

M Y Ū Z

Joshua Bauer
Julie Fontes
Kellie Griffin
Guy MacLaury
Luis Maranan
George Morgan

2009

Island Fox Press
California State University Channel Islands
One University Drive, Camarillo, California 93012

csuci.edu

M Y Ū Z

Copyright ©2009 Island Fox Press.
Upon publication all rights revert to the authors.

Managing Editor	Kellie Griffin
Editorial Director	George Morgan
Budget	Guy MacLaury
Art and Design	Julie Fontes
Submissions	Joshua Bauer
Submissions	Luis Maranan
Cover	Tristan Cassel
Proofreader	Carley Morgan
Faculty Advisors	Joan Peters Renny Christopher

Published by Island Fox Press and the English Department
of California State University Channel Islands
One University Drive, Camarillo, CA 93012

www.csuci.edu
www.lulu.com

Contents

Introduction	iv
<i>Joshua Bauer</i> , Spared	2
<i>Sarah Sturgis</i> , We	8
<i>Chris O’Neal</i> , Do Rabbits Dream of Electric People	9
<i>Sean Colletti</i> , Now Serving Number 44	14
<i>George Morgan</i> , Black Opal	16
<i>Krista Wilbur</i> , Kaleidoscope	28
<i>Sara Parker</i> , Hooray for Proposition 8	30
<i>Kristi Kellog</i> , Bishara, Avi, Always	32
<i>Luis Maranan</i> , One Hundred Hills	43
<i>Kellie Griffin</i> , T.V. Dinners	45
<i>Sean Colletti</i> , Ending	46
<i>Guy MacLaury</i> , A Walk on the Seven Mile Beach	51
<i>Adam Piccirilli</i> , Arc Eyes	58
<i>Julie Fontes</i> , And Hearts	60
<i>George Morgan</i> , Where the Road Ends	79
<i>Kristi Kellog</i> , Make Believe	90
<i>Laura Dunlap</i> , Miss Kate	91
<i>Sarah Sturgis</i> , Thursday	99
<i>Kellie Griffin</i> , Transposition	101
<i>Sara Parker</i> , A Part of Adulthood I’d Rather Avoid	108

MYUZ

INTRODUCTION

One of the first things we agreed to as an editorial staff was that our university's literary journal needed an updated title. There was nothing inherently wrong with the name *Island Fox*, per se, but we preferred something that might better demonstrate the *joie de vivre* of writing. After batting about a few names, we settled on MYUZ – a nod of appreciation to the nine daughters of Zeus – the Greek goddesses of artistic inspiration. A muse is something (or someone) every writer needs – an inspirational influence to whisper in their ear, to help lift their words and voice above the mundane.

During this past year, newspapers, television, and internet blogs have been filled with bad news – some of it terrifying. Here in Ventura County we were jolted by the huge loss of life in the Chatsworth Metrolink crash – the worst train accident in California history. We have decided to open our journal this year

with a non-fiction piece by Joshua Bauer that deals with this tragedy. Bauer begins his first person narrative with a group of friends getting together for a few games of bowling. The Metrolink disaster, which had happened just two days before, is not really on their radar. The story takes a dramatic turn when Katie, a young woman who had been quiet all evening, suddenly reveals the news that a friend of theirs from high school was one of the Metrolink victims.

Another short story you'll be sure to want to check out is *Bishara*, Avi, *Always*, Kristi Kellog's narrative of what happens when a conservative Hindu boy meets a worldly Indian girl hell-bent on winning a major beauty contest.

Poetry is well represented in this year's journal, making up about one-half of the entries. Adam Piccirilli electrifies us with his love poem *Arc Eyes*, Sara Parker introduces us to the horrors of nursing home life in *A Part of Adulthood I'd Rather Avoid*, and Krista Wilbur, last year's managing editor, takes us into the dark, blood-stained alleys of *poesie noir* with *Kaleidoscope*.

Current events were popular with our submitters this year; Sara Parker comes through again, delivering a sarcastic political elbow-punch with *Hooray For Proposition 8*, Chris O'Neal tells us the advantages of pet ownership during a recessionary economy in *Do Rabbits Dream of Electric People*, and Sean Colletti's esoteric *Now Serving Number 44* will have you puzzling over its meaning. Look closely – the clues are there.

Our editorial committee offers up their own contributions, of course. MYUZ's *mamma capa*, Kellie Griffin, brings us into the lives of two young friends on their way to a blood test in *Transposition*, Julie Fontes shows us what can happen when you meet up with your past at a downtown club in *And Hearts*, and Guy MacLaury illustrates the perils of beachcombing after dark in Jamaica with *A Walk on the Seven Mile Beach*. In addition,

Luis Maranan takes us into the gravity-prone forest of *One Hundred Hills*, there's the aforementioned reflective non-fiction short story from Joshua Bauer – *Spared* – and George Morgan squeezes in a few pages with a story about cul-de-sac culture, helicopters, and Polynesian cannabis in *Where the Road Ends*.

We broke some new ground this year, using technology in innovative ways. This is the first time the CSUCI literary journal has been published by an online publishing company: lulu.com. This will allow copies of MYUZ to be available in perpetuity.

All in all we believe our readers will enjoy the writing in this year's campus journal. It's been a pleasure putting it together. If you have any comments, or ideas to improve the next one, please write to us at island.fox@csuci.edu.

The MYUZ Committee

“There’s nothing to writing. All you do is sit down at a typewriter and open a vein.”

---Walter Wellesley

I hadn't seen my usual bowling group in weeks, since, as of late, they had been preoccupied with attending every pirate fair in the state. These events were a peculiarity of theirs that I readily accepted, mostly because of the funny stories that emerged from weekends spent with hundreds, if not thousands, of individuals decked out like pirates, wenches, and sailors. They dropped serious coin on their costumes, from the hand-made leather boots and battle-ready rapiers, to the tailored coats and Jack Sparrow or Captain Barbossa-styled hats. Once they arrived at the fairs, more money would change hands as they stocked up on gear for the next event. And let's not forget the rum. Sailor Jerry's, Captain Morgan Private Stock, and whatever concoction they cooked up at one of the vendor booths – they consumed it by the gallon.

Unfortunately, while they spent their weekends eating, drinking, and being merry (albeit mostly drinking), I remained in Simi Valley, cut off from the people I usually saw every Sunday for “Dollar Bowling” at Brunswick. Thus, I was ready to head back to the lanes and reconnect with the group from which I had recently grown apart.

My car's engine rumbled as I rolled into a parking spot at the front of the alley at 9:30. When I stepped out of the Mustang to retrieve my shoes and ball, I was assaulted by the scent of cigarettes from bowlers on their smoke breaks and the thundering sound of polyurethane balls knocking loudly against wooden pins. Once inside, I greeted the redhead at the snack bar, whom I often conversed with (but whose name I could not remember),

and Tim, one of the alley's assistant managers (and one of the best bowlers I had ever met).

I paid for three games, and the redhead assigned me a lane. I took a seat at my table, programmed my name into the digital scorecard, and pulled the swirled red and blue Vendetta .357 Magnum from my bag. I laced my shoes and took a moment to text the rest of the group, then took a seat and looked around to see who else was in the alley.

Since the local high school kids all had classes in the morning, Brunswick was relatively empty. Only the truly devoted bowlers (or, since this was Simi Valley, the truly bored) were in attendance. I soon got a call from Justin, letting me know he would be late (probably because he was watching the latest episode of *Family Guy* on TV). I decided to bowl a warm-up game by myself.

I scored a 128. Not so hot for me.

Gomez and his girlfriend Katie showed up at around ten, even though they'd told me they would be there at nine-thirty (tardiness being one of their inclinations). However, once they arrived, I immediately noticed something was wrong with Katie. Chattiness had never been her strong suit, but at least she could be counted on to contribute an occasional thought to the conversation. Tonight, she said nothing – keeping her head low, and staring at the floor.

None of this bothered me at first; I hadn't seen Gomez in a long time, and we had catching up to do. It wasn't until they were lacing up their rented shoes that Katie finally broke the silence and looked at me for the first time.

"Have you been on Myspace recently?" she asked, and I could tell by her tone that I had missed something big.

"No - I've been swamped with work and school," I said.

"So you haven't heard about Atul?"

“What about him? Did he get accepted to Harvard or something?”

This wouldn't have surprised anyone.

“No,” she said, pausing for a moment before continuing. “He was on the train.”

It turned out she was speaking about the Metrolink commuter which, two days earlier, had collided with a freight train in Chatsworth. Twenty-five people died in the fiery crash – the worst railroad disaster in California history – and it had happened less than an hour from my home.

“He didn't make it, did he?” I asked, already knowing the answer.

“No.”

Katie averted her eyes again, one breath short of crying.

“Wow,” was all I could manage.

We bowed, silently, as the noise around us seemed to fade away and I was left to contemplate the last few minutes of conversation. Again, Katie broke the silence.

“He was going to be President,” she said, more to herself than anyone else. She turned to me and said, “That, or cure cancer. Remember?”

Oh, I remember. How could I not, having gone to a school of roughly a thousand kids, where all the CP and Honors students knew one another by name and, in some cases, by GPA? I remember the short Indian kid, roughly a year and a half younger than the rest of our graduating class. I remember hearing how he had skipped a grade and started schooling early. He was the only sixteen year-old I ever knew to graduate high school. I remember how he and Bao Voung, another honor student, were in a battle for the title of valedictorian over some insignificant GPA difference, like .03 or something.

Most of all, I remember his speech at graduation – how he compared his love for our school with a fat kid who loves cake – then finishing with, “and I *love* cake.”

It was soon after this that Justin finally reached the bowling alley, and during our conversation I asked him, since he went to the same high school as Katie and me, whether he had heard what happened to Atul. He replied that he had, and went on to relate how he’d received a phone call Friday afternoon from a friend of his in which he’d been told to grab his medical kit and get on the road. Justin – a certified EMT and Set Medic for the Fox show “24” – turned out to be one of the first responders on the scene; so early to arrive, in fact, that the flaming wreckage was still fully engaged when he arrived.

When I asked him exactly what being there was like, he replied to me in a solemn tone – a tone in which I do not believe I’d ever heard him speak previous.

“It was bad. About the most awful thing I’ve ever seen.”

The death of Atul Vyas didn’t really hit me at first. Over the next week I invested some time going through my high school yearbooks, and clipping out newspaper articles on the accident. Some of the articles focused on possible negligent causes of the crash, while others focused more on the victims and their families. There was one particular piece I cut from the September 15, 2008 issue of the New York Times.

“A few miles away, a steady line of cars pulled up to the Vyas residence. Women in saris and men with their faces twisted in grief came to visit with the family of Atul Vyas, 20, pre-med student in Los Angeles. As a high school valedictorian, family joker and lover of video games and basketball, “his choices were endless,” said his cousin, Ruchi Agarwal. He chose Claremont McKenna College,

Ms. Agarwal said, in large part to be near to his family.

“I think he wanted to pursue something where he would help others,” Ms. Agarwal said of Mr. Vyas, the younger of two sons, who had begun to peruse his many medical school offers. “He was extremely warm – kind of jovial; brilliant of course. He could light up the room.”

While Atul was by no means one of my close friends, his death served as a wake-up call regarding how mortal those around me are, regardless of age. This, in turn, led me to consider the brushes with death that those closest to me had experienced. These thoughts consumed me for several weeks.

There was Justin, who had been victim to a ricochet bullet at his local shooting range several months earlier. Struck by a piece of shrapnel that nearly sliced through his carotid artery, he was rushed to a hospital, where he had the shard removed. But then he suffered a seizure during his recovery, and had to stay in the hospital a few more days than expected.

There was Alex, who, though not a regular member of the bowling team, had sustained several severe injuries in Santa Paula in his younger gang-banger years. During that time he had been stabbed, shot, and nearly blown up when one of the gang’s meth labs exploded.

Gomez came next – by far the luckiest of us all in terms of surviving near-death experiences. Over the last few years he had sustained a gunshot wound, a broken jaw, and cracked ribs. He had experienced heavy enemy fire while riding on a transport helicopter at the beginning of the war in Afghanistan. In another incident, Gomez managed to use his M-4 assault rifle to stop two Taliban soldiers who were about to shoot a rocket launcher at a vehicle Gomez and his buddies were riding in.

There are many more stories that could be shared about those I spend my life with, but until Atul's death I never considered how any one of them could be so easily taken away in a brief, unlucky moment.

I feel remorse for Atul – and sadness for his family. He was a nice guy with a promising future, and it was tragic that he had been taken away so abruptly from the ones he loved.

Unfortunately, there's nothing I can do about it. We all have to live our lives the same way: one day at a time.

there were a million
tiny drops of condensation
together clinging to your cup
before you lost grip.

Before it hit the tile,
your hand took hold of that glass,
to bring it from the table
to your lips.

in that one fell swoop
your palm smeared
every intricate droplet...
wrecking their arrangement.
erasing their existence.

but there was no time to care -
the floor soon kissed them

welcoming their crystal explosiveness.

and all that remained
of the shattered shards
that were once one,
was a solitary ring of water,

the kind that nobody ever bothers
to wipe away.

Do Rabbits Dream of Electric People

I had a terrible dream. It started off with a cloud bank forming over my mind's eye, engulfing me in a slightly moist and foggy hug. I floated through the nimbus and around particles of hydrogen and oxygen until I was touching an electric blanket of lightning.

It was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen. An orb of light, floating just above my horizon-radar, illuminating the frothy sky and warming my face. From within the transfixing gaze of molecular compounds and pure energy, I could see it: two eyes staring back at me. I began to feel uncomfortable. The clouds touched me like a prison guard leading a convict back to his cell, and the orb lunged at me in a threatening manner. I struggled, but the rain was *everywhere*. The sky darkened and harsh contrasting images peaked out from behind the mountains of white, screaming, "All of your relatives will die alone!" and "EEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE!" Eyes and gnashing teeth formed, chewing and glaring, forming tornados off the coast.

The ball drifted towards me, having formed appendages, and propelled itself by kicking its back legs and thrusting its tiny, irregular hands towards me. I screamed, but in dreams no one hears you. I slapped at the ball like a prepubescent girl. The ball touched me.

"EEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE!"

I jumped out of bed, over my girlfriend who, prior to my unexplained escape from slumber, had been sleeping peacefully, and ran into the living room. That scream. The one from my nightmare. It had pulled me out of bed and into the living room like a siren bent on leading me into the wall. But I was aware --

aware of my surroundings enough to not hit the wall. I was wide awake.

My work experience has been so varied, it would be hard to summarize. While some say they work in the “business sector” or the “automotive sector,” I work in the “Twilight Zone sector.” Back in 2006, when it came time to get an actual job instead of living off government issued cash (I suppose you could say I'm working for the government), I applied for a position at the local Animal Control.

I understand why people apply for positions at fast food restaurants or retail stores. I understand that *they* understand what they're getting into. They know that dealing with customers and being polite is a requirement. For this reason I have tended to stay clear of these positions. It's not that I'm not capable, it's that I have a lower tolerance. A lower tolerance for most everything, I imagine. The thought of being asked, "Does this come in my size?" or "Could you hold the pickles and onions and meat and just give me the bun?" terrify me in a way that only a fist could resolve. So, when I applied to Animal Control, I realized that animals -- unlike people -- cannot ask stupid questions.

It's funny when you think of how wrong you often are. Thinking about it now, I can see myself crying while writing in the application that I'm "good with animals" and that I can "groom myself meticulously." I should have written, "I am a sucker for animals. I will break down and take whatever you hand me as long as it has four legs and is strange to have," and then handed it in personally with tears streaming down my face, ready to be scratched, bitten, and berated.

After several months of the status quo, I found myself sitting in the break room, reading a week-old newspaper and trying not to die. My friend, Steve, sat near me and went on and

on about *Magic: The Gathering* and how he'd be attending the release party the upcoming weekend.

Before he could get into the benefits of having a mage-heavy deck over a land-heavy deck, a woman, who I will call "Advocate," interrupted.

"Look at this!" Advocate said. And there, in her hands, was the *devil*. It was about the size of a small, paper-back book, only a little hairier. It was, in fact, a rabbit. It was what girls call "adorable." In fact, adorable is exactly what it was. Have you ever seen a baby rabbit? They're adorable. I'm a man and I can say that they're adorable.

Advocate made me hold the devil. And so I did. It was small, furry, and completely engulfed in me hugging it. I knew I had to possess it.

Stood in the middle of my living room, looking frantically from wall to wall. Something irked me out of bed. Something moved me into the living room to check the locks, to see if the sliding door was shut. Amidst calls of, "Chris?" from within the bedroom, I stood like a sentry, until I realized...

I brought the devil home the following day. I bought it a cage, a water bottle, a litter box, and everything else essential to owning a rabbit, and then I told my girlfriend that I had a surprise for her. She asked if it was a bookshelf. I told her "maybe."

