story, "At noon, another load of raccoons comes in, and Claude takes them out back of the office and executes them with a tire iron," it is clear that this story is going to require the audience to react (45). My own reaction is to laugh. By this kind of choice, the reader becomes engaged in what will happen next. The driving force of this story, in particular, is the potential of can follow a pit full of dead raccoons and a corporate basement full of S&M equipment. Saunders's stories are often full of absurd and hilarious elements like these, and they operate according to many of the grammatical parts that Farb defined in his essay. Saunders's success as a writer is clear evidence of the usefulness of this type of humor in fiction.

The happenings of "The 400-Pound CEO" play with a number of Farb's "grammatical parts." For instance, "Obscenity," which Farb describes as, "taking the darker

side of human behavior out into the light where it can be seen,” is a strikingly accurate description of the office around which the story revolves (769). The raccoon pit behind the building is brought into the light and seen. Saunders then sheds light on workplace abuse with lines like, “I’m no homo. But if I was one, I’d die before doing it with Mr. Lard,” and, “It made me feel bad about myself that they thought I was actually with you. Do you know what I mean?” Jeffrey’s treatment is deplorable, but there is humor in how it is placed out in the open.

Another of Farb’s grammatical parts is “nonsense and the absurd,” two descriptors that fit this story very well. The absurdness of this raccoon extermination business asks the reader to allow for circumstances that cannot exist within the confines of a normal reality. Saunders takes what the reader knows exists, in the form of dishonest companies, and warps it into an absurd and troubling form. In many ways, this story takes advantage of the elements of the theatre of the absurd.

In his essay, “Absurd Drama,” Martin Esslin discusses the construction of traditional dramatic works versus the theatre of the absurd in the following way:

A well-made play is expected to present characters that are well-observed and convincingly motivated: these plays often contain hardly any recognizable human beings and present completely unmotivated actions. A well-made play is expected to entertain by the ding-dong of witty and logically built-up dialogue: in some of these plays dialogue seems to have degenerated into meaningless babble. A well-made play is expected to have a beginning, a middle, and a neatly tied-up ending. [Absurd plays] often start at an arbitrary point and seem to end just as arbitrarily. By all the traditional standards of

critical appreciation of the drama, these plays are not only abominably bad, they do not even deserve the name drama. (Esslin par. 2)

While this quote taken alone may suggest that Absurd drama is lacking in some way, which is not Esslin's point at all. Instead, he is outlining a new set of standards by which the absurdists are operating. The same conventions that Esslin is describing as a part of traditional drama could also be used when analyzing a work of short fiction, but they aren't clearly present in Saunders's "The 400-Pound CEO." Instead, Saunders's work seems to betray many of those conventions as it ventures, or stomps, into the absurd. Beginning with Jeffrey, the story's central character, there is little in the way of convincing motivation. Self-loathing could be pointed to as Jeffrey's defining trait but little else. This aspect of the work is even further illustrated when Tim is examined, who seems concerned with causing harm above all else, a concern that is in no way explained or examined.

Next, the dialogue of "The 400-Pound CEO" isn't "logically built-up." Instead, some of Saunders's dialogue seems more akin to what Esslin calls "meaningless babble." For instance, a line like, "He loves it back there. He likes eating the lint balls. They won't hurt him. They're like roughage," doesn't make sense in a story that is built around the ideas of logic, but within the context of the story, it fits perfectly (50).

Finally, there is the strange way in which "The 400-Pound CEO" begins and ends. If the central conflict of the story is the downfall of Tim's business, then one could certainly argue that Saunders has included text that is unnecessary to the progression of the story, and the final ponderings of Jeffrey about God and the hope for reincarnation as a less pitiful person seems almost out of place when examined as a single part of the whole story.

Whether or not Saunders is trying to work within the tenants of the theatre of the absurd, it is clear that “The 400-Pound CEO” does display with some of the elements common to that genre, and those same elements are where much of the humor of the work can be found.

George Saunders’s prose is generally more openly humorous than the other writers I have examined, and he writes a fiction that appears, at times, to be wandering into the comedic realm that I claim not to enjoy. Sometimes, he seems to be working toward a punchline; at other times, a detail seems to be fishing for a laugh. In line with this more obvious comedic style, it isn’t hard to believe that Saunders is very upfront when speaking about the use of humor in his fiction, but he has also spoken about the relationship he sees between his humor and the seriousness that can be found in his writing.

In an interview with Mike Sacks, author of *Poking a Dead Frog*, Saunders said, “I got the idea that high-serious and the funny were not separate. The idea that something could be gross and heartfelt at the same time” (par. 2). His writing certainly reflects this more conscious acknowledgment that the two parts of fiction are so connected. “The 400 Pound CEO,” for instance, is a story about regret, hopelessness, and abuse; it is also a story about a raccoon relocation business that simply clubs the animals behind the office. These sides are juxtaposed in a sense, and each of the halves is somehow reinforced by the other. It isn’t simply the case that Jeffrey is stuck in a dead-end job and is constantly beaten down by his peers; these things are true while Jeffrey has to go lie to people about the fate of their pests. There’s undoubtedly a purposefulness to that creation and his use of humor as a part of a thoughtful work.

When creating characters, for instance, Saunders employs the same kind of humor that he does when creating a story and world. He describes the balance between dark and light elements as “fairness,” but the results of that fairness create what is commonly known as incongruity humor: “Kevin sucks. Although Kevin does care for his sick grandmother. But yuck, Kevin masturbates while thinking about whales! And yet Kevin once saved a man’s life” (Sacks par. 24). This description is absurd, as is Saunders’s way, but it is also the description of a complete person. Kevin is both good and bad, and must be considered as such. Saunders is creating a rounded reality as a part of the joke he is telling. It is both serious and humorous, and must be considered as such.

In the same way that O’Connor looks to reality and Carver uses exacting language, Saunders employs the bizarre to fabricate dense and hilarious prose. In every case, these writers are aware of the complications that exist as an inherent aspect of humanity, but they employ humor in different way to illustrate that complicated nature. Saunders wrote that, “Humor is what happens when we're told the truth quicker and more directly than we're used to.” He’s dealing with truth. His truth just happens to be worth a laugh.

Structural Workings and Point of View in Denis Johnson’s “Emergency”

The last writer I will discuss in this critical introduction is Denis Johnson. His story “Emergency” clearly falls into the framework for humor that has been discussed thus far. The story itself doesn’t follow the more commonly used plot structure, and again it is centered on a character that is difficult to like. The narrator isn’t unlikable in the same way Mrs. Turpin is; he isn’t a bully. Instead, he’s difficult to get a read on because of the structure of the narrative and the decisions Johnson made in regards to the narrative point of view; as a result it is can be difficult for the reader to become invested in his outcome.

“Emergency” is written as a series of scenes that could individually be their own stories, if they were slowed down and drawn out, but they are not. In the first scene, after a man has come into the emergency room with a knife in his eye:

Everybody had a different idea about exactly how to approach the problem of removing the knife from Terrence Weber’s brain. But when Georgie came in from prepping the patient—from shaving the patient’s eyebrow and disinfecting the area around the wound, and so on—he seemed to be holding the hunting knife in his left hand.

Just like that, the tension of those first pages is undone. What seemed to be the conflict of the story is removed as an issue, and not only is the reader surprised, but the hospital staff are surprised as well. Suddenly, the narrator and the reader must move on and catch up. The pacing is hectic as the tension shifts from one thing to the next. There is an almost overwhelmed feeling to the story, as if there is too much to tell, which adds to the humor of it all. Sigmund Freud wrote about the need to surprise the “censor” in order to freely express the impulses which we identify as humor. This pacing certainly serves the purpose of surprising the reader, and in that way might facilitate an honest reaction to the humor of the situation.

At the same time that Johnson is moving quickly, demanding that the reader make jumps in time and event, the narrator of the story supplies the reader with very little in terms of internal dialogue or emotional response to what is happening around him. Instead, the events, which are relayed in a first-person point of view or presented as facts, even in the most dire of situations. This narrative decision may take advantage of a number of Farb’s grammatical parts, but it could also be an example of the commonly referenced comedic

theory known as the incongruity theory, or “something that violates our mental patterns and expectations (Morreall par. 20).” The narrator should be upset when the baby rabbits he has been trying to rescue with his own body heat are suffocated by his weight, and it is possible that he is, but instead of expressing those emotions to the reader, the reader is told:

Maybe it was the time we slept in the truck and I rolled over on the bunnies and flattened them. It doesn't matter. What's important for me to remember now is that early the next morning the snow was melted off the windshield and the daylight woke me up. (Johnson par. 145)

The delivery of facts immediately after potentially traumatic events is reminiscent of the deadpan comedic style, where little emotion is offered in response to a joke or offense. The style is often described with words like sarcastic and laconic, two words that could be used when describing “Emergency.” At its most extreme, deadpan can seem an unintentional comedy, and the humor found in “Emergency” could be described in the same way, largely as a result of the unique point of view.

In conjunction with this point of view and fast pacing, Johnson also employs an episodic plot in “Emergency.” This plot structure, which calls for the assembly of many seemingly unrelated sections, is hard to execute to any degree of success. The reason it is so difficult is that it betrays the reader's expectation that these scenes will end in some sort of resolution. That simply isn't going to be the case. Generally, a reader brings some expectation into short fiction; it is useful to assume a story will follow the usual format to some degree. With “Emergency,” whether it is accidental surgery or rescuing baby rabbits, Johnson ends each act abruptly and moves on to the next. Whether it is Terrence Weber's

stabbing or Hardee's draft dodging, the reader never finds any gratification in the rising action, climax, and denouement of a standard plot.

The story is satisfying, however, and that satisfaction comes in part from the humor, even as it deals with serious topics within these sections. From the moments the rabbits are introduced in the story, it is clear that they are important to the narrator. The death of those eight baby rabbits, however, is completely undercut by them having "slid around behind" him (Johnson par. 134). That deadpan delivery creates a horrifying image for the reader, and almost certainly traumatic for the narrator of the story, but the way Johnson moves on so quickly without giving the narrator or reader any time to deal with the event does not allow any of the parties involved to deal with the trauma; what is left to do might only be to laugh. This example of humor is about pacing in this story, as good humor often is, and it works regardless of the reader's best intentions. The humor in this story is central and is undoubtedly necessary for the story to function as well as it does.

Denis Johnson has said much less about humor (and writing in general) than these other writers have. "Emergency," is reminiscent of some of Carver's works in the way Johnson approaches subject and character. There is a calmness in both of their works, and they are largely powerful for what goes unsaid or unaddressed. Instead of focusing on these elements, Johnson's stories provide specific details and opportunities for humor in an otherwise bleak world. Perhaps this similarity to Carver was developed during Johnson's time studying under Carver at the University of Iowa, or perhaps this too is an innate affinity for humor and a manifestation of Johnson's voice (Amsden par. 4). Regardless, this humor manifests as an almost natural extension of the people and the world that is being created. And again, the humor is integral to keeping the reader engaged in the text.

The inclusion of strange and bizarre things, like the comical orders of the doctor who is too afraid to actually act, or the lyrics Georgie is singing while scrubbing up, create an awkward and almost surreal world, similar to the worlds found in Saunders's stories. But while Johnson is often a step removed from the reality that Carver or even O'Connor build, he is not as absurd as Saunders. If it is the case, as it seems to be, that Saunders is purposeful in his inclusion of the disgusting and bizarre, then it is likely the case that Johnson too is more conscious of the humor going into his fiction, and that he intends for a work like "Emergency" to result in laughs.

Final Thoughts

In *Humor Code*, McGraw and Warner point out that "It wasn't until the early nineteenth century that humor became widely used in its modern sense, as a virtue. Perhaps it makes sense, then, that people don't want to be connected to, or concerned with, a term that not long ago referred to "someone skilled at impersonating an insane person," and just prior to that referenced "someone whose body fluids were so imbalanced they acted mentally ill." Humor as a concept for study is still surprisingly new, and understandings of how it works in fiction, even more so.

Conceptually, the purpose of humor is a hard thing to pin down. Also, the success or failure of humor is often considered a matter of preference. Why else would we need five late-night television shows airing at the same time? E.B. White said that "Humor can be dissected, as a frog can, but the thing dies in the process" (McGraw par. 1). If this is true, and anyone who has ever had to explain a joke would almost certainly agree, then perhaps humor isn't meant to be studied or can't be studied effectively.

What is clear to me, after my attempt to figure out how humor is employed in the works of these writers I admire and emulate in my own writing, is that defining why the craft of any writer is successful is a difficult challenge. That challenge is made even more difficult by the desire to single out one specific element of that writer's toolbox and analyze it separate from the rest.

Even with the clarity that has been achieved in regards to what is funny and how humor can be broken down and analyzed, the successful application of the element of humor is still difficult to define. When used as a means of engagement, there may be no tool more advantageous than humor, and it is toward this end that humor is employed by American writers like Raymond Carver, Flannery O'Connor, George Saunders, and Denis Johnson. Each of these authors create "high-serious" fiction, to borrow Saunders's words. They deal with what matters, but they do so while giving their readers the opportunity to laugh. They each engage the reader through varying applications of humor, and each of them does so to great effect. The stories in following collection are also able to do precisely that.

Blake, Birdshit

Blake strode through the park, looking for birds flying overhead, but wasn't having any luck in his purpose. That figured, of course. The entire reason Blake was cutting up this trail and then down that one was to find some luck. Without that luck in the first place, how could he be expected to find the birds he was looking for? Blake's grandmother was the first to tell him that a bird shitting on him was actually good luck. She swore it was true. As Blake's grandmother put it, she was covered with bird poo when she met Blake's grandfather.

The story went something like this: Grandma was walking to the malt shop where she worked—yes, she actually worked in a malt shop—when a bird shit right on her head. She would describe, in gruesome detail, the warmth as the white mass rolled down her neck and under her sweater. She swore it must have been a condor or something, judging by the sheer mass. Anyway, it was the 1950s, so you didn't just skip work. According to her, people respected each other back then. So she walked the next few blocks with the still warm goo running down her neck, told her boss that she needed to go home and clean herself up, and then ran out of the shop in absolute horror as Chet Michaels told her she smelled even worse than usual.

Grandma always said that Chet was a real peach. Grandpa also said Chet had the hots for her, but didn't have the gumption to make a move. Anyways, there Grandma was, running down the sidewalk and entirely forgetting about looking both ways, when out of nowhere a truck comes plowing down the road just in the perfect position to hit and kill her. To hear her tell it, the truck never saw her. Grandpa said the guy did see her since he didn't have a cellphone to be on, and he was hard on the brakes. Either way, she would've gotten

hit if Blake's grandpa hadn't ran right across that street, scooped her up and sat her back down on the sidewalk.

Blake's grandpa's story was always better from this point forward. He says he walked her to her house and asked that she be careful in the future. The next evening he showed back up at her house, with a bouquet of flowers, to make sure that she was alright after the events of the previous day. She said she was, and they went for a walk. Grandpa says Chet ran into them and apologized to Blake's grandma after the consequences of not doing so were politely explained. Blake's Grandma has no recollection of that happening. The couple was married two months later.

Blake had always felt pretty sure most of the story came from a Billy Crystal movie, but it was still nice to hear his grandparents tell the story. And to his grandma, the moral was clear: bird shit is good luck. Without it she wouldn't have been saved and walked home by the most decent man she ever knew. Instead, she probably would've ended up with that old Chet who she always thought beat the woman he did marry, Sue. But that hadn't been her life. Instead, her life was one of kindness and comfort, full of wonderful children and grandchildren, and it all started with a walk home to wash some shit out of her hair.

Of course, this story was anecdotal. As a child Blake thought that just because one good thing came out of bird poop didn't mean anything else would, but Blake's life had proved to him how wrong that thought had been. His own experiences had transcended anecdote and marched right into the realm of statistical likelihood, if not simple proof. Blake was honest and unabashed about needing bird shit for luck. It wasn't a joke to him, it was serious shit. Blake needed some bird shit because he needed the afternoon to go right; he needed to hear a "yes" when he made his call, and he knew he could count on the birds.

When he reached the edge of the large pond, he was dismayed to see that the usual pigeon feeders were nowhere to be found. It was too late for lunch, and not late enough for dinner. Kids were still at school and the old people were likely taking their naps. This section of the park, at least, was nearly empty of people and birds. He cut back the way he had come to head to the small grove of trees that occupied the far corner of the park, hoping to find perhaps a murder of crows to supply him with what he needed. He hoped to find a mass of birds screaming in the trees, and that hope reminded him of the first time a crow had shit on his head.

Blake was only 11 at the time. He spent his summers the way most kids spent their summers, playing outside. He and some neighborhood kids were playing Rock-Ball in an empty lot at the end of his street. The game was something like baseball, except you hit a rock instead of a ball and climbed a tree instead running bases. That summer had brought a strange number of crows, a bird that Blake was sure was supposed to migrate somewhere else in the summer months, and many of them had taken up residence in the Rock-Ball tree, the biggest tree in the otherwise recently developed neighborhood.

The birds hadn't stopped the kids from gathering to play, and, in fact, the murder had added a certain sense of danger and foreboding to the game, a game that was violent in the way kids' games often are. Blake had been playing the blocker position. Basically, the blocker could try to land one good hit on the batter when the batter made for the tree. The blocker's goal was really just to slow the batter down while the fielders brought the rock back to the trunk. Once the rock was back, all the fielders took up position under the tree and threw the rock up at the batter until he was hit and made out. Until the rock hit him, the batter was climbing around the branches in order to touch the bases, which were specific limbs that

were spray painted with stolen survey-paint, spread throughout the tree. The batter called out every time he touched another base, and the person who had the most touches after everyone had batted was the winner. You could play the game with two kids or twenty, a feature that is invaluable in any empty-lot competition, and almost all the parents had forbidden the game from being played, another huge plus for a game. So Blake had been the blocker, which put him squarely in front of Sam, the batter. Sam was a tomboy to say the least. She was also three years older than Blake, and at 14 had already gone through the changes that turn a lanky little girl into a young woman that can really swing a bat. Sam ended up getting a shot-put scholarship to a Division 1 school, which isn't any sort of judgement, Blake always thought, it just goes to explain the kind of power that could be found in Sam's swing, even at a young age.

Anyway, Sam tossed the rock into the air, grabbed that bat with both hands, and absolutely crushed that rock. The sound was that of a gun going off. In fact, she split the rock into pieces, the largest two of which were dangerously serrated and headed straight for the place that Blake had been standing. Except Blake hadn't been standing there anymore, because as Sam had tossed the rock into the air a bird had shit on Blake's head. The reaction to this dousing was enough of a flinch to move Blake's head out of the way of what would've been his death. The rocks that were seemingly meant for Blake's skull had been lodged into the tree trunk instead.

These events had given birth to two separate things. The first was a game called Sam-Smash. All the kids would encircle the tree with their bats and rocks of choice and hit rocks at the tree in an attempt to get another rock stuck in the tree in the same way Sam had. No one ever succeeded. The other thing was the beginning of a belief in Blake. Maybe his

grandparents hadn't been wrong. Maybe there was something to his grandmother's idea that bird droppings were good luck. From that point forward, the story of how his grandparents had met was his favorite story. He memorized every detail and asked for clarification on certain points. He had studied the breaking patterns of certain types of rocks and the tensile strength of wood. Blake looked into the migration pattern of crows. What he learned was that the rock shouldn't have broken with sharp edges, the wood was too dense to be penetrated by the force that Sam and the bat created, and the crows shouldn't have been there in the first place. One impossibility after another, and Blake had been saved by bird shit as a result of it all. At age 11 Blake had decided what he believed, but that belief, like many beliefs that aren't exercised, faded with time.

But today, at 35, there was nothing faded about his belief. As he reached the wooded corner of the park and discovered that no flocks of birds were in site, the panic of a true believer began to set in. It wasn't just that bird shit helped Blake avoid catastrophe, or that good things got better. To Blake's understanding of the world, the only meaningfully good things in his life were the direct result of bird shit. He needed to find birds. This real estate opportunity was too good to miss out on. It was the culmination of years of hard work, and on occasion, good luck.

Perhaps the best of the luck-inducing bird shit had been what he had received on the way to his admission interview when he was trying to get into college. His grades had been good enough to get him in the door. Test scores and extracurriculars were just good enough too, but Blake had known on his way to the meeting that he wouldn't be getting accepted to perhaps the most prestigious school in the country because he met the minimum requirements. He knew he would have to blow them away in the interview, and it was on the

way to that interview that a bird had shit on him, right down his tie. There hadn't been time to get a new tie, and no matter how much he rubbed, that mess wouldn't go away. Blake had considered taking the tie off, but he was afraid it would look like he wasn't taking the process serious enough, so he left it on and hoped the stain simply wasn't as noticeable as he feared it was.

It turned out the stain was noticeable. It had been just as noticeable as the soup stain that the man in charge of the interview was wearing. Blake and his interviewer shared a laugh about how impossible it was to keep a tie clean. They joked about how preferable soup was to bird shit, and then they decided to forego the stained ties for the rest of their meeting. The man ended up inviting Blake for a small tour of campus as they went to get a coffee, and Blake was nearly accepted on the spot. None of that, Blake was sure, would've happened the same if it hadn't been for the bird shit. Driving home after that interview, remembering the events that had baffled an 11 year old, Blake was sure that it couldn't have been simple coincidence. The same thing that saved his life as a child had just carried his one ambition into reality. Blake was sure at 18 that bird shit was the key.

But now, in this park, he could find none. He needed birds because he had a voicemail on his phone. It said to call the bank back. They had made their decision about the property, and whether or not Blake would get the loan he needed to buy an old, bird shit covered building. The structure didn't look like much, but when Blake saw that particular patina, he was sure it was the sign he had been looking for. He was going to leave Grabel & Houser and start his own architecture firm. All he needed now was his funding, and for that he needed some birds. And where were the birds? Was it, perhaps, that the afternoon never had a chance to go his way? Perhaps it was a doomed enterprise from the start.

This wasn't the first time Blake had gone full doom and gloom. In fact, it was one of his most common moves. The summer after graduating, before he had found his position with Grabel & Houser, Blake had moved in with his parents. He was trying his best to get over a breakup, the sudden and intense proximity to his parents had fueled a sort of hopelessness in him, so Blake decided to take a road trip. He didn't have any real destination in mind, but thought he would drive to a few cities on the East Coast and study the buildings. Maybe he could be inspired to create something for his portfolio.

