UNDER THE SAME STARS

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“When it is dark enough, you can see the stars.”

-- Ralph Waldo Emerson

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Edith Palfrey stares at the human wreckage that had once been her father. He is sleeping fitfully; with his gaunt frame, he looks like a skeleton covered in bed sheets. A thin rivulet of spit runs down one cheek, and she reaches to wipe it with a tissue, tossing it into the trashcan near the bed. She lifts an overhanging bit of sheet to check the collection bag for the catheter, and sees that it is only a quarter full. The catheter is the type they call a Texas catheter, which some people also call a condom catheter, which gives you a better idea of how it works. Needless to say, it took her quite a while to get used to putting it on and taking it off of her father--though, if
she were completely honest, she would tell you she had never really gotten used to it.

Edith reaches over and brushes the hair away from her father’s face with her hand; his hair is as white as snow, with thin patches where she can see glimpses of his scalp. It is hard to believe how thick and dark that hair had once been, in another lifetime.

She steps out of the room as quietly as she can and goes into the small kitchen, where her tea is finished steeping. She removes the Lipton bag from the cup and tosses it into the trash, then tears the end off of a packet of Equal, measuring half the packet out into a spoon. She stirs it in and adds a dash of milk, then drops in a single ice cube to cool it down just a little. Taking a tentative sip, she nods her head in satisfaction before taking her cup of tea to the living room, where the TV is still on.

Edith takes a seat in the chair that has always reminded her of the one Archie Bunker always sat in on All in the Family. She leaves the volume turned down as she watches some crappy sitcom she doesn’t really like play itself out on the screen, while taking small, satisfying sips of tea.

After a while she starts imagining what is going on in the show, making up a storyline to go with the wordless images she is seeing. A tall, older gentleman steps out from behind a curtain he’s been hiding behind, and Edith decides that this man must be the Blonde’s father, and that he has been hiding because he doesn’t want her to know that he is secretly seeing the Brunette. She can almost hear the reaction from the studio audience, one of those cheesy ooohs that always accompany a scene were something racy is hinted at. Just then a younger man comes bursting onto the screen, and the camera cuts back to the Blonde, the Brunette, and the Dad/Secret Lover. They all look a bit sheepish, and when the camera cuts back to the Young Guy, he looks perplexed. As the camera hangs on him, Edith imagines the Brunette saying something off
camera: “This isn’t what it looks like.” And the audience laughs.

Finishing the last sip of tea, Edith picks up the remote and hits the power button, and the TV goes blank. She goes to the kitchen and slowly washes and rinses the cup before leaving it upside down in the dish rack to dry. She shuts off the kitchen light and makes her way down the hall to the back bedroom to check on her father. She cracks the door just a bit and peers inside; there isn’t enough light to see anything, so she opens the door just a little more to let in some of the light from the hall. A gasp escapes her and she rushes into the room, flipping on the light as she goes.

Her father is lying on his side on the floor, wedged between the bed and the bedside table. It takes some time (especially with him fighting her the whole way), but she gets him back up onto the bed. Some noises escape his throat, noises that might have been words if he could still talk.

“It’s all right, Daddy. You’re okay; you just had a little accident.”

Then the stench hits her, and she realizes just how right she is. She lets out an exasperated sigh, then immediately feels guilty for having done so. She knows that none of this is his fault. He had once been a happy, outgoing, man--a man’s man, her mother had called him. It all started when he began having trouble remembering things, and eventually the road had led right here, to this room, to this night, and to all the nights to come. The dark secret that lay in her heart, the nasty thing that she would never admit to anyone, that she could barely admit to herself, is that she often hopes that there won’t be many more nights to come.

“We need to get you changed,” she says.

She gets a pad and fresh pair of protective underwear from the linen closet (she can’t think of it as a diaper, never that) and sets it on the bedside table. Then she lifts her father up and slips the pad under him to catch any spillage. She then works on getting his soiled protective
underwear off of him, mindful of the catheter tube snaking out of one side. The soiled pair gets rolled up and thrown in the trash. She uses some wet wipes to clean him, and then gets the fresh pair of underwear on him. She lifts him up on his side again to slip the pad out, rolls that up and tosses it into the trash. As she works, she pretends that she does not see the tears in his eyes, or see the trembling of his too-moist lips. She can’t bear to see those things, and so she just doesn’t see it. She covers him with his sheets and gives him a quick kiss on the forehead before taking the bag out of the trashcan and tying it in a knot. She shuts off the light and shuts the door, then takes the bag of soiled things to the kitchen, where she stuffs it into the kitchen trashcan.

For a moment she stands in the kitchen, leaning against the counter. Then she walks slowly to the study where her father used to while away the hours once upon a time, reading, writing correspondence, or just napping (though he always denied that last one). She turns on a lamp and soft light bathes the room in a warm glow. She touches a few of the books lined up on the shelf: *Gulliver’s Travels, Don Quixote, The Collected Works of Poe*. She moves over to the desk in the corner where her father used to sit happily writing letters, and not-so-happily looking over the latest electric or heating bill.

Mounted on the wall over the desk is one of the scale model ships he used to build as a hobby. He had built at least a dozen of them over the years; the others were carefully packed away God knows where, but this one has always been his favorite, and so it was set on a shelf mounted on the wall of his study. It is a 1/50 scale model of the HMS Bounty. It had been up here on this wall ever since Edith could remember. She had often seen her father take it down and set in on the desk to just look at it, almost as if he were surprised that he had actually made such a thing. A few times she even dared to take it down herself, but never while her father was home.
As she looks at it now up there on the wall she can see that time has taken its toll on the ship. A few of the sails sag where they should be taut, a few scuff marks mar the hull, and the mizzenmast is bent slightly out of shape. She thinks that the ship must have taken a tumble from the wall at some time in the past; it must have happened when she was away, living her own life away from the house where she had lived as a child. For just a moment she considers taking it into a hobby shop to see if it can be repaired, put back in its original condition. Then she decides against it; why spend money just to fix something that will just stay hidden here in the study, where nobody will see it, anyway? She moves to the doorway and takes another look at the study, inhaling deeply the smell of the room, still retained, that smell that is so distinctly her father. Then she turns off the light and closes the door, leaving the room and its ghosts in darkness.

Edith leaves the house and slowly descends the porch steps. She walks to the street, turns right, and starts walking. At the stop sign she stops and turns back to look at the house that had been her home, then was her parent’s home, and now was her home again since her mother died and left Edith as the only one to take care of her father. There are a few lights on, and she can’t help thinking that the house looks like a big ship, lost and adrift on a dark sea. She turns and starts walking again, thinking that she will turn around at the place where Oak intersects Ridge. The big night sky envelops the world like a velvet glove, and a cool breeze blows gently in her face, blowing wisps of hair around her head. When she gets to the intersection of Oak and Ridge, she thinks that she will walk to the next intersection, and then she will turn back. But when she gets to the next intersection, she keeps going, thinking that it will be nice to walk just a little farther.
IN A FAMILY WAY

Sarah tossed the unfinished cigarette to the grass and ground it out with the toe of her sneaker. It was a warm night--warm for October, anyway--and the sky spread out above her like an inky sea, the stars like little chips of ice. She tugged at the right sleeve of her shirt, which was two inches shorter than the left one--the price of shopping at a discount. Somewhere dogs were barking, whether at a passing car or at the moon, she did not know. Sarah checked her watch. A Disneysesque princess’s face adorned the clock face, and the band was a bright shade of pink; Chloe and Laurie always teased her about it, calling it a little girl’s watch. She blew a stray strand of hair out of her face as she saw that Vic was twenty minutes late. It was par for the course with him.

A brief gust of wind blew cool air in her face as it sent a Burger King wrapper and a Styrofoam cup rattling along the street, before receding and allowing the trash to settle against the curb. Sarah sniffed, feeling the first warning signs of what would probably develop into a cold--or maybe pneumonia, with her rotten luck. She dug the tip of her shoe into the yellow, dying (or dead) grass, thinking about what it would be like to be somewhere else right now, someone else. In this other life, would things be better, or would it be just a different shade of the same shit?

A pair of headlights came flashing up the street, and she looked up, trying to squint against the lights. The vehicle sped up to the curb and screeched to a stop. The passenger door swung open and Sarah was greeted by Vic’s smiling face. He smiled a lot, Vic did--she couldn’t quite explain it, but it wasn’t the kind of smile you have when you’re happy, it was some other kind of smile that she had liked once, but now turned her stomach just a little.
“Hey, babe. Get in.”

So she got in, and as soon as her door was closed the car was moving again. Vic cut to the left and rocketed down Fairway. For a few minutes Sarah squirmed in her seat. After spending the last twenty-four hours trying to find the right things to say, she suddenly had no idea how to start. Finally, she tried to get it out.

“Vic, I--”

“Shh, wait till we get to my place. Right now I wanna listen to some music.”

He turned up the stereo. She knew the song she was listening to was part of Vic’s own personal mix—he said that radio stations these days were for shit. The song currently playing was one of his favorites: Frijid Pink’s rendition of “House of the Rising Sun”, a song originally about a woman living a sad, wasted life in a whorehouse. When the song was over, another one started, “Rockin’ in the Free World” by Neil Young. Right around the time Neil was talking about having fuel to burn and roads to drive Vic pulled up in front of the little house he shared with his parents. That was the term he preferred—“shared”—ever since they made him start paying rent when he turned eighteen.

“Come on,” he said as he killed the engine and hopped out of the car.

Sarah got out and slammed her door closed, then followed him into the house. The house was dark for a moment until Vic turned a light on.

“Where are your parents?” she asked.

“They’re visiting my Aunt Patty in Libertyville. We have the house to ourselves.”

He gave her a knowing smile, flashing his teeth; she could tell that they hadn’t been brushed recently. His poor oral hygiene was just one more thing about him that she hadn’t really noticed until very recently. It was like love—or something that you called love—put blinders on you,
allowing you only to see the best in people. It was only later that you started noticing things like the fact that their teeth hadn’t been brushed recently.

Without another word Vic started upstairs, and Sarah followed after him. He had the room at the end of the hall, which was also the smallest of the house’s three bedrooms; the master bedroom belonged to his parents, and the medium bedroom was his brother’s, who was fighting with the Army off in Iraq or Afghanistan (Sarah wasn’t sure which). Vic had tried to talk his parents into letting him swap rooms with his brother, since he was paying rent and all, but they insisted on keeping the room just like it was for Brandon to come back to.

Sarah closed the bedroom door out of habit, even though they were alone in the house. Vic got down on one knee and reached under the bed, bringing out a tattered cigar box. He sat on the edge of the bed and slid off the rubber band that secured the lid of the box. As he started rolling a joint Sarah moved aimlessly around the room, touching things, picking things up and setting them down. She paged through one of the comic books Vic kept piled up on his dresser, fantastic tales of supersonic men. She tossed the comic back onto the pile as the pungent smell of the weed filled the room.

“Want some of this?” Vic asked.

“No; I’d better not.”

“Whatever.”

Sarah moved over to the bed and sat down beside him. He lay back on the bed with his legs hanging over the side. She had to will herself not to flinch away when he started rubbing her back. She looked over her shoulder at him; his eyes were closed, and he was moving his lips like he was singing some secret song under his breath.

