

UNBEARABLE LIGHTNESS: GETTING OLDER WITHOUT GETTING MARRIED

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THESIS ABSTRACT

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As the title suggests, this thesis explores, in ways both direct and indirect, the life of a single middle aged man. This is not a scenario I would have imagined for myself when I was younger. While I never gave it much thought, I assumed the same future for myself that most of my friends and siblings did: that I would embark on a fulfilling career, fall in love, get married, and start a family. In fiction, movies, and television, these ambitions, however traditional some of them might be, are often the province of the women in those stories, and the possible thwarting of them the primary source of conflict. Oddly, the idea that men might share them is rarely addressed. Using my own experiences as a barometer, I was interested in exploring what becomes of men who have similar longings that go unfulfilled. Demographic trends seem to indicate that more people, both men and women, are living alone than ever before, but their stories, for whatever reason, often go untold. Perhaps they're not considered dramatic enough. In an effort to contradict this trend, this thesis will attempt to chronicle some of the circumstances and events in the life of an unmarried, middle aged man. In both dramatic and comic scenarios, it will attempt to illuminate some of the anxieties and satisfactions that can arise from a man getting older while remaining single.

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Lonely Nights at the Merion Cricket Club

Last night, I sat on my new sofa and watched Bill Maher interview Matthew Perry on his HBO show *Real Time with Bill Maher*. The topics that Maher and his panel debate are usually political, the agenda unapologetically liberal. But his questions to Matthew Perry were different.

“So you’re 41 now, yes?”

“Yes.”

“And you’ve never been married, am I right?”

“No,” said Matthew Perry, and suddenly everyone – Maher’s panel, the studio audience, Matthew Perry himself – got quiet. As if everyone understood how much is at stake when a talk show host asks an older man about his unmarried status on live television. Looking as if he was aware of this tension, Maher continued.

“So I imagine that you’ve probably accepted that if it hasn’t happened by now, it probably isn’t going to happen, right?”

I watched Matthew Perry’s face as he absorbed that one, watched him wince, as if Maher, the Lord of Misrule on late night television, had thrown a handful of sand in his eyes, and shake his head. It was gratifying somehow, to see in that spasm that Perry hadn’t given up, that he was still fighting, still allowing himself some other vision of what he hoped his life might someday be. Maher was gracious as he tried to explain what he meant.

“It’s just that, you know, you get older, you get set in your ways ...” Then someone made a crack about bachelors in general, and the conversation turned to Bill

O'Reilly's treatment of Barack Obama during the Super Bowl halftime show, and everyone moved on.

I'm 47 and single. This seems to be the defining fact of my life right now, that I'm 47 and single. Even Matthew Perry has six years on me to get his unmarried situation sorted out. I look at women sitting at tables in coffee shops, strolling down the street, standing on line at supermarket checkouts, and ask myself the same boring, inevitable questions: Is she wearing a ring? If not, is she available? And if she is available, would she even be interested? Would she decide that she was in search of something better, that she was too wealthy, too ambitious, too attractive, too young – too something – for someone like me? The compulsion to speculate in this way inevitably nauseates: one consequence of being a certain kind of bachelor is how many days and moments include this never-ending search as part of their subtext.

Bachelor. A strange term, I've always thought. The word seems to imply a choice, a choice I don't seem to remember making, despite 47 years of evidence to the contrary. I think of bachelors from literature. I think of Nick Carraway, fretting over his thinning hair, taking dinner alone in Manhattan restaurants, as I sometimes did when I used to live there, walking those alluring streets alone, as I often did, looking longingly through hotel windows at the shadowy figures on the other side, their seemingly more fulfilled lives something he could only imagine.

I think of the Merion Cricket Club, where I played poker once or twice in the posh rooms upstairs. My membership among this particular group, mutual friends of my buddy Spike, who keeps me in the email loop about the game, can best be described as fringe. Like Spike, and unlike me, most of these guys have been members of this club

since they were kids. And unlike me, most of them still have the means to play cricket and tennis on the well-tended grass courts beneath us. Most of them are also married with children, though a couple stray bachelors thankfully remain.

“Single men used to live in these rooms,” says Spike as he deals the next hand.

“Really?” I say, speaking instinctively for once, forgetting my outsider’s standing.

“Cards above the table,” Spike’s friend Chip reminds me, not for the first time.

“Oh right,” I say, lifting my cards out of my lap. “Who?”

“Bachelors mostly,” Spike replies. “Divorcees. Down and dirty, Gents,” he informs the table, laying the last card face down in front of us.