It was on that trip, driving up the coast after spending a couple days in Charleston, that Blake's borrowed convertible had been absolutely destroyed by a flock of gulls. The birds had circled and landed, circled and landed. Blake, all the while, was standing on the driver's seat, waving his arms and swinging at any birds that wondered within his range. He had never experienced anything like it, and standing alone on the beach, once the birds had done their deed and moved on, Blake paused his laughter long enough to find a detailing shop on his phone and head that way. He was in his uncle's 1971 MGB. Blake thought the man loved that car more than he loved his own kids, and he was sure he loved the car more than he loved Blake.

When he walked into the detail shop, his back having mopped up and smeared much of the mess on his seat, he got some odd looks. When he explained his situation to the cute young woman working the cash register and pointed to the mess that sat in the parking lot, Blake was greeted with looks of equal parts confusion and disgust. The girl kept covering her nose with the back of her hand to hide herself from some of the smell. She offered Blake the employee restroom while he waited, offering that it had more room to clean up and change, and the two of them talked about his trip and how she was working at her dad's shop for the

summer before returning to school to finish her senior year. She was double-majoring in Politics and Journalism, and she had opinions about everything.

It turned out that she actually attended college very near to where Blake's parents lived. They exchanged numbers and agreed to meet up in the fall. Blake called her from his tent that night. They talked for three hours and were married two years later.

He wouldn't have any of it without the bird shit.

Now, he was out of time. The bank was closing in ten minutes, and there was another offer on the property that the owner would accept if Blake couldn't get his financing in order today. He had to call, and even though he knew what the answer would be, he did. They told him that they didn't like the numbers. The building and renovation created too much overhead, and he while he had plenty of experience as an architect, he was missing the business experience that said he knew how to run that kind of business. They told him they would be happy to back him in a smaller space where he could have more manageable overhead and a smaller staff to manage. If that worked out, then the bank would be happy to back him in an expansion.

Blake knew there would never be an expansion or a more manageable staff. He had asked for a sign; should he stay at Grabel & Houser or move on? The sign he found was an unbelievable building covered in his own good luck. When he saw the building, he had known it was the right thing, but now he knew he was wrong. For the first time, shit had failed him, or maybe he simply failed to find the right shit.

Blake needed a drink to be done with this day, and as he exited the park and walked across the street, looking for a bar where he could drown his sorrow, the phone still in his right hand started to ring. He looked at his screen and read "Melissa Facetime Call." It would

be his wife. She would have just arrived home with their girls. They would probably all be on the line to hear the good news that Blake hadn't received.

He knew he couldn't face them. But as Blake reached his thumb to mute the ringer, he caught something moving out of the corner of his eye and felt the familiar warm mass spread across his wrist and splash onto the screen. Blake turned back toward his car, smiling now, and slid his thumb across that shitty screen to answer.

Hedgerows

Walking across the field, Hardy heard his brother cry out, but he couldn't let that slow him down. Not today. He continued racing forward through the grass. This field was pasture, and it had been full of cows until a few days ago when his father had moved the herd onto the adjacent ten acres.

The farm wasn't a big one. In fact, it may not actually be right to call it a farm. Certainly, they weren't farmers. There were thirty acres. Two tracks of ten were fenced off for the cows. With only 12 head total, it was barely necessary to take them off one pasture. Hardy's dad did it anyway, partially to let the off-pasture rest, and partially because he said the pastures ended up better off for the cows eating and shitting on them.

Hardy couldn't remember for sure if his dad had used the word shit, but he thought he probably had. For such a kind man and a good father, he really did curse. He cursed and he worked. Every morning Hardy's dad did what a lot of his friend's dads did. He got up, got dressed, and went out to check the animals. Hardy's dad had quite a few. First he would feed the dogs. In order from monstrous to cute there was Bull, the Akita; Bell, the Weimaraner; and Frisbee, the mutt. Once the dogs were fed, Hardy's dad went back to open the chicken coop and collect eggs, and then to slop the pigs with feed and last night's garbage. After that he checked the live-traps—killing opossums and skunks wasn't fun, he told Hardy, but it was necessary if they didn't want to lose chickens. And finally, he walked whichever pasture the cows were in to make sure everything was alright.

While this portion of his father's mornings fell in line with many of his friends' fathers, what came next was unique. Hardy's dad took a quick shower; got dressed again, this time in a shirt and tie; and went to work. After work he'd change into his farm-clothes again

and head back out to fix fences, worm cows, or do whatever else needed doing. As far as Hardy could tell, his father loved it all.

“Hurry, Hard,” Hardy’s brother, Alvis, called.

“I am,” Hardy yelled in response.

Alvis, Hardy thought, could have been over here himself. Running through the pasture, pulling the wagon, and grabbing patties, but that just wasn’t his style. No, Alvis would much rather be hiding behind a tree, throwing the occasional stick, and ruminating on the battle that lay ahead.

This kind of behavior had started their journey to the field this morning. Hardy wanted to play with a particular toy that was sitting next to Alvis. When he picked it up, Alvis demanded that he put it back.

“I’m playing with it,” Alvis had said.

To which Hardy had replied, “No you’re not. That toy has been sitting there all morning.”

“Nope,” came the reply. “It’s circling that pine tree at the moment, which is actually the enemy base.”

Apparently it was called imagination. Hardy suggested that Alvis could *imagine* playing with it while Hardy really did play with it. What happened next was a broken toy and two boys rolling in the dirt. Their mother directed them to get out from under her feet and go get along. She suggested that they build something or come up with a game. Instead, they had gone to war with a new enemy.

The wagon Hardy was tasked with pulling wasn’t large or particularly heavy, but its wheels weren’t meant for the grassy terrain. Instead, as his mom was happy to remind him,

the wagon was meant for parades and zoos. It was a red Radio Flyer. It had been used to carry around a cooler and snacks, or extra jackets and loose toys. If Hardy was to believe his mother, the family couldn't have survived without it when he was four and his brother was 6. But now things were different. At 9, Hardy was generally responsible for his own jacket. And snacks would have to be waited for. The wagon was going unused, until Hardy gave it new life.

Now the wagon played the part of a mobile fortress when his action figures needed to relocate to defeat the enemy. It could easily be used for collection when his brother and he had let loose every Nerf dart they owned and had to walk the yard retrieving them. The cart worked to haul water or dirt, when the occasion demanded it. It was priceless, Hardy thought, and today it would be the key to winning the war.

"You haven't hit me yet, cowards," Alvis yelled, apparently not talking to his brother this time.

"What are they doing?" Hardy replied anyway. He was afraid simple questions like that might bore the enemy or remind them that this was just a silly game, that they might find a better game to play while Hardy gathered ammunition, but he had to know what they were doing.

"They're throwing rocks," Hardy saw Alvis turn back toward the tree line to finish his response, "like a bunch of lousy cowards."

Hardy had to hurry, but he was thankful that Alvis was keeping the enemy's blood red. He didn't want to return with this load for nothing.

One upside to the cows having recently left this pasture was that Hardy didn't have to worry about any of the ammo being too fresh. In this heat, it would dry quickly and completely.

The ammo, of course, was cow shit.

Cow shit, as his father called it, wasn't as nasty as one might think. In fact, after a couple days it was completely hard and odorless. Not only is it not offensive, but it holds a very important part in the history of the Great Plains, where this particular battle was currently taking place.

Going through public school in Kansas, a student spends a great deal of time studying how the earliest settlers were able to conquer this truly wild and unwieldy land. Even as a child, Hardy had questioned the reality of the statement. He understood that it was certainly a hard life, but in comparison to what others had to face? First off, water wasn't too hard to come by in Kansas. Even in the dry months, July and August, rivers and creeks still flowed with water. It's not like you were going to die of thirst. In a dessert, sure, but not in Kansas. And food? Well there were animals all over the place, and you could grow just about anything here. To Hardy's thinking, if you were going to be a settler, and sometimes he thought it would've been an interesting thing to be, Kansas would've been a good place to do it.

The only real natural hardship facing the earliest Kansans, as far as he could see, was that there was next to no wood to be had out here. There just weren't a lot of naturally growing trees. Little wood to build and no wood to burn, so the settlers found an alternative source of fire. In a stroke of genius that stuck with Hardy, they took to burning buffalo

patties, and once they had them, cow patties. They burned it for heat, and they burned it to cook. This place became habitable, at least in part, because of cow shit.

Upon receiving this history lesson the first time, Hardy demanded a bonfire to test the stories. He and his dad had been picking eggs one afternoon when Hardy explained the ins and outs of prairie life.

“Well Mrs. O’Neil was telling us that the settlers lived in sod houses and dugouts. Basically, they would dig a shallow hole and then use that dirt to build up walls around that hole, and then they would use more dirt and grass and whatever else they could find for the roof, and I guess it kept them cool in the summer and warm in the winter,” Hardy often unloaded his history lessons on one or both of his parent’s when he got home.

“Yeah? That’s something,” was his dad’s reply.

“Uh huh, and do you know what they burned for heat and to cook?” Hardy really wanted a reply after this kind of question.

“I don’t know. Grass, maybe? It wasn’t wood?”

“Nope, because there wasn’t much wood in the prairie. Prairie is a temperate area where grass is the dominant plant life,” came Hardy’s proud response.

“You still haven’t told me what they burned,” Hardy’s dad reminded Hardy.

“Oh yeah. I just thought prairies was an interesting thing to know about too. They would burn buffalo patties at first and then they burned cow patties once they had cows.”

“I see. You know, I think I’ve heard that before, but I’m glad to know it again,”

Hardy’s dad handed his son the bucket of eggs he’d been filling.

“So... can I?” Hardy had been planning the question the entire time.

“Can you what?”

“Can I try burning some cow patties?”

“I don’t see why not. How about next time we have a bon-fire you toss a couple on and see what makes?”

“What if we have a bon-fire tonight?” Hardy suggested a preferable and more immediate plan.

Hardy’s dad did start a fire for him. Hardy, Alvis, and his mom and dad spent that evening around the fire, joined by some curious cows, and watched as Hardy threw the occasional dry patty into the flames. Now it was his pleasure every time his father burned something to burn some patties along with it.

That fire had been months ago, and today’s patties weren’t going to be burned for heat. They were going to be thrown.

“Hardy,” Alvis yelled again.

And on that cry Hardy turned the wagon and began the run back. He wasn’t pulling the wagon as fast as he could. He had tried that, but the rough terrain had caused the wagon to buck and bounce. Instead, he was doing his best not to lose all the ammunition he had gathered. He still made good time across the pasture and to his brother’s aid.

When he arrived under the shade of the tree line, Hardy could see the evidence of the ensuing battle spread over the ground all around him; small grey rocks littered the ground, rocks that belonged in a gravel parking lot, not in a Kansas pasture.

It made sense that the rocks looked like the kind you would find in a gravel parking lot, as that was exactly where they were coming from. While Hardy and Alvis lived in what could only be called the country, there was a rather large Christian school right next door. And sure, next door was two large pastures away from their house, but the institution was

close enough to afford the boys with a decent playground and soccer field just a short bike ride away. While the school was generally uninhabited after school or during the summer, this particular summer day found the grounds populated by what Hardy could only assume was a pair of teacher's kids who had been forced to spend the day at the school while their parent got his or her classroom ready for the upcoming school year.

What could have potentially been a couple of boys to play with for the day quickly regressed to sneers and insults passed through a row of hedge trees, and then rocks and sticks thrown back and forth in a mock battle. Hardy and Alvis had quickly developed a plan to win the battle and the war.

"I got all I could find, Alv," Hardy said as he leaned against the same trunk that his older brother was using.

The trunk belonged to a Hedge tree, or Osage Orange if Hardy's grandfather's language was preferred. The tree was one of hundreds that surrounded the farm, and separated fields and farms all over the state. These trees, just like the cow patties, had a very interesting and well known part in Kansas history, and another of Hardy's much loved lessons.

The 1930s brought a terrible drought to the Midwest. This prolonged weather pattern, along with poor farming practices, led to a period known as the Dust Bowl, where huge wind storms carried topsoil into the air in massive dust storms. While this period led to a mass exodus from the Midwest United States, it also led to better farming practices meant to improve yields and to maintain the vital topsoil that is so necessary to the success of our nation's bread basket.

As a part of these changes, tree lines, also known as windrows and hedgerows, were created. One of the primary trees used in this development was the Osage Orange.

One of the key identifiers of such a tree, and the feature that assured this battle would not escalate into a fist fight, was the presence of thorns on much of the tree's surface. For Hardy and Alvis, who had grown up under these thorns, it was no great fear or obstacle, but for the two strangers throwing rocks from their parking lot, the thorns must have seemed impenetrable.

“Bring the wagon over here,” Alvis said.

Hardy did as he was told, jumping over a rock that was careening for his shin.

“Okay,” Alvis began laying out his plan while separating the cow patties into two piles, “you are going to take these smaller pieces and start throwing from right here. Try to hit them, but it's okay if you don't, because you're really just the distraction.”

“What're you going to do?” Hardy asked, unsure that he liked a plan where he was just a distraction.

“I'm going to push through to the gap.”

The gap was a small opening that often doubled as a fort or shelter for the boys when they were playing on this side of the farm. Really, it was a tangle of Branches in the middle of the tree line that formed a small dome. The boys had long ago cut a path that went through so it could be accessed from the pasture or the parking lot, and there was no barbed wire there, as the trees themselves formed an impenetrable boundary for the cows.

“Once I'm through,” Alvis continued, “I'm going to move down the berm, where they won't be able to see me. Once I'm close enough, I'm going to hit them with these bigger pieces. Then you have to cover my retreat so I can make it back through the gap.”

Hardy liked the audacity of the plan, but the reality was that little of his projectiles would make it through the thick tangles. It may have been necessary for one of them to push through the trees, but he hated the idea of gathering all the patties and then never having a real opportunity to get at their enemy.

“Why do I have to be the decoy?” Hardy asked, making his displeasure with that aspect of the plan clear.

“Those boys can’t know what we’re up to,” his brother said, “and if they get to me on that side, I’ll be outnumbered two to one. I won’t stand a chance then. And besides, you aren’t just the decoy. You also have to cover my retreat so I can make it back to our side.”

“But what if they grab you?” Hardy asked, now unsure that he was up to his portion of the plan.

“They won’t,” was Alvis’s short reply as he grabbed four of the largest patties, two in each hand, and headed toward the gap.

Hardy knew just what to do and began throwing the patties toward the other boys, aiming for openings in the branches as well as the boys. The truth was the rocks were much better at penetrating the tangles, and the other boys were getting much closer to their target than Hardy was.

Then, suddenly, Hardy heard a yell that wasn’t his brothers. He heard another cry and one of the boys yelled, “He’s over there.”

With that, both of the boys dropped their rocks, and Hardy’s fears were confirmed. The boys weren’t throwing rocks anymore. They weren’t participating in the battle. They were going to beat up Alvis. Hardy dropped his own ammo and shot for the gap, dropping to

all fours and crawling under the tangle of sticks and thorns, unconcerned with the prickly debris that generally had to be cleared from the path.

He could imagine exactly what he would find on the other side. Those two boys, together, would have beaten Alvis up bad. As soon as he exited the hedgerow, they would grab him and do the same.

But then Hardy heard it, not the noise of his brother being jumped, but the sound of victory.

“The fuck?” One of the boys yelled. And then, “They’re throwing shit at us.”

A moment later Hardy saw Alvis dive into the entrance of the gap. Hardy turned around and started crawling again until both boys exited into the field. Alvis stopped at the exit of the gap and grabbed a stick off the ground, apparently ready to repel any would be intruders. Meanwhile, Hardy ran back to the wagon and continued throwing the Cow patties.

“Fuck this,” Hardy heard one of the kids say to the other, and then, “It got in my mouth.”

Hardy kept throwing, laughing out loud now, and joining his brother in his laughter.

“You guys are weird,” one of the kids said.

Hardy didn’t think it sounded like the same one that had gotten poop in his mouth.

“I’m going inside,” the other kid said.

And like that, the boys left. Hardy stopped throwing and his brother walked over to join him by the wagon. Hardy tipped it over, pouring out the ammo and dust.

“I hit him right in his open mouth,” Alvis said. “Like the whole piece went in his mouth.”

“That’s so gross.” Hardy was smiling, but actually felt a little bad for what they had done to the boy. He thought nobody deserved poo in their mouth.

Alvis, apparently reading his brother’s apprehension reminded Hardy that the other boys had started throwing rocks first. The cow patties were just them defending themselves.

As the boys walked along the tree line, more hoping than expecting that the other boys would return, they heard a bell ringing in the direction of the house. It was a dinner bell their father had installed. When it rang, the boys went to the house. No exceptions.

“Are we going to tell mom?” Hardy asked his older brother.

“No way,” Alvis answered. “We were basically fighting. She wouldn’t like that.”

“Yeah,” Hardy agreed, “And you threw poop and it went in one of their mouths.”

With that reminder both of the boys started laughing again, and they continued laughing as they climbed over the fence into the pasture that was being used by the cows, who moved as a herd in the boys’ direction, apparently curious about what the duo were up too, and whether or not they might have any sweet grain to offer.

The boys were still laughing when they climbed over the second fence, right behind the detached garage. Hardy stopped to pet Bull who was resting under a tree, in some shade. Alvis was repeating the boy’s words, “It got in my mouth,” with variations that ventured farther and farther from the truth.

When they made it to the back porch, their mother asked, “what have you guys been doing?”

“Just playing,” was Alvis’s reply, to which both boys started laughing.

“Uh huh,” came their mother’s unbelieving reply. “Just wash your hands before lunch.”

“Yes ma’am,” Alvis said.

“We sure need to,” replied Hardy, “I wouldn’t want any of this in my mouth.”

Both boys stood in front of the sink laughing. Alvis grabbed the soap that Hardy couldn’t reach and dispensed a good pump into his brother’s open hand before they both starting bumping each other’s arms out of the way, struggling to be the first to rinse.

A Guy in a Bathroom

Theodore Guy Abel knew there was no way he was going to be able to shit in a little room without a lock on the door. To call the emotion he was experiencing anything short of arresting fear wouldn't have been doing it justice, and in case anyone reading hasn't ever tried to evacuate their bowels while staring into the face of their own existence, Guy was stopped dead in his tracks.

It wasn't that the bathroom was dirty. In fact, the bathroom was surprisingly agreeable, and in those moments upon first entering, Guy was feeling much better about the undertaking than he usually was when using a public toilet for anything north of number one. The room itself was large enough to be comfortable, but a single occupancy setup. There was one toilet, one urinal, and no stall. If someone were to contemplate the ideal facilities to be found in a public space, and Guy had, the resultant facility would appear much like this one.

The smell was clean. Lemon Pinesol, or maybe citrus Lysol. The spray can on the shelf above the sink was linen-fresh Febreze, so the smell obviously wasn't the result of some measly masking. The toilet itself was clean, a white seat on white stool; neither showing the signs of recent abuse or much use over the years. In fact, Guy considered that the toilet looked almost new. He imagined that his own ass would be the first to have ever touched the cold seat, and very importantly, he imagined it ice cold when his ass first touched the porcelain.

The bathroom was also well supplied. Good news for anyone trying to gauge the attention with which a bathroom is attended. The toilet paper dispensed in one of those plastic containers that automatically fed new rolls when one was emptied. When Guy reflected on the simple likelihood that he would actually be the one on whom the paper ran

out, he felt confident that he would have no issues with completing the process; there were simply too many squares to be had in the first place. And the icing on the cake, as if all these discoveries weren't enough, was the dispenser of paper seat covers that adorned the wall, full of the protection and promises of a pleasant experience.

In short, this bathroom was ideal. If this deed needed to be done, and it did, there wasn't a better publicly available bathroom to be had. The whole of this decision, which would appear to those outside of Guy's mind to be a matter of minutes, and possibly requiring a checklist of some kind, was reconciled in seconds. It was only at that point that Guy saw fit to commit to his task by locking the door.

And that was where Guy still waited, unable to lock the door that had to be locked, and by the minute less able to abandon his pursuit in the small room. Guy's time had come. He was stuck.

"Oh, sorry. Didn't know it was occupied."

Guy was pulled out of his daze by the address of a voice too close to his ear, and turned to find the door closing behind the would-be bathroomer.

"Oh, it's uh." Guy tried to respond, but said much too little too late.

When the door had shut completely, he pushed his foot against the wooden veneer and examined the door more closely. There must have been a lock in a bathroom as well maintained as this one was. Who would go through the effort of restocking seat-covers without ever considering a lock on the door? His eye followed the edge nearest the knob from top to bottom, and then from bottom to top. He rubbed the back of his hand along the frame at eye level, about where he expected a simple sliding bolt would be. Upon finding no mechanism with which to latch the door, Guy's eyes drifted slowly to his left, knowing there

wasn't any reasonable way to lock the door on the hinge side, but wondering for a moment at this situation being anything but reasonable.

Finally, Guy allowed his eyes to rest on his defeat, the knob. It too was clean, brushed nickel to match the faucet, faux pulls, and light fixtures that adorned the room. The knob was nice, except for the obvious flaw, a flaw that marked the knob's failure in every way that mattered to Guy. It was without a core. It couldn't lock.

Guy fell against the door, his face pressed against the lacquer. He was too distraught to address the disgusting reality of putting one's face on the wall of a public restroom. And besides, what else could he do? Certainly he couldn't be expected to return to his table without having used the toilet. It simply wasn't an option. To illuminate his current circumstances to his date wasn't an option either. She was certainly already wondering why Guy hadn't returned. When he left the table, Guy hoped that basic modesty would deny her asking anything more explicit than a basic "You're feeling alright?" That was a question he could answer with an "absolutely," and neither would feel the need to say anymore or consider it any further. But that had been Guy's understanding of the events when his plan had been a three-minute trip born of a fast running necessity. Now he had already spent upwards of five-minutes in the bathroom and wasn't yet any closer to his ultimate goal. There was a soft knock at the door.

"Um..." There was hesitation. "Are you in there, Guy? Are you okay?"

"Yes, it's me."

There was silence again before he heard, "You're okay?"

"I'm fine." Guy didn't have anything else to offer.