At the time, we lived in a studio apartment in Port Hueneme, and we struggled often to pay the minuscule -- in California terms -- rent. Sometimes we ate noodles for dinner several nights in a row. Government loans and twenty hours a week at the Animal Control isn't enough to provide a mansion, but it was enough to live in Port Hueneme.

I put the devil in its cage right in the middle of the living room, and then I sat back and looked at it. It was adorable, yeah.

The devil comes in adorable forms. It was impossible to resist bringing it home.

When I came back from Texas a few weeks prior, having attended the funeral of my grandmother, I knew that something was missing. It was quiet in the house. We had a mouse that lived in our bedroom in a cage for two and a half years, and she had just died as well. I thought, "Well, at least grandma will have company." But what about me? The rabbit was looking back at me, confused, as I was, about where it was, and where I was in life. My grandmother had just died, so I bought a rabbit.

I had a rabbit!

When my girlfriend came home and didn't see a bookshelf and instead saw a rabbit, she cried. We couldn't afford it. Her sister is allergic. The first one I knew, not the second. Some welcome party for the rabbit. But it wasn't her fault. Living together is stressful. We love each other. We hate money.

"We can't afford this," she said to me, and I knew we couldn't but all I could think about was my grandma. Perhaps it was selfish of me, to get a rabbit that was so incredibly adorable. Maybe, but I couldn't tell myself no, even after all the flags went up reminding me of having to pay for bills on a credit card or buying cheap meat at the market in the ghetto. My grandma lived on social security.

After she calmed down a bit, she fell in love with the devil. It was impossible not to. It was sweet, it was *a-freaking-dorable*. We called it Benjamin. Only later did we find out that it was a girl. But the name stuck. *Benjamin the rabbit*.

A few months later, the Advocate made me aware of another rabbit. I hate the Advocate. But I loved this rabbit also. This time, it was a mutual decision -- we bought Pumpkin on October 1st. She is the color of Halloween, and this time we know she's a she for sure. My girlfriend cried when we took Pumpkin to the car, having just bought her, but it wasn't *because*

of Pumpkin. She had overheard a man at the shelter saying goodbye to his dog for the last time.

On that first night with Pumpkin home, my nerves were raw. Ben is my girl. Pumpkin was the new rabbit. Would they be friends? No, no they wouldn't. They live in separate cages, but they see each other, and on that first night I thought for sure that Pumpkin would get out of her cage and pay Ben a visit.

I realized, standing between the cages of my two rabbits – my freaking *girls* (They're literally my girls. They fill a void, I think) – that Pumpkin was in the middle of her own cage, and Ben was lying peacefully in hers. Eeeeeee! Was that a rabbit nightmare?

Maybe Pumpkin saw what I saw -- clouds in the form of her loved ones yelling at her. Telling her that they'll die alone.

"Chris?" came from the bedroom. "What is it?"

"It was Pumpkin. She had a dream."

Ben and Pumpkin consoled each other from across the room, and I went to bed.

“...ask not what your country can do for you...”

My feet are tired
from standing
in line for over
two hundred years
and I've long since
forgotten
why I was in line
in the first place.

And why does that sign say
Now serving number 44?
I thought this was a ride.
When did they start
serving shit?

Come to think of it,
this place *has* changed a lot...
but the line hasn't.
At least not the faces.
So I turn to one of them and ask
Hey, do you know how long
this wait is going to be?
But I don't get a response.

Then it hits me.
I can just walk up.
But when I do,
the ride won't start
because everyone else
is still standing there
waiting.

So I walk back
and a hand grabs my arm
before pointing to the sign that says
Now serving number 44
and I turn to the face
to say
No. It's the other way around.
and I wait to see
if anyone else walks up.

The telegraph poles stretched to the horizon in a perfect line, like an infinite number of dominoes waiting for a little nudge. Each pole held a single crossarm, and each crossarm carried two wires. The poles numbered in the hundreds of thousands – perhaps millions – milled from lumber forested from the southern tropic regions, each fifty meters from the next and all laced together across the entire middle of the continent like a skinny two-wire belt. More than two hundred telegraph repeater stations were spaced at even intervals along the line, studding the belt like a string of rhinestones.

A three thousand kilometer walk eastward would land you in Sydney. The same distance west would take you to Perth. The nearest sniff of civilization was thirty kilometers northeast at the gold mining outpost of Alice Springs. Other than that, nothing but sand and brush and dirt.

“Loneliness,” said Nevil out loud, addressing Petey, the stuffed parrot staring back at him from a shelf, “is a terrible thing.” He lifted a spoonful of rice cereal to his mouth and swallowed it quickly, wishing he had real milk to go with. “Unless, of course,” he added, “you *want* to be alone.”

Nevil blew a fine layer of grit from his watch, then checked the time. “Yulee will be checking in soon.” He poured the rest of the dry cereal down his throat, lubricated it with a glass of beige water, then pushed the wooden chair away from the table.

The telegraph shack stood twenty meters from the station’s front porch. Nevil jumped to the ground and walked the

well-worn, hard-packed sandy path. He made a stop at his small vegetable garden and noticed a number of large, ripe tomatoes.

“You guys are coming off this afternoon.”

Nevil pulled a carrot straight from the earth, and approached the corral. Kiki, a golden brown Palomino, trotted over and swallowed the carrot whole.

In the sunless lee of the telegraph shack lay a small generator. Nevil flicked the choke, pulled the starter rope several times, and in a moment the generator’s motor was chugging along, feeding electricity into the hut and its equipment. The door was unlocked, of course, since there was no lock to lock, and nothing inside worth locking up. There was a chair, a desk, some paper and pencils, a simple telegraph repeater, and a Morse key.

Nevil checked his watch. “Here we go.” He sat down at the desk, grabbed a pencil – licking its dull lead tip – then waited.

He glanced at the Tasmanian Ash wall in front of him, completely covered with black and white photos: pornography of a sort – the kind where the women actually wore some clothing. Over the last two years he had taken to giving them names – Henrietta, Mertle, Gabby, and so on.

Nevil put on the earphones and prepared himself for the incoming Morse code message.

Click click...click click click...

Every hand has a personality. The touch, the rhythm, the mood of the fingers on a sender’s key – all these revealed an individual’s personal traits. A high rate of speed meant impatience. An uneven speed meant nervousness or fatigue. Too many mistakes and the operator was either a new hire, or easily distracted. It took only a moment to recognize the familiar code signature of Yulee Goodson.

Today’s message was short, as always: *Gold ore extraction this week twenty-one tons. William Hughes elected*

Prime Minister. Yesterday's high temperature Alice Springs thirty-three Celsius. Water and food shipment will be late again. Sorry. End.

He put his middle finger, thumb, and index finger around the key and dutifully coded the exact same message on to the Hollis Valley West station, twenty-eight kilometers away. And with that accomplished, his employment for the day was over. There would be a little gardening to supplement his food supplies, some fix-it errands around the property, gas for the generator, a few other odds and ends – and that was it. The life of a Repeater Station Operator was as easy a job as one could imagine, offering a great deal of nap time and, according to his recruiter, “A host of generous retirement benefits.”

Nevil stepped out of the shack and reached for a large screwdriver lying next to the generator. He inserted the blade end on the cylinder head heat sink, then touched its metal shaft to the top of the spark plug. The motor's electrical system, now shorted to ground, slowed – then cut out all together. The desert returned to its perfect state of quietude. A powerful hush.

And with that hush came a new sound.

The sound was a just breeze. Nothing more than a simple breath of wind, the same gentle current that never stopped flowing across the infinite outback. But something was different. Nevil walked around the shack and saw it – a tall column of black smoke snaking into the blue cloudless sky. Whatever was burning looked to be close by – not more than a kilometer or two.

Nevil grabbed the shovel from the garden.

Kiki was Nevil's only mode of transportation. As they approached the fire he could see it was a motorcycle, one of the new Triumph models, lying flat on its side in the middle of the sandy road. It wasn't hard to figure out what had happened. The front tire was imbedded deep into the ground – a rabbit hole. Judging by the ferocity of the flame, the gas tank had clearly

punctured. The bike had two leather satchels, one mounted on either side of the rear wheel, which were not entirely escaping the flames' reach.

Nevil dismounted, tied Kiki to a large shrub, then shoveled several scoopfuls of sand onto the fire. Had the flame spread to the brush, the entire valley could have burned in less than an hour.

Nevil walked the area, looking for the missing rider, and soon he found her. The young woman was sprawled on the ground next to a gathering of blue-gray Hummock. She appeared to be about twenty years of age, with the satin hair and wet coal complexion of the Pitjantjatjara. Over her lean body she wore a button-up shirt and denim pants, and half her fingers were decorated with opals. But her skin and lips were supple – clearly someone who had not spent much time in the outback sun. Instinctively he touched his own lips – baked, cracked, chapped, and split.

Nevil could see she had a large bruise developing on her forehead – a common pitch-forward injury for both horse riders and cyclists who came in contact with hidden rabbit holes. Nevil himself had sustained two such injuries the previous year while riding.

The girl stirred, and her left arm moved slightly. Nevil tried to whistle for Kiki's attention, but his mouth was too dry.

The young woman groaned in pain.

“Don't move. I'm going to help you.”

Washing the dirt from her body as she lay unconscious on his bed seemed like an invasion – almost too intimate – and Nevil was reluctant to do it. On the other hand, allowing her to lie there covered in clay and dirt seemed equally wrong. He dipped the sponge into the bucket, lifted it up, squeezed out the excess water, then began to clean her right arm. The water turned the

clay into mud, and he did his best to keep it from getting onto the sheets.

The woman's eyelids fluttered slightly for a moment, and then they opened. She reached consciousness and turned her head to look at him.

"Your bike hit a rabbit hole. You took a tumble."

"Where am I?" She did not have the accent of the Pitjantjatjara. It was the voice of the educated, a person of letters and intellect.

"Hollis Valley East sub-station."

"A telegraph outpost?"

"You're lucky. If your motorcycle hadn't caught fire I would never have found you."

At the mention of her motorcycle she became more aware and tried to sit up. That action resulted in a cry of pain.

"You took a fall on your forehead – gave you a concussion. Just lie down and rest. Tomorrow morning I'll be in contact with Alice Springs – then we can get you some medical attention."

"My bike – where is it?"

"Not far. Don't worry – sometimes we go months without seeing anybody out here. No one's going to bother your bike – what's left of it."

She seemed to relax again, and closed her eyes. "What's your name?"

"Nevil."

"Nevil. Good to meet you. I'm Lowjita. Thank you for helping, but I need to get to my motorcycle."

"I can go get it – bring it here..."

"NO!" She grabbed his arm, squeezing blood to the surface. "No – just leave it. Just leave it."

Lowjita closed her eyes, and Nevil continued to wash the clay from her skin. There were three large opal rings on her left

hand, two more on her right. He suspected their value was huge – probably five years of his salary minimum. Nevil took a towel and dried her arm. Minutes later her breathing became deep and regular; the fatigue of her experience overtaking the young woman and delivering her to a deep sleep. Nevil sat and watched her for a while – watched her breathe, watched her sleep, watched her breathe. Every intake of air would make her breasts expand, tightening the buttons of her shirt, then loosening again on the exhale. When he started imagining the buttons popping, he knew it was time to get back to work.

As he headed for the garden, Nevil checked his watch, then contemplated taking a ride out to the motorcycle. Lowjita had been so insistent he not do that. Was she hiding something? Whether she was or not, the round trip would take most of an hour and he did not want her to wake up alone. On the other hand, if a vehicle happened along the road in the dark it could be seriously damaged. He would have to move the motorcycle before sundown, even though the probability of another vehicle coming through was slim.

Nevil grabbed the galvanized bucket and headed for the well; the garden needed watering.

She was standing at the sink peeling carrots, wearing nothing but her panties. The firm grip Nevil had on the basket of newly picked lettuce and tomatoes vanished, sending it to the floor with a thud. Lowjita turned around, a half-shaved carrot in one hand, the peeler in the other.

“Hello.”

“Feeling better?” was all he could think to say.

“Oh!” she said, covering her mouth with the carrot hand, as one might do if they were suddenly embarrassed. “You have tomatoes!”

She walked over to him and bent over the basket, picking out one clump of lettuce and two tomatoes. Then she returned to the sink. “I found some rabbit meat in your smoke locker, so I’m making soup. And now we can have a nice salad as well. Is that okay?”

“What – no dessert?” he joked.

She turned and gave him a smile and a wink. “Maybe – if you’re good.”

Nevil swallowed hard.

Lowjita crumbled the lettuce into a bowl. Then she took one of the two tomatoes and rinsed it off. She found a knife and began slicing. Nevil decided to attempt casual conversation.

“How is it you speak such perfect English?”

“I was a student, at Melbourne University. Graduated just last year.”

“Really. What was your degree in?”

“Geology.”

“Geology. You have an interest in that?”

“Nobody studies geology unless they have an interest in it.”

“Yeah, I suppose that’s true.” Nevil was becoming aware that intelligent casual conversation with a naked woman was somewhat of a challenge. “I see you like opals.”

Lowjita stopped slicing, frozen in place and time. She turned to look at him, a darkness now surrounding her. “What do you mean?”

He pointed. “Your rings.”

The darkness vanished as fast as it had appeared, and she gave him a big toothy smile – showing off two rows of high-priced dental work.

“My rings,” she said, laughing out loud. “Right.” She returned to the salad. “You live out here all by yourself?”

“Yeah.”

“Don’t you get lonely?”

“I got my parrot to keep me company.”

She glanced at the stuffed parrot sitting quietly nearby.

“I’ll bet the two of you get along famously.”

“Well, he doesn’t criticize me, I can tell you that.”

“Why do you do it?”

“Do what?”

“Live way out here – all by yourself.”

“Some people want to be alone.”

She placed the tomato slices into the bowl, stirred them in, then carried the completed salad to the table.

Don’t look at her tits. Don’t look at her tits.

“Some people want to run away,” she said, “but no one wants to be alone. What was it? Job trouble? Wife trouble?”

“Both.”

“And so you have run away to this place, and convinced yourself you want to be alone - you and your stuffed parrot, who never talks back.”

Nevil shrugged. “The government provides pretty good retirement benefits.”

“Good retirement benefits.” She pointed at his feet. “Are you going to leave your vegetables there on the floor?”

“Uh, no.” Nevil picked up the basket and held it against his waist.

Lowjita reached in and picked out another bright red tomato, polishing it slowly with her ebony fingers. “How much do you know about opals?”

“Well,” he said, “in some places, opals are more valuable than diamonds.”

“Up to ten times more valuable,” she said, continuing to finger polish the tomato. “Especially, the black ones.”

Nevil nodded. “Black-against-red. They’re considered the rarest, and most valuable.”

“Black-against-red. That’s absolutely correct. Sounds like you know quite a bit.”

She moved closer, her naked breasts now within easy reach. Lowjita could sense his unease.

“I’m not making you nervous, am I?”

“A little.”

She wrapped all five fingers of her right hand around the tomato, pressed it to her left breast, and slowly polished the fruit’s bright red skin back and forth against her nipple.

“Maybe we should have dessert first.”

Henrietta, Mertle, Gabby – pretenders every one. With each thrust Nevil was reminded of the drawbacks of being a telegraph station agent. The government had promised him the job would offer an immense amount of peace and quiet – an attractive offer after the madness of being a police officer in that claptrap of corruption and filth they called downtown Sydney. Their promise had proven more than truthful in every way. But raw, unrehearsed, unrestrained sex was one perk that was definitely missing.

Of course, there were those wonderful retirement benefits.

“Do you know where opals come from?” she asked, looking up into his blue eyes.

Several breaths, a couple of thrusts, then, “No.”

“They come from the fires of the ocean’s hell - small spheres of silica pounded by millions of years of pressure. Do you understand pressure, Nevil?”

He tried to nod.

“Pressure, Nevil.” Lowjita kissed him. “Never underestimate the power of pressure.”

“Do we have to talk about this right now?!”

“Let me help you,” she giggled, then spanked his ass twice, as one might encourage a reluctant donkey. Nevil

responded obediently with a loud, groaning orgasm. His eyes rolled back into his head, and his consciousness grew dark as a field of black opals. He rolled onto his side, and in less than a minute he was asleep.

When he awoke, the afternoon had passed into night, which had passed into morning. Nevil sat up in bed and realized he had been asleep for more than fourteen hours. He had never slept so long.

He stood up, expecting to find Lowjita making breakfast, but she was not there.

The transmission.

Nevil looked at the clock. 8:56. Four minutes until the Alice Springs station checked in.

“Lowjita!” he called out as he pulled up his trousers. He called her name twice more as he opened the door and trotted toward the telegraph shack. He pulled another carrot from the garden and stepped to the corral.