Tossing my crappy pair into the pile, I try to imagine the life of one of these men. I think about him wrapping up another day at the office before coming back to his rented room at the Merion Cricket Club. I see him place his accessories on the bureau: cuff links, loose change, a Rolex watch. Inspecting his reflection in the mirror as he contemplates a night of ... what, exactly? Fixing himself a drink before settling into bed, a dog-eared paperback of John Updike waiting for him on the nightstand? Or heading down to the oak bar in the club restaurant, to bend the bartender’s ear for an hour or two? Or chat up some unattached female version of himself, who also happens to find herself sitting alone at the bar at the Merion Cricket Club on a hot summer night? Are these silly scenarios just the product of my own bachelor angst, these balding Prufrocks measuring out their lives in dry martinis and coffee spoons? Was it a life that any of them planned, or wanted? And if so, can they give me some advice on how it’s done? Because I’m going to need some help with the details if I’m going to navigate successfully the remaining bachelor years that lay before me.

Ex-girlfriends, the Internet, and Me

I've been checking out some old girlfriends lately on Google and Facebook. Every once in a while, I'll find myself typing the names of former flames into Facebook's search bar, or trolling through Google's search results, its links to someone who may or may not be a person I dated once upon a time. I even plowed through my address book (yes, some of us still use those) for keywords the other night, pages A right on up through Z, just in case a former lover had escaped my notice in a previous search.

To anyone who has ever searched the Web for another non-famous person, it's no surprise that the results will be pretty random. Clicking on links that may or may not lead to someone with whom you were once romantically involved will usually produce some pretty odd results. For example, you can usually count on the genealogical link somewhere on the list, the family tree that includes the name of that special someone you've been searching for, except that this special someone appears to have died in 1886. But if your ex has been living any kind of life of her own since she disappeared from yours, some of the hits are bound to be legitimate. You know you've reached another level of spying when you find yourself scrolling through the list of 973 finishers for a 10K race that was run three years ago in a town you've never heard of. Fifty-six minutes and twenty-three seconds? That's almost a nine-minute per mile pace! Not bad. She must still be in pretty good shape.

And while this kind of computer behavior makes me feel not so much guilty as sleazy – my usual m.o. when it comes to personal bad behavior – it's not exactly unusual computer behavior. Or so I've been told. In the rare times when I have confessed that I sometimes use the Internet to spy on my exes, my friends' usual response is to freely

admit that they do the same thing with their old flames, and just about anyone else who comes within their general orbit, all the time. Just the other day, I was listening to a story on *NPR*, where Google published a report on the nature of the search topics of their trillion and one users. Our number one search category? Each other.

But just because I can tell myself that everyone's doing it, like some sad California swinger from the Sixties, that doesn't mean that this kind of behavior, of trolling through websites for whatever information I can find about women who don't want to see me anymore, is something that makes me especially proud. At least I can tell myself that it isn't something I do all the time. Only when a certain mood or moment comes over me – a bored day between classes at work, or, more often, a lonely weeknight at home, when I'm too tired and too despondent to find anything more edifying to do, to rouse myself to fulfill some higher calling, like scrub the three-day-old dishes in the sink, or take myself out for an evening jog, or crack open one of the paperbacks gathering dust in my bedroom bookcase, the unread literary classics from my college English courses. Married friends will often let be known – sometimes inadvertently, other times quite stridently – how exhausting living in a house full of spouses and children can be. And I empathize completely, accept without question their grievances over the never-ending demands on their time, the absence of any kind of personal space, things that I know everyone needs. But it can be exhausting living alone, too – the daily responsibility of keeping one's activities, if not meaningful, at least productive; the endless efforts to keep oneself gainfully occupied.

And it's when I can't find the strength to keep that effort going, as I sometimes can't, that I head to the computer to play another round of *Which Ex-girlfriend and I cut*

off all contact ages ago, and what new information can I discover about her now? For the record, it's not a game that I'll play with everyone I've ever dated. For example, the relationships that ended amicably, or at least as well as an intimate relationship possibly can, with a minimal amount of emotional damage, and general feelings of good will on both sides, are the ones that interest me the least. I find that if both of us managed to bow out gracefully, I'm willing to leave that person's fate in the hands of Providence, to wish her Godspeed and trust that the right winds and tides will carry her safely home. Or, to put it another way, to respect her privacy enough to keep my nose out of her personal life, at least as far as stalking her on the Internet is concerned.

No, it's the relationships that ended worst that interest me the most. The ones that detonated unexpectedly, like an IED, leaving both of us bleeding in the dust on the side of the road, dazed and wondering what the hell just happened. Relationships can end like that sometimes, or at least they can in my experience, with a sudden, unforeseen explosion over something unexpected – a realization of some fundamental difference between us, some non-negotiable life circumstance or point of view. Some conflict where lines were crossed, where things were said that couldn't be taken back, where the only solution was an immediate and permanent break, like the crack of a limb falling from a tree, good kindling for a winter's fire. Like a late-night blow-up at a B&B in Taos, New Mexico, where a former girlfriend and I realized the hard way that she had only just begun to recover from the end of her previous marriage. Or the very promising Internet match that ended with a very public shouting match at an outdoor patio bar. Note to self: avoid debates about the culpability of the Catholic church for its recent scandals. As conversational topics for promising young couples go, this one can be especially deadly.

