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INSIDE, THEN OUT

By

Jeffrey J. Hill

A THESIS

Submitted to
Michigan State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Department of English

1991

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ABSTRACT

INSIDE, THEN OUT

By

Jeffrey J. Hill

As the title suggests, these short stories often present characters who are faced with a conflict between two opposing conditions. Many times this conflict forms between the desire to belong to a larger community or family, an "inside," and the existence and/or desire for isolation, the "outside." In an attempt to resolve these conflicts, the characters often look to their surroundings for some representation of a solution.

The characters featured are, for the most part, representative of the author's background. That is to say, middle class and middle western. The style of the writing attempts to mirror the "middle-ness" of the characters it creates, hopefully expressing both a common language and the uncommon revelations that language can communicate.

In memory of my mother, Ruby J. Hill

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to acknowledge the assistance of Dr. William Penn who supervised this collection. I would also like to thank Prof. Albert Drake and Prof. Diane Wakoski for the benefit of their writing workshops, and Dr. Barry Gross who provided the inspiration for the title. Thanks, also, to Lori Weil for proofreading and patience, and to my parents, James and Ruby Hill, for charging rent that was commensurate with a graduate student's salary.

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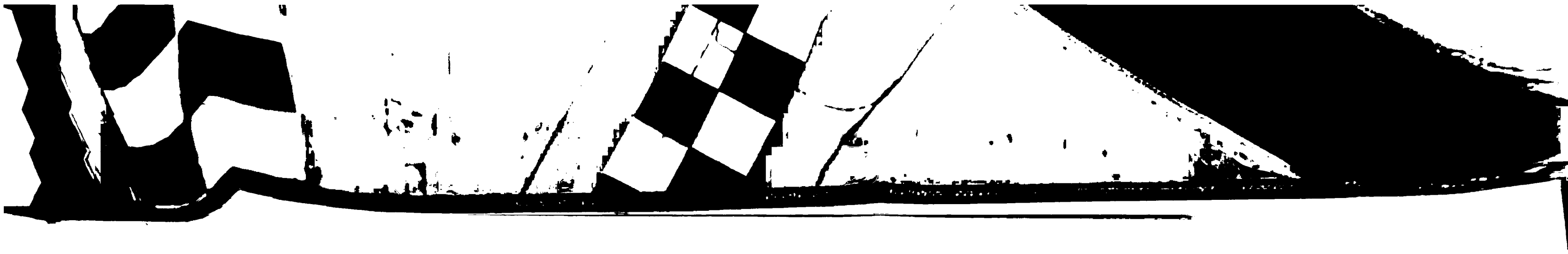


THE GIRL WHO FELL FROM THE SKY

She was older than I was that night. She lay flat on her stomach in the backyard grass, her arms spread to either side, one knee drawn up as if she had fallen, like Wily Coyote, from a very high cliff. Her face was turned toward me, her cheek pressed into the soft ground, her rear end rising into the pleasing arc that I had just begun to appreciate on the girls I went to school with. I looked down on her from a kitchen window holding a plastic cup of beer in my hand. I was thirteen years old, and there was a girl lying in the backyard that no one knew.

And that was the first party I had ever been to, a real party with shiny aluminum kegs and plastic cups and girls. The exotic smell of cigarettes and perfume filled the tiny kitchen: the same smell that would cling to my mom when she came home after a date and kissed me on the forehead. Five girls in skirts arranged themselves together on the far side of the room. They clicked the heels of their pumps against the kitchen linoleum: wonderful shoes in the same bright colors that I found on bubble gum packages and fast cars. From the knees down they looked like movie stars.

And from the knees up they were much older than I was, a fact they reinforced with each gesture: the casual turn of their fingers as they inhaled the smoke, the cigarette held just in front of their lips, mascara making their lashes thick and judgmental. They glanced at me just long enough to make it perfectly clear that they were looking somewhere else.

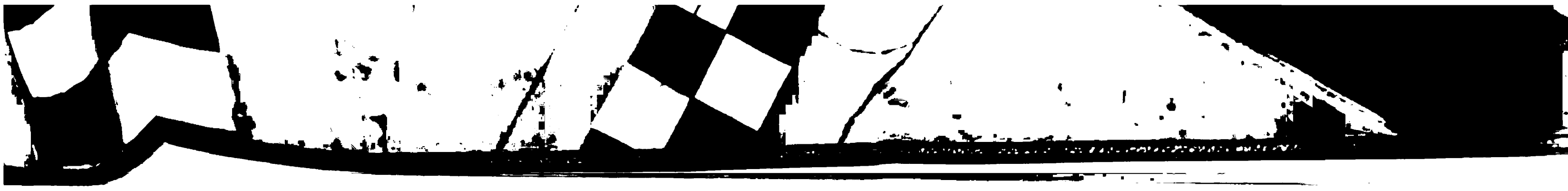
But outside that kitchen window there was a new and different kind of girl. A pool of light from the backyard flood lamp made a large, yellow circle on the grass. In the exact center, the fallen girl lay still, as if I was the only one around. Her purple-tinted eyelids were closed, not unaware of my presence, it seemed to me, but untroubled, unconcerned. Here was a girl I could look at in the same manner that I gazed at the pictures in magazines. A girl who wouldn't care that I was looking.

Not that others didn't take notice of her as well. "Nice can," was Johnny Johnson's opinion of the girl. Johnny was my newest friend, a guy I had just gotten to know a month before. Johnny was cool and his brother was cooler: an eighteen year old with a pin-striped Mustang and a mustache. He bought kegs of beer every time their mom went out of town. He threw incredible high school bashes like this one where younger kids could learn many truths about beer and swearing and girls who lay quietly on the backyard grass.

I had a lot to learn then, but I did have one skill: a talent for shoplifting vast quantities of merchandise. I was very good at taking things from people and this convinced Johnny that I was okay. It was my okayness that had admitted me to the party, but I suppose it didn't hurt that I often gave Johnny small gifts from my shoplifting excursions. These gifts made me feel that I was similar to him in some important aspect that I barely understood. We were alike in another way as well: we both only had one parent, a mom who wasn't home very often.

I had met Johnny's mom the week before when I tagged along with him and Wade Allman after school. When we got to Johnny's house, his mom was just pulling into the driveway. She was in a hurry. "On break from work," was what she said, and she wanted us to help her unload some boxes of silverware and plates that someone had given her. The back of their station wagon was crowded with three large cardboard boxes, and I wondered what they had been eating their food with before they were given these items. The car reminded me of the station wagon that my mom and I had driven to Michigan when I was ten, just after the divorce.

Actually, Johnny's mother seemed like mine in a lot of ways: younger than most people's mothers, long black hair, and she was very nice. "Do you boys think you could



give me some help?" she asked. She put her hand over her eyes to block off the bright sun while she looked at us.

I was ready to help out, but then Johnny started giving his mom a hard time. We just stood there and listened.

"I'm sure my friends want to waste their time helping you." He said a lot of things to her like that. Her niceness left her face then, but slowly, a little at a time. She tried to be stern with Johnny, but you could tell that it would never work. He just kept right on talking like he never even heard her. "How about if you pay us five bucks," he said. "You pay us, and we'll help."

After he said that she just threw open the back of the station wagon and started unloading the boxes herself. Johnny smiled at us, then followed her into the house without carrying anything. Me and Wade stood on the sidewalk. Wade leaned over and whispered in my ear.

"Johnny's mom is pretty nice, isn't she?" He put a sly inflection on the word "nice," implying something that I hadn't considered in my appraisal of Mrs. Johnson. I felt embarrassed, but when Johnny's mom walked back outside, I noticed new things about her: the sheen of sunlight across her panty hose, the pleasing symmetry of her skirt and blouse as she leaned into the car to grab another box.

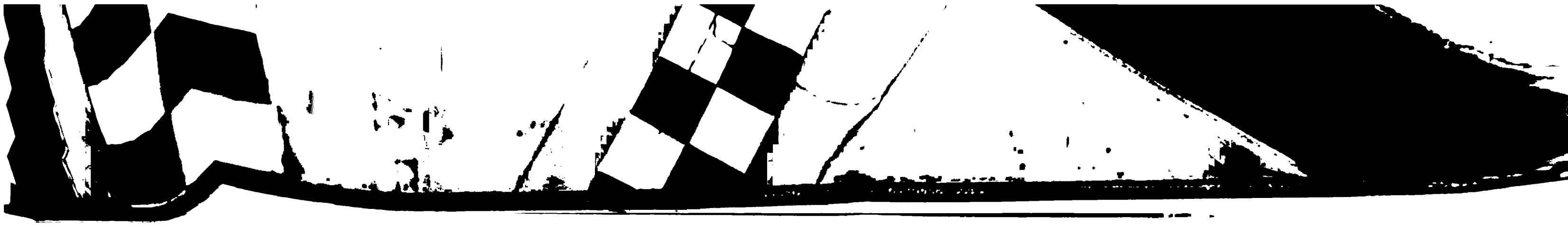
Johnny came back outside a minute later, and helped his mom carry the last box into the house. I could hear them arguing just inside the front door, but I couldn't tell what they were saying to each other. Finally she came back outside with Johnny trailing behind her.

"Come on, mom. Please? Just five bucks. Come on." He kept on with this beseeching tone, holding both hands out to her, palms up. His mom was half-way inside the car before she gave in. "Oh, all right. Take all my money." She unsnapped her purse and handed him a wrinkled five dollar bill. Then she slammed the door and backed out of the driveway.

Johnny walked toward us holding the five dollar bill up above his head with both hands. He had his jaw stuck out and a cock-sure grin on his face that made his eyes crunch down into two thin lines. It was a look that made me recognize another reason why I gave presents to Johnny Johnson. He was just like my father, a man who would continue to ask for things long after there was nothing left to give.

That night at Johnny's party, I learned a new skill.

I was standing beside the keg, squeezing the plastic tap between my thumb and forefinger, but the spout only issued a weak drizzle of beer. Right next to me some guy had a drunk girl pinned up against the refrigerator. I could hear the slurp of spit as they ground their faces together. The thin drip of beer from the tap filled my cup at an incredibly slow rate. I saw the guy put both his hands on the girl's butt. She reached back and removed



them. He put them back on her butt again, and that's where they stayed.

Johnny walked up to the keg. "What are you doing, idiot? You have to pump that keg if you want any beer out of it." He grasped the black pump handle at the top of the barrel. He raised it and lowered it, the metal wheezing and scraping with each rise and fall. When he finished pumping, I squeezed the tap again; a fat stream of beer flowed cleanly from the spout, filling my cup.

I returned to my spot beside the window, and there was the fallen girl just below me in the backyard. The party was beginning to fill up with people, and a crowd of mostly guys were clustered around the window. They talked about the girl on the lawn in loud, rough tones. I took another swallow of my beer and listened.

"She's wasted. Just the way I like them."

"I don't know where she came from, but she's ready."

"She looks like she fell from the sky." It was Johnny's brother who said this, and as soon as he spoke everyone else quit talking.

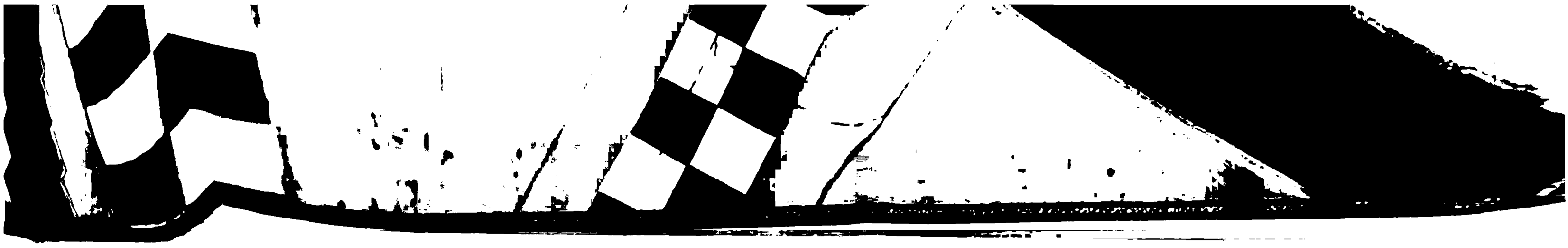
"She's from Girl Land," Johnny's brother nodded his head, stroked his mustache. "Girl Land: the golden land of perfect women. Once every thousand years, the Goddesses of Girl Land send a blessing to earth. Once every thousand years, one of the perfect women of Girl Land falls from the sky to be beheld by only a lucky few."

The room was totally quiet except for the thump of rock and roll from the living room. Everybody was listening to Johnny's brother, but he wasn't as brilliant as he seemed. He was stealing his story, almost word for word, from a pictorial in the Swank magazine that he had in his bedroom, the issue Johnny and I had read just last week. I looked around the room for Johnny, and I spotted him standing next to some girl. Johnny was listening to the story all over again, a smile on his face, and I was listening too. It sounded better out loud, even without the pictures. It sounded more real. Johnny's brother had it down.

"Out of those that view her, only the strongest of men is allowed to claim her." He paused for dramatic effect. "Only the strongest of men can command her. Only the strongest of men can take her--" He let the last two words hang in the air and made his voice as deep as he could: "--take her for his own."

All of the guys in the room started cracking up. Somebody slapped Johnny's brother on the back, saying "I think you got something there." Everybody else agreed. I looked over at Johnny and I saw him put his hand on the girl's arm. She was a high schooler. He did it like it was a joke, and she smiled. Then she took a step back.

And then I raised my plastic cup to take the biggest swallow I could, feeling the lukewarm rush of foam dropping down my throat, smacking my lips to the bitter and slightly metallic taste that coated my mouth. Then I leaned myself



against the frame of the kitchen window, and I took another drink, looking down on the incredible sight of a girl who had fallen from the sky.

And then the songs poured from the stereo speakers, one, two, three, more, the room swelling and contracting with the flow of feet. The girl was, amazingly enough, still all alone on the smooth carpet of backyard grass, a sign that I took as fate. No one was man enough to approach her but I was there, still watching over the backyard, biding time. I turned around and moved my head side to side, straining to see through the twisted lines of cigarette smoke and people that wavered through the stuffed kitchen. I finally caught sight of Johnny and the high school girl on the far side of the room. She was taller than he was, but the way he moved casually closer and closer to her was another sign, one I forced myself to memorize. He no longer spoke to her, never asked for anything. He just seemed to slide over the kitchen linoleum, always nearer. He shifted his beer to the opposite hand after taking a swallow. He stretched his arm behind her, and I could see the veins standing out on his forearm.

When she turned to him saying "don't," Johnny never said a word. He just kept his palm firmly on her hip and moved closer. A minute later he urged her toward the basement stairs and she followed. I watched them disappear down the steps, Johnny pulling her down the stairs with his right arm.

I looked back to the girl on the lawn, and her eyes were still closed. I flexed the muscle in my arm as I raised my plastic cup to my mouth. I took another drink.

And then I was outside, my feet moving, the gray streak of driveway forming a pathway to the backyard. And then I was there, leaning myself against the chainlink fence that surrounded the square of lawn.

She hadn't moved. Faint panty lines were visible through the thin seat of her blue jeans, and that night Johnny's backyard seemed like the vast, vacant department store that I often imagined: a store that contained everything I wanted, and where there was no one around to stop me from taking it.

I trailed my hand along the top of the fence as I walked to the gate, and then I paused. The latch was broken so the hinges swung easily in either direction. I opened the gate, then closed it, moving it back and forth with my hand. I kept looking at the fallen girl. I was wondering if I was strong enough to lift her.

The walk home through Washington Park was not scary though it now seems very scary to consider such a journey: a dark, empty park near midnight, a thirteen year old boy. But an unseen moon lit the sky that night, even there, in the middle of the city. I thought then about the girl at the party, and how easy it was to walk out into that

backyard and touch her. I did walk across that grass. I did stand over the girl. I did see the way her long hair fell into an even layer on the grass, and at that time in my life I had never really touched a girl in any way. The temptation to reach down and take something without any questions was a strong one, a power I could exercise over a girl who had fallen from a great height and was now below me.

But instead I was alone, standing beneath a bright sky that was gently scratched with jet trails. And there in the park I imagined each step that remained on the walk to my house. I imagined the light still on in my mom's bedroom, the reading lamp that was often left burning after she fell asleep. I imagined myself stepping softly across her carpet to turn off the light, and I saw myself seeing the picture that I felt I deserved: my mom snuggled deep within the covers, her black hair across the pillow. She was alone and safe in a bed where no one could find her, and at that moment, in the vacant park, I first experienced the sensation which is the finest part of being intoxicated: a great but indistinct feeling of hope, the immense possibilities of all the dark land that surrounded me.

FLOATING

It was the night of the day they outlawed nitrous oxide in Kalamazoo: October Fourteenth, 1986, four months after JoAnne left, and I had two girls at one party who would talk to me and smile at the same time.

One was Mary, who I came with, an old friend who might be something more now that JoAnne had moved on. But she wasn't sure, and I wasn't, and we both knew it would take a big effort to figure it all out.