His date was at the door. She wanted to make sure he was fine; she wanted to know he was still alive and didn't need help; she was worried. She couldn't doubt the reality any longer. He had been in the bathroom for too long, and there's only one reason to be in a public restroom for any length of time. That, of course, wasn't the action Guy had performed, but it was a superior understanding to any reality that Guy could offer.

"Well," she was speaking again, "Okay."

Guy waited and heard no more from his date. She had left, and couldn't have considered their interaction as anything but a misery. Still, Guy figured, she would likely place the burden of the awkwardness on her decision to visit the restroom in the first place. It was inappropriate, and she was the type to place the blame on herself before looking at any others. After some time considering the conversation he had just had through the door, to Guy's surprise and dismay, he felt the knob jiggle, the door move.

"You all right in there?" It was the same man's voice that had excused itself minutes before. "You've been a while. You all right?"

"Fine. I'm fine." Guy was almost yelling. His voice cracked.

"You sure? It sounds like you're right on the door."

"I said I'm fine, sir. Do you mind?"

"It's just that my son needs to use the restroom. We've been waiting."

Guy didn't respond but thought he heard the voice speaking, then he heard three hard knocks.

Guy didn't say a word.

"Sir, this is the manager."

Guy braced his shoulder against the door, but again didn't say a word.

The knob jiggled and the manager's effort was met with Guy's body. He didn't budge.

"Sir, I'm going to need you to open the door and come out."

"I won't," came Guy's reply.

"Okay, if you're another kid trying to get high in my bathroom then I'll—"

"Is that why you took off the lock? Because some kid wanted to smoke a joint in your bathroom?" The knob jiggled again but Guy didn't feel as much pressure against his shoulder. "You wanted to stop them from smoking so you took the lock off the door? Do you realize what that's done to me?"

The manager didn't speak for a moment, and then responded. "You need to get out of the bathroom now."

"Come on, guy," the man with the waiting son said.

Guy wondered for a moment how the man knew his name, a question he would never consider when in his right mind, and then pushed the thought aside.

"I won't, I need to use this restroom. I'm on a date and I need to use this restroom, which is an entirely reasonable thing to do, but I cannot. And the fault all belongs with you. Using the toilet is not such an outlandish request. To be able to lock the door is not such an outlandish request. Now, thanks to you, I can't do either. You have failed your patrons, sir. I'm not coming out."

Guy waited for a reply and after a few seconds heard, "I'm calling the police. And I'm going to let your table know what's going on."

Guy didn't say a word. Instead, he slid to the floor, his back still pressed firmly against the door. The date, Guy knew, was already done. She, surely was already gone or going. She had been a nice girl.

They had met in a biology class last semester and had studied together for the final. Her grade was better for them having met. Guy's grade was worse. But it didn't matter that she had drug him down a bit, because in the two months that followed she had raised him up. He was more outgoing with her friends than he was in general, and as a result Guy had made some friends of his own.

He was also trying new things, this local Thai restaurant, for instance, that he was now barricaded in. Mostly, she had just put up with him, with his fits of prolonged and one-sided discourse and resistance to pleasure; she had shown Guy that he could be put up with. But now she knew Guy's truth. He had abandoned their date to take a shit in a public bathroom, and when that plan hadn't come to fruition Guy had lost it.

Three thumps sounded against the door. The sound made by an open hand slapping a hollow object with some force. "The police are on their way."

Guy didn't speak again. He was, he supposed, taking a sort of stand. Guy read somewhere that people don't know something is history when they're in it. Maybe he was making history now.

Guy's father had lived through history, as had his grandfather. Guy, in fact, came from a long line of Guys who had served their country and shaped history. Guy's father had fought in the First Gulf War, and his father in Vietnam and Korea, and that man's father was a Guy who was a commander of a mechanized brigade in WWII. If Guys's stories are to be believed, Guys had stood up for their country in every major American conflict, but this Guy

hadn't fought anywhere. He knew he hadn't ever made a stand, a decision based solely on principal and without regard for the pain or negative outcome. He hadn't ever made a decision for the good of a group, for the good of all, but he could now.

Guy stood again.

"You can call the police. I'm making a stand. I shouldn't have to suffer because of someone else's ill-placed drug practices. I won't be placed in an unlocked room and told to shit. I will have my toilet, and I will have my lock, and I thank you for them both."

There was no noise through the door.

"You got that?" Guy asked.

No reply came from the manager. Then Guy heard a, "just a second."

So Guy waited again, as he was resolved to do.

Finally, "This is the manager again. I was on the phone with the police they're on their way. Joe said you had said something?"

"Oh, um. Yeah, I just said that my dad fought in Korea, or um Egypt or wherever. And... well I'm standing for the toilet. I'll have my lock." Guy stopped speaking.

"Okay. The police are on their way. Your date already left."

"That's fine."

There were minutes of silence before Guy slid back to the floor. The knob turned at that moment and the door opened a crack. Then, with some force, it opened completely. The manager was a young man. Maybe twenty-six or twenty-seven and had the body of someone who used to work out a great deal but had given up the pursuit in order to pursue a life. He was saggy and soft, his clothes too big. He smelled like peanut sauce.

Guy didn't speak.

“Get out of here. Go,” the manager was waving his hands back and forth, attempting to shoo Guy out of the room, “Get.”

Guy had backed himself up to the paper-towel dispenser that hung between the sink and urinal.

“I said out, guy,” the manager said as he picked Guy up.

Guy figured the man hadn’t given up weightlifting entirely, as the two pivoted around and Guy was sat back down in the open door. He stood for just a moment, looking around the large man and then decided on the futility of any attempt to regain the room.

He walked down the hall, past the kitchen door and his now empty table, and into the parking lot. The manager followed behind him.

“You know that bathroom needs a lock.” Guy turned around took a step back toward the restaurant, but quickly thought better of it. “I’m right.”

The manager didn’t move out of the doorway. “You’re a nut. Go.”

“I’ll go.” Guy unlocked his car door and opened it. The hinge squealed with use.

“And you, I think, will get a lock.”

Guy smiled with all his teeth and lowered himself into the driver’s seat. A sharp pain shot through his abdomen and he felt sweat running down his chest and brow. There was a penance to pay for any moral stand, any goal worth achieving, and it was clear to Guy that his penance would be paid now. He still hadn’t shit, and thought it best to hurry home where he knew a lockable door would be waiting. He would be alone, but that was the way of some men and some stands.

And with that thought, Guy hit the door lock button of his car and shit his pants. It had been too late. He sat, in the wet smell, looking through the small hedges planted along the edge of the parking lot, as the sun set.

Not every stand ended in glory, or in success. Guy knew that his ancestors had lost battles, just as they had won them. The important thing was to continue the fight, regardless of defeat. Perseverance is what made a man. Guy knew he would persevere.

“Guy, let me in. You drove us,” Guy’s date had come from somewhere and was pulling on the locked handle, “Come on. Just take me home.”

Guy looked her in the eyes, meeting her gaze.

“I won’t,” was all he said.

With that, Guy started his car and put it in reverse, backing out slowly so she wouldn’t be hit by the side mirror.

“Are you serious?” She asked, and then added, “Fuck you.”

As Guy left the parking lot, cracking a window for some of the cool fresh air that existed outside of the car’s confines, he smiled. It was serious, and Guy was serious. He had entered that restaurant a boy, but he had left it a man. His date had changed him from a guy into Guy. He would thank her for that someday, once she had time to calm down. He might thank the manager too, for the ridiculous decision of removing that lock from the door.

But today he would simply go home. He would go home and do the next thing that so immediately needed to be done.

Merritt

Fabian offered the dream job to the Merritt, and Merritt didn't know what to say.

Communication wasn't usually a problem for him, but accepting the job just didn't feel like the right decision. This place seemed to be a dream, a utopia built upon a simple idea. If you are the best place to work, then the best people will want to work for you. This particular utopia was almost 80 acres of beautiful California. Every amenity was included as a free perk. There was a massive cafeteria with food constantly being prepared and daily orders placed to local restaurants. There were state of the art exercise facilities. There was a temporary housing complex full of private rooms that could be booked in case of imminent deadlines that kept you from home for a night or two. The architecture was beautiful and there were massive outdoor workspaces. The Wi-Fi was incredible. And the unreal part was that the company wanted its employees to take advantage of it all as a part of their work. This place was everything that Merritt could imagine, but he didn't know what to say.

“Well, Merritt? What do you think?” The plaid-clad recruiter, Fabian, wore a huge, genuine smile. “It really is as great as it looks.”

Merritt glanced out at group of people standing around and talking in a small building. This campus actually had a bicycle shop with repair stands, compressors, and every bike tool one could imagine. There were bikes to borrow, but it looked like it was mostly used by people to repair their own bikes.

A few people passed by the window. Two men and one woman. They were all good looking. There wasn't a dress code, per se, but the general idea seemed to be looking good. Merritt wondered if that was possible. Could an entire place unify behind the idea that

everyone would look good, whatever they were doing? There did seem to be an air of excellence here, and maybe that excellence shaped one's expectations for oneself.

To Merritt, this place seemed as near to perfect as a place could be. The actualization of the millennial ideal. A place built around shared ideas, open community, individual success, forward thought, and constant support, regardless of failure. Things Merritt really believed in.

“Merritt?”

“Sorry, it's just hard to get my head around,” Merritt finally responded.

“I understand. We want you to be comfortable with the decision you're making. Is there anything I can clarify? The offer, maybe?”

“Yeah, no, it's an incredible offer. Just look at this place, and you guys have so much talent here that I'd get to work with.”

“Just look at the talent!”

Merritt's mother was looking at the finger painting he had just finished. Swaths of blue and yellow turned into green. The red mixed in to form shades of purple and brown.

“Calm down, Brid, he's only two. It's just a bunch of colors spread all over the page. Look, he got more on the newspaper you put down than he did on the paper. Oh, damn, now he's rubbing it all over his face.”

“And now your face looks extraordinary, doesn't it?”

Merritt looked back at his mother in the way a two year old does that's still trying desperately to figure out one thing. Then he smiled and commenced slamming his small hands into the paper that was covered with his creation.

“My goodness, Merritt, you’re making it even better.” Brid clapped for him to continue.

He did, slapping, smearing, and screaming in excitement.

“You know, Stephen,” Brid looked back at her husband, “I think our little boy could be an artist.” She looked back at Merritt. “Do you want to be an artist, little boy?”

“Please don’t start that already, Brid.”

“Don’t start what?” She was still speaking in her Merritt voice, soft and jovial.

“Don’t start telling him to become an artist. He’s going to need to get a real job someday.”

“He’s only two, Stephen. He doesn’t know what I’m telling him to be. All he knows is that I’m excited about what he’s doing. He’s always going to know that I think he’s the smartest most capable boy there is.”

“Ha!” Stephen let out one laugh that was devoid of humor. “And what if he’s not?”

“He will be.”

“Let me tell you something, Brid. I didn’t get to where I am by being the smartest or best looking guy. I got here by being the hardest working guy. Nobody ever pandered to me or told me good job when I hadn’t done a good job.”

“Maybe somebody should’ve.” Brid was still smiling, but she wasn’t speaking in her Merritt voice anymore. “Maybe then you wouldn’t always be so concerned with winning and getting the next thing. I would certainly love you even if you weren’t successful.”

“Yeah, thanks, but it’s a moot point. I’m going to continue being successful. I’m going to work hard and move up, and after I’ve paid my dues I’m going to start my own firm and become my own boss. That’s the only real freedom.”

“Uh huh, and I’ll support you in that. And if you decide, one day, that you want to buy a boat in Florida and become a fisherman, I’ll support that too.” Brid leaned over to give Merritt a kiss, and he covered her cheek in paint. “And our little boy can paint pictures of the ocean. Does that sound like fun?”

“I mean, listen, it sounds like a fun place to work.” Merritt was looking at the talent around him, unsure of where he would fall in comparison. He thought near the top, but so did every other employee, he imagined.

“We have a lot of talent here, and we want to add you to that pool.”

“And I appreciate that, I really do.” Merritt adjusted his bag.

He had worked hard to make it to this point. He had been the one to stay in on Friday nights while all of his friends were going out. He had decided to forego serious relationships so he could focus on school and his grades, and he’d loved it, but Merritt never lost sight of there having been a cost. He couldn't believe there wouldn't be a cost to this too. Nothing in his life had ever come that easy.

“I’m hearing my dad in my head, he’s a lawyer, and he’s saying *never enter an explicit or implicit, verbal or written contract without understanding every in and out of it.*

You mind if we look over the contract?”

“Sure.” Fabian looked a little surprised but not too bothered. “Let’s head to a coffee shop, we have six on the campus, and look over those details.”

“I appreciate it. Maybe it’s just my dad’s pragmatism, but signing a contract that I don’t understand is the last place I want to be.”

...

Merritt's dad was standing next to his wife in the first row of the middle-school bleachers. He looked ready to go, as was his way.

"Is he done? Does he have anything left to run?"

Stephen wore a sort of fedora, one like you'd see on businessman during WWII, even though it was 1999, and a suit and tie. Merritt thought he might be wearing the hat just to bother his son, but that would be some serious commitment to a gag. He wore that same get-up all the time, even on the weekends. He also went into work every day, so Merritt figured that sort of made sense.

Either way, he looked entirely out of place at a middle-school track meet. Everyone else seemed to be managing some sort of comfortable, even on the worn out bleachers, but Merritt noticed that his dad couldn't even be bothered to loosen his tie.

"Last place, Brid, he finished in last place." Stephen adjusted the hat that covered his already bald head.

For such a smart man, Merritt wondered why his dad was so bad at judging how far his son could hear. The distance from the bleachers to the fence was well within auditory range.

"So what. He had fun doing it," Brid said.

"What good is fun? He wants to run in the Olympics. All he's got on the walls are pictures of Michael Johnson and Maurice Greene. You bought him those expensive shoes, and he came in last."

Hearing this, Merritt figured his dad knew exactly how far his son could hear.

"Well, he was much faster than at the last meet. Maybe he's finding his stride."

Merritt's mom seemed to know he could hear them too.

"And maybe he's slow." Stephen sat down next to his wife in the bleachers and lowered his voice. Merritt could still hear him. "Listen, I know I haven't made it to many of these..."

"Any of these," Brid corrected, "You haven't made it to any of these."

"That's not fair. You know how busy I am starting the new office. It takes a lot of work right now to keep it all going, but it'll level out. It's my dream, Honey, and it's happening."

"And being a track star is Merritt's dream."

"I'm not saying he shouldn't do track. I'm just saying that maybe we should point him towards a more realistic goal."

"He's 12 and he's a good kid. We need to let him point himself and remind him what great things he's capable of."

"Nobody reminded us, Brid. We had to work hard and remind ourselves."

Merritt didn't think he could handle hearing his dad explain the importance of picking yourself up by the bootstraps one more time, so he ended his stretches and started toward his family.

"Great job, Honey!"

"Thanks, Mom." Merritt hopped up the bleachers and sat down next to his mom.

"Hey, Dad."

"Well done, Merritt." Merritt watched his dad struggle for something nice to say about his son's performance. "Way to not quit. Mom says you're getting faster."

“Oh, yeah. Two seconds faster than the last meet.” Merritt smiled in actual excitement to his mom. “Can I have some money for some nachos, Mom? I’m starving and coach said we can get concessions when we’re done for the day.”

Merritt’s mom handed him five dollars. “Keep the change.”

Merritt stepped over to his friends and showed them the five dollars, smiling. There wouldn’t be any change. He could still hear his parents.

“You spoil him, Brid.”

“No, I remind him that he’s worth it,” she answered.

“So that’s basically the breakdown. It’s generous with the stock options, if you stay on long enough for them to vest. That’s because we think you’re worth it, and we believe you will drive yourselves if you feel a real investment in the company.” Fabian closed the folder and slid it across the table for Merritt to take.

“I appreciate that.” Merritt really was pleased with the details. “You’ve done a great job, and this place is amazing.”

Merritt meant it, but there was a sort of itch in the back of his mind.

“I’m sensing reservations. I mean, honestly, most of the people who come in here accept an offer before I even show them a workspace, and I’ve given you the whole tour, plus some. So what’s the matter?”

Merritt shifted in the chair and then sat up, leaning forward on the table.

“Honestly, this place is great. You’re great. The deal is great. Even this coffee is great.”

“It is isn’t it? You want more?”

“No, thanks.”

“So what’s stopping you from saying yes?”

“Just say yes, Merritt, and I’ll get you the computer thing you’ve been wanting.” Stephen was leaning on the kitchen table, elbows on either side of his plate. “You come work for me five days a week, filing papers and running errands. I’ll pay you whatever the grocery store was going to pay you and I’ll get you that computer at the end of the summer.

“Sounds like a pretty good deal, Merritt.” Brid was serving herself some more salad.

“And you’ve been wanting that new computer so badly; this way, you could have it and some spending money.”

“And at the end of the summer you’ll have a better idea of what I do at work.”

“It does sound like a good deal...” Merritt was no slouch at negotiating, when he needed to. He had learned from his father. “But what am I going to do in the evenings all summer?”

This offer wasn’t the first Merritt had received, and he was fairly sure it wouldn’t be the last. His father had first suggested Merritt work for him all summer for free. So Merritt went and got a different job offer at the local grocery store. No way could his dad expect him to choose nothing over something. He had created leverage. His dad offered to match the pay.

Merritt didn’t like every lesson his dad had given him over the years, but he was very happy to be using lessons about leverage and negotiation against the master.

Merritt’s next step had been to sweeten the pot. He wanted a new computer. His Windows 95 Gateway was nearly shot. If he wanted to continue tinkering and honing his

skills, then he would need new hardware. He couldn't go to his dad. He knew that would be too obvious, so instead he went to his mom with a plan. He knew the computer was too expensive for his birthday, but he didn't want anything else, so what if he saved all the money from his job and gave it to his mom to go towards the computer? She could give him the computer on June 17th for his birthday, and then he could continue paying her back with his wages until they were even.

The plan was perfect, and the worst case scenario was that she said yes; he would gladly follow through with his part of the plan if that was his best option. Instead, Merritt thought his mom would go tell her husband how badly Merritt wanted the computer and how he wanted to get it. Merritt's father had done the rest.

"I'll get you the computer now, but if you don't work the whole summer, I throw it in a dumpster." Stephen was grinning.

Merritt knew why his dad seemed to be happy; he was proud of his son. Merritt thought it was probably a new experience for him.

"The pot isn't getting any sweeter than that," Stephen continued.

"You got yourself a deal, Boss." Merritt returned to his chicken fried steak. "But you aren't going to make me into a lawyer. I'm going to be the best programmer you've ever seen, instead."

"I'm afraid I'm not going to be the best programmer. That's part of my concern." Merritt scanned the full room and looked out the glass wall at the people milling about. "Look at all these people. Some of them have to do what I do, and I have no idea how I'm going to stack up. That's a scary thought."

Merritt wasn't sure that fear was what was actually making him uneasy, but he figured he'd dig some more and try to figure out his apprehension.

"Hmm," Fabian looked around, acknowledging how many people were around them, "I would guess that some of those people do what you do, yes. But I can guarantee you that we wouldn't have sought you out if we didn't think you were capable. You are. We're sure of it."

"See, that's the thing. I don't just want to be another capable programmer lost among other capable programmers."

"Okay, let's follow that thought. What's the alternative? You're a programmer, so let's chase the bug," Fabian suggested.

"You have a lot of great people here. You guys collect the best talent from around the world. Maybe I'm not as talented as some of them. I'm flattered that you want me, but maybe I'm just middle rung here."

"Okay, and how do you find out?"

"The only way to know is to take the job and find out."

"And if you don't take the job?" Fabian was still smiling, apparently not bothered by his current task.

Merritt thought he actually looked pleased. He probably didn't have to deal with many challenges recruiting here.

"I can find another job with a smaller company. Maybe a startup could use me." Merritt leaned back and sighed.

"And in a smaller pond you'll seem a bigger fish?"

"Sure, but I won't actually be. But maybe there I could make a difference."

“Why do you think you won’t make a difference here, Merritt?”

Merritt had been pretty sure Fabian was wasting his time, but just like that he found Merritt’s concern.

Merritt opened the offer folder to the front page. “Well, for one: what are all these people trying to accomplish?”

“What do you want to accomplish with your life, Merritt?” Stephen was at it again. Every time Merritt came home. “You’re about to graduate with a Computer Science degree from MIT. What are you going to do with that? You’ve got options.”

“Do we really have to have this conversation again, Stephen?” Brid said, “He knows how you feel.”

“Yeah, and he’s going to hear it again, too. The deal was that we pay for undergrad and you take the LSAT. You did and you got amazing scores. That plus MIT on your applications, and you got accepted to every law school you applied to.” Stephen leaned back in his chair to convey how easy the next part was, a tactic Merritt was all too familiar with. “Pick one.”

“Or you can pick a Computer Science graduate program, if you want.” Brid was looking at Merritt, and then she switched over to Stephen. “Did you forget he got those offers too?”

“I didn’t forget, no, but my offer is better than any of those. You get your J.D., pass the Bar, and come work for me. I’ll be out in 10 years and you’ll be the majority partner in a very successful law firm. Student loans, house notes, car notes, and whatever else you want,

you'll be able to afford. I'm talking about comfort, Merritt. I worked so you can be comfortable. Don't throw that away so you can go gamble on computers."

"Do you worry about anything but money? And do you really think computers are still a gamble?" Merritt spoke for the first time since this round of lecturing had started.

"It's a job, Merritt. You do it so you can earn money to support your family. You exchange time for a house, food, cars, and clothing. The better the job, the nicer those things get. After work you get to go home and enjoy those things."

"What about making a difference with a job? Can't I support my family and make a difference? Wouldn't it be nice if things were better for everyone because of my job?"

"Sure, do you have a plan to do that? If it's all about making a difference, you can take some of your time and represent clients who couldn't afford good representation otherwise."

This thought had occurred to Merritt when he was applying to college his senior year. Why couldn't he be a lawyer and help people? Being a lawyer sure seemed like the most obvious route, even if he hadn't ever planned on it. He had asked his dad about it then, a conversation that his dad seemed to have forgotten. The explanation he received then was that his father and the firm dealt with corporate tax. Basically, companies wanted to give as little to the government as possible, and his firm found the legal loopholes to make that happen.

