

**NOTHING OR NEXT TO NOTHING  
(ATLANTIC CITY BLUES)**

By

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# Abstract

*Nothing or Next to Nothing (Atlantic City Blues)* is a novella steeped in the tradition of American Naturalism. It follows the lives of teenage brother and sister, Derek and Daisy Kehoe, after the death of their mother and abandonment by their father.

*nothing or next to nothing*

barry graham

These are the thoughts of all men in all ages and lands, they are not  
original with me,  
If they are not yours as much as mine they are nothing or next to  
nothing,  
If they do not enclose everything they are next to nothing.  
If they are not the riddle and the untying of the riddle they are  
nothing,  
If they are not just as close as they are distant they are nothing.

- Uncle Walt, *Song of Myself*

But if these years have taught me anything it is this: you can never run away. Not ever. The only way out is  
in.  
And that's what I guess these stories are all about.

- Junot Diaz, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*

**Prologue:**  
***Daisy's Song***

We left Louisville two weeks after Daddy died and spent all summer digging for dinosaur bones at the bottom of a dried up creek in the backwoods of Dowagiac. Dirt and rock and large picks and small picks and trowels and measuring tape and bruised skin and bloody bandages and blisters. There were never any fucking bones. She was such a stupid bitch, Sherry was, I wanted to tell her that there were no dinosaur bones in Michigan, that people would dig and sift for a hundred more years but nobody would ever find them, that the movement of glaciers back and forth scraped away the layers of rock that contained all their remains. And erosion you stupid whore, what about erosion? But I loved her then, or maybe I just didn't know shit about paleontology, so I kept digging.

It was a little yellow pop up tent made for two. We built fires and roasted frogs and crawfish and waded knee deep in Dowagiac Creek hunting carp with sticks carved into spears then took turns cutting leeches from our bare skin when we made it back to camp. At night we slept side by side, sweating into each others pores and counting stars and watching them fall while we made wishes that wouldn't come true.

Lying beside us in the tent was a loaded .22 rifle she kept wrapped in an old wool blanket next to the flashlights. Some nights I heard snakes coil themselves around the strong branches of maple trees, and wolves grow massive claws and fangs by the magic of a full moon, so I'd unwrap the blanket and rub the barrel of the gun against my cheeks and chest which should have made it safer to sleep but didn't. Sometimes I slept the other way, with the side of my face pressed against Sherry's chest, listening to her

heartbeat. I counted them when I couldn't sleep, when I thought about Daddy helping me use the gun to scare away rodents and chase wild turkeys through the green grass of Kentucky. Sometimes her heart beat too fast or too slow or sometimes not at all. It was always working and not working. Sometimes I shook her awake so it would beat again. She'd push the back of my head harder into her breasts and kiss the top of my head then I'd fall asleep.

Sherry slept naked every night. Her skin was dusty. Always dusty and sooty and silky and soft and the dust made me sneeze into the back of her hair so I washed it for her every morning after the sun rose and she cooked us eggs and pancakes on a thin slice of sheet metal overtop the near dead fire from the night before and we ate while the chickadees and juncos sang and the silence of southern Michigan came to life all around us. By the end of the summer her skin became my skin, her breath and blood and breasts and bruises and black rings around her eyes, all became mine.

**&&&**

We dug every morning after breakfast. Arrowheads and old coins and jewelry and broken pottery but never dinosaurs.

"I found one. It's a bone, look."

"No it isn't Daisy."

"It's a fossil then. It looks really old. We should keep this, right?"

“Hand it here.” I did. She crumbled it between her thumb and forefinger and sprinkled it into the dirt like pixie dust.

“They’re pseudofossils. They’re not real.” She wiped the corners of my eyes and sucked my tears from her thumb and explained the differences in fossil types while I tried to stop crying. Pseudofossils are formed when small spaces exist in rocks and they fill up with organic material and leave false impressions that mimic the real thing. She talked about living fossils and micros and macros and resin and compression and trace fossils, which we found quite frequently, which really meant dried shit. “Everything we take from the earth has to be returned Daisy. It makes us all stronger.” I grabbed my hand pick and kept digging.

That night I dreamed we finally found bones. Squamo-occipitals and scapulas and sacrums and a single skull. It was Daddy’s skull full of maggots and carrion beetles feeding away where his brain should have been and both eyes were still in his sockets and I dug the hole deeper and dropped him back in and covered him with dirt and then I woke up. By the end of the summer I could almost make it twenty-four hours without sleep.

**&&&**

“Wake up Daisy, it’s time to go.”

“Where’s the flashlight? I can’t see anything.”

“We can’t. Just hold onto my arm. Are you dressed?”

“No. Why do we—” She put her hand over my mouth and held my wrist and led me out of the tent and into the creek where we waded upstream a half mile before I got out and sat cross legged on a large log beneath an elm tree.

“Stay quiet and don’t move.” She disappeared. The sun rose and set and I kept sitting.

**&&&**

Sherry was carrying the .22 rifle when she found me the next day, still sitting cross legged on the large log beneath the elm tree. We never made it back to Dowagiac. She rented a one room shack from a one-armed walleye fisherman less than a mile from an abandoned mine near the mouth of the Manistee River on Lake Michigan where we spent the better half of September sifting for gold with plastic pans and screens and shovels and sluice boxes we borrowed from the fisherman’s only friend, Linford, a homeless man who smelled like Smartweed and looked like Daddy, with dark hair and dark eyes that watched me while I worked; always in expectation of something he couldn’t have unless he took it and he never did.

Sherry and I slept together under a black and blue blanket on a blood stained queen sized mattress in the corner of our room. The wind blowing in from Lake Michigan made the nights unbearable, so Linford lent us his kerosene heater and we let him sleep on the floor beside it. He owned lots of things for a homeless man: old carnival bumper cars and bird cages and Korean binoculars and empty egg cartons and two more kerosene heaters, both black, both ending up in our shack as September



ended and the nights grew colder and my space in the bed grew smaller. I slept with the front of my body pressed hard against the weather-beaten wood wall while Sherry pressed hers against my back and breathed and bucked and braced and bit into my shoulder blades while Linford dug his dirty fingernails into her bare hips and fucked her.

She made scrambled eggs and sausage and blueberry muffins for breakfast and we ate them while Linford put his blue jeans on overtop his long johns and filled the kerosene heater before he left. Sherry wrapped her arms around my neck when she heard the door close and whispered, "he did it Daisy, he found gold." She repeated the word gold and we both cried.

We sifted through sand and rocks and gravel for most of the morning, watching the mud spill over the sides of the plastic pans, but the bottoms were always empty after the water washed everything away. Sherry found a fishing pole with a spin cast reel and a brown tackle box full of flies and fishing line and lures and fake worms when she went to take a piss. They were underneath an upside down paddle boat left alone along the edge of the lake, so we put it in the water and pushed it a little ways from shore and got in while the salmon fishermen heading out to the docks watched and whistled when Sherry's shirt got wet. We sat quiet and floated for hours and listened to the sounds the sky made and counted the clouds as they passed by us or we passed by them and I wondered if Daddy knew I was looking up hoping to find him. I wonder if he knew about Linford and the gold.

**I**

I was picking my nose and rolling the boogers into little balls and listening to whatever stupid shit was on the radio. It was *Crazy* or *Amazing* or some other Aerosmith song that nobody knows any of the words to except for the chorus. The rain was slowing and my wiper blades were screeching across the windshield, so I turned them off, along with the radio, and hoped for the best. The night was quiet and it smelled quiet and I almost forgot where I was headed.

I should have unlocked the door and went in, but I didn't. I stood outside beating on the glass just to see how long it would take until I was acknowledged. I took the place over a few weeks ago from a guy I knew since high school. He bought it off a friend of his father's with some money he stashed away from a series of armed robberies. He took three quarters of a million dollars in rings and necklaces and diamonds from seven different jewelry stores in the metro Detroit area. The police caught on and all three of his cousins flipped him and he served two and a half years then got out and opened Backwoods Bar and Grill. He was medium height, shaved head, scruffy and thick like a grizzly bear, so that's what everyone called him. He had a tattoo of Jesus on his right forearm and a McDonald's golden arch on his left.

Can you believe it? A goddam golden arch? Ray Croc, founder of the McDonald's Operating Company, started his business career as a failed paper cup salesman. He said that getting into the restaurant business was part of his insight, his ability to predict the next trend before anyone else and evolve his thinking accordingly. He also said that the best kept secret in America is that hard work really does pay off. Why not listen? The man built a fucking empire. His initial interest in McDonald's was to hustle these fancy milkshake machines

he designed, to put them in every restaurant in America. After avoiding bankruptcy by withholding his employees' pay for months, then begging his friends for more and more money, he took that one restaurant and established the most successful corporation in the history of the world. Maybe history's most inspirational innovators are more insightful than anyone else or maybe they're stupider with better luck or maybe God signed a pact with their ancestors and it doesn't matter how fucking smart or stupid anyone is now because all that shit's been predetermined. And guess whose ancestors got fucked.

In their initial agreement, Croc let the McDonald's brothers keep the original restaurant. It was their time and money and hard work that started it all. They planned on keeping it in the family as a lasting legacy for future generations, and when Croc returned to Arizona and made them an offer, they refused to sell. So Croc did what emperors do. He crushed them. Put up a brand new McDonald's right across the fucking street from the original and drove the brothers out of business. In the end, you may be right Emperor Croc, hard work really does pay off, but I like Grizzly's mantra better, restaurant rule two; nobody is your friend.

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I met Grizzly working at McDonalds the summer I turned sixteen and managed his restaurant for a month before I took it over and now I had to stand outside in the rain for ten minutes until someone let me in.

"Derek? What the hell are you doing out there? Why didn't you use your key?"

“Make me a cheese steak hoagie. Lots of cheese, mushrooms, onions, all that shit.”

“Why are you here so late?”

“I’m on my way outta town for a few days. I need you to open up shop for awhile.”

“That’s fine. Who’s gonna close?”

“I pulled Jalen from morning shift. He’s gonna come in and close, you’re gonna open. No bullshitting around while I’m gone. You’re in charge. I’ll call twice a day.”

“Is everything okay?”

“The safe is gonna be short tonight. When you’re done counting that last drawer just set it to a hundred bucks and pocket the rest. Where’s my sandwich?”

KC is an alright kid for being a fag. When he started working here last month he used to bring in some really good shit and smoke it with us until he got pulled over and searched by the police then he started leaving it at home. One day we smoked a joint in the stock room beside two boxes of Worcestershire sauce and he offered to give me a blow job. I was high as a goddam redwood and almost unzipped my pants but I told him I wasn’t fucked up enough and he never asked again. He’s had better luck with some of the other guys back there in the stock room. It really was some good ass weed.

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I put some Italian dressing on the cheese steak hoagie and it scorched my tongue when I took a bite. Two half chewed mushrooms fell out of my mouth. They landed on my t-shirt and I picked them off, ate them, and washed them down

with a bottle of Miller High Life. I took two cases from the cooler and four thousand dollars from the safe. KC asked me again if everything was okay and I told him again not to bullshit around while I'm gone. The rain slowed back down and 90's rock was still on the radio. At least it wasn't 80's rock; puffy haired douche bags with mascara and lipstick and blush smeared all over their faces, wearing band t-shirts and spandex, singing love ballads to groupie whores and letting their guitar solos last longer than they should. I had that to be thankful for. I drank another High Life. I stopped for gas just before crossing the state line into Ohio. I filled up with premium and took a piss before I paid. There was a pink piece of gum in the urinal and a bloody snot wad stuck to the freshener. I flushed twice, once before and once after, and washed my hands but didn't dry them. The register girl had curly red hair and freckles and big tits. She had brown eyes and thick hips and I wondered if her tits were big-firm or big-droopy once she unbuckled her bra. I paid for the gas and bought a lottery ticket and a pack of Swisher Sweets. It looked like her name tag was pinned to her right nipple. Women pretend not to like it when guys talk to their tits. Her name was Sherry. My mother's name is Sherry. She died when I was twelve. I came home from school and she was sitting at the table wearing just a pair of red panties, thongs, and her face was head down in a bloody bowl of cream of wheat. There were clumps smeared into her dark brown hair. So should I say *was* instead of *is*? My mother's name *was* Sherry. I never know how to say it. My mother's tits were big-firm.

I pulled her head out of the cream of wheat and wiped off her face and neck with a well worn green and yellow sponge from the kitchen sink. I wet the sponge

again and cleaned out her hair the best I could. Daisy opened the door and screamed. She ran to the table, slapped me twice in the face, and started to cry. I couldn't speak. I walked over to the phone and dialed 911 and handed it to Daisy.

"I think my mom's dead...I don't know what happened...My brother is here. He's not crying or talking or anything. I think he killed her."

I sat in a chair next to my mother. Daisy sat in a chair on the other side of her and held her dead head against her chest and petted her dead hair until the ambulance arrived. The police came too. They asked why she thought I killed our mother. They asked where our father was. They asked what time we left the house this morning. They asked how often our mother ate cream of wheat. They asked if she always wore thong panties. I never answered any of their questions. I stopped talking entirely for almost six months. Daisy answered all their questions one by one, purposefully, methodically.

"She was sitting there naked and Derek always tries to peek at her when she's naked...He isn't my father. He's my step-father and he's at work. He's a garbage man. Won't be home until 6:00 pm. He'll be drunk...I left the house at 7:25 am. I never actually seen Derek leave...Mother ate cream of wheat every morning, sometimes with bananas, sometimes strawberries...Yes, she always wore thongs. Sometimes she borrowed mine because they're prettier..."

My father came home drunk at 6:00 just like Daisy told the police he would. But that was the last day. 6:00 became 8:00, drunker; 8:00 became 11:00, even drunker; 11:00 became the next day, which became next week. By the end of the month it was never again.

There was no funeral. No relatives driving six hundred miles to visit, to send their condolences and make sure we didn't die beside our mother at the kitchen table.

"Don't worry, Derek, I'll take care of you. I'll always take care of you." And she did.

We used our mother's social security money to buy groceries and new clothes and a new car when Daisy got her driver's license, a white Mustang with a hatchback. My father kept the bills paid until Daisy's twenty-first birthday. We didn't know he stopped until Detroit Edison sent a man out in a white truck to cut off the lights; then the telephone, then the eviction notice came from the court house giving us thirty days to get out. She told me I could live with her if I got a job, so I did. I chose McDonalds because she was a vegetarian back then, which meant I had to be a vegetarian at home, salads and steamed broccoli, eggplant and baked zucchini, no fish, no cheese. She was reading *The Bhagavad-Gita*, *The Tao Te Ching*, *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*. I expected to come home from school to find her cross-legged, flying through the kitchen on a magic carpet, one of those purple and gold Persian rugs like Aladdin's, meditating over our mother's chair, but she never was. She was usually just listening to old hippie records, Janis Joplin or Jimmie Hendrix. She was always crying and always rolling a joint or smoking out of the clay bowl I made her in art class. It was brown and green, glazed smooth like a marble, like her eyes, like our mother's eyes.



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The gas station was big and busy. Three women in Ohio State jackets were standing by the door, looking at a map, pointing at Cincinnati. Two of them were thin, twins, brunettes. The other was a friend, blonde-headed, frumpy. Her tits were small even though she was fat. She was eating Funyons and twisting the knob on a bubble gum machine. She bent down to get her gum and dropped two Funyons and a truck driver came out of the bathroom and crushed them with his boot. She looked at his ass when he walked by. I stood beside the twins and pretended to study the map then got a piece of gum from the machine and spit it out before I got back in my car. One of Daisy's postcards was from Cincinnati. It was the first one she sent, three years ago. I had them all piled beside me in an old shoebox I found underneath her bed. Empty boxes, that's all she left behind. I drank another beer, rolled down the window, and smashed the two empty bottles on the highway. There were two cars behind me, a red mini-van, and a green SUV. The mini-van swerved to miss the bottles, lost control, and drove off the road into the field. The SUV stopped so I didn't have to.

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I drank another High Life and decided not to throw any more bottles out the window. It was close to sunrise and there was a girl standing along the highway hitchhiking. She was scrawny with small tits and a chipped tooth. She was short with long black hair that hung down passed her ass. Her skin was pale and she smiled with tiny lips when I opened the door to let her in. I wanted to run my tongue around the outside of them. She was carrying an orange backpack. Her hands and face were clean except for the dirt stains and dried blood underneath

her fingernails. She was wearing a white hooded sweatshirt but it wasn't zipped. Her t-shirt was white and there was more dried blood, and animal hair. Her eyes were grey and sharp like a cheetah. She smelled wild, carnivorous. I handed her a beer and she drank it, then I gave her another one. We were still sitting along the highway.

"What's up with all the blood? Were you in an accident?"

"No. I'm okay. Where you headed?"

"I'm going to Jersey. My sister thinks someone's trying to kill her. Do you need to go to a hospital?"

"No. I already told you I'm fine. Where are you really going?"

"Wherever you need to go."

"Quit fucking with me. I asked a simple fucking question."

"And I already answered it. Want another beer?"

"No thanks. I can walk from here." She reached for the door handle but I locked it. "What are you doing? Are you some creepy fucking pervert? Unlock the door." I drove onto the highway. 70, then 80, and I passed two cars and an SUV.

"Look. I'm not crazy. My name is Derek. I'm driving all the way to the coast. I'll drop you anywhere in between. It's a long ride."

"Sorry. I'm Holly. Can you drop me off in Pittsburgh?"

"Yeah, no problem. What's up with all the blood?"

"That's from the last guy who picked me up. He tried to get me drunk and stick his hands down my pants. I played along then cut his dick off and left it on his lap."

"You still got the knife?"

“It’s in my backpack.”

“Cool. You better have another beer.”

“I’m hungry. Can we stop and get some food?”

“Next time I see a place I’ll pull over.”

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We both ordered Big Mac meals and sat across from each other at a small square table beside the Happy Meal display case. There were people everywhere. Crumpled up receipts, straw wrappings spit from people’s mouths, and unidentifiable chunks of food littered the floor. People stepped over it or stepped on it, depending upon the cleanliness of their own shoes. There was dried ketchup on the table and two bugs crawling across the floor by our feet. I looked around for more bugs, in the corners, near the tables. I dipped my fries in chipotle barbeque and thought about telling the manager the restaurant was a filthy fucking shit hole. He was a thin guy with thick welfare frame glasses and frizzy black hair. He was talking to a customer. She had long blonde hair and big tits hidden beneath a blue sweater. She was wearing tight cut-off Capri style pants and open-toed sandals. Her pants were white and her panties shown through, black like the manager’s hair. He was counting out change, not disinterested, but unenthused. It’s the same way I counted out customer’s change.

Walking in the side door, next to the Play Place was a small girl still in her street clothes, black booty pants and a black Slayer t-shirt. Her light brown hair was pulled back in a pony tail. Her pale cheeks were flushed and she was smiling, not happy, but naughty, like all white trash teenage tramps when their pants are

too tight and they think everybody is looking at their ass and liking it. She was holding a black duffle bag in one hand and an orange and gray bowling bag in another, and trying to explain why she was running late; he shook his head and looked over her shoulder at the blonde haired woman's ass as she carried her tray to the table. She pulled her wrinkled uniform shirt from the bag and put it on over top of her t-shirt.

"You're not late; thanks for coming in...make sure you wash your hands before you clock in."

Beside us at one of the tables was a small, unkempt, freckle-faced kid. He was surfing on top of a little red swivel chair. He was happy and laughing until his sister kicked him down. His knee cracked hard on the ground and his glasses hit the floor, splitting one of the lenses horizontally. Their mother left the line to investigate. All three left the restaurant. Eight minutes later they came back in to order caramel sundaes and cheeseburger Happy Meals. No one was happy the second time.