These are some of the women I've been checking out on Google and Facebook. And making some surprising, sometimes unsettling, discoveries. Like the fact that many of them have in fact moved on with their lives, have found themselves new jobs and locations and spouses and homes in the intervening years, some of the things that I had once hoped romantically and, in each case, prematurely, they would find with me. At least it seems as if they have, from the admittedly limited information I've been turning up in my online investigations. How else to interpret the profile photo of a smiling mother, bouncing her equally delighted baby boy in her lap, or in another picture kneeling happily next to that same boy and what looks like a husband and another child, this one a daughter, at sunset on a windy beach somewhere? I know that I should feel happy for this woman and her apparent discovery of maternal and matrimonial bliss, but in a selfish and mean-spirited way, I can't. I can only wonder why, in our few months together, she couldn't have found a way to be a little more like the person in her Facebook photos than the relentlessly unhappy person I remember her being around me. Of course, neither of the women revealed by these images – her selective photos, my selective memories – add up to what could be called a fair and accurate portrait. But the thought that I might have had something to do with the difference between them only adds to the ache that I get from reviewing both the memories and the pictures.

And then there was the Google search for another Ex, a relationship that blew apart almost a decade ago. That search led to a very different result – the news that she had moved far away, back to the part of the country where she was born, two years before, after many years of life in our shared city, a place she had always sworn by. The last I'd heard from her was the card that she'd mailed a few days after our final blow-up,

on a sidewalk in her neighborhood, not far from her apartment. I read her neat script carefully: her apology and bewilderment over her “mean” behavior on the street that night; her admission of feelings of emptiness and loneliness, feelings that we weren’t together long enough for me to recognize or her to reveal; her rejection of my request, in a post-fight email, that we give things another try, a confirmation that we were in fact through. Eight years later, a feeling of sadness passed over me when I saw that she was gone, when I found her name on a list of faculty for some middle school in upstate New York. It’s strange to find yourself grieving over the unexpected relocation of someone who sensibly closed the books on the two of you so long ago, to discover that you’ve lost another part of your past without even knowing it, even if that part was so painful, so not something you would ever wish for your life, neither then, nor now.

The Recent and Ongoing Adventures of Uncle Matt

Unlike a lot of uncles he knew, Uncle Matt was never really sure of the day he became one. One day he was just Matt, the guy who hung out with his buddies in college, met them for beers after work when they all got jobs, handed them their rings at their weddings. Watching his friends cross that last threshold often made Matt sad, but what could he do? Things were changing.

And they kept on changing. His old pals’ wives started having babies. Everywhere Matt looked, it seemed, everywhere he went, he found babies. Babies squirming in their high chairs, banging their trays with their fists and spitting out their colorful, mushy food. Babies standing in their cribs, arms raised, crying to be picked up. Babies here, babies there, babies everywhere!

And now everyone's names have changed. For one thing, he's not Matt anymore. He's Uncle Matt, to them and all their kids. It doesn't matter, these new mothers and fathers tell their children, whether he's Mommy or Daddy's brother or not. He's Uncle Matt just the same. The uncle who pays them all a visit once in a while, on those evenings when Mommy and Daddy have somehow managed not to pass out from changing diapers all day long, or entertaining the toddlers who wear them. The uncle whose visits always seem to produce such intense feelings in the two, three, and four-year-olds who he now finds, running around the house and climbing all over the furniture, when he calls on his old friends.

For some of these children Uncle Matt's arrival is a thrill, an event they've been anticipating all week. At least that's what Mommy whispers when she lets him in. Uncle Matt wonders how boring these kids' lives must be, that a visit from him should make them so excited. He's not there to see them, after all. He was friends with Mommy and Daddy long before they came along, so they can just get in line. They don't know that, of course. They think that he came over just so he could play with them, that he gave up a perfectly comfortable evening stretched out on the couch watching basketball, just so he could spend his down time with a four-year-old.

Take the one who happens to be there when Uncle Matt is really visiting Daddy, his best friend from high school. He peeks out from behind Daddy's legs while Daddy and Uncle Matt stand in the kitchen, talking. Uncle Matt's not fooled, though. He knows about this one. He knows that the shy routine is just an act, and won't last long. And indeed it doesn't.

“Look, Uncle Matt, look!” the child exclaims during dinner, pointing at what he’s just discovered on his plate. “*Corn!*”

“That’s right!” Uncle Matt replies, struggling in vain for a wittier reply.

“Be quiet and eat your dinner, Elliot,” Daddy says. “Uncle Matt and I are trying to have a conversation.”

Elliot won’t be quiet, though. He knows that Daddy’s a pushover, and that Elliot is The Man in Charge Around Here. After dinner, Mommy, Daddy, and Uncle Matt take their desserts to the living room, in the hopes of good conversation. Elliot has other ideas.

“Look at me, Uncle Matt, look at me!” Uncle Matt looks over to where he’s standing, in front of the TV set, but the boy merely smiles back at him.

Uncle Matt turns back to his friends. “So you were saying about Costco?”

“Great place, Matty,” Mommy says.