“Vic,” she said.
“Huh?”

“We have to talk.”

“Okay,” he said with his eyes still closed.

“I’m serious,” she said, and now she did move away from his hand.

Vic sighed and sat up. For the first time she noticed a few wispy hairs on his upper lip that were struggling to become a mustache. She almost teased him about it, but thought better of it; now wasn’t the time for that.

“Well?” Vic asked, looking at her.

Suddenly she couldn’t stand meeting his eyes, and she lowered her gaze, studying the tops of her shoes. They were old and a little dirty, but her mom wouldn’t buy her new ones; whenever Sarah asked she got the old “do you think money grows on trees?” routine.

“I think I’m pregnant,” Sarah blurted out, surprising herself with the suddenness of it almost as much as she surprised Vic.

There was a quiet moment in which a bubble of silence seemed to grow and settle around them. Sarah noticed a splotch of blue paint near the tip of her left sneaker, and she wondered how it had gotten there.

“Well, like…so you’re not sure?” Vic asked, breaking the bubble.

“No. I’m sure.”

“Then why did you say that you think you’re pregnant, not that you know you’re pregnant?”

“I don’t know. But I’m sure. I was late, so I bought one of those tests from the store, the kind you pee on. It was positive.”

She finally looked up at him. He wasn’t looking at her, though; he was staring up at the ceiling as if there were some invisible writing up there that only he could see. The joint
smoldered between his fingers, forgotten now.

“How far along are you?” he asked, his eyes still on the ceiling. “You know, like, how many weeks?”

“I don’t know. I think a doctor has to tell you that.”

“A doctor?”

“Yeah,” she said. “An obstetrician, or something like that.”

Vic took is eyes off the ceiling, but he still wouldn’t look at her.

“I don’t think you’re gonna need an obstetrician,” he said.

“Why not?”

“Well, you’re just gonna have to…you know, take care of it. I have about forty bucks left from my last check; I can borrow the rest from Scotty if you need more.”

For a moment Sarah forgot to breathe as she stared at this boy she had once thought she loved, as the words he was saying seeped into and around her mind. Then she sucked in a lungful of air and let it out.

“I can’t do that,” she said. “I don’t believe in it. Shit, Vic, you know how my parents are. They would never forgive me if I did that.”

“That’s the thing--they’re not gonna know. We won’t tell anybody. You didn’t already tell them, did you?”

He looked at her then, fear in his eyes at the thought that her parents--the same people who had first expressed misgiving about her dating an older boy (him in particular), and then had outright forbade her to date him--already knew that he had knocked her up.

“No, I haven’t told anybody,” she said.

Vic breathed a sigh of relief.
“Then it’s no big deal,” he said. “We’ll get rid of it, and no one will ever know.”

Get rid of it. The words were caustic, burning her like little drops of acid.

“I told you, I can’t do that,” she said.

“Jesus, Sarah, don’t lay your parents’ religious crap on me,” Vic said as he stood up and moved away from the bed.

“It’s not even that,” Sarah said. “I just can’t.”

Vic ran a hand through his unwashed hair. He looked down at his other hand and remembered the joint. He licked his thumb and forefinger and stubbed it out before slipping it into his shirt pocket.

“What do you think is gonna happen, Sarah? Do you think we’re gonna start a family or something?”

“I don’t know,” she said, embarrassed at the silliness of the thought.

“You think I’m gonna marry you? And what, you’re gonna move into my room with me?

“I don’t know,” she repeated; it was the only thing she could think to say.

“Shit,” Vic said, and that one word seemed to sum up the whole of their lives.

He came back to the bed and sat down. He clasped his hands together tightly and stared down at them, neither one of them saying anything for a moment.

“You know that’s not gonna happen,” Vic said quietly. “Shit, it’s probably not even mine.”

That last part wounded Sarah more than she could say. Vic had been her first and only, a fact he had never doubted until this moment, when it became convenient for him to doubt it. Her eyes started to water up then, but she wouldn’t allow herself to cry. Not here, not for him.

“It’s yours,” was all she said.

“I guess you’re gonna have to prove it, and get the kid tested once it pops out. Until then,
“This is your problem.”

“Why are you being like this?” she asked.

“I can’t…,” he started, but didn’t finish.

Sarah stood up.

“Take me home,” she said.

Vic looked up at her for a moment, then shook his head slightly and lay back on the bed again.

“I want to go home,” Sarah insisted.

“Then walk your ass home.”

Sarah moved to the door and opened it, pausing in the doorway.

“Brush your damn teeth,” she said, and then she was gone.

The walk home was a long and lonely one. The warmth that she had noticed earlier was already leeching away from the night; soon the night would turn cold. As she walked her tears got the best of her, and she spilled her fair share of them. She had a lot of time to think about what she was going to do next. She didn’t know how she was going to break the news to her parents; just the thought of it was awful. She thought that she may even “take care of it”, like Vic wanted, but not because he wanted it. She would get the money somehow, but not from him--she didn’t want his money, or any part of him. Not anymore.

Every now and then she would stare up at that big, black sky hanging over her, and those chips of ice that were stars. She had heard somewhere that people are really made up of stardust. She didn’t know if it was true, but she liked to think that it was. For just awhile, as she walked home, it was nice to think that we are all made of stars.
PRESCRIPTION

When he was six years old Ignacio’s grandmother told him the meaning of his name, which had been her idea, and which her daughter--Ignacio’s mother--had simply accepted in the way she accepted most things her mother told her to do, or suggested, which amounted to the same thing more often than not. His grandmother told him that his name came from the Latin name “Ignatius”, which in turn came from the word “Ignis”, meaning “fire”. Fire, she told him, because that was what was in his heart, a fire that he must never let the world snuff out. He had liked the way it sounded, and upon hearing it he had immediately felt a flush of warmth, as if discovering for the first time, feeling for the first time, that fire that his beloved grandmother was certain burned within him. As he grew older, year after year, he felt the flame grow smaller, fainter, sometimes guttering like a candle after someone has opened a window and let in a gust of wind. Now, at the age of fifty-eight all he felt, late at night when the house was quiet, or on the long drive to work, with open fields and gently rolling hills stretching out on either side of him, was a small hot coal, no longer aflame but still giving off phantom radiant heat.

Now that fifty-eight-year-old man who once had a fire inside him stands in front of a monster of a building, a huge thing pouring out harsh white light into the night, a light that puts the meager light reflecting off of the moon above to shame. When the monster came to town many people said that it would kill the competition, and that all of the smaller stores in town would be forced to shutter their doors, to surrender to the monster. In the end, some stores had indeed gone out of business, but most were still around, as if they had come to some kind of an understanding with the monster, had achieved an uneasy peace.

When he enters the monster he is greeted by a nice-looking older woman who looks to be in
her seventies, if not older. She greets him with a smile, and tells him to have a nice shopping experience. He nods back at her with his own smile and continues on into the brightly lit belly of the beast, but it doesn’t really look like a beast at all, he has to admit, despite what Rudolfo had told him last year. Rudolfo, an old friend of Ignacio’s, was one of the smaller store owners who had found peace with the monster intolerable, and so had simply surrendered with much bitter resentment, taking comfort in telling his friends, and people he thought were his friends, his tales of misery and woe, and of rights put wrong by the monster.

Ignacio turns left and walks the short way to the pharmacy counter. Two people are in line ahead of him, a woman with a cough and a young man, a business-looking type in a nice-ish suit, with glasses that have thin metal frames that the man keeps nudging back up the bridge of his nose. Ignacio knew that if he were to shake hands with the man, he would find that the man’s hands were too soft, the hands of a man who hasn’t ever done an honest day’s work, real work, in his life. Not the kind of work you did while sitting in an office or a cubicle, but the kind you did with the sun on your back and in your face, or with the rain soaking through your clothes until a certainty grows within you that you will never be dry again for the rest of your life. First the woman, and then the man with the soft hands finish their business and leave, and then Ignacio is at the counter. The pharmacist, a pretty young woman, looks at him questioningly.

“Can I help you, sir?” she asks.

He searches in his pockets, and for a moment panics, thinking that he has forgotten the piece of paper, has left it on the table by the door, or on an arm of the sofa, or worse yet, that it dropped out of his pocket somewhere between home and this counter. It lasts only for a brief moment, this panic, before his hand closes on the piece of paper buried deep within his left pants pocket, and he takes it out and places it on the counter, sliding it over to present it to the young
pharmacist. She picks up the slip of paper and reads the strange writing there, the kind of writing only years of medical school can teach you to write, and only a pharmacology degree can teach you to read, and which looks like some alien cipher to the uninitiated.

“It’ll be one moment,” she says, and disappears into the back, where the pills and potions are kept.

Ignacio checks the clock hanging on the wall behind the counter. It reads 8:38. When the pharmacist reappears, it reads 8:45. So, Ignacio thinks, a “moment” is exactly seven minutes long. The woman has a bottle of pills in one hand, and she drops it into a white paper bag and places it on the counter.

“How will you be paying for this? Do you have an insurance card, or a Medicaid or Medicare card?”

“No. Insurance no.”

He pulls out his wallet and pulls out a few bills.

“Self-pay, then,” she says.

She punches some keys on the cash register.

“That will be thirty-six ninety-eight,” she says.

Ignacio looks at his cash, and without counting it he knows that he does not have enough. Two days ago he would have had enough. On Friday he will have enough again. But right now, here tonight, he does not have enough. He looks up at the woman.

“Too much. Another. Como se dice? Generic,” he says, the word finally coming to him.

“There is no generic for this medication, sir.”

And now she is starting to get irritated. She has worked a long day, she is tired, and she would like to get home to a bowl of chicken noodle soup and her DVR’d shows. Ignacio looks
back at his money, the money that is not enough but will be enough on Friday, and then looks back at the young woman.

“My wife, she sick,” he says.

“Self-pay is thirty-six ninety-eight,” she tells him, as if she thinks that perhaps he didn’t quite hear her the first time.

Again Ignacio looks at the money, the money that is not enough but would have been enough two days ago, before he paid the rent and the light bill.

“Excuse me,” someone says behind Ignacio, and he turns around to see who it is that has spoken.

The man who spoke has evidently been behind Ignacio in line for some unknown period of time. He is wearing a t-shirt and dark jeans, both splattered with paint, as if the man had been in the middle of painting a room in his house when he suddenly remembered that he had a prescription that needed filling.

“Please, allow me,” the man says.

He pulls out his own wallet and slips out some bills before stepping around Ignacio and handing them to the pharmacist. When Ignacio realizes what is happening, he waves his hands in the air nervously.

“No, no, no; can’t take money,” he says.

“Please let me do this,” he man responds. “I want to. I need to.”

And Ignacio sees something in the man’s eyes then, some kind of desperation that he does not understand.

“Please,” the man says again. “Let me do this for you.”

After a moment of hesitation (not a seven minute moment, more like a nine second moment)
Ignacio nods his head gently, and he sees the desperation in the man’s eyes dim just a bit, almost imperceptibly.

“Thanks you very much,” Ignacio says.

“No problem.”