Another girl walked through the side door and I could hear her talking on her cell phone. She was ten minutes late for work and sat down at a table close to ours like she wasn't. She had to wait for her brother to give her a ride because her low fuel light was on and she's either too scared to pump gas or she didn't know how. She was tall and skinny with almond shaped eyes, dark hair, and Mediterranean skin. She's pregnant and the baby wasn't her boyfriend's, but he told her he would take care of them forever. She didn't smile. Last week he fucked her best friend. Last week she wanted a hamster, so he went to the pet store, but left with birds. I wanted to take her to the pet store and buy her a hamster. I

wanted to take her in the isle between the turtles and fish tanks and take off her shirt and rub my hands all over her belly and suck her nipples until I tasted breast milk. I wanted to get behind her and wrap my arms around our baby and fuck her from behind until her knees bruised. I wanted her new hamster to watch us from his cage before I bought him and let her take him home.

Holly got up to get a refill and I handed her my cup and told her to get me another Dr. Pepper. We both got two more refills before we left. I filled up with premium gas and the register guy gave me a free commemorative Bill Clinton gold coin. I bought two instant lottery tickets and used Bill's head to scratch them. Both losers. There were no more stops and we made it to Pittsburgh in an hour and a half.

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Holly rented a small one bedroom apartment two blocks from Three Rivers Stadium. There were two drunk old black guys sitting on a chipped wooden bench in front of her building, waiting for the bus, nodding wisely and talking stupidly. Both men wore scruffy salt and peppered beards and smelled like acidic hangover puke. One of them was bald and smoking a Newport 100, the other wore a yellow and black Steelers stocking cap. He had a fifth of Black Velvet and they were passing them back and forth. The bald guy asked me for change and I gave him three bucks and one of the cases of High Life. He offered me a pull of the whiskey and I took it. It was soft but still burned my throat. I coughed and drooled and they both laughed. Holly opened the case and grabbed four beers and put them in her backpack then grabbed one, opened it, and almost finished it in one swig.

“I bet she got some nice pussy on her.”

“I bet it tastes just like one of them casseroles her momma used to cook up. Now that was a nice piece of ass.”

“Mmm mmm. Yes it was. And it only cost a brotha five dollars.” They both laughed and one of them reached out to smack her ass. She grabbed his wrist, twisted it, and punched him in the mouth. He shook it off, wiped at the blood with his stocking cap, and took another drink of whiskey.

“Yes sir, we got us a feisty bitch.”

She lived on the third floor and there was no furniture, only three pink bean bag chairs and a black and white television sitting on top of an even bigger floor model television from the 80's that stopped working three years ago during a thunderstorm. Her house smelled like cat piss even though there were no cats, no pets at all, not even a goddam goldfish. The carpet was shaggy and red like cheap wine. There were two cactuses on the window sill and a James Brown bobble head. The blinds were beige and they were pulled up and a bus stopped in front of the bench but nobody got on or off.

“Listen, I don't know if you're in a hurry, but you can hang out here for awhile and relax before you start driving again.”

“Do you care if I take a shower?”

“Knock yourself out.”

There were blue globs of Crest covering the inside of the sink. I touched one. It was hard and still smelled minty. The soap dish was empty and her toothbrush was on the floor next to the bathtub. There were long black hairs all over the counter and all over the floor and a few stuck inside the globs of toothpaste. I

took a good shit but couldn't find any toilet paper. I flushed, then reached down between my legs and cupped some clean water and splashed it up onto my asshole then rubbed it with my hand and dried off with a dirty sock I pulled from the top of her clothes hamper. I took some of the clothes out and put the sock somewhere near the middle then put the clothes back on top. I picked up a pair of green lace panties and they smelled horrible when I held them to my face, maybe like her momma's casserole after it sat out for a week or two. It was only a bathtub, no shower, so I picked a few black hairs out of the drain and ran the hot water. There was no soap in the dish by the tub either, just a yellow and white disposable razor with dried blood and a rusty blade. I reached over and grabbed the stinky panties off the hamper and put them in the tub with me. There was no shampoo so I squeezed a few drops of coconut scented conditioner into them and washed them out by hand. I put them on my face and yanked at my dick until I came.

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"You wanna help me drink all this beer before I go?"

"Yeah, why not. You got anything else?"

"I have a little bit of weed. Here, roll it up." I took the baggie out of my pants pocket and threw it on Holly's lap.

"You had this in your pocket the whole fucking ride and we were drinking beer?"

"Yeah, why not."

"You got anything else I should know about, powder, smack?"

"I don't do any of that shit."

"No?"

"I'll smoke and swallow, but I don't use needles or sniff shit into my brain."

"A classy, self-righteous drug addict. That's a good one. I should write that shit down."

"You got anything to eat in here?"

"I can make us some pancakes. I'll have to go next door and borrow some syrup. Hey, wait, you said you're a swallower? You want a couple hits of acid?"

"Sure. I hear it goes really good with pancakes." She ran out the door and came back in four minutes with a ten strip and a bottle of Mrs. Butterworth.

"How many you want?"

"Pancakes or hits?"

"Either or."

"Surprise me."

She cut off four hits from the strip and set them on the end of her tiny lip with a pair of tweezers. There were little pink elephants on each individual hit. I took a drink then pressed my tongue against her lip until all four hits stuck. I wasn't patient enough to let them dissolve. I waited five minutes then nibbled on them until they disappeared.

"Before I forget, can you go next door and get me some more of this shit before I take off?"

"If you got the cash. How much do you want?"

"How does he sell it?"

"Single hits, strips, or sheets."



“Can you get me three sheets?”

“Holy shit. You know how much that’s gonna cost?”

“I don’t care. Go ahead and make it four. You keep one.”

I put butter and syrup on the first two pancakes, ate them, and washed them down with the last bottle of High Life. The bottoms were burnt black. I went into the kitchen to check on the rest of my pancakes and she was standing in front of an old electric stove, naked, flipping flapjacks, listening to African tribal music, and burning strawberry incense. Her belly button was pierced and her ass was small and dimpled and bruised and her ribs were poking out of her skin. Her pussy was shaved smooth and there was a black and blue Celtic cross tattooed where her pubes should have been and her long black hair was pulled back in a ponytail. She reached her arm around her back and smacked her ass with the hot spatula. There was pancake batter stuck to her left ass cheek and I got on my knees behind her and licked it off., then I licked the right one where it was bruised. I ran my tongue up the center, between both cheeks and all the way up her spine to her neck. She closed her eyes and leaned forward into the stove. I walked back into the living room and stretched out on a bean bag. After three minutes or thirteen minutes or three hours Holly walked into the room. Her hair was dark blue and she was carrying a plate with one pancake. She unbuttoned and unzipped my pants and pulled them down to my ankles. The pancake was half-cooked and she licked the head of my dick until it got hard then wrapped the pancake around it and nibbled it like a rabbit. Then she grew long fluffy white ears and buck teeth and there was no more pancake but she kept chewing, then sucking, then chewing again until there was blood. I pushed her head away, ran

to the bathroom, and rinsed off my dick, but the blood was gone. I picked up the green panties and walked back out. The pancake was ripped to pieces, crumbled into the floor. She was on all fours, taking bites of pancake and shaggy red carpet like a wild animal. I filled a cup with ice cold water and dumped it on her back and she made hungry prehistoric sounds and growled like a cheetah and I knew it was safe because that's what she was when I picked her up along the highway. Blood and animal hair. I got behind her but she wouldn't keep still. She kept growling, then hissed, so I knew it was time to go. I took the green panties and pushed them inside her with two fingers. I pulled my pants up and left out the front door.

\$\$\$

I circled Pittsburgh four times until I found my way back to the turnpike. I kept passing the same seven roads blocked off by construction barricades. There were no workers in orange vests, no heavy machinery, nothing was being constructed. I kept reading the same blue and white sign pointing to the Amtrak station. The same billboard of Ben Roethlisberger with his arms raised over his head, pointing up at a cloud shaped like Frosty the Snowman, or to some groupie in the stands who fucked him and four of his friends every day for a week for three free tickets.

My father was a drunk and lost all of his money betting football games. He worked as a garbage man with his brother Leroy in an old green pick-up with a rigged up hydraulic lift to dump the trash from the bed of the truck. It was a Saturday in January and the truck bed was icy and my father fell off at 45 mph. He fractured both tibias and his left fibula and shattered his ankles and took a train from Detroit to Pittsburgh every other weekend to get them reconstructed

by a specialist. My father was born in Pittsburgh then moved to Detroit with his brother after their father died at home of a heart attack. He was outside in late October, raking leaves, drinking beer, and he fell to his knees and died. My father was eight. The only thing he remembered about Pittsburgh was the billboard. Back then it was Terry Bradshaw. Terry had his helmet off and his eyes were closed and his arms were over his head just like Ben's. My father said he was pointing at God, reminding him to pay attention, and that's why he won all the Super Bowls. My father was a gambling man who liked Bradshaw. The 70's were kind to both of their football careers, respectively.

I was coming down off the acid and my skin was boiling in hot french fry grease and my nose was too dry to pick but I still tried. There was a small scab in my left nostril. I picked it and it bled. I wiped away the blood with my shirt sleeve and called KC to check up on the restaurant.

"I'm thinking of changing our name. What do you think of Grizzly's Homestyle Grille?"

"Derek? Where are you?"

"I'm in Pittsburgh, on my way to the ocean. You like the name?"

"The ocean? What the fuck? And no, I don't. What's wrong with Kehoe's?"

"Nothing man, I just think its time to mix shit up."

"You sound fucked up dude, are you high?"

"How's the place look? Everything better be fucking spotless. If I walk in and anything is dirty anywhere in the store I'm firing everyone on shift."

"Cool out man, we all know you're a goddam clean freak."

"How much did we do yesterday?"

“About eleven g’s.”

“Take a hundred out for yourself and give Jalen fifty.”

“Yes sir, Bossman. When you coming home?”

“Maybe tomorrow. Maybe never.”

### \$\$\$

I was still listening to the same radio station but it switched from rock to country sixteen miles outside of Pittsburgh. I don’t mind twin fiddles and steel guitars and drunk middle-aged mountain men cheating and crying and picking their mommas up from prison, and drinking homemade shine from mason jars. My father was a mountain man. It’s those fake Abercrombie kid posers, putting on cowboy hats and whining through their noses about losing their high school sweethearts and life lessons learned that piss me off. They all take turns sucking each other’s dicks and buying each other’s CD’s. There’s more of them than there are of me, so they’ll keep getting radio time and seven digit record deals and I’ll keep cleaning up after paying customers. Dwight Yoakum came on, singing about guitars and Cadillacs and lonely, lonely streets that he calls home. I turned it up and dropped two more hits of acid.

There was a run down trailer next to an empty creek at the bottom of the mountains a hundred yards or so off the turnpike. There was an old stone birdbath in the front yard and a rusty swing set hidden by trees. There was a gray haired woman taking towels off a clothesline. One end was tied to a flag pole and the other to a small branch of a birch tree. There was a man underneath his truck changing the oil. She took the towels into the house and brought the man some

iced tea in a canning jar. There was a dirt path leading down the mountain beside the trailer that followed the creek for almost a mile than went nowhere. There were traces of oil on the man's hands and the jar slipped when the gray haired woman handed it to him. It shattered and sliced the woman's thumb and forefinger when she picked it up, then I sneezed twice and my nose bled. I opened my eyes and everything seemed suspicious, like a runny pastel finger painting. Water flowed freely through the creek, the color of lilacs, and a mother cheetah and four cubs were drinking. There was a trout fisherman, wading, flicking his fly. The parallel path lead to an open kitchen where my mother was standing, wearing just a pair of red panties, thongs. She was smiling, slicing strawberries, and stirring cream of wheat with a wooden spoon in a stainless steel pot. The mother cheetah and her four cubs finished drinking, crept quietly down the path, and surrounded her. I closed my eyes, drove off the highway, and side swiped a guard rail. My head hit hard against the dash. I blacked out. I woke up in a cage.

**\$\$\$**

It wasn't exactly a cage. I was in the backseat of a goddam cop car, handcuffed. The car smelled like sweaty feet and stale popcorn. He was in the front seat pretending to be important. Pretending there were calls on his radio he needed to wait for and respond to before I could be released. They gave me a breathalyzer. I blew a .03, below the legal limit by Pennsylvania law. He wrote me a ticket for reckless driving while his partner searched the vehicle. The acid with the little pink elephants was wrapped in tin foil in the trunk, pressed between pages one

thirty-two and one thirty-three of an old medical dictionary. The over-sized fully illustrated edition they make you buy in college to propagate the endless cycle of text books and money and academia. I imagined all the academic dickheads meeting with all the book publishers, drinking whiskey, snorting high quality Colombian blow, and playing intellectual sex games where men have to identify all the organs, muscles, and bones of a particular body system then they get to fuck the woman from the opposing team that also gets it right. They settle ties by bidding. Marriages, friendships get ruined. Textbooks get chosen, careers continue, lives go on.

The trunk was never checked. I think it had to do with constitutional amendments and a locked trunk not being considered *in plain view*. Maybe I watch too much *Law & Order* and the officer just didn't give a fuck. The door was pretty banged up but the engine still started. It might have been a little louder than before the accident, a little hesitant, skeptical. My open case of High Life was still on the backseat, two beers less than before the search. There was three hundred dollars missing from my wallet. It could have been the cop or the cheetah girl or maybe I gave it to the bald black guy on the bench at the bus stop. He asked for three more dollars on my way out. I opened my wallet. He gave me another pull of the whiskey. I didn't cough or drool the second time but they still laughed.

I drove through one of the mountain tunnels. The yellow sign said no passing but a Chinese woman in a red Cherokee did and I followed her around a black Mac Magnum hauling heads of lettuce from eastern Kentucky or coal from West Virginia or Idaho potatoes. The license plate said Maine. They all said

Maine. I stopped at the next rest area to take a shit. The Ohio State girls were there too. One of the twins took her shoes off and walked around in the grass holding onto a dog's leash. It was a Doberman and he stopped walking and pissed on a pine cone. The other two girls were standing by the snack machines looking at another map, a big one that showed mountains and rivers and all the side streets. I bought a bottled water and a bag of teriyaki beef jerky, opened it with my teeth, and offered some to the girls. The other twin laughed, reached in my bag and took a big handful.

There were two stalls in the bathroom. The first toilet had dried blood on the seat. The second had no blood, but there was shit in the toilet, so I flushed and sat down. I wondered who's shit it was and why they left it there. I read the graffiti on the door, gang signs and phone numbers to call if you wanted rough anal sex with real cowboys. I wondered why there was no toilet paper in the toilet with the shit. Then I looked at the empty dispenser and hobbled out of the stall with my pants and boxers around my ankles and grabbed seven paper towels. A little dangly turd fell out of my ass and dropped onto my left shoe. What did the other guy do?

I drove ahead to the full-service pump and waited for the tiny blonde haired woman with the small silver necklace and crucifix charm to come out and fill me up. She did. Her pants were blue and her ass was missing and she smelled like pumpkin pie with whipped cream. I bought two scratch off tickets and asked her to throw away my empty beef jerky bag. I used the gold Clinton coin. I won ten dollars and gave it to the blonde woman as a tip. She turned to walk away and her ass wasn't missing anymore.

**\$\$\$**

It was dark. I was tired. I pulled off at the next exit and slept in a roadside motel ran by a Korean woman.



# II

I was twelve. Daisy and I moved into a small three bedroom house in Ypsilanti. Half the neighborhood kids were black and the other half were white and wore baggy jeans and fitted Starter hats with rhinestones and pretended to be black. Death Row ran the music game and everyone was smoking chronic like Dre and Snoop and drinking forties of St. Ides. Daisy put a new stereo and twelve inch subs in the Mustang. The neighborhood infected her. It infected everyone. Dug inside your skin and took a shit. It smelled like rotten bananas and itched like scabies. No more Janis and Jimmie. It was Cypress Hill and Too Short. She moved passed the Eastern mystics, onto *Junky*, *Tropic of Cancer*, and *The Dharma Bums*.

I met a girl named Jennifer who lived down the street in a small two bedroom house with an outdoor swimming pool. We both bit our fingernails down until they bled. She had kinky brown hair and braces and her parents both drove Cadillacs. We started holding hands in school and sitting together on the bus, her on the outside, me with my head against the window, feeling it bang every time we hit a bump. She only rode it home. Her parents drove her every morning just to make sure she got there and after a few weeks they drove me too. We told her parents that my sister had a two year old son and she needed Jennifer to babysit while she went to work. It went good for awhile until her parents wanted to see the babysitting money, then I started giving her thirty bucks a week to show them. She gave it back the first few times, but by the third week she didn't and I never asked about it. She bought me Reebok Pumps and a Charles Barkley jersey, Philly not Phoenix, and Geto Boys' *'Til Death Do Us Part* for my birthday. She must have been saving up.

Jennifer had chubby girl titties and there were lots of little white bumps on them but the skin was soft and silky and they were the first tits I ever had in my mouth. One night we were alone, lying together on Daisy's floor because the only radio in the house was in her room. We did everything right, Tevin Campbell on the radio, apple-cinnamon scented candles, both of our shirts were off. I was too scared to unbutton her pants. We were kissing for hours. I was licking around her belly button, sucking, making a light purple heart out of hickies. Jennifer looked up then reached for her shirt. I turned around and Daisy was standing in the doorway watching us watch her. Her hair was wet and she was wrapped in a white towel with red stripes on either end. She walked over top of us and opened the second drawer of her dresser. She let her towel drop onto my shoulder and stood over Jennifer's face while she sorted through her clothes. Drops of water ran from her hair, down her back, and dripped off her ass on to Jennifer's cheeks.

"You two don't need to stop for me. I'll be done in a minute." She slipped on a pair of white cotton panties, left her wet towel on my shoulder, and walked back towards the door. "You better hurry up and get her pants off. Her mother will be here in fifteen minutes. And I made you guys some tacos. They're on the table." Then she left the room. I never noticed the tattoo on her shoulder. It was a daisy. Jennifer stopped babysitting.

**&&&**

I started working at McDonalds when I was fifteen. All I could do was run the cash registers and clean the bathrooms. The men's room was never that bad. A few spit wads on the walls behind the urinals that I never wiped off, or piss-

soaked toilet paper on the floor beside the toilet. I put on gloves, picked the shit up, changed the trash bags, and swept and mopped. It was the women's room that was always fucked up. There were bloody tampons that wouldn't flush, then another dumb bitch would drop another one in and try again. Three tampons later the blood/piss/shit water would overflow onto the floor. I wheeled the blue mop bucket into the stall, caught a whiff, puked up my Quarter Pounder, took off my powdered latex gloves, punched out, and walked home. They tried to fire me, but Daisy came in and threatened to call the health department. I never had to clean bathrooms after that. I took orders in the back drive-thru booth and collected the money. I started taking a quarter from every customer's change and pocketing it. Nobody missed quarters and if they did I smiled, apologized, and gave it back. I left every night with thirty dollars in quarters, except for Mondays and Tuesdays, slow days, but that didn't last long. I turned sixteen and they put me back in the grill with Grizzly. He knew everything about restaurants.

"Two hamburger patties, ketchup, mustard, pickle, onion, and a slice of cheese between both pieces of meat, that's a double cheeseburger, my man."

"How do you remember all that shit?"

"I smoke a lot of weed. It keeps my head clear. You smoke?"

"You got any with you?"

"Sure do. I'll take you home. It's on the way."

"How do you know where I live?"

"You're Daisy's bro. Everybody knows where she lives."

We rolled two joints in the parking lot before we left. It went like that for two more years. He picked me up, we smoked. We worked together in the grill

night after night getting our asses kicked, frying hamburgers, dropping chicken patties and nuggets and fish, burning our fingers and wrists and arms on the grill until they blistered, then scraping and cleaning and scrubbing and starting all over again. And those were good nights. He took me home, we smoked. He taught me everything he knew about the restaurant game.

“Restaurant rule one, cleanliness. Everything has to stay clean, clean parking lot, clean lobby, clean bathrooms, clean service area, clean grill area, clean stock room, clean office. Everything needs to be so fucking clean that the Virgin Mary can give birth right there on your goddam floor.”

“Cleanliness, check. What else you got?”

“Restaurant rule two, nobody is your friend. Your best friend will set that ass up for the right price.”

“No friends, check. What’s rule number three?”