The other girl I had just met at the party, another Mary, believe it or not. The two of us were floating.

Rising off of the green shag carpeting, going up like hot air balloons in a blast of nitrous oxide. Levitating over the coffee table, bumping our toes against the backs of the cheap dining room chairs, doing handstands against the ceiling with the wind singing falsetto notes in our ears, we saw the rock and roll posters on the wall from a new angle.

And hot, a second-floor apartment in a two-story house. The radiator under the window ticked like a wind-up toy, and I wallowed in the humidity that had collected like

smoke at the top of the room. Propelling myself through the thick air, I did a kick turn against a ceiling fan, and then I was treading air in the exact middle of the room, able to see the entire party which was spread below me.

In one direction I could see a small crowd surrounding a folding card table. There were twenty-eight cartons of nitrous oxide whipped cream chargers on top. "Whippets," were what we called them, little silver hand grenades as long as your finger. And Whippets were now illegal, contraband, soon to be extinct. No more would Kalamazoo enjoy fresh whipped cream. No more would people rise from the ground, human blimps drifting with the current. But on that evening, October fourteenth, everyone was ready to float one last time. And so they went, pulling out the chargers, slapping them into the barrel of the nitrous dispenser with the sharp clack of metal hitting metal. Then they'd stretch a balloon over the tip of the dispenser, and with a twist of the hand, the balloon inflated. People sucked on nitrous oxide; people rose up, climbing into the air where I was already floating.

And when I turned around and looked in the other direction, there was Mary. Mary the old friend, that is. She was on the couch watching a TV with no sound. From where I was, I got a pretty good view down the front of Mary's blouse, the frilly edges of her bra looking soft and comfortable. I could also see a light spot at the top of her head, her skin looking pale beneath her thin, wet hair.

On the way to the party I had walked through ten blocks of drizzle with my old friend Mary. Street lights reflected off the wet pavement in greasy streaks, the tail lights of cars hovering in front of us, then growing smaller as they drove away. Mary, being lower to the ground than me, took short steps, and I was getting tired of doing half-strides so that I could stay beside her. We went past Mexico On The Run, this dismal take-out place that me and JoAnne had ordered from when we lived together on DeQuinter Street.

Mary asked me if I had ever eaten there which seemed more ominous than coincidental. I said I had, a few times, but not in a long while. Truth was, I had eaten there a lot. Back when I was with JoAnne, Mexico On The Run was right on the way home; I didn't have a car then, same as now, so it was convenient. I remembered all the nights I had gone up DeQuinter balancing two styrofoam boxes full of two #14 enchilada combos (Mexico On The Run was always out of paper sacks.) The steam used to leak from the openings on the boxes, and it would trail out behind me like smoke off of a train engine, twisting in the cold air, rising. I used to sprint those blocks in the winter, pushing the lids down tight, trying to get home with a little steam still left in the box. It never worked. The enchiladas and sauce would be congealed into a solid wafer when I walked through the door. JoAnne would laugh, though, and then she'd kiss me, cold enchiladas or not. She'd say "my hero," or something like that, and then she'd take the enchiladas out of my hand and turn on the oven. The food was even worse re-heated, but I still enjoyed the feeling, the smell of enchiladas warming up in the oven, the two of us goofing around in the kitchen, sliding around in our socks on those solid hardwood floors. After we ate we'd lay in bed and promise each other that we'd never eat Mexico On The Run again. The next time I'd suggest enchiladas, though, she'd say okay. She hated that food, but she never said no. Later, when the bottom fell out, she got a lot more particular about telling the truth.

I shook the drizzle from my hair when Mary and I walked past DeQuinter. I tried to forget all that JoAnne stuff: no use going down that street again. Mary sneezed about six times in a row, and I looked at her. Even with her head tucked into the collar of her jacket, Mary's lips were shining, looking eager and agreeable and wet. I asked her if she'd rather get a cab the rest of the way, we could have called from the Dunkin Donuts. She said she didn't mind the rain, and she kept taking her low to the ground steps. She sniffled a lot the rest of the way, but she kept on walking. When we got to the party her hair was plastered flat. She took my arm as we went up the stairway, but it wasn't wide enough for us to be side-by-side. I went up first and I could feel her weight tugging down on my elbow as we climbed.

Mary, floating Mary, she drifted away from me, swaying slowly in the blue strings of smoke, arms and legs spread out like an astronaut walking in space. She shook her shaggy do back and forth, her lips pulled back into a big laugh that showed her teeth: small and round, glittering in the dim light at the top of the room. A crinkle of her zapped hair flew off when she shook her head. It went up even higher than we were, spinning against the textured plaster ceiling. And she looked right at me, the happy lines at the corners of her eyes getting sharper. I moved toward her then, my arms pushing back like I was swimming under water. I sailed over her shoulder in slow motion, and I spoke hopeful words in her ear: "just think of all the places we could float to," I said, "just think of what we could do there."

When we settled down onto the floor it was an easy landing. The opera singing dissolved into the mumble of the party and the sighing exhalations of the nitrous chargers. Mary the floater took my hand. We went to find another balloon.

As Mary broke open a fresh carton of Whippets another girl walked up to us, not a bad looker, not at all. She wasn't wearing any make-up. Mary introduced me as her nitrous buddy. The other girl had a name but I forget it now. We sipped beer and smiled. Mary picked up a pink balloon.

I held the barrel of the nitrous dispenser out to her. She spread the collar of the balloon between her two fingers, ready to slip it over the aluminum nozzle of the dispenser. Then she paused, a laugh on her face, her eyes darting first to me, then to the other girl. She pulled her two fingers further apart, stretching the balloon more and more, the rubber turning a paler pink the same way your fingertip does when you press it against something solid. And then wider yet, Mary looking up at me with her two fingers pointing at the long, pink slit which was spread between them. And I was standing there, my palm wrapped around the barrel of the dispenser, ready to stick it in, but unsteady now, not sure what this new game was leading to. I took a deep breath. Then all of a sudden Mary pulls the balloon away from me and holds it up to the other girl. I saw Mary wink at her.

"What does this remind you of?" Mary asked the other girl.

The other girl stood still for a second, looking at Mary and at the narrow slit she had formed in the balloon. Then the other girl licked the tip of her middle finger and stuck it knuckle-deep into the opening of the balloon. Then she pulled it out, then in, then out. The two of them

looked at me, smirking.

"We're pretty good friends," Mary said, and she was talking about the other girl. She wasn't talking about me.

"Wow," I said,

"You knew," Mary said.

I shrugged.

"Don't worry about it." She took the dispenser out of my hand and slid the empty balloon onto it herself. "Me and you are still nitrous buddies."

I told her that I wasn't worried, and the truth was, I wasn't. I felt pretty good, relieved almost. Mary cranked on the dispenser and the nitrous whispered unimportant words into the night. The pink balloon rose.

Mary, the old friend, was standing in front of the ticking radiator, looking out the window. I joined her.

"How's the floating going?" she asked.

"It's fun," I said. "You should try it."

"Nah."

"Why not? Nitrous is one of the safest drugs you can do." It is, too. My buddy Brian told me, and he should know.

"It's hot," she said. She flipped the latch and with a big push, shoved up the window. The frame was very sticky and let out a harsh grunting sound as it opened. Outside, cold October rain was pitting the sidewalk. The cool air swirled in the window and collided with the heat rising from the radiator. We watched thick drops of condensation form on the window pane.

"You think you'd like to get out of here pretty soon?" she asked.

"Not having a good time?"

"I don't know, I just feel like getting outside, walking."

"Where do you want to go?"

"I don't know," she said. "Home maybe. My house." Her house was an even longer walk: twelve blocks to her basement apartment on Lapeer Street. Mary had lived there forever, five years. She even had a washer and dryer and this amazingly white kitchen, even the floor, white tiles that made your footsteps sound loud and serious. If you stood in front of her kitchen sink you could look out the tiny window and be at eye level with the grass and dirt, earthworms and flowers. "We could get something to eat maybe. Watch TV." Her voice was very un-hopeful. I suppose she thought it sounded extremely dull to me. It didn't sound dull, really, just familiar.

I put my hand just outside the window, felt the sweat evaporate in the cold air. I pulled it back inside and held my palm above the wrinkling waves of heat that rose from the radiator. The warmth prickled across my skin. I stuck my hand outside again, then inside.

"I don't know," I said. "I think I'd like to hang out a while. It's still early."

"Yeah," she said. "But I think I'm going to go."

I nodded, and she got her jacket. Then she kissed me on the cheek and was gone.

I heard her steps going tock, tock, tock, down the bare wooden stairs. I heard the sizzle of the rain through the window. I turned around and saw Mary the floater going up toward the ceiling with her friend beside her. Mary shook her head wildly, her hair a blur of dark floating waves. A flock of loose crinkles flew up on their own, swirling toward the sky. Then she was waving at me, and smiling, her leg kicking up like a cheerleader's, her arm around the shoulder of her friend. And she was motioning for me to join them, saying "come on buddy," her bright red fingernails smearing in the smoky air. And then I was moving, trying to make my steps slow and easy, my arms hanging loose. I was looking for a spare balloon, already feeling the hollowness of walking on air.

THE NEW OPPORTUNITY

His right arm was a lot stronger than his left arm. That worried Terry sometimes, and that's what he was thinking about when he saw Grable come into the office and shake off his big overcoat. Grable had on a new tie, one of those black silk jobs. It absolutely gleamed under the fluorescent lights, made his jacket look just like new. That was a nice tie. Terry wished he had a tie like that.

Of course, Dan Grable was the Sales Manager, so he always had something new to wear. Terry only had three sport coats. Two pairs of gray dress slacks that got a lot of wear between dry cleanings. Three ties. Terry was new here: only seven months on the job at Fulton's Farm Supply, and he was still trying to get used to the idea of dropping three-hundred dollars on work clothes. Back when he had first started, he had been absolutely amazed that you even wore a tie to sell farm equipment. "What farmer is going to buy a tractor from some clown in a business suit?" He said that to his wife on the day he got hired by Fulton's, and they told him how he had to

dress.

He soon found that you didn't sell to farmers, at least not very many, not any more. Fulton's was a pretty big outfit, largest distributor in the Tri-state area, and they dealt mostly with the corporate offices of larger farming organizations, cooperatives, places like that. More often than not, Terry pitched a sale to another guy in a suit. Seemed unusual at first, but he got along. It was just the same as when he used to wear his old boots for tramping through the muddy corn fields each spring. Just wearing the right apparel for the job was what it was.

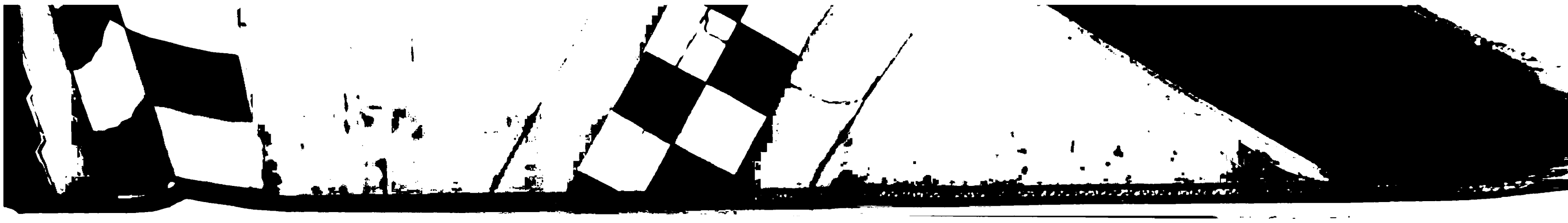
Terry used to farm. His folks had three-hundred-fifty acres right outside of Bennings. They didn't have it anymore. It was a sad story, but Terry didn't think that there was a lesson to it all. They weren't making it by staying small, so they tried to get bigger. Dad took a loan and expanded, and when prices dropped, they lost it all. There wasn't a right and wrong to it; that was just the way things worked.

Terry started school at Jackson Community after that, studied Management and Marketing. Went from farm work to taking notes, turning pages in books. He met his wife, Cindy, at school and they were married even before Terry graduated. When he did get his Associates, last spring, the job at Fulton's just fell out of the sky. One of his dad's old buddies was on the Board of Directors for the company, and Terry knew that had helped. He had a connection.

"It's an opportunity," Cindy said, when Terry told her about the job, and he had to agree. He had never planned to sell farm equipment, but it was a good job when he needed it, and he thought he could do it well. And he had done well at Fulton's. Absolutely.

When he went into the bathroom to rinse out his coffee cup, Terry looked at his arms in the mirror. Beneath the white dress shirt, they looked to be the same size. If he felt his biceps with hands, though, he could tell the difference. It made Terry worry. Back when he did farm work, which was for all of his life up until two years ago, it seemed he was always using both of his arms. He was right-handed, like most people, but around the farm he would be humping ten gallon cans of fertilizer out of the truck, chucking baled bricks of alfalfa into walls as tall as he was, wrestling the stubborn tractor around the fields.

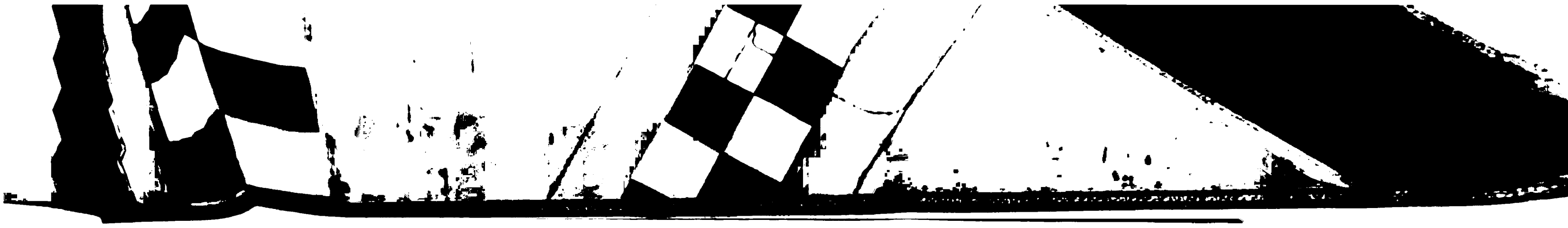
These days, working at Fulton's, he only used his right arm. He was always writing things down, that's mostly what it was: appointments, memos, orders, contracts. Then there was the product catalogs he was constantly flipping through, and the trade mags. Grable liked you to do what he called P.R., too. Racquetball with the clients, cocktails. Almost everything Terry did, he did with his right arm, and now he could feel the difference. He thought



he must be ten times stronger on that side now. It was scary. He was afraid it was going to throw his whole body out of whack.

After a little chit-chat, Grable called the salespeople in for the Wednesday Meeting. First he amended a couple of points he made in the Monday Sales Meeting, gave the fourth quarter projections, told about a new sales course he thought was quite effective. Terry wrote it all down. Then Grable started in on the real purpose of the meeting, and Terry was the first person to get the treatment. Grable did a good job; Terry had missed a big order with Midwest Soy Bean at the end of last week. Sitting there with Grable jawing at him, Terry put on the face that a lot of people used at Fulton's Farm Supply: serious, repentant, head nodding up and down.

When they got out of the conference room, Terry had a phone message on his desk, a call-back. Turned out to be a guy with a family-owned farm, a Ma and Pa is what the salespeople called them, He wanted to talk to someone about reinvesting in some equipment. These small scale operations weren't the kind of thing Terry jumped up and down about; they usually called for a big time commitment for a small order, if you got an order at all. But after the lashing Grable had just given him, Terry couldn't really afford to turn anything down. "The sooner the better," was what this Ma and Pa guy said. Terry had his morning free, so a half-hour later he was driving west of town,

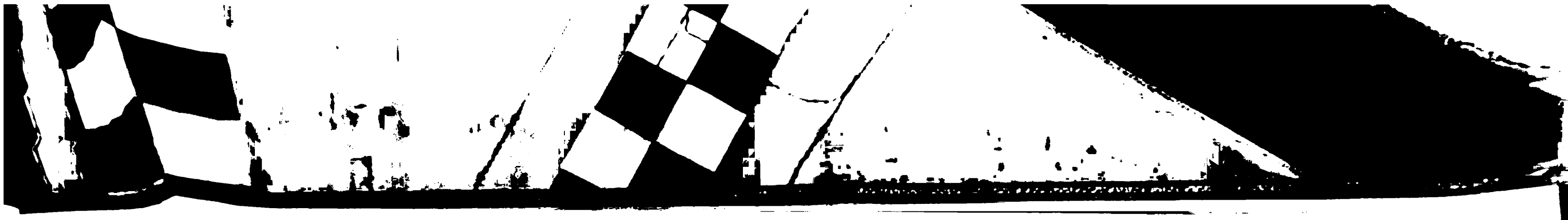


heading in the direction of Watsonville.