The pharmacist puts the money in the register, then tears off a receipt and staples it to the bag before handing the bag to Ignacio. He grabs the bag and gives another nod to the man in the paint-splattered pants.

“Thanks you,” Ignacio says again.

“Have a good night,” the man says in return.

The man gives him a slight smile before turning to the pharmacist to conduct his own business.

As Ignacio leaves the monster that does not look like a monster (though Rudolfo is pretty sure that it is) he nods to the woman who greeted him when he entered, and she nods back. Then he is in the sparsely lit parking lot, then he is in his car, and then he is home. He thinks about telling his wife about the man with the paint-splattered shirt and pants, but decides that he will wait. Someday the memory will come back to him like an old, lost friend, and he will smile, and she will see him smiling. She will ask why he is smiling, and then he will tell her. He hopes that then, when he tells her the story of the man in the paint-splattered pants, she will smile, too.

Later, while lying in bed, listening to his wife’s slow, steady breathing beside him in bed, Ignacio feels something that he hasn’t felt for a long time, something that he wasn’t sure if he would ever feel again--assuming he had ever really felt it at all, and it was not just some illusion, like a mirage that appears to a man lost in a lonely desert. What he feels, in that quiet hour of the night, is a flame, a flickering fire burning within.
OLD DOG BLUE

“I’m goin’ to tell you this jes’ to let you know
Old Blue’s gone where the good dogs go”
- Jim Jackson

Gus found him when he came down for a midnight snack. He tiptoed into the kitchen, not wanting to disturb Blue’s sleep; the old boy had been sleeping in the same spot by the door that led from the kitchen to the side porch for the past ten years, ever since the time he had sat there on his haunches one night and refused to budge, until Meryl had finally thrown up her hands and had told Gus to just bring the bugger’s bed to the kitchen—his bed being a big, open-topped box with some blankets laid in it. In the years that had passed since, the box had been replaced five times, the blankets four times, the last of the kids had moved out of the house, and Meryl had passed on. After that, it was just the two of them, Gus and Blue. For a while, on those first lonely nights after the cancer had taken Meryl, Blue had laid at the foot of Gus’s bed, sensing the man’s need for comfort and companionship. Even then, however, Gus would wake up to find that Blue had gone back to his own bed sometime during the night while Gus was asleep.

When Gus grabbed the piece of Saran wrapped cheesecake (courtesy of the widow Helmsley), he almost turned and walked back up to his room without delay. But something had nagged at him, something about the way Blue had been lying half off his bed. He set the cheesecake on the table and shuffled over to Blue’s bed by the door. The kitchen was dark, the scant illumination from the blue-white porch light not enough to banish all of the shadows. Gus reached over to the wall and flipped the light switch, and a warm yellow light immediately
bathed the room in its glow. Blue didn’t move. Blue didn’t breathe. His eyes were half open, and they looked dull. There was nothing left there.

Gus got down to business then. He took off his robe and slippers and got dressed in a flannel shirt and an old pair of worn blue jeans. He went out to the toolshed and got the things he knew he would need—a pair of gardening gloves that had once belonged to Meryl, a shovel, a tarp. He had two tarps to choose between; he took the one that had fewer holes in it.

Back in the kitchen, he laid the tarp on the floor next to Blue’s bed. He lifted the dog’s body out of the bed and placed it on the tarp, then wrapped the tarp over it and lifted it up off the ground. The old boy was lighter than Gus would’ve thought. Then again, the dog had been getting thinner lately, what with his old age and his bad stomach. Gus shifted the weight to one arm for a moment so he could use his free hand to open the door, then he carried Blue outside, stepping carefully down the porch steps. He took the bundle to a spot near the side of the house that Blue had been fond of in times gone by. He had buried many a treasure around this spot back before arthritis had made it too painful to dig.

Gus set the tarp down on the damp grass, put on the gardening gloves, took the shovel in hand, and began digging. He back hurt something awful, and his knees popped from time to time, but he kept at it. Even with the gloves on, his hands soon became sore, but still he wouldn’t stop. After some time he stood looking down at the hole in the earth that he had made, and was satisfied that he done it proper. He tossed the shovel aside and slipped off the gloves. It was too dark to get a good look at his hands to see if there were any blisters, but he didn’t doubt that there were at least a few.

Gus then picked up the tarp again (his back groaning in protest), and set it down gently in the freshly dug hole. He stood there for a moment, looking down at Blue and thinking that
something just wasn’t right--and then it struck him. He went back inside, to the kitchen, and gathered up Blue’s blankets. He brought them back and covered Blue with them, tucking them around the tarp. There; that was how it should be.

The hardest part was shoveling the earth back in and covering Blue with dirt. He didn’t like throwing dirt on his friend, but Gus did it, and when it was done, and all that was left was a little mound in the ground near where Blue used to like to bury his treasure, Gus took the shovel and gloves back to the shed. He snapped off the bare 60 watt bulb that was the toolshed’s only source of illumination, and went back inside the house. In the kitchen he found the cheesecake still sitting on the table, warm now and getting soft. He didn’t feel much like cheesecake anymore, so he tossed it in the trash, making a mental note to tell the widow Helmsley how much he had enjoyed it. He went over to the sink and rinsed his sore hands with warm water before bending down with a grunt and opening up the cabinet beneath the sink. Here was where he kept the last of his booze, a fifth of Wild Turkey, stashed behind a few bottles of household cleaning products so the kids wouldn’t see it when they stopped by for a visit (something that happened rarely these days).

He took the half-empty bottle and set it on the table, then rooted around for a proper glass. He finally settled on a small plastic cup with a picture of Superman on the side of it--whether it had belonged to one of his own children when they were young, or if one of the grandkids had left it after a visit, he didn’t really know. He sat at the table, poured himself a drink, and swallowed it down, the liquid settling like a warm fire in his belly. He considered another drink, but decided against it; one was enough.

Gus stashed the Wild Turkey away, washing out the plastic cup and setting it to dry. Then he grabbed the phone off the wall, sat down, and considered who to call. Neither Tom nor Linda
seemed appropriate. By the time Blue had come around, they had both already flown the coop, and were off building their own lives. Jack, then. He was the only one still living at home when Blue first came ’round, the only one of them that really had a relationship with the furryheaded bugger. Gus took his thumb off the button keeping the line closed and started to dial, then paused. He moved his thumb back to the button, closing the line, and looked up at the Felix the Cat clock hanging on the wall. The clock face glowed slightly in the dark; it was 1:34 in the morning. Gus stood up and took the phone back to its cradle on the wall, deciding that it would be better to wait until morning to make the call.

He climbed the stairs wearily and crawled back into bed. It was a bit chilly, so he pulled the covers up over himself and laid on his side awhile, one hand tucked between his face and the pillow, his eyes open and staring into the darkness of the room. Eventually his eyes slipped shut, and not long after that he was asleep. He had a dream about Blue that night, but in the morning he would be unable to recall the details of the dream. All that would be left was a sense of having lost something important.

THE PROMISE OF RAIN

Cassie laughed as she saved Ken from taking a nosedive. She caught him and pulled him up until he was standing (well, sort of); he needed to lean on her for support.

“We’re almost there, honey,” she assured him.

“Whuh?”

She almost laughed again, but this time she was able to suppress it with an effort. She didn’t want to hurt his feelings.
“We’re home,” she said. “Now we just gotta get you inside and into bed.”

“Okay.”

At the door she had to hold onto him with one arm as she worked the key ring with her free hand until she found the house key. She unlocked the door and pushed it open; it swung back easily and rebounded slightly off the wall. Cassie led Ken through the doorway and leaned him up against the small table beside the door.

“Lean against this for a second,” she instructed.

She trusted him to stay upright with the aid of the table long enough for her to shut and lock the door, then take off her coat and hang it on a hook. She then helped him out of his own coat and hung it up next to hers. As she moved back to Ken he belched right in her face, an aroma of beer and onions.

“Ah, the little ways in which you show me you still love me,” Cassie said.

She helped him navigate his way on the epic journey first through the living room, then down the darkened hallway to the bedroom. Off came the clothes, on went the pajamas, and into bed he went. Cassie covered him with the bed sheet, kissed him on the cheek, and went into the bathroom, closing the door softly. She reached into the shower and turned on the faucet, pulling up the lever to divert the water up to the showerhead. She stripped out of her clothes, leaving them in a pile against the wall, then checked the water to see if it was warm enough. Finding it to her liking, she stepped into the shower and stood beneath the showerhead, letting the strong, warm spray of water wash over her, warm tendrils tracing down her skin. The warmth worked into her muscles, relaxing, soothing.

Cassie took her time, wanting to relish the pleasure of the hot, cleansing water. When she was finished, she grabbed a towel from the rack and dried herself off. She tossed the towel on the
counter, switched off the light, and walked out into the bedroom; steam followed her out. The thick window curtain was slightly open, letting some light from the street shine through the sheer curtain that remained closed, giving her just enough light by which to navigate the room. She went to the dresser and found a pajama bottom, slipping it on. It took her a couple minutes to find the matching top; she put it on and buttoned it up.

She walked over to the window and opened up the sheer curtain, then unlatched and lifted the window. She breathed the cool night air. Ken stirred behind her, and she turned to see him pulling the bed sheet tighter around himself; he had always been the type to get cold easily.

Cassie closed the window and slid into bed beside Ken. She tried to go to sleep, but she couldn’t. After twenty minutes of tossing in bed (with Ken snoring contentedly beside her) she threw back the sheet and got up, slipping out of the room.

She went into the kitchen and poured herself a glass of water, dropping in a few ice cubes to make it cold the way she liked it. The ice clinked against her teeth as she sipped slowly. When she finished the last sip of water, she poured what remained of the ice into her mouth and chewed it while rinsing out the glass. She went over to the kitchen window and stared outside. From here all she could see was the backyard and the wood slat fence marking the back edge of their property. There was a noise behind her, and Cassie turned to see Ken standing in the gloom, looking almost like a ghost in the shadows.

“I woke up, and you weren’t in bed,” he said.

“I was getting a drink. I’ll be there in a minute, babe.”

“Oh.”

He wandered out of the kitchen; she heard him stumble his way back to bed. Cassie would follow him soon, but she lingered in the kitchen just a while longer. She opened the kitchen
window just a crack, once again letting the night air find its way into the house. She inhaled it deep into her lungs, breathed it out. She could smell rain coming. It hadn’t rained much at all lately, and she remembered reading something in the paper about farmers worrying because their crops were starting to die out. She hoped the farmers would find some comfort come morning, after the rain.

Cassie closed the window and walked to the bedroom, climbing into bed beside her husband and snuggling up close to him. He was dead asleep, but she gave him a kiss anyway. For a while she listened to the quiet of the house, to Ken’s breathing, to the sound of her own heartbeat. Then she closed her eyes. This time she had no trouble falling asleep, and within minutes her breath had steadied into a slow, soft rhythm.

PHOTOGRAPH

A moment in time captured in a flash of light. Five figures stand facing the camera. They are standing in front of a ’58 Buick, and in the background you can see a tree outlined against a clear sky. The whole scene is presented in shades of gray. The people are smiling, happy, eager to go for their first drive together in the new car.