Merritt's thought at the time was that being a corporate tax attorney opposite of the difference he wanted to make. His opinion hadn't shifted in the following four and a half years. His dad protected the rich, and as far as Merritt could tell that hurt the poor. He wanted to improve things for people who lawyers and tax law never would.

“It says you are going to improve the world through technical innovation, but do you have a plan to do that?” Merritt was leaning on the table, holding his empty coffee cup with both hands. “I mean it’s nice to say, but how is it actually being done?”

Fabian took a long drink of his coffee. “That’s a tough question to answer because real improvement can be a long process.”

“But you can point to improvements? Plans that have come to fruition? Programs that are helping now or will help in the future?”

“Well the internet has been a boon for civilization as a whole, I think you’ll agree. We have streamlined the way the internet functions and provided users with clean UIs that function fault-free.”

“Really?” Merritt sat back in his chair, and then caught himself and calmed down. “Your answer is to take credit for the internet? I’m not trying to be rude, but there are other options for everything you guys provide. And this company makes money on all the apps, websites, and plugins.”

“Without a way to monetize services, a company can’t exist. All this can’t exist.” Fabian pointed to the extravagance around them.

“But you know those things benefit the people who work here, not the world.”

“Like I said, the road is long and complicated. We monetize some services so we can recruit and provide comforts to our employees. Those employees then look for ways to improve the world.” Fabian’s smile had become less convincing, but he still wore it.

“So if I accept, will I be one of those world improvers?” Merritt was back to leaning on his elbows.

“It’s really hard to say, but there’s always opportunity for moving within the company, so if you don’t like the first assignment, you can file for a transfer as soon as your probationary period is up and your team leader signs off.”

“Let me ask you this, the last person you recruited, where did they start?”

Fabian hesitated, “debugging the search engine, I believe.”

“And the person before that?”

Even more hesitation this time. “They worked on coding a plugin that automatically searches for better prices while shopping online... The thing you have to understand is that even in the positions that aren’t glamorous, people are earning stock, making a generous salary, and enjoying all the comforts this campus offers. They can move up. You can move up, but you have to accept the offer first.”

Merritt knew the look; Fabian was done explaining. The pot wasn’t getting any sweeter.

“You’ve been great.” Merritt stood up from the table. “What’s the expiration on the offer?”

“Forty-eight hours and I’ll need an answer.”

“So do you have an answer, Merritt?” Stephen asked as they walked through the airport.

Merritt hadn’t seen his parents for a few months, but his dad was straight to business, as always. He was relentless. Stephen wanted to talk life goals and plans.

“You chose a master’s degree in computer sciences and now you’ve got it. You wanted to make the world better. So now that you’re done learning, you must have the answer. How do you do it? How do you make things better?”

“No, I still don’t know, but I already got a job offer. I had a few interviews, and they seem to want me bad.”

“Oh Merritt, that’s great.” Brid hugged her son.

“And is the place reputable?” Stephen was still business, but Merritt heard interest in his voice, instead of condescension.

“It’s as reputable as they come, and I’m not actually supposed to say who it is as a part of the recruiting process.”

“The military? NSA?” Stephen actually looked excited now.

“No, dad.” Merritt laughed and gave his mom another one-armed hug. “Sorry to disappoint. I’m actually flying out to San Francisco, right after you guys leave, to tour the place and see what I think. Honestly, I think it’s a done deal.”

“Just ask questions, Merritt. Many an employer has promised more than they can deliver to attract talent, and you are certainly talent worth attracting.”

Merritt paused while loading his mother’s bag into the back of the Subaru and then took his Father’s bag and did the same. He had just been complimented by his father. He wasn’t sure he could remember that happening before—probably had something to do with the boot straps.

“I know. I’ll ask questions.” Merritt sat down in the driver’s seat. “But I’m telling you Dad, these places aren’t what you’re used to. They work differently.”

Merritt wished his dad would believe him, that he would try to understand what Merritt meant about the new ways these businesses work, what they were really about.

“Maybe you’re right. Maybe I’m a dinosaur who just doesn’t get it anymore. Maybe it’s all about dreams and the world. Maybe your generation really doesn’t care about comfort or your salaries anymore.”

“It’s not all about being comfortable, right? I mean taking a job here?” Merritt had only made it three steps from the table when he turned to ask the question.

“No, of course not,” Fabian answered. “I understand the apprehension, Merritt. It’s nice to think that we can change the world. Maybe we can, I don’t know, but do you have to be uncomfortable to do that?”

Merritt thought about how hard he had worked filing papers that summer and how much he had enjoyed his new computer each evening. The computer his dad had bought him.

“I don’t see why.”

“Right, me either.” Fabian held out his hand to Merritt. “So are you going to join the team?”

Merritt thought about what he had told his father for years, and what his dad had told him about comfort and salaries. His dad had been wrong, Merritt figured. He would change the world. But in the meantime he would make some money and work on this incredible campus. He had student loans to pay; he couldn’t pay those with nothing. And it’s not like the cost of living was going down.

Merritt returned Fabian’s gesture, grasping his hand and giving it two vigorous shakes.

“I’m excited to make a difference.”

Would I?

Chip wasn't sure why he was even going to the dance, but there were a couple things he was sure of. He was sure no one would actually dance with him, and he was sure he wouldn't have a good time.

"Glad you made it, Chip," Andrew hollered across the street, still looking great in his uniform. Andrew and chip had been friends since they were kids. They had enlisted together.

As they walked down Main, Andrew's girlfriend, Maggie, was saying something that Chip couldn't hear. He had no doubt she was saying something about his coming tonight. Probably something about his eye. The truth was, Chip wouldn't have come at all, but he couldn't handle the thought of sitting in the living room with his mom another night just to listen to her complain about how Chip never tried and how she would never have any grandchildren. He had been listening to it for the last three nights, as long as the Clarksville Spring Fair had been going, and he couldn't do it again.

The Clarksville Spring Fair wasn't much, but it passed for the event of the year in a sleepy town like Clarksville. It was four days of rides, games, music, and dancing. Tonight, the last night, was the Jamboree. It was a dance very much like the dances of the previous three nights, but this time there was an expectation that everyone attend. Young people, old people, butchers, mechanics, police, everyone would be at the dance tonight.

The result of this unusually large meeting of townspeople was that it was sometimes called Lover's Jamboree. Couples were formed on this night. Marriages all over town could be traced back to this one night a year. If you were single and wanted not to be, there was no place better to be. Or at least that how Chip's mother had described the situation to him, but the truth was that at 25, Chip didn't really want advice on love from his mother.

Standing with his key in the car, Chip thought about turning the key back the other way. It had been locked for a few moments, but he hadn't taken a step away from it. He wasn't sure he was going to.

"Chip, you made it," Michael said as he slapped Chip on the back.

"I made it," Chip replied.

There was a pause and then Michael said, "Well are you going to the Jamboree or just standing by your car all night?"

"I... uh..."

"Come on," Michael grabbed Chip by the shoulder and pulled him close as if they were better friends than they were.

The two walked down the sidewalk. Michael and Chip hadn't ever been close. Michael was just too young, four or five years younger than Chip. That didn't bother Chip now; what bothered him how quickly Michael was walking. On a night with weather like this, he couldn't imagine why anyone would be in a hurry to get anywhere.

"What's the rush?" Chip asked.

"What's the rush? How about every single girl in town being in one room? And they're all looking for love tonight. Chances don't get any better for single guys like us," Michael whooped and then slapped a leaf that was hanging low over the sidewalk.

"That's what my mom said too, basically."

"Oh God, man," Michael stepped in front of Chip, facing him, "don't say that again. Definitely don't say it to any girls in there."

Michael turned and the two started toward the hall again. The music was now clearly audible. Chip noticed and put his hand up to his left eye. He then purposefully forced his hand down to his side.

“You aren’t worried about your eye, are you?” Michael said, apparently noticing Chip’s actions.

Chip didn’t respond.

“It just ain’t a big deal, you know? I mean there was that rumor about it, you know the one, but everybody pretty much knows that isn’t true. I mean, fake eyes are made out of glass, right? So everybody know that’s what it is. I mean, it’s not like we talk about it, but everybody knows is what I’m saying.”

Chip stopped walking. Michael stopped speaking. Chip was trying to decide how he could waste a few hours. Maybe he would just drive around. One thing was for sure, he wasn’t going into the dance.

“Come on, man,” Michael said and put a hand around Chip’s shoulder again, pushing him the last block to the Jamboree, “I’ll stay with you until you feel comfortable.”

And with that, Chip crossed the threshold. Everyone near the door seemed to turn to them as Michael straightened his tie and walked straight away from Chip and toward a group of young women standing near the punch table.

This was the first Jamboree that Chip had been to since he was a kid, and while it seemed smaller than he remembered, there also seemed to be more people than there had been then. The hall itself was white wood, painted fresh every year just before the Fair and Jamboree. There were pink and yellow streamers hanging between rafters and small sconces

full of spring flowers hung on the walls. Three of the four walls slid open like barn doors, opening the hall up to Main Street on one side and the park on the other two.

There was a table covered with ten punch bowls full of ten different colors of punch in one corner. To the left of those tables was a small group of men leaning against a stack of boxes covered in burlap. The punches didn't have any alcohol, of course, but if you wanted to warm up a bit, those men would top off your punch glass with whatever mash concoction they had been saving up all year for this very occasion. Those men and their wares were a "secret" that stood in the same place providing the same service every year since the first Jamboree. When Chip was a kid he had asked his mother about them. She said that the first Jamboree had been during the prohibition. Now they hid it half out of politeness and half out of tradition.

In the other corner, about twenty white folding chairs were lined up in rows. A few had been moved by individuals to accommodate conversation, but all the chairs currently stood empty. As the night went on, the chairs would slowly fill. Young women who hadn't been able to find a dance partner, and were tired of coyly trying, would line up there to be selected by the still partner-less men. Chip had always found that portion of the night a bit sad, but that was apparently the way it was done.

The largest wall, the one that didn't open, was home to the bandstand and a local band that would play all night. The middle of the room had been cleared as the main dancefloor of the Jamboree. Just outside the open door on the Main Street side was where the older and married men gathered to talk, the first park side door was where the older and married women gathered to watch the dancing, and the second park side door was where the children gathered to dance, play tag, and occasionally fight.

Chip hadn't attended a Jamboree in years, but it was exactly like he had remembered it, and since he was now alone and obviously wasn't going to ask anyone to dance, he knew exactly where to mosey to.

"Hi there, Mr. Williams, Mr. Taff, Mr. Voller," Chip said as he stepped onto the sidewalk off Main.

The three men seemed to be wearing identical suits, khaki linen. Mr. Taff was holding onto a pipe, but it wasn't lit; his second wife wouldn't let him smoke as she blamed smoking for the death of her first husband. They all had punch glasses full of clear liquid.

"Hello, Chip," Mr. Taff replied.

"Why aren't you in there dancing, Chip?" Mr. Voller asked.

"Too young to be out here with us old men," Mr. Williams offered.

"Oh, you aren't too old, Mr. Williams," Chip replied.

"Uh huh," Mr. Williams said, apparently understanding that Chip wasn't up to dancing just yet.

"How's the shop doing?" Mr. Taff asked, "The wife said she passed on her way back from late service and there were four or five cars out front already."

"Yessir, it's doing great so far. I almost have more work than I can stay on top of."

"My tractor has been slipping out of high gear. Think that's something you can look at?" Mr. Voller asked.

"Oh, yessir. Tractors, cars, trucks, anything. I'm happy to look at it," Chip replied, "You want to head out there now and take a look? I don't mind."

"Now? Son, we just got to the Jamboree," Mr. Voller said with a confused look on his face.

“You look like you could use some punch, Chip,” Mr. Williams said, “and I think Tiffany over there would maybe use some too.”

Mr. Williams pointed to his niece who was standing alone just inside the first park door. Tiffany was a pretty girl, short with the maybe the curliest hair Chip had ever seen. He took the hint that it was time for him to leave this particular group of men and headed in the direction of Tiffany and the punch.

He filled two cups and thought of asking for a couple nips but decided that might be a bit presumptive. He took the cups to Tiffany and held the one out in his right hand, offering her that side of himself.

“You looked thirsty,” Chip said.

Tiffany looked almost startled, but then took the punch. “Thanks, Chip.”

Chip, being out of the material he had prepared, didn’t know what to say next and just stood next to Tiffany.

“It seems like it’s been a long time since I’ve seen you, Chip,” Tiffany spoke, “Where have you been?”

“I was in California,” Chip said, somehow unaware just how interesting that statement actually was to girls from small towns in Ohio.

“California? Wow.”

“Yeah, I was training on diesel engines and then petrol engines.”

Tiffany spoke again, “did you go to the beach? What’s the ocean like?”

“Oh, the beach is sandy. It gets in everything and it’ll ruin mechanical parts. You better have a good air filter, and even then it’ll get clogged up.”

Tiffany looked around, but Chip noticed that people were leaving the couple mostly alone. Then, suddenly, Tiffany thanked Chip for the punch and walked away toward a group of women standing just outside.

That left Chip standing alone, again, at the Jamboree. He gulped most of the punch from his glass and headed toward the men leaning against burlap. He asked that they top him off, and then walked away sipping what the night so obviously called for.

“What’ve you got there,” someone said as they grabbed Chip by the shoulder.

His first thought was that Michael had finally made his way back to fulfill his promise of sticking around, but when Chip turned around he found Andrew instead wearing his dress-uniform, shining with medals.

“Chip, where have you been?” Andrew asked, “And where’s your uniform?”

“I uh, I didn’t think...”

“You didn’t think?” Andrew asked and then laughed, “You should have worn the uniform. Girls love it.”

“Well I didn’t really...” Chip paused to find a way to say what he meant but couldn’t. It was the reason he hadn’t spent any time with Andrew since he’d gotten back.

“Hell, you didn’t.” Andrew slapped chip on the back, almost causing him to spill.

“You did.”

Chip took a swig in an attempt to catch up to his old friend and avoid spilling his drink.

“Listen, I know you don’t want to talk about it, so we won’t. I just wanted to say that the rumor about it being made out of wood, that’s so awful. It drives me crazy,” Andrew was now standing face to face with Chip, looking him square in the eye.

“I appreciate that,” chip said, as he turned his head a little to the left.

“And listen,” Andrew continued, “My sister is coming a little later with my cousin. You probably haven’t seen her since she was little. Her name’s Mona. I don’t know if you remember her.”

Chip thought maybe he did.

“So they’re coming, and I told Mona that you wanted to catch up with her since it’s been so long since you’ve seen her. And listen, she’s got that thing with her lip, but that’s not why I thought you two would be great together. She’s like my favorite family member, out of all of them, and you’re my best friend, and I thought you guys would be good. Is that alright?”

Chip didn’t know whether it was alright or not, but he was very quickly remembering how good of friends he and Andrew had been and how much he missed that. He hadn’t really spent any time with Andrew since that last leave when Andrew had come to visit him in the hospital one last time. It was before shipping out. They both new Chip wouldn’t be shipping out, ever, but Andrew had promised to save some Japs for him and suggested that Chip just go with an eyepatch instead of the replacement they were fitting him for. He said the eyepatch would scare the shit out of those Japs.

Instead, Chip had gotten the replacement and then gone to a mechanic school in San Diego after his medical discharge. The place was cutting edge, but he was an injured veteran, so he’d been a shoo-in for the program. He didn’t tell them that he’d been injured during training, just two weeks after finishing basic. He didn’t really tell anyone that, although everyone here already knew. Once he was done with the Diesel training, he enrolled in the

petrol program. He was good with mechanical things, and he couldn't stand the thought of going back home.

Soon after that, the war ended, and Chip had run out of schools to attend. He went back home, but never got back in touch with Andrew. This was the most they'd talked in the six months Chip had been back.

"All I'm saying is that you should talk to her when she gets here," Andrew said.

Chip agreed to say hello, and the two walked over to where Andrew's girlfriend was standing with some of her friends. They were a few years younger than Chip and Andrew, but Chip recognized most of them and did his best to be friendly, standing awkwardly with his right foot toward the middle of the circle, facing almost perpendicular to the group.

"Sharon, what took so long?" Andrew was speaking to the young woman who had just walked into the hall, his sister, "where's Mona?"

"She got caught by Mom. She's here," Sharon replied, "You're going to love her, Chip."

Chip wasn't sure he liked that Sharon was in on the setup too, and he glanced around the circle of people, wondering how many of them were in on it as well. He did his best to smile and nodded to Sharon. Then he took his glass to the punch table, got a drop of the blue liquid this time, and then asked for his glass to be filled to the top with the good stuff.

Chip spent the better part of the next hour standing in Main Street. He spoke to a few men as they passed by him, but did his best to stay to himself and stay unnoticed. As some of the older townspeople got tired and started to leave the Jamboree, the street became more difficult to hide in, and eventually Chip was discovered.

“Where’d you go, Chip?” Andrew asked as he approached his old friend, accompanied by his sister.

“I’ve been here.”

“Well,” Sharon was speaking now, “Mona was waiting to meet you, and you’ve been pretty ugly about it so far.”

“I didn’t ask you all to do that,” Chip said, trying to defend himself from Sharon’s pointed wrath.

“You didn’t have to. You’re basically family and we want you to be happy. Get in the hall and say hello to Mona, you ass,” Sharon said and then turned around and walked back into the hall.

The group of men that were still standing in the street were mostly looking at Chip now, aware of exactly how his night was going.

“When did Sharon grow up?” Chip asked.

“When we were away,” was Andrew’s reply, “She loves you Chip. Probably more than she loves me, honestly.”

“I should apologize to her,” Chip said.

“You should go talk to Mona, whoever that is,” Mr. Williams said, “that’s how you make it right with little Sharon. And did you hear your sister curse like that, Andrew? Who taught her that, I wonder?”

Mr. Williams appeared to be the only member of his original group still at the dance, but apparently he had heard the whole exchange. Chip thanked Mr. Williams, apologized to Andrew, and then asked that he walk in the hall with him and point out Mona, in case he didn’t recognize her.

Chip didn't need the help.

Chip remembered and recognized Mona immediately. She had a light complexion; her skin was almost the same white as the chair she was sitting on. Now, looking at her in profile, Chip noticed her small nose that turned up, ever so slightly at the tip. Her ears were somehow cute and barely visible under the jet black hair that fell in long, smooth ribbons to her mid back. She was short, but not necessarily small. There was an obvious power in her frame. Chip remembered that she could outrun and out climb all of them as kids. In short, Mona was beautiful, and she somehow looked entirely empowered in the chair that Chip that thought of as sad only a short time ago. He hesitated.

"Go, chickenshit," Andrew whispered into his ear, and then gave in a small shove.

Chip moved between the rows of chairs as the song changed from something in the realm of fast to a slow song. Perfect, Chip thought, I can dance to this. As he stepped up to Mona she turned to look at him, and he was struck for a moment by something that he had forgotten from their childhood. Mona had a cleft lip as a child, and now she had a scar where her top lip didn't quite line up across. As a piece of the woman before him, Chip thought the scar was barely worth noticing. In fact, he thought the scar was even becoming on her.

"It's about time," Mona said, smiling for an instant before sort of forcing the expression from her face.

"Yeah, I'm sorry." Chip was struggling to find something to say again, "I uh..."

"You're here," Mona spoke again.

Chip appreciated that she would talk when he couldn't find a word. Mona smiled again while he sort of stared at her, and again she forced the expression from her face.

Finally, Chip remembered what he should ask next, "Would you like to dance?"

Mona answered immediately, “Would I?”

In that moment, Chip new that he had been right about Andrew and staying away from him. Chip had been right about what the rest of them thought of him. He thought of Mona smiling, and then forcing the smile from her face, attempting to hide her laughter. For the first time since he had been talking to Mona, Chip turned his body slightly to the left and faced her with his right.

“Cleft lip,” He said, and then louder, “Harelip.”

It took some time for the moment to catch up with Mona, but as she covered her mouth and started to cry, Chip was sure he had done the right thing. He wouldn’t be ridiculed anymore.

As he walked out of the hall, past his old friend and Sharon, past Mr. Williams and the rest of the men, he whispered under his breath, “wood eye?” and then, “Harelip,” as he enjoyed the cool air of spring and the music falling out of the Jamboree.

Elyria

The old fence rail had resisted much more than Kearns expected, but hedge fences tended to last. As he threw another aged post onto the old beat up trailer Kearns thought that there was shame in what he was doing. This fence had been standing his whole life, providing a boundary to what had seemed his entire world. He still couldn't believe that his father had given in and agreed to his mother's pleas. Plastic just didn't seem to suit the old Kansas farmhouse that Kearns and his older brother, Miles, had grown up in. He couldn't imagine those perfectly white and straight rails lying where crooked, grayed limbs belonged, set against the worn façade of his parent's home.

As Kearns wrenched another board from its long standing post, he felt the cold wind pulling across the pasture. It disappeared into the thick row of trees only to reappear on the other side where it could rob someone else of their warmth. He worked to button up his flannel jacket without removing the stiff leather gloves that kept his fingers from turning numb, but the task proved every bit as daunting as removing the fence.

Kearns noticed movement in the tall grass, now growing with the lack of cows in the pasture, and expected to receive a lick on the glove from his bloodhound, Gus, who was well past his prime, but happy to join Kearns in simple tasks. Instead, Kearns was surprised to hear Linda's voice. He still fumbled with the buttons, but immediacy was added to his actions.

"What are you doing?" Linda wasn't too near Kearns yet, but she was moving closer.

"I'm trying to button up this jacket, but these stupid gloves..." Kearns didn't turn around.

“Here.” Linda put her hand on Kearns’ bicep and turned him around. The task was easy for someone not wearing gloves. She quickly returned her hands to her pockets once his jacket was closed. “Your cheeks are so red.”

“Yeah, it’s cold out.” Kearns thought that was true, but he had also felt them flush as his sister-in-law had stood close, buttoning his jacket. “You want to help?” Kearns grabbed the crowbar again and was more than happy to take some of the attention off himself.

“I haven’t ever been much good with manual labor, but I can hand you what you need,” Linda said as she moved towards the pile of tools that was spread out across the tailgate of Kearns’ truck.