“Awesome,” says Daddy. “They sell everything. Even food. And lots of free samples. I take the whole family on Saturdays, and we just fill up.” Uncle Matt is nodding vigorously when Elliot yells again.

“Look at me, Uncle Matt, look at me!”

Uncle Matt looks. Elliot throws his arms up in the air. Uncle Matt waits for more, but the show seems to be over. It occurs to Uncle Matt that Elliot’s acting a lot like Daddy did when *he* was a boy.

Uncle Matt looks at his watch. 9:00. “Um, when did you say was his bedtime?”

“Soon, soon,” Mommy and Daddy assure him. “So, you’re still single ... tell us about your sex life.”

For other “nieces” and “nephews,” however, Uncle Matt’s visit is cause not for celebration, but dread. Take the little girl whose Daddy was Uncle Matt’s best friend in college. This one he considers more on the ball. Hands clasped behind her back, she’s standing in the foyer, ready to greet him, when he arrives. She’s smartly dressed for the occasion: red corduroy dress, white stockings, black patent leather shoes. When Daddy opens the front door, however, little Emily takes one look at her guest, turns around, and dashes out of the room. She’s recognized immediately that a man six times her size makes for an inadequate playmate and that, unlike Mommy and Daddy’s other friends, he hasn’t brought any playmates more her size with him.

Daddy’s legs don’t even begin to offer her the protection she needs. She hides in her bedroom while he, Mommy, and Daddy eat their hors d’oeuvres and drink their cocktails. She ventures out a half-hour later, and only after Mommy has paid her a visit. Uncle Matt can’t make out her muffled words through the bedroom wall, but he can hear Mommy’s voice change, from chirpy and appealing to low and threatening.

“Oh, she’s just so quiet tonight,” her parents say when Emily finally emerges. She positions herself between Mommy and Daddy on the sofa, safely on the other side of the coffee table from Uncle Matt. “She’s normally *never* this shy around other people. Why are you so quiet tonight, honey?”

Uncle Matt smiles his stupid fake smile at her. Emily stares back, her eyes wide and unblinking. She’s not buying it for a minute. All through dinner she eats fish sticks with her fingers and stares at the man with the fake smile. He ignores her, happy to saw his way through the porterhouse steak Daddy has grilled, and make grownup talk with Mommy and Daddy, uninterrupted.

Later, after coffee and dessert, Mommy has a great idea. “Hey Sweetie, why don’t you take Uncle Matt down to the basement and show him your castle?”

Mommy has changed her for bed between courses. In her blue Easter Bunny sleeper, she leads Uncle Matt down the steps into the dungeon that was once her playroom, her favorite room in the whole house just three hours ago. She turns around and looks up at him wordlessly every three steps or so, to convince herself that this nightmare is really happening, that the most frightening man she’s ever met is invading the safest space she’s ever known.

“Don’t even try to make her feel better,” Uncle Matt thinks once they’ve reached the bottom. “The only way she’ll ever start to trust you is if you ignore her completely.”

This logic, or the determination with which he follows it, seems to work. The assortment of toys her parents have provided her begins to weave its collective spell. She picks up a Barbie-ish doll in a wedding gown and begins speaking gibberish to it. Uncle Matt finds a Thomas the Tank Engine train set that he likes. It’s a poor substitute for the electric trains he played with when he was a boy, but he makes do. She wanders from toy to toy, speaking what sounds to him like utter nonsense, even for a two-year-old. Uncle Matt begins to wonder vaguely if she’s right in the head. Mostly, though, he’s relieved that she doesn’t seem to think that he might transform into a monster at any moment, and with a giant roar rush toward her with his hands over his head.

As he rolls the wooden train around its track, he realizes that Emily is standing next to him, looking at him. She is making words that he can’t understand, but she is pointing at an inflatable blue castle in the corner of the basement. Shyly she leads him over to it. Fully inflated, it rises up just above his waist, and over her head. The castle has

holes on each side that she can crawl into, and one at the top. She crawls in and wades among the multi-colored plastic balls that cover the castle floor, delighted. She wriggles in and out of the play fort, trying different entrances, babbling joyfully, before pointing at the castle's blue battlements.

“Do you want to go in through the top?” Uncle Matt asks her.

Yes doesn't seem to be part of her working vocabulary, but clearly she wants to go. Uncle Matt picks her up by the waist and deposits her through the hole in the roof into the chamber below. Squeals of delight echo inside the inflated fortress. Encouraged, he grabs her ankles as she crawls back out, picks her up off the floor, and lowers her headfirst into her suddenly favorite toy. Her squeals are even louder this time. The castle walls shake. Plastic balls fly out of the holes in every direction. Three more sessions of “Headfirst Down the Hole, Crawl Out the Side Laughing Hysterically” take place. After the third one, she scrambles out and scampers over to Wedding Day Barbie, with whom she sits down in a miniature rocking chair to share her adventure.