The father is wearing his good suit, the hat on his head tilted slightly back on his head. He has dark hair and a bright smile. He has already taught his oldest child the basics of chess, and they play on weekends; mostly he lets the kid win.

The mother is wearing a sundress. Though the colors don’t show in the black and white photograph, the dress is yellow, spotted with blue flowers. She is wearing a wide hat that covers her brown hair. She uses a shampoo that makes her hair smell like apples.
The oldest child is the boy who plays chess with his father on weekends. His hair is cut short, and he is squinting one eye slightly against the glare of the sun. He is nine years old. He knows that his father lets him win at chess, and he is grateful. Sometimes they play out on the front porch, and his mother makes a pitcher of ice-cold lemonade. He loves them both so much that it fills him up.

The next child is a girl, three years younger than the boy. She wears a hat that looks just like her mother’s, but with a shorter brim. A unique feature about her--not discernible in the photograph--are her blue eyes. Both parents, as well as her brothers, have chocolate-brown eyes. Her maternal grandmother had the same deep blue eyes. She is wearing a frilly dress, and short white gloves on her hands. She looks like a proper little lady. She once buried a box with a silver locket in it in the backyard; it will not be found for another fifteen years, by another daughter, of a different family. Inside the locket there are two pictures--one of her, and one of her mother as a young girl. The resemblance is uncanny.

Then there’s the youngest, a boy, two years old. He stands on unsure legs, one hand holding onto his mother’s dress. One of his favorite phrases is “me milk”, said when he is thirsty. He is wearing a pair of overalls, the denim legs only coming halfway down is chubby calves. His hair is a wispy, dark blond.

They are all smiling. They are about to get into the car, to go for a drive. Aunt Helen, who is behind the camera, will wave to them as they pull out of the driveway. They will drive on until they get to Rt. 204, where they will make a right-hand turn before continuing on. The oldest child--sharing the backseat with his sister--will tell the father to go “Faster! Faster!” The father will eventually oblige, edging past sixty, then sixty-five, but no faster than that; a look from his wife warns him not to push it too far. The toddler will babble from his perch atop the mother’s
lap, as the mother makes a futile attempt to smooth down his hair. The daughter will stare out the window at the passing flatlands, one arm hanging out the window, her hand catching the wind. She will not see the car in the opposing lane as it grows closer. She will not see it as it swerves suddenly into their lane. She will not feel the impact.

When the police come upon the scene they find the mother and father pinned in the front seat of the car; the father is dead, but the mother will live for another twenty minutes, asking for her children. The daughter is found in the back seat, as dead as her father. The youngest won’t be found for another three hours, having been ejected from the vehicle and thrown into some tall grass. They will never be sure if he died on impact, or if he was alive for a while after the crash. The driver of the other car (and its only passenger) is found lying in the street, thrown free of his vehicle and looking like a discarded ragdoll.

The only life left after the impact belongs to the oldest child, the boy who once played chess with his father on the weekends while sipping his mother’s lemonade, the kid who would sometimes sneak a whiff of his mother’s hair, that scent of apples. It will be three months before he can walk again; more than a year before he can walk without crutches. He will leave the house he grew up in and will live with his Aunt Helen and Uncle Ed. They will be good to him, and in time he will have that same big love for them that he had for his own parents.

And now that boy who is no longer a boy puts the photograph back in the box where he keeps it, and puts the box into the bottom drawer of his dresser. He moves to the window and stares out at the still night. One of the grandkids lets out a throaty laugh downstairs. Soon he will go back down and join his family. Right now, though, he thinks back to another place and another time. It’s something he has found himself doing more often lately. Maybe it has something to do with getting older and facing his own mortality (again); he’s not sure.
Sometimes, if he tries real hard, he can still remember the smell of apples in his mother’s hair.

A VARIATION OF WAVE PRESSURE

The Girl waits in line with the others, both friends and strangers. The sun has gone down already, and the evening has taken on a chill; not a “you can see your breath in the air” chill, a softer, less brutal chill than that, but still a chill. She regrets now her choice of a top, a faded and thin lime green t-shirt with a logo on it, a screeching skull with a long, serpentine tongue lolling from its mouth that seemed to leer out at you, and beneath the skull a bucket that was tipped over on its side and spilling foul contents across a dirty tile floor. This was the logo of the band that was playing tonight, Scuzz Bukkit, an orthographically challenged group of young men from a town in the Midwest called Willmar, Minnesota.

When the Girl first discovered the band, on a warm, June night in the apartment of a friend, the first time she felt the pounding pulse of their music, she decided that she wanted to learn everything about them. Late at night, back in her own apartment, while sitting up in bed with her laptop throwing a pale blue glow on her face, she searched out every little thing she could about them.

That was when she learned they were from Willmar, Minnesota, a place she pictured as a near-empty town far from anything that could be called civilization, a place where angry men spent their days working in factories that would soon close, and their nights drinking in bars whose bathrooms smelled like piss and vomit, nursing their wounds (both literal and figurative, for surely they were barroom brawlers, these men), thinking of all the things they should have been, and could have been if only, always “if only”, “if only” being the one thing that stopped
them from achieving some greatness.

And the women, the wives, mothers, sisters and daughters of these men (and boys who thought they were men), they spent their days wiping the asses of squealing babies, and the noses of dirty-faced toddlers, and worrying about the baggy clothes their teenaged daughters had started wearing lately, and wondering if the clothes were hiding something, a growing belly perhaps, hoping that they are wrong, that it is simply a fashion choice. These women spent their nights looking out windows with worried looks on their faces, wondering why their particular man wasn’t home yet, wondering if maybe there had been an accident on the road tonight, wondering if they should call the hospital, but afraid to call, because last time they’d done that their man had gotten angry when he found out, and he had shouted at her that she was too paranoid, that nothing had happened to him, that he had stayed out a little late drinking with his friends, and that wasn’t a sin, was it? And when the men finally came home, and the fears about five car pile-ups and skid marks on blacktop were put to rest, then another kind of worry set in, a worry about the effect of alcohol on a bitter man, a man who could’ve been something if only; and maybe they knew, all the woman of Willmar, that they were the if only, or at least suspected it. They sat quietly at the dinner table, hoping that they would not have another bruise to explain to the neighbors tomorrow.

And somehow, four young men had broken free of all of this, had used their guitars, drums and amplifiers as chisels and picks, and had escaped from the darkest prison they would ever face. They had given themselves a funny name that wasn’t meant to be funny, and they had run from Willmar, Minnesota.

Or at least that’s how she imagined it that night, sitting up in bed and staring at the screen of her laptop.
The line moves glacially forward, and the Girl gets ever closer to the front of it. She hopes that the club doesn’t reach capacity before she gets in, thinking what a waste it would have been to drive into the city for nothing. She moves closer, and closer still. Eventually, after the passing of several epochs, she makes it to the door, and the man waves her inside without bothering to check her ID, and she wonders if this means something, if it means that she no longer possesses the girlish look that had once been a pain in the ass to her, that had meant that every bouncer in town always asked for her ID, and checked it over twice before letting her in. Then she feels the music, and all this bullshit scatters like dandelion fluff.

The music thumps against her chest, a steady wallop. The club is filled with people with strange haircuts, and even stranger piercings, and Mandy, who drove the Girl into the city, mouths something slowly and carefully, so that the Girl will have no trouble reading her lips, but Mandy’s consideration counts for nothing as the Girl nods politely without bothering to read her friend’s words. Mandy, thinking she has been understood, disappears into the crowd, and the Girl stands alone despite the crowd around her. She closes her eyes and feels the *thump thump thud* of the music. She enters into something like a trance or a waking dream as she stands there, an island of calm in a sea of sweaty and violently moving bodies.

She is jolted back to the world by another person bumping into her, and she opens her eyes to see a guy whose face is covered in tattoos, and he is trying to tell her something (to apologize for bumping into her, most likely), but she cuts him off with the old familiar gesture—she grabs an earlobe, then points to the ear and shakes her head. The guy smiles nervously and walks away.

The Girl looks up toward the stage, and sees the four men from Willmar up there, playing their instruments roughly, as if their instruments have somehow offended them. They are earnestly playing the music that most of her friends can’t understand the way she understands it,
can’t feel the way she feels it. To them it’s just noise, but to her it’s something else entirely. She moves forward through the crowd, politely nudging people aside so that she can get closer to the stage. A few people give her rude looks, but she pays them no mind. As she nears the stage, and the big pulsing amplifiers, the thudding grows heavier, deeper. Closer still, and she can feel it in her teeth. She walks right up to the stage and smiles up at a large speaker rising high above her. She reached up and touches it with her hand, cautiously at first, as if she is afraid that it might shock her, or bite her. Then she places her hand flat against the speaker and she can feel the sound, the waves of pressure coursing up her arm, vibrating her entire being. And on her face, shining forth like a rugged beam of light cast into the night to warn ships of the rocks ahead, there is a smile, a simple smile.

HAND IN UNLOVABLE HAND

1: Man and Wife - the Latter

When Carla looked back on the sad wreckage of her life, on those quiet, empty nights when Ben slept in the den and she slept alone in the vast expanses of a bed shared with no one, she couldn’t quite put the pieces together so that they made any kind of logical sense. The numbers didn’t quite add up, and no amount of rearranging them could do the trick. She would draw the covers up to her chin against the night chill and stare at the window, a neat square of bare moonlight in the darkness of the room. Sometimes she would cry, but mostly she didn’t; the time for tears had passed, and she wasn’t entirely certain that she had the right to cry.

In the mornings she would cook some eggs and bacon, or pancakes for the kids; if she didn’t feel up to cooking, she would just pour them some cereal. They accepted whatever she gave
them without complaint, for which she was grateful. Whatever she made for breakfast, Ben wouldn’t touch it, waiting until she was done to make his own breakfast. It had been like that for the last three weeks, ever since the night of the confession, when she had acted on some idea of honesty and a fresh start, and the reaction to which had not been what she had expected. But what had she expected? She couldn’t really remember.

After breakfast she would drive the kids to Oakwood Elementary, where David was in the fifth grade and Lynn was in the second. If things were running according to schedule, Ben should be gone to work by the time she came back, but lately, just to be sure, she wouldn’t go straight home. Instead she would stop by Dapper Donuts for a coffee (lots of cream), or the Val-U-Mart for a pint of strawberry milk. She would drive home slowly, taking the long way, and she would arrive to find an empty house, quiet in an awful way.

During the long hours of the day when she didn’t have the kids to look after she had nothing to do but clean the house (even if it didn’t need cleaning), watch TV (even if there was nothing good on), or go mad (the most tempting option of the three, but not really practical). When David had come along it had been decided that she should quit working and stay at home, so the kid (and later, kids) would always have a parent around for them. The decision had purportedly been mutual, but now, upon further reflection, Carla didn’t remember ever explicitly agreeing that it was a good idea. What was done was done, however, and it was far too late to change it. She imagined that people weren’t exactly clamoring to hire a thirty-nine-year-old woman who had been out of the workforce for twelve years. Maybe it was this emptiness in her days, this unique loneliness that had led her to what she had done. Or maybe she had just been selfish--she still wasn’t certain.