Kearns’ pried at another board, but it didn’t want to budge. “Sledge.”

Linda grabbed the ten-pound hammer and handed it to Kearns. “This is going to take you a long time.” She looked down the length of the fence that Kearns still hadn’t gotten to. “It’s supposed to keep getting colder today.”

“Boy, you sure do bring the positivity with you,” Kearns said and swung the sledgehammer at the non-compliant rail. It answered the strike with a gun like pop. Again and again the report, until the board finally snapped loose. “Really, I don’t mind the work.” Kearns sat down on the bottom rail of the fence. “If by the end of the day I’ve bled a little, then I’ve probably accomplished something worthwhile.”

“Huh. I’m not a big fan of bleeding for any cause. Even self-fulfillment.” Linda moved to the rail and sat down next to Kearns, gripping his arm for warmth.

“It gives me a chance to think, too.”

“That’s what you need, Kearns, more opportunity to be in your own head.” Linda stood up and ruffled Kearns’ stocking cap before starting towards the house. “Love ya.”

“Yep.” Kearns stood too, grabbing the crowbar again and starting on the next rail, wondering how it could feel the same after all the years.

Kearns was only eleven, and Linda twelve, when her family moved away. Kearns could remember her in the front seat of her mom’s station wagon, waving at Miles and him, with one of the stray dogs in her lap. Kearns had given the dog to Linda the day before she left, after he had found her crying on same fence he was tearing down now.

“I don’t want to leave. Why should I?” Linda wiped her face with the oversized plaid shirt that she had taken from her dad’s closet. It was the same kind of shirt that she wore every day.

“Well, we’ll still see you.” Kearns was standing against the fence, reaching up to grab the top rung, half hanging as they spoke.

“When will you see me?” Linda had stopped crying, but the tears were still present in the form of clean runs down her dusty cheeks.

“We won’t see you.” Miles was throwing rocks across the road, trying to hit the abandoned oil well that he hadn’t ever seen spinning.

“Shut up, Miles.” Kearns let go of the fence, but didn’t move towards his older brother for fear of what might happen if he did. Miles and Kearns didn’t fight much, but when they did, Miles’ recent entry into puberty gave him the upper hand.

“I’m going in. You guys are being boring.” Miles stepped through the fence and patted Linda on the back, awkwardly, then started towards the house. “See you, Linda.”

“He’s right, Kearns.” Linda looked at the pack of town dogs that were walking on the road towards the children and their commotion. “I won’t see you or the dogs anymore.”

Linda jumped off the fence and started sprinting down the road in the direction of her house.

None of the dogs followed her. Instead, they just came to stand around Kearns, as they all watched her run. When she was out of sight, Kearns looked at the pack that Linda loved so much, looking for something

“You’ll do, Scratch.” Kearns grabbed one of the smaller dogs out of the bunch, sure that he could prove to Linda that it’s going to be all right.

Linda had named the dog Scratch because he would scratch anytime he wasn’t moving.

“Let’s get you cleaned up,” Kearns said, headed toward the house.

After Scratch was washed, Kearns made a leash out of some old bailing cord, complete with one of the Christmas bows that his mom had saved, and delivered it to Linda. She was so excited when she saw the dog, and so upset about moving away, that her mom decided to let her keep the spastic mess.

“Thank you so much, Kearns!” Linda leaned over and kissed Kearns on the cheek. She was still holding the dog, and it licked Kearns on the other cheek at the same time.

It wasn’t quite the outcome he had hoped for. Kearns had thought he loved her in the way an eleven-year-old does. He thought that she would know that when he gave her the dog. Instead, he had ended up with one slobbery cheek, and one that held no lasting evidence of affection.

“Sure thing, Linda. Bye.” Kearns ran out of the open front door and found his own new dog, Gus, waiting for him.

...

Years passed with little word from Linda, until things changed.

Kearns ducked again, putting his hand on the long-since tilled ground, as Miles waved the pellet gun around to emphasize his story. It wasn't, Kearns thought, that Miles didn't know the right way to handle the gun. They had both been taught their entire lives how to be safe. Miles just didn't care about safety if disregarding it could help his telling a story.

"And then the guy stopped the car and we all took off into the field." Miles was still swinging the shotgun. "Linda was faster than you, and she wanted to slow down in case that guy followed you."

"Miles, shut up. I was there." Kearns started walking through the harvested cornfield toward the tree line, his gun pointed down and away. Gus was right beside him, nose to the ground, smelling for anything that might warrant shooting.

"You know, Linda was a cool girl," Miles was nodding and smiling. "I think I'll call her tonight."

"What? Why would you call her?" Kearns bent down and patted Gus on his flank, hoping Miles wouldn't notice the panic in his voice. "We haven't talked to her in, like, a year."

"Well, I'm going to be able to drive in a couple months, so maybe I'll ask her out." Miles' chin was higher in the air than it had been before. He tripped on a berm and caught himself by leaning on his gun. "It's not like they moved very far, anyways, just to McPherson."

"Yeah, well I don't know why she would want to go out with you." Kearns didn't like the idea of Miles on a date with Linda. He didn't even think that Miles had really liked her.

“She would want to do that because I’m handsome, and well-spoken, and let’s not forget funny.” Miles was grinning.

Kearns thought the joke would have been funny if his brother didn’t actually walk around believing those things.

“This is so boring.” Miles gave up on stepping over the furrowed earth and started walking straight down a line, perpendicular to Kearns’ path.

“I’ll meet you over there.” Kearns pointed at the trees that he was walking towards, happy to not be talking about Miles dating Linda, and turned to see Miles shoo him away.

Gus’ tail was wagging, and his pace was picking up. He smelled something in the next row, but there wasn’t any telling what it was. It could be pigeons, quail, a raccoon, or even a skunk.

Kearns hoped it was whatever had been killing the chickens. A purpose for hunting always made it more exciting for him. “Find it, Gus.”

On the command Gus broke for the trees that held the game, and Kearns shouldered the shotgun in case it was quail. Nothing flew when Gus reached the trees, so Kearns started a slow jog in his direction, looking over to see Miles oblivious to the action, and talking to himself in lieu of an audience.

When Miles got to Gus he saw his hound standing over a male opossum that was pretending to be dead. “It’s yours, Gus.” Kearns turned around and started walking out of the tree line. The sun was set now, and it was getting cold. There wasn’t any noise from Gus or the opossum as the dog killed the faking animal.

Kearns remembered how much Linda had hated hunting or taking a pig or cow, but those things were the reality of country life.

“Nothing?” Miles had finally reached to tree line too and was digging through his coat pockets for his gloves and flashlight.

“Opossum.” Kearns pointed towards Gus. “Big male.” He too put on his gloves and pulled out his flashlight for the walk home. “Come on, Gus. That’s good.”

Gus left the now dead possum on the ground and the three of them started the walk back through the field, Miles telling another story.

Kearns stood, patting the draw-horse on his quivering neck, and listening to his father visit with the Mennonite men. Kearns’ dad had been a friend of the community for a long time, and while they obviously weren’t Mennonite— because neither of them was wearing the old style clothes and his father didn’t have a full beard— they were always welcome at the get-togethers that the Mennonite community held.

“Well, crops will do alright if it stops raining.” Kearns’ dad was drinking some fresh tea that one of the women had brought to him.

Kearns’ own dry throat made him regret being too shy to have asked for a glass of his own.

“Better too much than not enough.” The oldest Mennonite man, Johann Lederach, was nodding. “And we’ll all be complaining about not enough in a couple of months.”

The joke got a chuckle out of most of the men, including Kearns’ dad, but Kearns was too distracted by the arrival of Miles and his date to laugh.

“Hey, everybody.” Miles waved and addressed Johann first. “Do you remember Linda, Mr. Lederach?”

“Of course I do.” Mr. Lederach started to chuckle. “How could I forget the little girl who dressed my daughter up in a purple dress and makeup and almost gave my wife a heart attack?”

“Oh yeah, that was me.” Linda pushed her long red hair out of the way so she could nervously rub her neck. “Sorry about that, Mr. Lederach.”

“Not a problem young lady, that’s water under the bridge. Please,” Mr. Lederach motioned to the tables covered with food and the kids playing games, “Make yourself at home, but please leave the children how you found them.”

With that, the men started heading towards the new barn that they were all celebrating. Mr. Lederach was describing the construction to Kearns’ father with hand motions and interlocking fingers, as if he wouldn’t be able to see the real thing in a few moments.

“Sorry, Linda.” Miles started after the men. “I’ve got to ask my dad about that noise that car was making. Can you just hang out with Kearns for a minute?”

“Sure.” Linda turned around to look at Kearns and started walking towards him.

Kearns was still leaning against the horse’s neck, rubbing its shoulder with one hand and holding its face with the other.

“That horse must like you.” Linda sat down on the step of the wagon.

She was wearing a plaid shirt, just like she had when they were kids, but this one fit her tight. Kearns thought she looked beautiful, but still like herself.

“Yeah.” Kearns tried to speak, but the word was choked out by a dry throat and nerves. He tried again, this time almost yelling. “Yeah, I guess so.”

The horse tried backing up at Kearns' sudden volume, but was quickly calmed by the quiet control that he placed over it, grabbing just above the bit and pulling its head down to his own. He shushed the horse until its neck started its relaxed quivering again.

"Wow." Linda was standing closer to Kearns now, but not near the horse or the trailer. "You really calmed him down. How'd you learn that? You haven't ever had horses, have you?"

"No." Kearns didn't move much, but he did turn his head to look clearly at Linda. "I just stay calm, I guess, and quiet."

"You've always been good with animals, huh?" Linda started to reach for the horse's nose. "I remember the dogs always preferred you to the rest of us."

It jerked its head back, but Kearns saw Linda refocus. He thought she was probably going for quiet and calm. When Linda finally touched the horse's face a grin came across her own.

"It's so soft." She kept rubbing the velvety skin around the horse's nostrils.

Neither of them said anything for a while. Kearns was comfortable leaning against the horse's chest, and bringing it some comfort in return. And he liked Linda standing so close to him. Her flowery smell and the horse's salty one were mixing together in the air, reminding Kearns that they were both there.

"Miles has been real sweet the last few months." Linda broke the silence.

"Yeah, he's swell, I guess." Kearns piled as much sarcasm as he could into his voice. "He's never home anymore, and when he is he's always a jerk to me."

“You guys will like each other again. Don’t worry.” Linda ruffled Kearns’ hair. “It’s just puberty right now. He’s finishing and you’re getting started, or whatever. My mom says that makes for too much testosterone.”

“No.” Kearns stepped away from the horse. “It’s got nothing to do with puberty.”

The horse, tired of being startled, and no longer being calmed by Kearns, pulled his head away from Linda’s touch. She crossed her arms.

“You know, you used to be like the little brother I always wanted.” Linda started to move towards Kearns, but stopped herself. “Now I hardly ever see you, even when me and Miles are hanging out at your house.”

Kearns looked at Linda, but then turned towards his brother and dad when the hood of Miles’ car slammed shut. The horse was startled again by the noise.

“Let’s get some food.” Miles was approaching Kearns and Linda, dancing with one leg in the air and clapping, while nodding towards the food. “And it’s just a loose belt. Good to drive and cheap to fix.”

Miles threw his arm around Linda, who looked embarrassed by the display, as Kearns started to walk toward his father.

“You want to go hunting tomorrow?” Kearns looked across the kitchen table that was covered with the meal his mom had cooked. They were both teenage boys, growing and hungry, so the delicious smells of fried chicken, mashed potatoes, and fresh corn always found them sitting down to eat.

“Yeah, sure.” Miles was nodding and looking at their father. “Can we, Dad?”

“Okay, you guys can take my .22 and Miles’.” Their dad looked at Miles for a moment, then at Kearns, to make sure that they were both paying attention. “Be careful. And you ask your mom before you go. If she says no for any reason, that’s it. Got it?”

“Yepper.” Kearns had a huge grin across his face.

The next day Kearns grabbed his father’s lever-action .22 and went to look for Miles, hoping that Gus and he would find something to shoot at along the way.

Instead, he led Kearns right to the hay barn and all he found was Miles trying to undo Linda’s bra. They were both sitting on one of the blankets that were used as a drop cloths when they worked on the tractors. It was covered with oil stains, but the two either didn’t care about getting dirty, or they couldn’t see the stains in the dim light that cut through the barn in sharp lines. Kearns could see the hay dust being pushed quickly away from their faces, and noticed how hard they both seemed to be breathing, even though they were sitting almost still.

Neither Miles nor Linda saw Kearns come in. He wasn’t sure what to do, but the thought of leaving quietly never crossed his mind. What he did instead was click the safety off the back of the rifle and fired a shot into the tin roof. It echoed in the barn, and he heard the bang answer as it was shot back by the acoustics of the round top barn, a few hundred feet away, before any of the three could react.

Kearns, who had been prepared for the shot, was startled when Linda shrieked at the noise and jumped up, running towards a corner of the barn. Miles jumped too, as his eyes became even bigger than they were while he was looking at Linda’s chest. Kearns, recovered from his shock, tried to peek at Linda, but couldn’t make out more than her shape in the darkness. Then he started laughing at the entire spectacle.

Miles leapt up and started after Kearns. Realizing that he was going to get a whooping if his brother caught him, Kearns turned around too and tried to run through the door. In his haste, Kearns didn't think about how he was holding the rifle and it was too wide for the small opening in the red sliding door. Neither he nor the rifle made it through. Instead, the impact knocked the wind out of Kearns, and broke the walnut stock of the gun.

Miles stopped once Kearns' was on the ground, and turned to help Linda. Kearns watched, from his back, as Miles grabbed Linda's shirt and brought it to her. Then he grabbed the blanket off the ground and held it up so Kearns couldn't see Linda anymore. They both huddled under the blanket in the dark corner. Kearns could barely hear Miles's voice over Linda's sobs and gasps. Miles was talking, which was usual, but the look on his face wasn't the anger that Kearns had expected and hoped for. It was calm concern. He appeared almost stoic. There wasn't any production in Miles' brother's monologue. Instead, he sat stock-still and whispered, glancing at Kearns once, but not indicating anything with his gaze.

Kearns left the barn, knowing that he didn't belong there anymore, and found his dad home early from work. Kearns held up the gun in two pieces. His father didn't react at first. Instead, he just stared at Kearns. Kearns was used to the method of punishment, and could generally deal with it, but this time he started to cry. His dad knew that something bigger than the gun breaking had happened.

“Is your brother alright?”

“Yeah.” Kearns looked at the ground. “I think he's okay.”

Kearns' dad took both halves of the gun and look at the broken pieces. "We'll fix it, and this can be your gun, but you're going to have to work to buy me a new one to replace it."

"Okay." Kearns was embarrassed by his tears, and tried to be his best version of a man. "Sorry, Dad."

"I know you are, buddy. Now tell me what happened."

Things had changed between the three of them after that day. At first, Kearns had tried pretending like nothing had happened at all. Eating spaghetti at the table with Miles that evening, Kearns had repeated a joke about the meatballs that their grandfather had first made. It was always good for a laugh, but Miles hadn't even looked up from his plate. At school, Miles avoided contact with his brother beyond what the three year difference would general warrant. Miles separated from Kearns almost completely for those few months and then went off to college.

Linda didn't come around at all after that. She kept dating Kearns and then chose the same college as him. Eventually they both graduated, got jobs, and were living together.

Kearns had done his own thing in all that time, going away to school and then further away for graduate school. He had seen his brother during breaks and even Linda occasionally, but they weren't those kids hanging on the fence anymore.

Then their dad had gotten sick. Kearns found a job and moved back home to help his mom. Miles and Linda had stayed close. They had a kid.

...

Kearns wrenched another rail off of the hedge post, and looked down the length of the fence that he had yet to dismantle. He saw Miles with Annie, Miles's daughter, on his shoulders. They were walking down the side of the road. They had walked to the co-op to get Annie a candy, and the brown stain of success was covering her face.

"Hey, Uncle Kearnie, you missed a spot." Annie yelled and was giggling before she could even finish the coached statement. She held up her hand in anticipation of her and her dad's ritual.

"Way to go, She-Thing." Miles high-fived his daughter, and started across the shallow ditch that separated them from Kearns.

"No, I saved that for you." Kearns pulled his niece off of Miles shoulders and set her on the tailgate of the truck. She immediately stood up and started grabbing tools. "I like your brown lipstick."

"I'm not wearing lipstick." Annie was shaking her head.

Her hammer and arm were swinging back and forth in time with her head, so Miles grabbed the hammer before Annie hit herself, and ruined any fun she would have.

"Look here." Kearns opened the back window of the truck cab and positioned the rearview mirror so Annie could see herself in it.

Annie stuck her head through the hole and started giggling at her own reflection.

"Do you want to help me with the fence?" Kearns lifted Annie out of the truck and set her down in the tall grass.

She was so well insulated in her down coat that she could barely move her arms, but she took the crowbar from Kearns, and held it in anticipation. Kearns stepped through the fence and held out his own hand.

“Crowbar, please.” He took the tool from Annie and gave her a courteous bow.
“Thank you.”

Annie watched, in awe, as the wood split around the old nail and popped loose of the post.

“Why are you taking the fence?” Annie motioned to the downed section.

“Your grandpa wants to put a new one up, and your dad is too lazy to do it himself.”

Miles grabbed a splinter of wood out of the truck and threw it at Kearns. “It’s got nothing to do with laziness, Thing.”

Annie giggled at her own name and looked back at Kearns for further explanation.

Miles spoke again. “I’m morally against your grandpa taking down a fence that represents Kearns’s, your mom’s, and my childhood. That’s why I’m not helping.”

Annie was nodding, even though she didn’t understand most of the statement.

“Also, your dad likes to talk too much, so he’s good at getting out of work.” Kearns knelt to look at Annie over the lowest fence rail. “Are you going to be a talker or a worker when you grow up?”

“I’m going to be like mom.” Annie was nodding and smiling, apparently sure she had answered correctly.

“That actually makes a lot of sense.” Miles nodded.

At that moment Kearns heard Linda yelling for Annie, and looked down the fence line to where she was, bracing herself against the wind.

“You go in now. See your mom?” Miles asked.

Annie nodded and headed off in the direction of her mom, fighting the grass with every step. Gus walked next to her, apparently done with the cold wind.

Kearns and Miles watched until Annie made it to Linda before Kearns returned to the fence.

“You don’t mind pulling this down?” Miles asked.

“Not really,” replied Kearns.

“I don’t mean the work. I mean tearing down those memories. So many good ones.”

“They aren’t all good,” Kearns offered as another board pulled free of a post.

“Come on, what’s not good? Our childhood was amazing. I knew I couldn’t leave once we had Annie. I want her to have what we had. Linda does too.”

“The fence doesn’t just exist here, you know? It took work for someone to put up, and dad has worked for years to maintain it. Pulling it down is the easy part, being done with it.”

Kearns kept pulling off boards while Miles watched.

“Don’t you remember sitting on it, waiting for Linda to come over?” Miles asked.

“I remember,” Kearns answered, “and I remember sitting on it and watching her leave.”

“Huh, I don’t.”

“You weren’t,” Kearns said. “When she left, I didn’t think you cared about her. And then you said you were going to call her and I thought it was a joke.”

“I missed her then,” Miles said.

“Do you remember the barn?” Kearns asked before he knew what he was saying.

“You mean when Linda thought you shot her and then you broke dad’s rifle? I remember.”

Kearns yanked off another board.

“Things changed after that.”

“Things change,” Miles said. “I was mad then, but we were kids.”

“I was a kid... and I hated you for not hitting me that day.”

“Hated me for not hitting you? That’s got to be a first.”

“I wanted you to hit me because that’s what you would have done a year before. But when I shot that rifle, you were worried about Linda being okay, not getting a lick on me.”

“Huh, I guess you’re right,” Miles said.

“You know I loved her, right?”

“Sure, we both did. I guess maybe we both do.”

“But you know I wouldn’t ever... After that day I never would have.”

“I know, Kearns,” Miles said, and then walked toward the next section of fence holding the sledge.

“I thought you weren’t going to help with the fence,” Kearns said as he moved the crowbar to the rail, and watch his brother bring the head of the hammer down to meet the grey wood.

Philip's Beak

Clint leaned forward in the blue hospital chair, holding on to Leah's hand and trying to stand up. It suddenly seemed to be swallowing him. The walls were off-white and textured, rough. Clint and his wife had been in the room for seven hours, waiting for Leah to be ready to give birth, and now the room smelled like that many hours of sweat and stress.

The couple hadn't been ready; this was all happening just over a month early. Clint wonder why everyone else wasn't more freaked out.

"Wow, you're really dilated," Dr. Malhotra's heavy Delhi accent cut through the assessment.

"Okay?" Leah seemed to want some more guidance than she was getting. "So do I push?"

"Oh yes, please do," The doctor spoke again. If he was excited, his voice didn't indicate it.

Clint was very happy to be at the top of his wife. He had no interest in seeing what was going on at the other end.

Clint squeezed back as Leah braced herself by attempting to crush her husband's hand. Her right arm was resting along the top of her belly, pressing slightly. The room was quiet aside from the occasional beeps of the machines and Leah's hollow moan. It looked easy, much easier than Clint had been prepared for. Just one push and he heard a suction sound bouncing off of the hard walls and generically abstract artwork.

"Oh, Goodness." The doctor didn't look up.

The nurse nearest the doctor went from a flushed pink to pale white, almost translucent, in the instant that she looked at the doctor's hands. She left the room. Clint had

been warned that he might faint or vomit, but nobody had told him that the nurse might do the same.

Besides, Clint had a baby now, and he didn't give any more thought to the ease with which Leah had just forced a child through her cervix or the horror that was written across the nurse's face. He just wanted to hold their baby and know it was healthy, but the doctor wouldn't even lift it over the sheet for either parent to see. So they both looked, first at each other, and then at the blue sheet still draped over Leah's knees.

"Well?" Clint was tired of the suspense, and it occurred to him that something might be wrong. Leah squeezed Clint's hand again.

"It's a, uh..." The doctor's head appeared first. It was covered and tied in blue. Then he lifted the baby without specifying the sex.