“There is no rule three. Never break those two and everything else takes care of itself. Hey, what you got going on when you get out of high school?”

“Fuck, I don’t know. Daisy keeps riding my ass about going to college, but I don’t want to. I like doing this shit.”

“Me too brotha. My dad and my grandpa own restaurants. They taught me everything I need to know. I’ve been working in kitchens since I could fucking walk, baking, frying, boiling, broiling, steaming, chopping, slicing, dicing, I can do it all bro.”

“So what’s up? Why don’t you start here, manage this place?”

“They ask me all the time, but that’s not what I want. I’m into sit down and eat restaurants, steak, shrimp, wine, frozen fruity cocktails, ditzzy waitresses with blond hair and big tits. I want all that shit, a nice family place. You want in on it?”

“So why don’t you do it? Open up a restaurant.”

“It costs a lot of money. Money I ain’t got.”

“I don’t know. Let’s smoke more weed. It keeps my head clear.”

I didn’t have to think very long. His cousins got him caught up in a series of jewelry store heists. Everything was good at first. Grizzly was hitting the stores, selling the jewelry, stashing the money. That was the plan. But he was the only one who stuck to it. His cousins bought five-bedroom, two and a half-bath, two-car garage Victorian houses with balconies and indoor swimming pools, sports cars with doors that opened vertically, and liquor stores for a legit business to fall back on. The IRS knows that trailer trash mechanics can’t afford that shit. Everything was confiscated except Grizzly’s stash. Nobody knew where the money was, not his cousins, not his momma, only me. I left it in a pre-paid storage unit in Lansing. It was all waiting for him when he got out \$776, 549. He gave me twenty-five grand and opened Backwoods Bar and Grill. I bought Daisy a new Mustang and went to the county building for our mother’s ashes and bought her a plot between two oak trees, and a headstone inscribed with a verse from the Beatitudes. She came to rest in a small country cemetery in her hometown, eighty miles south of Louisville, Kentucky. I invested the rest in Microsoft stock. Daisy never came home from Louisville and three weeks later she started sending postcards.

&&&

Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania:

*How disgraceful we have become when one must ask in advance to be told the truth.*

*Love,  
Daisy*

&&&

“Hey dogg, what you got in the bag?” I ignored him and kept walking. “I know you hear me you little scared motha fucka. I asked you what’s in the bag.”

“Just some nuggets. They’re for Daisy.” He knew Daisy. Everyone on the block knew Daisy.

“What kinda sauce you got?”

“Hot mustard and sweet and sour.”

I usually made it to the house without getting fucked with. Most people just drove by slow and talked shit or tossed empty forty bottles at my feet or threw up gang signs, always folks up, everyone on Calder Street were Cripps. One night a candy apple red Regal pulled up with tinted windows and deep dish gold Daytonos and four guys jumped out. One of them had an aluminum Louisville Slugger. They took my coat, my hat, my sweatshirt, my pants, and my Reebok Pumps. The smallest guy had a Malcolm X medallion tied to a black string around his neck. His black Triple Fat Goose was unzipped and there was a bud leaf on his shirt and he put my hat on and punched me in the ribs. I bent down and he kneed me in

the stomach. When I fell to the ground all of them kicked me a few times then got back in the car. I walked the four blocks home in my white and green striped boxers, bleeding from the knees after I scraped them on the sidewalk.

“I’m gonna need barbeque sauce with my nuggets bro. You better take your ass back to Mickey D’s and grab me some.”

He came over the day before to smoke weed with Daisy and she told him she don’t get high with punk ass bitches. He spit on her face and pushed her down the stairs, off the porch, and now he wanted to spit on me.

“Tell your bitch ass sister to come out here. Tell her I got something for her.”

“She’s already asleep. She’ll be pissed if I wake her.”

“And I’ll be pissed if you don’t, dogg. Wake her ass up.”

He ran off the porch in his bare feet. He was wearing a maize and blue Chris Webber jersey with the matching shorts and a gold necklace and his knees and legs were hairless and ashy. He grabbed me by the neck and his clothes stank like pissy diapers and rotten macaroni and cheese and there was a small hole inside the number four on the back of his jersey. He put me in a loose headlock and walked me towards my front door.

“Now go in and wake her ass up. If she ain’t out here in five minutes I’m kicking the motha fuckin’ door in, I ain’t trippin’.”

Daisy pushed through the screen door before I could open it. It was white and the screen was ripped out on three sides. She died her hair dark chestnut brown with red highlights and cut three inches off the back. She was wearing my Barkley jersey and a pair of silky pajama bottoms, with little cartoon cows



jumping over gray moons with smiley faces. There was a joint in her mouth and he let me out of the headlock when he saw the gun in her other hand; a chrome .357 revolver I never knew she had. I never knew a lot of things. I never knew why my mother died or why Daisy told the police I killed her.

“I knew you were a punk ass bitch, a grown man picking on women and teenage kids. You must be really fucking tough.”

“What bitch, you gonna shoot me, right here on the porch?” She pulled back on the hammer and his eyes widened when he heard the click.

“Take your pants off mother fucker. I bet you ain’t got no balls.” He took them off. She pulled a pair of pink granny panties from her pocket and passed me the joint and I hit it. Then I hit it again.

“Put these on you fucking homo.” He did. “Now take off your shirt and pinch your nipples.” He did that too.

“Derek, there’s a camera on the coffee table. Bring it out here and let’s have a photo shoot.” I did, then I opened the McDonald’s bag, took out three hot mustard sauces, opened them, and smeared it on his face, then took eleven pictures.

“Put your thumb in your mouth...squeeze one of your ass cheeks...Derek, pull your dick out and put it on his eye.”

“Come on Daisy, this is getting fucked up.”

“No. Do it. He needs to know it’s not ok to fuck with us.” I did it. “Now piss on him. Piss right on his face.” She grabbed the camera from my hand and took two more pictures. I started pissing and hit the joint two more times.

“Now get up you sorry faggot. If you ever fuck with us again, I’ll show these to everyone you know and then I’ll blow your fucking balls off.”

I knew right then that one of us was going to die. She called her dope man in Flint and told him she was just raped. I heard her crying, feeding him all the fake details. She set the .357 down on a stack of books beside her bed, all women, Gertrude Stein, Flannery O’ Connor, Sylvia Plath. Two hours later a van pulled into the driveway next door. I heard four gunshots. I ate the nuggets cold and went to sleep stoned. I was glad to know it wasn’t going to be me or Daisy.

**&&&**

There was a manager named Tracy that worked with Grizzly and I at McDonalds when he first started training me in the grill. She had red hair down to her shoulders and light freckles on her cheeks and nose. Her hips and thighs were thick and her ass was round and you expect thick women to have big tits but she didn’t. They were small, disproportioned. On Mondays and Tuesdays it was only the three of us and we all smoked weed in the lobby after she locked the doors and turned off the parking lot lights. One night we smoked three joints and Grizzly talked her into giving us blow jobs. I swept the floor while Grizzly got his, then he mopped when it was my turn. We did this every Tuesday until she was almost fired for cashing out fake customer refunds and pocketing the money. The first time she did it we all laughed and bought two fifths of Maui, one red, one blue, and stayed at the Red Roof Inn. I threw up all over the brown sheets and pillows and left them for the maid to clean in the morning. But that trick’s only good a few times a month. She started refunding Double Quarter Pounder meals with strawberry shakes and apple pies every day for a week until she was called

into the office and warned. I should have told her about my quarter scheme. Minimal goals are easier to achieve. Nobody misses quarters.

Two weeks after the warning she stopped by the house to see if I needed a ride to work but it was my day off. Her pink t-shirt made her tits look big, big-firm like properly filled water balloons, like my mother's. She brought a twelve pack of Pabst Blue Ribbon and we sat on the couch and drank and watched *Juice*. She reached her hand down my pants and jerked me off. Daisy opened the front door and told me to get my ass outside and help carry groceries. Tracy came out to help but Daisy told her no thank you. She ignored her and picked up a gallon of chocolate milk.

"Did you hear what I said you filthy fucking whore?" She put the chocolate milk down and left.

"Why do you have to say shit like that to people?"

"That girl's a dirty slut and I don't want her in my house, touching my food."

We put away the groceries and Daisy made stuffed peppers and scalloped potatoes and took a shower. The door was opened half way and I watched her get naked, take a shit, and brush her teeth my toothbrush. After she wiped, she looked at the toilet paper before dropping it into the water, then smelled her hands but didn't wash them. I closed the bathroom door and went to my room to call Jennifer. Her mother said she wasn't home. I waited five minutes and called back. Her father said she was visiting her aunt in Tennessee. I waited another five minutes and called back. The answering machine picked it up.

"Come here for a second please. I need your help with something." She was lying on her bed wrapped in a purple and blue beach towel.

“What?”

“Who were you on the phone with?”

“I tried calling Jennifer but her dad said she’s in Tennessee.” She unwrapped her towel.

“See that little white jar of cream on my dresser. Can you bring it over here please?”

“You called me in here to get something off your dresser?”

“Nope. Open it up.” I did. “Grab one of those white strips and bring them both over here.”

“What is that shit?” It smelled like rotten milk and candle wax.

“Dip your fingers in and scoop some out.”

“For what?”

“I need it to get these little black hairs off me.”

“Where? I don’t see any hair.” She spread her legs apart and pointed and her inner thighs were bruised on both sides. “I still don’t see any. Do you really need me for this?”

“It’s down here. Give me your hand.” She took my hand, stuffed it between her legs, and made me feel the tiny hairs between her twat and her asshole. “Now scoop out some of that gunk and spread it all over.” I did. “Now take that white strip and press it down hard, then rip it off.” She winced when I yanked it.

“Can I go now?”

“If you want to.” I walked towards the door.

“Hang on. I don’t think you got it all.”

“Do it yourself.”

"I can't reach it. I need you." I walked back over to the bed. She grabbed my hand and stuck it back between her legs.

"Where's it at?"

"Keep rubbing, you'll feel it."

"This is fucked up Daisy. Just show me where it's at so I can do it."

"You ever see a pussy before, this close?"

"Jesus Christ, Daisy. Come on."

"You ever smell one, touch one?"

"You're a nasty bitch. I want to get out of here."

"Touch it." She took my hand and ran my fingers back and forth against her clit until she got wet then she put one of my fingers inside her then one of hers.

"I want you to keep touching it. Touch me everywhere." I kept touching her. I put my hands in every opening, every crack, every crevice, on every muscle, every bone. I touched her, rubbed her, pinched her, squeezed her, tickled her.

"Now do it with your mouth."

I kissed every inch of skin, every hair, every tooth, every mole, between every finger, every toenail, both nostrils. I kissed her, licked her, chewed her, sucked her, swallowed her.

"Now do it with your dick."

I stuck it in every hole, every fold, her creased knees and elbows, between her toes, under her armpits, then she sucked on the head until I came on her tongue and she swallowed me. Every part of me touched every part of her. She opened the window, turned on the ceiling fan, and sat straight up on the bed with

her back against the headboard. I turned off the radio, laid my head in her lap, and she read me passages from *Leaves of Grass* until I fell asleep.

&&&

I tried quitting school to work at McDonald's full-time. I skipped fourth hour biology, walked to the main office, and asked for the drop-out forms. The student-assistant behind the desk was short and fat with dark brown hair and floppy titties. She was punching holes into a stack of blank paper and talking on the phone. Everyone called her Meat; everyone but me because she was Jennifer's cousin. I asked Jennifer how she got the name and she said she packed her lunch everyday in elementary school and all that was ever in her Rainbow Bright lunchbox was a bologna sandwich, no chips, no apple. I thought it was because she was a fat slob that liked cock.

"You'll have to talk to a counselor to get those papers."

"Why?"

"Do you still go out with Jennifer?"

"No. Why do you give a fuck?"

"I didn't think so. She said your sister is a freaked out dyke bitch."

"That's nice. Just give me the fucking paper."

"I'm glad you ain't with Jennifer. My cousin can do better than a drop-out piece of shit loser."

“Give me the paper you goddam fat whore.” I was yelling and the assistant principle came out of his office. He was short and bald and made All-American in wrestling at Ohio State his junior and senior years.

“What’s going on out here, Derek? Why aren’t you in class?” His nose was bent like a beak. He squinted his eyes and blinked hard and fast when he spoke.

“I asked her for some papers and she called my sister a dyke.”

“Carrie, go wait in my office please.” She went.

“So how’s Daisy doing these days? She’s a really smart girl. Ha sshe heard back from any of those colleges I wrote her recommendation letters for?

“I think so. She talks about it sometimes.”

“Now what about these papers you need me to sign?”

“Money’s getting tight, Mr. Novak. Daisy won’t keep a job. I need to work full-time.”

“You’re father stopped sending support?”

“He stopped a long time ago, when Daisy turned twenty-one.” He blinked four more times.

“I don’t know, Derek. What did your sister say about it?”

“I’m not telling her. If I’m at work she’ll never know.”

“She’s your legal guardian. She has to sign the paperwork.”

“Ah, fuck.”

**&&&**

Grizzly was in the kitchen cooking a half-dozen scrambled eggs and a slice of scrapple all in the same iron skillet. I was sitting at the table rolling a joint with

some weed I bought off the substitute teacher during second hour algebra. He was still in college to be a math teacher. The buds were greenish yellow with little red hairs. It smelled like pine needles before we lit it and burnt cardboard after. He bought it off his chemistry professor for sixty dollars an ounce, and had to grade his mid-terms for two semesters to get the discount. We ran out of papers and poked holes in a Pepsi bottle with a steak knife and kept toking even after it melted and we both knew we were just taking hits of ash and plastic.

“Want to fire up some more?”

“Cool. Let me get Daisy. She might wanna smoke.”

She was in the bathroom with the door closed. I knocked once and opened it.

“What are you doing asshole? I’m trying to take a shower.” She wrapped herself in a peach towel with a bleach stain in the center.

“I just thought you might wanna smoke some of this before it’s gone.”

“Well I’m naked. Get out and close the door you fucking perv.”

“Never mind, next time I won’t ask.”

“Good, I don’t need your goddam weed.”

She came out of the bathroom in black sweatpants with the right pant leg pulled up to her knee and an off-white wife beater. She wasn’t wearing a bra and her nipples were pokey and her hair was still dry. Her right arm was bruised by the elbow and there were scratches on both wrists. She told Grizzly to wipe the top of the bottle off and put more weed on it and he did. She lit it with a black lighter, inhaled slowly, and exhaled even slower through her nose.



“What happened to your arms Daisy? It looks like someone whooped your ass.” Grizzly never knew when to talk and when to shut the fuck up. Or maybe he did. Maybe it was me that didn’t get it.

“No one kicked my ass, you fat fuck.” No. It was Grizzly.

“I’m just playing. Why do you always talk shit? You know I’m just fucking around.” She looked at me then took another hit.

“It was Derek.” She looked at me again. “He got pissed because I wouldn’t let Tracy come over. Then he called me a whore and pushed me onto the floor.”

“That’s fucked up Derek. Why you hitting your sister. You should get your ass kicked for that.”

“What are you talking about Daisy? I never touched you.” She lifted her shirt. Her ribs were bruised. Grizzly got out of his chair and shoved me on the side of the head. His pinky jammed into my left eye.

“This is bullshit Daisy. It wasn’t me. Who did this to you? Who hurt you?”

“It was you. You kept kicking me.” Grizzly shoved me again, harder.

“It wasn’t me.”

“Yes it was, you lying fucker. Hit him Grizzly.”

He pushed me to the floor and walked towards the door. I landed on a bookmarked copy of *Catcher in the Rye*. She was rereading the classics, *Gatsby*, *Mockingbird*, *Lord of the Flies*. I didn’t try to get up. “Come on, you pussy. Hit him.” He came back and stood over me. She whispered something in his ear then he kicked me twice in the face, once on my nose, once in the jaw and I lost two teeth. He put his boot on my throat and pressed down until Daisy made him stop. I cried. They both walked into her room and shut the door. Restaurant rule

number two wasn't just for restaurants. Grizzly picked me up the next day from school and we smoked more of the greenish yellow buds with little red hairs.

**&&&**

Two school busses pulled into the parking lot; one full of varsity football players, the other cheerleaders. I asked for my break when I saw them pull in and punched out before they parked. Their uniforms were red and white. None of the cheerleaders had big tits, except a chubby brunette with pigtails and "Go Flyers" painted on her left cheek. There's always one fat girl that makes the squad and stays too late at parties and fucks the full backs and defensive tackles one after another, flat on her back with her head buried under the pillow. The quarterbacks and receivers fuck the blondes with no tits and straight white teeth; the honor role whores who won't get drunk or take off their shirts or give them a blowjob. They make the boys pull out before they cum, then hurry home to make curfew. The offensive guards drink too much beer and jerk off to sinful pleasures dot com. I was sitting in the back booth closest to the bathrooms eating a Big Mac with no pickles and a chocolate shake. Jennifer walked in and stood in line with 64, a second string linebacker with dark brown hair and a pudgy nose. He grabbed her ass. She smacked his hand away, then leaned her chubby girl titties against his chest and he grabbed it again and pulled her closer. She kissed him. I got up and cut through the line towards Jennifer. I was carrying my tray and pushed it into 64's back when I walked by, then tripped over something and fell to the floor on top of my tray. 12 and 32 just finished getting their food. They both

stopped in front of me. 12 stuck his hand out to help me up then pulled it away and dumped his Coke onto my head. 32 dumped his. 44, 26, 81, 78, all walked by and dumped theirs. Jennifer yelled for them to stop then walked into the bathroom when they wouldn't. People were laughing and pointing and dumping. Grizzly came around the counter with two more guys from the grill and punched 26 in the mouth. He started to fall and pulled Grizzly down with him. The two guys from the grill threw punches at anyone close by. 44, 32, a brown haired girl with braces and small hips caught an elbow to the ear. The rest of the players backed away. 26 was still on the ground wrestling with Grizzly. I kicked him once in the throat and stomped six times on his kidneys. Grizzly stood up. The assistant coach came in from the bus and tried to break it up. Grizzly head butted him on the bridge of his nose. It bled profusely. I turned around. Jennifer was walking around the corner with a cop, Officer Shankweiler, a tall man with a serious German mustache and military posture. He made all the football players and cheerleaders get back on the bus. He put all four of us in hand cuffs. Tracy came out from behind the counter doing her best to appear managerial. She told him the football players were throwing food and causing trouble and one of them grabbed a girl's ass.

"That's how this whole thing started sir. One of those football guys sexually assaulted a girl and she told him to stop. He didn't and Derek asked if she needed help and the guy went all crazy and punched him in the face."

"I'll need this girl's name ma'm."

"That's her. Right there." She pointed at Jennifer.

“Is that true? Was one of those boys grabbing on you after you told him to stop?” She looked at me without speaking. “Young lady, I’m asking you a question.”

“Yes sir. It happened just the way she said it did.” He fingered his moustache then tapped his finger against his cheek.

“Alright. I guess you guys are ok. I’m gonna go talk to them boys and if I hear anything different I’ll be back.” He never came back.

I asked Tracy if I could go home and change uniforms then asked Jennifer to walk me home. They both said yes.

“Why’d you come here? You knew I’d be here.”

“We’re not together anymore. I was hungry.”

“Then why didn’t you order any food?”

“Carrie told me what happened with you two the other day.”

“Fuck her.”

“Fuck you.”

“She called Daisy a dyke and wouldn’t give me the papers I asked for. She was trying to be a bitch.”

“Come on Derek, Daisy is a little weird. She freaks me out. Do you know all the shit people say about her?”

“I don’t care what they say, neither does she.”

“Yes you do. You both do. Come on, she pierced her own nose and shaved off all her hair and she only wears boy clothes, those stupid white tank tops that black guys wear.”

“So, go tell her. Go tell her she’s a freak.”

"I don't want to fight with you Derek. And I'm sorry for what Carrie said about you. Not about Daisy, but about you. You're not a loser. I miss you."

"Then why'd you stop coming over?"

"It's my mom. She keeps asking me about the bruises. I tell her they're not from you but she won't listen. Plus your sister, I think she wants to kill me."