So she spent her days cleaning or watching TV, and trying not to go mad, and when school
ended she brought the kids home and helped them with their homework. Then it was time for dinner, which (like breakfast) Ben would not eat, making himself his own little meal, a turkey sandwich, or a Hungry Man. When dinner was finished, he would give Lynn a kiss on her forehead, he would give David a brief hug, and he would disappear into the den. The kids would look after him when he closed the door of the den, and then they would look at Carla, seeking an answer to a question they didn’t know how to ask, an answer she didn’t know how to give. The kids would take turns in the shower, and then she would put them to bed. Then it was time for the terrible walk to her own bedroom, the loneliest mile. And she would lie there staring at the window, and try again to put the pieces together. But still they never quite fit.

2: Man and Wife - the Former

In the morning he would lie on the couch in the study for a time after waking, wanting to prolong facing her for as long as possible. Right around the time he heard her rooting around in the kitchen and the kids starting their first quarrel of the day, he would throw off the blankets and stand up, stretching out his stiff back. He would pile the blankets crudely on the couch without bothering to fold them, and slip out of the den. He would rush upstairs and jump in the shower and then, with a towel rapped around the lower half of his body, he would take advantage of the opportunity to have the bedroom to himself. He would close the door behind him before searching in the closet and in drawers for something to wear.

Then it was down to the kitchen, where (if he had timed it right) Carla would be finished making the kids breakfast, and he would make himself something, maybe some scrambled eggs, or maybe an English muffin topped with two strips of bacon and a slice of deli cheese. Right around the time he was finishing his breakfast, Carla would be leaving to take the kids to school.
With some time to kill, he would turn on the TV and turn it to a local news broadcast, or maybe to CNN, with an eye on the time. He didn’t want to be home when Carla got back, didn’t want to have to be alone with her.

He had done some thinking of his own over the past few weeks, and what he’d decided was that he wished she hadn’t told him. He wished she hadn’t done it, but having done it, she shouldn’t have told him. Not ever.

He would turn off the TV, leave the house, and drive to work. At work he would laugh at every joke, and smile, and even tell a few jokes of his own. He would help someone with something they couldn’t quite figure out on their computer, or with the copy machine. He would take a break, have a cup of coffee and a donut, and shoot the shit. And all the while he would be thinking about the fact that he would have to go home when work was done, and he would have to be near her again, to see her and be seen by her. Sometimes his heart would start to race, and he would feel himself begin to flush, and maybe someone would notice and ask him if he was alright, and he would say yeah, I’m just fine. Feeling a bit under the weather, is all.

He would think about Carla and wonder what she was doing right then. Terrible thoughts would rise up in his mind about what she might be doing, and he would push them away. He didn’t really believe those thoughts; she said that the whole thing was over, and in spite of everything he believed her.

The drive home would be a slow one, with Ben taking unnecessary turns, making a circuit all around town before finally arriving at home. The kids would be home by then, a buffer between Carla and himself. He would make himself something to eat, and sit at the table with his family. Lynn would talk about her day at school, long tales that didn’t really go anywhere, but which Ben liked to hear nonetheless. David would let them know that nothing really happened at
school, as far as he was concerned.

Sometimes he would think of a line from a song: “Is a dream a lie if it don't come true, or is it something worse?”. He couldn’t remember the name of the song.

When he was finished eating, Ben would wash his own dishes quickly, knowing that Carla would probably re-wash them later, and he would go into the den where the couch awaited him, with its not-so-springy springs, and with that mysterious bar that seemed to press up into his back no matter which way he positioned himself.

He would listen to the sounds of the kids finishing dinner, and the sound of Carla washing the dishes while the kids took their showers, and then he would lie in the darkness of the den, listening to the silence of the house. He would think until thinking made his head hurt, and then he would close his eyes and try to get at least some sleep before it was time to get up in the morning. Eventually he would sleep, and the best days were when he woke up with no memory of his dreams.

Craig Dulles sits in his Nissan with the radio off, his eyes closed, wanting to put off going inside the house for just a little while longer. Maggie and the kids are in there right now, sitting down to dinner most likely, and probably wondering why he isn’t home yet. Maggie has already tried him on his cell twice; both times he allowed it to ring without answering it. If any of them should bother to move aside the curtain and look out the living room window they will see him parked in the driveway, sitting in his dark car. He wonders what Maggie made for dinner, or if she didn’t make anything at all and just ordered a pizza. It doesn’t make much of a difference to
him; he isn’t hungry at all.

Headlights momentarily light up the interior of the car as someone turns onto the street, and then all is dark again. Craig’s cellphone chirps again, and he takes the phone out of his pocket; it’s Maggie again. With a great sigh he hits a button and puts the phone up to his ear.

“Yeah, I’m home,” he says before she can speak. “I’ll be right in.”

He ends the call without waiting for a reply, slips the phone back in his pocket, and climbs out of the car. He hits the button to lock the door and swings it shut, then heads for the front door of the house. Just as he gets to the door it opens and Maggie is standing there, a worried look on her face.

“Where have you been?” she asks. “I tried calling you.”

“There was…something at work. I was going to call home, but I got busy and it slipped my mind. Sorry, honey.”

He leans in and pecks her on the cheek. For a moment Maggie stands her ground, blocking the doorway, the worried look on her face now turned to one of suspicion. Craig rubs at his temples, where a nasty headache is starting to form. He looks at Maggie, and she searches his eyes, trying to find what it is that he is not telling her. Then she turns without another word and retreats into the house; Craig follows after. He takes off his jacket and hangs it in the foyer closet, and sets his keys and wallet on a table. He moves to the stairs. Just as he climbs the first step, Maggie calls from the kitchen.

“Your plate is already on the table. We’ve been waiting for you. Hurry up, before it gets cold.”

He winces at the thought of them sitting around the table, staring at their food, waiting on him. He thinks about calling back to her that he isn’t hungry, and that they should just eat
without him, but he knows that will only raise more questions, so he joins his family in the
dining room. He takes a seat at the table and looks down at his plate. Maggie has made pork
chops, using that orange powder stuff that makes it taste so good. Beside the chop is a generous
serving of thick, creamy mashed potatoes and a small mound of corn. Ordinarily a meal like this
would make him salivate, but tonight his stomach is a ball of lead. He looks around the table,
first at Tommy, then Celeste and the baby, finally settling on Maggie.

“Looks delicious,” he says. “Have you kids thanked your mother for this wonderful dinner?”

“Thanks, mom,” Tommy and Celeste say in unison.

The baby just burbles in her own unknowable language. Maggie smiles then, and it is nice,
Craig thinks, nice to be here, sitting at this table with his wife and children.

“Well, dig in,” he says.

The kids waste no time in obliging him. Maggie takes turns eating from her own plate and
feeding small spoonfuls of corn and potatoes to the baby. Though he isn’t hungry, Craig gamely
cuts off a corner of his pork chop and eats it. As he cuts off another bit of meat he has a minor
coughing fit; he’s had a lingering cough for the past couple months, a stubborn bitch of a cough
that has refused to quit. Maggie looks over at him.

“I keep telling you to make an appointment with Doctor Hoye,” she says. “I don’t know why
you won’t listen to me.”

“I will, soon,” he promises.

She does not know that he has already seen Dr. Hoye. She doesn’t know, because he hasn’t
told her.

He eats another piece of the chop, has a couple spoonfuls of potatoes, washing it down with
the Diet Coke Maggie has left near his plate. The baby has her own little coughing fit, evidently
having trouble swallowing the last bit of potatoes and corn Maggie fed her. Maggie pats the baby gently on the back, and the coughing subsides. The baby then grins like she doesn’t have a care in the world. Craig can’t help but smile.

“Daddy,” Celeste says through a mouthful of food. “We’re gonna put on a show at school in two weeks, and I’m gonna sing.”

“Don’t talk with your mouth full,” Maggie chides.

“That’s nice,” Craig says. “What are you singing?”

“It’s--” Celeste begins.

A look from her mother stops her short; she swallows the food in her mouth before starting again.

“It’s a song called ‘Fifty Nifty United States’. Are you gonna come watch me?”

“Of course I’m going to come, sweetie pie. I wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

“She’s prob’ly gonna forget her lines,” Tommy interjects.

“No, I’m not!” Celeste says, hotly indignant at such a claim.

“Cut it out, Tommy,” Maggie orders.

“Jeez; it was just a joke,” Tommy says. “You’re gonna do great.”

He sounds genuine, and Celeste’s mood immediately brightens.

“Thanks,” she says.

The baby gives a loud, happy shriek, refusing to be left out of the conversation, and everyone laughs. Craig’s laugh, however, turns into another coughing spell, worse than the last one. He coughs into his napkin; the coughs sound deep and ugly. Maggie gives him a look that says, See, now will you listen to me? The coughing spell dies away.

“Sorry, excuse me,” Craig says, and gets up from the table.
He pockets the napkin and leaves the dining room, then heads to the upstairs bathroom. In the bathroom, he turns on the light and shuts the door behind him. As an afterthought, he pushes the thumb lock. He turns on the tap and washes his mouth out, the cold water hurting his teeth a bit. Then he shuts off the tap and stares in the mirror while leaning on the sink. Dark circles are starting to form under his eyes.

He thinks about Maggie downstairs, and how she doesn’t know about the visit to Dr. Hoye. He thinks about what else she doesn’t know: about the subsequent visit with Dr. Mendes (or the fact that there is a Dr. Mendes); about the scans Dr. Mendes took; about the follow-up visit with Mendes today, where he had gone instead of work, making excuses for why his wife hadn’t come with him. She doesn’t know about any of these things, though he knows that eventually he will have to tell her.

Craig reaches into his pocket and takes out the napkin that he stowed there, the napkin he used to cover his mouth during that last coughing spell. He holds it bunched up in his hand, still looking at his own reflection in the mirror over the sink. Then he looks down at the napkin, and slowly spreads it open. There in the center is a stain; it is a deep, dark red. Eventually Maggie will know about this stain as well—but not tonight. He balls up the napkin and buries it as deep as he can in the small trashcan beside the sink. Then he opens the door, turns off the light, and leaves the bathroom to rejoin his family at the dinner table.

GAME SHOWS TOUCH OUR LIVES

64 AD. The Great Fire of Rome occurred in 64 AD. Dave knew this. It was an easy one—for him, at least. So why hadn’t he been able to answer the question? That smug prick Rex Green--
whose real name is Morton, Dave happened to know, Morton for chrissakes!--had flashed him that big plastic smile of his, a circle of perfect white in that fake-tanned, plastic face of his, and Dave had frozen up, had drawn a blank, had reached down into the well and come up with a big bucket of nothing. In that moment he was able to picture how he looked to the studio audience, and how he would look to the television audience when the show aired--like a confused, sweaty simpleton. He had stammered, his eyes roving around the studio, taking in the audience, the cameramen, and his two opponents, before coming back to settle on Rex Green, longtime host of America’s third favorite primetime game show, *Take It or Leave It?*. Then the buzzer had sounded, like the judgment of a cruel and unforgiving god, letting Dave know that he had run out of time. And with that, his brief stint as a game show contestant had come to an end.