Mr. Lawson, the guy he had come to see, he was standing there in front of his pole barn when Terry pulled his car into the driveway. Lawson was an older man, somewhere in his fifties was Terry's guess. His head was tucked down into the collar of his brown canvas jacket which he had buttoned up as high as it would go on account of the cold. It was the first freeze of the year that morning, and a stiff one for late October. Lawson had an orange hunter's cap on his head with the ear flaps pulled down. The way he was dressed made Terry feel cold once he got out of the car. Terry didn't own an overcoat. He was glad when Lawson asked him inside. "Let's go have a seat in the kitchen," he said, and away they went, across the frosty grass.

Terry sat down at a round dinner table with a raised lazy Susan in the middle. The table was clean except for some jars of honey and jam, a napkin holder with the "Daily Bread" prayer on the side. There was an absolutely battered old percolator on the stove, dented like a buck-shot stop sign, but Lawson poured two cups of hot water from a shiny teapot. The flat, steamy smell of instant coffee filled the kitchen.

Before Lawson sat down Terry took a good look out the window, trying to get the lay of his land. He wanted to find something that would start this deal on the right foot, show Lawson that he was interested in his operation.



"Establish some common ground," was how Grable put it. The first thing Terry noticed was a brand-new Chevy pick-up sitting beside his car in the drive, a detail he'd missed when he first pulled in. The truck was bright red, the sticker still on the passenger window.

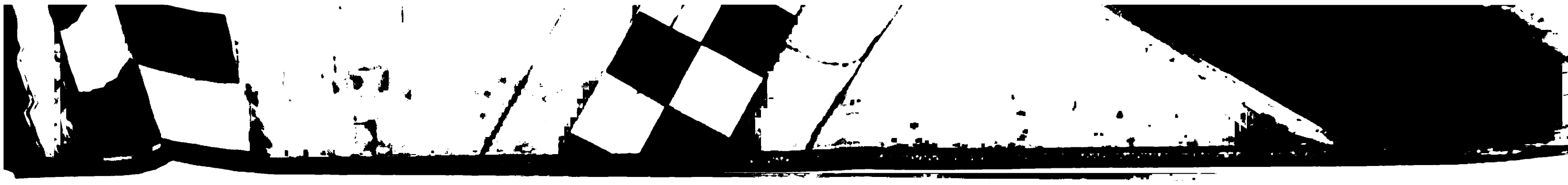
"You have a good year, Mr. Lawson?" Terry asked as the older man pulled up his chair.

Lawson nodded, looked at Terry with his eyes narrowed down. "Yeah, very good, as a matter of fact. Which is why I wanted to talk to you--" Lawson had a way of cutting through the social crap, and getting down to business. That was a rare trait in the suit and tie people that Terry usually dealt with. A new combine was what Lawson was looking at, a simple enough transaction. Seemed his old one had busted up on him just a couple days back. "She didn't die until I was harvesting the last acre, though, I'll say that much." Lawson nodded his head and sipped his coffee. He was ready to talk business.

Terry did his job, and they got into it pretty good, what Lawson had to spend, what he needed on it. He liked the looks of the new Deere 9600, and Terry liked the looks of it too. Seemed a large capacity combine for what Terry could make of Lawson's farm, though. "How many acres do you have here?" Terry asked him. That's when things got interesting.

"Only got four-hundred--" he said, "right now."

Seemed Mr. Lawson was thinking of expanding his



operation. Seemed a man at the bank had recommended Fulton's Farm Supply. Seemed Lawson was waiting for word on a large loan right now. If that loan came through, and if things worked out fine with this new combine he was buying, he would be talking to Terry again. He never mentioned the size of the loan, but Terry imagined large figures. Thinking positive was one of Grable's rules. Terry told Lawson that expanding his operation was a good idea, absolutely.

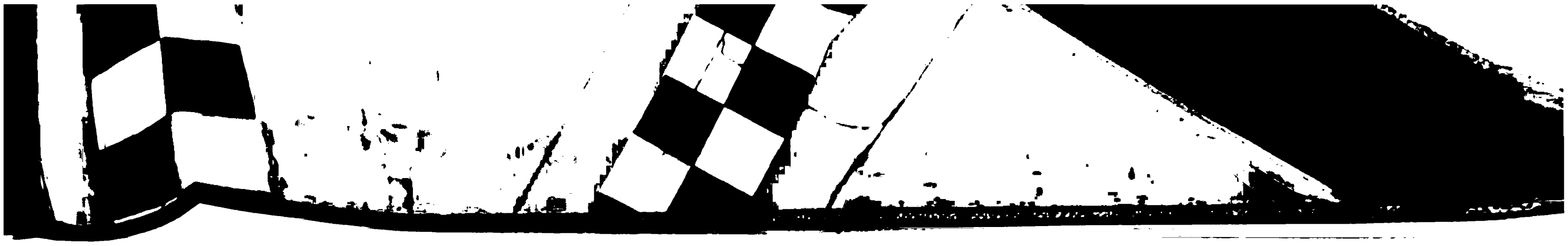
The combine transaction was worked out inside of an hour. Terry took the five percent off the top: "New Customer Discount," was what he called it this time. He didn't want Lawson shopping around with his loan money. Terry gave him the pink copy of the order; Lawson gave him a check for the 9600. Lawson stuck out his right hand and Terry shook it, easy as that.

Mr. Lawson, David, he walked with Terry out to his car. Terry was at that awkward point of the sale that began after the real selling was over. Where he feel like he had to say something nice to prove that he was worthy of the money he had just been given. It could be a tough job when he was dealing with the suit and tie types, but with Lawson he just told the absolute truth.

"You've got a nice place here," Terry said. "I grew up on a farm just about like this, my dad's place."

"You're a farmer?" Lawson said, smiling. "I never would of guessed."

"Used to be," Terry said.

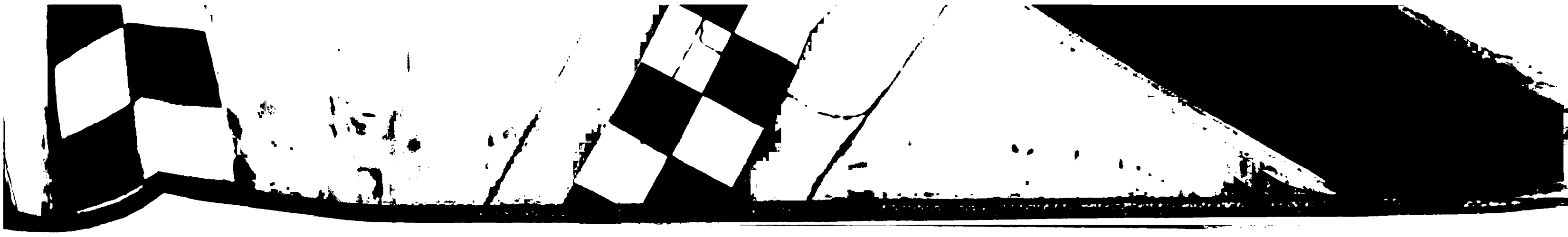


Once he heard that, Lawson opened up a bit. They stood there in the drive, talking farming in spite of the cold. When Terry finally looked at his watch, he saw that he had spent more time with Lawson than he should have. He was trying to find a way to ease out of the conversation when Lawson looked away, out toward the field that ran behind the pole barn. He turned back with a different look on his face. "Come here a second," he said to Terry. "Take a look at this old combine. It's the damndest thing."

Terry followed him into the the pole barn. The combine, an old International, sat just inside the door, but Lawson walked past it, on over to a window on the far side. The window looked out over his big back field. The sketchy black furrows were edged with frost, running away toward the horizon. Lawson raised his hand and Terry looked where he was pointing. "I was working out there day before last when it happened," he said. A small tower of bricks rose up out of the field about thirty yards away, as tall as a man. It was surrounded by some still-standing rows of of corn and looked like some kind of ancient alter.

"What is that?" Terry asked.

"It's a chimney-- or what's left of one. The people who settled this land had their house out there, must have been built in the 1840's. The house burned down sometime later, 1900 or so, 'least that's what the man who sold me the farm said. I should have gotten rid of that damn chimney years ago, but I never did. Anyway, I was out there



two days ago, working those last rows. I plant right up to the chimney on the far side, and that's where it happened. I was looking away, not keeping my eyes on the work. All of a sudden I hear a big crash right underneath me, then more racket, clanking metal. I shut the combine down as quick as I could, but not quick enough."

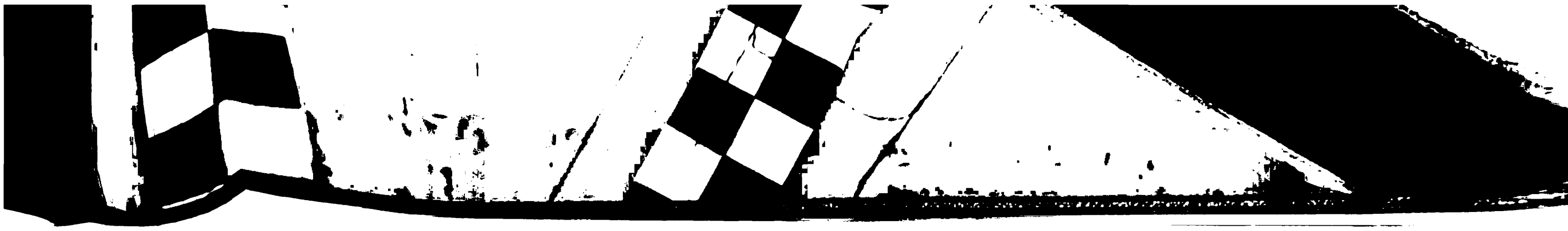
Lawson walked over to the combine. He had the feeder house pulled off the front so they could look right in on the cylinder. "It was a brick," Lawson said, "or a piece of a brick. Came from that chimney, but how it got off the chimney and into the rows, I can't say. Did a hell of a job though, didn't it?"

It certainly had. The cylinder was actually bent in the middle, some teeth smashed flat. It looked to Terry like someone had just walked up and bashed it with a baseball bat. "The rasps are a big mess, too," Lawson said. "Just ain't worth hauling an old war horse like this in for service."

"What is that?" Terry asked. He could see a dark, flat piece of something wedged under the cylinder.

"That's what I wanted to show you. I can't figure out what it is. Something else that got sucked in with the brick, I suppose, but I can't budge it."

Terry stooped down to get a better look at the stuck thing, and that's how it started. Lawson kept saying there wasn't any need for Terry to be bothering, but then he gave it up and handed Terry some jersey work gloves. There



was an old jacket hanging on a nail, brown canvas worn as thin as cloth, and he gave that to Terry, too. "Keep your suit clean," Lawson said, but the jacket didn't help, really. Before long little dabs of grease appeared on the front of Terry's work shirt, five or six of them, black on white.

They kept working, their breath puffing out in big clouds around their faces. They pointed and scratched their heads. They poked and pulled and laughed. Finally, Lawson got a crow bar under the cylinder and Terry took off his gloves. He reached in with both hands and got his fingertips on the edge of that stuck thing, just barely. When Lawson counted three they both pulled as hard as they could.

It came loose with a little bit of a crunch and that was that. It was a piece of wood, a log maybe, and it was smashed flat as a wafer. When Terry dropped it on the ground, it split into two pieces and there was something inside.

Lawson and Terry both leaned over to look. There were clumps of brown fur mixed in with the pulped wood. Nothing else. "What the hell?" Lawson said. He plucked a clump of fur between his fingers and held it up. "Some little critter must have been living in this log when it got sucked into the combine."

"Not much left of him now." Terry shied away from the clump of fur in Lawson's hand, the wood that was still on the ground. He was trying to avoid the blood and guts, but when he finally looked back down at the smashed log there was nothing but the fur. He kicked the wood with the toe of his boot, but there was no blood left to see, not even enough to wet the dirt.

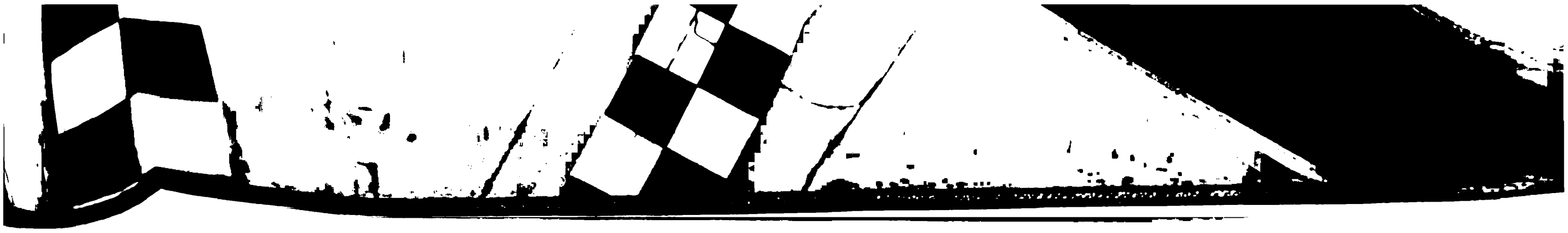
After they got cleaned up, Terry was finally ready to go. It was one o'clock by then, and he knew he would have to skip lunch or grab something on the run. They were standing out in the driveway again, saying good-bye for the second time. It was then that Terry started wondering whether he had given Lawson one of his business cards. He was almost certain he had, he always did, yet it wasn't something to forget. He didn't want a customer with a fat bank loan calling the office and not knowing his name. Terry decided to make sure. He reached for his wallet.

"I wanted to give you this," he said, trying to sound confident. Always sound like you know what you're doing. That was another of Grable's commandments.

Lawson didn't seem to pay much attention to what Terry had said, confident or not. He was still going on about the piece of wood and the dead animal. "That little critter was just squashed down to nothing," he said, and he shook his head, smiling.

Terry was leafing through the papers and bills in his wallet, trying to find a card. His fingers paused when he reached Lawson's check for the new 9600, the plain green paper bright against the black wallet.

"You still got pretty good hands for the machinery,"



Lawson said. "You ever think about going back to farming?"

Terry flipped past Lawson's check and found a card. He gripped it with his thumb and forefinger, and held it out to Lawson.

"You already gave me one of those," Lawson said.

"Well take another, then. I want you to know where you can find me when that loan comes through." Terry laughed and so did Lawson. They shook hands. Terry remembered to give him the old firm grip.

When he backed out of the driveway, Terry thought about how much he still had to do that day and where he was going. Then he looked down and once again noticed the black dots spattered on the white material. He had grease on his shirt. He was going to have to change.

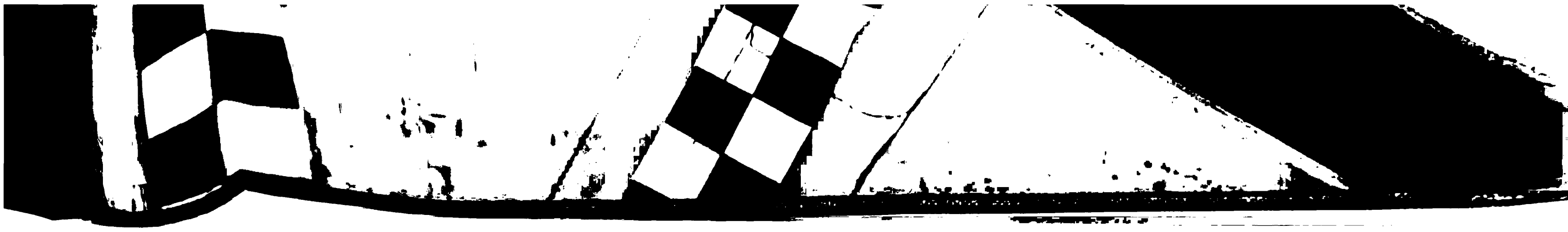
SMOKE

The dull metallic sheen in the west at five p.m. Strings of car exhaust braiding with the black spiderwebs of the trees that sprouted from sidewalks. Gray February slush spattering like the spray of an uncovered sneeze with each passing car.

Done with work, down these streets each day, dark, stiff denim chaffing my thighs, is it any wonder that we bounced our pockmarked cars over curbs and developed a dependence on crimson cans of beer, the unflinching blue light of the jukebox? Is it any wonder that we would fall in love with the barest hint of primary shades in a town where color was vacant half the year and always dim behind smoke and clouds and flat metal roofs?

The spray of sunset red, her hair across the icing of the pillow. The thin whiteness of her face, the indistinct lines of her eyes before make-up, it was all a grandly understated foreground for that bright hair, the blossoming circles of pink nipple that stained through the damp t-shirt she pulled on in the moist bathroom air. She only laughed when I plucked a cluster of long strands from her blown-dry hair.

When she left, dragging the strap of her purse and a line of smoke from her cigarette, I sprinkled the red strands across the pillows, and imagined that the thin embroidery of smoke looked different that morning, though I had certainly seen a lot of smoke for a lot of years.