"That's crazy, my sister wouldn't hurt you."

"And Carrie told me I should stay away from you. She said that if Daisy is that fucked up then you have to be fucked up too. She says I just don't know you that well yet and if I stick around, I'll regret it."

"Do you tell all this same shit to 64? Do you miss him too? Did you fuck him?"

"I met him last week. I don't like him. I don't know why I came here. Maybe I wanted to see you. Maybe I wanted to forget you."

"Did you fuck him?"

"I don't want to forget you."

**&&&**

"Mr. Novak called. What the fuck were you thinking? You're not quitting school."

"We need the money, Daisy."

"You're not quitting school."

"I'll just stop showing up."

“What the fuck is wrong with you, Derek? Look around. There’s only niggers and crackheads here. Is that what you want for yourself? You gonna flip burgers your whole goddam life?”

“They said they’ll make me a manager this summer. Then me and Grizzly are gonna open our own restaurant.”

“Grizzly’s full of shit, Derek. Why don’t you see that? He’s a pothead loser. Keep hanging out with him and that’s all you’ll be too.”

“Fuck you, Daisy. Was he a loser when you were down on all fours and he stuck it in your ass? You’re a slut.” She grabbed my left cheek and dug her finger nails into my skin until I bled. She spit on my nose and kneed me in the balls.

“Drop out if you want to you little fucker. I’ll sign the papers tomorrow. Pack your stuff and get the fuck out. Actually, leave your stuff. I bought it. I keep it. Just get out.”

“Mom bought it all, bitch.”

I walked to Jennifer’s house. She was standing behind the garage talking too loud into the cordless phone and smoking a Marlboro Light.

“Who you talking too?”

“It’s Carrie. I’ll tell her to call me back.”

“Why you walking around outside?”

“I can’t smoke in front of my dad. You know he’s not gonna let you come in.”

“Can you stay out here?”

“For a minute. I’m going to the store with my mom. I’m glad you came to see me.”

“Daisy kicked me out.”

“What? I told you she was a bitch.”

“It wasn’t her, it was me. I told her I was dropping out and I called her a bitch because she didn’t want to sign the papers.”

“She kicked you out for that?”

“Then I told her I would just stop going and I called her a slut.”

“Why, Derek? Now what are you gonna do? You want me to call Carrie? She lives with our Aunt Diane. She’s cool. She’ll let you stay there.”

“Carrie will say no. She hates me, remember?”

“She doesn’t hate you. She just worries about me. I’ll talk to her. If I ask her, she’ll say yes.” I moved in that night.

It was an old four bedroom farm house, ripped from its roots in rural Kansas, and planted a mile off of Michigan Avenue, four blocks from the water tower. Her aunt was fat like Carrie, but taller with wider hips and big tits, big-droopy, better proportioned. She worked the closing shift at Taco Bell on the corner of Ecorse and Parkwood. She washed dishes and brought home leftover taco meat and stale nacho chips with no cheese. Sometimes she brought home shitty dark brown weed she bought for cheap off the fake white boy gangsters that lived on Parkwood and wore all blue and carried baseball bats to protect themselves while they made enchiladas at Taco Bell. Sometimes she got it for free for sucking their dicks in the walk-in cooler. She got down on her knees and grabbed their zitty ass cheeks and dug her nails in while she sucked so they came faster. Those were the off weeks when the bills were past due. She never asked Jennifer any questions when she asked if I could move in. Carrie didn’t object.

Jennifer was always right, until she was wrong, and went back to Tennessee with her aunt.

**&&&**

I had two bedrooms to choose from. There was a big bedroom with a big closet with a big window with a view of the neighbor's big wooden fence. It had a light brown hardwood floor and no heating duct. The walls were lighter than the floor, toffee. There were holes in the walls where nails were hammered in then pulled back out. Papa Smurf and Smurfette were drawn together in blue crayon, standing on top of a purple mushroom, beneath black clouds. There was red and orange thunder; a masterpiece. There were stacks of old Weekly Reader magazines sitting on the shelf in the closet beside a pile of handmade dresses, four of them, identical, red and white like Raggedy Ann.

The other was a small bedroom crammed between Diane's and the bathroom. The walls would have been white if its last occupant wasn't a smoker. There was baby blue carpet and two small windows on opposite walls. There was no closet and the heating duct was directly below one of the windows. That's the best place to put a bed. You catch the breeze in the summer and the rising heat in the winter. There were dark blue curtains covering the windows.

I picked up my paycheck the same day I moved in. I cashed it and bought a wood-framed futon with a black mattress, a pink sheet and pillowcase set, and a pink comforter. I let Jennifer pick them out. She also picked out a small black table to put beside the futon. I put a thirty-two inch TV on layaway and a stereo with a five disk CD changer. I paid them off in two months. Jennifer grabbed a twelve pack of lubricated condoms, ultra-thin, ribbed, and a small first-aid kit. I



bought three cases of Dr. Pepper and five eight-packs of crayons. She told her mom she was staying over at Carrie's for the weekend. Jennifer never told them I moved in and neither did I. I never went back to school and we used four of the lubricated, ultra-thin, ribbed condoms the first night; six more by Sunday when she left.

She said she was a virgin but she didn't bleed. We borrowed Carrie's stereo and listened to *Let's Chill* by Guy, all night on repeat. I took off her red t-shirt and pink bra and there was a hicky on her left chubby girl titty that I ignored. There weren't as many little white bumps this time, but her tits were still soft and silky. Daisy's tits were smaller and fit better in my mouth. I could bite them open and draw blood or rub them raw if I wanted, but I never did. I just knew I could and that mattered. I unbutton Jennifer's pants too early and she knew it. I played with her bush for a minute and a half, twirling and pulling, then spread her pussy open with my fingers and rubbed her clit with my thumb and she was already wet. She was too wet, sloppy, slippery like sardine oil. Her panties were boy-cut and cherry red and two of the three little pigs were on them. The first little pig was on the front dressed in a white and blue sailor suit, making a house out of straw, and the big bad wolf was winking, blowing it down. The second little pig was on the back dressed in a white t-shirt and blue jean overalls with a patch on the knee, erecting a big brick wall to protect her asshole. There was no big bad wolf.

The next nine times were quicker, all in our wood-framed futon, under the pink comforter. No radio. She wouldn't bend over. She wouldn't get on top. She laid flat on her back and dug her fingernails into my shoulders and bit my neck

and made the same breathy, half-moans all high school girls think they should make. The last time we fucked I was uncovered and never bothered to strap up. Diane came in and asked what we wanted for dinner. We didn't stop and she stood in the doorway watching my ass and my hips pump in and out of her niece for another three minutes even after we told her we'd eat later. Jennifer went home. I ate leftover tacos.

**&&&**

I woke up. Still tired. I threw up the leftover tacos and went back to sleep. It was dark and I missed the toilet. I woke up an hour later to shit. It was runny and squirted out of my ass and I sat in my own puke. It felt clumpy and gritty against my ass cheeks. The toilet paper was thin and my fingers poked through when I wiped. There was runny yellow shit all over my hands and under my fingernails and I washed them off with generic cocoa butter soap from the dish beside the sink, then cleaned my puke off the floor with Carrie's clean purple towel and hung it back up to dry. I called work to tell them I wouldn't be in, then walked to the kitchen for ice water and sat at the table and rolled a dime bag in a Swisher Sweet wrap. It was dark green and there were too many seeds in the bag. I bought it from one of the guys in the grill who almost got arrested with me for fighting the football team. He said his cousin brought it back from Mexico. He met a Mexican woman who bought cigarettes for seventy-five cents a pack, then crossed the border every night to sell the same pack for three-fifty in El Paso. One night she was selling dirty Mexican homegrown in the back of a bar, beside the jukebox, for fifty bucks an ounce and he bought three. He sold one to his cousin

for seventy-five who traded half of it to me for free food for him and his two kids when they come in for chicken nugget Happy Meals and kiddy cones on his days off, a Twentieth-Century triangular trade.

I smoked half the blunt and Carrie came into the kitchen and cooked french toast and bacon. She wore tiny black shorts with *No Limit* in green letters across her ass and a black tank top. The shirt and shorts were two sizes too small and she wasn't wearing a bra.

"Can I get some of that bacon?"

"Can I take a hit of that homegrown?"

"I'll let you have the other half if I can get the first plate." I wanted to call her Meat and ask her to squeal like a pig for it.

"Sounds good."

I lit it again, hit it twice, and handed it to her. She handed me a thick styrofoam plate. I took it into my room and ate the french toast, then the bacon, then drank a Dr. Pepper. The bacon was fatty. The french toast was cooked with cinnamon and brown sugar and topped with butter and whipped cream and thick syrup. I grabbed two packs of crayons from underneath the bed and stared at the Smurfs standing on top of the purple mushroom, underneath the black clouds and I cried. Carrie knocked twice on the door and I told her to come in.

"You want to smoke any more of this. I'm over it."

"Come on in."

She handed it to me and I hit it. I handed it back and she hit it too. Nobody's ever over it. We passed it three more times then I put it out in the extra syrup on the styrofoam plate and handed her a pack of crayons. I drew an orange

and yellow sun with bright red rays and she drew purple flowers, small flowers, yellow flowers, dead flowers, giant flowers. I used brown to change the thunder bolts into birds. She drew snow-capped mountains and a small stream with water the color of lilacs. We made black and green fish and a weeping willow tree with a tire swing and six stick people holding hands. I drew blood on Papa Smurf's face and Carrie gave Smurfette an art easel and a black paintbrush with brown bristles. She drew blue and purple pot leaves growing out of the mushrooms; a masterpiece. I sat on the edge of the futon and Carrie sat beside me. We both cried.

**&&&**

Jennifer came over after school and her tits got bigger every time I saw her. The little white bumps were less and less. I hadn't moved off the bed, neither had Carrie. We both fell asleep sitting up then slowly fell backwards, my head against her shoulder, and that's how she found us.

"Well, hello." I woke up. Carrie didn't. "What the fuck, Derek?"

"We just fell asleep. We were drawing. Look." I pointed at the masterpiece.

"You two just drew that? Just now? Are you stoned?"

"I don't think I am now. I slept it off. But I was at the time if that's what you're asking."

"And you didn't touch her?"

"No. We were sharing a blunt, then we started coloring, then we smoked more, then we fell asleep. Promise."

"You look like shit. Why ain't you working?"

“Too many leftover tacos last night. I woke up puking and I called in.”

“Well stand up, give me a kiss.” I did. “Oh shit, Derek, You need to brush your teeth, you’re breath smells horrible.” I leaned in and kissed her again. “Stop it. You’re fucking gross. Go brush your teeth, please.” I did.

“Come in here with me.”

“What about her?”

“She can stay there. Just shut the door.”

“That’s what you want. My cousin shut in your room, laying on your bed.”

“That’s not funny.” I brushed my teeth with Diane’s orange flex toothbrush and spit the toothpaste into the sink.” I brushed too hard. There was blood in the spit.

“What about my aunt? I bet you’d like to fuck her.” She noticed the toothbrush.

“Maybe I already have.” She punched me in the arm.

“She’s a whore. She’d let you.”

I stood behind her at the sink and reached around and squeezed her tits. She pushed my hand down. I squeezed them again. She didn’t push the second time. She never pushed anyone the second time. I squeezed harder then I should have and watched her in the mirror. Her eyes were closed. I put my mouth on the back of her neck and licked it, then blew out hot air. She got goose bumps on her neck and her arms and I did it again. She turned the light off and let me take her shirt off and unhook her bra. I locked the door, unbuttoned and unzipped her pants, and pushed them down to the floor. She was wearing thongs. They were soggy and it was dark, so I couldn’t see the color. She left them on and pushed

them to the side. I kept my boxers on, slid my dick out the front slit, and stuck it in. I flipped the light on. Her thongs were white with different color dots like Twister. Her eyes were still closed and her tits were in the sink sitting in bloody toothpaste spit. I turned the hot water on and let it run down her chest onto her nipples, then switched and gave her cold. I splashed water onto her face, then hot, then cold, then hot, then I pulled her back and stuck her head into the sink and turned the water back to cold until she gargled and gasped for air. I pushed her forward again, rammed in and out of her hard for thirty seconds or so, and pulled out and came on her ass cheeks, then rubbed it in and smacked it. She reached behind her and smacked it again, then pulled her pants back up, put her shirt on, kissed me on the cheek, and said she had to get home to help her mom make dinner, glazed ham, scalloped potatoes, and string beans. I went back to my room, laid behind Carrie, put my arm around her waist, and fell asleep.

**&&&**

I spent every night with Tracy, learning to count out the cash registers and enter the totals into the computer. She taught me how to open and close every position, how to set up my floor plan and fill out my pre-shift checklist in the toolkit. She signed off on all my station observation checklists. Two days after my eighteenth birthday they gave me two blue button-down uniform shirts, two red ties, a set of store keys, a password to the safe, and promoted me to manager. Tracy, Grizzly, and I went out after work to celebrate. We bought two fifths of Maui for old time's sake and went back to the Red Roof Inn. It was a small room with a small black

and white TV without cable and a single bed with the same brown sheets. It was right next to the ice machines. Grizzly and I changed out of our uniforms before we left, but Tracy kept hers on until we got in the room. She sat on the counter beside the sink and pulled her shirt over her head. Her bra was black and there were puffy purple stretch marks on her stomach and a faint patch of red fuzz trailing down her navel. She unhooked her bra, opened the bottle of blue Maui, and poured a bit on each nipple.

“What are you boys waiting on?” Grizzly got up off the bed and I followed. We each put a nipple in our mouths. Grizzly sucked. I licked and tugged with my teeth. I could smell the Filet O’ Fish grease soaked into her pants, and the few drops of dried tartar sauce that stuck to her right pant leg. Several seconds later I was nauseous. I gagged on her right nipple and ran to the bathroom, locked the door, kept the light off, and sat alone on the toilet seat. I had two joints wrapped in cellophane in my pants pocket so I smoked one of them, then got undressed and took a shower in luke-warm water. No soap or shampoo. I let the water run down my face, into my eyes and through them. I got dressed and opened the door. Tracy was bent over the bed with her greasy black pants down around her ankles. Grizzly was behind her, fully naked, his chest and arms and ass and back just as scruffy as his face. There were more puffy purple stretch marks on the insides of her thighs. He had a fistful of long red hair in each hand and neither of them stopped when I asked for the car keys. Tracy pointed to her purse and told me to be back before check-out. I took the unopened bottle of red Maui and drove home. All the lights were off and everyone was asleep. I kept them off while I brushed my teeth and pissed. I could hear it splashing off the seat so I readjusted

but it hit the wall. I brought the red Maui with me into my room, took off my clothes except my boxers and tube socks, and pulled the pink comforter back and fell onto the bed, but someone was already there. I curled up behind her with my dick nestled between her ass cheeks and slept hard until morning.

**&&&**

“Who let you in?”

“I climbed through the window. I need to talk to you.”

“It’s almost been a year. What do you want?”

“You’re eighteen now. They’re going to cut mom’s social security money. I got a letter in the mail yesterday.”

“It’s about fucking time they stop letting you spend mom up. So, what? You need some money? You need a job? What?”

“I need you to go to college, Derek. That’s the only way they’ll let us keep getting it.”

“Not us, Daisy. You. You need the money.”

“I know, Derek. Please?”

“I’ll think about it.”

“I really need this. I need you. Can I lay here with you for awhile?”

“I gotta pick Grizzly and Tracy up at noon.”

“You have a car now?”

“I’m driving Tracy’s.”

“Why?”



“Her and Grizzly stayed at the Red Roof last night and I wanted to leave, so she let me take it. Now I gotta pick them up.”

“What about after?”

“I have to work.”

“Oh, that’s right. I hear you’re the manager now.”

“No I’m not. I was full of shit, remember?” She smiled.

“Shut up and lay here with me. You have another hour. Can I ride with you? I wanna say hi to Grizzly.”

“I guess.”

She kissed me on my bottom lip. I kissed her on the cheek. We lied facing each other with our foreheads touching, then she turned over and I pressed my dick back between her ass cheeks. She untied her gray sweatpants and pulled them down to her knees. Her panties were gray and cotton, her left hip was bruised, and she grinded back and forth until my dick lodged in deeper. Her tits felt good against my back. Her hair was grown out past her shoulders and it smelled like cheap green-apple scented shampoo. She turned back around, crawled under the covers, and licked and sucked. She reached between her legs, got all five fingers wet, and stuck them on my face and under my nose and I came in her mouth. She put my hand on her throat and left it there until I felt her swallow. I took a shower and Daisy was gone when I got out, so was the red Maui. She left a community college catalog, application for admission, and a yellow and white registration form in its place. I filled them out, threw them on the floor beside the stereo, and picked up Tracy and Grizzly twenty minutes late. They

were sitting on the sidewalk in front of the door. Tracy's pants stank worse than the day before. I walked home.

**&&&**

"Don't fuck me over, Derek." It was the day of his sentencing.

"Come on, Grizzly, it's me."

"Here's the address and unit number." He slipped a twice-folded piece of paper into my front shirt pocket. "And here's the key." He reached into my right pants pocket and dropped it. "I know how much is there. No bullshit. You here me?"

"You know I wouldn't steal from you."

"I know. You're a good kid. That's why I'm letting you keep twenty-five grand."

"Are you fucking with me? Thanks, man."

"Do some good shit with it, bro. That money is costing me three and a half years of my life."

"Was it worth it?"

"Every fucking penny."

The bailiff was tall and bald and bow-legged. He wore dark sunglasses in the courtroom and I left after he handcuffed Grizzly and walked him through the back door behind the jury box. I never wrote or went to visit.

Diane let me take her truck to Lansing. She was standing by her bed in an opened white bathrobe with nothing underneath. Her skin was pale and pasty

and I wanted to touch it. Her nipples were pierced with sterling silver hoops with little black balls in the center. Her snatch was shaved and the lips looked dark and wrinkly and beat up like a low budget porn star. She was smoking a joint and let me hit it twice I wondered who shaved the spot between her twat and her asshole. Maybe she would ask me to do it if I brought it up.

“Where do you need to go?”

“I’m helping Tracy move and we need a truck to haul the heavy shit.”

“You’ll have to put gas in it.”

“I’ll fill it up. She told me to tell you she has a microwave and a toaster she’s throwing away if you want it.”

“Yeah, bring the toaster back with you. I’ll check it out.”

“She also said you should quit Taco Bell and come work with us at McDonalds.”

“She just wants to smoke my weed and eat my pussy. You think I should let her.”

“Whatever makes you smile.”

There was nothing in the storage unit but an old army duffle bag. It was green and the zipper broke when I pulled it. I sliced it open with the box-cutter Diane kept in the glove box. There was a note addressed to me sitting on top. The money was rubber-band wrapped in stacks of a thousand.

“Derek:  $\$776,549 - \$25,000 = \$751,549$ . Grizzly.”

I forgot to bring something to carry the money in. I searched the truck. There was a white laundry basket half-full of fitted flannel sheets and other bedding and a cream colored comforter that smelled like clouds and rainforests

when I took it out and held it to my nose. I wrapped my money in the matching cream colored pillowcase, locked the storage unit back up, and stopped at Wal-Mart for a new toaster on my way home, one with four slots and a special red light that glows when you're bread's being toasted. I thought about Diane's pierced nipples and her open white bathrobe and about Tracy eating her pussy. I could feel my dick getting hard and I jerked off driving down the street. I cleaned up with the cream colored comforter and wondered if Diane or Tracy or Daisy ever licked pussy.

&&&

I took my GED test at Washtenaw Intermediate and filled out my application for admission at Wayne County Community College in Detroit on Fort Street. I signed up for *American History: Jamestown to Reconstruction*, and *Introduction to Psychology*, and gave Daisy the pink copy of my registration form to turn in to the social security office.

"American History, what the fuck, Derek? You're gonna sit in some class and listen to some asshole feed you a bunch of bullshit?"

"I thought you wanted me to sign up."

"History is told by the conquerors, the oppressors."