Now here he is, at some bar with an Irish name, drinking watered-down bourbon and lazily tracing some scratches in the countertop with one finger. There’s a ballgame on the TV hanging in the corner--no HD, not in a place like this, just a beat-up old set that had almost certainly had a pair of rabbit ears hooked up to it not long ago. Dave glances up at the game. The Yanks are beating the Orioles 6-zip in the bottom of the eighth. He doesn’t care one way or the other--he has no dog in that fight. Then a sloppy prick in a business suit speaks up.

“Hey Marty, why don’tcha turn it to that game show?”

Dave grimaces, and it isn’t the bourbon that makes him do it. He hopes the guy doesn’t mean that show, *the* show. He checks his watch. It’s 8:31. Yep, just about the right time.

“What game show?” the bartender asks.

“You know, that show,” the drunk says. “The one where the guy is always asking people if they wanna take or leave it.”

Dave can’t decide if that reply makes him want to laugh or cry; in the end, he does neither.
The bartender (evidently Marty) walks to the TV in the corner and starts flipping through the channels.

“Which channel is it on?” Marty asks.

“I think it’s on channel eight,” the drunk tells him.

Yes, it is on channel eight; Dave knows that, just as surely as he knows when the Great Fire of Rome occurred. Marty the barman flips to channel eight, and right there on the screen, staring out at the television audience with that fake smile of his, is Rex Green. Dave takes another sip from his glass as his red-rimmed eyes swivel away from the TV.

From the television:

“Now that we know how the game is played, it’s time to…”

And at this point the audience, the contestants, and the drunk at the bar all join in, like one big happy, demented chorus:

“TAKE IT…OR LEAVE IT!”

The audience claps; so does the drunk. Dave just groans. He can’t really remember now what made him want to go on that ludicrous show in the first place. He chances a glance back up at the set as Rex Green asks the first contestant--a pretty young woman wearing a University of Michigan sweater--who the twenty-eighth President of the United States was. He tells her that this man had been an avid hunter, an explorer, and a soldier.


“Wuzzat?” the drunk asks.

“Teddy Roosevelt. The answer to the question.”

On the TV the young lady from the University of Michigan answers:

“That would be Theodore Roosevelt, Rex.”
“Well, Sarah...that is coooo-rect! You just won five thousand dollars!”

Sarah from Michigan smiles, and the audience applauds.

“Hey,” the drunk says, turning to Dave. “Good one, man.”

Now Rex has something he needs to ask Sarah:

“Now Sarah, you can either take the five thousand dollars, and pass to the next contestant...or you can leave it, and answer another question, this one worth ten thousand. Sarah, do you want to take it…”

Oh God, Dave thinks.

Once again, everyone joins in:

“OR LEAVE IT?!”

Like Goddamn sheep.

“Leave it,” the drunk says. “Five grand ain’t nothin’ these days. Leave it.”

“Well, Rex, I think I’m gonna leave it.”

Cheers from the studio audience, and in the bar the drunk wears a smile of self-satisfaction on his big moon face, as if Sarah had taken his advice personally.

“Okay Sarah, now for the ten thousand dollar question. This symbol is a nonstandard punctuation mark used in various written languages, and intended to combine the functions of the question mark and the exclamation point. What is it?”

“Interrobang,” Dave says.

“A what-a-bang?” the drunk asks.

“Just...watch,” Dave says, waving a hand in the general direction of the TV.

“That would be an interrobang, Rex.”

“That is coooo-rect!”
More applause.

“You’re good,” the drunk says. “You should go on that show. You could really clean ’em out.”

“I did go on.”

“Go on where?”

Dave sighs.

“I went on that show. I went on there this afternoon, as a matter of fact.”

The drunk looks at the TV screen, then back at Dave.

“Then how come you’re not on the tee-vee?”

“They film that show weeks in advance. My episode won’t be on for a while.”

The drunk looks back to the TV, his brow furrowed as if he is still trying to work it all out in his head. He turns back to Dave, and now Dave tenses up, not wanting to hear the question he is certain the man is going to ask.

“Well, how’dja make out?”

And there it is. How did he make out? He didn’t make out well--not at all.

“I, uh…”

There’s a commercial for shampoo on the TV, promising an end to dandruff. Marty the bartender is looking up at Dave as he cleans a glass with a dirty rag, having picked up on the conversation. From the back of the bar came the sounds of pool balls clacking together as someone breaks. Dave’s stomach feels like a tight knot wrapped around a hot coal. And the drunk is staring at him, wanting to know how he made out.

“I cleaned ’em out. Just like you said.”

“Well, all right! Tell ya what, have another drink on me. Whaddya say?”
“No, I actually have to get going,” Dave says. “Thanks, though. And be sure to keep tuning in. I’ll be up there on that screen before you know it.”

Dave pays his tab, considers a trip to the restroom for a piss before beginning the walk back to the hotel (paid for by the good people at *Take It or Leave It*?), but decides against it. He can hold it until he gets back to his room. Then he hopes to sleep a dreamless sleep.

He walks to the door before stopping and turning back toward the bar, toward the drunk and Marty the bartender, toward the TV screen, on which another commercial is ending and the show is coming back on. He wants to say something, but he is at a loss for words. And then a line from a song half-remembered floats to the surface of his mind.

“These bars are filled with things that kill.”

“Huh?” the drunk asks.

But Dave doesn’t try to explain himself. He walks out the door, slipping out into the shadows of the night. On the TV Rex Green is flashing his million dollar smile, and everyone is clapping, each one certain that if they ever get their chance, they’ll clean ‘em out.

**A BRIEF HOSPITAL STAY**

Machines beeped and chirped. Air wheezed in and out of ventilators, a soft susurration. The halls were filled with such sounds, a constant symphony that could rattled the brain after a while. It got to where Don always made sure to close the door whenever he came for a visit, even though the nurses seemed to frown on the doors to patient’s rooms being closed. Every time a nurse or CNA came in to check on Harriet, they would leave the door wide open when they left, and Don would have to get up again to close it. With the door closed the room was quieter, just
one machine beeping, one machine chirping, one machine wheezing, and he could bear it.
Almost.

The curtain was open, letting in pale moonlight. Don thought how nice it would be to open the window, to let some fresh air into the room, but he had been told that the windows in patient’s room were supposed to remain closed--no exceptions. He thought the room smelled too much like cleaning fluids, but rules were rules.

He scooted his chair a bit closer to the bed and took his wife’s hand. The hand was wrinkled now, the veins too big, but they had looked elegant once, and graceful. In another time, in another life, Harriet Steck had had beautiful hands. He raised this hand that looked so little like the hand he had slipped a ring on fifty-two years before, and he kissed it; both the hand and his lips were dry. He lowered the hand to the bed, leaving one of his own hands on top of it, squeezing just so gently. Her eyes remained close. Her hair fell around her face in a wintry halo.

There was a soft rap on the door before it swung open and a CNA swept into the room. She smiled at Don as she moved to the bed.

“Just need to check her vitals,” she said.

Don moved back from the bed and let the woman go about her business. She checked Harriet’s blood pressure, took her temperature, and checked her oxygen saturation levels. The CNA then unwound her stethoscope and took a listen to Harriet’s heartbeat, and her breathing.

“Everything good?” Don asked as the woman wound the stethoscope up and stepped away from the bed.

“Everything’s good,” the CNA replied with a smile.

She stepped out of the room, leaving the door open a crack, letting in the mechanical noises from the neighboring rooms. Don sighed. He stood up with an effort and patted Harriet’s hand,
then walked to the door. He slipped out of the room and closed the door softly behind him, then
made the long trek to the cafeteria, which the hospital saw fit to place as far from the patient
rooms as possible.

The kitchen was closed at that time of night, so the cafeteria was mostly empty, just a couple
of nurses sitting together at a table having a snack. Don cycled through the available items in the
rotating vending machine, passing on the egg salad sandwich, a cheese sandwich, and a
microwavable cheeseburger. He pulled a handful of change out of his pocket, counted out eight
quarters, and inserted them into the machine, sliding open the little plastic door and grabbing out
a hot dog. He tore open one end of the plastic package and placed the whole thing into the
microwave that sat on a table next the vending machine, punching in a minute and half and
hitting the START button. When the machine *dinged*, he slide the cardboard tray out of the
plastic package and topped the hot dog with a thin line of both mustard and ketchup, then added
a small squirt of hot sauce.

Realizing he was hungrier than he had thought, Don scarfed the hot dog down in three bites.
He threw away the cardboard tray and the plastic wrap, then poured himself a small cup of water
and drank it down, the cool water putting out the fire that the hot sauce had lit in his mouth.

After trashing the paper cup he made the return trip to Harriet’s room. He took his seat next
to her bed and leaned back in the chair, stretching out his legs. He looked at his wife, saw her
lying there, unconscious, gone down some deep, dark hole. He wondered if she would ever find
her way out of that hole. The doctor’s used lots of uplifting words, saying things like “hopeful”
and “optimistic” a lot. But he saw other words, left unsaid, in their eyes.

Don’s thoughts sometimes turned to things he would rather not think about. One thing that
kept coming back to him, rattling around his head, were all of the obituaries he had read recently.
When you got to be a certain age your friends started dropping like flies. He thought of the words and terms that you could find in just about every obit, things like “the deceased is survived by…”, and “in lieu of flowers, the family requests that…”. He thought about all of the obits he had ever read, and how many of them had mentioned that the deceased had passed after “a brief hospital stay”. A brief hospital stay. How much heartache, how much horror could be contained in those four words?

Don looked around the room, at the clean whiteness of it. The smell of disinfectant stung his nostrils, and again he wished that he could crack the window open a bit, let in some fresh air. Out in the hall a pair of rubber-soled shoes went squeaking past the door. The ventilator whooshed air in and out, in and out. He felt a lump forming in his throat, and he swallowed it down with great effort, as he had all his life. Men didn’t cry. It was a rule he had never questioned, and likely never would.

He clasped one of Harriet’s hands in both of his own then, and sat watching her. He wondered if she knew he was there, or if she was dreaming. He wondered if there was any light at all in the dark hole she had descended. He wondered if she could find her way back to him. He hoped she could. He hoped.

**PAPER THIN WALLS**

When it came, it came quick and loud. He had known it would come, could see the signs and portents, like a dark cloud in the west. An ugly thing tracking closer, promising nothing good, promising noise and flash, and the threat of floods. He had seen it in the way they looked at each other, and then in the way they didn’t look at each other. He had seen it in the way they moved
around each other, never quite touching, as if they were both generating their own opposing magnetic fields. He saw it in the way his mother clasped her hands together in that nervous way she had when they weren’t occupied with any specific task, and in the way his father drank his one beer, greedily, like a man who just walked parched and dry out of the desert. He saw it in the way Nicky followed their parents around the house with his eyes, Nicky, who was always the canary in the coalmine that was their household. He felt it like a vibration in the back of his teeth.

That’s why when it came, he was still awake, waiting for it and hoping it wouldn’t come, listening for it while trying not to listen. From the distance and direction of their voices, he knew that it started downstairs, in the kitchen, where his mother was washing the dinner dishes. Since he was not a direct witness to it, or to its prelude, he did not know exactly how it had begun, and he didn’t care to imagine. They sang together in an unlovely melody, call and response, the line and the refrain, the verse and the chorus. The lyrics had been written over the period of their thirteen years of marriage, a secret song that only they really knew, giving their children only aural glimpses, but never the whole song, leaving the kids to fill in the gaps, to try to work out the structure and the correct pitch.