Having suddenly lost his playmate, Uncle Matt finds himself forced to play alone. He sees that the holes in the castle walls might be large enough for him to crawl at least part of the way inside. He lies on his back and wriggles in as far as he can go, and is pleased to find that he can squeeze in all the way up to his waist. If Emily were to look up from her conversation with Wedding Day Barbie, all she would see would be two grownup legs in khaki pants sticking out of one of the castle holes.

Inside, the space is larger than he expects, a shadowy blue cocoon that muffles the baby talk he can still hear in the basement beyond. Uncle Matt never understood how those ridiculous plastic ball palaces at Chuck E Cheese and McDonald's, or the one at

Sesame Place, could appeal to little kids, but he recognizes immediately why this compartment would appeal to her. It's a sanctuary, a private little place of her own where she can crawl in and hide, or play with Wedding Day Barbie, or any of her real-life friends, or do whatever she wanted. Sort of like a snow fort.

He'll have to get one of these for his apartment, Uncle Matt thinks. He picks up one of the plastic balls on the castle floor and juggles it while he considers what room would best accommodate it. Not the kitchen. Not enough room. Maybe the living room? He could crawl in whenever any of his guests started to bore him. But where to put it? Not enough space in that room, either. Maybe the bedroom. He could put it over next to the bed, and crawl in whenever he had a nightmare. A sanctuary within a sanctuary. Definitely the bedroom. As he muses over these logistics, he invents a little trick. With his right arm extending out of a castle wall, he finds that he can toss a ball in through the hole in the roof and catch it with his left hand.

Five minutes of blissful ball tossing pass before he realizes that something is wrong. The basement is silent. The conversation Emily was having with Wedding Day Barbie ended, he realizes, some time ago. Through the hole on his left he sees her. She is clutching Wedding Day Barbie to her chest and staring at him in horror. Her lips are a perfect O. From the look on her face, he realizes that he's broken some immutable law of child psychology. He sees that he has invaded her world in some monstrous way, violated a place the child holds sacred. Even worse, he sees that he's grasped this principle seconds too late.

Her scream, when it arrives, does so at full volume, and is properly amplified for him by the acoustics of the castle chamber.

“Wait!” he implores to the Easter Bunny that is clambering up the basement steps as fast as its little legs can take it. “Emily? Honey?”

In her distress, she can’t manage to turn the knob of the basement door, so she bangs on it and screams until her mother comes and opens it. With great effort, Uncle Matt extricates himself from the castle and follows her upstairs. Mommy is standing in the kitchen, holding her daughter in her arms. Emily’s head is buried in her mother’s shoulder, and her back is to Uncle Matt, but neither of these positions are enough to stifle the howls that reverberate throughout the house. Mommy’s look is an interesting combination of curiosity and accusation, to which Uncle Matt professes complete bafflement.

“I don’t know, Cath. We were playing with her castle and she just ... I guess she just got scared being down there with someone she didn’t know very well. I don’t know what happened,” he ends weakly.

“Here,” says Daddy, slipping a snifter of brandy into Uncle Matt’s hand. “You look like you could use one of these.”

Out on the back deck, Uncle Matt sips the after-dinner drink and smokes the cigar Daddy has proffered more quickly than usual. While Daddy reminisces about the good old days, Uncle Matt calculates to himself how soon he can leave without appearing rude. It’s time to call it a day. Adventures like these just wear him right out.

The muffled wails coming from inside the house seem to be dying down. Back inside, he bids farewell to Mommy. Emily is sitting on the couch with Wedding Day Barbie, staring again. Her mother insists that she kiss Uncle Matt goodbye, a demand that no one else likes, especially Uncle Matt. Even he recognizes the lack of wisdom in

forcing a two-year-old to defy feelings so primal. She won't take part in the ritual on her own, so Mommy carries her. Uncle Matt can see the conflict in the little girl's face; she's beginning to think that he might not be so bad, but lots of other feelings are working against that possibility. She squints her eyes shut, scrunches her face, and presses her lips against his cheek. It's not the most deeply felt kiss Uncle Matt has ever received, but he understands. Such forced displays of affection offend him, too.

Daddy follows Uncle Matt out to his car. "Give us a call again soon," he says, his arm around Uncle Matt's shoulder. Uncle Matt promises that he will. But when he hits the ignition, Daddy folds his arms and leans against the rolled-down car window. He looks as though he's about to say something profound, something that will perfectly capture the changes that have taken hold of their lives, and send them both on their way with fresh perspective. All that comes out, however, is a chuckle that sounds more like a choke.

"That didn't go so well I guess," Daddy says, his face red, not just from brandy. "Let's give it another try soon though, ok?"

With a smile and a nod to his friend, Uncle Matt reverses his car, backs out of the driveway, and heads down the road that leads out of their development and back toward his unmarried, childless life, convinced that he must be the worst uncle the world has ever known.

Flight 2077, Philadelphia to Chicago

I don't see her coming as I sit with sand-filled eyes, reluctantly open to manage my way through the early morning flight, reading the sports section. She ignores my

instinctive apology, squirms past before I can stand up from my seat on the aisle. Her arms wrapped around the bundled blanket, she eases into hers next to the window. Then I see the line of passengers pressing up from behind and decide to forgive her for a move that I would have considered rude in other circumstances. Exceptions can be made, I guess, for a young woman flying alone, with a baby that can't be more than a few weeks old, whose husband waits for them perhaps in the city she's flying toward.