"Quit acting like you care what classes I take. You just wanna keep getting mom's checks."

I dropped Psychology after the first week. The professor was a middle-aged blonde haired woman in a short black skirt and a low cut black blouse. She wore

thin glasses and her hips were wide and fit snug inside the skirt. The syllabus was four pages long, back and front. There was a mid-term and final exam, two twelve page research essays with a ten source minimum, fifteen case studies, and ten out-of-class observation hours and an accompanying five page summary.

History worked out better. The professor was short and solid and unfit, like an amateur athlete who gave up and settled for domestic life. He had shaved hair and a brownish-red goatee and wore a big fake diamond in each ear and a stainless steel spike through the bottom of his left eyebrow with a small black ball on top. He looked like the kind of teacher who sold greenish yellow buds with little red hairs to his students and smoked it with them in the parking lot before class. The syllabus was three pages, front side only. There were chapter quizzes once a week to hold us accountable for the reading material, no mid-term, two five-page essays, and a two hundred question, multiple choice, true/false, fill in the blank final exam.

Instead of Jamestown, we began with the Tudors in England. Henry VIII had six wives and beheaded two of them, the first being Queen Elizabeth's mother, Anne Boleyn. His first wife, Catherine of Aragon was related to the Spanish royal family. She bore Henry a daughter, Queen Mary, Bloody Mary. Henry was a Machiavellian; once he obtained power his only objective was to keep it. Since he had no son, no heir, he got desperate. He did not wish to see England divided again by Civil War, so soon after the War of the Roses. He needed a male heir. Catherine was too old, infertile. England, like the majority of Europe, was under the control of the Roman Catholic Church who did not grant divorces. Henry pleaded with the Pope to make an exception and he almost

obliged, if not for the pressure from the Spanish. Henry was not a man given over by passion. He was not romantic, love-stricken, blinded by his lust for Anne Boleyn. He was a brilliant, fearless monarch, capable of anything, murder, parting from century old tradition, to keep his country united, to keep his family in power. He would have killed Catherine but he didn't want war with the Spanish, so he dismissed the Catholics and formed the Church of England, and established himself, and ultimately the English throne, as defender of the faith. He got his divorce. He beheaded Anne to marry Jane Seymour, and finally got his son, Prince Edward, who would later become king and rule for a short time before Mary and Elizabeth. He later married Anne Boleyn's cousin, Anne of Cleves, then two more Katherine's. Katherine Howard and Katherine Parr. Queen Elizabeth died without an heir and the Tudors lost their throne to the Stuarts. I never made it to week two. I found Grizzly's money, invested in Microsoft, and bought Daisy a new white Mustang, and my mother a headstone. I dropped the class and left the Stuarts on the throne. I wonder if the class made it to Reconstruction.

History made sense to me, not because you need to learn where you came from in order to know where you're going, or because you must learn from past mistakes or you'll be destined to repeat them, or even because it helps explain why things are the way they are, none of that cliché bullshit. History made sense to me because once something's done it's done and there ain't a fucking thing anyone can do but talk about it. Things happen, then it's history, then everyone forgets and it becomes nothing.

&&&

“Hey Derek, come in here for a second.” Diane was wearing her white bathrobe. It was closed and tied at the waist and there was dried blood on her left ankle and an ankh tattoo that wasn’t there the day before. “You got anything we can smoke?”

“I ain’t got shit. You want me to make some calls?”

“Yeah, go ahead. I need to get stoned. You like my tattoo?”

“It looks kind of fucked up. It’s dried out. You need to put something on it.”

“All I have is lotion. Is that good?”

“Don’t use lotion. It’ll fuck it up. I’ll make some calls and I’ll check to see if I got anything you can put on it.”

I called Tracy to bring over some weed and some triple antibiotic ointment, and went back to her room. Her bathrobe was untied and her panties were baby blue and dingy. There was a hole in the waistline and her nipple rings were missing.

“Tracy’s bringing you some weed and some cream for the tat.”

“Is she coming from home or from work?”

“She’s at work, why?”

“Call her back and tell her to bring us some food. And tell her to change her stinking ass clothes before she gets here.” I did.

“She said she’ll bring some nuggets and some apple pies. She also said she’s giving your ass some weed and ointment and food, so she’ll wear whatever the fuck she feels like it.

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Ten minutes later someone knocked on the bottom of the screen door. Diane answered the door with her bathrobe still untied and I stood behind her.

“Do you always answer the door half-naked?” She couldn’t see me. “Where’s Derek?”

“No, I’m usually fully nude. Derek’s right here.” She reached behind her back, grabbed my arm, and pulled me forward. My left hand caught her bathrobe and my forearm grazed her tit. It was cold and firm like frozen jello. I liked it. I looked inside her bathrobe and Jennifer slapped me on the side of my head and my ear rang faint like a far away fire whistle.

“I just came to tell you I’m pregnant, but I see you’re busy.” She started crying. I thought about the lubricated, ultra-thin, ribbed condoms, then I thought about 64 squeezing her ass and her pretending she didn’t want him to, then I thought about Diane’s nipples and I wondered where the rings were and how easy it was to take them in and out. I wondered if it hurt her and if she liked it.

“How do you know? Did you take a test?”

“I took two tests. They were both positive. What are we gonna do?”

“Did you tell your parents?”

“We’ll tell them tonight.” She kept saying we.

“When did you take the test?”

“We...”

“Did you call a doctor?”

“We...”



“I thought I wore a condom every time.”

“We...”

Tracy walked in without knocking. “I brought some good shit, but someone else gotta roll it.” She threw the bag at me but I couldn’t lift my arms to catch it. She saw Jennifer crying and Diane standing beside her with the baby blue panties on with the rip in the waistline. “What the hell’s going on? You guys are all fucking crazy.”

“So this is it. This is what you do all day when I’m not around. You get high with my aunt while she walks around naked? I saw you in bed with my cousin the other day. Now I come over here to tell you I’m pregnant and this bitch shows up. Fuck you.”

“Oh, I’m a bitch? You’re the one whose pregnant you little whore.”

Diane grabbed the back of Tracy’s hair and punched her on her upper left cheekbone between her ear and her eye and she fell to the floor, then she kicked her twice in the stomach. Jennifer kicked her four more times in the throat, then Diane, Jennifer, Diane, Jennifer. I watched. They finally finished and Tracy wasn’t moving. She was bleeding from her nose and her mouth and the tops of both eyelids and her work clothes stank just like Diane said they would. Like sour strawberry shake mix and the grease traps from the fryer.

“Holy fucking hell. Come on, Derek. You gotta help me get her out of her.”

“I ain’t getting involved in this shit.”

“You’re already involved. Help me pick her up.”

We lifted her off the floor and carried her to the car. Jennifer opened the door and we set her on the seat. There were red and black seat covers with white

flowers and her head hit the steering wheel when we let her go. “Hey, grab that bag of food off the seat, and grab that tube of A&D Ointment.” We went back inside and ate our chicken nuggets with hot mustard and barbeque sauce and rolled Tracy’s weed and smoked it. It was dry and brown and smelled like dirt and Diane rolled it in a white zig-zag. I watched Jennifer take a hit. She inhaled deep and held her breath longer than Houdini in his goddam water tank, then blew it out her nose like a bull. I thought about the baby, newborn, sitting beside us in an old Oscar the Grouch green, garage-sale highchair, getting stoned, sucking on Jennifer’s chubby girl titties to cure the munchies, then sucking on Diane’s cold jello tits because it still wasn’t full. Jennifer and I smoked three more joints in my bedroom and fell asleep. I woke up at 3:30 am and she was gone.

**&&&**

I had to piss but my dick was hard so it shot out in spurts; a little on the seat, a little on the floor. It was still hard when I went back to bed and I wished Jennifer was still there. I took the crayons out from underneath the bed and worked on the masterpiece. I drew a cemetery beside the mushrooms; a large gated cemetery with all black headstones and dead babies lying on top of dirt and grass. I drew a red, white, and blue airplane dropping footballs into the sky. One landed on Papa Smurf’s foot and I dropped the crayon when I heard someone behind me. It was Carrie.

“She’s gone, Derek.”

“No shit. I couldn’t tell.”

“No. I mean she’s gone. She’s not coming back. Her mother came and got her last night.”

“When? I was here all night. I didn’t hear shit.”

“Her parents found the pregnancy tests in her room. They came and picked her up. They got in a big ass fight. They’re making her go to Tennessee.”

I handed her the crayons. She drew a large egg in the sky above the cemetery then cracked it and the yolk was bloody with thick blue veins and it was spilling onto the babies but never touched any of them. She stepped back for a better look and pressed her left leg into my dick which was still hard then turned around to face me.

“I heard you guys beat Tracy’s ass pretty bad?”

“There wasn’t no *you guys*. It was your mom.”

“And you guys still ate her food and smoked her weed, that’s funny. You think she’ll call the cops?”

“No. That’s not how she does shit. She’ll probably try to get me fired.”

“Jennifer knows you fucked her.”

“Tracy? She gave me head a couple times when I first started working with her, that’s it.”

“Who gives better blow jobs, Tracy or Jennifer?”

“Tracy, but probably cause she’s a whore and she’s done it a million fucking times.”

“What about me? Do you think I’d be any good?”

“Why, are you a whore too?”

“Fuck you. I’m trying to be nice and your being an asshole. I was gonna suck your dick but forget it. You can jerk off by yourself.”

She left and I did. I thought about Carrie on her knees in front of the masterpiece licking my balls and playing with her floppy titties underneath her tan tank top. I thought about her mom and Jennifer joining her and all three taking turns until I came all over my pink pillowcase. Carrie was standing in the doorway when I looked up. I walked passed her and washed my hands with orange dish liquid in the kitchen sink. She was lying in the bed when I came back, wearing pink cotton panties and ankle socks.

“I really like our picture, Derek. Do you think we’ll ever finish it?”

“I don’t know. I try not to think about anything.”

“Do you think you’ll miss her?” I said nothing.

“Do you think Tracy’s gonna get you fired?” Still nothing.

She kissed me on the cheek. Her lips were warm and fluffy and wet. I put my arm around her waist and fell asleep. She was still there when I woke up.

**\$\$\$**

The county is required to keep cremated ashes for seven years. Sherry Lynn Kehoe, 6791-9SLK, was set on fire and placed in a cardboard box, and kept quietly on the fourth shelf in the back room at the county coroner’s office. Six years, two months, and seventeen days later I presented a Michigan State ID to a county worker with dark brown eyes and a poorly set perm, and she sent another county worker to retrieve them, an elderly hunchbacked Mexican man with a

black hat and a green jacket with yellow stripes down both sleeves. He might not have been Mexican. All white people think Latinos are Mexican. He could have been from Peru or Panama or Puerto Rico. His mother could have been a coffee bean picker or a banana plantation owner or a Venezuelan whore who gave birth to him when she was thirteen. But he was probably from Arizona and migrated north to work in an auto plant like everyone else who came to Michigan from somewhere they should have stayed. He probably lost his job and applied for a city position and they stuck him in the coroner's office collecting people's dead mothers.

My mother was born in a small town in rural Kentucky, just south of Louisville. She came to Michigan with her father, an aircraft mechanic who specialized in sheet metal and worked for a small non-commercial airline nobody ever heard of. There was a long line of evergreen trees and a bed of rocks that ran parallel to it, and a decrepit dirt road that split them into two straight lines on either side of the road. All three began on the southern end of an empty pasture. There was grass and wild weeds and dried clumps of cow shit, but no cows. They ran for six and three-quarter miles and dead ended at South Woods Cemetery. All of my mother's family lived in town. None of them came to visit when she died or called to offer their condolences. When Daisy and I returned my mother's ashes to her hometown for a proper burial we visited no one, we called no one. We buried her in a quiet plot between two oak trees in view of an herb garden with a stone frog and four gnomes. I said a prayer while Daisy dug a hole in the ground with her fingers and planted a handful of seeds. There was dirt in her fingernails and she said Amen when I finished.

We checked into a hooker motel in Louisville. There was a yellow sign out front that advertised free basic cable and free local calls. There were two double beds, both unmade, when we checked in. She ordered a medium chicken barbeque pizza and cheesy bread with red-peppered ranch dipping sauce and made me pay for it when it came.

“Thanks for taking those classes, Derek. I really appreciate it”

“Is that enough for you to live? Do you need some extra cash?”

“It’s plenty. I’ll be alright.” A small tear ran from her left eye, down her cheek, and I wiped it with my thumb and kissed her eyelid. “You can come back home if you want. I’m sorry.”

“I don’t know, Daisy. Carrie’s house is so close to work. I’ll think on it.”

“You still talk to Jennifer?”

“Not since she went back to Tennessee.”

“Let’s go get her.”

“You’re fucking crazy. We can’t just show up in Tennessee and make her get in the car.”

“Why not? If she sees you on her doorstep she’ll love you forever. You still got the number?”

“In my wallet.”

“Call her. Tell her you’re on the way.” I did. I called her and told her I was on the way. She cried. She told me if she sees me on her doorstep she’ll love me forever.

“Get dressed, let’s go.”

She opened the door and walked out. I got dressed and went outside. Daisy's white mustang was in the parking lot, keys in the ignition, motor running, but she was not. I never saw her again. She sent thirty-one postcards in close to three years. All of them said the same thing; city, state, then some aphorism, some lesson she must have learned that day. I put them all in an old shoebox. I kept them in my closet underneath the pile of red and white Raggedy Ann dresses on the shelf.

**&&&**

I stopped showing up at McDonalds. They called four or five times a day for the first two days, then twice a day for the next three. I showed up on payday with my unwashed uniforms, but kept the store keys in my pocket to bargain with in case they tried to hold my check. I imagined the scene I would make if they resisted. I thought about it all week, played it out over and over in my head, practiced in front of the bathroom mirror, with and without clothes on, kicking the Happy Meal toy display case, pink plastic My Little Ponies falling to the floor, yanking the Ronald McDonald House charity box full of change off the front counter and throwing it through the side window, shards of broken glass slicing into customers on the sidewalk who just want a fucking Big Mac. But there was a new manager there in my place; a tall, middle-aged man with strawberry-blonde hair and light brown glasses who didn't give a damn if I got my check or died in a hit and run in the parking lot or if I fucked his little sister. There was a gap between his front teeth and his hands were greasy when he handed me my check, not french fry greasy, more like the waxy buildup behind your ears when you don't shower for three or four days. Nobody but him spoke to me before I left.

Diane was waiting for me in the truck. I gave her ten dollars for gas and asked her to take me to the bank to cash my check. I got a money order for one hundred fifty dollars to send to Jennifer and gave Diane another thirty to stop and get me some weed from her Taco Bell gangsters on the way home. The bag was light and seedy with too much shake and not enough buds, but Diane was my only hook-up and she knew it. We rolled two joints in the parking lot and smoked them on the way home. I didn't want to because there was a wart on her lip like a slimy snot wad and it wobbled every time she talked, so I just nodded my head to everything she said hoping she'd shut the fuck up, but she didn't. She never just shut the fuck up.

"You know, Jennifer keeps telling everyone the baby ain't yours."

"So."

"So, you don't give a shit?"

"I do, but there's nothing I can do about it. She's gonna say whatever she feels like saying."

"Maybe you should call her."

"I'm just gonna send her money every week. If she wants to talk to me she'll call."

"You're sending that little whore all your money and you don't even know if the baby's yours? Don't be so stupid. At least wait and —"

I handed her the joint and she hit it. There were two more blisters on her left thumb. I wondered where else she had blisters and who's cum she swallowed to got them.



I got home and took out all the crayons in the box and wrote names on all the babies' tombstones. I used my last name, Kehoe, for the boys, and hers, Belford, for the girls. I sent Jennifer a different name every time I sent her a money order. I continued sending the money even after the baby was born and she named her Myranda Lee Schuler.

**&&&**

Cincinnati, OH:

*Am I to blame for your obvious lack of character.*

*Love,  
Daisy*

**&&&**

"Carrie? What the hell are you doing?"

"I thought of something to add to our picture. It looks good don't it? Look."

"I don't care what it looks like. I don't want you in here when I ain't home. I don't go in your room and get in all your shit."

"I didn't get into anything. I brought my own crayons. Just look at it Derek, please."

I liked it. She drew light brown wooden crosses ascending from all the gravesites and big black crows or ravens resting on the crossbeams, some with pink and purple rosaries in their mouths, some dropping baby blue blobs of bird

shit onto the graves, others were bleeding from their eye sockets. Two of them were dead, decomposing. I liked it a lot.

“It isn’t our picture, it’s my picture. Now get the fuck out.”

She took all the crayons from the box individually and threw them at me one by one. I didn’t bother dodging them. I liked feeling them bounce off my face (2, antique brass and 11, blue bell), my chest (5, asparagus), my arms (7, beaver and 15, brick red), one of them poked me in the eye (19, burnt sienna). It was a 128 pack and she was crying by crayon 25, atomic tangerine. I smiled when she cried. I liked feeling. She stopped at 81, razzle dazzle rose, and dropped the rest on the floor, still in the box.

I went to the kitchen and heated up a four-day-old chili cheese burrito and a tostada without chives, then watched *Beavis and Butthead* reruns until I crashed out on the couch. Carrie woke me up around 2 am; my neck was stiff and my right leg was asleep. She helped me to my room and into bed. She took off my shoes and socks and tucked me under the covers and slipped her own shoes and socks off and laid beside me until I fell back asleep. I woke up at 4 to piss and she was still there. I picked all the crayons up off the floor and put them back in the box and set them on the black table beside her head. My stomach felt rotten when I finally laid down and I farted for half an hour before it felt better. I shit myself at least twice. I took my pants and shirt off and cleaned up with one of the sleeves. I was naked when I got back in bed. We were both naked in the morning.

I got dressed before she woke up. I put the same pants back on but a different shirt, a green zip-up hoodie with a single pocket in the front, then went to the kitchen to make breakfast. I scrambled four eggs and added chopped

onions, sliced ham, and shredded mild cheddar. I toasted two slices of rye bread, spread strawberry jelly on both, and cut them into triangles. I took the food in to Carrie and set the plate beside her box of crayons on the black table. I shook her shoulder and kissed her on the forehead. It was sweaty and bumpy and tasted like cod oil. She kissed me on my bottom lip and bit it lightly when I pulled away. Her mouth did not taste like cod oil. I left the room before she got dressed.

&&&

“Thanks for making me breakfast.”

“How were the eggs? The cheese smelled funny. I hope it didn’t taste bad.”

“It tasted fine. If you thought the cheese was bad why did you use it?”

“It wasn’t moldy. It just wasn’t the freshest. If it smelled sour I wouldn’t have used it. Thanks for helping me back to my room last night.”

“Yeah. How did you end up with no clothes on?”

“I sleep better naked. Why were *your* clothes off this morning?”

“I sleep better naked too. And I’m sorry for going in your room last night. It won’t happen again.”

“No, you’re okay. I was being a dick. You can go in and draw whenever you feel like it. Just don’t go through my shit.”

“Why? What am I gonna find?”

“Depends what you’re looking for.”

“I’m not looking for anything. I just don’t know what the hell you’re thinking sometimes. Why did you quit your job? What are you gonna do for

money?” Here she goes with all the fucking questions. At least they’re you’s and not we’s.

“I still have some of the money my dad left for me and Daisy. I’ll be alright.”

“How much do you have? Have you heard from Daisy? What are you gonna do if you’re not working?”

“I have no fucking idea. Maybe I’ll go back to school.”

“School? What are you gonna go to school for?”

“Who knows. Maybe I’ll be a goddam doctor. A gynecologist.”

“A gyna what?”

I went back to Wayne County Community College and retook the two classes I dropped, the history and the psychology. I aced them both. I took two more the next semester, philosophy and child psych.