Shortly after the song began, there came the first instrument, the crashing dinner plate. Then the voices shifted as the man and the woman left the kitchen and ascended the stairs. The voices came closer, and then took up positions in their bedroom, which shared a wall with his own room. He closed his eyes and listened to them sing with each other, to each other, at each other. He opened his eyes and saw only the darkness of his room. One voice momentarily rose above the other, and then they fall back into the old familiar rhythm.

He closed his eyes again, trading the darkness of the room for another kind of darkness. He
searched the interior of his eyelids, but found nothing there. He could feel the blood flowing through his veins, could hear its soft susurratation. And still the song went on in the next room, and he waited for the outro, for the fade out, for the last jangly chord to be struck, for the hiss that would pass for silence. He waited, in short, for the record to end. And he hoped never to hear this song again, though he had a feeling, half-formed and not completely understood, that he would, and that someday he himself would sing a similar song with a woman he felt something for, even if that something couldn’t quite be called love.

A MODEST WAGER

“So this guy I used to know,” Jimmy said. “He used to go around the neighborhood, right? And he would look for dogs that were sort of just roamin’ around, dogs with no leash, right?”

Marcus was only half listening; the bulk of his attention was fixed on the small TV set sitting atop a crude table made up of a couple cinderblocks and some rough boards. They were in the back of Donnelly’s, a bar that doubled as a betting parlor; the betting parlor part wasn’t strictly legal, which is why Jerry Donnelly insisted that any business to do with gambling be done in the back room, away from the prying eyes of respectable folks. Marcus, a longtime patron of Donnelly’s, had yet to see any of these so-called respectable folks Donnelly seemed so protective of. It was a place that only boozers and losers chose to frequent.

“And then he would snatch ’em,” Jimmy continued. “Then he would wait. A few days would go by, and after hearing little Timmy and darling Tammy crying about their little lost doggy for a coupla days, mommy and daddy would print out some fliers, and they’d start putting them up all over the neighborhood. If they’re offering a reward, he returns the pooch and says
that he found it wanderin’ around. Kinda genius, ain’t it? I mean, sure the reward was never too big, but it’s a quick way to make some spendin’ money. Enough to get a case of beer, maybe take the little lady to a steakhouse. What do you think?”

“What do I think about what?” Marcus asks.

“What about? About the guy I used to know who heisted dogs. Weren’t you listenin’ to a thing I said?”

“What did he do when they didn’t offer no reward?” Tony cut in, having been drawn in by Jimmy’s story of the dognapper.

Jimmy turned his attention to Tony, a small relief to Marcus, who didn’t give much of a holy hell about anything other than the ballgame on the tube right about then.


“What if there weren’t no reward?” Tony said. “What did he do with the dogs then?”

“How the hell should I know? Maybe he sold them to a Korean barbecue joint.”

He laughed as if this were the funniest joke in the world.

It was the bottom of the ninth, and Derek Jeter was up to bat. He was facing the arm of Joaquin Benoit, the closer for Detroit. The Yanks were down 6-4, with two outs. Marcus wasn’t from New York, had never been to New York, and would most likely never go there. He didn’t care about the Yankees any more than he did about some dog shit stuck to the bottom of his shoe, but he wanted to make some money, and the Yanks had seemed like a smart bet. They had been on fire the past few weeks, while the Tigers had been cold. Now New York was just one out away from losing him fifty bucks.

“I’m gonna get another beer. You want one?” Jimmy asked.

“Nah, I’m good,” Marcus answered.
Jimmy got up and disappeared through the door that would take him into the main part of the bar, where the respectable folks supposedly were. On the TV Jeter caught a fastball and knocked it out in a line drive. He hauled ass to first, considered trying for second, then evidently thought better of it and stayed at first. Marcus raised up out of his seat a little, his heart pumping just a bit faster. He managed to calm himself down, reminding himself of all the times before when he had allowed himself to hope that maybe, just maybe, his luck would turn, only to be disappointed.

Next up to bat was Curtis Granderson, the center fielder. He was oh-for-three at bat so far; his bat was asleep, and Marcus wasn’t holding out much hope. Benoit let loose with the first pitch, a curveball that broke way outside. Ball one. Benoit took his time with the second pitch, finally throwing a fastball, low and inside. Granderson caught it, sending it into the near outfield. He hustled to first, just beating the throw from Brennan Boesch, while Jeter took his place safely at second. Now there were two runners on base, with A-Rod coming up to bat.

Jimmy reappeared, sitting down next to Marcus and sipping his beer. Marcus just hoped the man could keep his trap shut and let him concentrate on the game. Fifty bucks was nothing to sneeze at, considering the economy and all.

The first pitch to Rodriguez was high and outside; he tipped it, and it went foul. Strike one. The second pitch came in low and fast, and A-Rod pulled back, letting the pitch go by. The umpire called it a strike. Rodriguez didn’t look too happy with the call, and Marcus sure as shit wasn’t happy with it; it had definitely come in over the plate too low, well below the strike zone. Rodriguez stepped out of the batter’s box for a moment, adjusted his helmet, and stepped back in, a determined look now on his face.

The next pitch was a slider, one of Benoit’s signature pitches, but it arrived at the plate lazy
and dragging, and when A-Rod swung at it, it looked like he was playing tee ball. The contact between the ball and the bat sounded like a pistol shot, and the ball rocketed away. The view changed to a wide shot, with the camera following the ball as it sailed through the night air, getting lost momentarily in the stadium lights. Marcus stood up, his breath caught in his throat as the ball flew on. For a moment it looked like it was too far to the right, as if it were going to come down foul. But somehow, some way, it stayed fair, and the crowd in the stadium went wild. In the back room of Donnelly’s Marcus went wild, too, letting out a yip and jumping higher than even he would have thought possible.

“God damn!” he yelled.

“Christ Almighty, Mark-o; it ain’t like you won the Powerball or somethin’,” Jimmy said.

But it was like that to Marcus, it was like he won the Powerball. He went on celebrating, and soon his mirth caught on, and the rest of the riffraff occupying the back room began celebrating with him, those who had won, those who had lost, and those who hadn’t bet a single red cent. They were loud and raucous, and they just didn’t give a shit. Out in the bar, where there were no respectable folks to be seen nor heard from, nobody took any notice of the commotion.

SCARY THINGS

The flashlight clicked on and off, throwing crazy shadows on the closet wall. On--shadows forming strange faces and unidentifiable objects. Off--total darkness. The darkness was dangerous, but if she only allowed it to envelope her for a few seconds at a time, then she knew she would be safe. The light was good; the light was safety. Ugly things, hungry things lived in the darkness, but they couldn’t stand the light; they feared it. That’s why she held onto the
flashlight extra tight, gripping it for dear life, fearful that a hand (or something not quite a hand) would burst forth from the shadows to knock the light from her own hands.

There was a noise outside the closet door, and she held her breath, waiting for something to happen, for a bang on the door as some unspeakable entity hurled its invisible form against it, or for the knob to begin turning slowly, so slowly. Instead there was a light rap on the door.

“Who’s there?” she asked, her body tense, her eyes wide and bright in the near-darkness.

“Connie, it’s me,” came a whispered voice from the other side of the door. “Open up.”

She let out her breath in a shuddery sigh of relief. She reached up and untied the end of the scarf that was wrapped around the knob; the other end was tied around the bar on which her mother’s clothes were hanging. She turned the knob and pushed the door gently open.

“Come on, Oscar. Hurry up!”

Her brother came rushing into the closet, and he closed the door after him, but left the makeshift lock off. In one hand he carried his own flashlight, his shield against the dark.

“The coast looks clear,” Oscar said. “Are you ready?”

“Yeah; I’ve been ready,” she said with a roll of her eyes.

Oscar either didn’t notice or didn’t care about the eye-roll. He waited with one hand on the knob and the other holding his flashlight up, took one quick glance back to be sure his sister was really ready to go, and then opened the door. They hurried out of the enclosed space and across the darkened bedroom. The bedroom door was slightly ajar, and Oscar swung it open wide enough so that he could lean out, taking a peek out into the hallway. Finding the hallway deserted, he slid through the opening; Connie followed after him.

They crept down the hall, staying close to the wall, their flashlights stabbing out into the gloom. A board creaked beneath Oscar’s feet, causing his sister to let out a surprised yelp; they
both froze in place then, and stared at each other for a moment before moving on, Oscar taking extra care to tread softly. Connie stepped over the spot that had creaked, and continued on after her big brother.

As they came to the head of the stairs Oscar stood on the top step, shining his light down the carpeted length of the stairs. He started down, but Connie hesitated at the top of the stairs. When Oscar realized that his sister wasn’t right behind him, he looked back up the stairs and motioned wordlessly for her to follow. Still, she hesitated.

“Come on,” he said; it was barely a whisper.

Slowly Connie started climbing down after him. Satisfied, Oscar turned and continued down. When he got to the bottom of the stairs he waited for his sister to catch up. As Connie stepped off of the last stair there was a noise from somewhere in the house. Both Oscar and Connie swiveled round, their flashlights held before them, throwing twin beams of light into the darkness.

“What was that?” Connie asked.

“I don’t know,” Oscar replied with a shake of his head.

They looked at each other, each wanting the other to lead the way; eventually Oscar, as the older of the two, relented, and slowly made his way across the living room. As they neared the door to the kitchen they could see a harsh, white-blue light seeping out from under the door. They stopped in front of the door, both taking quick, shallow breaths, a chill coursing through their bodies as their minds imagined what unspeakable things they might find on the other side of the door, their only defense two flashlights whose beams seemed somehow paltry now, too weak to be any real defense.

There was a clinking noise, a rattling of dishes in the kitchen. Oscar reached out and pressed
one hand flat against the door, then paused. He realized then that he was holding his breath, and he tried to let it out, but found it to be a difficult task. He could hear the blood rushing in his ears. He pushed on the door, and it swung slowly open on its well-oiled hinges. The blue-white light grew brighter, harsher. A sharp laugh pieced the silence of the dark house, and the door swung fully open.

“Hey, what are you kids still doing up?” Dad asked.

Mom and Dad were both at the sink, Mom washing the dishes and Dad drying them with a dish towel.

“We found the ghosts! We found the ghosts!” Connie called out brightly.

“Boo!” Mom said. “Now get up to bed and go to sleep. Both of you.”

“Come on,” Dad said. “It’s late. Up, up, up.”

Oscar laughed.

“Okay, okay,” he said. “We’re going.”

He let the door swing shut, and he and Connie made their way back upstairs, moving swiftly this time.

“Good night, Oscar,” Connie said as she ducked into her bedroom.

“Good night.”

Oscar went into his own bedroom, shutting off the flashlight and setting it atop his dresser. He climbed into bed then, digging under the covers to keep out the chill of the long night. He looked over toward his window, at the soft moonlight shimmering in through the sheer curtains. The world outside was bathed in that milky moonlight, mixed with inky pools of shadow, and dark recesses in which any horrible thing could take cover. But in the morning the brighter light of day would return to banish the darkness, to give warmth, to give life.
And as he thought about the night and its darkness, and the day and its light, Oscar fell into a deep, contented sleep.