To say Clint was surprised would be an understatement. He was vaguely familiar with strange births. He had seen the titles of shows on TLC "The Turtle Boy," and "Sextuplets," and he had even seen a two-headed cow once when he had been in college. It was just a short detour from the highway. Still, those examples had all seemed more gimmick than reality. His child, or whatever you call it, wasn't apparently a gimmick at all. It was a sort of mass that seemed to be changing colors slightly, from light to dark shades of brown and then back again. Clint couldn't make out hands or feet, but there were a number of bits dangling. One feature was very recognizable, and that was an eye gazing straight back at him, identifying him as father.

"One, two-." The nurse holding Clint and Leah's new child was counting out loud. The birth had been quick, but in the two hours since, Clint wasn't sure he had remembered to breath.

The nurse apparently didn't know what else could fill the silence, and counting appendages must have been hospital policy, even in this case.

It seemed to Clint that the number of tentacles was basically an unimportant fact, except.

“Oh no.” Clint looked at Leah.

“What?” Leah spoke for the first time in a while.

Clint didn't respond. If it had eight, then it would be an octopus. He hoped it only had seven; most people probably couldn't even come up with septopus.

“Oh God.”

Six would be a sextopus.

“What, Clint!” Leah was staring into Clint's eyes. He noticed the glow people talked about. She was sort of sweaty, disheveled, and red.

The nurse spoke first, a short fat woman with a smile, even now. “There are eight.”

“Eight,” Clint and Leah spoke together as the nurse handed the baby back to Leah.

Dr. Malhotra was right outside the door, talking with two other doctors. His white lab coat was wrinkled, like he threw it in the bottom of a locker at the end of his shift. The lapels were stained with bright orange smears, evidence of the Cheetos that he kept hidden behind the nurses' desk. Clint suddenly wondered where the doctor had gotten his degree.

“Here he comes.” Clint took a small step towards the door.

“Okay.” The doctor, done with his conversation, joined the couple. “It's basically an octopus.”

“What do you mean?” Leah squeezed her swaddled child tighter and glanced at Clint. He didn't know what to say.

“Well, other than not needing to stay wet, your child is an octopus.” The doctor looked a little annoyed by the question.

“Is that possible?” Clint started to put a hand on the swaddled mass but stopped himself and laid it on Leah's shoulder instead.

“Well, I don't think it actually is. I just looked it up, and Octopus can only survive in the open air for maybe an hour, depending on the humidity.”

Clint was staring at the man, his mouth hanging open.

“So I suppose it wouldn't be right, strictly speaking, to call it an octopus. Frankly, we don't have another word for it at the moment. Also, it was birthed by a human.”

“I'm not asking if it's possible for an octopus to survive outside of water. I'm asking how it's possible that we have this.” Clint was almost yelling, and he was pointing at the mass of flesh resting on his wife.

“I don't think it is possible, biologically.” The doctor bumped Clint's shoulder with a loose fist and grinned. “But here we are.”

Clint didn't know how to respond to that statement. He had expected to be thanking the man, but that didn't seem the obvious choice anymore.

“So next,” Dr. Malhotra continued, “we need to run some tests. Your child's oxygen levels seem to be fine, and we can't obvious detect any signs of stress. Basically, we believe he's healthy.”

Clint wondered why the doctor was using “he.” Clint couldn't imagine that there was a little penis in there somewhere.

“We would like for you to stay for at least a few days. We need to figure out how to feed the little guy, and to make sure you’re equipped to care for him moving forward. Now you see those men in the hall?”

Clint nodded to the doctor.

“The taller gentleman is a geneticist. He would like to run some tests on your little guy’s blood to try to figure out exactly how we’ve ended up here. And the other two gentlemen are a highly regarded marine biologist and his graduate assistant.”

Clint thought maybe he had misunderstood Dr. Malhotra but quickly decided that hadn’t been the case.

“Now I don’t care for running too many tests on a child. I choose this field because I consider every child to be a sort of miracle. Yours no differently than any other, really.”

Leah responded, “Thank you, Doctor.”

Clint didn’t have anything to say to such a statement.

Dr. Malhotra continued, “However, other doctors would love to research this little guy and try to make their own careers. What happens next is up to you, and how much access you want to give those gentlemen is your decision. I simply brought them in incase you wanted to a better understanding of how to care for your child. May I bring them in to introduce you all?”

After the introductions had been made, and once everyone stopped staring, each doctor explained how they believed they could help. Clint didn’t like the idea of being a part of a study, but he was sure he had no idea how to care for an octopus-human hybrid. He needed the help.

Leah said she just wanted to do whatever was best for her baby.

They spent the next month in the hospital. One of the first things that was decided was that there was no way to explain how a human could give birth to an octopus, and that the child was exactly that. One of the next things to be decided was that it was a male octopus. Leah named him Philip after her grandfather.

The next challenge had been figuring out what to feed Philip. The marine biologist suggested that milk or formula might be a bad choice. Raw fish and sea foods were decided on, and Leah would puree them into a sort of baby food before feeding her baby boy.

Another point that was agreed on by everyone was that there seemed to be a sort of understanding in Philip's eyes as if he recognized his mom and the doctors

After thirty three days, and more tests that returned bizarre and strangely expected results than Clint could count, it was time for the family to leave.

Clint was leaning into the small car, trying to buckle his newborn into the recently purchased child seat. The twist of grey cushions and straps still smelled like new plastic. Clint wondered how that could still be the case after a month of sitting in the car.

The sun was painfully bright after the days spent in the hospital. It was July seventeenth, and Clint couldn't help wondering if the dry Midwest heat could dry out his octopus, although the doctors seemed sure that wasn't a possibility.

Leah was cooing at the baby, grinning and wagging her fingers in the one eye that was facing out. She seemed happy, and Clint thought, apparently unaware that child seats weren't designed for octopus safety. He split the tentacles that were curling and swinging in

the leg space of the backseat, four to each side, and felt ridiculous for pretending that they were legs. Frustrated, he took a step back and stood up straight, flexing his back.

Leah leaned over and buckled the strap, securing her baby easily. “We're all ready to go. Aren't we, Philip?”

Clint shut the back door and sat down in the driver's seat, looking at Leah in the rearview mirror. She had told Clint how excited she was for their first drive as a family. The day had arrived.

Clint adjusted the mirror so he could look at the octopus.

“Let's go.” Leah reached around the headrest and grabbed Clint's neck giving him the two reassuring squeezes that she always did when they started a drive.

Clint looked back, one more time, and saw a black stain spreading across Philip's diaper. Leah had made the same decision that Clint made with the child seat when she first decided how to strap a diaper on their child: four tentacles made a leg.

“Leah...”

Leah saw where Clint was looking, and then saw the stain herself. “Uh oh, somebody had an accident. We need to get home and change him. That's having a baby.”

“That's a silly boy.” Leah was wiping up the remnants of their most recent attempt at feeding, grinning.

Clint walked into the kitchen and pulled some scallops out of the freezer for the next feeding, and then he opened a tuna pouch. He didn't like the smell, never had. He'd have to get used to it.

Leah leaned back to see around the wall and into the kitchen. “Bring a new spoon. This ones covered with carrots, and Philip doesn't like carrots, does he.” She turned back to Philip and cooed at him again.

Feeding had seemed easier in the hospital. Lots of things had seemed easier with a staff to help. Still, he was more than happy to be home.

Clint sat down on the couch and was relieved to be on his own furniture again. The whole room was his doing. Modern styles, colors and beiges, and all clean lines. There wasn't any clutter, everything fit together perfectly. He looked at Philip.

Leah put the spoon into the beak, and the white fish disappeared. “Philip is an albacore man.”

Clint watched as Leah sat on the floor. Tuna was being flung everywhere, and there was a sort of suction noise every time Leah moved the spoon to Phillip’s beak.

“I still haven’t told my parents,” Clint almost whispered.

“About what.” Leah was still feeding Philip and didn't catch the question.

“About Philip.”

“You didn’t tell them we had him?”

Clint recognized the tone in Leah’s voice. He had heard it quite a bit in the last month when a new doctor would show up with a research idea, or a new nurse hesitated to help Philip.

“I didn’t know how to tell them about how he is. Leah, he's an octopus.” Clint motioned to Philip who had slid onto the plate and was gulping in the rest of the tuna, making barely audible squeaks and clicks. They both stared at their child and the inhuman but blissful act it was taking part in.

She turned towards him. “He's our son. How could anything else matter?”

Clint didn't respond. He couldn't think about anything besides the awful suction noise that Philip was making with now empty plate. They were supposed to be smart. Nobody really knew how smart. He'd figured out the plate and tuna quickly.

Then, for a reason Clint still couldn't identify, a black puddle appeared under Philip as he excreted ink on his eating mat.

“I'll clean him up,” Leah said in the same tone she used on the nurses, lifting up Philip, “You clean the mat.”

Leah was frowning at Clint who was trying to ignore the scowl. He had been staying ahead of his wife and Philip by going to find the items on the shopping list, but the canned seafood options in this store had overwhelmed him.

“I want to have Philip baptized.”

“What, why?” Clint finally looked away from the canned fish options and toward his wife.

“I know he's... he's special.” Leah reached into the child seat that was sitting on the shopping cart and started twirling a tentacle like it was a loose strand of hair. “We don't really know what can happen.” She stroked the smooth mantle that constituted Philip's head.

Clint thought it might have been the first time he had heard his wife acknowledge that there was anything different about their son. She spent most of her time seeming almost impervious to their situation.

Clint nodded and moved next to Leah and put a hand around her shoulders. “Okay, so we'll have him baptized.”

“And I want to go show off our little boy to my friends.” Then Leah was cooing again.

Clint still didn't feel right walking with Philip out in the sun, but Leah swore that the sunshade on the stroller would be enough.

“Are you sure he should be out like this?” Clint asked. His hands were in his pockets and he was about six steps behind on the sidewalk.

“Yes, I'm sure.” Leah was pushing Philip in a stroller. “He has to get out to experience things.”

Clint started to point out that they weren't even sure how Philip did experience things, but the last time he'd brought it up Leah had responded that the same could be said of any child. He laughed at the simplistic answer, but didn't have a rebuttal to offer.

“Oh my goodness, look at the little guy!” A tiny woman came from behind one of the hedges and stepped in front of the stroller. She was unkempt. She was wearing a Harrah's casino visor, the kind they give you after they take all of your money, and her glasses were at least half an inch thick, and judging by the frame about twenty years old.

“His name is Philip.” Leah informed the woman and then pulled back the sunshade to make him more accessible.

“Philip, what a good strong name.” The woman grabbed Philip's mantle and gave it a rub and squeeze. “Does he like cookies?”

Clint saw the woman lift up her cat embroidered sweater and open the fanny-pack hidden underneath. She pulled out a cookie and offered it to Philip.

Clint jumped forward and grabbed the cookie. It was damp and stale, and the women reeked of ammonia. “Um, he just ate, but I’ll give it to him later and tell him it was from you.”

The woman looked up at Clint for a moment and then back down at Philip.

“Do you live around here?” Clint tried to engage her.

He wanted her to leave Philip alone. The woman was filthy, but somehow that didn’t matter to Leah who wanted to show Philip off to anyone who gave her the chance.

“You’re a nosy one, aren’t you?” The woman turned away from Clint and the stroller and continued speaking in the opposite direction of her audience. “You come and steal that cookie. Don’t you realize that I know what you have planned? Defecator.”

Clint was pretty sure he was the Defecator, but was more interested in getting away from her than in figuring out how that was actually a bad thing.

“Let’s go, Leah. Across the street.” Clint turned the stroller himself and pushed it gently off the curb.

“Uh huh.” Leah glanced back at the woman who seemed to be engaged with a car antenna. “She didn’t smell good, did she? She sure liked Philip, though.”

Clint pulled the car seat out of the car in the church parking lot. The car seat doubled as a carrier and had a blanket draped over the top. Clint generally tried to avoid the questions that came when people saw Philip.

“So they’re going to do it in front of the whole congregation?” Leah was flattening her dress, and checking her reflection in the car window. “That’s exciting. It was nice of the

priest to agree on such short notice since we aren't even regular members of the congregation.”

Clint, who was already headed into the church, stopped and turned back to his wife. “Well, I told him... Well, the thing is, I'm not sure that he would have, but I told him that there were some unusual circumstances, and so he agreed to do it rushed.”

“Oh.” Leah looked unsure of what to say.

Clint held open the door for Leah, and she pushed two of the tentacles back into the carrier before she walked in. Clint saw another fall out the other side.

“Hello, Father.” Leah held out her hand to the priest. He was a huge man, taller than Clint's six-feet and nearly as wide across. “I'm Leah Snyder. This is my husband, Clint, and our son, Philip. She motioned towards the carrier with the hand that wasn't being shaken.

“Hello, hello!” The priest's voice matched his stature and somehow his nose. It was booming, inappropriate even. “I'm Father Flor. It's Florence, but they call me Flor. We're all running a bit late, but that's all par for the course.”

Clint started after Leah and Father Flor. They all seemed to be running towards the back of the church, and a few parishioners nodded and welcomed Clint as he walked. Clint held the blanket down so no more tentacles would fall out.

“All right.” Father Flor held the door while Leah and Clint walked through into his office.

The room smelled like sweat and Mountain Dew. There were jars of jelly beans everywhere. Some were mixtures of color, and others solid colors black, red, and others.

“A nip for the nerves?” Flor held out a jar full of dark blue beans, and took a large handful for himself.

“No thanks.” Clint waved off the offer and sat the carrier down on one of the worn out leather chairs.

“Well, let's take a look at the little bugger. Philip is it? That's a good strong name, isn't it? So, can I ask what the 'circumstances' are? Is he going to be all right? Sorry for asking.”

“No, that's okay.” Leah spoke as Father Flor stepped towards Philip. She lifted the blanket to reveal Philip. “It's not that he's in danger or anything.”

The father stopped in front of the chair and dumped what remained of the handful of jellybeans into his mouth. He chewed and swallowed without saying a word or taking a step closer to the child.

“Is this some kind of joke?” Father Flor was almost whispering.

Clint couldn't bring himself to look at the man, so he watched the now dangling tentacles instead.

“No.” Leah was the first to speak.

“Well it better be. A funny gag, all right.” Father Flor grabbed another handful of beans. This time from the red jar. “How'd you even get an octopus? Don't they need water?”

Father Flor sat down on the edge of his desk, an action that Clint questioned the safety of, and then reached around to dump the handful of red beans in the center of his desk. His face shifted from Leah to Clint and then back again, glancing at Philip on each pass.

“He's not...” Leah spoke in the voice that had been for the nurses and looked at Philip.

Two of his tentacles were tangled with one of the safety straps. His diaper was stained with ink again.

Clint recognized the look on Father Flor's face. His eyes were wide, and mouth barely open. The dye from the candy had stained the inner ridge of his lips purple. It was the face of a man waiting for the punchline. Clint looked at his wife. He thought he understood why Philip was so able to change colors.

“He's our son. His name's Philip. We didn't get him from anywhere,” Leah said.

The father began laughing. It was a high shrill laugh, not remotely matching the man it was emanating from.

Clint motioned for Leah to stand up and motioned her toward the door. He grabbed the carrier, stuffing the blanket into the diaper bag that was over his shoulder.

“What about the baptism?” Leah said, following behind Clint.

He didn't answer, only continued to the car.

As Clint buckled in Philip, Leah sat in the front seat, buckling her seatbelt. She looked ahead, straight into the glare on the front windshield.

Clint sat in the driver seat and was messing with his phone. The ringer filled the car; it was on speaker.

“Hello?”

The voice was Clint's dad's.

“Get Mom, Dad.” Everything's fine, but we need to talk to both of you.

There was a silence. Leah looked over at Clint who was smiling. He looked happy.

“Do what with the speaker now?” Clint's dad asked someone.

“Give it to Mom. She knows how.”

“Hi, Clint.” Clint's mom had the speakerphone on and was obviously panicked.

“What's going on, is everything okay?”

“Yeah, it's fine.” Clint looked over at Leah, and then moved the phone in her direction. “Me and Leah are here in the car, and she's got some news for you.”

“Oh god! He said they have some news... I don't know they haven't said yet. You can hear everything I can.”

“Sheila, you're a grandma.” Leah gave the news, excited again.

“Oh my God! She said I'm a grandma, aren't you listening? What's his name? I know it's a little boy, isn't it?”

Leah hesitated. Looking in the back seat, she wasn't sure how to respond. It was an octopus.

“Yeah, Mom, Philip.”

“Is he in the car?”

“He is,” Clint replied, “and he's actually an octopus.”

Right then a piercing scream filled the car. It was truly painful, like high frequency tone you could get on your phone to annoy people, except louder. Clint reached for his ear, but then it ended. He looked in the backseat. Philip had quit squirming.

“Was that him? Lively, isn't he?”

“Yeah, Mom. He's lively.” Clint squeezed Leah's knee. “You need to come see us mom. You need to come meet your grandson.”

Whoever Goes with Mitch

As Mitch sat, he was in awe of the scene around him. The house, his house, was full of merriment as all sat down to eat and play. The food was simple but rich, an assortment of baked fair. Also, there were fried food, and a display of sauces not to be rivaled. As he watched, the men ate, and they would celebrate what men tend to celebrate, their manliness. The game was a simple one to the initiated, and puzzling to those who weren't, Texas Hold-Em. Mitch knew that they all wanted to win, not for the paltry change that could be attained, but instead for the rights to brag and to exit the den even manlier than they had entered. The stakes were high.

As is the case when men get together in large numbers, the room was full of foul smells and foul talk. They compared sexual exploits and physical feats—which had won which championships in which sports some twenty years ago and who had slept with which women before they had finally given it all up to be the best husband and father in the room.

Suddenly, there was a faint knock. Truthfully not so faint, but to be heard over the raucous conversation required a deliberate pounding, and then she entered and walked across the room. A strange creature, out of place with the words that had just filled this space.

She was Mitch's wife, and his immediate thought was the wrath that might be unleashed if she had heard any of the claims that he had been making during the last two hours.

She spoke, "Everybody doing all right? Mitch, don't forget to turn the lights off. I'm getting ready for bed, but we need dog food, so I need you to go out to get some. We need it in the morning, so you'll have to go tonight."

Mitch realized he had been holding his breath for the announcement. He resumed breathing.

“Goodnight, Pam,” the room echoed in chorus as she walked back toward the door. A few shy stragglers answered late and were heard separate from the rest. All of the men looked scared, more like children than men. They too seemed afraid that she had heard, that she wasn’t done talking, that she would call the festivities to an end.

She didn’t. Instead she simply walked to the door and spoke so all of them could hear. “Whoever goes with Mitch will be tested.” Her voice echoed off the cement floor and bare walls of the man-room/garage.

The door answered all of their apparent confusion with a shallow click when the latch set into the recess in the frame.

Mitch was the first to speak. “Looks like I’m running to the store. Anybody want to roll with?”

Mitch wasn’t the type to say *roll with*, but he was the type to immediately do what his wife asked. To others it seemed to make him a good husband, but that was not why Mitch did it. He did it out of fear—fear of letting Pam down and fear of the consequences. He often acted out of that fear.

“I’ll go.” Mitch’s younger brother, Taylor, answered.

Taylor wasn’t much like his brother. Mitch always thought of him as fearing very little and acting just exactly like he wanted to most of the time. If he was going it was because it sounded like a better time than what he was already doing. The only person Taylor was interested in pleasing was himself.

“Me too, I’ll go.” Ralph, Mitch’s only black friend, answered.

Ralph was the same age as Mitch. They had gone to high school together, but blackness in high school seemed like a meaningful thing, so Mitch hadn't ever associated with Ralph. When they met each other again in college ethnicity seemed somehow less important, so they had become friends. Mitch thought Ralph was motivated by fear too, but his was the fear that he wasn't really black anymore.

All three men stood by the door and waited, for a moment, to see if anyone else would sound off with a request or offer to accompany them, but none did. They seemed to all be set where they were. They would all make do, as men ought to.

Mitch was at the wheel, Taylor in the back center—between the two car seats, and Ralph was riding shotgun, scanning the radio stations.

“I have the stations set. You can just push the numbers.” Mitch wasn't enjoying the three-second blurbs.

“You do, but you don't have any rap stations set,” Ralph said.

“I don't like rap.” Mitch looked away from the mostly empty road to look at his friend's concentrating face. “Since when do you?”

“I've always liked rap.”

“Don't you listen to classic country most of the time?” Taylor was pulling on a plastic dinosaur that had been left in the car.

“I do, but I like rap too.”

“Classic country is set at one.” Mitch pointed as if he was going to push the button himself.

“Fuck you guys, I used to love rap.”

Taylor answered “Yeah, and now you’re a registered republican.”

When Mitch looked to the backseat and saw Taylor’s grin they both started laughing. Ralph hit the number one on the radio and sat back in his seat, quiet in defeat as Waylon Jennings played on.

“I need gas, if you guys want anything,” Mitch said.

“I’m going to see if the cashier know where I can buy some bud,” Taylor said as he lunged over the car seat on his right and fell out of the car.

“I’m going to go see what they’ve got in a 40,” Ralph said right before taking a toy dinosaur to the back of the head.

At the moment the convenience store door shut, a large SUV pulled into the parking lot. Mitch watched as black men unloaded from each door. It was impossible to see through the windows, but Mitch thought it doubtful that there was anyone else left in the vehicle, as there didn’t seem to be a way for anymore to have fit. However, the bass end of the rap still shook the windows.

He thought of the Louis C.K. joke about a black man walking into a convenience store and Louis thinking “That’s all right. It’s all right.” He wondered if Ralph was thinking the same thing now.

A few minutes later, when the gas was pumped and Mitch was waiting inside his car, hoping that the pet store stayed open until 10:00 but knowing it didn’t, Ralph came out of the shop along with the group of black men who had followed him in. He shook each of their hands in the way where the participants end up in half-hugs and walked back to Mitch’s car, smiling.

Taylor was right behind him, apparently sending a text while crossing the parking lot.

“Did you make some new friends there, Ralph?” Mitch asked.

“They were nice guys, yeah. The guy there in the red jacket is a music producer. We exchanged numbers, probably going to do something soon,” was Ralph’s reply.

Taylor pulled his door shut after climbing back across a child seat, and all three men spent a moment looking at the crew standing next to the blacked-out SUV.

Mitch looked across the car at Ralph and then back at the men who were taking a moment to open their cigarettes and have a smoke before setting off again. Mitch wasn’t sure he could imagine anyone who had less in common with Ralph, at least at first glance.