**&&&**

The philosophy instructor was a short, balding, goofy fucker who looked and talked like Vizzini from *The Princess Bride*. All he knew were the Greeks and he didn’t know them very well. There was a lot of bullshit about Plato believing that everything on Earth was mirrored in its perfected form in Heaven, the St. Peter’s gated-community in the fluffy white clouds version. There were ten essay questions to choose from for the final exam. We had to pick one and write five pages defending our answer. *Is Aristotle’s idea of basing your rhetorical strategy around logic, as understood by his topoi, still relevant today?* The short answer is that nobody has any goddam common sense, but that’s not what I said. I said

that a system of rhetoric build around logic is doomed to fail, because logic is based on the idea that the society you live in has an agreed upon moral code, a recognized value system, ideas about right and wrong, concepts that make organized thoughts and behaviors logical. But to have this system in place, this moral code, is to infringe upon a person's individuality, their privacy, their freedom to make an informed decision about what is best for their own lives and the lives of their families, and to live accordingly, without fear of ridicule or rejection, or without the threat of isolation or shiny steel shackles. I argued that *pathos* is a much more effective strategy, that manipulating people's emotions makes more sense, because while not everyone has the same sense of logic, everyone has emotions and can be fucked with if you push the right buttons, everyone can be forced to act, to make a decision, whether they want to or not, even if they are able to consciously comprehend that the decision is a bad one. And that worked. I got the A. Inconceivable.

Child psych was dull. The instructor had flat hips and long, messy orange hair and her tits weren't big or small.

**&&&**

Carrie slept with me in my room every night. Her waist and cheeks were getting smaller, and her tits were too, but she couldn't get rid of the stretch marks. She made me throw away the pink sheets and pillowcases that Jennifer picked out. Hers were green and white Egyptian cotton and she had a goddam seizure every time I pulled out and came on them, then wiped my dick off on the top sheet. Her

pussy was a lot like Jennifer's but softer on the inside, more pliable, mushy, like hot buttery mashed potatoes, but not as edible. She always showered first so she tasted like scented dish soap, and not even Dawn or Palmolive, but the cheap shit you get at the dollar store that's just called Dish Soap. Over time the stretch marks faded into soft, wrinkly, pale indentations in her skin. I liked running my tongue against the ones in her armpits then brushing my fingertips all the way down to her hips, then in between her thighs where there were more indentations.

"Why are you always so quiet when it's just us?"

"When is it not just us?"

"You know what I mean. You talk to me until we have sex than you won't say a word the rest of the night."

"What do you want me to say? Thanks Carrie, the pussy was great, sweet dreams."

"Pussy? That's what this is to you. It's been a year now and I'm just pussy?"

"That's not what I meant, I – "

"Why, Derek? Why don't you tell me what you mean?"

"I was trying to but you won't shut the fuck up long enough for me to speak."

"Well I'm here. I'm listening."

"I still don't know what you want me to say."

"Forget it. Don't say anything. I love you."

"Love? Girls always talk about love when they don't know shit about it."

“What girls? Jennifer? I’m not her. You think I’d do that to you? She was fucking that guy the whole time and everyone knew it? You think that’s who I am?”

“You knew and you never bothered to tell me? All that time you let me get shit on. And you want me to think you’re different? Bullshit.”

“That’s not fair. She’s my cousin. We grew up together like sisters. You’re telling me you’d snitch out Daisy?”

“Fuck Daisy.”

“Whatever, Derek. Just trust me, I’m not either one of them.”

She kissed me on the cheek. Her lips were warm and smooshy and her breath smelled like meat, like the bologna sandwiches she used to pack for lunch in elementary school.

**&&&**

The bathroom door was open when I walked by. Diane was looking in the mirror, baring her teeth, and scraping at the crust with her fingernail. She inspected it, then scraped again. Her bra was dingy and white and there was a clean yellow towel wrapped around her waist. She was standing with her left foot on the side of the bathtub, shaving her legs with a dull razor. Her towel came open in the back when she bent down to get the hair around her ankle. “You missed a spot.” She jerked her arm and cut her skin right above the bone. The blood was darker than I remembered blood being. My mother’s was lighter, softer, like the sweet

cherries you buy in a jar and put on an ice cream sundae. Diane's was thick like tree sap.

"Why'd you do that asshole?

"Did I scare you?" I was smiling.

"Hand me a rag, hurry up." I took my time grabbing a brown wash cloth from a pile of dirty towels on the floor.

"I'm sorry. Let me see it."

"What, you're some fucking doctor? What can you do?"

"Just press down on it as hard as you can. I'll go get a band-aid."

"Grab my bag off the table. You wanna smoke?"

"No. I'm cutting that shit out."

"So, you are trying to straighten up. I thought Carrie was just running off at the mouth because you're fucking her." I got the band-aid and brought it back in.

"You forgot the pot."

"You need anything else." She let her towel drop. Her pussy lips were chafed, scabby.

"Could you run the water for me while I finish wiping this off? Don't make it too hot. You wanna get in?"

"I'm sure you can handle your own water." I closed the door on my way out.

**&&&**

I bought the goddam cultural anthropology book for a hundred and forty dollars, but the bookstore wouldn't buy it back even though the big blue banner behind



the cash register said 50% book buy back on all new and used books, now through May 23<sup>rd</sup>. They did give me seven dollars for an MLA reference guide. I bought a five hundred sheet notebook and a pack of pink highlighters and got shorted two quarters by the redhead working the cash register. She had large silver hoop earrings and enormous tits and she kept leaning them further into the counter the longer I stood there talking to them. I wanted to bite one of her nipples and keep pulling at it until she gave me some money for the anthropology book, but instead I bought another notebook and an unsweetened iced tea.

Carrie was waiting outside the bookstore by the information desk. There was a student lounge on the other side of the desk with a ping pong table, a pool table, and a nineteen inch TV that only gets channels 2, 4, and 11. There was a short Asian guy with waxy skin wearing a leather jacket and matching leather gloves standing in front of the ping pong table selling scantrons and blue books out of his backpack for a dollar each. I gave him a handful of quarters and told him to keep the scantrons. He left the lounge and walked towards the pay phone. We shot a game of pool and I knocked in two of my balls by hand when she wasn't paying attention, but I scratched trying to sink the eight ball in one of the side pockets. We played two more games and I bought two more iced teas from the bookstore. I lost both games the same way.

"The only reason you keep going in there is to stare at that girl's tits."

"I had no idea she was in there the first time. And after that, what, I can't get a fucking drink because the girl working at the store has big tits?"

"They're only big because she's fat."

"I don't care why they're big, I ain't fucking her."

“You would if she let you.”

“You’d fuck Brad Pitt if he let you, so shut the hell up.”

“Maybe you’ll get lucky and she’ll be in one of your classes next semester.”

“Yeah, maybe she’ll blow me during art history.”

“You’re taking art history?”

“I need another fine arts class to graduate.”

“Then what?”

“No idea. What do you want to do?”

“Can we move out of my mom’s house?”

“Neither of us have jobs.”

“How much of your dad’s money you got left?”

“Not enough.”

“Well, you’re graduating. Won’t you be getting a good job?” I knew an associate’s degree in liberal arts from a community college qualified me to work with her mom at Taco Bell, but I didn’t share this information.

“Once I’m actually finished I’ll be able to find something. Then we’ll start looking for a place.”

“You promise?”

“Promise.”

“I love you.”

“I love you too.”

&&&

Lexington, Kentucky:

*Maybe they're laughing...laughing at you. Eventually they will all laugh at you.*

*Love,  
Daisy*

&&&

"Thanks for picking me up. I know it's the middle of the night."

"It's cool. I thought you weren't getting out for another six months. How'd you pull that off?"

"It's good time, my man. Everybody gets a couple days knocked off if they just keep their heads down and shut the fuck up. Let's find a bar. I need some food, some beer, and a piece of ass. And none of it has to be that good."

"I'll take you anywhere you want to go, but I can't hang out tonight. I got shit to do in the morning."

"Shit to do? You ain't seen me in two and a half years and you got shit to do. Fuck you. Just take me to get my money."

"It ain't even like that. I got exams in the morning."

"Come on, one drink then you can get some sleep."

"One drink?"

"Yeah, one drink, we'll play catch up and you'll be asleep in an hour. And you'll take me to get my money, right?"

"After class tomorrow. First thing."

We hit a dive strip joint on Michigan Ave. There were half a dozen cars in the parking lot and a handful of motorcycles, but only four customers inside and we were two of them. Beers were six dollars apiece and all the women had to wear little star shaped stickers over their nipples. The only way anybody in their right fucking mind would pay any of these women to get naked is if they were just getting out of prison, so I knew we were in the right place. We sat in a back booth beneath two green and purple disco lights. There was an onion ring and a blob of mustard on my seat and the waitress brought us a pitcher of Labatt's and two complimentary shots of spiced rum and I asked her for some extra napkins to wipe it off. She had dark brown hair and brown eyes and her hips were small and bony, so her big tits must have been fake, and the rum tasted like dill flavored kerosene.

One of the dancers came over to the table. She was short and scrawny with jet black hair and a snaggle tooth; southern red neck sexy, and she straddled my lap, unfastened her black bra, kissed me on the neck and asked me to buy her a drink. She smelled like all strippers do, like sparkling white wine and baby powder. The lights were flashing too fast and she was grinding her ass back and forth on my lap to an old Def Leppard song and I couldn't take my eyes off her pierced lip. The shot glasses were empty and the waitress picked them up as she walked by.

"You wanna buy the lady a drink?"

"I guess. Whatever she wants."

"Give me a screwdriver."

"Sounds good honey. I'll be back in a minute."

She came back ten minutes later with the screwdriver and two more shots of rum.

“Either of you boys want a dance?”

“A dance? How much you charging?”

“Ten dollars in the front, twenty if we go in the back.”

“What’s the difference?”

“My panties come off in the back. I can’t up front where the alcohol is.”

“Twenty dollars... hmmm. What about a hundred? Is there anything we can get for a hundred?”

“I’m not off until 4. You guys gonna be here that long?”

“Not me, I gotta get going.” Grizzly leaned into my ear.

“Come on man, hang out for awhile. I haven’t had pussy in a long time.”

“Look, I’ll give you two hundred bucks. Take a cab to the Motel 6.”

“Alright, but make it four hundred, just in case she brings a friend. I’ll pay you back tomorrow.”

**&&&**

The redhead from the book store wasn’t in my art history class. The teacher was a black woman born on a Chippewa Indian reservation just outside of Sault St. Marie. She drove a red convertible and only painted pictures of the insides of garbage cans and her art was on display all over New York and Paris. Her cheek bones were raised and her shoulders were broad and her forehead was short and sloped, so she could have actually been an Indian. Her favorite niece was

supposed to be born on July 26<sup>th</sup>, that was the due date from the GYN, but she took it upon herself to put on war paint and eagle feathers and dance around the living room with the black and white ultra-sound photos, shaking a makeshift maraca made of buffalo bones, while burning breezewood incense, smoking obscure herbs from a peace pipe made by a descendent of Chief Tecumseh, and listening to a recording of tribal drum beats given to her by a relative of Sitting Bull. And that was enough to ensure the baby would be born on July 14<sup>th</sup>, her great grandmother's birthday, thus completing the matriarchal cycle of birth, life, death, and rebirth. She planned a class trip to visit her reservation, but changed her mind the day before we were set to go. She didn't want to be held responsible if any of the Indians on the rez killed any of us white folks. That's all she taught us about art history.

Grizzly just got out. We planned a coming home party, and he paid for the whole fucking thing; four kegs of Killians, steaks and baked potatoes to throw on the grill, expensive strippers with real tans and big fake titties and blonde hair you couldn't tell was dyed, and a half pound of weed with fluorescent green buds. There were no seeds or stems in the bag and it smelled like lemon meringue pie when you lit it. We smoked half a joint and Grizzly told me about the restaurant. Some asshole his dad used to swap wives with was selling his steakhouse for half a million dollars and they decided it would be in Grizzly's best interest to buy it, pay to transfer the licenses and permits, and make all the repairs and renovations. It was a moneymaker they said. A mile down the street from one of those mega-outdoor sporting goods stores where you buy live minnows and leeches and three bedroom cabins and there's a slow moving stream with lily

pads and snapping turtles and frogs and a fish aquarium running though the inside. There's a fake mountain full of stuffed black bears and badgers and everything costs more than it should, even the upstairs restaurant that serves elk burgers and rainbow trout to Babe Winkelman wanna-bes from the mid-west too fucking stupid to know any better. And hotels with indoor water parks and restaurants are sprouting up all around like Jack's goddam beanstalk hoping for the same magic.

"Why's the guy selling if it's a moneymaker? And what happens when the bubble pops."

"Why all the shitty questions? I expect it from them but not from you."

"I'm just thinking of the shit that you ain't. I got your back."

"I know you do, you always do, that's why I want you in on it, 50/50." I relit the joint and hit it twice.

"I don't know man. I gotta talk to Carrie."

"You don't need to talk to that bitch. Just think about it. And look out there. I got something for ya."

He was pointing at a black Ford Explorer, four-door, with tinted windows and chrome five-star rims parked in the front yard between a bird bath and two birch trees.

"Get the fuck outta here. That's for me?"

"Yeah, here's the keys, but check it out in the morning. Tonight we're gonna get fucked up." And we did.

**&&&**

“I’ll take over on the grill if you wanna chill out for awhile, grab a drink.”

“No, I don’t mind. It’s sort of relaxing.”

“Well let me do it anyway, I don’t want you fucking everybody’s food up.” I let him. Grizzly’s right. I would have fucked it up.

Carrie was in the kitchen, talking to her mother on the phone and pouring two fifths of Wild Turkey into a punch bowl and mixing it with red Juicy Juice and three trays of ice cubes. Her dress was short and black with bright red roses on each ass cheek. I stood behind her and slid both hands underneath her dress and tickled the stretch marks on the insides of her thighs. She relaxed her neck. I slid my hand inside her panties and she was already sopping wet, and sticky like sun-melted mayonnaise. I rubbed her clit with my middle finger then smelled it, dipped it in the punch bowl, swirled it around, tasted it, and thought about her getting wet from talking to her mother.

“Yes mom, there will still be weed here when you get off work. Grizzly bought a half pound. Is it cool if he stays over tonight? He’s pretty fucked up.” I tickled, rubbed, smelled, dipped, and swirled again, but this time I put my finger in her mouth. “Thanks. I’ll let him know.”

“Let who know what?”

“She was talking about Grizzly. She told me to tell him that if he’ll share that half pound with her, she’ll share her room until he finds a place.”

“Grizzly wouldn’t fuck your mom.”

“Are you kidding? Grizzly would fuck his own mom.”



“I don’t know why you don’t like him? He’s a good guy.”

“A good guy? This is his get out of prison party. Yeah, he’s the goddam citizen of the year.”

“He’s opening up his restaurant and he offered to let me run it with him.”

“He’ll never open a fucking restaurant Derek, open your eyes.”

“You don’t know shit. He already signed all the papers.”

“Come on Derek, you’re busting your ass to finish school. Now you’re just gonna work in a restaurant? You could have stayed at McDonalds and did that.”

“Did I mention he’s gonna split it all 50/50. And he already bought me a new car.”

“Yeah, that’ll fucking happen, Derek why do you-“

“Look, it’s right there. Look out your goddam window.”

“Let me guess, it’s the Taurus, no it’s the Cavalier, no, no, it’s the Explorer. He bought you a brand new fucking Explorer, huh?”

“You know what, you’re right Carrie. I’m high. I’m making all this shit up. I’m going back outside.”

“See, that’s what I been saying. He’s no good. You told me you were gonna quit smoking weed, now he comes around for one week and you’re so fucking stoned you don’t even know what you’re saying. I should have known better than to believe any of your bullshit.”

I took the keys out of my pocket and threw them in the punch bowl, then went outside and grabbed a piece of steak from the grill, well done, and washed it down with a cold cup of Killians.

“Hey Grizzly, we were just talking to Diane, she said you can stay here with her as long as you’ll share your weed.”

“You think she’ll let me fuck her?”

“Probably, but she’s an old worn out nasty bitch. I heard she lets every guy at Taco Bell bend her over the table in the break room.”

“Oh well. I’ll keep the lights off and wear a rubber.”

“And look at her lips, up close, she got warts and shit all over ‘em. I couldn’t do it.”

“You’re telling me you been living here all this time and you ain’t never fucked her. You’re full of shit.”

“No, I been with Carrie. Why would I have to?”

“And what’s up with that? Last time I seen Carrie she was a fucking heifer. How’d she lose all that weight? She’s doing too many drugs. You better be careful Derek, you got a nice future waiting for you. You don’t need that white trash bitch keeping you down. Think about it.”

**&&&**

Philadelphia, PA:

*I miss the way your sweat tastes when we are both dripping wet, and I lick it from the nape of your neck.*

*Love,  
Daisy*

&&&

I drank four more Killians and rolled a joint in a white zig-zag and stuck it behind my ear. The moon was almost full and my Chippewa teacher from art history was the only person I invited from class who showed up. She was outside, sitting cross-legged atop a small pile of dirt, eating pasta salad with a plastic fork and tilting her head back to chant every time she swallowed. I took my shoes off and sat down beside her in the dirt. I fetched the joint from behind my ear and lit it. I closed my eyes, inhaled, and passed it to her before I exhaled. She took a hit deeper than mine, fuller, it meant more, something personal, or maybe I was already too fucking high. She set the joint down on the ground and grabbed hold of my chin and forced my head to face hers. Her fingers were slim, angry like eagle talons. She reached in her left pocket then blew smoke in my eyes and her tits were bigger than I remembered them being. Big-firm and useful, aware of the role they played in creation. She told me to open my mouth and I did. She set something on my tongue and told me to chew. I did. She picked the joint back up and didn't bother wipe the mud off before putting it between her lips. I handed her my lighter. A small black cricket leapt onto my lap and I blew my smoke down onto it. It didn't move. I kept doing it, so did she. We both tipped our heads back and chanted in between hits until the joint was gone and we heard someone coming.

"Derek, what are you doing out here? I've been looking all over for you."

"Shh. She's teaching me how to meditate."

"Can we talk for a minute? Please. It's important to me."

The cricket kept still and fell from my lap when I stood. I took her hand and kissed the top of it and we locked fingers like Lincoln Logs and walked hand in hand to the Explorer. I could still hear chanting as I opened the passenger door for Carrie to get in.

“I’m sorry. I was wrong about Grizzly.”

“You said you wanted to get out of your mom’s house. That’s what I’m trying to do.”

“I know. I said I’m sorry. I love you.” She kissed me. I sucked on her bottom lip. I could taste the Wild Turkey and red Juicy Juice. “Let’s get in the back.”

I put the key in the ignition, flipped it over, and turned the radio to some country station. It was late and they were playing oldies, Hank Williams, George Jones, Loretta Lynn, sappy shit my father listened to every time my mother disappeared for days on end. Maybe we’d all be better off if he never took the time to find her.

I stuck my head underneath her dress and licked the outside of her lacey lavender panties. She slipped her hand inside and went straight for the hole. It was dry. I licked over top of her fingers and up her wrist. She put a hand on each of my shoulders and pushed hard until I popped my head out. She unbuttoned and unzipped my pants, pulled my dick out from the slit in my boxers, and climbed on top and slid down. It was still dry. She leaned into me and covered my left ear with her mouth and told me she liked tasting her own pussy on my fingers. Her lips and tongue were warm and wet and I came before she finished talking.

I reached over and put the window down and heard chanting close to the car. The Chippewa was standing outside the driver side window with charcoal ashes and fresh mud smeared on her face in circle and square patterns, shaking a tree branch full of leaves. I put the window back up and fell asleep still inside her and my battery was dead in the morning.

**&&&**

Carrie was still sleeping when I woke up. Nobody was outside. There were no other cars in the driveway. The grill was gone, the kegs, the coolers, there was no sign that a party took place, no trash, no tables and chairs, no leftover food, no dead crickets. I left her sleeping and went inside to make breakfast. There was no trash anywhere, no dishes in the sink, carpets were vacuumed, everything was dusted and wiped down. I made french toast with cinnamon sprinkled on top, and sausage patties with too much pepper, and poured thick generic syrup all over everything and took it out to Carrie. She was awake when I brought her the plate.

“Thanks baby. I’m so hungry. Was mom awake yet?”

“Her door was shut. I didn’t hear her.”