Kiki was gone.

“Lowjita! Where are you!?” He looked around the station in every direction, circling the enclave as fast as he could run. She was not to be found. He checked his watch: out of time.

Nevil ran to the generator and grabbed the starter rope. One pull. Two pulls. Three. Four. Nothing.

The choke! The choke, godamnit!

He flicked it on. Another pull. Another – and this time the generator coughed a few times, spit out a few noxious fumes, then accelerated to a proper chug. Nevil took one last look around.

“Lowjita!”

He was utterly alone.

Nevil entered the shack. Power on. Paper. Pencil – don't forget to lick it. Something's missing.

Headphones.

Nevil got them on just as the transmission started.

Click...click click click...click...

Every hand has a personality. And Nevil could sense right away somebody new was at the Alice Springs station. He could tell by the speed of the code key, the touch, the style, the overall technique. Someone younger than Yulee, judging by the enthusiastic tempo. As soon as this transmission was done he would send back a reply – something he rarely had to do. An injury report? A missing person report? Not sure, yet.

But as the pencil scratched out the incoming message, Nevil realized something else was different; no gold ore report, no weather report, no tedious news from the coast.

He wrote.

All stations on alert. Shooting at McKensy Mining in Alice Springs. One man injured. Suspects are two white males in their forties. One black woman in her twenties. Stolen: 2000 rare opals.

It had been several years since Nevil had pushed himself physically; nothing ever happened at the Hollis Valley East repeater station that created a need for haste. But today was certainly different. As he ran towards the motorcycle, Nevil was nearing his physical limits. Soon he could see the blackened earth where the motorcycle had burned, and as he approached he saw the twisted skeleton of the bike's remains. When Nevil got within fifty meters one more thing became clear; the leather satchels were gone.

Nevil walked around the blackened steel frame. The rubber tires had burned completely, leaving the metal wheels bare

– except where the front tire had imbedded in the rabbit hole. He looked in every direction; there was nothing but sand and brush and dirt. And some horse tracks – heading south. South, toward the land of the Pitjantjatjara.

He was about to leave when a small object caught his eye. A gray pouch was tied with a string and set in the road on a small slip of paper.

He picked them up. The paper had a handwritten message.

In case the retirement benefits are not as generous as they promised.

Nevil untied the pouch and held it at an angle so the sun's rays could reveal the contents.

He counted at least ten high-grade opals.

The walk back to the station was casual, even though he was way overdue for his transmission. Nevil surveyed the land around him, all of it at one time buried under water, beneath millions of tons of pressure exerted by the ancient Eromanga Sea. He stopped, and took a thoughtful moment to look eastward, the same direction the domino line of telegraph poles followed in their march toward Sydney. Yes – pressure was something he understood all too well.

As Nevil placed the headphones over his ears he imagined the poor fellow at the next station, biting his nails and stressing over why the morning's transmission was so late.

Nevil glanced at the photos on the wall in front of him. "Good morning Henrietta. Mertle. Gabby." He put his middle finger, thumb, and index finger around the key and began his transmission.

I know what death is:

a cold brick wall, iron-colored, rust, painted with blood,
the smooth skin of young hips its brush,
shorts stained at the hem of the waist, the canvas
damp with cries, cherry-colored, where the seam
of two legs meets.

Feet lanced, opened in even, angular, criss-crossed lines,
blood clinging to the arch, shiny like
the setting sun
on a lake in early fall: glassy and still.

It's orange and gold, fading
to a black
night.

Death is:

a green dumpster, cool and soothing to the touch,
a Hefty bag filled with black and white and red all over,
and
some gray for good measure.

Brown-lined bare feet, pencil lines like pennies,
twisting over and
under
and around.

Purple rings like bangles on my wrists, just as loud,
banging and shooting sparks,
black and yellowing gems pressed into my burning
skin.

And it's a fading rainbow.

I've seen death and birth stand together, holding hands, like
lovers.

The shape of the world changing, rounding out,
touching sheets differently,
clean laundry holding promise.

Lined paper filled, bound, packaged neatly and
with order, with rhythm, handed off

to someone,
making sense
of a senseless world.

My world, broadened with new voices,
with new hands and eyes,
skin touching mine, tracing shadows and lines,
the heat and beat of someone else's heart,
resting above mine,
keeping time,
keeping remembrance of death but
watching the horizon for
delivery.

Thanks for letting me know I'm second class. No worries.

I'm not mad.

Those rights. Wasn't going to use them anyway.

Thanks again for ripping away what I had.

Won't have to worry about a wedding. Actually, I'm glad.

Guess I can save my money for a rainy day.

Thanks for making me second class. Don't worry. I'm not mad.

You won't be forced to watch us kiss, but I'm not sad.

You've made yourself clear; there's nothing more you need to say.

Thanks again for taking away what I had.

I'll go back to pretending hetero is my fad.

Brainless housewife; with pleasure I'll play.

Thanks for telling me I'm second class. Don't you worry.

I'm not mad.

Now my children won't miss having a dad.

How could I raise them any other way?

Thanks again for erasing what I had.

I'll wonder what life's like without a lad;
my dreams will be where my fantasies stay.
Thanks for making me second class. Don't worry. I'm not mad.
Thanks again for ripping away what I had.

“Avi!”

My father’s voice booms through the halls, even though he is downstairs and on the opposite side of the house. I quickly finish tying my sneaker and appear in a flash, like a djinni, at the doorway of his study—

“Yes papa-ji?”

His pen pauses at my favored - and his despised - term of endearment, but he does not actually look up from his desk.

“I am surprising your mother this afternoon and taking her out. So, you need to pick up Kameela from dance.”

“Okay.”

“She gets out at one. Get there at twelve-thirty. I don’t want her waiting outside the studio by herself.”

For this important final instruction concerning my baby sister, who is sixteen and truly sweet, he actually looks up.

“Yes” – I hesitate – “*baba.*”

Sometimes I just can’t resist.

“Avi, please. Enough of this. If I wanted a baba-this and ji-that ‘*wallah*’ for a son, I would have never left Bombay. You are American, and I’ve had just about enough of this India kick; the next time you call me anything ending in ji, you call a landlord.” Ravikiran Yadav does not smile as he says these words.

“Yes father.”

“Good, good.”

At this, I am dismissed, presence no longer required - *alvida*. My father has work to do, obviously. It is Saturday morning, but that doesn’t matter. Like every other day, he is

buried behind his desk. The only difference on Saturday is the location - home office instead of office downtown. *He is a dedicated law-wallah, isn't he?* I think to myself with a smirk.

My father is America - red, white and blue. Well, maybe not blue; he would balk at any similarity to Krishna. He grew up in Mumbai, but that is all I know of his childhood. It's as if he was actually born at 20, when he stepped onto American soil. Congratulations Lady Liberty and Uncle Sam, on the birth of a frenetic, six foot, 180-pound, brown-skinned man-child.

I can't recall a day that my father hasn't worked in one way or another. His unrelenting dedication to providing for his family is formidable - and intimidating. How can I, his only son, ever hope to be as great as he is?

"Avi!"

Now it is my mother's voice that is calling, soft and pure, like a song. The only Hindu word I've ever heard my father speak without mockery is "bulblul" - songbird - which is what he often calls my mother.

I turn around and there she is, standing behind me with a coffee mug.

"Good morning."

She stands on tiptoe to kiss my cheek.

"Good morning."

She smiles, but no wrinkles mar her face. She is ageless, as beautiful as she was during my days in primary.

"What will you do today, my son?"

"I'm going to the gym, and then I'm picking up Kameela."

At the mention of Kameela, my mother's smile grows wider, but then confusion clouds her eyes.

"Why are you going to pick up Kamee? I pick her up today," my mother says, passing by me to take my father his coffee.

I'm surprising your mother. "Oops," I stammer, "I thought it was my turn."

"It's okay, love. Have fun at the gym."

I park in the back lot, passing the cars vying for spots in the front. My gym bag feels light on my shoulder as I walk purposefully (though without purpose) toward the glass-walled building, an army of stationary runners moving futilely before me. I pass the outdoor pool, crowded with old men swimming slow laps. I force the vision to blur, choose to see a different scene, be a different man. My mind transforms the chlorinated water into the Ganges, places baskets on the bald heads. I imagine my father at 20, the same age I am now, still in Mumbai, or rather, Bombay. Down what roads did he walk? Who did he see? What is there in me that was then in him? I know so little about his early paths, and I can't help but wonder. It's become an obsession; the past, India, my father - they've merged into a three-headed Ganesh that my subconscious cannot escape. How can I know myself if I do not first know from where I came?

A beautiful, bikini-clad blonde gingerly inserts her foot into the water, and she becomes my scene's pale Parvati. I whisper the name out loud - "Par-va-ti."

"Excuse me."

Like a fool, I'm blocking the entrance, standing in a daze outside the double doors. I smile an apology and hold the door open for the man I stalled, taking one last look at my now-glistening Parvati. This vision is, like all my visions, smoke and mirrors and magic - dusted with the glitter of Bollywood, underscored by Rushdie, glamorized and exoticized. But I can't help it; despite my dark hair, dark skin and colorful name, this is all of India I know. My father doesn't speak of it, and my mother is silent, also, in deference to him. My blood flows with the

water of the Ganges, but I've never set foot in it. I am shackled to the dream of a country, the fantasy of a homeland.

The handles of the elliptical are sweaty, and I suppress a grimace, beginning to jog nowhere. For an hour, I enjoy a delicious run, my gliding feet consuming the minutes. My daily jog affords my mind eight miles of peace - eight miles of open anonymity where there is no one to interrupt my reveries with a derisive, or doting, "Avi!"

An hour comes and goes too quickly. My watch reads 12:07 - better go leave to get Kameela. As I walk by the shining mirrors, I can't help but think of my father once again. I look exactly like him, aside from the hazel eyes that are my mother's.

I have the same nose as Ravikiran, the same crooked smile, even the same wide teeth. It seemed like my body would never be as tall and strong as his, but that, too, has finally caught up to match. I am the spitting image of my father forty years ago, just as Kameela is of Sathi.

In front of Brentwood Dance Academy, there are several girls loitering about, some younger than Kameela. They look vulnerable, barefoot on the pavement, ballet slippers dangling from their hands, skinny pink legs jutting from black leotards. Male drivers passing by slow down to stare, and something like fury surges inside me. My father's voice echoes in my head: *I don't want her waiting outside the studio by herself.*

The girls nod hello to me as I pass by, and I suppress the urge to tell them to go back inside. It's not my place. Who am I? Kameela's older brother, sure, but not much older than they are. If I were stern, and warned them of danger, they would merely laugh.

Inside, the studio is pristine. There is a comfortable waiting area where my father, mother and I have all spent much time waiting, though my mother has spent the most. I feel out of

place sitting there on the delicate couch, in front of the ivory coffee table with stacks of *En Pointe* magazine, surrounded by photographs of Balanchine and Fosse, listening to the endless chatter of mothers about their daughters. I usually make my way to the back and look in on Kameela's class.

And there she is. Through the glass door to studio B, I see her plié-ing and piqué-ing her heart out. She is the shortest girl in the room, but she stands the tallest. She doesn't notice me watching, intent as she is on her muscles in the mirror, but her teacher notices me and glares, so I shuffle off down the hall. I consider resigning myself to the frilly couch and *En Pointe* until I hear foreign notes of music float through the air. The drum pounding, the flute flailing higher and higher, the strains of a sitar - is this my crazy head again, or am I really hearing the music of India?

I move toward the last door, heartbeat quickening. I am prepared to acknowledge that my obsession might be overboard if this music is in my head, but it is not. The tambourine beat gets louder as my feet move closer, and there, through the door, is an apparition that makes my heart spin circles. There, before me, is Sri Lakshmi, Hindu goddess of dance, come to life, her hips spinning - and she is beautiful.

It is Azza, my sister's childhood friend, now a woman. Bangles dance on her dark, dancing wrists. A silk scarf is twisted through her deft fingers and it flies behind her, running the same silver circles as her hips and my heart. My first instinct is to look away from her, writhing with so much uncovered skin, but I can't. She is just too beautiful.

The muscles in her arms move rapidly to the spasms of the drum, and her hands are hummingbirds above her head. Here her eyes are open, there they are shut, palms outstretched, then closed, then outspread again. She faces away from me now, and her hair spills jaguar black down her back. When she turns back

around, her kohl-rimmed emerald eyes beckon like fire at night. She is too beautiful.

Rather than embarrassing her, my presence seems to somehow propel this mesmerizing dance, and her hips begin to sway harder and faster, so much so that I find myself out of breath from just watching. There is no shame in her gaze, only defiance; I'm now whispering her name, not Parvati's.

I've never seen this, Tandava – Shiva's dance – in real life, only in documentaries, or in bastardized Bollywood versions, and I am speechless. I'm not even sure if Tandava is what she is doing, but it looks like some form of it, as she drops down into splits and then rolls up the vertebrae in her back, shoulders shimmying left and right. The sheer fabric of her silk skirt flairs around her legs as she rises and falls.

She is India; she is what I have been missing. Here are the Ganges and Ganesh, Kashmir and Krishna; she dances, and the scent of chambeli covers me like a chadar. Here is *my* birth, this woman, this goddess, Sarasvati, Durga, Parvati, Sita, Radha – Devi alive, here in this little nautch girl—

“Azza Azhaar.”

My voice is a rasping whisper.

My imagination has tattooed henna on her hands, sprinkled jewels above her eyes, and I swear I can smell incense.

Her dance is like a spell calling me homeward, but Kameela breaks it—

“Avi!”

I spin around, and there is Kamee, wide-eyed and innocent – a sweet smile on her face.

“Isn't Azza amazing? I wish papa would let me dance like that.”

I manage a blink and grunt, still stumbling out of Azza's trance. Kameela keeps talking, oblivious. And now she is waving, waving at my sanam Azza, and Azza has stopped

dancing and is glidingwalkingflying toward us, hips still spinning, only slower, and my heart is swimming in my socks.

The girls embrace. She is so close, and it's hard to swallow, hard to keep up with my ridiculous thoughts. Is this what Rama felt when he saw Sita for the first time, what my father felt when he saw Sathi? They're speaking, but I can't hear what they're saying, until Kameela tugs on my shirt and asks—

“Can we give her a ride home?”

“Of course. Hello, Azza.”

“Hello Avi,” she says.

“Let me go change, okay?” Kameela thrusts her slippers into my sweaty hands.

Kameela scampers off down the hall and I stand, alone, before the goddess. I have to speak to her, have to know her; I have a harrowing sense that this is one of the moments that will either make or unmake me a man.

“Did you like it?” she says.

“What?”

She moves a little closer - close enough to kiss - and her ruby lips part in a slow smile revealing blindingly white teeth.

“Watching me.”

“Uh-um, yes, miss, I mean, the dance was, was—”

The music still plays in the background, and I can't think, can't stop insipidly staring. She is still dancing in my mind, and I want desperately for her to bring India back to life with her thighs and her hips and her feet again. I cannot be a bumbling fool right now, I must finish—

“—beautiful.”

“I can dance for you again.” Mischief is in her eye, and I recall her childhood crush on me; I'm unsure, but still nod yes.

The taal has slowed, and so do her hips, accordingly. The way she is moving now - it is somehow different than before, and I lose my ease. Azza is tracing invisible lines around her navel,

and her fingers move upwards, over the tops of her breasts. Now I look away.

“Azza, stop.”

She only smiles. Defiance.

“Azza, stop,” I repeat, voice louder.

“Why,” she purrs.

“Because it is shameful!” My voice booms, like my father’s, and echoes in our ears. The music has stopped, and Azza is now glaring.

“Shameful?” she asks. She laughs, low and guttural, her question hanging in the air. “I,” she continues, “am not ashamed.”

“Think how you represent India!” I beg.

“India?” she asks, with more laughter. “Avi, what do I care about India? It’s just a dance.”

My fast-won heart is slowly breaking.

“Just a dance?” I echo.

“It’s my ‘talent’ for Miss Teen USA. Didn’t Kameela tell you? I won Miss Los Angeles, and I go on to State next month.”

She can’t be saying this. I don’t want to let this dream go; something is coursing through my body that I can’t describe, and I grab her hand.

“Azza, the way you just danced - you brought India to life.”

She bursts out laughing, high and shrill this time, and wrenches her hand away.

“Silly boy – India this, India that.” She can’t finish the sentence she is laughing so hard.

“Don’t you care about where you came from, your history?”

She looks at me blankly, bored – clearly no longer intrigued by her friend’s older brother.

Her cell phone begins to ring and she scurries to answer it, happy at this chance interruption. I watch her, and now, close up, notice the light acne underneath her thick makeup and the faint splotches on her bare legs, belying the spray that turned her skin darker. She is still beautiful, of course, and so young; but she is no goddess – even if she looks like one when she dances.