FURROWS

I still haven't seen the snakes. Miss Matheson, down the road, she's been raising a big fuss about the black snakes crawling up from the creek bed and sunning themselves on the road in front of her house. I've been down there everyday looking for them, well not all the way down the road, but far enough to get a good look, and I haven't seen any snakes at all. I told that to Daddy. He says Miss Matheson is struck.

She wants my Daddy to come down and kill the snakes. I don't think he wants to go, though. He says he's been too busy with the planting to be running around with a stick chasing snakes. He has been busy, too. I see him over on the other side of the creek when I come home from school. He's plowing up that little square pasture for a new cornfield, turning over the clumpy grass on that tilted piece of land so that he can sow some corn along with the cabbage, the potatoes. Last fall Daddy had to sell off a good piece of our bottom land to the church. This year he says he's going to have to plant right up onto the sloping ground, right up to where the steep

hillside jumps up out of the valley just so that we can take in enough to keep our ribs from showing. It's on account of the Depression, he says.

I see him across the creek, his shirt off now that we're getting the first of the heat, his skin as pale as whitewash against the wild blackberry brambles on the hillside. He jerks up and down, side-to-side, walking behind the plow and the horses. This is the second year in a row he's had to use the horses on account of we can't afford gas for the tractor. Back before he sold off that piece of land, Daddy cut good long furrows for planting, clear down to the crossroads where the church sits. Now there's not so much land, and he has to keep cutting back and forth, back and forth, wrestling with the reins each time to turn the horses, picking up that plow with both arms and tossing it over. At the end of the day he sits down bone-tired to the dinner table. His old smile has gone thin and straight. Sometimes I ask Daddy if I can help with the farming, and he always says that planting isn't work that girls can do. Last time he told me that he got mean, so I quit asking. I think I could help with the farming, though. I can do lots of things.

Today in church, the Minister talked about snakes. He said the snake in the Garden of Eden was evil. He said there were snakes around at this very moment in history, especially since the Depression has come. Snakes, just waiting with apples in their mouths to tempt the poor people.

Daddy didn't go to church with us. He said he was too busy with the planting, but it seems he doesn't have much use for preaching since he had to sell the land to the church. I hear folks talk about Daddy sometimes. Grandma says that where my daddy comes from, over on the other side of the mountains in Tennessee, people aren't God-fearing Baptists like we are. I've been to Tennessee, though, to see my other Grandma. People are nice there, and they do too have churches. I think I like my Grandma there better than my Grandma here. She always cries when we leave. She says she cries on account of she won't see me for so long. I haven't been to Tennessee for three whole years because of the Depression. I think all the time about going up over Roan Mountain though, how at the very top I could look one way and see the Cole Creek Valley here, where my Mother is from, then look the other way and see Tennessee where my Daddy's from. I think about my other Grandma and how nice it would be to see her. I think how I'd like to fly out of this valley right this very minute, right over the mountains. How I could see everything for miles and miles, and how I would come sailing in over the flat land, setting down soft as a hummingbird right in my Grandma's backyard.

Today on the way to school I saw the men starting to paint the church. Every two years they paint the church white. Once, a long time ago, a man climbed up to paint the big steeple on the roof of the church. He got part way up that tilted roof, then he slipped, fell over, rolled down, dropped all the way to the ground and got killed, there and then. Ever since, nobody wants to climb up and paint the steeple. I wonder if anyone will paint it this year?

After school I got to go to the general store at Silverstone with my friend Louise Banner and her father. We took their truck, all of us sitting up in front, and we went by way of the Tanner Gap Road. We were coming up on that loose gravel bank outside Silverstone when all of a sudden two big boulders come skipping, tumbling down that bank above the road, big clouds of tan dust flaring up behind them. They shot across the road a stone-throw in front of our truck, and each of those boulders were as big as a man, I swear on the Bible. They crashed into the bushes across the road, one catching a little tree square on the trunk and snapping it as easy if it were a dry twig. Mr. Banner pulled the truck to a stop where the rocks had crossed the road. The dust was thick as wood smoke, sticking to my throat.

"Rock slide," Mr. Banner said. I looked down at the road and saw a foot-deep gash in the dirt where one of

the rocks had smacked into the flat ground. The boulders were long gone down the ravine, smashing whatever was below us. "When they built this road here they used dynamite to blow a level path across the face of the mountain," he said. "There's still some loose rocks up above and every who-knows-when they come crashing down the way." I looked up to the top of the gravel bank. Gray-white boulders were perched on the edge, leaning out over the gravel cut.

When we started driving again, Louise told a story about her brother rolling a stone down the side of the hill behind their house. That stone got to flying like a freight train, and half-way down the hill it hit a cow. Then the cow started rolling, and it went all the way down and crashed through the side of their barn and got killed. Mr. Banner got to laughing about the story. He said they had butchered up that cow and had steak everyday for a month. Said it was the tenderest meat they ever had on account of the cow got softened up by rolling down the hill. Then Louise started shaking her finger and talking like Miss Lewis, our teacher. "You should never roll a rock down a hill," she said. "They just get to rolling faster and faster, and they can roll right through a barn or a house or anything!" Mr. Banner said that was true, but he sure did enjoy those steaks all the same. I told Louise that I already knew about rolling rocks, that my Daddy had told me better. I told her that I wasn't stupid.

Seems there's more and more talk about the snakes everyday. Old Miss Matheson keeps saying there's snakes in front of her house, and keeps asking Mother to ask Daddy to come and kill them. Mother keeps asking, but daddy won't go down there yet. Still too busy is what he says. Mother's face gets tight, and her mouth sags open when Daddy says that, but she hasn't crossed him. She just walks away and figures something to tell Miss Matheson. Other folks are starting to talk about it now. Today David Mast came up to me and asked if I was scared of snakes like my daddy. I took a good swing at him, but he just ran away, laughing. I hate him.

When I got home, I decided to walk a ways up toward Miss Matheson's to see about those snakes. I walked clear to the end of our property, farther than I ever been before. I stood there and stared down toward that bright spot of sun that falls on the road just in front of Miss Matheson's. I didn't see anything at first, but after a while I thought I could make out a dark line or two on the dirt. I was just about to go closer, I swear on the Bible, but all of a sudden I heard my Daddy. "Martha! Where you going to?" He was way over behind our house, just a tiny little dot far off in the fields. How he saw me, I'll never figure. "Get on back home now," he shouted. I looked back down toward the snakes, but there wasn't much I could do. It was getting close to dinner time, and I should've been

home. I turned tail and went back to the house. I helped Mother set the table.

The Minister came to our Sunday School class this morning. He told us about David and Goliath which is a story we've all heard a thousand times. Afterward he asked if we had any questions. David Mast stuck up his hand and asked if Miss Matheson's snakes had apples in their mouths like the snakes the Minister had talked about last Sunday. A couple of the others looked over at me when David said that. I felt myself get red, but then I looked back to the Minister, and he was red too. He just stood there for a minute like he didn't know what to say. "I didn't mean *real* snakes, David," is what he finally said, then he left all at once. No one got to ask any more questions.

In church, the Minister got to talking about the Cole Creek Valley where we all live. He talked about the big hills that go up in front and in back of our house. "The valley is narrow," is what he said, "but righteous is he who goes not into the hills of evil!" I was still confused about real snakes, but when he said that about the hills, I got scared. I've always liked going up onto the hills. That's where we keep our cows.

When night came and it was time to count the cows in, I just stayed down on the bridge instead of walking up onto the back hill like I usually do. The sun was already down behind the mountains. Everything was purpley-blue. The bushes and the rocks up above me were just dark shapes. They could have been anything. The crickets and the sound of the creek were louder than I ever heard before. I stood there on the bridge, trying to make myself stand still. I strained my ears for the sound of the cows coming down, and the night noises just got higher and higher. The chirping, the water-- the sound all swirled together and rose up until it sounded just like a rattle.

This morning I was just setting off for school, heading up the road, when Daddy stepped out of the barn and called to me. "Martha, come over here a minute, I want to show you something." I walked over and we went inside the barn. "Up here," he said, and I followed him up the steps to the loft. "Take a look." He pointed to the top of a hay bale and there it was, a snake! I jumped back and screamed and was about to run out of there as fast as anything. Daddy caught my arm. "Don't worry, don't worry. It's not a real snake." I quieted down a bit when I heard that. Daddy walked over and picked up the snake, and it wasn't real! It was empty, an empty snake. "It's a snake skin," Daddy said, and he held it up as high as he could in the air. It was as big as two of me put together long-ways, its tail curling into the loose straw. Daddy explained how snakes shed their skins when they grow up, how their old skins won't hold them anymore and they just bust on out. "This snake is still growing," Daddy said, and he shook it in the air. "He's a big fella." He was big, but he didn't seem so scary with Daddy holding onto him so easy. Seemed he could have twisted that snake skin up into a loop and made a lasso out of it, just like a cowboy.

I was in the living room this evening when Daddy came in from the fields. He sunk down into his big gray chair, waiting for dinner. Mother walked in from the kitchen, wiping her hands over and over on the dish towel. "Miss Matheson asked again about you coming to look after those snakes."

"She did?" Daddy's eyes narrowed down. "She still wants me to take time out of my day to chase after snakes, does she?"

Mother said how we were the only neighbors Miss Matheson had for a mile around. How we had to help her out on account of she was a widow woman.

Daddy said how he was the only neighbor who had a farm spread across both sides of the creek, part of it on sloping ground. He said no one ever came to help him out with snakes or anything else.

"I'll help," I said, but no one listened to me.

"I'm the one that has to hear them talk about you," Mother said. Her voice was real high and squeaky all at

once.

"So, let them talk." Daddy's voice got louder too. "Seems that's all they ever do. Hard times come, and a man gets where he can't afford to bring in his crop. Then the head of the congregation comes over and he does some talking. He offers to buy the best piece of a man's land out from under him. That man has to sell just to bring his crop in, and still all I hear is talking. No help, just talk."

"It isn't easy for anyone now," Mother said.

Daddy said it was easier some places.

Mother wanted to know where that might be, and he told her. "Tennessee."

"Well you just go on there, then," Mother said. She ran out of the room crying. I heard her steps go quick up the stairs. A door slammed.

I went into the kitchen and got a drink of water. When I came back, Daddy was still sunk down in his chair. I sat down too. "You know Martha," he said to me, "one day this depression is going to end, and when it does, I'm going to get good and drunk." I didn't make a sound. I had never heard Daddy say anything about liquor before, and it was scary hearing him then, his eyes looking far away, out the window. Truth is, you never hear anyone around Cole Creek saying anything about liquor. Except for the Minister, that is. I've heard plenty about liquor from him.

We both sat in our chairs for the longest time. Daddy's head was down, looking at the backs of his hands. It took me a long time to quit being scared, but I finally asked him my question. "Are you going to kill the snakes?"

"Hell no." It was the first time I had heard him use those words too. A minute later he went and laid down in the downstairs bed. I took the pots off the stove then came up here to my room. That was a long time ago, and now the dark has filled up my room. Everything is spooky-quiet in the house. We haven't eaten dinner. I'm just lying here in in my bed, thinking, and I guess Daddy is lying in his too.

Today me and my best friend Louise went over to David Mast's house after school. I didn't want to go, but Louise is sweet on David and she wanted me to go with her. I asked Mother if it was okay ahead of time, so I didn't get in any trouble, but it figures David would get into something he shouldn't have.

We were playing out in the tool shed at his house, setting up empty boxes that we could throw rocks at, when all of a sudden David pulls out a big brown bottle with a cork in it. "What is that?" we asked.

David said it was his Daddy's corn liquor and did we want to drink some?

I said no. I may not know what the Minister means

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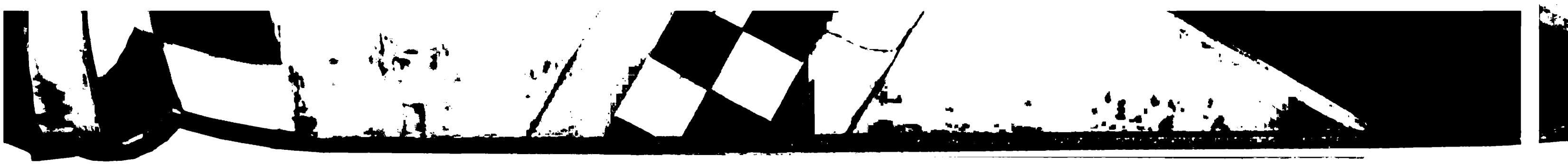


about snakes but I know what he means about liquor.

"Come on," he said, "it won't hurt you," and he took a swallow. He made believe it tasted good, but I could see how his face curled up when he swallowed. "Come on," he said. "Don't be scared." I said no again, but David kept it up until Louise started looking a little too close at that bottle. She has been sweet on him for a long time, and then sometimes she's not too smart. She finally gave in and wrapped both hands around the bottle. She took a little sip, blowing out her breath after she finished. Her face got white.

David started in on me then. He said something about how I was scared of snakes and liquor both, but I just shook my head and watched to see what would happen to them. Nothing happened, at least not until David took two more big drinks. He started twirling around in circles and laughing. Then he fell over in the corner. All of a sudden his eyes got real big, and he quit laughing and the next thing you know he's throwing-up all over everything. Afterwards he just laid there and moaned.

Louise's face had gone back to its regular pink color, and she was standing up straight as a fence post, looking down at David. All at once she started in saying how it was a sin to drink, but she stopped when I picked up the bottle. I held up one hand to her, then I tilted the bottle back and took a sip. It burned all the way down, but I guess it wasn't as bad as I expected. "I thought you wouldn't drink?" Louise said.

I just started in to laughing, and then so did she. We went outside and left David there on the floor. Everything was happy-looking outdoors. We giggled forever. As we walked home, I told Louise why I took the drink. After I watched David and her, I had it figured. It wasn't a sin to take one drink. It was a sin to take three.

They never did paint the steeple. When I walked by the church today I saw that all the painting men's things had been taken away. There was that steeple getting duller and duller. When you get up close you can see where the paint is starting to crack up there, sharp little lines running all across the steeple. While I stood there looking up, Grace, the post office lady, came by. She started looking up at that steeple too. She said she could remember when that steeple was so bright white that it looked like a sharp knife sticking up against the hills. It's not sharp anymore. Now it looks like a butter knife.

The Minister came out of the church a minute later, so me and Grace had to move on and pretend like we weren't noticing the steeple. The Minister said good morning, then walked across the road to the piece of land my Daddy sold to the church. He opened the gate on the new fence they put up there. He walked out into the field then started pacing back and forth in quick little steps. He was counting off the distance of things, I guess. There's talk of building a new house for the Minister there on Daddy's land. The Minister was bent over, watching his feet while he walked. His dark suit looked hard and shiny against the red-brown of the dirt. His black shoes got covered in mud as he stomped over the corn stalk stubble that was still poking out of the ground in short, broken-off lines.

In his sermon, the Minister started in to talking about farming which is something I've never seen him do. "Jesus comes to the man who plows the thin, straight furrow," is what he said. Back home, I went up to change my clothes, and out the back window I caught sight of Daddy working. He was across the creek again, on that little square of tilted ground, tucked back against the hill, away from everything. His shirt was off again, his skin still white except for his arms which were as brown as the dirt. He was going back and forth on the short rows, sowing seeds with the swing of his hand.

After I got into my play clothes I snuck out the front door. I made up my mind to quit being scared. I was going down to Miss Matheson's to kill those snakes and be done with it. I crossed the road and walked along the ditch so that Daddy wouldn't see me. When I got up close to Miss Matheson's, I found me a big rock in the ditch. I crept up onto the road, heading toward that bright spot of sun,

but looking away at the same time, not wanting to see them. I tried to make myself keep walking, but my steps got slower and slower. I stopped. I looked all around me, up and down the road, hoping for some help. There was no one. I made myself look down at the sunny road, right in front of me, and it wasn't till then that I noticed. The road was empty, nothing but dust.

I started thinking about whether there really were any snakes. I remembered the snake skin in the barn. That was real. I got to looking at the hills that were all around me. I hadn't been up on the hills since the Minister talked about them, but I thought how, if there were any snakes, that must be where they hid. I decided to have a look.

I found me another, bigger rock, and I set off toward our bridge, staying down in the creek bed, then cutting around back of the barn so that Daddy wouldn't see me. That rock I had was as big as a small watermelon, and by the time I reached the bridge I had to set it down to rest. I have to admit I was feeling a little fearful standing there looking up at that hillside. I just kept saying "stop being scared, stop being scared." Then I picked up my big round rock, and I crossed over the creek.