“Did Grizzly stay over?”

“I didn’t see him.”

“Who was that lady that showed up last night? The one you were praying with or whatever.”

“That was my teacher from last semester. Why?”

“Why? Because she’s fucking crazy. She was looking in the windows watching us have sex, then before you guys were praying she was over there taking pictures of our trash cans. That’s creepy shit.”

“No she’s fine. That’s just what she does. And I don’t think she was watching us have sex. She thinks she’s some kind of fertility godde-... of shit.”

“What?”

“Nothing, it’s stupid. Let’s go in the house.” Grizzly and Diane weren’t in her room.

**&&&**

“Mom, who cleaned the house?”

“I have no idea. I thought you and Derek did.”

“It wasn’t us. Where’d you go this morning? Did Grizzly stay here with you last night? Where’s he at? Did you sleep with him?”

“Goddam Carrie, why all the questions? I’m *your* momma, remember? Grizzly said if he was gonna stay here he would help out with the groceries, so we ran down to the store. He’s outside bringing them in. You and Derek get your asses out there and help. And since when do you care who’s sleeping in my bed?”

“Did Grizzly tell you about the restaurant?”

“Yeah, so?”

“Do you think it’s for real?”

“Why you keep asking me all these questions about Grizzly?”

“He keeps telling Derek he’s gonna open this restaurant and he believes him, and I just wanna know if it’s all a bunch of bullshit.”

“You ought to be glad he’s getting a job.”

“I am, but he’s going to college. Why does he want to go back to taking orders and making other people’s food?”

“Taking orders is what he does. It’s in his blood, honey. I don’t know what else to tell ya.”

**&&&**

I rode with Grizzly every day to the restaurant, Backwoods Bar and Grill. He put in a jukebox, hung old concert posters of Bob Dylan and John Lennon and autographed photos of Jeff Foxworthy and Frank Sinatra over top of scenic wall paper meant to resemble a ghost town from the Wild West. He hung outdoor camping lights all throughout and a transparent display case full of replica NASCAR cars, all except Jeff Gordon. He kept the 24 car on a small stand beside the cash register. One of those fake flopping fish hung above the door and sung songs from *Smoky and the Bandit* to all the customers on their way out. Instead of booths along the walls there were wooden picnic tables and drinks were served in mason jars. All the waitresses were college dropouts back home after a year of binge drinking and showing off their tits at the lake over spring break because they couldn’t afford Ft. Lauderdale. They lure male customers in over lunch hours and after 9pm when drunk men outnumber drunk women 5 to 1 and the waitress whores are there to give losers hope. We caught a break after the second week. One of the girls, a tall red head with long legs and scabbed-up, knobby knees, and broken brown eyes that never look at you, left in a beat up Ford

Ranger with two local boys and gave them blow jobs for a ride home. Business after 9pm tripled. Grizzly's dad was right, the place was a moneymaker.

**&&&**

"What are you doing? Why are you covering the masterpiece?" Carrie was in the bedroom covering the walls with black and white wallpaper with patterns like Amish hex signs.

"You like it?"

"What about the picture? All the time we spent?"

"The dead babies are starting to creep me out."

"The babies, they're my babies, why would you-"

"I'm pregnant Derek. And the babies and the tombstones and the cracked eggs, it's all starting to make me crazy."

"Pregnant? How long you known?"

I put my hands on her belly over top her t-shirt. I knew there was no baby to feel yet. No kicks, no heartbeat, but I still expected something, a bump, a feeling. I pressed my thumb into her belly button and applied pressure until she winced.

"Not so hard Derek, I'm sore. I've been throwing up all morning."

Her mom told her to eat Corn Pops and Cherry Pop-Tarts for breakfast because they taste the best coming back up. Grizzly stuck his head in the door.

"There's a guy coming in tonight for an interview. Would you mind going in and talking to him?"

"Fuck. Hang on, give me one more minute."



I kissed Carrie on the cheek, bent over, lifted her shirt, and kissed her stomach, then licked her belly button where I poked, and kissed her again on the cheek. I told her I loved her. She told me to bring her back some cream of broccoli soup and a dinner roll.

&&&

It was drizzling outside and Grizzly rolled down the window and handed me a joint. It wasn't the same weed from the party. It was brown and smelled like dead tree bark and burned deep in the back of my throat and raindrops tickled my nose every time I turned towards the window to exhale. Garth Brooks was singing the live version of *Friends in Low Places*, the one where he gets drunk and tells his ex to kiss his ass. "One more hit and we gotta put that shit out. I don't want Carrie smelling it in the truck."

"Are you serious? She's really fucking with your head."

"She's pregnant. I don't want her bitching and stressing out right now."

"Pregnant? Are you sure? Did you see the test? Make sure she shows you the test. Women do that shit all the time."

"No, it's the real deal. She has an appointment Thursday. I'm gonna need the day off."

"Yeah, let's get this guy hired in and get him trained."

"Who is it?"

"It's a young guy. I think he's a homo."

KC had pale skin and dirty blonde hair. He was skinnier than I thought someone who worked in a restaurant should be. He seemed passive, reliable, it was in his voice. His wrists were bony and his watch was gold with a brown wristband and he wore it on his left arm. His fingernails were clipped and polished with a silver sparkle clear coat and his knuckles were hairless. You could easily picture him and another guy waxing each other's balls with exotic imported gels from Madagascar and painting each other's toenails on top of a fluffy cream colored comforter in a queen sized bed. His eyes were bloodshot behind his glasses and he smelled like spray-can deodorant and menthol cigarettes. He showed up with a resume. I liked him immediately. I gave him a copy of the menu to look over and showed him around the store.

"I can't believe how clean everything is here. Every other place I worked in was a mess."

"That's rule number one here. Everything has to stay spotless, all the time."

I gave him Grizzly's line about the Virgin Mary giving birth on the floor. He smiled, but wouldn't laugh. I really liked the kid. I gave him the password to the safe, opened it, took out three hundred dollars and handed it to him.

"Here, get yourself some good button down shirts. They have to be blue. Pants have to be black. Slip-proof shoes, a couple ties, they don't have to be plain but don't get nothing stupid. If you wear a belt it has to be black. If they're ever dirty or wrinkled don't show up. You'll be fired on the spot. You have any questions?"

"When do I get my first check?"

“Payday’s every Thursday.” I handed him the keys. “Same thing with the keys, if you lose them, don’t bother-“

“Showing up for work. I’ll be fired on the spot. Got it.”

I waited around for another half an hour while he filled out his application and a W-2 form. There were other papers too, authorization forms to let us do a credit check, criminal check, all that shit. We never did any checks. If a man can cook food and count out cash registers I don’t give a shit if he kidnapped his neighbor’s kids or fucked a fourteen year old when he was twenty.

**&&&**

Shelbyville, TN:

*Ants are the strongest of all living beings; it is no coincidence they are so easily crushed.*

*Love,  
Daisy*

**&&&**

The scabby, red-headed girl was wiping off one of the picnic tables. She kneeled in a puddle of ketchup to grab a chewed up chicken strip off the seat and I peeked inside her shirt and she caught me looking when she stood back up. I didn’t bother look away. Her bra was pink and padded and there was a mole on her chest between her tits. I wanted to pick it open and rub my cheek against the bloody mole pus. I grabbed a handful of napkins and took them over to her.

“You could’ve used a broom. Take these napkins.”

“I don’t have time to wipe it off. Can you get it for me?” I wiped the ketchup from her knee and it smeared into my fingers. She grabbed my hand, licked the ketchup off my middle finger, and put my pinky in her mouth and sucked. Her fingers were gritty, sweaty, and her breath smelled like pizza sauce. “Can you give me a ride. I’m off in five minutes?”

She walked in the back towards the bathroom. I finished talking to KC, gathered up his paperwork, and put it all in a manila file folder in the office. Grizzly was watching the surveillance cameras, a man was sitting alone at a picnic table, glancing at a newspaper, wearing headphones, eating a chicken gyro with buffalo sauce and feta cheese, and swirling the ice around in his glass with a straw. I told the red head we’d give her a ride home, then grabbed Carrie’s cream of broccoli, half a ham and cheese sandwich, and two six packs of Pabst. It was still raining when we left.

**&&&**

Grizzly was in back with the red head. Her shirt was off and the padded pink bra was pushed down around her waist. He grabbed a bottle of Pabst, shook it, opened it, and poured it between her tits. The foam was everywhere. A small stream of beer ran down the center of her chest, overtop of the mole, underneath the bra, and parted around her belly button like the Red Sea, like Grizzly was the modern day Moses, leading lost gentiles out of darkness, into the Promised Land. She took her panties off and dropped them on my lap. They matched the pink bra and smelled like four-day old clam chowder left sitting on top of the stove long

enough to attract flies. I cracked the window halfway and tried tossing them into the ditch with the dead leaves, but the wind caught them and they ended up on the shoulder of the left lane beside a half-empty two-liter of Faygo Rock and Rye and a bloody, mutilated raccoon corpse. I found a half-joint in the ash tray, lit it, toked it twice, and passed it to Grizzly. I couldn't find his fingers in the dark and burned his forearm three times before he took a hit and handed it back. The red head straddled Grizzly's lap, backwards like a bull rider, leaned forward, pressed her tits flat against my seat, and yanked the top of my hair with her right hand while he fucked her. I relit the joint and held it to her lips. She kissed the back of my head, inhaled, then exhaled into my ear. I wanted to pull off onto a dirt road, flash the four-way lights, switch places with Grizzly, and stick it in little red's ass, but I smoked the last tiny piece of the roach and dropped her off out in the country in front of a big blue house with white shutters and freshly mowed grass. There was a small cement porch with two plants in gray pots on the top step. She never asked about the panties.

Carrie finished hanging the Amish wall paper, and was sound asleep when I got home, snoring into the pillow, with her feet sticking out from beneath a new sherbet colored comforter, the second one she bought in six weeks. I put her soup in the fridge and ate my ham and cheese sandwich. Then I jerked off in the bathroom, with the light on, sitting on the toilet, thinking about the red head rubbing cold cream of broccoli all over Carrie's pregnant belly and slurping it off. I cleaned myself up with Diane's towel then hung it back up over the shower curtain. There was a little bit left on my finger. It smelled like chlorine and I

wiped it on the bar of soap beside the sink, Irish Spring with aloe. It never hurts to have the luck of the Irish.

**&&&**

Grizzly was sitting at one of the picnic tables in the back beneath an old rickety ceiling fan, reading the front page from yesterday's paper, eating pecan waffles and wheat toast with grape jelly, and drinking black coffee from a styrofoam cup. He called me over to the table and I sat.

"Listen Derek, we gotta work something out."

"Sure, whatever you need, you know that."

"My paperwork came back from the liquor commission. They denied my license because of the felony. If we wanna keep the place open we're gonna have to put everything in your name."

"If that's what we gotta do, let's do it."

"Thanks a lot bro. You always come through for me and I appreciate it."

**&&&**

Carrie met me in front of the restaurant after work. We walked to Wilderness Park in the center of town beside the bridge, across from the Old Mill Museum. River Raisin cuts through and dams off and forms a waterfall. Along the bank, beside the gazebo, there is a small patch of grass between two oak trees. We took our clothes off and sat with our legs and feet in the water. The sky was starless and the traffic was light and the river was rushing over the waterfall. If you

listened closely you could hear the water hitting the rocks at the bottom of the fall. You could hear it bubbling and turning to foam if you listened even closer. A mosquito landed on Carrie's arm, inside one of her stretch marks, and I watched it expand, fill up with blood, then I slapped her bare skin hoping to feel it pop open against my hand, but I couldn't, so I licked most of the blood from my fingers, kissed her on the puffy pink bite the mosquito left, and wiped the rest between her legs.

"That's disgusting. Why'd you do that?" I didn't answer. I tried to kiss her neck but she moved when I leaned in. "Help me clean it off."

"Get in the water."

"No. It smells like dead fish. You get in." I did. I slid down and stood between her legs with my shoulders and head above the water and buried my face between her tits and pressed them against my cheeks and quacked like Donald Duck. "You're so fucking crazy Derek. I love you so much."

"Do you? Get in."

She did. The river was shallow. We went further and further out until our hearts and our souls were completely submerged and only our eyes and lips were left above water. We held each other for minutes or hours or days, until her left leg buckled beneath her and we both lost our balance and went under. The muddy water was thick and tasted like the bottom of a mop bucket and she closed her eyes and I kissed her on both eyelids and asked her to marry me.

We walked over to the sandbox still dripping wet and laid down side by side like fresh herring fillets tucked tightly in a tin can. There were crushed rocks and bugs and broken beer bottles mixed in with the sand. I grabbed a handful and let

it fall slowly from my hand to my chest like an hour glass. I took two more handfuls and spread them across her body like a map of the Mormon Trail, then further, deeper into new territory, to secret places too private for words or fingers, then I rolled over twice and covered myself head to toe with sand. Carrie leaned into my dick and licked it and her tongue felt rough and gritty and she wrapped her warm mouth around it and sucked hard for a minute and a half until I came. I pressed two fingers against her throat and felt her swallow the spit and sand and cum, then she told me yes, she'd marry me. She kissed me on the cheek and we both fell asleep. I woke up before sunrise, put my clothes back on, set hers in the grass beside two dandelions just below her feet, and went back to the restaurant to start on the paperwork.

**&&&**

A tall man in a tall gray suit with straight white teeth and straight white hair sat at the table closest to the register and ordered an all meat omelet and a glass of orange juice and asked to speak to the owner after the waitress handed him his bill.

“Are you Derek Kehoe? The owner of Backwoods Bar and Grill?”

“It was Backwoods. I filed the name change last week, it's Kehoe's Kountry Kitchen.”

“Ah, yes, so the sign indicates. I'm afraid there is a matter of 1.2 million dollars that you need to resolve with the Michigan Department of Treasury.”



“1.2 million dollars? What do you mean? I just took over last week. How could I possibly have acquired that much debt?”

“It appears the previous owner had an outstanding tax debt that you inherited when you took over ownership.”

“I didn’t know. Grizzly never told me.”

“I’m afraid it’s the purchaser’s responsibility to request a tax Clearance Certificate from the state of Michigan, not the seller’s.”

“Well fuck, is there anything else?”

“I’ll leave these papers with you to look over. You have forty-eight hours to contact the Michigan Department of Treasury. And here, start with this.” He handed me his bill for the all meat omelet and orange juice. “Good day.”

I walked back to the office and Grizzly was eating a hot roast beef sandwich over mashed potatoes and drinking a Miller High Life.

“A man from the Michigan Treasury just stopped in. 1.2 million dollars? Are you out of your fucking mind?”

“I didn’t know Derek, I swear.”

“Bullshit. You got the same paperwork I did.”

“My dad fucked me Derek. What was I supposed to do?”

“Make a goddam payment arrangement like I have to do. You knew all along? You didn’t give a fuck about me and splitting 50/50. You set me up you piece of shit.”

“No I didn’t. I’ve only known for three weeks. I was gonna tell you.”

“When motherfucker? And why would you make up that liquor license bullshit if you were gonna tell me the truth.” I punched him on the bridge of his nose and he fell into the file cabinet. “Get the fuck out of my restaurant.”

“You can’t kick me outta here. It’s my place. I’m just using your name for the paperwork.”

“Was your place. Grizzly’s restaurant rule number two, no friends, remember bitch?”

“Derek, you’re not fucking listening. I didn’t know. I’ll help you pay it off.”

“Bet your ass you will; one way or another.”

**&&&**

We found a large two bedroom apartment a mile from the restaurant, across the street from Wilderness Park in between a run-down feed mill and a 24 hour laundromat with old school arcade games. Diane called me an asshole for punching Grizzly over the 1.2 million dollars and told Carrie she wasn’t gonna make him leave and if we weren’t okay with that we could get the fuck out. So we did. The walls were off-white and full of plaster and nail holes and there were cobwebs in every corner except for the kitchen. The biggest bedroom had two windows, both facing the park; the smallest had a lone window overlooking the last row of front load washers in the laundromat. There were no carpets in either room. There were mousetraps smeared with peanut butter in the bottom of every closet and none of the floorboards creaked. The landlord was a small man with dark hair and dark eyes and he wore overalls and a flannel shirt and gave us the

keys a day early so we could start moving our stuff in. He said he'd be back for the rent in the morning.

We decided to start from scratch. The only things we took from her mom's house were personal items we kept in our bedroom; clothes and blankets and my favorite picture of us lying together in the middle of the filthy kitchen floor with a bowl of spinach salad spilled all over us, thick red French dressing dripping from her face like junky blood. We hung the rest of the photos up and down the hallway. She left a large space in between two old family portraits, one hers, one mine. "You see that baby, that's where we're gonna hang your diploma after you graduate." Her forehead was sweaty when I kissed it and we held hands while we hung the last frame.

"I think that's everything."

"What about my shoebox? Where'd you put it?"

"What shoebox?"

"The one with all Daisy's postcards in it. Where is it?"

"I didn't grab it, did you?"

"What the fuck? What if your mom threw them away? Dammit Carrie."

"Sorry baby, let's go get them. We'll go right now."

"No, you stay here. It's raining. I gotta stop off at the restaurant anyway."

The rain was heavy. There was a dried booger on the left side of my nose. I drove it deeper up my nostril the more I picked it. The kitchen light was on when I pulled in the driveway. I opened the door without knocking and Grizzly and Diane were half naked and half asleep on the couch watching Jim Carey do *Night at the Roxbury* on a rerun of Saturday Night Live. Two joints were sitting in a

black ashtray on the coffee table next to a half a glass of grape juice and Diane mumbled something about needles and dinosaur eggs when I poked my head in to say hello. I walked back to the room and found the box, still on the shelf underneath the red and white Raggedy Ann dresses. Diane was standing behind me when I turned around. She was wearing a white t-shirt with no bra and white panties. Her left leg was bruised behind her knee and I never noticed until then that Carrie had her mother's ass. She saw me staring.

"You like what you see? Is that why you came back without Carrie?"

"That'll never fucking happen. I forgot something." She smiled when she saw the box.

"Did you forget to grab sissy's postcards?"

"How do you know what's in the box?" She wouldn't stop smiling.

"Another one came in the mail yesterday. It's on the table." I took it and read it. "You gonna go chasing after sissy now? No one's trying to kill that girl. She's fucked in the head just like her mother. Two crazy slut bitches."

**&&&**

Atlantic City, New Jersey:

*I know who killed mom. They're going to kill me.*

**III**

I woke up. Still tired. Paid a different Korean woman for another night and went back to sleep.

###

I woke up at three in the afternoon and took a shit. It was tar black and hard and didn't want to come out. I braced my hands on my knees and pushed and took breathes in imaginary Lamaze patterns. I felt my asshole rip when it popped out. There was blood on the toilet paper. I brewed a pot of coffee and took a shower without soap or shampoo or a clean towel. I dried off with my shirt then dried my shirt off on top of the heater and called KC.

"Derek? What the fuck. You haven't called in three days."

"I been taking care of shit. You handling everything ok?"

"Something ain't right, Derek. You need to get back here. Grizzly's been in here twice today looking for you."

"So what? Grizzly comes in all the time."

"He brought these two guys with him. They all looked pretty pissed off. They were asking a million fucking questions about the restaurant and when you were coming back."

"What did you tell them?"

"I said you were out of town and you'd be back in a week or two."

"Cool. I'll call Grizzly and find out what's up. What about everything else? Everything running smooth?"

"Everything's good bro, same old same."

###

I walked out to the road to look for a place to eat. There was a brown haired woman with wide hips carrying a light blue laundry basket full of towels and tube socks to the laundromat next door. There was a billboard for a Pennsylvania Dutch style buffet twenty-eight miles down Route 30. I made the trip. I passed a hotel shaped like a ship and a small tourist trap called Dutch Wonderland with a motel, and a monorail running overhead. There was a horse and buggy in front of me. Both the driver and passenger were midgets with thick brown beards and black bifocals. We stopped at a red light and the horse's tail wagged and he took a shit on the highway. I watched it fall out of his ass then plop like mud pie. The light turned green. I passed the restaurant and followed them into a little town called Paradise. Clip-clop. Clip-clop.