“I’m going to defend him here, Mitch. Ralph seemed to hit it off with those guys.”

“When they walked in I heard “Scuffin’ Those Knees” playing, Ralph said. “I complimented their choice and I guess they were impressed that I knew the song. He produced some of Naughty by Nature’s stuff. I’m going to go check out his studio next week.”

Mitch looked in the rearview mirror and met his brother’s eyes. They shared a knowing look, not unmarked by surprise, and both started laughing again. Mitch scrolled through the radio stations until he found some rap, and they set off.

A few blocks from the store, Taylor asked Mitch to take a sudden right. Mitch complied not thinking at first but quickly realized what errand he might be running.

“I’m not driving to pick up drugs.” Mitch meant it and slowed to turn around.

“Fuck off, Mitch. We’re just two blocks away.”

“I don’t care how close we are.” something else occurred to Mitch and he pulled the car over. “Were you really able to walk into a gas station, ask the clerk for drugs, and find a dealer a few blocks away all in like 3 minutes?”

“So what?”

“Aside from that being really impressive, don’t you think it’s maybe a little dangerous?”

“Maybe, but probably not. Look at the neighborhood, Mitch. Things don’t go wrong in neighborhoods that look like this. We’re parked behind an A5 for fuck’s sake.”

“He’s probably right, Mitch,” Ralph was weighing in, “I mean, I could see a serial killer living in a yuppie neighborhood like this, but it’s hard to imagine drug violence is too common in million dollar homes.”

Mitch wasn’t sure if it was a good point or not, so he just ignored it.

“But you just got the drug dealer’s info from a gas station attendant. You don’t know anything about them.”

Taylor started laughing in the back seat, a little offended by how stupid Mitch thought him to be.

“I didn’t get any numbers from the gas station. I just went in to take a leak. I’ve been getting weed from these guys for like 6 years. In fact, you know them. Remember Aaron and Samantha that I graduated with? You drove us all to Six-Flags one time?”

“You buy weed from Aaron and Samantha? Don’t they have like three kids now?”

“Yep.” Taylor waved his hands, indicating that they should move forward again.

“Aaron has a prescription, but they don’t smoke it all. I buy like half of what he gets.”

“So why’d you say you asked the gas station guy?” Mitch was looking at his brother in the mirror as he pulled back into the street.

“I wanted to see what you two would do. You’re both kind of chicken-shit.”

“Hey, I was down for whatever,” Ralph offered.

“I’m sure you were, Ralph.” Taylor said.

Mitch stopped in front of the place Taylor indicated. It was a gorgeous mid-century modern with a front yard full of children’s toys. The two in the front seats waited while Taylor went to buy his drugs. Samantha waved to Mitch and Ralph as she held the door open for Taylor. The two men in the car watched as Aaron appeared in the doorway, waved to the car, and then spoke to Taylor for a few minutes, eventually handing over a small plastic bag.

Mitch thought it looked like they were consoling him, and he wondered what for. Samantha gave him a particularly long hug. Aaron went so far as to put a hand on his shoulder and give it a few reassuring squeezes before Taylor finally stepped out of the door and walked back to the car. Mitch’s concerns for his brother were quickly assuaged by his smile as he approached the car waving the bag.

Mitch made a three-point turn and headed back out of the neighborhood. They would make it to the store, but not by much. At least, he thought, everyone is getting what they need tonight.

Once they had arrived at the store the task should have been simple. The trio went to the dog food section to grab the 40 pound bag. It was the same that the chocolate lab had always eaten, but they found the shelf empty.

“Excuse me, ma’am?” Mitch tried to get the attention of a woman wearing a bright blue polo as she walked by, doing her best to offer no assistance to any customers.

“Yes?” She responded, doing a bad job faking being happy to help.

“I’m looking for this dog food that’s usually right here. It’s Polly or Pollum or something like that. I think it’s salmon something. I’d know the bag if I saw it.”

The employee looked very annoyed at being asked to work this near to closing time. “You have to have this one? We have some other salmon food on the next aisle. Basically all the brands make a salmon food now.”

“I’d really rather this one. It’s what we always get,” Mitch responded.

“My brother has a picky dog and a picky wife,” Taylor said, turning from the refrigerated dog food he had been examining.

The employee saw Taylor, and whether it was his looks or his easy voice, her attitude changed immediately. “Oh yeah? Let me see what’s the deal.”

With that, the girl produced some sort of PDA from her belt, scanned the barcode of the shelf, and proceeded to tap furiously with her stylus.

“It looks like we got a shipment yesterday, but it was damaged or something so it went straight back to the manufacturer. Don’t know when we’ll get more.”

Having explained all she could to Mitch, the girl took a small step toward Taylor and took to asking questions about what the three were up to and what his deal was.

Mitch thought of heading to the front of the store and asking for a manager. He would appreciate speaking to someone who was at least willing to fake interest in his current dilemma, but that still wouldn’t get him the food Pam needed him to get. He decided to interrupt the enamored young girl instead.

“Ma’am,” Mitch spoke up after sharing a look with Ralph, “Is there maybe another store where I can get it?”

The girl turned to Mitch, annoyed this time by his interference. “The scanner said every other store has it in stock, but we all close in like fifteen minutes.”

“That’s okay. Where’s the nearest store?” Mitch asked.

The girl answered and the three men began to speed walk out of the store. The girl watched, disappointed at being unable to finish her conversation with Taylor and then walked toward the stockroom again before anyone else could ask for help.

Mitch pulled onto the interstate and floored it to merge in front of a semi rather than end up behind it. He watched the driver pull his air-horn pull cord, apparently unhappy with the maneuver.

“We aren’t going to make it over there in ten minutes, Mitch,” Ralph offered.

“Yeah we will, or it’ll be close,” Mitch replied.

Mitch continued speeding, bending traffic laws. Pam had given him such a simple request. Quicker than any of them would have expected, they arrived and pulled into the parking lot. The lights were still on, but when the men approached the front door it didn’t open for them.

“Closed,” Taylor said.

Next to their car was another vehicle. This blacked out SUV seemed to be occupied, although the three men couldn't actually make out who was inside. Mitch was wondering if it could’ve been the same SUV from the gas station when the door behind him slid open and a

large man in a red jacket stepped through the door, carrying a bag of dogfood over his shoulder. He was accompanied by a young black man in a white shirt and bright blue tie.

“Samuel?” Ralph said.

“Goddamn, Ralph, are you following me?” The red jacketed man, Samuel, spoke.

“No, man, we’re trying to get some dog food, but apparently we’re too late. These are my friends that I mentioned before, Mitch and Taylor.”

While the men talked, the young man slid the door closed again and locked it. Mitch attempted to protest, even going so far as putting a portion of his body across the threshold, but the young man continued shaking his head and apologizing. Mitch stepped back, saying he understood.

“Fellas,” Samuel offered each his hand. “Sorry to tell you, but I was the last they let in.”

“Shit... and it looks like they had what I needed.” Mitch pointed to the bag of dogfood on Samuel’s shoulder. His mind was swimming with how they could get the food. Regular big box stores didn’t carry it, but maybe a natural grocer or something. For a moment he wondered why Pam has chosen such a difficult to get dog food for the family pet, but quickly decided that there must have been a good reason.

“Your dog eats Castor and Pollux too? It’s supposed to be good stuff.”

“Yeah, that’s what my wife tells me. I guess I’ll have to hear about it again when I get home.”

Samuel shifted the bag to his forearm and held it out without hesitation. “Take this bag. I’ve got enough left for a few days still.”

Mitch was shocked. “No... Thanks, but that’s too much. I can’t take that.”

“It’s not too much, Mitch. And I’m going to be seeing Ralph on Monday, so why don’t you just send a bag with him. Then you didn’t take anything.” Samuel held the bag out a little farther.

Mitch took it.

“I really do appreciate it,” Mitch said as he slapped the bag and shifted its weight to his hip. “I’ll make sure Ralph has a bag with him on Monday.

“How did I end up stuck carrying dog food all over town?” Ralph asked.

“Shit, an OG accountant like you? You can handle it.”

“Sorry, OG accountant?” Taylor asked.

“Yeah. What, Ralph didn’t brag? The man walked into a gas station at 8:30 on a Friday, complimented me on my music choices, and in five minutes had me doubting some investments I made fifteen years ago. He’s coming in Monday to look at how our equity is structured and whatever else accountants do.”

“He mentioned meeting you, but skipped over the rest,” Mitch said.

Samuel stepped over to the car and pulled open the passenger door, making it clear for the first time how loud the music actually was.

“I hope your dog enjoys the food, and I’ll see you first thing Monday, Ralph. Have a good night, fellas.”

“OG accountant?” Taylor asked as the SUV pulled off.

“What?” Ralph responded. “I have good taste in music and I happen to be a phenomenal accountant.”

Mitch laughed at his friend who had been so selective earlier in shaping his narrative.

“Right,” Mitch said, “but the explanation earlier seemed to be much more focused on the music part.”

Ralph shrugged as he and Taylor got into the car.

Mitch opened the trunk and sat the dog food on top of some reusable grocery bags and a platter he was supposed to return Monday on his way home from work. He made a mental reminder of the errand and then, knowing he would forget, added a reminder in his phone as he got into the car.

“Since we’re over here anyways, and it’s gotten late, I need you to make a stop.” Taylor said as Mitch pulled out of the parking lot.

“Stop for what?” Mitch asked. He was happy to have completed his assigned task and wanted to get home to show Pam the proof of his success.

“Real quick,” Taylor answered. “Just stay straight and you’re going to turn right after Mills Street. It’s called Western Manor Apartments.”

“Isn’t that the name of that old, sketchy apartment complex that’s all yellow and brown?” Ralph asked.

“We’re not going to buy more drugs, Taylor. I think you can make do with what you’ve got,” Mitch said.

“Layoff. I’m not buying anything.”

That statement was uttered in a tone completely devoid of Taylor’s general good cheer, so Mitch did lay off. When they arrived at the complex, Taylor directed Mitch to a particular building, promised he wouldn’t be long, stepped out of the car, and then thanked them.

Mitch was off put by the thanks. It wasn't in Taylor's nature to be thankful; the thought hadn't ever seemed to occur to him.

Mitch watched Taylor knock on an apartment door, and a tiny woman wearing a beanie answered. She looked at the two men still in the car for a moment as Taylor walked into the apartment, and then pushed the door shut behind him.

Mitch couldn't decide how old the woman had been, and asked Ralph while they waited. He said the same. They both agreed that she had looked tired, and maybe familiar, although neither could place a name to go with the face.

After about ten minutes of scanning the radio for modern hip hop that the men could stand, Taylor stepped out of the apartment, pulled the door shut, and then checked to make sure it had locked behind him. When he climbed back in the car, both the men smelled weed on him, although he wasn't acting particularly stoned.

"So," Mitch asked, at least a little irritated that he had just waited for his brother to smoke, "who was that?"

"Nobody. Thanks for stopping."

Mitch could tell his brother wanted to leave it alone, but Taylor's lack of reply had Mitch too interested in what his brother had gotten himself into.

"We'll go, but who was that, first?"

Mitch turned the car off and sat back, making it clear that they weren't moving anywhere. He waited quietly, looking at his brother in the mirror, and was about to give up when Taylor finally spoke.

"Jesus. It was Tani. Now let's go."

“Tani, like your ex, Tani?” Mitch asked as he started the car. He couldn’t put it all together.

“Yeah, my ex Tani. Please, let’s go.”

“I didn’t recognize her.” Mitch was pulling out of the apartment complex now.

“Ralph either.”

“No, I didn’t,” Ralph said.

Mitch spoke again, very curious now, “Didn’t she cheat on you? Isn’t that why it ended?”

Taylor’s reply came quickly this time, “Fuck off, Mitch.”

Mitch wasn’t clear on why the question had made his brother so mad and didn’t know how to respond.

Ralph jumped in, “She’s lost weight, and it seems like she used to have a darker complexion. Wasn’t Tani the black girlfriend, or am I remembering a completely different girl?”

“No,” Mitch replied, “that was her.”

He looked in the mirror, but Taylor was looking down at his hands.

“She’s sick.” Taylor was playing with the dinosaur toy again. “She’s dying, actually.”

“But you guys are dating again?” Mitch asked, trying to understand what was going on.

“No, not really. I’m just helping her.”

“Helping her how?” Ralph said, beating Mitch to the question.

“She’s got pancreatic cancer. She’s dying” Taylor responded.

“And how do you fit in?” Mitch said.

“Well, she doesn’t have anyone else. Most of her friends sort of skipped out on her with all of it, and her mom died a few years ago. She never knew her dad.”

Mitch looked in the rearview mirror and met Taylor’s eyes for a moment before his brother continued.

“She didn’t ask for my help. I just kind of started one day. She tries to get me to stop sometimes, but I think she knows she needs me. She basically made me go out with you guys tonight. I usually go to her place right after work.”

“So how do you help?” Mitch asked.

“I used to take her to her treatments,” Taylor said and then paused. “I used to take her to her treatments, but she doesn’t have those anymore. They didn’t work.”

“So the weed...” Mitch began.

“She’s says it helps with the pain, and I know it helps her eat. She hadn’t eaten anything today, which is why I needed to do this tonight. She was mad that I drug you both all the way over here.”

Mitch wasn’t sure what to say. His brother had always been the selfish one.

Ralph broke the silence with a, “Huh.”

“It sounds like you’re doing a good thing, Taylor,” Mitch offered, sure he needed to say something, “Just make sure you’re okay too.”

“Yeah, I’m okay.” Taylor hesitated.

Mitch looked in the mirror and could see that his brother was deciding if he should continue or not.

Taylor laid his head back against the seat. “It turns out it feels good to help people. I mean it makes me fucking sick to see her like that, but I feel good about helping. Sometimes I think it’s the wrong thing if I enjoy it. I’m helping her die.”

None of the men spoke for a minute. Mitch wondered if Taylor had ever enjoyed doing the “right thing” before. He was glad that his brother was finding out about it now.

“Would she rather you be miserable?” Mitch asked.

“No, of course not,” Taylor said.

“Of course not,” Mitch echoed, “Selflessness feels good. At least for most people it does. Maybe it’s really just another kind of selfish.”

“That certainly makes this whole thing less surprising,” Ralph said and chuckled.

Taylor laughed. “Yeah, and I thought you were the whitest person out of the three of us.”

“I did too,” Ralph said, “Turns out being an accountant is just as black as anything else.”

Mitch couldn’t believe what he had seen tonight.

“You guys both surprised me tonight,” Mitch said, wanting to be a part of it, “What about me? I really went out of my way to get that dog food, didn’t I?”

“Yeah, but that’s always been your thing, for like a decade,” Taylor said. “You’re scared to death of letting Pam down. That’s not surprising at all.”

“He’s right, or maybe you’re actually just scared to death of Pam.” Ralph said, and the three men finished the drive in silence.

When Mitch pulled into the garage Ralph didn’t even go back into the house. He was too excited to go home and tell his own wife about his potential new client.

“Mitch.” Ralph waved and started backing up his own car before Mitch had time to respond.

Taylor hopped into his car too. “I’m going to go, Mitch. Tani just texted me asking what we’re up to. I’m going to go hang out with her for a bit, see if I can get her to sleep.” And with that, he pulled out of the driveway.

The door into the kitchen opened and Pam walked out. She was wearing a black robe. It was silk, and the draw from the air conditioner pulled at the tail. It waved in a wind that didn’t obviously exist as Pam spoke. She was circled in light from the kitchen. All Mitch could see was her outline from his vantage behind his car. She was a sort of blur.

“Everyone left a bit ago,” she said.

“That’ll work. Sorry we took so long. Did they leave behind a mess?”

“Not really. I already threw the dishes in the dishwasher.”

“Great, thanks.” Mitch went to the trunk of his car and lifted it open. “You actually won’t believe what happened tonight. Ralph and Taylor—”

When Mitch shut the trunk lid, coming into his wife’s sight again, he lost his breath when she looked immediately disappointed.

“That’s not the right food.” She pointed at what was on his shoulder.

“Sure it is,” Mitch said, “Castor and Pollux.”

“Right, but Choc eats the salmon and peas. That’s the duck and sweet potatoes.”

Mitch stood behind his car.

He thought about Ralph. How excited he had been about his meeting on Monday. How likeable he would be and how quickly he would make himself indispensable to Samuel as an accountant. He thought about how much work Ralph would put in tomorrow, making

sure he was familiar with the fiscal practices of the music business and the ins and outs of the hip hop genre.

Then Mitch thought about Taylor. How he was giving his time and his weed to a dying girl. Mitch thought about how much more comfortable Taylor had seemed recently, having discovered that it's okay, it's possible, to care about others and yourself.

Mitch needed to surprise himself too.

“Well, it looks like Choc will be eating Duck and Sweet potatoes for the next few weeks,” Mitch said as he stepped past the dog food container and into the kitchen, bag of dog food still on his shoulder.

“Whatever,” Pam said to him as she rounded the corner toward their bedroom, “Did you put that platter in your car? Don't forget to return it on Monday,”

“Yeah,” Mitch replied, proud of the savvy he'd displayed in the parking lot of the second pet store, “Don't worry; I've got a reminder in my phone.”

Wheaty

Gary slapped the red paddle down, pointing to the lone cow standing in a spot of shade. Gary couldn't believe his luck as he announced "cow!" He never saw just one cow while playing Eye Spy. A cow on his board almost always meant a cow on Pete's board, but this time his brother would have to wait for another opportunity.

As the car moved on and that cow quickly drew out of sight, Gary spent just a moment considering the cow. It had looked lonely, staring into nothing, seemingly oblivious to the mass of flies swarming its head, so thick that they were visible to Gary as he rode past. He hoped there was some herd, cows and calves, around a bend or just over some hill. He hoped that the cow wasn't really as lonely as it had seemed.

"I quit," Pete told Gary.

"But we just started."

"Yeah, and now you have a cow and I don't. And we're about to start into the mountains and then there aren't any cows."

Pete seemed pleased with his decision. He hadn't wanted to play in the first place. He said the game was boring and just for kids. It seemed to Gary that, recently, Pete had been more and happier to avoid things that were "for kids." Gary was tired of it.

"So I win!" Gary exclaimed. He almost never won Eye Spy, and he figured winning now would almost make up for what was at the end of this trip and would definitely get Pete back for quitting.

Pete had always been better at this particular game than Gary, more able to focus. Maybe it was the three years difference between them, but even when Gary's older brother's

nose was buried in one of his new comics, he would spy first, yelling *dog, water tower, bridge*, and usually *cow* long before Gary got the chance.

“You don’t win. I quit before you won,” Pete let Gary know in the voice he always used when Gary had gotten something entirely wrong.

“No, you quit because you knew you were going to lose, loser,” Gary exclaimed. He knew he hadn’t gotten this one wrong, no matter what voice his brother was using.

“Yeah okay, Gary,” Pete said while putting on his sarcastic grin, “you won.” Then he let out a, “ha!”

“Why don’t I just ask the Magic 8-Ball?” Gary started shaking the plastic ball while asking the question out loud, “Did Pete just lose at Eye Spy?”

Gary looked at the settling blue liquid and hoped with everything he had that it would come up with a positive answer. If not, he would just lie. “It is decidedly so. Sorry, Pete, but you lose.”

Pete shot across the backseat, enraged in the way he only seemed to get when that cheap plastic ball had done him wrong. He moved so fast that his seatbelt locked and wrenched back against his shoulder. With the sudden restraint, he came up short from the ball and was forced to retreat after simply punching his brother above the knee.

“Ow,” Gary cried out, although the seatbelt had taken most of the starch out of the punch. The boys didn’t fight much, so Gary took advantage of every chance he had to get his brother in trouble.

“Boys, that’s enough,” The boys’ mom sounded from the driver’s seat of the station wagon. She paused and then added, “And if you quit now, I’m agreeing with the 8-Ball; you lose, Peter.”

Gary looked at his brother grinning, suddenly without pain and happy for his mom's help to win the argument.

Pete grew quiet, and seemed to return to his comic. "Cow," he said, pointing out the right window and barely looking up from his comic. Gary looked out the same window and saw a herd of brown and white cows. He looked back at his brother who was grinning with his victory.

"Sure, now you're playing sinc—"

"Semi-Truck." Pete cut his younger brother off, pointing to the rapidly approaching semi and flipping down another paddle on his own Eye-Spy board.

"Let's hope that's the last one we see," the Boys' grandmother said from the front passenger seat.

"No, we'll get stuck behind a line of them, I'm sure," their mom replied.

Gary didn't understand what the big deal with the semis was. His mom always complained about them before these trips, grandma too. Even Gary's father and grandfather would complain about them, although he couldn't remember ever making the trip with either man. There were usually discussions about when the best time to leave would be, and the response was always "doesn't matter what time, we'll be stuck behind trucks once we get in the hills." Then the discussion would always shift to when they were going to open up the interstate through there. The road was four-lane north of the Boston Mountains, and four lane south of Shreveport, but 71 south was a two lane winding road for this portion of the trip.

What Gary didn't understand was why anybody would want a four-lane interstate for any portion of the trip. Four-lane interstates were boring, but 71 south was the reason he came on this trip, that and there being no real options in life for a nine-year-old. Growing up

in Western Kansas, this road was a miracle to Gary. It serpented through the Boston Mountains, clinging to the sides of cliffs. Signs reading “Beware of Falling Rocks.” were a constant reminder of the imminent danger that could be around every bend. Those signs also reminded him of a joke his grandfather loved to tell about an Indian chief named Falling Rock who has remained uncaptured for decades, only to terrorize travelers on his land.

When there was an opening in the trees, or the cliff side of the road was so steep and perilous that no plants could hang onto the slope, Gary could look out into valleys and distant ridges. Occasionally he would see a cabin or home, sometimes a driveway in the distance, and he was in awe of the mechanics of it all. How did that person get wood, and screws, and wiring? How did they receive electricity? Maybe they simply lived off the land, but he knew no one really did that any more, not in 1995.

“We’re almost to the park, Pete,” the boys’ mom interrupted Gary’s thoughts.

“Are we going to get food? I’m hungry,” was Pete’s response to the good news.

“Me too,” Gary added.