I started climbing, looking around everywhere for snakes. I was getting more and more scared, jumping at every little sound, but I just kept climbing up that hill. Up and up, pretty soon I got into the briar patches. I followed a trail through there, the thick brambles on both

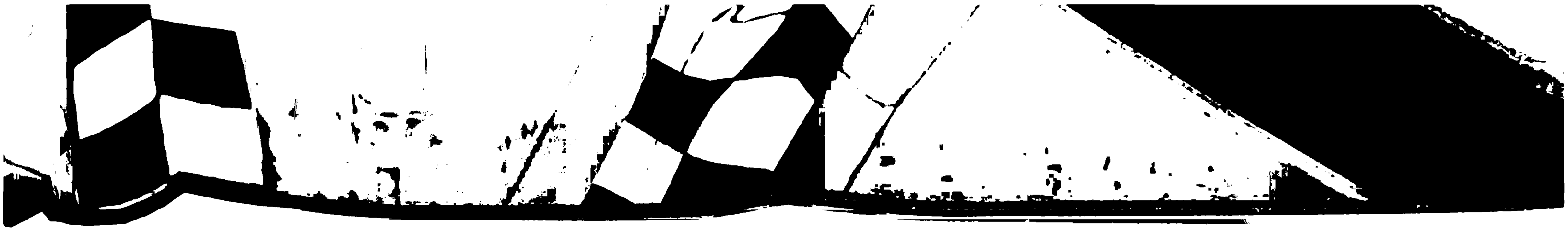
sides of me, taller than I was. All of a sudden I hear a rustling, slithering sound coming out of the bushes. It was a snake, I was sure. I almost took off running straight down that hill, I swear on the Bible. Somehow I got as brave as I could, though. I raised my rock up over my head, and I stepped around that thicket where I heard the noise. I couldn't see anything, just criss-crosses of briar branches everywhere I looked. The rustling got louder. I pushed the briars aside with one hand and twisted sideways into that thicket. The nettles tore at my dress. The ground was slippery underneath my shoes. The slithering sound was right in front of me. I shoved aside more briars, prickers raking across my arm. I stepped out into a little clearing, and there it was.

A cow! A cow rooting through the brambles for who knows what. I almost conked it on the head before I realized, and when that cow saw me she got scareder than I was. She took off running out of there with her dumb-looking eyes bigger than ever. I laughed. It was funny. I decided then that it wasn't any use to be searching for snakes. I dropped my rock, and I climbed on up to the knob of the hill, just for fun.

At the top I sat down to rest. It's awful nice up there on that hill. I had almost forgotten how nice. You can see all up and down the Cole Creek Valley, thin and straight, see the creek, a jaggedy line the whole way through. You can see the lumpy blue mountains off in the distance, see clear down to Roan Mountain, and that's in Tennessee. I started in to thinking about my Grandma that lives on the other side of the mountains and my Daddy talking about going back there. It's a long ways between Tennessee and Cole Creek and there's that big mountain in between. I started thinking how if this was flat country, it wouldn't seem so far. I thought right then that if there wasn't a mountain in the way, I could see Grandma's house right from the top of the hill. It would be like it was right next door.

I started rubbing my hand back and forth on a smooth brown rock that sticks out at the top of the hill there, and that's when I got the idea. I looked around until I found me a big stick, then I started digging into the ground under that brown rock, trying to pry it up out of the dirt. It was heavy, and bigger than I thought it was. I had to dig my stick back and forth into the powdery dirt, pushing and pulling, getting tired and sweaty, and when I finally got it worked free that rock was bigger than my arm is long, thin and round like a wheel. I looked straight down the hill. There was a good stretch of grass right in front of me, then more briars, then finally the little square field way at the bottom. I took a good look for Daddy. He was way over across the creek then, working the other field. I double checked for cows, and the way was clear. That rock was too heavy to lift, so I just tipped it up on its skinny side, gave it a good push, and away it went.

It wobbled back and forth until it got moving faster. Then it straightened up, and you should have seen it go. It whirled and whirled down that hill so fast it was just a blur. So fast that the sun started flashing off of it, and that stone looked just like a Ferris wheel at the carnival. When it hit the briar patch it just disappeared. I thought for a second that it had stopped rolling, but no! It came jumping out of the briars, up above the thicket, as high as a man is tall, and a second time, higher, the rock spinning through the air, a pinwheel, getting rounder and rounder as it went. When it hit the field at the bottom, the rock cut into the soft ground like a knife, right down into the land. It scooted over that field crossways from the direction Daddy plowed it, busting through mounds of plowed earth like you never saw. Before it came to stop in the creek that rock had sliced a line clear across that square field, a deep, new furrow cut into the damp, brown dirt.

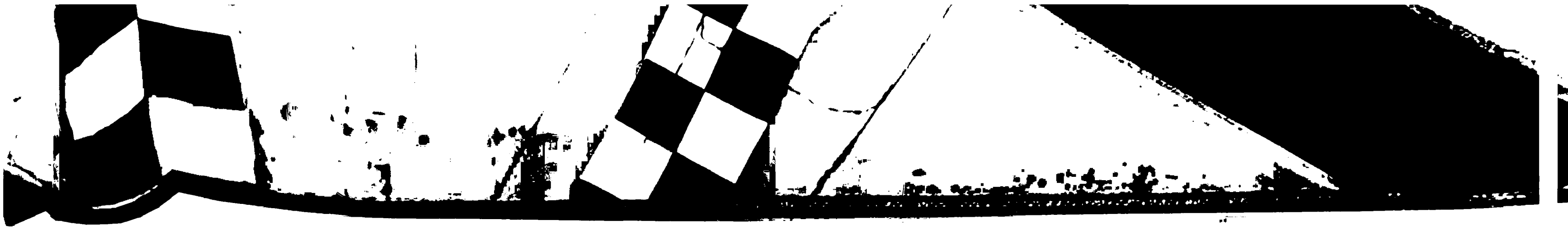


COMMON GROUND

Those were the first months of my first marriage. I lived with two women then. One was my wife, Lois. The other was Theresa, a woman Lois had gone to college with. They were friends.

I remember the first night we spent in that farm house where we all lived together. I remember Lois and I lying flat on the floor on just our mattress. The bed wasn't set up yet. The lone street lamp on our road lit several corners of the room, and I could see Lois's panties lying crumpled against the wall, the place where I had so joyfully tossed them just a few minutes before. I could also see the nightstand on Lois's side of the bed, an opened card of birth control pills on top. And now we were lying here, not talking, not even touching, feeling very far apart in a bed that should have been common ground.

I stared up at the ceiling and wondered what it was going to be like living in one house with two women. I wondered especially about Theresa, a person I did not know, though I did know that she had once had a baby, and that she had given the baby away. I thought about the way she



had drifted past the open bathroom door as I brushed my teeth before bed. The t-shirt she wore was too large for her, fluttering in the breeze that sailed up the hallway between our bedrooms. But it was also too short: stretching, just barely, to the tops of her thighs.

I was married. Like our parents before us, Lois and I had agreed to a life. We put rings on. But unlike our parents we were living together in a farm house that would sooner or later be torn down. That was our situation. Theresa had rented the house with the understanding that it would one day be leveled to make way for a new housing development; we moved in with four months left in a six month lease and no guarantee of an extension.

But the rent was cheap, two hundred dollars a month, and when Theresa called to see if we were interested in becoming her roommates, we were cramped into the only place we could afford: the tiny studio apartment Lois had lived in before the wedding. We told Theresa that we didn't care how short the lease was; we started packing.

And for a while that house seemed like the fulfillment of a promise. Each morning I awoke to the crow of the wild rooster that lived in the fields alongside our house. When I stepped into the bathroom, the steam from the girl's showers still clouded the mirror, the warm, wet air laced with the smell of their perfume. Then I'd kiss Lois

good-bye, and most days she'd still be half-naked when I put my arms around her. In the kitchen, Theresa would be sitting at the table in just her bathrobe, her hair wound up in a towel like some kind of exotic native.

On the way out of the driveway, if I was lucky, I would catch a glimpse of that rooster stalking along the edge of the field. If I stopped the car and cackled at him, he would bob back deeper in the weeds, but he answered with something close to a war cry. We figured that the rooster was a leftover, a remnant from the days when our farm house was actually a farm, instead of the fields of tall weeds which it had become. We got to like that old bird. Named him John. That was a funny way to start the day, seeing old John stand his ground as if he still had a barnyard to protect.

I planted a garden. It was something I had always thought about, growing food. There in the country, where the brushy weeds seemed to get taller before your eyes, I figured that I could raise about anything. One evening, Hank, a guy I knew from work, brought his rototiller over in the back of his pick-up. He rattled up the driveway just as I was finishing the dishes, and then the three of us, me, Lois and Theresa, we walked out into the last of the sun to watch him plow the ground.

Hank had brought his daughter along with him, a shy

kid, about three or four, who seemed intent on hiding in the cab of the pickup. But then Lois snuck over to the truck and peeked in the open window. She ducked down, hiding herself, a playful smile on her face. Then she peeked in the window again, and soon she had Hank's daughter involved in a game of peek-a-boo that made the little girl lean clear out of the window and squeal with laughter. By the time Hank finished the tilling, Lois had lured the girl out of the truck and the two of them played across the lawn. I had never seen Lois with children before, and it was a sight I kept watching until I went inside to get Hank a beer.

When I came back out, I thanked Hank again, then took a good look at my rectangle of plowed ground. The dirt was dark blue in the twilight. I knelt down and dug in my fingers. The clumps broke apart into moist, muddy dirt that smeared across my palms. It reminded me of the mud I mixed at my job, cement work. This was different, though, and I knew it. You can't grow food in cement.

I heard the rooster's crow from far off in the fields, old John. He was howling at the setting sun as if he didn't know night from day. I looked over at Lois and the girl. They were running in a big circle around the yard, their faces orange in the setting sun. The little girl was chasing Lois, her arms stretched out in front of her. And then Lois quit running. She knelt down, and when the girl ran to her, they joined hands. Lois took her into her arms

and lifted the girl off the ground. My wife walked toward me with the little girl hugging her neck, the two of them looking as much like a mother and daughter as anyone I've ever seen.

I looked back down at my hands in the dirt. I picked up a clod, and tore it apart. I saw the tiny root hairs which had held it all together.

"Well Mr. Farmer," Theresa said, "what are you aiming to grow here?"

I dropped the dirt and brushed my palms together. I looked once again toward Lois and the little girl, and I thought of several answers to the question.

What I ended-up planting were a half-dozen tomato plants that Hank had given me. I planted some peas too, and some carrots, some corn. Potatoes, peppers, zucchini. I spent a long Saturday getting it all into the ground. I stuck little sticks at the end of each row, and hung the seed packages from the sticks so I'd know what was what. Then I watered the whole thing, and when I looked at the straight rows where the food would soon come up, I felt good.

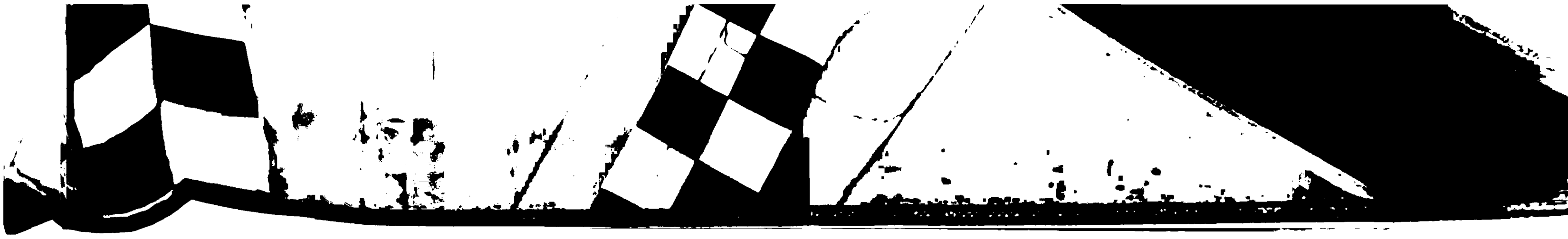
And I felt tired. Aside from Hank's rototiller, I hadn't gotten any help with the planting. I had asked Lois a few hopeful questions that morning. "How's my favorite field hand?" I said, half-serious jokes which might get

her involved. She wasn't having anything to do with gardening, though. That wasn't Lois. She just made jokes of her own.

"Are the tomatos going to be done by dinner, or do I have to drive all the way to the grocery?"

So I spent that Saturday on my own. Lois stayed inside doing I don't know what. Theresa was inside too, but I didn't give her that much thought. Theresa hadn't entered the crazy picture that I was still able to imagine in those days: Lois and I living together on that farm, raising a family and a good life. That's what I thought of when I spent that first day in the garden, but I didn't get mad at Lois for not being there. I just worked harder, and felt hopeful. I thought about the Saturday night that was waiting for the two of us.

I had promised Lois an evening on the town: dinner dancing, the works. We hadn't had a big time out since the honeymoon. After I came in from the garden and took a shower, we were off. The Limelight for dinner, then over to The Monkey's Fist. We got two stools at the bar, and I felt my tiredness disappear with the thump and crack of the band. When Lois was ready to dance, we danced, just like I promised. I can't say it was disappointing. She had worn her black skirt with the high slit, a little racy for the The Monkey's Fist, but I suppose that was the idea. There were no pantyhose under that skirt, and the sight of her bare leg sliding in and out of that slit was another



kind of promise. When we finally got a slow one, I pulled Lois up close to me and buried my face in her blond hair. I looked down at her high heeled feet and watched her take beautiful, swaying steps on the dusted floor. When we sat back down on our bar stools, I slid my hand up her leg and squeezed it between her crossed thighs. "Let's go home," I said, and Lois just nodded.

When we got back to the house, we were in a hurry. Still, I put my arm around Lois after we got out of the car, and I pointed at my garden. "I made that," I said. "I made it."

She kissed me on the cheek. "You're so cute," she said. "Always making things."

I stepped behind her and put my hands on her waist. Right there in the yard I slid down the zipper on Lois's skirt. "What do you say we try making something together?" I said.

Lois pulled away from me. She zipped up her skirt. She turned to face me, and her look was not kind. "Honey," she said, "I'm not making anything but love."

Lois went on towards the house then, but I just stood there in the yard. Even after I heard the back door shut, I stood there. I could feel all kinds of words mixed up inside me, but we had said them all before. Nothing had changed. I walked over to the garden and kicked my toe into the soft dirt.

When I heard the rustling sound coming from the field,

I was too lost in thought to be startled. It was John, I knew that right away, though I never did see him. I listened to him scuffle around in the underbrush for quite a little bit, and then I cackled at him. He didn't answer, everything just got quiet. I walked to the house but before I went in, I turned back toward the field. I tilted my head back like the roosters in the cartoons, and I let go with my loudest crow. Then I opened the door and went inside.

Theresa was on the couch in her robe, watching TV. I sat down too. I sensed that Lois had long since disappeared into the bedroom, and Theresa gave me a few looks, wondering what was up. I just put my feet up on the coffee table, and the two of us sat there in the family room for a long time. After a while we were laughing at funny things on the TV, and we talked. I wanted to ask Theresa about the baby she had, but I never did. Instead we talked about simple things: the rooster, the price of groceries, the number of growing days before the first hard freeze.

Theresa got interested in the garden. Soon she was coming out every time I was there, talking to me about the work. Sometimes she asked me the same question that she had asked just a day or two earlier. That's something that a lot of people do, repeat questions, and it's something that usually annoys me. But with Theresa I never seemed to mind. Maybe because she always seemed so interested and pleased with what I had to say, smiling and nodding, pulling back her long hair and holding it in a pony tail above her shoulder. Then again, I suppose that I enjoyed her familiar questions because they allowed me to repeat the few things I did know about gardening while avoiding all I didn't know, which was plenty.

One thing I didn't know, in the beginning, was how much work was involved. It was a lesson I learned quickly. The weeds I pulled on Tuesday would magically reappear by the following Tuesday. My conversations with Theresa seemed to get shorter and shorter as I had more and more work to do: putting in stakes for the tomato plants, picking off the worms. I began to wonder if I had made my garden too big. Still, Theresa spent a lot of time outside and never seemed bored by what I was doing, though sweating and digging a hoe into the dirt certainly seemed boring to me. I suppose I wasn't surprised that things turned out as they did.

One evening, just as I started working, I heard the back door slam shut. I knew it must be Theresa, so I didn't look up right away. Then she was beside me, on her knees in the dirt. I took a good look then.

"Thought you might need some help," she said, and she started right in.

"Yeah," I said. "I guess I do." And that's the way t

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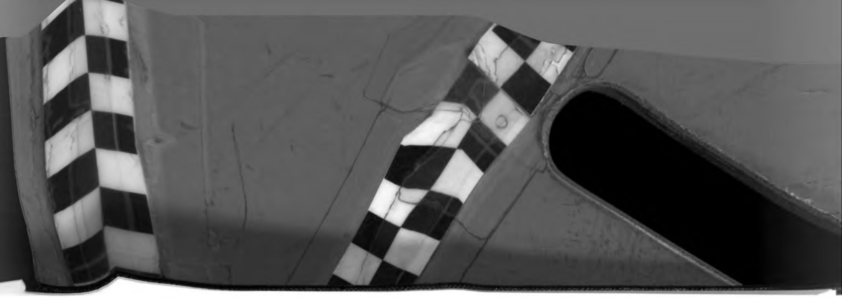
it went, the two of us working side-by-side. Theresa had on shorts, but she didn't seem squeamish about grinding the dirt into her knees. The shorts were a good idea as far as I was concerned. Theresa's bare legs were always a welcome sight: good solid flesh, like tree branches.