“Ready?” Kameela chirps.

Azza looks up from her pink phone and mouths to Kameela that her mom is coming after all. Kameela nods okay as I silently mourn my shattered dream - I have just witnessed Sri Lakshmi transform into Kali, and have once again lost sight of India. I’m ready to admit this obsession has gone overboard, turning girls like Azza into maharanis and all water Gangetic.

Kameela sees Azza’s silk scarf, devoid of magic as it lies motionless on the hard floor. I can already see what she’s thinking, and want to tell her no, let’s go, but don’t; why not let her play? She bends over, and – ever the dancer – kicks one leg up over her head as she does so, then sprints over to the stereo and flicks the music back on. I inwardly groan as the same sitar strings twang into life, and slouch against the wall, waiting for Kameela to finish.

There is no choreography, of course, and Kameela begins to make up her moves as she goes along, springing to the left and the right, to the right and the left, sporadically. When Azza danced, her eyes spoke of seduction, but when my sister dances, there is only light. I begin to smile in spite of myself, as my sister pours life into the room. Azza, I can see, is not impressed; she still looks bored, listlessly stringing her gum along her fingers.

Azza is clearly not India. I am ashamed of how readily I was deceived, or rather, deceived myself. But I don’t want to think about this, and so turn my attention back to Kameela.

“Avi, come dance!” she calls, leaping across the floor, doing ballet where ballet doesn’t belong. But this is my sister, who butters her toast en pointe, who brushes her teeth with one foot resting astride the towel rack, who adds her own strange balletic flourish to everything she does, without apology. Like Azza, she is shameless, but unlike Azza, she has nothing of which to be ashamed. And Kameela wants me to come run around the room with her and lift her over my head like when we were little, so I will.

“Do I look like Sri Lakshmi?” Kameela laughs.

I am shocked that she knows who Sri Lakshmi is, and raise my eyebrows incredulously. Kameela wraps the scarf around her head and peeks out at me. Here, now, she looks like India, the Eastern sun beaming behind her eyes. I catch sight of the two of us in the mirror, spiraling out of control, until we fall (her with grace, me without) to the floor, scarf draped around her neck.

In the reflection I see my father – I seem him in both Kameela and me. I also see my mother, and, of course, I see India. I turn to my sister, sprawled out like a cat in the sun.

This is who I am, or at least a part of it. My mother is another part, and yes, my father is a part, too. Suddenly I feel ashamed – ashamed of my shameless grasping, as I think of the day’s delusions. Maybe not delusions, but rather, dreams.

Of the dreams of India I am not ashamed, but of my readiness to find identity in something as paper-thin as a watery mirage? Or as vain as Azza’s dance?

Is not my father greater than India? Is not Ravikiran, not Sathi, not sweet Kameela, more critical to my essence than my imaginings of the east?

My sister stands up and reaches down to assist me. I pull my gangly self up and bring her hand to my lips; she giggles.

“You,” I say, “are a true maharani.”

“A what?”

“A princess, Kameela, a princess. You are of more royalty than any Indian queen ever hoped to be.”

“Oh, Avi,” she says as she waves goodbye to Azza and takes my hand. “Such a dreamer.”

The vast grey sky
blots the sun from my eyes
as I lay on the cool green blades of carpet.

The wanton wind greets the tree brothers
and fondles through their leaves
let loose the free-fall acrobats.

Flip, spin, dive,
a lone sky swimmer lands next to my shoulder.
I turn my head to congratulate his bravery.

He is old, withered and brown.
Wrinkles and cracks cover his body.
The holes in his chest tell tales of battles won and lost.

I focus beyond him
to see his fallen folk
bonded together forming a hill.

I stand.
The giant.
Hill killer.

I run; wind pierces my face
howls in my ears
the tree brothers shake in protest.

I pull my foot back,
gravity grabs and pulls down.
The impact shatters their bond.

Blanketed within leaves, grass and dirt.
I drop my head and cover my eyes.
I wait for the violence to settle.

I ease my defense and open my eyes
only to be greeted by
one hundred more hills.

Mommy and Daddy don't love us anymore.
Talking in Grownup words, they leave us lying there,
leave us simply lying there, jumbled on the floor.

Mommy stands and drags herself through the door.
Daddy stands, they turn their backs not caring to repair,
Mommy and Daddy don't love us anymore.

Daddy screams at Mommy, calling her a whore,
Just kids, three quiet carefals, sit and stare.
Leave us simply lying there, jumbled on the floor.

Our family photo ripped to shreds, not like before-
What did we do, what's an affair?
Mommy and Daddy don't love us anymore.

No arms to cradle us, to hide us from this war,
three innocents without arms to bear.
Leave us simply lying there, jumbled on the floor.

No longer three whole, but broken pieces that they tore,
confused and crying, Daddy says its despair.
Mommy and Daddy don't love us anymore.
Leave us simply lying there, jumbled on the floor

He shoved his pocket notebook and pencil, the only materials he ever brought to class, in the back of his jeans. Outside, he pulled an American Spirit cigarette from his pack and lit up, watching the other students pass through the courtyard.

The professor walked out after a minute and noticed him to the right of the door.

- You didn't seem very responsive today.
- No?
- I didn't see you taking any notes.
- I don't take notes.
- And the comments everyone gave you?
- Don't really take them, either.

Today had been his day for workshopping. From the students' reactions, the short story he had written was a hit, but a few comments had been made that might have helped in a revision. Only there wasn't going to be a revision. The professor drew in a deep breath slowly, glancing down at the ground before speaking again.

- You know, you might get something out of paying attention to what other people say about your work.
- Maybe.
- I know you're not full of yourself. Least you don't come off that way. So, what is it?

He considered the question for a moment, trying to come up with an appropriate answer. True, he wasn't full of himself. Not once did he think that his opinion or writing held precedent over anyone else's without a good reason. But he *had* been

unresponsive. Purposefully unresponsive.

- I don't want it.

- Don't want what?

- The help. If there's something I need to fix, I'll figure it out and fix it. I don't want help finding those things, though.

- Then why are you in this class?

He took a drag from his American Spirit.

- I have to be.

It looked as if the professor was going to say something else, but he walked away towards his office. He followed the professor with his eyes until he was out of sight.

Not far from the classroom was a bench where he often sat. It was situated in between two large cedars and overlooked a fountain. When he needed to write, he sat there for hours at a time, sometimes getting thousands of words down. Sometimes getting none. The weak splashing of the water reminded him of when he used to live near the beach. He would sleep in on the weekends and wake up to the distant rush of waves, each a different note in a never-ending symphony.

Back then, things had been more simple. He hadn't been engulfed by the waves of academics, forcing him into places he didn't want to go. All he wanted to do was write, but it was sometimes difficult. As he sat, he wondered if he had been better off back then, not writing. Not even reading. Simple could be good or bad, he thought.

Less than five minutes after he sat down, a girl from his class came by. Her hair was short and amber. She had bangs that curled over her eyes, and demonstrated a habit of flicking her head to the left. She sat down next to him.

- Do you have a smoke?

Without giving her much attention, he handed her one of his cigarettes. She produced a generic yellow lighter from her

pocket.

- I liked your story.

- Thanks.

- When did you start writing?

- I don't remember.

Four years ago. He could have pinpointed the exact date if he'd wanted. Nodding her head, she reached into her backpack and pulled out a crumpled sheet of paper and handed it to him.

- What's this?

- The comments I gave you. They were in the trash.

It looked as if he was almost smiling.

- Sorry.

- Are you?

After thinking about it, he corrected himself.

- Not really, I guess.

She paused for a second and began speaking straight ahead, not looking at him.

- When I was younger, I was in love with this American actor. I'd seen all his movies. Memorized his lines. I even read a biography about him, which is unusual if you're a kid. One day I got the chance to meet him. It turned out he was filming not too far from my hometown, so my parents drove me to get an autograph. After they were done shooting, he came out and walked past everyone. We had taken the time to come out, so I ran off to the parking lot to try to catch up. I was able to get ahead of him and I asked if I could get an autograph. He stared right at me. Right at me. Then he walked to his car and drove off.

She was staring at the fountain, the sun reflecting off its surface. He didn't know if she had finished or not, so he said nothing. After a few moments, she got up and put her backpack on. She dropped the cigarette on the ground and put it out with her shoe, glancing at him for only a second. Then she left.

The story he was working on was not a revision of the one the class had read for the workshop. This was his masterpiece. Or at least that's what he called it if anyone ever asked. It had been with him for more than two years, but he had yet to come up with the perfect ending for it.

In front of him, a woman was walking with her son. He wondered how many families visited college campuses and why they did. The boy could not have been more than eight. He was holding out his hand, asking his mother to give him coins to throw into the fountain.

Watching the pair, he thought about how he must have been at that age. Had he ever asked his mother for change? What wishes had he made? He scribbled something into his notebook. Just a few words and images. Looking at what he had written, he began thinking more. The words were perfect, he concluded. He started writing freely, erasing and rewriting every few sentences. All that was around him went out of focus except for the mother and child and fountain. His pencil scratched wildly on the paper as he glanced back and forth between it and the fountain area. He was surprised that his concentration didn't wane, since he'd usually take breaks to smoke. After a few minutes, he had finished.

He looked over everything he had written and confirmed that it was the perfect ending to his story. Exactly what he had been looking for and exactly what he had wanted. He took another look at the mother and child next to the fountain. A discernable amount of energy had left his face. An expression of frustration took its place. He stared back down at the notebook and realized the words didn't belong to him. They belonged to them. The splash of the pennies hitting the top of the water sounded heavy. His head dropped into his left hand and he took out another American Spirit, lit the tip, sucked in sharply and started coughing.

Tearing out the last few pages of his notebook, he stood up and walked over to the nearest trash can. He threw in the crumbled paper of comments the girl had given him. After, he pulled out his lighter and held it under the papers from his notebook. As they burned, he saw his perfect ending disappear. When the flames came close enough to touch him, he dropped the papers into the trash without thinking. They landed on top of a soda bottle, then burned out, the remaining words indecipherable. Seeing that his ending had been destroyed, he shoved his hands into his jeans and walked to the parking lot, where he got into his car and drove away.

A Walk on the Seven Mile Beach

There is a whole fish on my plate, cooked all the way through, and I honestly don't know what to make of it. Do I cut the head off first then pick at its bones for what meat it has? Or do I just dive right in and pay no heed to the childhood law that states, 'When eating fish, chew slowly!' The curried rice and steamed vegetables seem interesting enough, so I'll just pick at those for a bit. The fish goes on the ground for the rib-caged dogs to gnaw at. They kick up a storm of dust as they bicker amongst themselves.

My eyes occasionally rise to the sun-dressed lady behind the cauldron, mixing and stirring up a fragrance that makes me dream of its contents. She smiles at me and asks me a question in a language that I don't understand, so I just nod my head and give her the thumbs up, hoping she asked how the food was. There is nothing better for dessert than a cigarette, so I strike a match and slowly turn my body around to face the view that completely justifies my reasons for leaving home.

A blazing sun dips down to the ocean's horizon and spills a canvas of soft summer colors into the clouds. Small fishing boats churn up foamy salt sprays with quiet motors as they head in for the day. There is a romantic couple on shore. He tips his lady into a perfect arch and I watch as her hair formlessly dances on the soft sands. They both rise together and continue their sporadic mamba as the Reggae music from next door turns up a notch for the soon-to-be night crowds. My cigarette is out now so I flick it to the side, perk up a big smile as I stretch out my bones, and say to myself, *Now this is Jamaica.*

For days I have been stumbling around from hotel to hotel in one of Jamaica's most famous tourist cities, Negril – better known as “The Seven Mile Beach.” Negril is a city comprised of one major road, which runs parallel to the ocean. For seven miles of lush mountain scenery you follow its twists and turns, trying to avoid its horn-obsessed taxi drivers and unblinking bicyclists.

Beginning at the northernmost point of Negril, at the start of the seven-mile stretch, stand the powerhouse resorts that are home to the most fancy and well-to-do tourists in the area. They resemble a strip of Malibu-styled mansions that offer to sell the “true image” of Jamaica, an image which includes a full package of health spas and massages – with exotic oils, of course – and white sandy beaches lined with beckoning palms. In short, the northern part of Negril is nothing more than a false representation of what Jamaica truly is.

On the other hand, the farther south you go, the more the local culture seems to spring to life. This is where you find the Rastafarian with his dreads hanging low and his joint puffing steadily. It is where beautiful Jamaican women gowned in light blue satin dresses balance baskets of fruit on their heads and provide your morning breakfast. It's also where poverty lives, where the wooden shacks are stacked on top of each other, and entrepreneurs stand ready to sell you anything – from Bob Marley paraphernalia to wooden spatulas to bottles of Red Stripe. It is in this southern quadrant of Negril that I found myself most intrigued, and where I hoped to find the “true” Jamaica I was searching for.

At night the crowds begin to spill into the scene, so I sling my backpack over my shoulder and head south, toward reality. The sun is gone now and all that lights my way are little beach fires. Locals, tourists, and travelers – all are lounging around and stoking the flames of conversation. A few catch my ear and I stop to be entertained.

I thrive on these little gatherings. After traveling solo for a few days, you would be surprised how lonely things can get. Small talk becomes a necessary ingredient for sanity. It allows you to take a break from your own thoughts and slip into those of another. I keep walking, searching for Jamaica and its hidden beauties.

The beach fires are becoming less frequent and my ambitions of finding a hotel are lessening with each fire that I pass. I look at my watch – it's almost eleven. Where has the night gone? A cigarette sounds nice, so I take a seat and watch the waves catch the moon. A voice from behind startles me, and I feel vulnerable. It's harsh and cold and breaks my serenity.

“You wanna Jamaicon blow-job mon?”

I snap my head around to see this Amazonian Jamaican woman in a tight tank top with manly shoulder muscles and a skirt that shows me her rippling, overpowering thighs. I hope she doesn't try to wrestle me. She strikes a smile and all I can see are two, maybe three, teeth.

“Best in ALL da countree!”

“Uhh, no thanks. I'm good.”

Prostitutes are a funny breed. Once you turn them down, their goal of obtaining sexual favors for money flies out the window and they become just your average passerby. She plops down next to me and gets to talking. In me, her loneliness finds a soul mate.

“We all have a star, do you know dat?” She stretches her hand and points to the sky. “Dat one ies mine. It means ‘bright person.’ Yours is out there too, you gotta just find iet. Eets who you are, who we ALL are.”

I am inclined to grab her and hold her tight – tell her I love her. She is real and alive, and I can feel her vibrations rocket through my body. My mind melts into hers as she paints the night sky with boney fingers and wild words. We sit together

in ecstasy and pick apart planes from satellites and planets from stars. I share my soul with her and in return she gives me hers.

A Jamaican man wearing the stereotypical Bob Marley outfit is walking toward us and he is not looking too happy. The whore and this disgruntled man share loud words in the Jamaican dialect. Both glance at me occasionally. I know I am the subject of their distress and I treasure my life, so I say my quick goodbye and trek out into the silent night, unaware of what lies ahead in the dark corners of Jamaica's wild frontier.

I continue moving south into unexplored lands. There are no more fires leading me on in my journey, and the dark is beginning to unravel my nerves. The drug dealers become persistent. The travelers and tourists have turned in for the night and I am the last remaining hope of a hot meal for some of these crooked-teethed hagglers. Once I have made my way past one, another appears – offering all the instantly-gratifying, reality-relieving substances known on this green earth. My mission is in jeopardy. Have I strayed too far into the city's underbelly? Is this the true Jamaica I am searching for?

A scrawny-looking Jamaican man leans against a wooden fence in front of me. I stay to the shore line and plan to pass this druggie by without a fuss. My back is hurting from my backpack and a soft bed is yelling at me from afar. It's got to be around two or three in the morning. Here comes the fence junkie. *Don't look at him in the eye*, I tell myself.

"Hey mon, you want some weed? How abouts sum ecstaciiiiee or some LSDee, I gots it all mon." He remains perched against his fence with hands crossed over each other. He seems sure I am interested.

"Ahh, no thanks man, I got all I need for the rest of my night." My feet keep moving. The crazed man is out of my peripheral view now. The planks creak and I know he has left

his stoop. The sand behind me is crunching beneath violent feet. Can he be following me? A glance over my shoulder tells me that he is. I don't stop.

"I gots the purple skunk, the green kush, the yellow rag tails mon! Look at dis!" I keep walking. "Look at DIS!"

There is a tug on my backpack and I lose my balance, stumbling backwards. I am caught off guard and thrust up against that damn wooden fence with the red-eyed man grabbing at my shirt, asking me how much money I have in my pockets. His face is close to mine. His rotting teeth create a stench that rolls out of his mouth and sticks to my lips. He keeps slamming me against the fence. Our eyes remain locked together and I feel the anger swell inside me. My threatened body lashes out and I knock the man's legs out from under him.