She settles in quickly, efficiently, silently, placing her carry-on bag in the empty seat between us. She's pretty, in a middle class, suburban sort of way – a thin, blonde, tan, somewhat bland sort of attractiveness. Her bright orange blouse and khaki shorts highlight her body's angles gracefully. But what I notice most is how young she is: 22, 23 at the most, and having made choices in her life that I've only just begun thinking about.

Turning away, she tugs at the hem of her turquoise shirt and presses her baby, whose head is lost in the bundle, to her chest. I obey the rules of breast-feeding decorum and look away, up the aisle toward the travelers seated in front of me. Their anonymous heads all face forward, as they begin a mostly silent wait to reach their destinations; in my limited experience, air travel seems to be the most anxious mode of transportation.

We're preparing for takeoff. Our pilot's voice comes over the PA system, telling us about our route, giving us information about wind speed and direction, our estimated time of arrival. It seems like every pilot I've ever flown with assumes this deliberately casual tone; it must be something they're taught in pilot school. Our flight attendants check that our seat belts are fastened, point out the emergency exits, show us how to use the oxygen masks, and then file past us to take their seats at the back of the plane. It's all out of their hands now. The engines rev higher as we taxi toward the head of the runway.

Across the aisle from me, a retiree in beige pants and matching orthopedic shoes whips out a paperback copy of *The Perfect Storm*. He looks eager to immerse himself in the vicarious thrill of a natural disaster, the kind of experience the rest of us are hoping to avoid.

Disasters. Like that one in a movie my sister and I once rented. The one with the kids flying over some remote mountain range in South America. Soccer players and their girlfriends, if I remember right, a travel team on its way home from an important game on the other side of the mountains. They are flying in and above the clouds. The mood on the plane is cheerful. The kids move around the cabin at will, playing cards, flirting with one another. Someone in the back strums on a guitar. Occasionally one of the adults sitting up front stands and yells at them to stop smoking and get back in their seats, orders they obey until he sits down again. They are enjoying the privilege of being young, of having the talent and good fortune to travel abroad, if they like, and play the other young men and women of South America.

Then something goes wrong – the engine fails, the controls misread, something. The cabin is seized by a series of invisible jolts. “Whooh!” the kids scream, delighted by the roller-coaster effect of the first few. After a few more, everyone is sitting down and no one is making any sound. In the cockpit, a red light flashes its inevitable warning. Panic-stricken, the pilots try to pull the handles of the controls toward them in a last-ditch effort to climb out of the clouds and avoid whatever looms in front of them. Their efforts all for naught: the plane drops below the clouds and there it is, the top crag of a snow-capped mountain, easily too close now to be avoided.

The plane strikes the mountain's peak toward the back of the tail, which snaps off along with one of the wings, sending the ever-unlucky rear passengers plunging into space. A second peak just beyond the first removes the other wing. The collisions remind me of the model rockets I used to build and launch when I was a kid, their balsa wood frames no match for the trees or ground into which they inevitably smashed.

In what's left of the plane's cabin, the only sound is the wind rushing past as the nose of the plane falls forward through space. The remaining passengers grip their armrests and clench their mouths in fear, in prayer, in response to the air pressure that pushes against them and threatens to crush them. Occasionally the back rows of seats, the ones closest to the plane's lost tail, succumb to whatever physical laws are at work and snap off. The screams of the kids seated in them are the first human sounds we hear as they, with seat belts still securely fastened, somersault backward into the void. From our lounge chairs in my parents' den, my sister and I watch the scene, our mouths open, horrified by just how effective those special effects are.

Finally the nose of the plane makes contact with the earth. It plows into a snow-covered mountainside, hurdling forward like a toboggan for another hundred yards before slamming into a frozen snow bank. The seats dislodge from the impact. The passengers scream in unison as they are catapulted forward, their sliding seats folding into one another, like a train of grocery carts in a supermarket. A woman screams as her legs are crushed by the frame beneath her.

At last the plane's forward motion is stopped. A stunned silence falls on what remains of the cabin. Then someone coughs, others begin moaning and screaming, and the

passengers in the back seats, the ones who have not been sandwiched, begin pulling the others out of the wreck, the first of many acts in the group's effort to survive.

Safely in the air, I investigate the contents of my Bistro Bag, the carry-on breakfast American Airlines provided its passengers as they boarded. Happily, I arrange my food on the tray I've unsnapped from the seat in front of me. It's only 7:00 in the morning, but after a 4:30 alarm and the subsequent rush to the airport, I'm starving. The girl sitting next to me has finished breast-feeding her baby and fallen asleep. Her mouth hangs open, she is almost snoring, as she cradles the child in her arms. Even unconscious, the mother holds the sleeping bundle tightly against her chest. I watch, unobserved, wondering if there's any truth to the story I once heard, that two hearts beat together when they beat next to one another.