"Watching you made me want to get my hands dirty," she said. "I hope it's okay."

"Hey," I said. "The more the merrier."

Theresa smiled at me, then leaned into the work, her hair falling forward across her face, her worn denim shirt looking comfortable enough to sleep in. She reached for a stray tomato stalk which had drooped onto the ground. She grabbed hold with sure fingers. She raised the stalk straight up in the air, as tall as the others, and she secured it to the stake with a piece of string. I saw the tiny green tomatoes on the stalk. And I watched them gently tremble in the sunlight when she removed her hands.

One Saturday in late June the sun came out brilliant and harsh, and the humidity seemed to rise out of the ground. Theresa and I were sweating just walking out to the garden, both of us in shorts now, Theresa in a halter top that was even better than the denim shirt. We had a big day in front of us: fertilizer, mulching, some chicken wire fencing to keep the rabbits out. We even talked about building a scarecrow as we knelt in the dirt and felt the



sweat run out of us.

Lois was outside too. She had her lounge chair stretched out in a good patch of sun right beside the garden. She had a glass and a big thermos of ice tea on a folding tray beside her chair. She was afraid bugs would crawl in her drink if she put it on the ground.

At first I enjoyed the view. It's true that Lois was made for a bikini. I expected the sight of her to ease my work, but then the hours went by. I think I saw her exert some energy when she first rubbed on her tanning butter, but after that she lay absolutely still. All afternoon she was motionless except for once every half-hour when she would drink a glass of tea and then flop from her back to her stomach, or vice versa, fastening or unfastening the strap to her bikini, whichever was appropriate.

And the more I sweated and crawled around in the dirt, the more the sight of her lying absolutely still made me mad. I had no good reason to be upset, I know that now, but love and reason are often far apart. I started thinking of ways to make Lois help us, and when she did her next half-hour flip I called to her.

"Hey Lois, how about bringing us some of that tea?"

She put her hand over her eyes and looked at me. "This tea?" she said, and I nodded. "Sorry, but it's all gone." She waved the empty thermos to show me.

"Thanks for offering," I said.

"Sorry, but I thought you two were growing your own tea leaves and would only want the fresh stuff." She laughed, and then she lay down again, and I just stood there. I looked over at Theresa. She was hauling the roll of fencing up the driveway, breathing hard through her open mouth, her bangs flattened wet against her forehead. She was working hard, trying to grow this garden, and there was Lois: lying flat on her back, trying to get prettier. I looked down and there was the garden hose curled at my feet, ready to water. I reached over to pick it up, then looked back at Lois. I wrapped my hand around the nozzle, and took a few steps toward her lawn chair, making sure I was close enough. Then I grabbed hold with my other hand and stretched out my arms. I took aim, ready to blast Lois out of her chair with a long, hard shot of water.

Theresa put her hand on my arm. "I'll water," she said. "You go get us some beers." She took the hose out of my hand and turned to the garden. I backed slowly toward the house, watching Theresa. I felt the heat lift off my back when I stepped into the shade.

When I got back outside, I handed Theresa her beer. I rubbed the other can across my forehead, feeling the cold sting against my skin. Theresa took her can and rubbed it across her neck and, her collar bones, between the straps of her halter. The beads of moisture on the aluminum mixed with her sweat, leaving moist smears across her skin. And I was watching, and then she watched me watching. She

didn't get embarrassed, she just stopped rubbing. She just looked at me with a puzzled expression.

"That looks like my job," I said.

Theresa continued to look at me for a minute, then she lowered the can and looked away. "No," she said. "This is your job." She swung her arm in a narrow arc which began at the far end of the garden and ended by pointing directly at Lois.

I shook my head. Theresa shrugged, then worked her bare foot underneath the coil of the garden hose which she had dropped when I gave her the beer. She raised her foot slowly, lifting the hose toward me. When it was close enough for me to reach, I took hold. Then Theresa put her foot back on the ground and she walked away.

I leaned back and took the biggest drink I could hold. When I lowered the can, this is what I saw. The bare dirt of a garden I had planted, but which now seemed a hopeless amount of work that I would never complete on my own. And my wife in a bikini, laid out in a lawn chair with one delicate but beautiful leg gracefully dangling, her flip-flops held far above the green grass which was spread beneath her.

I turned around in a slow circle and took it all in: the fields, the road, a farmless farm house that would soon be smashed flat by bulldozers. And somewhere in the tangle of fields that still remained, there was a wild rooster. At that moment I had a pretty good idea of how

he felt. Lost in country that was no longer the same, he was rooting through the brush for whatever he could find, trying to get by on less than he expected.

IN THE RIGHT PLACE

After the fight, Jean watched the daylight break down outside the kitchen window. She blew her nose one last time, then leaned over the dishes that were still on the table. She picked up Leon's plate, more of a bowl really, a good idea that someone had once had, making a child's plate with raised edges so that everything would stay where it should be.

Jean picked out the baby-size pieces of turkey which were still on Leon's plate, and she put them onto the big silver platter that was still in the middle of the kitchen table. She looked at the platter. It was a mess, covered with slabs of meat, the partially-sliced bird, scattered remnants of the gooey inside stuffing, even some dobs of mashed potatoes that had landed there after Martin, her husband, had slammed the bowl down on the table.

Jean hadn't seen this fight coming, and she certainly didn't expect it to end that way. "I wonder what city we'll be in next Christmas," Jean had said. She was putting food on Leon's plate.

"Someplace better, maybe," Martin said.

"I'd be happy with someplace," she said, and Martin got mad. He yelled something; Jean yelled something back. Then Martin banged the bowl down so hard that Leon jumped and blinked.

"I don't know what the hell you want," he said.

Now Martin was in the living room and she was here, wondering about the things that could make two people scream at one another, the things that could make someone spatter potatoes far across a table. And Leon--he was in his room, at least Jean believed he was. Hopefully he was playing with new toys, but here, in this kitchen, there was a Christmas dinner that no one was going to eat on Christmas.

She got some plastic containers out of the cupboard and started sorting the food. Then she saw Leon's dribble cup, half-full of milk, and picked it up. He would want juice in a while, and she would need this cup. She looked around the room for a place to put it. She sat it beside the sink. Then she picked it back up and she took off the top, dumped the rest of the milk. She rinsed it and snapped the top back on. Then she sat it down in the same spot, right next to the sink; she knew exactly where it was.

When Jean had cleaned up as much as she had to, she sat down at the table. She could hear the sounds of a football game in the living room that Martin was watching. Someone was playing football on Christmas day. She knew that this happened every year, but the idea suddenly seemed peculiar to her. What did the players do once the game

was over? Where did they eat dinner? She pictured a large man in a quiet hotel room, late at night. He was looking at a phone, trying to think who he could call, who he could talk to on Christmas.

Jean looked around the kitchen. It seemed like someone else's kitchen, everything out of place. And not just the unwashed dishes, though God knows there were enough of those. But other things, things that should not have been in a kitchen: magazines, a calculator, cassette tapes, the Welcome Wagon Guide to Sacramento, unpacked boxes of clothes, stacks of novels that apparently had no other place to rest. Novels in a kitchen, as if they could find the answers to their problems like looking up a recipe in a cookbook. They shouldn't be there.

There was another book laying on the chrome ledge above the stove knobs: Geodesic Living. Jean picked it up and opened it. Inside were pictures and plans of dome-shaped houses, wide open buildings with no walls, just beautiful, airy interiors with plants and white and chrome furniture, everything perfectly placed. Jean knew the houses well, though she hadn't looked at the book in some time. She and Martin were going to build a geodesic house. Someday, when he found the right job and they settled down in the right place. They used to talk about it a lot.

Jean closed the book, but kept it in her hands. She took a breath and walked into the living room. There was Martin, reading and listening to the football game at the

same time. What was amazing was that he could keep perfect track of what was going on in both. He hadn't heard Jean come into the room, so she just stood there, holding the book and looking at him. She tried to remember many things. Why did they move to Sacramento? Why had they moved to San Bernardino? Why did they have a child? When did Martin begin reading biographies of the astronauts?

Jean walked over to the big easy chair, sat down opposite of Martin in the rocker. He looked up. She looked at the TV. He looked back down at his book, and she looked at him. He looked back up at her. There they were.

"Who's winning?" she said.

"Nobody. There's no score." Martin frowned. He looked down at his book again.

"Where's Leon?" she asked.

"I don't know."

"I thought you were watching him? You don't know?"

"I don't know anything, I guess."

"You don't," she said. "You just don't know."

Martin slammed the book shut. He was good at slamming things. He stood up and walked straight down the hallway. Jean saw him stick his head into Leon's room, heard him say something she couldn't clearly hear. Then Martin headed back toward the living room, and he walked directly to the closet without looking at her. "He's in his room," he said.

"I just wanted to know."

"The only thing I know for sure," Martin said, "is where I'm not." He pulled his jacket off the hook and put it on. He opened the front door and he left. She heard the car start up a minute later. She heard it drive away.

Jean looked down at the book she was still holding. She sat it on the table. She went back to the kitchen and found Leon's dribble cup where she had left it. She filled the cup with orange juice, and put the top back on. She called Leon's name. "Leon," she said, and then she went to find him. When she peeked her head in the doorway of Leon's room, it was empty.

"Leon," she said again. Then she stooped down and looked under his bed, a place he sometimes crawled to and fell asleep. It was empty. Jean wondered where he had gone to, how a child could be somewhere one moment, then disappear.

She heard a noise and looked. Under the crib she spotted the two tiny tennis shoes, then two legs extending up to the rest of Leon which was hidden between the crib and the wall. It was a place she had never seen him hide before. "Leon," she said, then sighed. She pushed her palms against the floor and stood up, but the dribble cup slipped out of her fingers. As she was straightening up, the cup was falling, and her hands covered her mouth and she sucked in her breath.

The cup didn't spill. It just lay there on its side, the juice sloshing gently back and forth. Jean just stood

there, watching it, wondering at a thing which could be dropped and still keep everything where it should be.

AGAINST THE BRIGHT SKY

The flimsy metal door cracked against the frame as it slammed shut. Leo was already awake, the covers pulled up to his chin, the sleep in his eyes making the dim light that fell into the room look blue and foggy. Leo thought of mornings when he was younger. He thought of his fingers wrapping around the window sill, the way he used to grab hold each day and pull himself up to look out the high window of his upstairs bedroom. He remembered gripping the wooden ledge as hard as he could to watch his dad walk away toward the forge.

That was long ago, he was bigger now. Just yesterday morning he had stood on his bed. When he stretched as tall as he could, his arms by his side, he saw the sky, a pale wash of light at the end of the street, then the crisscross of telephone wires and dark outlines of the forge buildings in the distance, then the gray stripe of sidewalk and finally, his dad, going to work. Walking straight forward, shoulders hunched, his dad had looked the same as always: the cigarette, a Lucky, the kind without the filter, it was clamped in the exact center of his teeth, a red spark

at the end. Leo used to think his dad looked like a train engine chugging down the tracks, small puffs of Lucky Strike smoke rising above him.

But that was before. Leo wouldn't stand on his bed this morning. He wouldn't watch Dad walk off to his job at the forge as he had every weekday for as long as he could remember. This day was new, and even though Leo left the house at seven-forty-five, even though he cut through the thin scrap of trees to the railroad tracks that he followed to school each morning, the air sounded different today.

The ground was still black, though. A coating of coal dust and cinders stretched across the open land that surrounded the tracks, broken only by the silver and rust of the rails. A stone-throw down the tracks, the drop forges rose up from the ground: clumps of corrugated metal as long as a football field, black like everything else, the odd-shaped peak of each building thrust up against the sky like a half-opened fist. The railroad tracks ran a thin line between two foundries: the Lindsey Forge to the east and the Federated Forge, where his dad had worked, to the west. Today the smack of the forge was gone, the endless cough and grunt of the drop hammers replaced by softer noise. Leo stepped slowly from tie to tie. He could actually hear the scratch of his pant legs rubbing together. He heard the fresh leaves sizzle in the wind, the caw and rustle of crows which were invisible in the high trees.

A new sign clattered against the chain link of the railroad gate that led into the Federated Forge: "No deliveries until further notice. Production at the Federated Forge is temporarily suspended. Inquiries to Main Office."

"Indefinite lay-off," was how his dad had said it yesterday, and this morning Dad had opened and closed the front door only to get the morning paper. Now he was leaning back in his reclining chair, and the forge sat here, stone-still in the weak sunlight. The big overhead doors were pulled closed and the ground was still beneath Leo's tennis shoes. It was quiet, and maybe that was worse than the noise.

Leo had been inside the dark buildings once. Back when he was seven-- five years ago--, back when Federated still operated a night shift, his dad had taken him on a tour of the forge. "These are the drop hammers," Dad yelled. "This is what I work on." Giant blocks of steel slammed up and down. Glowing rods were smashed into strange shapes. Sparks whizzed between him and his dad like the fizzle of giant sparklers, and the sound was deafening: kicking Leo in the stomach, making him feel like he was going to throw-up. He turned away from the hammer and looked up at his dad. The cherry glow of the furnaces lit his dad's face, and he was smiling: smiling in the middle of all the heat and the burning smell and the noise. One of the workers had walked up to Dad then. He flipped up the dark goggles that covered his face, and shouted close to

Dad's ear. "This one of the new workers?" he asked. pointing at Leo. The man smiled.

"Yeah," his dad put his hand on Leo's shoulder. "This is my boy Leo. He's hiring in."

And now Leo stood on the tracks and saw black and white. Below, the ground and the tangle of forge buildings were as dark as tar, looking as if they had been singed by a great heat; above, the always overcast sky shimmered silver-white, brilliant. A giant chrome-colored water tower shot high into the air just this side of the foundries. As high as it was above him, the round, shining water tank reminded Leo of a hot air balloon. The silver ball seemed to tug against the four legs which fastened it to the blackened ground, ready to fly away.

A week later the gray clouds peeled back, and the first of the hot weather came to town. Leo went to school without a jacket. On the way home, he tight-roped a railroad track all the way, and only fell off once. The windows of the forge shower room were thrown open despite the lay-off. Leo could hear the sound of a few men yelling inside the showers, the sound of water splashing. It certainly wasn't the same as before the foundry shut-down, when clouds of steam and singing billowed from the open windows. But someone was in there, working and washing. Someone was making some noise.

At home, Dad was kicked back in the rocker-recliner. Gilligan's Island was on the television. "Hey." Dad raised his hand to wave at Leo. His voice sounded too loud.

"Hi." Leo's voice was as loud as his dad's. It had to be be: too many years next to the drop hammers had taken most of Dad's hearing. Now he could only understand if he was shouted at, and there was a lot of shouting in the house. Leo's mom had gotten so used to shouting that she found it difficult to speak in a normal voice no matter who she was talking to. Leo hated to shout so he just kept quiet around Dad most of the time. Dad didn't seem to mind.

In the kitchen, Leo pried the bent cap off of a half-full bottle of Coke and took a long pull. He considered the bottle, then took another drink, being sure to leave enough for later. Every afternoon Leo and his dad sat in front of the TV while Mom prepared dinner. They munched on cold popcorn or pretzels, and they drank: Leo, a juice glass of Coke, Dad, a mug of beer. It was a habit that had started years ago, he could hardly remember when. All he could remember were late afternoons when Dad would walk in the front door, the cold air still clinging to his brown canvas jacket. He remembered that sometimes --usually on Fridays, paydays-- Dad would hold a present behind his back: a steaming box of cashews that he had driven downtown to buy. He remembered Dad bending over to unlace his steel-toe boots, the big square knuckles raised up on his hands. When he was very young, and his mom had first told

him that his dad's job was to make metal parts, Leo imagined him bending steel between his balled fists. That was an easy thing to believe; his hand could completely surround a quart bottle of beer. After he had poured his mug full in the kitchen, he would settle slowly into his yellow rocker-recliner. Leo remembered that sometimes Dad had talked to him, in a quiet voice, as he recalled it, and that sometimes he had talked to Dad. They had both nodded their heads a lot, listening.

Leo soon got used to seeing his dad at home each morning. He would walk past the recliner on the way to the kitchen, look down and see the same picture every day: Dad's short legs propped up on the foot rest, a mug of instant coffee in his hand, an un-lit cigarette in his mouth--he was trying to cut down.

Then one day Leo came downstairs, and Dad was gone. For ten days he worked at a forge in another city: Ft. Wayne, down south, Indiana. His mom called it an under-the-counter job, but she didn't seem to think that was a good thing. Dad never called while he was gone; his hearing kept him away from phones when he could avoid them. He did send one letter, though: a page off of a motel note pad filled with slanted, handwriting and crossed-out words. He complained about lousy restaurant food, and the non-union shop he worked in, the too-soft bed in his hotel room.

The last line of the letter, squeezed along the side of the page, said that he missed them.