A POUND OF FEATHERS

“Which weighs more--a pound of rocks, or a pound of feathers?”

“Hmm, let me see. A pound of rocks?”

“No, Mommy; they weigh the same. Get it?”

And then he laughs. That sweet laugh that is like the sun. He giggles, and she giggles with him, and his father joins in. It’s a good one, a funny one, and it is his favorite little joke, a little boy’s riddle.

Now his mother stands in an open doorway, staring into a bedroom, at a bed where once a boy had lain. Her gaze wanders around the empty room, taking in the bureau where the boy’s clothes are neatly folded and stacked inside drawers, and atop which are scattered a few knickknacks and figurines.

“Can we see the monkeys?” the boy asks.

“There a lot of animals besides monkeys at the zoo, honey,” his mother says.

“Yeah, but can we see the monkeys?”

“Yes, we can see the monkeys.”

She rests her gaze on the plastic chest pushed up against the wall beneath the window, where the bulk of her son’s toys are stored. She looks back to the bed, neatly made, so empty and sad, like a forgotten animal. It is a bed where a boy would lie no more.

“Tell me a story you’ve never told before,” the boys says.
His father is still at work, and when he gets home he will look in on the boy, give him a peck on the head, and leave him to his dreams, but right now it’s just the boy and his mother.

“What kind of a story should I tell?” the mother asks, stroking her son’s chestnut hair.

“Tell me a story from before time.”

And she thinks really hard, trying to think how to begin, and then she finds the words and tells him a story from before time.

She closes the door to his bedroom and floats down the hall, passing the closed door of the bathroom where the boy took his baths, and brushed his teeth, and where she once sat him on the closed lid of the toilet so she could clean and bandage a scraped knee that he had gotten when he tripped and fell in the driveway while running to stop a ball from rolling into the street.

“How many stars are there?” he asks.

“I don’t know,” his father says.

His father is not at work on this day, and the boy is happy. He is happy to have both of his parents to himself. He is a sapling basking in the sunshine of their tenderness.

“I bet there are more than a million,” the boy says.

“Maybe there are.”

The woman enters the room she shares with her husband, but he is gone, he is still at work and won’t be home for an hour yet. Leaving the light off, she moves to the bed and lies down on top of the covers. She lies in darkness, staring into the shadows, into a pitiless void that seems to throb with menace, threatening to swallow her whole, to envelop her, to make her disappear. It takes her a moment to realize that the void is not without, but within. It lives at the core of her, a cold stone in her stomach.

“What weighs more, mommy? A pound of rocks, or a pound of feathers?”
“They weigh the same,” she whispers to the empty room. “They weigh the same.”

This time there is no smile, and there is no laughter. There is no boy. There’s just the room, the darkness, and the night.

**WHAT’S A PRETTY GIRL LIKE YOU DOING IN A PLACE LIKE THIS?**

Candy cleared another table, first stacking the empty red plastic food baskets and abandoned beer bottles on a tray, which she in turn placed on a neighboring table, and then using a rag to clean the table off, wiping away a puddle of beer and a glob of dried marinara sauce. The rag (too dirty to clean tables with, but she didn’t give much of a damn, if truth be told) disappeared into a pocket of the lime green apron that all the waitresses at Lucky Bucky’s wore, and she lifted up the tray, wincing at the slight cry of protest from her back, carrying it to the kitchen. She left it by the sink for Freddy, the dishwasher with the milky eye, to take care of.

She left the kitchen and stood near the front counter, staring across the dim interior of the restaurant. There was only one table occupied at the moment, a guy sitting alone finishing off a sandwich and catching up on yesterday’s news with a newspaper, the Juniper County Register most likely. She glanced at her wristwatch (only $15.99 at the Val-U-Mart, but it looked real fancy, which is why she bought it) and saw that it was only fifteen minutes till closing time, so as soon as this last guy was finished, she knew she could head home, count her tips, and get some sleep.

She looked over to the cash register and saw Charlie leaning against the counter, reading a comic book. The man was as dumb as a stump, and he had a penchant for giving people too much change when they paid for their meals (not as a kindness, simply because he was too stupid
to figure out the right change), but his uncle was Buck Larson, known as Lucky Bucky to his friends, and so nobody gave him shit, or at least not too much of it.

Candy looked back out at the nearly empty dining area, and at the lone straggler, the man who stood between her and home. She decided to give the guy a sort of message, to let him know that maybe it would be best if he hurried along and finished his sandwich before disappearing to wherever his destination was on that particular night. She walked over to a nearby table, reaching into her apron and pulling out the rag that really was too dirty clean tables with. She started wiping down the table; when she was done wiping it down she stacked two chairs on top of it, facing down, and moved on to another table. She shot a glance over at the man, but he seemed to be absorbed in whatever he was reading in the paper, which she could now see was indeed the Register. She couldn’t imagine what it could be that demanded such rapt attention from him--the biggest stories the Register carried usually had to do with bake sales or some bullshit like that.

After wiping down the second table and stacking chairs on top of it, she looked over at the man again, and was a little surprised to see him looking back at her, with a small smile spread across his lips. His eyes were chocolate brown, his hair jet black. He reminded her of Sam, an old boyfriend who hadn’t been so bad, even if his breath always did smell like licorice.

“How ya doin’?” the man spoke.

“I’m doin’ fine, Jack,” she said back.

“Name’s not Jack. You can call me Bob.”

“Sure thing, Bob,” she said, moving to the next table.

“Would ya like to sit with me for a spell?”

“I’m workin’, Bob.”

“Ah, hell, you can sit with me while I finish my sandwich, can’tcha?”
He looked back over his shoulder at Charlie, still leaning against the counter and reading that damn funny book.

“That is, unless I would be getting’ you in trouble with the boss man over there,” Bob said.

“That ain’t the boss man; that’s just Charlie, and he ain’t much of nothin’.”

“Then come on and sit a spell.”

She considered using some other excuse, a story about a sick kid at home that she really had to hurry off to check on, perhaps, but she didn’t have any kids, and the truth was that she really didn’t have anything better to do. She sighed, stuffed the rag pack into her apron, and sat down across from Bob.

“Whatcha readin’ there?” she said, nodding at the paper laid spread out on the table.

“Nothing important.”

He folded up the paper and set it aside. He lifted up his turkey and bacon sandwich and took a bite.

“Good sandwich,” he said. “You make it?”

“No. The cook made it.”

“Hmm. Makes sense, I guess.”

Candy reached over and grabbed the paper, sliding it over to her. The first story on the front page was something to do about a shortage of crossing guards at schools in the county. She pushed the paper aside.

“I told you my name, but you haven’t told me yours,” Bob said, taking a swig of root beer.

“Candy.”

“Your name’s Candy?”

“Yep,” she said with a nod of her head.
“It’s your for-real name?”

“It’s my for-real name. My mama thought it sounded nice. Most people think it sounds like a stripper name.”

He laughed softly; it wasn’t an unkind laugh, though.

“Want a bite?” he asked, offering her his sandwich.

“No thanks. I have a rule: never take a bite out of a half-eaten sandwich that’s offered to me by a stranger.”

He laughed again and took a bite himself.

“Oh, I’m not a stranger, honey. We know each other--I’m Bob, and you’re Candy. See?”

“Mm-hmm. We’re just like old friends, you and me.”

“Exactly.”

“What do you do, Bob?” Candy asked.

“Oh, I do lots of things.”

“I mean your job, how you make a living.”

“I drive a truck. All across the country.”

“Do you like it?”

“It ain’t half bad, I gotta tell ya. I get to see the country, cities I ain’t never thought I’d see. Plus, I like drivin’. Lots of people get lonely out on the road, but for me it’s different.”

“You don’t ever get lonely?”

“Oh, I do get lonely sometimes, but it’s a different kind of loneliness. I can’t explain it really. It’s a peaceful loneliness. A contented loneliness. I guess I’m not makin’ much sense, am I?”

“Not much.”
“How about you--do you ever get lonely?” Bob asked.

She flinched at the question; no one had ever asked her that before.


Bob sat quietly for a moment, just looking at her, like he was trying to figure out some secret that she didn’t know she was keeping. Then he finished the last of his sandwich, and drank the last of his root bear.

“I guess I’d better get going,” he said. “I gotta be in Kansas City by tomorrow afternoon.”

“It’s gonna be a long night for you.”

“Yep. Why don’t you come with me?”

She was taken aback by the abruptness of it. For a moment she just stared at him, not really sure that he hadn’t meant it as a joke. There was no humor in his eyes, though.

“Do you use that line on all the girls, Bob?” she tried.

“It isn’t a line. It’s a question. An offer.”

“I can’t just up and leave with you. Things don’t work like that.”

“Things work lots of different ways.”

“Just…no,” she said.

“You got ties here? A man? Kids?”

“No.”

“Is it this job? You can’t bear to leave it behind?”

“No, it isn’t that. I don’t even know you.”

“I’m Bob, remember?”

“Yeah, I remember. Listen, buddy, are you a bit touched up there in the head, or somethin’.”

He laughed good-naturedly.
“Nope. And I ain’t no pervert, neither, in case you were wonderin’. I just thought you looked like a nice woman, and I enjoyed talkin’ with ya and all, and I thought maybe we could get along together. If we get to Kansas City and you decide you don’t like me, I’ll bring ya right back.”

“Oh, you’re touched, alright. I can’t go with you to Kansas City. I have a job here, I have friends here. I’m not gonna just up and leave. That’s not me.”

“It could be you, though,” he said.

They looked at each other for a minute, neither of them saying a thing. Then Bob saw some final answer in her eyes, an answer that told him that what she had said was true, that it couldn’t be her.

“Well, maybe I’ll catch ya around some time,” he said.

He stood up, grabbed his jacket from where it hung on the back of his chair, and put it on. He took out his wallet, grabbed out a five, and set it on the table. He walked over to the front counter, tapping Charlie on the shoulder to get his attention. Charlie put his comic book down and took the man’s money. On the way out Bob gave Candy a nod, and then he was gone. She slipped the tip into her apron, and then got up, picking up his plate and empty root beer bottle. She walked back into the kitchen, tossed the bottle in the trash and set the plate down near the sink.

She leaned against the sink then and thought about a few things. How does one measure a wasted life? She wasn’t quite sure. For one brief moment, she let herself imagine what it would be like to run outside right then, to catch Bob before he pulled away, to travel with him to Kansas City and to whatever lay beyond Kansas City. Perhaps, if she were someone else, some other self, some other Candy, she could have done just that. She could have stopped him and
climb up into the cab of his truck. But she was not someone else, she was not some other self, she was simply Candy, a forty-five-year-old waitress at Lucky Bucky’s near Route 9, and she did not stop him, did not climb up into this cab. Instead she drove home, counted out her tips (twenty-one dollars), threw off her apron, stripped out of her clothes, and took a hot shower. Then she went to bed. It was some time before she was able to sleep, and when she did she dreamt she was in a town she had never been to before. She wasn’t certain, but she thought it might’ve been Kansas City.