And find myself filled with a growing sense of something I can't identify. The pressure of it increases, at a point just behind my eye sockets. Not so much an awareness of something within me, but an absence. A lack. I can't stop staring at this young mother and her baby. Finally the feeling registers: *This is not something I ever really had, or knew.*

This is not exactly a revelation to me. Various crises in my adult life have sent me in search of help, in the form of therapy, over the years. Loneliness in distant cities. Painful breakups. And each time, we sift through the evidence, my therapist and I. Not of the present causes of my dilemmas, although that's where we always start, but of the past. Two detectives looking for leads on a cold case, one long since closed and probably best forgotten.

Several clues reveal themselves. Photos provide some documentation. Polaroid black-and-whites of a two-year-old standing in his crib, his hands on the railing, staring at the camera with a face that spelled trouble for anyone willing to mess with him. Seeing those, my mother would press her hands against her cheeks. “Oh Matthew, that’s *just* how you would look. Like you had a tiger by the tail or something! God, you were a funny baby.” And others, taken years later. Color snapshots of a fourteen-year-old, lost in the crowd. His hair is disheveled, his clothes carelessly chosen. Not a boy who spent much time in front of a mirror. He avoids the camera’s eye, his fragile smile directed down and away, toward the ground. Happy to let his older siblings hog the spotlight.

We go over the rest of the evidence, my memories, together. My therapist points out other events from the structure-less story I spin every Monday afternoon. She holds them up like artifacts that were always in plain view, had I only bothered to scan the ground and look for them.

“Well, just look at what happened,” she tells me. “Five children. The first one born with cerebral palsy. Then twins. Then you. Then one more. And in the middle of all that, a mother who suffered from manic depression. Doesn’t it make sense that maybe you got lost in the shuffle sometimes?”

I squirm in the plush cushions of my therapist’s chair, offended. “I don’t know. I don’t know! God, I *hate* doing this!”

“Why?”

“I don’t know, because. My mother was what -- 22 when Julie was born? God knows she and my father weren’t perfect, but they did the best they could.”

“So?”

“So I don’t want to sit here twenty, thirty years later and blame them for this stuff! Point my finger and say, ‘Oh yeah, well, you didn’t give me the love I needed when I was two or ten or whatever, you didn’t do this, you didn’t do that –”

She raises her palms, traffic-cop style. “Hold on. This isn’t about that. This isn’t about *blame*. This is just about you being more aware of what might have been going on back then. At a time when you *couldn’t* have understood what it was all about. So maybe you can understand it better now and use that knowledge for whatever it’s worth.”

I slump back in my seat, sulking. What good does knowing about the past do anybody? It can’t change what happened. I stay with it, though, and with my therapist’s help make progress for a while, reconstructing the past. Eventually, however, I get bored with the process, sifting through the evidence, revisiting the same crime scenes, over and over. I end our sessions after a couple of months, citing inadequate insurance.

Away from my therapist, however, these stories are not something I choose to forget. My brother, sisters, and I often unpack them when we find ourselves together, away from our parents. Our own versions of “what happened.” What surprises me is how hilarious they are, their humor based as it is on the absurdity of events all too real. They leave us doubled over in movie theater parking lots, gasping for breath. Strangers pass by and smile, the way people will when they see others laughing, even though they’re not in on the joke.

And why shouldn’t we laugh? After all, everything turned out okay, didn’t it? That seems to be the underpinning for each of our narratives, it seems to me. We’re all adults now, and relatively happy. We love our parents, and we know they love us. We all survived.

On board Flight 2077, a tone sounds, reminding us to buckle our seat belts. Obediently the passengers comply. Our pilot's sugary voice comes over the speakers. "We're experiencing some slight chop," he informs us. "Nothing too bad. We should be through it soon."

The flight attendants push the beverage cart up the aisle and begin serving the passengers in the rows ahead of me. They work their way toward the back of the plane, smiling graciously as they pass out the Pepsis and white zinfandels. Their efforts to take care of us strike me as futile somehow. Poignant, but somehow pathetic. Our plane trembles occasionally as we fly through the unexpected turbulence. The young girl sitting next to me has woken up. Lost in thought, she stares out the window and into the cloud bank that prevents any clear view of the ground below. Her baby is still asleep, quiet in her arms.

Soon we will be in Chicago. We'll wait for the tone before unbuckling our seat belts. Safe in the terminal, we'll rush to meet our connections, the flights beyond this one that will take us somewhere, anywhere at all.

Pierce Street

I first see the cat on my way out to the Super Fresh to pick up Portobello mushrooms. He's lying on the other side of our one-way street, a single lane narrow enough to be an alley, a place where he never would have lain normally, smart stray that he was. I didn't look for long, only enough to confirm that his body had been crushed, though not which part, to acknowledge the red pool spreading slowly beneath him, the flies already buzzing inside the mouth that the car wheel had forced open.