The envelope also contained a picture. Dad wrote an explanation on the back: "one of the guys I came down with had a Polaroid camera, and he took this." Leo turned the snap shot over. There was Dad, looking over his shoulder, surprised by the picture, probably, his face washed out by the flash. But he looked different than Leo remembered, a black stubble of beard peppering his cheeks. He had his shirt off, his feet propped up on a chair. There was a red and white beer can in his hand, replacing the intricate glass mug that he drank from at home. Over his shoulder was a TV with a fuzzy blue light playing across the screen, and beside the TV, another man. The other man had his eyes closed, but the rest of his face was blurry, unrecognizable. He had a beer in his hand too, but except for this splash of red he seemed to be fading into the dark paneling of the room.

Leo flipped the picture over once again, reread his dad's words, then saw another sentence at the bottom of the snap shot. "This is me," was what it said.

Leo's mom changed while Dad was gone. In the days just after the layoff, she had been everywhere: talking on the telephone to the unemployment office, rousing Dad so that she could vacuum his chair, flipping through the

classifieds in the Journal and yelling into the living room when she came across something worth yelling about.

With Dad out of the house, her actions seemed to get slower day by day. Now Leo often found her sitting at the kitchen table looking out the window, no longer busy with the housework that had once occupied her. Or sometimes she would be sitting in Dad's recliner, her feet kicked high in the air on the footrests. She was usually watching soap operas, something he had never seen her do before. One day Mom looked like she was crying while she watched the program. A man in a doctor's coat was talking. His wife was leaving him. On the last day of the marking period, Leo came in with his report card and his mom was gone. He went from room to room, all through the empty house, trying to fight the spooky feeling that it might stay empty forever. His mom did come back at dinner time, but she said nothing. Her hands shook as she opened the can of soup for Leo's dinner.

And then one morning Leo heard the crack of the screen door, and Dad was back. "No more low-wage scabbing," he said, and he sat down in his recliner. Things were better with Dad home, but still not so good. The yelling often erupted late at night when Leo was in bed. He usually got out from under the covers when this happened, sometimes standing on his bed to look out the window. One night when the yelling just kept going and going, Leo shoved up the window as high as he could. He popped out the screen.

Climbing onto the thin headboard of his bed, he gripped the edges of the frame and pulled himself up. He kicked out his leg and climbed into the open window. He stood, slowly, uncertainly, then stepped to the outside sill.

He was the tallest that he had ever been. The night breeze fanned across his face, and he could see purple dots of light in the distance. The rest was dark, but Leo imagined that if he stood in this high window in the daytime, the sun would allow him to look for a long, long ways. He imagined the bright colors and the view, all the things he hadn't seen before.

One afternoon the windows of the shower room were shut tight. The pipe that had always leaked a thin stream of steamy water was empty. When Leo walked into his house, his mom was waving a piece of paper and yelling at the Dad.

"I told you it would come to this," she said. "You waited to be called back, and now look what's happened: out of business. There'll be two-thousand men looking for jobs tomorrow. How many jobs do you think they'll find?"

"There's jobs up north," Dad said. "I told you. The company will hire men up north, Lake City."

Mom slapped the paper down on the bookcase. "And I told you. We can't just pack up and go. We own this house. Leo's got school. We can't just leave."

"I can," Dad said. He stared at the blank television.

"This company has work, why don't they work you here, in this town."

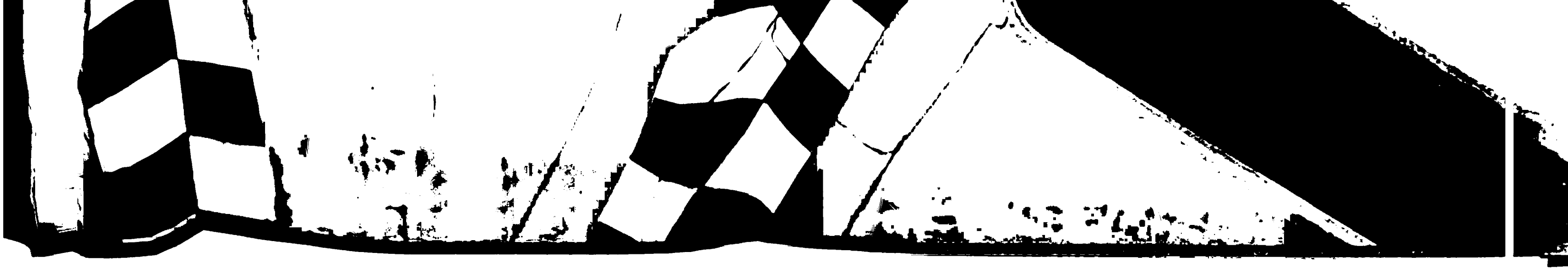
"Because in this town we got a union," he said. "In Lake City, they don't."

"They won't pay you a living wage," she said. It's just the same as Ft. Wayne."

"But they will pay me." Dad lit a cigarette. He left it in the exact center of his lips and talked around it. "I have to go down to the forge this afternoon and clean out my locker. Word is, a man from Lake City will be there to talk to anyone who's interested. I'm going to listen to what he has to say."

A half-hour later Dad left the house, and a while later, Leo left too. He didn't plan to walk down to the railroad tracks, but soon he was moving through the trees, the dead leaves crackling under his feet. He didn't plan to walk down to the forge, but soon the chain link fence rose up in front of him, and the oily ground spread in all directions.

Leo tramped down through a shallow ditch and then over to the forge's trash dump which lay just outside the railroad gate. He kicked at the pieces of flash which covered the ground: hunks of once-melted steel that had been trimmed from the forged parts and tossed out in the dump. The flash was heavy and rough, covered with bubbles and bumps like a moon rock. Leo hefted a piece from the



mushy ground, tossing it back and forth between his hands, feeling the solid, cold weight against his hands. He drew back his arm and threw the metal as high as he could, straight up in the air. It hung for a second against the bright sky, then slammed back down into the soft earth with a dull thud.

"Hey!" Leo turned at the sound of the voice, and there was his dad walking through railroad gate, toward him. A badly smudged leather apron was draped over his shoulder, a pair of goggles dangled from his hand. His steel-toe boots sank down into the spongy ground with each step.

"Hey." Leo walked toward him.

"What're you doing down here?" Dad asked.

"Just waiting," Leo said.

His dad looked at him, his eyes just two more thin creases in a well-lined face. "Well, looks like I'm going north, if that's what you're waiting to hear." Dad raised the goggles, dropped them down.

"Why?" Leo knew he shouldn't have asked, but he did anyway.

"It's work," Dad said, and he walked past Leo, heading down the siding toward the main tracks, headed for home. Leo stood still, watching him go. After a few steps he turned back to Leo. "You coming?" he asked, but he continued walking before Leo could answer.

And Leo stood there watching his dad get smaller against the Lindsey forge buildings which sat large and

black on the opposite side of the main tracks.

"Come on with me, Leo." Dad waved back one more time, but Leo stayed where he was. And as his dad got further away, he seemed to forget Leo. He just kept walking, watching the ground in front of him.

Leo looked up, the silver water tower leaning over him. He looked at the ladder which lead clear to the top, and he let his eyes follow the ladder all the way back down to the ground. He tried to think what it would be like at the top of the water tower, all of the things he could see.

When Leo started walking, he didn't go towards the tower, but followed his dad's steps down the siding. He walked slow at first, step after step, but then faster, and then he was running, his feet crunching into the ground, kicking up clouds of gray dust with each step. Then he was hurdling the rails of the main tracks and still running, his dad just a little dot in front of him, a point that he was trying to get to before it disappeared.

THE MARGARITA SEA

"How high are we?" My wife asked me a question while I drove. I looked at her, but didn't answer. "The altitude thing," she said. "What's it say?"

The altitude thing is a gauge attached to my side of the dashboard, and if you want to be precise, it's called an altimeter. Then again, if you want to be precise, my wife isn't really my wife. Her name is Wendy, and we aren't married. We do live together, though, and we've both been married before, so I call her my wife. She used to call me her husband, but she doesn't do that anymore. Wendy and I haven't seemed too married lately.

"I don't know," I said. "I can't read it now. I'm trying to drive." Actually, I had a pretty good hunch how high we were. We were driving in Michigan, the Lower Peninsula of Michigan, to be precise, which is a mostly flat piece of land surrounded by much water. We live in Lansing, a city eight-hundred-sixty feet above sea level. Since we had driven over nothing but flat ground since we left town, I figured we were about the same.

My wife probably didn't think about this, though;

she doesn't memorize figures like I do. She likes to look at a gauge and see what it tells her. When I didn't answer her question she didn't have any idea where we were, how high or low. I should have told her what I knew, but I didn't feel much like talking. That's the kind of day I was having.

I had woke up feeling okay, though. It was Saturday after all, February, and an encouraging thirty-six degrees at ten a.m. The sky was blue behind the big smokestacks, which are the first things you see when you look up from our bedroom window. The stacks are the highest points in Lansing, and every time I see them I struggle with some kind of metaphor to explain these tallest of objects in country that is largely low. On many days in Lansing, the tops of the stacks are obscured by clouds, and they remind me of beanstalks, as in "Jack and the Beanstalk," a ladder to the clouds, to someplace that might be better than here. But this morning they were noble white columns against the brilliant blue, flagpoles that should have been flying the grand flag of mid-Michigan, if there were such a thing. With such a day surrounding us, my wife and I hatched a plan. We decided to drive north, which was what we were doing now, but between then and now, two things happened.

My wife had asked me a question, and I hadn't answered it. That's what she said anyway. Actually, I had answered the question several times before, she just didn't remember my answers. Like I said, my wife doesn't memorize, and

some things she doesn't seem to remember at all. That's what happened this morning.

"If you could be anybody in the world who would you be?" she asked. It was a simple question, but it was also ten-thirty a.m.: too early to be thinking of answers, even if you already knew them. That's what happens when you live with someone, they can ask you anything at any time.

"I've answered that question two times before," I said.

She told me I hadn't, I told her I had. Then she shook her head and said what she usually says. "Well, tell me what you said then, then."

I didn't tell her. It wouldn't make much sense. You see, once I had told her I would be Gauguin, the painter. And once, back when we first started living together, I had told her I'd be me, Roy Fuller, the electrician.

"You never tell me anything," she said. "I have to pry everything out of you."

I told her my first wife had used those exact same words.

You're always shutting me out," she said. "You never say anything."

"I say as much as you," I said. "You just forget all your conversations, then repeat them. It seems like twice as much because you say everything twice."

"Maybe I'll just talk to someone new then," she said, and she must have meant it, because she hadn't said another word to me until she asked about the altitude thing, until she began to wonder how many feet we were above sea level.

I decided that this was probably a good sign. It was nice to be talked to again, even if I didn't answer her question. Things got rapidly quiet after that though, just the growl of highway wind and the faint sound of a cassette tape whose words I couldn't quite understand. I thought maybe I should say something. I looked at my wife, then leaned over and took a good look at the altimeter.

"Eight-hundred-eighty feet," I said. "We're twenty feet higher."

She smiled at me. "Thank you." She took my hand, and squeezed my fingers. I glanced at her, and she had that speculative look on her face that usually appears just before she asks a question. I could see it coming, and even had a hunch what the question would be. 'If you fell off of a real tall building, what would you think about while you were falling?' That was another of her favorites. It was something I preferred not to think of, falling off buildings, so I decided to beat her to the punch. I told my wife a story.

"Paul Gauguin was a banker. He made his living by wearing a suit and tie and turning other people's money into more money, some of which he kept for himself. He had a nice house in a nice part of Paris. He had a wife

who came from a rich family in another country. He had five children.

"But then Gauguin started to paint. He started hanging out with other painters. He started to hate his job more than he did before. So Gauguin quit. He painted some more. He grew his hair long because he was now an artist. He starved because he was an artist who couldn't sell his paintings. He left his wife and family and went to live with Van Gogh in Arles. One day Gauguin told Van Gogh that he painted too fast. Van Gogh told him that he looked too fast. I don't know what that has to do with this story, but I like it.

"One day Gauguin sold all of his possessions and he bought a ticket for Tahiti, an island which is about as far away from France as you can get. Once he got there, Gauguin hung out on the beach with beautiful Tahitian women. He painted many pictures of them which became very famous. He lived in a nice grass hut, and sometimes a fifteen year old girl came by and stayed with him. They were all very happy."

"But what happened to his wife?" my wife asked me. "And why did he leave Paris? I'd love to go to Paris."

"He didn't like it, I guess."

"But that's where his family was. That's his home."

"That's why he left," I said, but my wife didn't

understand. "Look," I said, "it wasn't like he could go to the Eiffel Tower everyday. He had to go to work in the morning, come home at night, breath smoke, argue with his wife, worry about money-- It was probably like living in Lansing to him."

Wendy fixed me with a look which I could feel even though I was watching the road. "What happened to his wife?" she said.

I said I didn't know. "Maybe she met somebody else."

"Smart woman," Wendy said.

We passed a mileage sign: "Mt. Pleasant 18". Mt. Pleasant is not a mountain. It is as flat as a blank piece of typing paper and actually lower than Lansing by a good ninety feet. I watched the sign sail by and I thought about where we were going. Then I returned to the conversation.

"Well what about Gauguin?" I said. "He did okay once he got to Tahiti."

"Fourteen year old girls. Would you rather live with a fourteen year old instead of me?"

"He didn't live with her," I said.

It was at this point that my wife decided, once again, that talking was of little use. A few more miles went by, but I decided that Mt. Pleasant was probably more than I could handle on this afternoon. Somewhere near Alma we reversed directions. A moment later more signs sailed past our car. These were larger and more colorful. One of the signs had a few words of advice. "Come to the heart of

Michigan: Lansing."

By the time we got close to the heart, a ceiling of low winter clouds had been pulled across the once-blue sky. The wind blew colder. It seemed a typical weather pattern for Michigan: good conditions turning rapidly worse. Just outside of town, a mixture of snow and rain began to spit out of the clouds.

When I pulled my car into the driveway, my house looked as big as always: two stories, three bedrooms, one-and-a-half baths. Wendy still wasn't talking to me, and it was at times like this that I was glad for the size of my house. While my wife stayed downstairs and stared angrily at magazines, I could go upstairs to what I usually called my study. What I usually studied there was the view of the three smokestacks, the color and clearness of the Lansing sky. It was an activity that reminded me of the days when I hid out upstairs to avoid another woman, who, like Wendy, was tall and had blond hair. That was my first wife, the one I was really married to.

I had answered "I do," she had answered "I do," and with both of our names on the marriage license, we went looking for a house. This one seemed perfect. When I signed my name to the mortgage, I was proud of myself. I can still remember sitting in the realtor's office and looking at the thick blue lines left by the fountain pen: "Roy C.

Fuller." And we didn't think twice about a thirty year mortgage. Back then, thirty years was a spit in the ocean.

So we moved in. We hung curtains and put up pictures. My wife gave me a calendar for my study. "Gauguin 1987." As a calendar, it was poor, the numbers listed out in a long line so that was hard to tell which day and date you were looking for. But as a source of pictures and information, it was great. It had the story of Gauguin, a painting for every month, and at the back of the calendar an analysis of each painting. Everything you needed to learn about a famous French artist in twelve installments. I learned a lot.

When I think about that calendar, I can almost point to a particular month that things began to change: August, 1987. From then on, I would come home some nights and be glad for everything I had: a house, a job, a wife with blond hair that I loved. Then I would come home the next night and be depressed about all the things I saw: every piece of furniture and knick-knack, the wedding pictures in heavy silver frames. "Jeez," I'd say, "where did all this come from?"

On nights like that I'd go upstairs to my study, just for somewhere to go. All I'd see there was the city that was all around me, smokestacks, clouds, more houses just like mine. On the wall there was the calendar with bright pictures, beautiful, exotic women. And some of the paintings had titles that asked questions: "Where Do We Come From?"

"Where Are We Going?" I knew the answer to the first one; I was from Lansing. The second question made me think for a long time, and by the time I got to the last painting for 1987, I still wasn't sure.

Maybe it's a feeling that would have passed. That's what all my still-married friends told me. On my better days, I thought that it was passing, and that I was ready to go forward into whatever the future had for us. Somewhere along the way my wife started having her own doubts, though. She also had a memory that could recall every angry word of a past argument, and she would often bring them up days or even weeks later. On New Year's Day we didn't make resolutions. We replayed the last year, and then my wife asked her own questions about where we were going. The answers I gave didn't seem to satisfy her, so I bought my own calendar for 1988, and the things I learned in the following year had little to do with art. Instead, I learned the cost of a mediocre divorce lawyer. I learned many interesting but inconclusive facts about weather and geography. I memorized the menu and the daily specials at Corey's Lounge.

Now I was back in my study once again, while another woman who wasn't satisfied with my answers waited downstairs. I watched the weather turn to definite snow. It was getting worse. The strobes on the smokestacks had been turned off in the early dusk, replaced by red beacons which winked slowly and out of rhythm with one another.