This can't be why I came to Jamaica! To be hassled by thugs and junkies was not on my "things to do while traveling abroad" list. No, I am here for peace and culture and true experiences that don't involve being robbed on the beaches of Jamaica.

My enemy is on the floor. I am the predator now. I am the one with the red-stained eyes (but much better teeth). My elbow crams into his throat and I hear the air gasp out of his lungs. I tell him in harsh words not to stand back up until I am out of view. He can't say a word, but I know what he would say if he could talk. I walk backwards to make sure he listens. He is lying there panting with a confused look about him. Goddamn junkies.

I need a drink and a quiet place to spend the rest of my night. The hotels are all too far to the north, so a comfortable bed is not an option. Up ahead there is a beacon, the last light that can be seen for miles. All I can hope is that it's not a junkie gathering.

There is Reggae music, and it's good Reggae music, too. Wooden beams create the frame of this shack that tilts to the left ever so slightly. Palm branches are spread over the top for a roof. It's a bar, with one Rastafarian sitting at the counter and another behind it, thumbing through old records. I am hesitant to enter, but before I can turn away to find a pile of sand to sleep on, the Rasta drinking beers shouts to me and beckons me to come join. I can't resist a good drink so I pull up a stool next to the old timer and he cracks a Red Stripe for me. I chug it down gratefully and he cracks me another. We quickly become best friends and he begins to tell me all about the Jamaican lifestyle. I have found my liberator – the one who has the answers – and he has my full attention.

His name is Simon and he has a stuttering problem. I don't mind, though. Within minutes I have become accustomed to his speech.

“D-d-d-dddis country has eets problems, mon, but I don't c---c-ccomplayn... As long as I can bee free, who I wwwwont to bee, then, that's all right. Y-y-yyya know mon?” I nod my head, soaking up every syllable he has to offer.

Beer after beer, joint after joint, cigarette after cigarette, Simon tells me of the Rastafarian way. He compares the Rasta to the Hippie, noting their similarities and differences. He shows me black and white photos of the first tourists in Negril. He tells me of the education system and how hard it is for some people in Jamaica to move out of poverty. Simon even brings up the resorts in northern Negril and how they bring in business for Jamaica's economy, while taking away the true experience of the country's culture.

It is still dark out and the early morning cold begins to bite at my bones. Simon lights up a beach fire next to where we are sitting, and we continue our talk. After history lessons on political uprisings, corrupted Jamaican leaders, Bob Marley's

contributions to the culture, and all sorts of extravagant heated issues that played a part in the shaping of Jamaica, Simon and I begin to talk like normal human beings. We discuss our lives, and what makes us happy or mad or excited or depressed. We talk about love and beauty and what makes us want to get up in the morning. We laugh and smile together, treasuring the moments that make us feel alive.

A pale light begins to creep up from the mountains behind the sea. I shiver a little and rub my hands over the ashes for the remaining warmth of the fire. Simon sits next to me, staring into the embers. As the light from the morning sun begins to show itself more and more, I begin to realize something. For days I have been traveling around in search for this image – this experience of Jamaica that would make me explode with enlightenment. I look up to the north, at all of the sandy miles that I traveled in order to arrive at this point. Then I glance over at Simon. He still has his eyes fixed on those embers. I stand up, sling my backpack over my aching shoulders, and say, “Thanks for Jamaica, mon.”

You can walk the city streets
wrapped in a chain the size of
a scarf. That won't keep the
embers out of your eyes that
glow with the brilliance of a
thousand camera flashes.

I know you, Arc Eyes, drink
the soft pantomime of your
step over an errant puddle,
the laugh because my shoes
aren't made of fabric as thin
as underwear. I can see the
heat rising from your exposed
skin. My hand on the window
frosting as the past rushes so
quietly behind me, the five
red specks of light on my
fingertips as we unite like
Tesla coils, a bright filament
of acquaintance you can keep
hidden sometimes, but you

can never stop the lightning.

flicker flicker flicker

On and off in the night like a
stereo playing a bad CD, that
ghostly needle between plus
and strangers, unity in electric
waste. You pull on your gloves.
I lower my hand and breathe a
mist onto the window pane.

Dallas stood under a pink neon light, the glowing tubes twisted into the word ‘Mystique.’ He cupped his hand around the cigarette of a teetering woman in a low-cut blouse, and her face was momentarily illuminated by the flame of his lighter.

She leaned on his arm for support.

“Thanks, Dallas. You’re a gentleman.” Her too-small three-inch heels made standing straight a little bit of a challenge.

Dallas said, “Someone once told me that beautiful people don’t light their own cigarettes. I’m just doing my part in keeping you pretty.”

“Aw, Dal. I’m going to find you a girl tonight. I’m going to find you the hottest girl in there, and she’s going to go home with you. And do you know what she’s going to do?”

“You know I don’t take drunk girls home, Pam.”

“No. You don’t know what she’s going to do to you.” Pam staggered backward on one foot and righted herself. She used her index finger as a point of emphasis on Dallas’s chest. “You’re going to take a girl home. You’re going to tonight, and I’m going to find the girl, and you know what she’s going to do to you?”

Pam leaned in and cupped her hand around Dallas’s ear, whispering, “She’s going to suck your dick.” She pulled away and nodded at him. “I’m totally serious. It’s going to happen.”

Dallas’s face revealed no excitement. “Wow, Pam. Can I just say in advance that it’s really nice of you to think about me, and I wish you luck.” He sighed and gave her a tight-lipped

smile. “I will now be getting back to my job. Enjoy your cigarette.”

“It’s going to happen, Dallas! Whether you like it or not!”

Dallas lumbered through the club to relieve the other bouncer from his post at the back door. The front dance floor was filled with college-aged girls swinging their hips and running their hands up and down their bodies. The pulse of the music sent each pelvis into motion. Hair swung. Mascara ran down sweating faces. The floor was encircled by men holding beers and watching. They were the striped-shirts. Twenty-something guys fresh from their cologne baths who spent the night approaching one girl after another. By the end of the night more than a handful of ladies had usually had enough alcohol to succumb to whatever these guys ended up proposing – usually a drunken stumble to a swerving car followed by mild mutual date-rape.

Dallas didn’t dance. The last time he could recall dancing was when he jumped up and down and sang with his sister to their dad’s Michael Jackson records in the eighties. His sister would hold the big cardboard record sleeve and gaze into Michael’s face while spinning in circles. She called this “falling in love.” She said she wouldn’t marry anyone except Michael. At least she wasn’t around long enough to see what a disaster her betrothed had become.

The crowd at the club ebbed and flowed with rhythmic regularity. Evenings began with a slow trickle of neighborhood drinkers – Pam was one of them. Divorced at age twenty-nine, she’d been coming in semi-regularly for her Grey Goose martinis, extra dirty, for the past six months. If she made it to her fifth martini, the drink would usually end up on the ground, or on whomever she happened to be talking to. Pam, now on her fourth, was well on her way to the “tipping point.”

Tonight Mystique was stuffed with enough striped-shirts and barflies to barely allow any elbow room. Dallas had already broken up a couple of fights and kicked out an asshole for harassing and groping one of the cocktail waitresses. As he approached what would be his final post until last call, Dallas noticed his buddy Rocky was surrounded by three women who looked like they had been dipped in glitter. The oldest of them was wearing pigtails and sipping a daiquiri while yelling into Rocky's ear about a "fucking kick-ass after-party" that was only two blocks away.

Rocky nodded toward Dallas while getting up from his perch. "If you can get this guy to go, I will not only go to your party, but I will give you girls a strip tease."

Dallas smiled and shook his head. "Sounds like a good deal. Too bad I'm sick of seeing this guy naked." He turned to Rocky. "How many times do I have to tell you – you're not my type. I like my guys femme and well read, not waxed and beefy."

Pam approached Dallas with a younger girl in tow. The two were linked by arms that were over each other's shoulders, and having more than a little trouble keeping their four legs in working order.

"Daally, bay-bee. Look at this hot piece of aaasss." With that, Pam smacked her friend's rear. "Shessays she's ssea shells. She sells—what was I saying? Oh yeah. She'sgon suck yur dingaling!" Pam managed to curl into a ball while still standing, and her body bounced up and down with laughter.

"You are ridiculous, Pam." He took a look at the prize Pam had brought him and stopped smiling. "Nicole, what the fuck are you doing here?"

The girl, who had been looking through droopy eyelids at him stared and squinted—trying to place his face.

"Oh my God!" She covered her open mouth with her hands and shouted. "Dallas! You fuck! What are you doing

here?” She spread her arms wide to give him a hug, and he took a step back. “Were you going to give head to a fucking stranger?”

Nicole stared at him and shook her head. “God, Dallas. I don’t know. She slouched and looked at the floor. “God-damn. You’re bouncing. You’re a bouncy bouncer. I didn’t know you were the bouncer. Pam said ‘there’s this guy. I don’t think he’s been laid for years. Let’s do him a favor.’ So it was like for the good of mankind. I didn’t know it was gonna be you.”

“That’s fucking great, Nicole.” Dallas felt angry. He didn’t care about the club girls – he felt pity for them and tried to make sure none of them wound up dead. Other than that, they could be as slutty as they liked. But Nicole was a person; she used to sit across from him at the dinner table and show off a mouthful of mashed potatoes when no one was looking. She taught his sister and him how to play Bullshit, and teased him when he turned thirteen and his voice began to crack.

“What, Dallas? Hey, what are you doing after this? You want to come with us to Denny’s – have a little coffee – catch up on old times?” As she ended her sentence, one of the striped shirts stumbled up against her, which caused her pink drink to empty onto Dallas’s shirt.

From behind her a loud bell rang and the bartender shouted out, “Last call!”

The stumbling striped shirt grabbed Nicole’s arm and brought his face three inches away from hers for an apology. “I’m sorry, girl. Let me buy you another drink. Wait – hey girl, you look good. Do you want to be my secretary? I own my own business. I could pay you lots of money. I’ll buy you coffee in the morning, too.” He slid his arm around her waist. She laughed and whispered something in his ear.

Dallas looked on in disappointment. He tried to detach the reality of the idiotic girl in front of him from the memory of his childhood friend.

“I have to start herding these people out of here, Nicole.” He pointed to the guy at her side and turned to walk away. “Good luck with that.”

“Wait, Dal.” She fumbled through her little red handbag and brought out a business card. “Call me.”

The card read, ‘Nicole Spartas, Hair Stylist.’ Far cry from what she had aspired to be as a kid. Back then she wanted to be a chemist. She was fascinated by the work of Dallas and Montana’s father. She and Montana would sneak into his lab and play with the beakers and Petri dishes. They performed “experiments” on Barbie dolls. Once, Dallas walked into the kitchen while his mom and dad were on one of their evening walks and found Nicole and Montana pouring brown gravy from a graduated cylinder onto the heads of a Barbie, a My Little Pony, and a Teddy Rukspin. The incident got the girls grounded for two days—which meant they weren’t allowed to watch Kids Incorporated or The Mickey Mouse club, and had to wash every last dinner dish.

Dallas looked down at Nicole’s card, then back at her. He wondered how far she had fallen. At what point had she abandoned her dreams? Was it after Montana died? If Montana were still alive would Nicole even be at the club, or would she have been at home studying. Perhaps she would have been staying up late and drinking coffee, surrounded by textbooks and notebooks filled with equations. Maybe she wouldn’t have this mongoloid attached to her – dragging her away to the bar.

Dallas smiled. “Yeah, sure. I’ll call you.”

* * *

Paul sat on his recliner and massaged the skin between his cat's ears.

"Is that cat's hair ever going to grow back? Jesus, Dad it looks depressed."

Paul chuckled and nodded. "He's got some stubble growing in. We like to call it a full-body five o' clock shadow. This little guy is going to be coughing up furballs in no time." Dallas's father had been working on developing a compound that would be added to pet food. Its purpose was to make their feces odorless. Unfortunately for Sampson, one of the side effects happened to be hair loss.

Dallas shook his head as Sampson vacated his father's lap and hopped up onto the couch next to him. He nudged at Dallas's hand with his furless little wet nose. "Guess who came into the club the other day."

"Hmm, now let's see – Pat Benetar?"

"Don't be a dork. Nicole was there."

"No way. Our Nicole? What is she doing? I haven't seen her since – is she still in school?"

"Nope. She does hair."

"Really." Paul's eyes watched his son's hand as it smoothed the cat's back. "Hmph. Well, that's a shame. Well, no. She was always a social girl. She's probably great at that. What else? How are her parents?"

"Well we didn't really get to talk. She was kind of drunk, you know – and I was working."

"Oh, I'd like to see that girl. She was so smart. She really could have done anything, you know – anything. She had the looks and the brains." He looked down at his hands. "They both did."

"Yeah. I don't know if she's doing so well, though."

"What, why? She's not one of those tweekers or junkies is she?"

“No, no, I don’t think so. I mean, she looks really amazing – gorgeous. The way she was acting, though. I don’t know. It was just kind of – no, it was really a bummer.”

“How do you mean?” Paul leaned forward in his chair, concerned.

“Just like another slutty drunk girl. I mean, it shouldn’t faze me. It’s the nature of the club, right?”

“Well, people get blotto at nightclubs and act in ways that they wouldn’t normally act, that’s for sure. We should invite her out to dinner and catch up. Did you get her number?”

“Yeah. She gave me her card.” He reached for his back pocket, upsetting the cat on his lap, who proceeded to leap onto the floor and saunter toward his bowl of Meow Mix.

Paul took the card from Dallas and examined it. “We should definitely have her over.”

* * *

Dallas sat in a booth with Rocky, a bottle of Fat Tire in front of him. The diffused glow of the afternoon pool framed the figure of a woman at the door. She was pink and puffy, and wore her hair in a greasy ponytail. Dallas assumed she was one of the patrons from last night who might have lost something in the bar, or left her credit card behind (a common occurrence). There were customers that would let bartenders hold their limbs overnight if it meant another round of drinks.

The woman walked in slowly, not saying a thing. Usually patrons would shout ‘hello’ into the empty bar – such a different approach from the way they dance out of the club in the late evening.

“Can I help you?” Dallas got up and walked to where she stood.

The woman strained her eyes to adjust to the dark. “No. I’m just looking around.”

“The bar doesn’t open for another two hours, so...”

He trailed off, expecting her to take the hint and leave, but she stood her ground.

“I just want to look around.” As her eyes grew accustomed to the dim light, she focused on the details of his face. “Can you tell me what it is you do here?”

“I’m a bouncer.”

She looked silently at his face for a moment more than was comfortable. “Do you work on Friday nights?”

“Well, yeah, most everyone does. That’s one of our busiest nights.”

“Oh. Well, do you remember people? Like, the people who walk in the door – you check their ID’s?” She clutched a photo in one hand and fingered the edges with the other.

“Sure. Some of them are regulars. Some only come once in a while, but I’m pretty good at recognizing faces.”

The woman turned the photo toward him. “This is my daughter, Valerie. She was at your club two weeks ago. Do you recognize her?”

He guessed the photo of the young girl was a high school graduation picture. Her hair was done up and she had one of those weird black cloaks that they made the girls wear so that they all looked like they were wearing the same shirt. She did look familiar to him – a little younger, of course, in the picture.

“Yeah. She’s a dancer, right?” As he asked the woman this, he began to realize why her eyes were so tired and puffy. “The one who went missing.”

She looked straight into his eyes. “No. She’s dead. She was killed by someone who picked her up on the way out of the club – then dropped her in a ditch.”

Two police detectives had visited the club the Monday after and questioned everyone who had worked that Friday. At the time of the questioning Valerie had only been missing. The cops thought maybe she had run off to Vegas, or hooked up with an old boyfriend.

“You say you remember her? You know she was a dancer. Do you remember that night? Do you remember who she was with?”

“Yeah. I do remember that night. The police came and questioned all of us. We never imagined she would have been killed. I saw him. I could probably identify him, if they put him in a lineup.”

The woman stood in front of him and rubbed the edge of the photograph with her finger. Her eyes were closed, and she opened them into misty red slits as she asked him her next question.

“What is your job?”

Dallas figured that in her grief she was forgetting bits of their conversation.

“I’m a bouncer.”

“So you’re a security guard – right? You make sure everyone’s safe?” Her voice started to rise, and the photo in her hand began trembling as her hand shook.

Dallas just stared at her, not sure what to say, but he knew where she was going because he was already there. Her mouth accused him of the crime for which his conscience was already admitting guilt. He had seen her. He had remembered the night because the questioning after the disappearance had helped him recall a surprising amount of detail. He had seen her leave with an older man – some guy who had given him the creeps from the moment he walked in the door. The man had sat at the bar drinking water and watching the dance floor – his lips puckered and his head rocking. Every now and then he would

approach a lady and try to make conversation. As the night wore on, he had become more and more successful. Finally, after last call, he watched Valerie leave with the man at her side. It didn't look right, but there wasn't much that looked right anyway by the time you got to last call.