###

We passed Paradise Lane and turned left into a park a mile or so down Route 30. I parked in the grass behind an old white pavilion. The horse and buggy pulled down a small dirt path leading to a baseball diamond. I took two hits of acid and sat at a wooden picnic table inside the pavilion. There was another pavilion beside this one. There were swarms of vehicles surrounding it. Some cocksucker was celebrating his retirement from New Holland Ford. His anorexic red-headed wife and three drug addicted step-children showed up, smiling, pretending they were proud of his pretend accomplishment. His co-workers came, bearing gifts;

cards, watches, framed photos, golf clubs, sweaters, cologne. A blonde haired woman wearing flip-flops and white cut-off shorts with no panty line gave him a little blue box with a set of keys inside. Everyone looked but said nothing, even when he closed the box and put the keys in his right pants pocket.

There were a dozen or so buggies parked beside the diamond. Amish folks were playing softball. They all played well, made difficult double plays from third to first and picked off runners trying to steal second. Even the women hit home runs. I wondered how often they bathed and if their pussies tasted sweaty and overworked like newly cultivated corn fields or warm and satisfying like freshly baked bread brought home from an Amish market, yeasty. I hadn't played ball since Little League. I pitched the last three innings of every game and played first base the rest of the time. My father taught me how to pitch, how to throw curveballs, sliders, split fingers, and change-ups. In the games I only threw forkballs. He also taught me how to bet baseball games, how to evaluate a starting line-up, starting pitchers, scan the disabled list, factor in pitcher's at-bats when we watched the National League, and how to avoid sucker bets. All this teaching but he never came out ahead. He never made room for the unpredictable; injuries, crooked umps covering the spread, Kirk Gibson's heart, Mitch Williams' meltdown, or the endless determination of the underdog. He never had it in him.

I walked over to the retirement party and started shaking hands and introducing myself as Michael from second shift. I grabbed a styrofoam plate and made a sandwich with chipped ham and swiss cheese on wheat bread with relish and mayonnaise. I grabbed a handful of sour cream and onion chips and black olives, carrots, cauliflower, and celery sticks from the vegetable tray and ate them



without dip. I scooped some baked macaroni and cheese and pasta salad, and grabbed two deviled eggs and two red beet eggs, salt and peppered everything, then walked back over to the other pavilion, sat down at the picnic table, and set my plate on a drop of dried bird shit and a little carved out heart with  $RT + SW = 4 \text{ EVER}$  inside it.

The macaronis formed a line and marched off the plate like ants. I stuck my mouth on the end of the plate and scooped them in before they escaped. I ate everything this way, shoving it all in, barely chewing, coughing, gagging. I turned the plate upside down and dumped it on my face, down the front of my shirt. I needed a drink. There was a water fountain underneath a square cement gazebo but it didn't work. A few feet away there was a rusty manual water pump coming out of the ground. I cranked the handle up and down a few times and water came out. It was the best water I ever drank. It was spiritual, holy. I stuck my head underneath and let the water soak my hair and face and skin. I took my shirt off and cranked it again and crossed my fingers over my forehead for baptism. I finished and sat in my car for an hour and a half watching the softball game.

###

The party ended shortly after the game. They threw all the leftover food in a green garbage barrel and I was still hungry. There was chipped ham and roast beef right on top. I grabbed a few handfuls and shoved the meat into my pockets, then took some barbeque chips from an open bag. There were two small boys with brown hair and matching gray overalls playing in the sand box. Their mother had long

brown hair and flat hips and made them get out of the sandbox and play on the blue handicapped swings on the other side of the park after she caught me munching on the chips. She wouldn't push either of them. She was sitting on a black metal bench reading a romance novel when I walked by.

I walked to the back of the park along the bank of a skinny river. I took my shoes and socks off and threw them into the water. One of the shoes stuck to a stick and the other floated away and my left foot was on fire. I stepped in burn hazel and soothed it with cold mud then came to a fence. It was hard to climb without shoes. My toes kept catching and cutting. I gave up and crawled through the opening underneath and followed a trail to a large heap of junk beside a small pond in the middle of a cow pasture. There were two men sorting through the junk for metals, putting aluminum in a black bag, copper in a gray one, and brass in brown. There were four kids fishing in the pond with stick poles using canned corn and stale hamburger buns for bait. One of them was barefoot, digging for worms with his fingers and lifting big rocks while another boy yanked the worms out of the dirt. I stepped in a pile of dried cow shit. It felt good between my toes. The top was flaky like peach pie, then mushy and squishy when I got to the middle. I looked for more cow pies and stepped in all of them. I stood for a few seconds in each one wiggling my toes before moving on. They all felt different, but familiar, like pussy, like warm bowls of cream of wheat.

The trail picked back up on the other side of the pond and dead-ended at a set of train tracks. There was a short man with shaggy red hair walking along the tracks beside two boys with the same red hair. They were picking up rusty railroad spikes from the tracks and putting them in a small brown shoebox. The

big boy jabbed the little boy in the ribs with one of the spikes. The little boy cried, the short man did nothing. I picked a snotty booger from my left nostril and walked back to the car.

###

“Grizzly, man what the fuck’s going on? KC said you been in every day this week looking for me. Who are those guys coming in with you?” Why are you asking all the questions?”

“I’m in trouble, Derek. It’s my cousins. I tried telling them I don’t have any more of the money left but they won’t listen. I need two hundred thousand dollars before the end of the week or I’m gonna fucking disappear. What can we do?”

“Holy shit, two hundred grand? I’m out of town right now. I don’t know when I’m coming back. How much can you get together?”

“I got twenty, maybe twenty-five, tops. Can you get me the other one seventy-five?”

“You know I ain’t got that kind of money, man, what the fuck are you thinking?”

“I gave you the money that got you started. Don’t forget that shit. I need you.”

“Give me until tomorrow. That’s all I can do.”

“What’s the plan?”

“That’s why I need until tomorrow.”

###

“KC, do exactly what I say and shut the fuck up about it and I’ll give you forty grand.”

“This is gonna be something stupid, I can already tell.”

“Listen, you and Jalen switch shifts. I need you to close for awhile. Every night when you count out the drawers set the registers right for the opening shift and take the rest of the money home with you.”

“What about petty cash? What about silver change? What about-“

“Just use your goddam head and stop asking questions. You with me so far?”

“Keep going.”

“On the 3rd day, when you close for the night, I want you to drain all the oil out of the back two fryers and keep them turned on when you walk out the door.”

“Won’t that-“

“Don’t worry about what it will do, just keep taking the money home and keep showing up to work.”

“Don’t do this man, just tell me what’s going on, we can straighten it out a different way.”

“There is no other way. I’ll call you in a few days.”

###

I walked back up to the front office and paid for two more nights. This time it was a Korean man in a blue throwback Adidas jumpsuit and a thick gold chain. Two of his teeth were gold and so were the rings on his fingers. He smelled like designer cologne and stir-fry vegetables over-cooked in olive oil. He smiled when I handed him two hundred-dollar-bills and told him to keep the change. I was hoping he would do one of those silly bows you always see Japanese people doing in movies, but he didn't. Maybe it took another hundred. Maybe Korean people don't do that at all, only the Japanese.

The brown haired woman with wide hips was outside again carrying another broken laundry basket. It was white and full of wet jeans and she wedged it between her stomach and her car door while she dug around in her right pants pocket.

“Want me to hold that for ya?”

“Would you mind?”

“No not at all.”

Her name was Nancy. She left her husband last week after she found two DVD's in his desk drawer starring his three sons, 11, 9, and 7, dressed up like Happy, Dopey, and Doc from the seven dwarves, taking turns sucking each other's cocks, while him and a friend from work sat on the floor in front of them and jerked off. She was only living there temporarily and her tits looked better far away than up close. There were three moles in a straight line on her left cheek and thin black hairs growing from her chin.

“You wanna come in?”

“No, I better not.”

“There’s beer in the fridge.”

“What kind?”

“Pabst.”

There were two half eaten peanut butter and marshmallow sandwiches on top of a phone book on the floor underneath a small square table. The table was brown and there was dried peanut butter and blue and yellow paint stuck to the wall behind it. There was a twenty-seven inch TV on top of a small dresser on the wall opposite the beds and a freshly painted Van Gogh knockoff on the wall in between two gold lamps. The mirror above the sink was cracked, and she left the door open while she brushed her teeth with red tooth paste, spit it out in the toilet, and turned the water on in the bathtub. “I’m gonna grab a quick shower. Grab a beer and I’ll be out in a minute. Turn on the TV if you want. There’s cable.” She closed the door the rest of the way before she got undressed and I grabbed a beer and turned on the TV, *Matlock* reruns.

###

Nancy was out of the shower in five minutes. Matlock won the case by proving that the defendant’s former business associate owned a small trucking company and supposedly transported the dead body from the hotel after sneaking it out of a locked room through the heating ducts, down the elevator shaft, through an emergency exit, and out the back door into one of his trucks. The judge and jury

were overjoyed to successfully fulfill their civic duty and everyone in the courtroom clapped and hugged their friends, except for the defendant's two daughters whose mother was still dead. They were finished crying, waiting patiently for their father to acknowledge they were alive, breathing, wondering why the man who owned the small trucking company was in a locked hotel room with their mother. The dad was smiling, patting Matlock on the back for a job well done, pausing for a photo op in the local newspaper, not sure how to tell the girls their mother was a high priced hooker who let all the local business men and city council officials tie her wrists and ankles together with dirty tube socks, stuff their shit-streaked cotton underwear in her mouth, gag her with the tie rope from the complimentary hotel robe, and shoot their cum inside her asshole. And all this to pay for the girls' piano lessons and exclusive private school and family trips to Disney World.

Nancy came out of the bathroom in a baggy, off-white t-shirt and black cotton panties.

"Grab me one of those beers would ya? I gotta look for the blow dryer." I grabbed her the beer. "Do me a favor. Squeeze that loaf of bread down there, tell me if you think its still good. I'm hungry."

"How long's it been there? You want me to order some pizza or something? A couple subs? Whatever?" I ordered a large ham and pepperoni pizza with garlic crust and two orders of cheese sticks. "Hey, I gotta grab something from my room. Here's some money for the pizza in case it comes before I get back."

I threw a fifty on the bed and walked to my room. I took a really soft shit, watery, then cut a ten strip of acid from the sheet, threw it in a sandwich baggie,

and stuffed it in my back pocket. I tripped stepping down off the sidewalk, twisted my ankle, and fell forward into a black mini-van with a Maryland license plate and a cracked driver's side taillight. I limped back to my room for the gray bucket beside the sink and filled it with ice from the machine two doors down from the office. I hobbled back to Nancy's room and knocked on the door. No one answered. I knocked again. Nothing. I tried the handle. It was locked. I waited ten more minutes, then picked a bloody scab from my nose and wiped it on the bottom of my shoe. I went back to my room, turned the heat on high, took off my clothes, stretched out on top of the sheet, and watched another episode of *Matlock*.

###

Six episodes, Matlock won them all.

###

The Ben Franklin Bridge was under construction so I took the Walt Whitman out of South Philly into Jersey. They got Thomas Paine and Bill Cosby and Rocky fucking Balboa and they name their bridge after a gay poet from Long Island? Daisy said that Whitman was the father of free verse and *Leaves of Grass* was the Declaration of Independence of American poetry, so maybe that's why, or maybe Philly's full of homo heroin addicts with paintbrushes and typewriters and too much brotherly love and one of them put on a pinstriped suit and took a job where his only two duties were coordinating tours to Independence Hall and giving fucked up names to suspension bridges. Daisy also said that JFK was killed



by a crazy comic book writer brainwashed by the CIA, and the government faked the Apollo 11 moon landing to settle their dick measuring contest with the USSR.

Traffic on the bridge was heavy. The Phillies were playing the first of three home games against the Pirates. There were two teenagers in a yellow truck, both wearing throwback Mike Schmidt jerseys and red Phillies hats, slamming cans of Stroh's and tossing the goddam empties into the Delaware River for the fish to choke on. My father loved the Pirates as much as he loved the Steelers. He bet every game, every season, if he lost he bet more. Even after the Pirates won three straight National League East titles, but couldn't make it to the World Series; even after Barry Bonds started shooting steroids into his ass cheeks and they sent him off to San Francisco and the Pirates haven't had a winning season since. Barry Bonds was not as kind to my father as Terry Bradshaw.

I got off the bridge in Gloucester City and stopped for gas and a bag of barbeque chips. The man behind the register had long brown hair and brown eyes and he was reading Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*. I bought a lottery ticket and asked him how the bridge got its name. "Whitman spent the last eighteen years of his life right here in Jersey." He was pointing out the window at the overgrown grass outlining the parking lot. He tried to sell me a copy of his own chapbook; *The Boulevard is Not That Bad*, a collection of haiku inspired by Elton John lyrics, then invited me to listen to him read it later that night at a coffee shop near Camden. I told him I had to get going, then offered him a few hits of the pink elephant acid for one of his chapbooks. He accepted.

*warm streets hold her close*  
*wet needles pierce perfect skin*  
*too tiny to dance*

*dirty time clean hands*  
*like dollars or the ocean*  
*her thunder still rolls*

*hats light as feathers*  
*pulled plucked from her golden goose*  
*don't want to go on*

###

It was a straight shot down 42 S. into Atlantic City.

###

It was close to 1:00 am when I knocked on the door. The mother answered. She was small; everything, teeth, tits, hands. Her hair was black and knotty and her small t-shirt clung close to her hips. She didn't know Daisy. I showed her the postcard and she told me to come in.

"Isaac, get your ass down here."

"What Mom? Fuck, I'm watching a movie."

“Some guy’s here. He says he knows that friend of yours. The crazy one.” He was eating barbeque chips and licking his fingers.

“Yeah, I know Daisy. You’re Derek?” He laughed. “She said you’d come.”

“That’s really fucking funny. Where’s she at?”

“I don’t know. She left two days ago.”

“When did she say she’d be back?”

“She didn’t.”

“Can I wait here?”

“Whatever. *Mi casa su casa.*”

###

My neck was sore from sleeping crooked on the couch the next three nights, resting my head against the caramel colored cushions without a pillow. The rest of the furniture was navy blue. Everything in the house smelled like old people piss, except for Lacy, the teenage girl with long black hair and black eyes who gave two guys a hand job for a half a pack of Marlboro Menthol Lights. She smelled like warm milk on the verge of spoiling. I offered her a few hits of acid but she called me a dick and said drugs were for losers.

She lived in a two story condo on Pacific with her mother Suzie and older brother Isaac and whatever friends he felt like dragging in to sponge off of mommy fucking dearest, a widow, living off her late husband’s social security, and tips from singing old Patsy Cline tunes on karaoke nights in high class joints up and down the boardwalk. This was the address on Daisy’s postcard.

###

I woke up with dog hair stuck to my teeth and tongue like I spent all night licking a fucking Chihuahua. Lacy was lying on the floor in a white tank top and white cotton panties, watching Spongebob, and eating a bowl of Chocolate Lucky Charms. She was small like her mother with better skin. She asked me for a cigarette. I asked where the bathroom was. She pointed left. I told her I didn't smoke. Isaac was standing in the shower, wrapped in a red towel, flossing his teeth, bloody saliva dripping down all five fingers.

"If you gotta take a piss just come in and piss. I gotta finish getting ready." I went in and pissed. "How long you gonna wait around for Daisy? When she leaves it takes her a couple weeks to find her way back."

"She knows I'm coming. She'll be back. How do you know her?"

"We work together."

"She has a job?"

"Something like that."

Isaac worked three days a week hustling tourists at the game booths on the boardwalk. Thursday - darts. Friday - goldfish. Saturday - ring toss. Daisy looked for loners. Talked sweet. Talked dirty. They'd walk arm and arm passed the booths, then she'd stand real close with her tits against their backs and tell them how wet she gets over fluffy brown bears or big stuffed penguins, that kind of shit. Sixty bucks later she'd lose them in a casino. Isaac gave her half. On bad

days she cleared three hundred dollars. Daisy was good at spotting suckers. They were everywhere.

“I know she won’t be back tonight, but we’re gonna party later if you wanna stay and hang out.”

“Sounds good.” I felt another hair catch in the back of my throat. “What kinda dog you guys got?”

“We ain’t got no fucking dog.”

###

We stood together holding hands while God blessed our ham and sweet potatoes with his holy spirit. Isaac on my left. Suzie on my right. Her fingers felt like modeling clay. She kneaded the top of my hand with her thumb until we said *Amen* in unison. Everyone let go but me. I held onto Suzie while we sat, while we buttered our bread, chewed our honey glazed ham, sipped our apple juice.

“I’m singing at the Sand’s tonight. You wanna come?”

“I should probably wait here for Daisy.”

“Ok, but when you get tired of waiting you know where I’ll be.”

Someone knocked an hour after she left and Lacy answered in hot pink pajamas and let in two Puerto Ricans with a 24 pack of PBR, and two more a minute later with another 24 pack. The first two chain-smoked a pack of Lucky Strikes and played Madden 07 on Xbox. I swapped a case of beer for a ten strip of acid and drank one after another until I passed out on a dirty Scooby-Doo blanket with my head on top of an empty pizza box. I woke up an hour later. The house

was full and my pants were wet. Dog hair clung to the crusted corners on both sides of my mouth while Guns-N-Roses took us all to Paradise City.

I found the bathroom and pissed on the little red rug in front of the toilet even though I aimed for the bowl. My nose didn't bleed when I picked it. I brushed my teeth with Isaac's toothbrush, wiped my fingers off on the shower curtain, and took two hits of acid. The door opened before I was finished. One of the Puerto Ricans came in and handed me his joint while he pissed. It smelled like moss but it wasn't harsh when I hit it, so I hit it again, then set it on the counter and kept the door open when I left.

The hours and people kept passing. Everywhere. Nowhere. Behind the couches and under the stairs and hands and feet and bodies snuck out from cabinets and curtains. Reflections in mirrors came and went as imprecise as small town fireworks never knowing when night would come. Tiny girls with tiny tits sat in semi-circles smoking from glass bongs and brushing each other's hair. A midget cut coke on the countertop next to the toaster. Lacy deep fried cheese sticks and breaded mushrooms and handed them out on thin paper plates with ranch sauce and marinara as the ceiling fan swirled. Isaac was standing in front of the door blocking my way when I tried to find the bathroom.

"I told you that slut sister of yours wasn't coming back tonight.

"Hey, fuck you, she ain't no slut, and she'll be here." Two of Isaac's friends were behind him and they laughed when I talked back.

"Well all three of us took turns with her. Nasty little whore wanted all of us at once. Let us do whatever we wanted."

I spit on his left cheek and he punched me twice on the bridge of my nose until it bled. They pushed me down on the bathroom floor and kicked me in the ribs and throat and face and their boots mixed with the blood and I tried to stand but couldn't. They took turns pissing on my face and in my hair until I cried and they closed the door. I laid there for twenty more minutes waiting for my eyes and heart and lungs to work again, then climbed out the bathroom window and threw up twice in the street before finding my way to the boardwalk.

Seagulls hung overhead like bats in the midst of casino smog while a tall woman with thin grey hair and droopy tits dug through a trash can. She found a half-eaten sausage wrapped in tin foil and ate it in three bites. A skinny black man with no hair and no legs asked me for change, so I handed him a dollar and headed towards the Sands to look for Suzie and stopped to call KC when I found a payphone.

"Derek, when are you coming back? Everything's fuck up."

"Did you make it happen?"

"I did what you said. I shouldn't have. There were fire trucks and cops and an ambulance. I parked across the street and watched it burn down."

"Ambulance? Did someone get hurt?"

"No. I was the last one out. But that's not all Derek. You really need to come back. Today. Where the fuck are you?" His voice had been crackling, but it finally broke. He was crying. "It's Daisy. She was in the fire Derek. She's dead."

###

Ypsilanti, MI

*Nothing is ever as it seems. Don't look for me. I'll always find you.**Love,  
Daisy*