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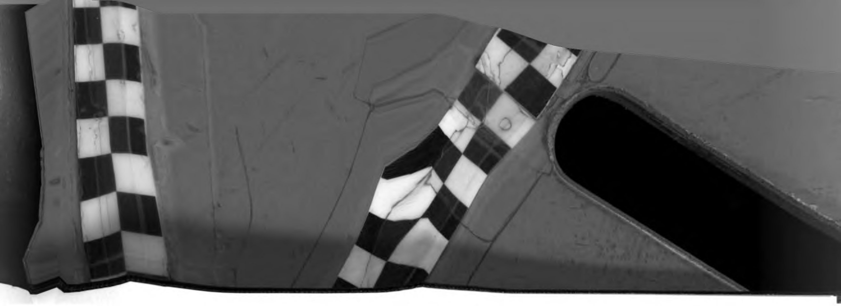
I heard the TV switch on, sounds of life. I thought about leaving my study then. I thought about returning to my wife, being upbeat and apologetic, trying to rescue what was left of a Saturday evening. Then I concocted an odd plan in my mind where I wouldn't talk to my wife at all, but would slide down a bed sheet from an upstairs window, stealing away to a secret night of Margaritas at Corey's.

I stood there thinking of both these ideas, but not doing either of them. I looked back up at the smokestacks, as if they might give me a sign. They didn't seem to want to. They just stood there, the three wise men, Wynken Blynken and Nod. Yes, it's true, the smokestacks have names. Someone named them years ago, drawing inspiration from the nursery rhyme, perhaps searching for a metaphor of their own. It seems Wynken, Blynken and Nod were three kids who supposedly went sailing through the sky in a wooden shoe. They caught stars in a net. But what really happens is that they're all three just one kid who's asleep in his bed, dreaming of something better.

I considered this fact while I watched the snow fill up my neighbor's backyard, while my wife watched a television show below me. I was thinking about the connections between nursery rhymes and French painting. I was wondering if you could sail a wooden shoe all the way to Tahiti.



"There's only one way off of a peninsula," I said. I was talking to the guy next to me at the bar, Lou something, another Saturday night refugee at Corey's Lounge. Another person being soothed by bright colors in a dark bar: the golden bubbles of beer in a clean glass, the incredible Gauguin green of my Margarita.

I had taken option number two: escape to Corey's, over option one: apologies and reconciliation. I hadn't slid down a bed sheet. I had left by the front door with firm words hanging in the air behind me: "I'm going out." I wondered if the bed sheet wasn't a better idea, though; Wendy had spoken several sentences of her own before my exit. Sentences which expected me to make choices and give answers, and which can best be summed up in the last four words: "what do you want?"

Now I was at Corey's, and behind the bar was Michelle, my favorite bartender, but also a friend of Wendy's. A lot of people said that she and Wendy look alike, but they never seemed alike to me. Michelle's too quiet. Michelle was the reason I had met Wendy, though. One night Wendy was at Corey's waiting for Michelle to get off work, and I was there waiting for someone to replace my ex-wife. We talked, and then everything else happened.

Tonight when I came in, Michelle had asked what Wendy was doing. I had given a partial answer, insinuating that she was home alone, but saying nothing about the fact that she was about to leave me. Then I started discussing geography with Lou something. I expressed my fondness for islands, while Lou seemed to be a peninsula man. He liked Michigan, and Lansing in particular. I can't say that I agreed, but what he said had me thinking.

I was thinking about a Bugs Bunny cartoon where Bugs gets mad and cuts Florida off of the rest of the United States. Florida, after all, is a peninsula, much like Michigan. And Bugs takes a handsaw and just cuts it loose. "South America, take it away," Bugs says, and off it goes, Florida, looking like a dismembered thumb floating in the Caribbean.

"Hey," I said to Lou, "what do you think would happen if we could cut Michigan off from Ohio and Indiana? Just chop it off, so they're not even connected?"

"People would get pissed."

"Yeah, but that's not what I mean. If we cut it off, Michigan would be an island."

"So?"

"An island. Haven't you ever wanted to live on an island? Like Hawaii, or Tahiti?"

"Where's Tahiti?" Lou asked.

"It's by Hawaii, only better. Palm trees, beaches, Tahitian women. Everything you could want." I waved at Michelle. I wanted another Margarita.

"I don't know," Lou said. "I kind-of like it the way it is. A peninsula." Lou was watching the TV while he spoke, but then he looked at me. "And we have women here, you k

know."

"Not like Tahiti," I said.

Check out Michelle." He nodded toward the woman who was mixing my drink.

I did check her out. I had actually checked her out quite often in the past, even without Lou's coaxing, but I failed to see his point. No matter how nice Michelle was, or how long her legs were, I just couldn't picture her in a grass hut, or smiling at me out of a painted canvas. I knew Michelle. She was a friend of my wife's.

Lou turned his attention back to the TV. When my drink arrived, I tipped the glass back and forth, watched the green liquid slosh up onto the sides like waves lapping a foamy beach. I held the glass up to the bright light of the Stroh's sign, and admired the color. Then I put the glass to my lips and ducked my head beneath the surface of the briny Margarita Sea.

"Where are we going?" Wendy asked me. Yet another question.

"We're going home," I said,

"Then why are we driving here?" Here was South Avenue, a mysterious-looking back street that ducked under the Cedar overpass, and ran alongside the river. It was a route home from Corey's, but not a direct route. That was okay, though. Direct routes had many policemen who would not

approve of the multiple Margaritas I had drank before leaving Corey's. Wendy didn't approve either. More precisely, she hadn't approved of me drinking the Margaritas at Corey's while she was at home by herself. So she had driven to Corey's and found me. I wasn't mad when she came in, though. I was glad to see her, and was still glad to see her now. That's why were driving home together.

Before she showed up I had drank my Margaritas and watched more of the lumberjack contest, though I don't remember how it came out. Me and Lou didn't talk anymore about islands, and after a while he left. "Home to the wife," he said.

I didn't stop thinking about islands, though, and once was Lou was gone I found myself thinking about them more and more. I started to pretend I was in a bar in Tahiti. I pretended that I was an artist, like Gauguin, and that I was sipping one of the local concoctions after a hard day of painting naked women. I kept looking at the door where Gauguin himself would soon appear. Where he'd take off his hat and smooth his mustache, and then wave when he saw me at the bar. He'd come over and join me, the stool where Lou was just sitting. We'd talk about our art, what we had painted that day. We'd talk about what a great time we were having on the island.

I didn't pretend for very long. Michelle kept walking back and forth, taking orders, cashing tabs, and every time she went by, Gauguin faded away. I started to think that maybe she did look like Wendy, at least from the back. Same figure. Same blond hair. I had her fix me another Margarita, and I drank it. Then I started pretending Michelle was my wife. My wife in a bar in Tahiti, but no--that wouldn't work out. So then she was just my wife working at Corey's Lounge. When I was ready for a fresh one, I called to her.

"Hey honey, how about another Margarita?"

Michelle turned around and gave me a funny look. "Okay dear, just hold your horses."

I went to the bathroom. After I washed my hands, I looked at myself in the mirror. That was me.

When I got back to the bar, my new drink was waiting for me. That was good. While I drank it I started thinking about my first wife, the real one. The first week we were married, she would always have my beer sitting on the coffee table when I got home from work. It only lasted a week, and was more of a joke than anything else, but I got a kick out of it. It reminded me of this Margarita, just sitting there happily on the bar when I walked up. I looked at Michelle again. She looked like my first wife, too. I thought then that I didn't really have a problem with women in general, just tall women with blond hair.

I started pretending that Michelle was my first wife, working at Corey's. Which was weird, because my first wife worked for the State of Michigan, and I don't think she'd quit such a well-paying job to be a bartender. I wondered what my first wife would say to me if she was here. Probably nothing. She sure hadn't said anything to me for the last two years. And she wasn't saying anything now. She hadn't spoken to me since I ordered the last drink, and in fact, seemed to be avoiding my end of the bar. I swallowed the last of my drink and waited. Then I waited some more. People were getting off their stools at the other end of the bar. They were walking out the door. Finally my thirst overcame me, and I called to my wife.

"I need a drink here, darling."

She walked up to me, and as she got closer she looked more and more like Michelle and less and less like anybody else. She also looked worried.

"Are you okay?" she said. This was definitely not my first wife. She didn't care if I was okay.

"I'm wonderful," I said. "I'd be even more wonderful if I could have another Margarita."

Michelle shook her head. "I think you've had enough," she said. She shook her head again and smiled. When she smiled I knew that this was Michelle. Michelle had perfect teeth. Michelle was not Wendy, and Michelle was not my first wife. Wendy was not Michelle, and Wendy was not my first wife either. Everybody was different.

"I'll get you a cup of coffee," she said, and I said that would be okay. It was a while later, I think, that Wendy walked in the door. Wendy, and not Gauguin. Wendy looked like Wendy always does, but different too. Maybe

she was mad. I was smiling, though, and I called out to her. "Wendy," I said. "Wendy."

By the time we left Corey's the snow had stopped, but the roads were still tricky, at least on Margaritas. Wendy was uneasy about my driving skills and my ability to navigate. "Why *are* we driving here?" she said again, still referring to South Avenue.

"We're not driving," I said. "We're stopping." And that's what I did, I pulled over to the side of the road. South Avenue runs past a rickety wooden railroad bridge that once carried trains above the river, and that's where I stopped. The bridge was posted with ominous signs on snow-covered barricades: "Danger. Unsafe structure. Do Not Enter." I liked South Avenue. It was nearly always empty, and at times like this it reminded me of a movie set for a detective picture, a place where exciting and possibly dangerous things were about to happen.

"We can go home this way," I said. "You've been this way before."

"I don't remember," she said.

"You don't remember anything, do you?" I was smiling, but Wendy wasn't.

"I remember what happened tonight," she said. "I remember what I asked you before you left."

I laughed and hugged her, but she didn't hug back.

"Let's forget that," I said. "I need to forget more things."

Wendy didn't smile. She bit her lip. She didn't say anything.

Up ahead, the three smokestacks shot up into the clearing sky. "Nice view," I said.

"If you like to look at smokestacks," she said. "Why are we stopped here?"

"We're just admiring the view," I said, and I laughed. "Plus, you're driving." I opened my door and got out; Wendy slid behind the wheel.

"It's about time," she said. "I told you."

I cautiously made my way around the car, slip-sliding on the icy pavement. "Yeah," I said, once I got back inside. "You're right."

"Where do you want to go?" she asked.

"Home," I said. "Drive us home."

Once I made it through the front door and up the stairs, I just took off my clothes and fell into bed. Too much had happened to worry about brushing my teeth. A while later, Wendy came in. She got into the same bed we slept in every night, but now it seemed different. I noticed the smoothness of the sheets and the warmth of another body.

Wendy went to sleep instantaneously, as if I snapped my fingers and she went into a trance. As if she wouldn't remember any bad things about this day when she awoke. Me, I just lay there, thinking some more. I was flat on

my back, my arm just barely brushing against Wendy. And that's the way I stayed, not getting any closer for fear I'd wake her up and she would remember. Not wanting to move any further away.

THROUGH THE MESH

First his wife died; then his bees died. When he thought about it, Finch could almost remember a folk tale about bees and dying, something from one of the books that his wife had bought him when they had first moved to the farm. Seemed that dead bees were supposed to be an omen for dead people. The bees had it backwards here, but Finch didn't see it mattered much. There had been more than enough signs in the six months that came after they had found her cancer.

In the shed, Finch slid a comb frame out of the hive. A few curled bodies were stuck to the frame, looking like brittle leaves. He scraped the dead bees into a coffee can with a putty knife. Then he pulled out the other frames, and started in, cutting the comb from the frames. He went quickly, not careful as he usually was. It was spring, and there was not enough honey in the brood to be worth saving.

When he was finished, he slid the empty frames back into the super, put the covers back on. He left the hive on the workbench, and walked back to the house. He made

himself another cup of instant coffee and carried it to the back porch. From there he could see his land stretch either way. East, to the fence line and beyond, to the gently curving lines of the Watson's new-plowed field. West, to the stand of locust, where the blossoms would soon come, the direction the bees used to fly, their bodies black, wavering traces over the field.

Finch looked down at his coffee cup. Tiny colored droplets bobbed on the surface, red to purple to yellow. For a moment he smiled at the tiny rainbows, the same oily sheen that gathered when gasoline drained onto wet ground.

Gravel crunched beneath car tires, and Finch stood up, his back sore from so long in one place. When he opened the front door, he saw Wayne Ely climbing the front steps. "Hello Wayne," Finch said.

Wayne smiled. Put his hands in his pockets and rocked back on his heels. He had something to say, but he didn't want to say it too soon. "Beautiful spring day," he said.

"Yes it is," Finch said. "It is that." He looked up at the sky as if to confirm its beauty. "Come on in. Drink a cup of coffee with me."

"Well," Wayne said. "I might do that."

They sat down with their cups on the back porch. They were quiet. Finch looked down at his cup again, but he didn't see the rainbows anymore.

"How you been doing?" Wayne asked.

"Keeping busy. Cleaned out that hive this morning."

Wayne nodded, smiled. "A lot of people in the Association have lost hives. They say it's a mite gets into the hive that does it."

Finch nodded. "Is that right?"

"That's what they say. Say once the bees die out you can start a new hive, and it's okay. Mite moves on, I guess."

Finch pressed his lips together and looked out over the field.

"That reminds me," Wayne said. "I brought you my copy of the Apiary Catalogue. Thought you might be looking to start up a new hive."

"I don't think I'm up to chasing down any swarms," Finch said. He thought of the time he started his first hive, climbing an extension ladder up against a pine tree on Wayne's farm. He remembered sawing the branch, and carrying the branch down the ladder, and at the end of the branch was a ball of bees as large as his head. And his wife was below him on the ground, saying "be careful."

"You don't need a swarm," Wayne said. "You can order the bees out of the catalogue. Come in a box, queen and all. A lot of people in the Association are ordering them."

"You don't say," Finch said. "A box?"

"Let me get you that catalogue." Wayne went out the back door and came back slapping the magazine against his

thigh as he walked. He opened the door again and came inside. He showed Finch the listing.

"Well, what do you know," Finch said. "Bees in a box."

That night Finch slept, which was unusual, but when he had the dream, he wished he hadn't. The dream had gone on for a long time, but he only remembered the back edge of it. His wife was laying in her bed, and she was certainly dead. And Finch was there, and someone else. He couldn't remember who. Maybe the ambulance people who had been there that day. And while Finch stood beside the bed, looking at his wife who was dead, she opened her eyes. Not all the way open, just half. And she tried to smile but could not. Then Finch woke up, and he realized that his wife never seemed more dead to him than at that moment.

A few days later Wayne pulled into the driveway again. He got out of his car carrying something.

"I can't stay," Wayne said. "I have to get up to Hillsdale this morning. But I wanted to drop these off for you." What he had was a white box with a cardboard handle.

"Joe Isaacs said that he had one more box of bees than he needed, so I thought you might want it. Or did you order some?"

"No. No, I didn't." Finch took the handle between his thumb and forefinger, held the box at arm's length. "Well, thank you, Wayne. What do I owe you."

"Nothing. Like I said, it wasn't being used. There's instructions inside the box, I believe."

"Well, thank you." Finch knew he should be more persistent about the money, but he didn't feel up to it.

"Well I have to go then," Wayne said. "Good luck."

"Thank you."

When the car was gone, Finch carried the box back to the shed. He went inside and sat it next to the hive. He looked at the box, then leaned over and put his ear against it, listening for the sound of movement. He didn't hear anything, but he believed they were there.

Finch straightened up, smoothed back his hair. He looked at the box again, then let his eyes wander along the workbench. Then he looked out the window. There was a tractor in the bright sun in the Watson's field.

Hanging next to the window was a bee veil Finch had bought years back. Seemed he hadn't used it once he got used to the bees, but now he took it off its nail. He might need it if he was going to take these bees out of their box.

Finch slipped the veil over his head. The workshop seemed much darker through the black mesh. He looked out the window, but the screen created a haze that tinted the brightness he had seen a moment ago. Finch left the bees

on the counter and walked to the door. He stepped outside, still wearing the veil.

He looked at his house. Then he turned and looked out over his field, the place against the back hill where the hive used to set. On a day like today the bottom board would be a confusion of bees, crawling and flying, coming and going. Further away, he could see the the stand of locust, its green buds looking fuzzy through the mesh. Soon there would be leaves and in the fall they would be gone.

Finch stood there, looking. He crossed his eyes and tried to focus on the screen that was just in front of his face. Then he uncrossed his eyes, and tried to look past the veil, but the haze was still there. Then Finch remembered a time when he was very young. Of when he stood at the front door of his parent's house, not old enough to be outside on his own. He had jammed his face up against the door screen then, the wire sharp against his nose. And he had stared through the screen at the green and bright yellow of the front yard, the sight and smell of an outside that he could not yet go to.

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