"You bouncers are here to be security, and the cops are out there in their cars; I see two cop cars every five minutes down here, for Christ's sake!"

"I'm sorry about what happened to your daughter, ma'am, but these are grown people we're watching over. I can't take responsibility for everyone who I think is about to make a bad decision. If I did, my nights would be a hell-of-a-lot busier and people would probably try to stay away from the club. My job is to stop fights and make sure no minors get in – that's all. I'm sorry."

"That is irresponsible! You are irresponsible. You watched my baby leave with the man who would murder her, and you didn't do anything about it!"

"I'm sorry," he said.

She turned to leave, and he escorted her to the door.

"Can you just promise me that you will try something new with your job? Can you promise that you will take care of the grown-ups? Maybe you're busy checking IDs and stopping the fights, but maybe you could also be busy preventing some of those bad decisions – maybe someone would live longer."

Dallas knew that it was not his fault that Valerie was murdered. That her mother was grieving. That her body was buried in some cold cemetery somewhere. The helpless mother's plea gave him a headache.

* * *

“This shit is off the chain, Dallas! Did you see all the ass in there tonight? Time to get serious.”

Phil was an old college friend who quit school to pursue his dream of being the sickest B-Boy in Ventura County. He pointed at a girl’s rear as she walked by.

“Holy Lord. Did you see that! Damn, that ass is like a shelf. Imma go see if I can put my drink on that, ’cause this place ain’t got no tables. Peace, Dallas.”

“Good luck with the shelf, kid.” Dallas watched his friend run up to the group which contained shelf-girl. The guy had the energy of a seventeen-year-old, and it matched the energy that was pulsing into the club. The news of the murder had not caused business to wane even slightly. From the looks of the crowd that night, it had brought more people out. Dallas had to enforce the one-in-one-out rule as early as nine-thirty. He still had a headache from Valerie’s mom when Nicole showed up in front of his line.

“Hey, Dallas. I’m really embarrassed about the other night. I made a total ass of myself. That’s really not how I am.”

“It’s cool. Don’t apologize. You were drunk. I see that shit everyday, and I was kind of a dick about it, but that’s just because I care about you.”

Nicole gave him a light punch in the arm and put on a Southern accent. “Aw shucks. I know. Hey, what are you doing after this?”

“I’m probably not going to get off until three in the morning.”

“That sucks. We should get together and do lunch.”

“Sure.”

A couple walked out of the club, and Dallas waved Nicole in. The thump of the music could be heard from outside, and Dallas watched the line lengthen. Some parts of it were full of energy – like the group of women on a night out, shivering and

bouncing to keep warm in their skirts and heels. Groups of men trying to look cool, leaning back with their hands in their pockets. Guys like Phil looking like they were about to jump out of their skins, talking up everyone around them, even the cool guys. The line stayed long and alive until last call, when Dallas had to break the news that the last of them would not be getting in.

Nicole showed up at his side as she exited the bar. “What’s up, Dallas?” She pulled a man toward her. They crashed into each other as she overused her arms and he underused his legs. “This is my friend. What was your name?”

The man looked embarrassed. “Josh – for the twelfth time.”

“Oh. Josh is going to take me home.” She swung her arm around Josh’s shoulders and used his frame for support.”

“Are you okay to drive?” Dallas eyed Josh’s posture and slightly vacant expression. “How many drinks did you have?”

“I just had a couple, naw just a few. Wait—a couple is two and a few is three, right? How many is eight?”

“Too many to drive home. I’ll call you a cab.”

Dallas got out his cell phone and began to dial. “Where’s your place?”

“It’s like, a few miles away. By the mall.”

“What’s the address?”

“I’m not telling you my address. What if you’re some kind of sex offender? Are you on Megan’s Law?” Josh burst out laughing.

“I’ve got a guy who needs a cab at Club Mystique – going near the mall. Oh yeah, and he’s really hilarious, so hold onto your sides when you pick him up.” Dallas put his phone back in his pocket and looked down at Nicole. “Hold on, don’t go anywhere, Nic. I’m going to see if I can get off early and take you home.”

“No, Dallas. It’s okay. I’ll just go home with – what’s your name again? He has a hot tub.”

Josh looked annoyed – Dallas even more so.

“Again, Nicole? Have you just lost all your standards?”

“Fuck you!” Nicole turned to go, but Dallas stopped her.

“I’m taking you home.”

* * *

Nicole sat in the reclining chair of Dallas’s bedroom. She held a photo album on her lap and flipped through the pages – examining pictures she hadn’t seen in years. The last time she held this album she was sitting in the back of a minivan owned by Montana and Dallas’s parents. Dallas had been teaching Montana to drive that day, and the ride had been frightening to Nicole. The memory of it became vivid to her as she turned the pages.

“Do you remember when you taught Montana how to drive?”

“Yeah. That was nuts. She almost killed all three of us. Dad would have been so pissed if he found out.”

Nicole leaned back in her chair and closed the photo album. “What do you think Montana would be doing if she were alive?”

“Probably the same as you. She was always so social – rebellious, too. I remember Mom and Dad used to talk about how much of a headache she would be once she became a teenager.

“Yeah. She was great.” Nicole closed her already droopy eyelids. She had nearly drifted off to dreamland right before she whipped her body back up into sitting position. “Hey! You got any blow?”

“What?”

“Coke. Do you have any coke?”

“What would make you think that I have coke?”

“What would make me think that you wouldn’t? You work at a club – right? You’re in the night life. Don’t look at me like I’m crazy.” She closed her eyes and leaned back in the chair again. “Thanks for letting me sleep over. I hate going home alone.”

“Is that why you get so shit-faced all the time?”

“No.” Nicole sat up and watched Dallas as he grabbed a blanket from the closet and a pillow off the bed. “I just like to have a good time. I like to forget about everything. Loosen up. I’ll stop when I’m either in love or too gross to go out. Like, if I had kankles, like that Pam lady, I would totally stay home.”

“Funny. I’m going to sleep on the couch, so you can go ahead and take my bed if you’d like.”

* * *

In his nightmare, the picture of Valerie wasn’t of Valerie. It was of Nicole, and the woman holding it was his own mother. As she stood in front of him accusing him of murder, the picture of Nicole became a picture of Montana, but she was grown. She was wearing dark lipstick and winking. His mother lit him on fire and called him worthless.

The next morning Dallas woke before nine. He made sure Nicole was still sleeping, then put his ex-girlfriend’s *Sex in the City* DVD in the player. He let the menu loop, in case Nicole decided to leave the apartment. Dallas had to get to his father’s house and back before he got back from his morning gym and breakfast ritual.

Valerie was still asleep when Dallas returned to the apartment. Nervous about what he was about to do, he pushed PLAY on the DVD and drifted into the world of sexy New York.

He fell asleep with the corked tube in his pocket and was awakened by Nicole's request for coffee. He wiped the grogginess from his face and looked at her – wondering how he was going to word his explanation. With this one act of heroism, he had never felt so creepy.

“I have something better than coffee.” He sat up and touched his pocket.

“Like what? Tea?” She was rifling through his pantry in the same clothes she had worn the night before.

He was surprised when his voice didn't crack from the lie he was about to tell her. “Naw. You know that stuff you were asking me about last night?”

“What? I don't really remember all of last night. What stuff?”

“You were asking me about ‘blow.’” He took the tube out of his pocket and put it on the coffee table.

Nicole turned around and lit up when she saw the white powder on the table. “Oh. Goody, goody, gumdrops! Why'd you lie to me? Were you scared I'd tell your dad?”

Dallas tried to laugh, but his effort created only a smirk, which gave him that creepy feeling again – like he was that guy on the barstool. “I just didn't think we should stay up all night. It's always better after a good night's sleep.”

“I wouldn't know about that. This will be my first time doing it in the morning. Well, aren't you going to rack 'em up?”

He picked up the tube and panicked for a moment. He had white powder but none of the usual accessories like straws and razors. “You can rack yourself however much you want. I'm going to go take a shower.” He got up and walked toward the bathroom.

“I'll just use my nail, then.”

Two minutes after he got in the shower, the bathroom door opened and Nicole yelled over the rush of the water, “Have you done any of that yet?”

“Uh. Yeah, why?”

“I think it’s bunk. It doesn’t even taste like coke. It tastes like laundry soap! That shit’s nasty!”

“Oh, yeah. I should have warned you. It’s a new kind.”

“What do you mean, “a new kind?” It’s from a plant. Is it a fucking Downy hybrid? I feel like I’m doing laundry in the back of my throat.”

Dallas pushed out a fake chuckle. “I don’t know. I got it from one of my really good buddies. It gets you high. That’s all that matters, right?”

“Okay.”

On his way to taking Nicole home, Dallas sweated. She had done half of what he had brought home and would begin losing strands of hair after about three days. They promised to keep in touch, and she told him his coke sucked. He hoped she would be able to forgive him.

* * *

Dallas’ mother slept in Montana’s bed for two months after her daughter’s death. It was the beginning of separate bedrooms for everyone, and soon of separate houses. Dallas was only sixteen, and had been watching his sister’s health deteriorate since her twelfth birthday. When she started losing hair from the chemo, he began to buy her a new hat every week. Blossom was popular then, and funky hats with flowers above the brim were acceptable. Her favorite one was purple with a big fake yellow daisy glowing just above her face. She had been wearing it during her one and only driving lesson.

When he was young and full of normal angst, Dallas and his mother shared a secret anger with his father, who had been receiving recognition almost yearly for innovations in bio-friendly commercial cleaning products development. He was so smart, Dallas believed that if there was a cure for cancer, his dad was the only one who could find it. Sure, he talked to the doctors, found the most lauded specialist with the highest success rate for treatment, but none of it mattered in the end. He had blamed his father for not saving Montana – for withholding his knowledge like a cruel wizard – for continuing in his research on aerosols while his daughter died in her sleep.

He understood everything now. His dad wanted nothing more than to save Montana, but there are some things that are so much bigger and harder to fight than a drunk guy in a bar. Things so small, they can attack a girl’s entire body while grown men, utterly helpless, stand by and watch, kneel by her bed, pray, make phone calls, and write letters. They can kick ass, but they can’t lick a tiny cell. They can’t tell a mutant cell to get the fuck out of their house and stop messing around inside someone they love. That’s how they watched Montana die.

* * *

Two days after Nicole’s dose, Dallas sat in his car outside of his father’s house and debated about whether or not he should tell his father. He hadn’t heard from Nicole or seen her at the club and was worried about how his actions would play out, and whether she would be able to make the connection between his “bunk coke” and her missing hair. He tried to imagine how his brain would work after a sudden and rapid hair loss, and guessed that Nicole would probably be able to figure out the cause pretty easily—then again, he wasn’t really sure about how much she “partied” and how many different chemicals she put in her

system every week. Who knew whether she would figure him out. Hairdressers don't read scientific journals.

He started his car and pulled away. He knew what he had to do, but he had to make sure the substance had worked its magic. He drove to the salon and parked outside. The storefront was made entirely of windows so that he could see all of the hairstylist's stations from his car. Nicole was not inside. He got out and approached the receptionist, a girl who looked as though she was still in high school, wearing a flawless coif of shining raven hair, and dark eyeliner that curled up to give her eyes the effect of a contented cat.

"Hello, how can I help you?" she purred. A pen was poised in one hand, the tips of her fingernails hovering over the phone.

"Does Nicole Spartas work here?" Dallas asked.

"Yes, but she's out sick for the week. Did you want to make an appointment?"

"No, I—um, do you know what's wrong with her?" Dallas tried to sound casual.

"I think she has the flu or something. Do you want to leave a message for her?" She looked confused by his line of questioning.

"No, that's okay, I'll just go by her house, I guess."

* * *

Nicole woke up with a feeling of dread she couldn't place. As she turned over in her bed and saw another few hundred strands of hair on her pillow, she remembered the misery of the past few days. She sat up and stared at the fallen soldiers on the bed underneath her.

"What the fuck?!" Nicole stood up – afraid to touch her head and feel her emerging scalp or cause another freefall of hair.

She didn't leave the house at all the day before, and was dreading the trip from her home to the doctor's office. Even if she could figure out what was causing the hair loss, she couldn't bring back nine inch strands of hair to fill in the bald spots which continued to grow on her scalp.

Nicole carefully wrapped what was left of her hair into a loose braid and tried not to get it wet in the shower. Water pooled in the tub as the drain had undergone some serious hair-clogs in the past three days. It wasn't just the hair on her head, either. Her eyebrows had fallen out, and she only had a few of her once long and curling lashes left. After drawing on some light brown arches and covering her head with the hood of her sweatshirt, she emerged from her house.

When Nicole stepped onto her porch, she saw something on the bench that she hadn't seen for ten years. She remembered another girl, ten years ago, sitting on her bed and crying because she didn't want to pose for school pictures while wearing a wig. She saw Montana's hat sitting on the bench, big and purple with a yellow daisy above the brim and a note.

All it said was, 'I'm sorry.'

There was a time in this country when, if people wanted to be left alone, free from governmental interference, they would build a house in a remote area, perhaps up in the mountains somewhere, and live far away from civilization and all its intrusions. But time has changed. Today when someone wants to be left alone, they buy a house at the end of a residential cul-de-sac.

That's what my parents did ten years ago, yanking me out of Washington Elementary, and into a newly constructed school deep in the suburban wilderness. It was there that I met my future stoner-buddy Rick.

I don't remember exactly when it started – sometime in our sophomore year, I think – Rick and I took to passing time sitting atop the roof of my parents' two story stucco, and watching the world pass slowly by, like water in a lazy brooklet.

The name of the street was Danbury Drive – a long winding finger of asphalt at the end of the world. It wound its way like a boa through the foothills, ending at a classic circular cul-de-sac loop. Danbury was so out of the way, so difficult to find amongst the maze of suburban streets, that no one ever stumbled upon it. You couldn't find Danbury even if you were lost.

Our reclusive street was bordered by dozens of well-appointed homes, but the most important of those homes for this story were the five residences at Danbury's end. Our house was at the southern neck of the cul-de-sac. Next to us were the

Wilenskis, then the Fortmeyers; next to them the Johnsons, the Harveys, and finally, directly across the street from us, was Mr. Yaslow.

The interior of Mr. Yaslow's house was essentially a pot farm. He grew several varieties, but our favorite was a Polynesian strain known as Hawaiian Skunk, samples of which Rick and I would earn by doing his yard work. He called it his "weed for weeds full employment program."

When people move somewhere to be left alone, there's usually a very good reason – Mr. Yaslow being a prime example. The Fortmeyers, proud owners of seven Rottweillers, had moved here to avoid the prying eyes of Animal Control. City ordinances placed a limit of three such animals per household – a limit the Fortmeyer family badmouthed to the point of arrogance. Then there were the Wilenskis. The mother's sister had fallen on hard times and was living in a motor home. The RV had an expired registration, a broken tail light, and two flat tires – preventing it from moving from its enduring place alongside the cul-de-sac curb. From under the motor home a water hose and electrical extension cord led up the driveway, where they disappeared under the garage door to connections unseen. Like a mountain climber hanging on the edge of a cliff by his fingernails, the hose and wire formed a tenuous grip on the civilized world for the Winnebago's lone occupant. Next door, the Johnson's were likewise guilty of several code violations, not the least of which was the required five-foot fence around their swimming pool which had partially blown down during a windstorm years ago, and had yet to be repaired. Oh, and the Harveys. They were up to something, we were all certain – what with strangers coming and going at odd hours. But so far no one cared enough about their business to penetrate their veil of secrecy.

This was life on Danbury Drive – a life that changed one day with the arrival of a real estate sign. The Harveys had

mysteriously picked up and moved overnight, leaving behind two months' rent due and a landlord scrambling to find a new tenant.

There are a great many people in this world who, like my family, desire to live where the road ends, and so the house did not sit empty for long. I came home from school two weeks later to find a large moving van trying to maneuver in the confines of the unyielding cul-de-sac. Rick arrived and together we sat on our red tile roof, smoking Skunk, and watching the workers unload furniture. A middle-aged guy with a crew cut and greasy denim overalls seemed to be in charge. Was this our new neighbor?

An hour later the van was gone. The man with the greasy overalls had stayed behind.

I took a last puff, then said, "You wanna play Doom?"

"Sure," said Rick.

I was about to stand up when he grabbed my arm.

"Wait. What's that?"

I looked below – and there, coming down the street, was a pickup truck towing a trailer. And on that trailer was a helicopter, its blades folded up for storage and travel. As the pickup maneuvered the trailer around, greasy-overalls-man came out of the house with a cell phone glued to one ear. With his free hand he gave directions to the pickup driver, who skillfully backed the trailer toward the house. He stopped, set the parking brake, and the two men greeted each other like old friends.