“Sure. You guys want Dairy Queen or McDonalds?”

“Neither. I want Sonic” Gary was happy to make the choice for the car.

“They don’t have a Sonic, Gary,” his grandma said, “but we can get some ice cream at Dairy Queen.

“Fine. And we’re going to eat at the park, right?” Gary said, staring out the window, looking for a gap full of dinosaurs.

“Well, that was disappointing.” Gary’s grandma said, squeezing her grandson’s socked foot that was propped up on the console between the seats in the way only a small child can accomplish.

She was talking about the park, and she wasn’t wrong. What came at the end of this trip was a nightmare, but what came right in the middle was supposed to be a treat. A dinosaur park. Whoever had the idea to build fiberglass structures around playground equipment so that everything seemed to be a dinosaur was a genius, as far as Gary was concerned. To climb a ladder into the heart of a tyrannosaurus-rex only to slide out the end of the tail was as near to nirvana as Gary could imagine. Swinging from monkey bar to monkey bar on the belly of a brachiosaurus was almost beyond belief.

On this trip, however, things at the park had gone differently, and Gary was troubled that the reality of something could be so different than his memories of just one year ago. On the first step out of the car, the boys’ mom had planted her heel right in a pile of dog shit (Gary’s mom’s words, not his). Eating at the picnic table, even after she had applied a great deal of effort toward scraping the tread clean, they could all still smell that uniquely dog aroma. Pete had even been good enough to point out that it had ruined his meal, although he did manage to choke down his banana-split, all the same.

If only that had been the end of the dog poop (Gary’s word, not his mom’s), but it wasn’t. Gary was the next to step in it. He took a moment before looking down, sure of why the dry grass had become suddenly slippery. He then took another moment to consider whether the pile had been bigger than what his mom had found, or if it was just a matter of his own foot being so much smaller.

“That looks more like one of these dinosaurs shit.” The swearing meant Gary’s mom was frustrated, but she did a good job of concealing it with a smile.

“Sorry,” was all Gary could think to say.

“I’m assuming you didn’t mean to, so it’s okay. Tiptoe over there and drag your feet in that grass.” Gary’s mom pointed to a patch of thick grass in the corner of the park.

Gary’s grandma was next. She was carrying the trash from lunch, so her view of the ground in front of her was obstructed. Right foot, and it somehow curled up and onto the white leather. While laughing at the misfortune of his family and running toward the triceratops, Pete hit the fourth pile. No man was spared.

“Can we go, guys?” The boys’ mom sounded reluctant, but didn’t want to push bad luck too far.

“Yeah.” Gary had already returned to the picnic table, waiting for the good news that they could leave.

“This park used to be kept clean. It’s a shame,” Gary’s grandma was explaining, “It doesn’t look like anyone has mowed in a while, and the dinosaurs all need a coat of paint. It’s always been hit and miss, but I think this is the worst I’ve ever seen it. And this park has been here for probably 20 years.”

“Well,” Gary’s mom replied, “there doesn’t ever seem to be anyone here when we stop. Maybe it just doesn’t have the visitors to justify the upkeep.”

“Sure, but somebody could at least pick up the poop.”

“Pete?” Their mom called to the son who had disappeared from sight.

“Wait, Mom.”

“No, we’re heading out. Let’s go.”

“There’s a big bug-nest in this T-Rex. I think it’s dead, but the structure-”

“Leave the wasps alone, Son.” Their mom interrupted in a voice marked by practiced concern over a boy that was willing to poke an interesting nest, dead or not.

Pete left the nest by sliding through the tail of the T-Rex, and headed straight for the backseat of the car.

“Did you wipe your feet?” His mom, again.

Pete began hopping on one foot, still headed for the car. When he looked back at his mother, Gary could see the *no* on his face.

“Go wipe your feet, son.” And with that, their mother placed her other foot into another pile of dog poop.

Gary couldn’t help but laugh. If anyone was going to step on two, it was his mom. Gary’s dad called it a talent. If there was shit to step in, he would say, she would find it and step in it. Gary couldn’t see that there was much room to argue the point.

Gary’s dad has even made a job for his brother based on the necessity of removing poop from their own yard. Pete was “The Shit Man” on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday evenings. His job was to walk around the yard with a small shovel scooping up any excrement he could find and then throw it all over the fence into one of the pastures that surrounded the house. Their dad usually took the weekend shift himself.

This park, however, didn’t seem to have a shit man, and finding a solution to the problem of what to do with 5 poo-covered shoes was front and center in everyone’s mind. What portion of the smell was emanating from shoes, and what portion was really “in their nose,” was hard to determine, but four hours in the car with that smell was a troubling proposition. Thankfully, the boys’ grandmother always brought a bag full of seemingly

unnecessary essentials. One of these items was a garbage bag, so now the family rode barefoot. Their shit covered shoes were piled into a bag and stuffed under the luggage in the back of the station wagon.

“That might be our last stop at the dinosaur park, guys.”

“No, mom.” Pete had always loved that park.

“It was just really nasty. No one was taking care of it.”

As his mom and brother continued to discuss returning to the park, Gary looked out at the overgrown weeds, overflowing trashcans, and peeling dinosaurs that were all shrinking in the distance. He imagined a family stopping and seeing how worn down it was, commenting on the overgrown grass, and moving on. The children never enjoying the opportunity to climb and explore. He imagined an older couple traveling through the area after many years and without their children for the first time. They would stop just long enough for their two Boston Terriers to relieve themselves where their own children had once loved to play. He imagined this road after the interstate was completed, the park bypassed completely, and not even a passerby to reflect on what used to be. And before he realized it, Gary couldn't even see the silhouettes of the dinosaurs in the distance.

Aside from the ever-present poo smell that seemed to be faintly everywhere in the car, the next four hours had been pleasant enough. Pete, always happy to entertain others by explaining the seemingly unimportant difference between individual species of dinosaurs, spent a quarter of the time explaining why the T-Rex had such short arms, what purpose the triceratops' boney hood served, and why that jungle gym had clearly been a brachiosaurus,

not a brontosaurus. His grandmother had encouraged the explanations, beaming with the pride that a happy grandmother often does.

Gary was less content than the others, however. There was nothing pleasant about trip now. There were no lunches or themed parks to break up the day. All Gary had left was waiting to reach their destination. He would have to wait for the short drive from Fort Smith to Bonanza. He would have to wait for his mother and grandmother to collect themselves before one of them approached the front door and pounded with all their might, as the other stood back, 30 or so feet, trying to minimize the threat that they might pose. And they all had to wait to see if their destination held life or death. All that was left was Wowo.

“We’ll need to take her to the supermarket and to Sears, if she’ll go.” Gary’s grandmother had thankfully interrupted his dread with talk of the mundane.” She needs a new fridge. If that one she has now breaks, she’ll be in real trouble.”

And with that simple statement, the dread returned. Gary had reflected many times on what would put her in “real trouble.” Alone down here for six months at a time. If her air conditioning broke, what would she do? Sweat to death, hermetically sealed in with all that Arkansas summer heat. If her fridge broke, what would she do? Could she survive for months on what was in the pantry, or would she simply starve to death? What if her water line broke? Gary always supposed she would just die. If a fuse went out, it would depend on what that fuse powered; any of the above and she would be dead. Maybe she’d be lucky and it would just be the lights, so she could live her months alone and in darkness. At least then they wouldn’t have to find her dead, just scared.

When Gary’s mom pulled off the highway and onto the small road that would take them the last few miles of the trip, Gary couldn’t help but feel that all these fears weren’t

wrong. Looking at his grandmother, Gary noticed that she had transitioned from enumerating the families “things to do” for the next two days to quietly picking apart a Kleenex that was squeezed in her left hand. His mother’s knuckles were white from ringing the steering wheel. Even Pete, who had an inhuman ability to remain oblivious to the world around him when a comic book, TV show, or his own thoughts were at the forefront of his mind, was instead looking out the window, marking the passage of the final few houses between where he was and the families end point.

And like that, they arrived.

As his grandmother pounded on the side of the trailer, Gary became very sure that this was the worst part of it all. She pounded again and stepped back to where she could be seen from the small slit that Wowo kept cut in the black plastic, her peep-hole of sorts. Gary’s mom, who was standing much further away from the trailer but still in sight from the peep-hole, looked over and gave a fake smile to the boys, not enough teeth to be real, they both knew.

The yard was large and generally unkempt. Gary knew that the neighbor mowed it a few times a year, as a favor. According to Gary’s grandfather, because he didn’t want a grown up field next door. There was no other way it would be mowed. Behind the trailer, and only adding to the general terror of visiting the place, was a deteriorated homestead that had belonged to the family. The roof was caved in, and any paint that had adorned the building was long gone. What remained was a grey structure, grown up with weeds. The windows were broken, but full of defiant, sharp shards of glass. To the right of the house, and just past it when looking from the front, was an old well. It was the kind that Timmy had fallen down, and Gary couldn’t stand to consider what may have found its way down this hole. The old

house and well, just like the trailer prior to an all-clear, were off limits. The difference between them were the reasons for the restrictions. Gary was sure he wasn't allowed in the house or near the well because his mother and grandmother feared rusty nails or earth that could give way; he wasn't allowed near the trailer for a different reason, a reason that sent chills down his back in the sweltering car.

Gary's mom and grandmother were afraid. They were sure that one of these trips would be the trip where they would find Wowo dead. Gary was sure of it too.

Wowo had been born Wheaty in a small town near Fort Smith, Arkansas, not far from the place she lived now. She was the second oldest of five daughters, and for a reason no one could remember, she had always gone by Wowo. The whole family had packed up and moved to New Mexico when she was 11. Her father had contracted black lung in the coal mines of Arkansas and dry air was nearly all that could be recommended to treat the illness at the time.

All of the sisters were petite women, the tallest wasn't 5'3". Wowo, however, was the smallest, not breaking the 5 foot mark. There were two events that had shaped Wowo's life and created the woman who now terrified Gary with the likelihood of her death and the realities of her life. The first was her catching Scarlet-Fever when she was a small child. The illness hadn't taken her life, but it had taken her hearing. Being poor, deaf, and a woman in the mid-1900s wasn't a recipe for independence, so Wowo never found any. She watched two of her sisters marry in their teens, then Wowo comforted her mother through the inevitably early death of her father. After she moved back to Arkansas with her mother and two remaining sisters, Wowo watched another of those sisters be married, and then the

second life-shaping event occurred. Wowo watched as her mother died slowly from cancer and was left to live with her older sister.

Fern, as she was called, was also unmarried for a reason. Gary heard his parents call the reason Schizophrenia, and as far as he could decide, that meant something like scared. Fern had been the one to teach Wowo about the importance of covering all the windows, the dangers of shopping at the store, and the misfortunes that result from traveling too near to a road. Fern, in short, taught Wowo to be afraid, and Wowo had been a good student. Fern's own early death to breast cancer had solidified the realities of those dangers, and Wowo had lived in her trailer for the following 27 years, alone, shut-in, and without any contact except the bi-yearly trips divided up among the remaining sisters; trips like the one Gary, his brother, their mom, and their grandmother were on at the moment.

Gary's grandmother pounded on the wall again, not the door as someone might expect, but somewhere near where the floorboards were. She looked back and her daughter. Gary's mom asked if Gary's grandmother could hear Wowo moving around inside, and Gary's she didn't respond. She stepped forward and pounded on more time, adding a "Wheaty" to no possible effect. Then she stepped back quickly, apparently having heard something.

When the door finally did open, just a crack, Gary could see a small almost skeletal face squinting in the light. Her eyes seemed to dart from his grandmother to the car to his mother and then back to his grandmother. She didn't smile, didn't seem to react at all, in fact, except to pull the door shut and reopen it again without the two chains attached. Gary's grandmother stepped into the dim room, and a small arm pulled the door closed again.

Gary mom approached the car, obviously relieved, which gave her sons some relief as well. They all took a moment to breath and smile to each other. At least the worst possible outcome had been avoided. But, Gary thought, that meant they had to go in.

“Okay, you guys can get out now.”

Both boys jumped out of the sweltering car.

“Why didn’t she let us in?” Gary asked his mom.

“Maamaa is just letting her get used to us being here,” was the answer.

“And flushing the toilet,” Pete added, “Remember last time when it stunk and we couldn’t figure out why and then dad went into the bathroom and he said it looked like she hadn’t flushed for months?”

“Why wouldn’t she flush?” Gary was curious to know.

“Well,” His mom paused, “she thinks she doesn’t have enough money to pay for everything—”

“But Maamaa and Papa pay her bills,” Pete interrupted.

“They do, so I guess she thinks they don’t have enough money. She doesn’t really understand money very well. She’s never had to, so she thinks it’s important to save on the water bill.”

Gary didn’t think this made much sense, but the door opened again and stopped him from asking any follow-up questions. What stuck its head out the door was not dead, although that wouldn’t have been obvious aside from its motion and concerned look. Wowo was seventy, but truly gauging her age would have been near impossible. Her skin was pale, almost translucent, from a life spent indoors, a lightless life she created for herself. For years she had covered her windows, from the inside, with aluminum foil and garbage bags. She

said it was to keep out the wet and the heat, but Gary thought it was just as likely so she could forget that the outside world existed at all, as scary as it was to her.

That was the irony of Wowo, and even as a small child Gary was completely aware of it. She was as scared of him—more scared even—than he would ever be of her. That was sad, he thought, because Wowo really did scare him.

She smiled to the family and waved for them to come in. Her mouth was almost empty except for three rotten teeth. When she reached out to hug Gary's mother, her niece, Gary stepped behind Pete. When it was Pete's turn for a hug, Gary stepped back behind his mother, hoping to be forgotten in the lineup. He wasn't, and the hug that followed was weak in comparison to the powerful hugs that he received from the rest of his family. Wowo was weak, truly skin and bones. Gary distracted himself from the hug by examining his new surroundings. The living room had a small recliner and an old TV that Gary doubted even had a remote. Gary and the rest of the family stood in the ample empty space while Wowo locked and relocked the door behind them. There were six different locks on the door, and Wowo turned, latched, or ran each of them five times before moving on.

As there weren't enough seats for all in the living room, the family made their way to the kitchen where there was a table and four chairs. Gary sat on his mother's lap and listened to the adults discuss health, family, and what they needed to do during the visit. Wowo, who had spent her life deaf and alone and only had a few years of speaking upon which to base her own attempts at language, tried to speak. What came out was all deep vowels and Bs, and Gary couldn't understand a word. He ignored the conversation for the most part, but based on what his mother and grandmother said, they could be going to the grocery store, to the

dentist, to Sears for a new fridge, and maybe somewhere for a new TV that would have closed-captioning.

While these discussions were taking place, Gary studied a peculiarity occupying the middle of the table. There were four gallon containers lined up next to each other. Two had apparently contained milk and two had contained fruit punch. Now what they contained was different, however, and lived up to the promises of his brother's description. Each jug was full to the top with cardboard, and as Pete had promised, the pieces of cardboard were so small that they could barely be discerned.

Pete had thought it was funny, but the pieces were a marvel to Gary. Pete had commented that it was dumb to hide cardboard from mice, because mice didn't really care about cardboard that much anyways, especially not when the pantry was still full of boxes filled with food, but Gary didn't think that was really the point. He glanced into the living room and saw the one chair sitting across from the TV, then back at the jugs. He couldn't imagine how long it had taken to start off with a cereal box or a graham-cracker box and end up with something that more closely resembled dust. Looking at a single container, Gary could see the hint of horizontal striations of color, although they were mostly cardboard brown, which marked each individual package. He saw a line of red and imagined Wowo pulling apart a box of Ritz crackers, turning it into confetti, one piece at a time. The line of blue sitting above that could have started as Pop tarts, Gary's own favorite, and to that she had done the same. Looking at the each jug, Gary couldn't count the lines; they were too many.

"I like your milk-jugs." Gary turned red, surprised at himself for speaking.

Wowo hadn't heard him, couldn't have heard him, but did turn to him after Gary's grandmother and mother had done the same.

"Look right at her and say it again, Gary," his mom suggested.

"I was just saying, I like these jugs."

Wowo didn't respond and instead looked at her sister.

"Gary said he likes your jugs." She pointed at the containers.

Wowo looked back at him and nodded, smiling the littlest bit.

That smile wasn't scary at all. Gary thought it looked scared, if anything, unsure of what to do next.

"How, um..." Gary paused, looking back and up at his mother. "How did you tear the boxes up so small?"

Wowo looked back at her sister. Gary thought she hadn't understood again, and he became frustrated. He had tried to speak slower and had looked right at her the whole time.

Apparently she had understood, because she responded to her sister, apparently offering Gary the help of an interpreter while sparing him the embarrassment of having to ask for one after the fact. What came out of her mouth was indiscernible to him, just more deep vowels and Bs.

"She said time. It takes lots of time and patience, but she says she has lots of time so that's okay. She just sits quiet and tears."

Wowo spoke again once Gary's grandmother had stopped.

"She said she could show you, but you're probably too busy and wouldn't have enough time to tear up too many."

"Yes ma'am," Gary responded slowly, still looking at Wowo.

She spoke again saying, “It helps keep the mice away.”

This time Gary nodded to Wowo before his grandmother had the chance to translate.

Soon after discussing the boxes, the whole family, Wowo included, loaded into the car. Their first stop was the drug store, and then they went on to the grocery store. Most of what Wowo bought wasn't perishable. This food would be lasting her the next six months. Gary was surprised by how little they were putting in the carts, but his mom told him she was little and didn't eat much. Gary's grandmother snuck extra into the baskets regularly, obviously having the same concerns that Gary himself had.

When they arrived in the dairy section, Wowo pointed to the whole milk and held up two fingers. Pete helped by lifting the milk into the basket once Wowo had moved a few feet down the aisle.

She would follow this pattern: they walked part way down the aisle, they stopped, Wowo examined the front of every box, she picked one or two items, and after five or ten minutes in that spot they moved a little way down the aisle and repeated.

When they reached the cereal aisle, Wowo stopped and seemed to consider much more seriously than she had on any other aisle. She grabbed a box here and a box there, until there was a small collection in the basket. Then she turned to Gary.

“What's your favorite?” seemed to be the question.

Gary took a few moments and then led Wowo to a box of Captain Crunch Berries. Wowo smiled and grabbed the box. She seemed to signal for one more, so Gary led her to Cinnamon Toast Crunch.

“I’ve never had this,” Wowo somehow said with only deep-vowels and Bs, and Gary understood her completely. She grabbed a box.

They both stepped over to the cart and examined their haul.

Wowo said something like, “I love cereal.”

“Me too,” Gary responded, but he forgot to look at Wowo, and he turned to see that she was already on her way to the next aisle.

When they were nearly done, and after Wowo had produced a handful of tissue from her purse that she used to completely dust the Little Debbie display, Gary heard his brother ask their mother how long they had been in the grocery store.

“Almost three hours,” came the reply.

Gary realized that he was exhausted and hungry, and looked forward to leaving the store, but tried to hide it for Wowo’s sake.

As the cashier rang up the groceries talking to the adults in the way of small town grocery store clerks, Gary looked at Wowo sandwiched between Gary’s mother and grandmother. She looked miserable again, not the same as she had been explaining the torn up cardboard or picking cereals. She kept glancing from the total-display, then to her sister, to her boxes of cereal, and back to her sister.

Gary grandmother offered, “It’s okay, Wheaty. This will get you through six months. That’s not so much for six months of food.”

Wowo said something that Gary couldn’t understand, although he knew he was getting better at hearing the words in her speech.

“No, we’re getting your cereal too. Don’t worry about how much it costs,” was Gary’s grandmother’s response.

Then she paid the bill, and the five made their way to the parking lot and the waiting station wagon.

The next morning, after heading back to Wowo's from the hotel and taking her to breakfast, the family said their goodbyes in the dark living room of the trailer. Wowo and Gary's grandmother were crying, promising that they would see each other soon.

Gary looked over at the table in the kitchen. It was empty of milk jugs. One of the tasks of each trip was getting rid of all the trash, but Gary thought it had been better when the table was full of Wowo's work.

Once they had made it outside and Wowo had pushed the door shut behind them, the family listened to the locks turning and the chains sliding into place behind them, again and again until they fell silent. Gary's mother and grandmother shared looks like the looks they had shared when the family arrived the day before. This time Gary thought they meant something like, *I hope we see her again.*

Gary thought the same, and as the station wagon pulled onto the road, Gary imagined Wowo sitting at her table in the dim light, hearing nothing, tearing up a box of Cinnamon Toast Crunch and dropping the tiny pieces onto the red layer of cardboard that had come before it. He hoped she would like the cereals he had suggested. He thought she would.

Driving away, as the trailer and worn down house faded into the distance, Gary thought about the trip down and how scared he had been to see Wowo. He thought about all the other trips that his grandmother and great-aunts had made over the years, and he wondered if Wowo watched the road through the slit in the plastic as the cars faded into her distance.

“Want to play Eye Spy?” Gary asked his brother.

“No,” came the reply, “I always win.”

“Maamaa,” Gary was leaning forward now, addressing those in the front seat, “do you think the park will be nicer the next time we come down?”

“I don’t know. We’ll just have to stop and try it out.”

“Yeah,” Gary replied, “but it’ll be worth the trip either way.”

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ABSTRACT

Humor is an ever-present aspect of American Literature, and, in particular, short fiction. While the construction of the comedic has been studied and broken down into its constituent parts, the reasons for its application are less studied and understood. This dissertation examines the application of humor and the comedic in the works of American writers: Raymond Carver, Flannery O'Connor, George Saunders, and Denis Johnson in order to gain understanding about the decision to include humor in a variety of their works. The goal of the critical introduction portion of *Pieces* is to illustrate the use of comedy as a means of creating engagement in works of short fiction, which may be less engaging as a matter of plot or character, and then to come to a conclusion about the decisions these authors make about humor while writing. The creative portion of *Pieces* is a collection of short fiction, which attempts to illustrate the same comedic application.

Biographical Sketch

Cameron Guidry grew up in Kansas and attended the University of Kansas where he earned a Bachelor of General Studies in History. He then relocated to Pittsburg State University where he completed his Master of Art in English. Next, he moved to south Louisiana and enrolled at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette where he completed his Ph.D. in English in 2017 while working as a high school English teacher in Port Barre, Louisiana.