Our new neighbor put away his cell phone, then he and the driver rolled the helicopter off the trailer and onto the driveway. The delivery driver waved good-bye, got back into his truck, then it and the trailer drove back up the street and out of view.

"Whoa," I said. "My new neighbor has a helicopter in his driveway."

Rick took out some more Skunk and began to roll. “I think we’re going to be here a while.”

A few people came out of their homes to watch and stare. One of them was Becky. We called her Becky because she looked like Rebbeca DeMornay, but her real name was Jamie Harris – a college student who was renting a room from the Fortmeyers. All the guys in the neighborhood had made a pact that if any of them got anywhere with Becky they would share the details with everyone else. That was two years ago, and so far no one had anything to report.

The man in the overalls was sitting in the pilot’s seat of the helicopter. He seemed to be working on something. Eventually everyone went back into their homes – everyone except Becky, who sauntered over to the open cockpit door and started talking to the man.

I could see Rick tense up. Becky had been his inspiration for a thousand midnight solo sex performances, and I knew he would not like the thought of her talking to anybody else. In fact, Becky never talked to anyone. Now here she was, chatting up helicopter man.

From our perch we watched them giggle and laugh and blab for twenty minutes. Then the impossible happened. They stopped talking, and started walking – right up to his front door and into the house.

At the sight of this provocative event Rick choked on the inhale, coughing up several large puffs of blue-gray smoke.

We certainly could not leave now – and so we waited. An hour later they came out. He was wearing a crisp white T-shirt and jogging shorts, and Becky’s hair had a distinct mussed-up look of what I could only assume was post-coital dishevelment. He said something that made her laugh, they waved good-bye, and each disappeared back into their individual front doors.

Rick and I waited another ten minutes, but nothing else happened. The helicopter just sat there in the driveway, static and unmoving – a question mark looking for a sentence. We went in and played Doom for a while, and Rick competed with an intensity I had never seen. An hour later he left for his night job at Burger King.

The next day I arrived home just after 3:00, an algebra book tucked under my arm. I was about to go inside when I noticed our new neighbor, standing in his driveway and working on his helicopter. Blue rays of light from an acetylene gas welder ignited an area near the rotor thingy. I decided to let down my usual shy façade, walk over and investigate. As I arrived at his driveway the man tilted up his welder’s helmet, closely examining a junction of two aluminum support rods, now glowing red hot.

“Hi,” he said, not even looking up.

“Hi,” was my clever reply.

He set down the welder and extended his gloved hand. “Name’s Jack – Jack Mitchell.”

We shook hands. For some reason or other I didn’t have the presence of mind to tell him my name. “So whatta ya doin’ with a helicopter in your driveway?” I just had to ask.

“Bought her from a company in Canada. Tail rotor hit a tree and it crashed – got banged up pretty good.”

“How much did it cost you?”

“Twenty-five thou. I’m gonna fix ‘er up for resale.”

“Really? How much can you get for it?”

“Refurbished and rebuilt – should fetch two hundred grand. Maybe two-twenty.”

“That’s a good profit.”

He smiled and nodded. “Yeah. Won’t be easy, though. This baby needs a lotta work.”

Standing next to it now I could see what he meant about being banged up. The twirly thingy on the back was cracked in half, and there were dozens of broken welds on the thingy that the twirly thingy was connected to. The control panel in the cockpit was missing those meter thingies, and the engine below the rotor looked like it was missing all sorts of thingies. Yes, I concluded – this baby needed a lotta work.

“I could use some help,” he said. “I’ll pay you.”

And just like that, I became an apprentice helicopter technician. Over the next two months I spent most weekends in Jack’s driveway, learning about flybar paddles, swashplates, and pitch control rods. Sometimes Becky and Rick would help out. Jack taught us how to weld, and we introduced him to Hawaiian Skunk.

The biggest job was rebuilding and remounting the engine. I’ll never forget the day we first tested it. The four of us rolled the copter to the middle of the cul-de-sac, then Jack asked me to sit in the cockpit and start the motor. A minute later the rotors were churning at hundreds of RPM. I was surprised at how loud it was – but I wasn’t afraid someone would complain. This was, after all, Danbury Drive.

Then, after shutting down the engine, Jack proudly announced, “She should be ready to fly by next week.”

It was on the following Tuesday afternoon that the rest of the world discovered our secluded little burb. Rick and I were at our rooftop perch. He was sitting, and I was laying on my back counting clouds.

“What does F-A-A stand for?” Rick asked.

“I’m not sure,” I said. “But I think the ‘F’ stands for Federal. Why do you ask?”

“A car with those initials just parked in front of Mr. Mitchell’s driveway.”

I sat up just in time to see two men in suits and ties get out of the car.

“You’re right,” said Rick. “They’re wearing suits; they must be Federal.”

The two men started inspecting Jack’s helicopter – and it was at that moment that all hell broke loose on peaceful, tranquil, Danbury Drive. Mr. Fortmeyer opened his front door to see what was going on – and three of his Rottweilers took that as an invitation to scoot – running, drooling and growling as they made a beeline for the Federales.

Mr. Fortmeyer ran after his dogs, but it was too, late. The lead dog grabbed one of the suits by the leg, bringing him down hard. The second man jumped onto the helicopter and started climbing – saving himself from certain injury. The first Rottweiler was tearing into the downed man’s leg, refusing to yield even as his master tried to pull him off. That’s when it happened – the man with the dog attached to his leg pulled a gun from a hidden holster. Yes, a real gun; one of those things you only see in the movies where a guy pulls a trigger and a bullet flies out. He pressed the gun against the dog’s shoulder and fired. The Rottweiler yelped, released his grip on the man, staggered sideways, then fell lifeless to the asphalt.

Rick pointed to the second man, who was yelling something into a walkie-talkie.

“He’s probably calling the cops,” I said.

Rick shook his head. “This is Danbury. It’ll take them hours to find this place.”

He was wrong. The first police car showed up in minutes, followed quickly by an ambulance, two animal control vans, and three more police cars – all crowded together in the circular cul-de-sac. As an EMT worked on the FAA man’s leg wound, the animal control guys confiscated the Fortmeyers’ remaining six Rots. One of the dogs avoided capture for a few minutes, finally

being cornered under Mr. Yaslow's living room window. As the animal control guys restrained the dog, one of them happened to look through a small crack in the curtain behind that window.

Rick stood up. "Uh-oh."

The animal control officer put two fingers to mouth and whistled at one of the cops, who came over and took a look. He and his partner kicked in Mr. Yaslow's front door, went inside, and fifteen minutes later a DEA van joined the crowd.

Meanwhile, across the street, one of the officers was circling the RV like a shark. At that moment Jack's car arrived. He parked as close as he could, then walked up to his driveway where the two Feds were waiting. Seconds later all three were arguing and shouting about something.

In the midst of that argument a city code enforcement truck arrived, followed by a large flatbed tow truck. As the city officer ordered the tow driver to take the RV away, vocal chaos ensued. Mrs. Wilenski's sister was screaming at the tow driver, the Fortmeyers were threatening the animal control officers, and Jack was clearly not making points with the FAA guys. Mr. Yaslow, fortunately for him, was nowhere to be found. As a final insult, one of the code enforcement guys taped a citation to the Johnson's front door – undoubtedly for their fence violation.

Another thirty minutes, and it was all over. The RV was gone – the dogs were gone – and every single potted pot plant was gone. The FAA guys – which had been the first to arrive – were now the last to leave. Before doing so, they issued Jack what looked like some sort of citation. As they drove away, Jack crumbled the paper and threw it at their car.

As the sun went down that afternoon, the Danbury Drive cul-de-sac was once again as serene and still as ever.

Late that evening I lay in my bed, unable to sleep. I wasn't worried about the Skunk, of course. I had long since made preparations for a raid – stealing some of Mr. Yaslow's

seeds and planting them inconspicuously amongst my mother's Primrose Lilac, Royal Purple Hydrangea, and Pink Delight Butterfly Bush. The time had come for me to assume some responsibility. I was a farmer now, and farming was not for slackers.

At some point my consciousness began to fade, and I drifted toward sleep. That drift was suddenly interrupted by my cell phone blaring. I grabbed it off the table.

"Yeah?" I said.

"It's me," said a voice. It was Jack. "Come down to the street. I need your help."

When I arrived on his driveway, the first thing I noticed was that three of the four main rotors were fully extended. The fourth, blocked by the house, was still folded.

"Grab something and pull," he said.

We maneuvered the helicopter down the driveway and into the very center of the cul-de-sac. Then Jack climbed to the top of the engine and began to swing the fourth rotor into flight position. He pointed to his tool kit resting on the sidewalk.

"Hand me the three-quarter wrench, will ya?"

I held it up for him, and a few minutes later he had the rotor locked and ready. He climbed down, replaced the wrench, then stowed the tool kit behind the pilot's seat.

"Are you leaving?" I asked.

"Yes," he said.

"Where?"

"I'm going to a place where nobody can drive up in a car with a citation book and hassle me. I'm going where there aren't any roads."

"You mean like in 'Back to the Future'?"

He gave me a hug and said, "Thanks for your help."

I looked behind the pilot's seat. There were some duffle bags, and several boxes with foodstuffs – cereal, dried milk,

canned fruit. There was also a tent and a large sleeping bag. Was this real? Could someone do this? Pack some gear and a few boxes of food and just fly away from civilization? Escape to a nowhere place and live unfettered by the burdensome crap of society?

It was attractive, and for a brief moment I contemplated going with him. Then I remembered that such a trip would separate me from a steady supply of Skunk. My first harvest would be coming in soon; I had to stay. Like it or not, Polynesian pot held me like an anchor to the real world.

“Better step back, son.”

I did better than that – retiring to the sidewalk and sitting down on the Fortmeyer’s cement block retaining wall.

He checked a few of his instruments and toyed with some of the controls. Then I saw him push the power button and the engine began to whine. A few moments passed, then the blades began to turn – slow at first – then accelerating quickly to the point where the human eye could no longer distinguish them above a blur.

Jack threw me a military salute, then the helicopter rose off the ground. It hovered for a moment at a point about four feet high, then rose swiftly into the sky, tilting slightly and banking west over the Johnson’s roof. Moments later it was out of view, and once again all was quiet on Danbury Drive.

I continued to watch, long after he was gone. Then I saw Becky’s bronze Toyota coming down the street. She parked outside the Fortmeyers, got out of her car, and walked over.

Jack’s empty driveway said it all.

“He’s gone, isn’t he.”

“Yeah.”

We said nothing for a while, then she said, “I’m gonna make coffee. Would you like some?”

Instinctively I knew this was not the time to tell her I had never had coffee.

“Sure,” I said.

We stopped talking, and started walking, toward her front door.

White and smooth, glass beneath her fingertips—
She loved loved loved to kiss kiss kiss the smile
On that man with those teeth between those lips!
And it seemed real for such a long while...

But deceive, did these teeth, this smile, this man—
with his implausible laugh, gleaming grin—
years later, she wrenched her hand from his hand,
discov'ring beauty can't override sin.

She wished beauty could, but knew it simply
can't—a line gets crossed, then there's no going
back—so she bid adieu his lovely
lies, counted her losses, savored the sting.

A dream of forever proved but a mist,
vanished like his hands, his teeth, his dead kiss.

Sorghum syrup ran down the sides of his mouth as Cecil stuck his calloused index finger back in the Mason jar that was brimming and spilling with the dark, gooey liquid. Cecil never made the connection that the syrup was the color of old blood, but his thoughts went no further than the hot dinner of turnip greens and cornbread he was looking forward to later. The dip into the sorghum wasn't an early dessert in his mind—he was just having a little break and a sweet pick-up from baling hay for his brother.

The barn was full of a sharp and musty smell, emanating from the stripped sweet Sorghum stalks stacked up in the corners, waiting to be pressed. Then they would be transformed into the tangy sweetness that dribbled off Cecil's weathered chin and onto his sweat-drenched tank-top that was stretched over his protruding belly. With sticky fingers, he put the flat plate back over the jar, then – licking the remains of the syrup – he walked back through the barn to the hay baler.

After wiping his hands on his workpants and stepping out into the humid evening, he picked up the pitchfork and continued to load hay into the small square baler. Cecil pushed the tool deep into the fluffy yellow pile, producing a satisfying crunching sound.

He enjoyed working like this. The smell of the pressed syrup still wafted from inside the barn, mixing with the hay. Cecil breathed deeply, and even though his back ached and his hands were sore, the aftertaste of the Sorghum reminded him of the fruits of his labor. Looking up, he could see lights from town.

His brother lived just on the outskirts of Tallapoosa, the farm being one of three surrounding the town. No more than a couple of square miles, it had been Cecil's life-long home and he'd been no stranger to folks in the neighborhood.

The lights were also on in his brother's house and Cecil could smell dinner cooking. He could hear the door to the house squeal open and squeal shut. As he lifted a load of hay into the worn machine, he heard his brother shout his name.

The bright lights of Bremen Memorial had made them all tired, but room 388 was full of laughter when Dr. MacClendon opened the door. The two women, sisters whom he knew quite well, were giggling—their faces strained and their eyes squinting—while the tall man with the booming voice chuckled as if he were a cartoon character. They watched him come in and shut the door behind him.

“Well now,” he started, “they jus’ got a hold of Cecil—he was out by his brother’s, balin’ hay.”

As the sisters wiped their eyes, James, the man, nodded with a smile on his face.

“All right Doctor,” he said. “We’ll be here as long as it takes.”

Dr. MacClendon smiled.

“In the mean time, is there anything I can do for you folks?”

Janice, the younger sister, folded her hands together on her lap and composed herself.

“Yes, Dr. MacClendon, I believe you can,” she said matter-of-factly. Janice pointed towards the bed. “You could do something about mother’s mouth,” Janice said, biting her lip, trying not to giggle.

Mac saw what she meant. Her mother's head was slightly back and her mouth was hanging wide open.

"She's been like that for over an hour," said James with an air of dramatic humor. The women stifled giggles as the Doctor turned and approached the bed. "We just thought she was asleep."

This had both women laughing now, doubling over in their chairs while he put his hand underneath the old woman's jaw and pushed it shut. Her body was thin and pale, with downy white hair that made her head look like a cotton ball. Dr. MacClendon smiled at their laughter, happy to see that grief had not consumed them.

"I'm afraid we can't call time of death until Cecil gets here. I'm very sorry that this had to happen to you, folks," he said.

They all nodded, and then he walked out. Janice turned to her sister.

"You know, Glinda; I heard that the funeral director was out of town on a trip with his family, but I haven't seen Cecil since Ned died." Her sister sat in the chair, dangling her short legs – looking restless, but listening to every word. Janice continued.

"Cecil and I were even in grade school together," she said. Glinda got up and patted her sister on the knee.

"I have *got* to use the commode. 'Scuse me."

Janice nodded and turned to her husband.

"You know, he used to work for mother and daddy," she told James, talking seamlessly.

The sound the old gurney made coming down the hallway reverberated back to Cecil's ears and made his eyes water. After his brother had come out and told him that the hospital was looking for him, he cleaned himself up as best he could and put

on his dark green polo shirt and some nice pants. He'd loaded the van up by himself and drove all the way from the funeral house in Tallapoosa to Bremen Memorial.

Cecil passed room 391 and checked his note again. The cart's wheels jerked madly, still making that awful squeaking sound. The room was only a few more doors down the hall, but Cecil feared his cart was on its last legs.

The door was open and he could hear voices. Cecil stopped the cart, putting a halt to the horrible squeak, and straightened his shirt out before knocking softly. He smoothed back what was left of his straggling black and gray hair, then entered.

"Hello there folks, would you like a few more moments?" he asked. The women had smiles on their faces, almost as if they were laughing at him.

"Well," the woman with the long white hair said, drawing the word out. The other one who had her hands interlocked with the man next to her raised her eyebrows.

"Seeing as we've been waitin' here three hours, there ain't no point to be waitin' any longer," she said, finishing her sisters thought, then smiling. Cecil recognized her, and her sarcastic tone.

"Mrs. Smith, you sure are a sight for these old eyes," he exclaimed.

Janice and her husband rose from their seats. Her sister stood up behind them, her knee joints clicking in the process.

"Too bad it had to be under these circumstances," said Janice, putting a hand on Cecil's large shoulder. Cecil turned towards the woman who'd been in the bed. His smile faded as he realized who it was. There was an awkward stillness in the room for a moment. Slowly, Cecil let out a sigh and tore his eyes away, looking back to Janice.

“I am truly sorry,” he said. “Mrs. Williams was a good woman.”

Janice gave Cecil a smile.

“Yes she was, a good woman for a very long time.”

After the paperwork had been signed and Dr. MacClendon had called the time of death three and a half hours after she actually died, Cecil moved the small, frail body onto his gurney. As he struggled with the body, he discovered the gurney was broken. The hospital lent him a replacement; he strapped the body down, then placed a crisp white sheet over it.

The women thanked him and he shook hands with James. They said their goodbyes and Cecil wheeled his silent patient back down the sterile hallways to his van, wishing – only slightly – that the wheels of the new gurney were not so quiet.

The highbeams on the van didn’t work, and so the road was visible for only a short distance as Cecil drove back to Tallapoosa. There was only the one long road between him and Bremen, and he would have to drive carefully to avoid hitting deer. He lamented that the director had been off with his family, and even though the two front seats in the van had been closed off from his cargo, driving at night – alone with the dead – had begun to unnerve him.

“The whole world’s dyin’,” he said aloud.

The worn sign – *Welcome to Tallapoosa* – was briefly highlighted by the car’s headlamps as he passed. There was a ‘population’ number at the bottom, and for a moment he considered reducing the number by ‘1.’ For want of a paint bucket and brush, he drove on.

Cecil passed a few more houses, several with ‘For Sale’ signs posted in their bare yards.

As he backed into the cracked driveway, and into the makeshift loading dock, he thought about Janice and Glinda. He had known them his entire life, and was pretty sure they were related somehow. Cecil remembered when he was seventeen, working on the Williams farm, cutting Sorghum stalks for twenty dollars a month. The girls came by with their boyfriends once in a while, always snagging a jar of syrup, but never getting caught because their daddy knew and it was okay by him.

Their father – and owner of the farm – Fred Williams, had been the most popular man around, owing to the fact he produced the town's Sorghum syrup. Cecil had admired him greatly, but convinced Fred to sell the farm to his brother when it became obvious Fred's advanced age was preventing him from fulfilling his farming duties.

Familiar images like Fred moved in and out of Cecil's mind as he pulled the gurney from the van and wheeled it across the painted concrete floor, through the extra-wide door, and into the work room where the embalming took place. Cecil clicked the light on, and several overhead halogen bulbs flickered to life. The sudden brightness hurt his eyes – especially the sharp reflection from the clean, stainless steel table in the center of the room.

Fred Williams had passed away nearly eighteen years ago, long before Cecil began working in funeral services. He remembered hearing the news, and was sorry he could not pay his respects. The gurney continued its silent travel as Cecil pushed on past the table and through the plastic flaps that guarded the main work room from the cold storage.

The lights came on immediately, which always scared Cecil a little, making his heart jump. He never seemed to get used to the automated lights, though it made his job easier.

Cecil could see his colorful, blob-like reflection in the faces of the steel drawers as he brought the gurney to a stop. He parked the body head-first towards the wall, then fished his keys from his pocket and unlocked a drawer.

It made a smooth noise as it slid from its hiding place, clicking and catching when it was fully extended. The clean tray smelled like rubbing alcohol and formaldehyde. Cecil pulled the sheet back, then folded it up. The pale, bony face appeared more empty than peaceful. It was sad how the oldest woman in town was now nothing but a shell.

Cecil checked the tag on her toe to be sure the information was correct:

Williams, Kate

99 years

Tallapoosa, GA

He sighed, placing the folded sheet at the end of the tray like a thin pillow.

She wasn't very heavy, but Cecil found her limbs were extremely stiff. He gently placed her on the drawer, then worked her arms back and forth until he was able to loosen them enough to fold her hands across her chest.

Staring a moment, he remembered how she'd fix him lunch on the farm, always with fresh biscuits and Sorghum on the side. She'd been a woman of survival, working by her husband, not afraid to beat her children when they did wrong. Cecil saw her once, chewing one of her famous cayenne peppers right off the plant. He had heard stories about how she would kill possums with Fred's shotgun.

He remembered how good her biscuits were, and that she was one of the only people left in town that made them the old-fashioned way with a carved wood basin. Cecil put his hand around hers, holding them for a moment – warming them. He placed his other hand on her shoulder, and decided he would not

change the population sign until morning. He let go of her hand and moved the gurney slightly so he could close the drawer.

It slid shut after he released the catch, and locked with an audible click. He left the gurney and started walking out, turning back towards the drawer when he got to the plastic flap door. There was a buzzing in his ears from the overhead lights.

“Goodbye, Miss Kate,” Cecil said, walking out.

Another congregation

Beers poured, pounded, passed around.

Cups like leaves fall and scatter, to be raked in the morning.

Door swings open to a chorus of boisterous voices sitting
amongst the

Empty packs of cigarettes occupying countertops.

Flirting outside are a million stars after the same moon.

Gabbing gossip queens don't remember jabber come morning,

Hence their words carry no meaning, not tonight.

Inordinate amounts of toxins are consumed while every
individual is

Jostled by the crowd, inebriated, numb.

Kaleidoscope vision blurs the swirling colors that we see through
the

Lenses of our own eyes.

Music and dialogue fight for the same space.

Nothing is enunciated; you can't make out your

Own tone from others'.

Pianists compile symphonies, and here we create our own.

eQualizing, balancing, composing conversations into one song,
the

Revelry we all share.

Somebody falls and hollers follow, cheering for the fumble.

Tides rise. Crash. Pull the night travelers back out to sea.

Underneath (Soon, we'll rise above its surface, not yet).

Vacillating between brushing our teeth or not,

We crawl under your golden sheets, laughing;

eXemplars of the college verve.

Your eyelids and mouth shut; your body at ease beside mine.

Zephyrs blow in through the screen as we sleep.

They sat on the edge of his bed. She picked up his dirty socks between her toes, and let them drop again in a monotonous cycle. He pretended to watch the rerun of Seinfeld on his TV. She stopped and looked at him.

“You know we don’t havta do this,” she said.

“Yes we do. We don’t have anything to be afraid of.”

“Easy for you to say, Mr. Moral Support,” she teased, but there was tension.

“Shut the fuck up. You don’t want to leave high school unsure, do you?”

“Well-no, not really.”

“Then we need to go, okay?”

“Okay.”

They left Jack’s house and began their walk. It wasn’t far, not in miles anyway.

“You didn’t tell anyone right?” She knew she was pushing his patience, but she couldn’t help it. They had already been through enough hell together – what was one last trip before graduation?

“Christ almighty! No, I did not tell anyone, Chels’.”

“Um, I’m sorry,” but he kept walking. “Hey! Stop – I’m sorry. I’m just nervous.”

“It’s okay, bud. How long have we been friends for?”

“I don’t know, like three and a half years.”

“And I haven’t earned your trust yet?”

“Jack—I get it.” She looked at him and half smiled. His face contorted in response and they burst into laughter, walking again.

The building loomed quite suddenly before them. It screamed haunted hospital wing, or maybe it just screamed. A sign attached to the front flashed in neon pink, “Health Clinic.”

Jack nudged Chelsea in the arm, “Ready champ?”

“Ready.”

They walked through the doors into Ammonia-R-U's and signed their names away, exchanging identities for numbers. A faceless kitty-and-puppy-smocked nurse walked over to them and placed two clipboards on top of the three-month-old issues of Redbook, Self, and People. Jack picked his up first.

“‘Sexual history: please fill out the following to the best of your ability.’ Fuck this.”

“Jack, shut up. What do you have, like two partners?”

“Hey, fuck you mademoiselle experience!”

“Okay, okay. I’m biting my nails already. See, my cuticles are all red and puffy. I didn’t mean to trivialize Trisha, or was it Tasha?”

“Ha ha, very funny.”

They continued to fill out their respective paper piles, this time in silence. To the left of Jack was a track-marked junkie; we’ll call him Phil. To the right of Chelsea was Prostitute Polly. She was wearing a pair of frayed, vintage jeans from the eighties. Stained with dirt and time, they looked as if they may have once fit well, but today – on a speed-induced skeleton – they looked more like a jean dress than a pair of separate pant legs. What the fuck were numbers twenty-four and twenty-five doing here?

A door at one end of the room opened, “Number twenty-two.” Phil-the-Junkie scraped his toes across the linoleum as he dragged his ass to the nurse, closing the door of fate behind him.

“Jack, I can’t do this. What if, I mean what if...?”

“Chelsea...just breathe. Come on we’ve done everything else together. I’ve been there for you through all your silly little breakups and the games your fucking parents play. This is miniscule. So snap out of it and let’s just do this.”

“I know, and thank you, but I’m still scared.”

“Well, me too.”

“No, you’re not. There’s no chance, it’s like not even a possibility for you.”

“Of course it is, I’m sure we’re both fine.”

“Okay. Fuck me, well not literally.”

“Now there’s a real smile Chels.”

Twenty-three was called and jean-skirted Prostitute Polly left the waiting room. A few brief moments, then –

“Twenty four.”

“Jack, that’s you.”

“See you in a few. And remember, no big deal, this was your idea in the first place.”

“I know, I know – just go. I’ll be fine.”

The nurse led Jack into a room with wall paper straight out of the Brady home, circa 1964. It was like an acid trip of rainbows and ponies. There were two chairs with a desk set between them. The desk had various office supplies, including a big red stamp for some undisclosed purpose. Virginia (according to her nurse’s badge) sat down and began reviewing his questionnaire.

“Jack, don’t be nervous. Based on what I see here, everything should be alright. I just need to ask you a few more questions so that we have a complete file for our records. Is that alright?”

“Uh, yeah. That’s fine.”

“You can call me Ginny, and please feel free to interrupt me at any time, okay?”

“Sure.”

“Okay, how many sexual partners have you had?”

“Two.”

“Alright, and did you use protection?”

“Well, yeah.”

“What kind of contraceptive did you use?”

“I used condoms with both partners, most of the time, but they were also on birth control.”

“Okay.”

“Have you had oral intercourse?”

“Yes.”

“Vaginal intercourse?”

“Yes.”

“Anal intercourse?”

“Um...uh...”

“Jack, have you had anal intercourse?”

“Yes.”

“Did you use a condom this time as well?”

He thought for a second, then said, “Yes,” even though he couldn’t remember if he had or hadn’t. Ginny asked him a few more questions. She swirled the cotton pad of alcohol onto his skin, he cringed as the needle pierced his vein and the nurse drew one vial of blood.

“Alright, you’re done. You can head on out to the waiting room now and wait for your friend; she should be done in a minute as well.”

“Thanks.” He smiled as he left the cheap room of wallpaper happiness and sat back down by Redbook, Self, and People – familiar faces now.

Twenty-five, formerly known as Chelsea, sat in a different room. Well, not a room. Barely even a cubicle. The walls were grey, the floor was grey and the nurse was grey.

Nurse Carmen was her name, and she sat across from Chelsea at a desk.

The desk was grey.

“Did you answer these truthfully? You know you’re only hurting yourself if you didn’t.”

“I was honest; can you please just draw the blood now? I hate that part.”

“No, I’m sorry, I have to confirm a few of these answers first.”

“Oh...okay. We can’t just skip that part and move on to the needle...thing?”

“How many sexual partners have you had?”

“Seven.”

“Hmmm. Okay and did you use protection?”

“I am on birth control and I also used condoms.”

“With every partner and with every sexual experience?”

“Yes, I think so...If you wouldn’t mind; you’re making me even more nervous.”

“Well, sorry. I didn’t mean to make you feel uncomfortable.”

“No – I didn’t mean it that way; well I guess I did. Never mind – anything else?”

“Have you had oral intercourse?”

“Yes.”

“Vaginal intercourse?”

“Yes.”

“Anal intercourse?”

“I can say ‘no’ to that one.” Chelsea attempted a smile, thinking she had accomplished one small joke to help clear the tension, but the nurse was not amused.

“Alright then, Chelsea; it looks like everything is in order. I am going to draw your blood now and then you’ll come back in a few days for your results.”

“A few days? You mean I don’t wait for my results in the other room?”

“Nope. We need a few days to run the test and get the results. You know you’re not the only person here getting tested.”

Nurse Carmen drew her blood, then shooed her away. Chelsea returned to the waiting room. Jack was already there.

“Was it just me, or did this seem like a fucking waste of fifteen minutes?” she asked, completely unsure of herself or what her results might be.

“I’m ready to get out of here.” Jack’s voice was static.

“Yeah – me, too.”

They walked to his house in silence. Chelsea got into her car and drove home.

They each received phone calls a few days later, and returned to the clinic.

“Four,” the nurse announced, and Chelsea walked away first this time into a different room.

Same color, different cubicle.

“Chelsea, everything came back clear.”

“What?”

“You are healthy and fine. I suggest you continue to exercise both means of birth control. The pill can only keep you from getting pregnant. Condoms are the only contraceptive, other than abstinence, that can keep you from contracting any sexually transmitted diseases.”

“Thank you.”

“We suggest that if you remain sexually active with multiple partners, you come in to get tested every few months.”

“Thank you again.”

As Chelsea walked out she was thinking she would never come back. She ran into Jack in the hallway. He hugged her tightly and they walked quickly out of the clinic. They said goodbye, and Chelsea got into her car. On the drive home she called her boyfriend to tell him her results.

Jack walked into his house. His parents had just sat down to dinner.

“Jack, honey – is that you?”

“Yeah, mom.”

“You’re just in time for dinner; come sit down.”

He didn’t know how to tell her ‘no.’ He sat down at the dining room table while his mother dished spaghetti onto everyone’s plates. His father passed him a basket full of garlic bread.

“Hey...guys...everybody...Carol!”

Everyone stopped.

“I’m positive.” Jack placed the garlic bread on the table, pushed his chair away, and marched upstairs.

Sara Parker

A Part of Adulthood I'd Rather Avoid

Discard want for need. Struggle
to comfort one who once comforted
bruises, belly aches, bullies.

Torments of others strewn about a stark, white space
pale against the
indisputable importance
of our own.

Next door, wretched gurgle. Profoundly penetrating
moans float by on elevated bleach carpets. Across the hall,
wrinkled, bloody face.

White coats assumed to be practiced, knowledgeable, trustworthy
quickly
become frustrating, ill-equipped, bumbling, cold.

Tears
stream privately at home
during much-needed showers.

Fears
have no place around the one
most fearful.

Pacing back and forth
down humming halogen hallways. Short
respites rapidly ripped away
by glimpses of later life.

Squeaky, gray rubber walkers across turquoise linoleum
squares.

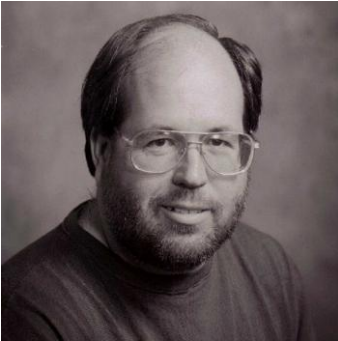
Nursing home application.
DNR form signatures, “Here, here, and here.”

Anxieties plague daydreams, quiet moments, subconscious
thoughts, nightmares.

Accepted, desired, yearned-for protection dissolves
eventually.



Kellie Griffin is grateful for the challenge and opportunities CSUCI has provided. She continues her academic endeavors at the University of West Los Angeles School of Law to pursue her Juris Doctor and a career in family law. Her passion for creative writing will never lessen, and she hopes to continue her storytelling alongside her courtroom adventures. This year's staff has been so productive and efficient that she can only hope that the future creators of this literary journal will have as much pride in their publication as the Spring 2009 staff has.



After taking a thirty-five year break from his college education, George Morgan is thrilled to finally be closing in on that degree. Writing has always been his passion, and what better way to fulfill that passion than to publish a literary journal with such a professional and hard working group of students. George is a member of the Writers Guild of America. In 2007 he was awarded First Place in the International Family Film Festival Screenwriting Contest. He is a produced playwright and screenwriter, novelist and composer. George and his wife Lisa have six children and live in Santa Paula.



Joshua Bauer was well into his endeavors as a writer before arriving at Cal State Channel Islands. It has been his pleasure to work with excellent peers and mentors during his time here, including his fellow editors at the CSUCI literary journal. He is grateful for the friendships that he has made, some of which will hopefully remain strong in the years to come. Joshua looks forward to continuing in his growth as a storyteller.



Julie Fontes is in her third year at Cal State Channel Islands. In 2010 she will graduate with her bachelor's degree in English and begin work on a super secret project. Hopefully one day she won't have to ask so many people how they would like their steaks.



Luis would like to thank his family and friends for all of their support through his collegiate adventure. He is proud to be a part of this year's literary journal team and wishes everyone success in their future endeavors. He also loves long walks on the beach, koala bears, and the letter J.



Guy MacLaury is a student at Cal State Channel Islands where he is happily in pursuit of a bachelor's degree in English with an emphasis in Creative Writing. In his free time, he enjoys writing stories, sewing pocket T-shirts, and cutting up tiny pieces of construction paper to make lavish visual scenes. He hopes to retire by the age of 25 to a remote, indigenous village somewhere deep in the Amazon jungle.