Pierce Street is deserted. There's no one around to fill me in on what happened, no one but me and this dead cat. It's a hazy summer night in South Philadelphia. Air conditioning units whir from first and second floor windows. There isn't much to decide, really. I'm strapped for time, with a friend due to arrive for dinner and my new backyard grill not even fired. I keep moving, toward my Nissan, which beeps cheerfully when I aim the keyless remote toward it.

I squeeze my car around the cat, turn the corner and wave to the two old ladies sitting on beach chairs in the next alley. They smile and wave back. We've been on better terms lately. Our relationship, which even now consists solely of smiling and waving, has evolved slowly. At first they were content to stare as I drove past them on my way out for the evening. I forced the issue, though, making eye contact and waving when I was in a good mood and staring straight ahead when I wasn't. The inconsistent approach didn't exactly loosen them up, but now we have the routine down: I nod and smile, they smile and wave.

This brief interaction doesn't help my mood, though. I make my way through a grid of streets in the gray summer night, pondering the reality of my neighborhood, a place where cats are hit by cars that keep driving. Where a friend of mine called after leaving my housewarming party, insisting that I move immediately, having just witnessed a gang of kids beating up another kid over on Washington Avenue as she drove out of my neighborhood. And where the people next door, a family that I knew would be trouble not long after I moved in, once put a bullet through the center of my front picture window.

I had gone out for the night, down to my parents' house south of the city, in the now-suburban countryside where I grew up. It was dusk when I returned to find police tape separating my row house and the one next to it from the small crowd that had gathered. A group of women and children, some of whom I vaguely recognized, pointed me toward the cop who stood nearby guarding the crime scene.

He wasn't able to provide any kind of explanation, although I heard the story plenty of times in the weeks to come from Norman, the boy who knows everything there is to know about what goes on around Pierce Street. His face would light up and his glasses flash as he recreated the scene, the domestic dispute that erupted in the house next to mine and spilled out into the street. How the old lady's son went after the guy nobody had ever seen before, how everybody scattered -- adults, kids, everybody, including Norman -- when the old lady gave the gun to her dear boy so he could start shooting. He didn't get the guy, Norman said, not trying to hide his disappointment. But I should have seen how the cops came running, he said, speaking breathlessly again. They must have been right up the street to get here so fast after everybody started using their cell phones to call 911!

At first the cop wouldn't let me past the tape, but he changed his mind after a few minutes, with a warning not to touch anything until the detectives showed up. As I unlocked my front door, I took a closer look at the window. The hole the bullet had made was small and perfect, except for single cracks on each side that extended from the hole to the frame, like blood vessels in the eye of someone who is tired or stoned.

Inside, I turned on the light next to my sofa. Everything in the living room looked as I had left it, except for the tiny shards of glass on the stereo and carpet, and the hole

the streaking bullet had made in my ceiling. I looked at the one in the window and the one in the ceiling and made a quick calculation: even if I had been standing right in front of the window, watching the fireworks, I wouldn't have gotten hit. A broom that wasn't mine was lying out on the patio, a stray projectile from the earlier rounds of the fight next door. Later, I sat on the sofa watching the NBA Finals, as a detective stood on one of my kitchen table chairs and poked a thin metal rod with a circular catch into my ceiling.

“Who's up?” he asked.

“Lakers by ten. Third quarter.”

“Looks like their year again, huh?”

“Yeah,” I said. “Too bad.” He nodded, concentrating on extracting the bullet.

“Having any luck?”

“Nope,” he said, grunting as he stepped down from the chair. “That's okay. We'll have enough to nail him without it. Better call your landlord. Give him this when you see him,” he said, handing me his card.

The cat is still lying there when I get home. The street still seems deserted, but then I see Bobbie peering out her screen door and shaking her head. She looks distressed. I don't know her well but I like her. Her face, perpetually tanned, is weathered enough to suggest someone in her late forties. Childless, she and her husband live in the house directly across from mine. Every night she spends ten minutes with the hose watering the plants on the sidewalk, a lit cigarette dangling from her upper lip. Her garden is a dazzling array of color and shape, all in ceramic pots, and the only sign of natural life on

Pierce Street. She smiled and said she would help when I told her I intended to start my own right across from her, but that was a few weeks ago and the last time we spoke.

“I’ll get a box,” I tell her.

“I’ve got one,” she says.

“Then I’ll get gloves.”

She lines a cardboard box from her SUV with a green trash bag and gives it to me. I find that the only way to pick the cat up is to not think about it too deeply, not speculate on the life it might have led, a life I never considered that often on my way to and from my car every day. The head sags and the flies scatter as I wrap my hands around the broken body, the blood smearing against the dried soil of my gardening gloves. Bobbie grabs her hose and aims a jet stream at the small pool still in the street. I hold on to the box, not sure what to do with it, deciding finally to put it on the sidewalk in front of the house where the cat was hit.

Just then Melania comes out of the house two doors down. I have been wondering where she’s been. It is she who has been putting out the styrofoam bowls of dry food that were eaten every day by this stray and two others. Her attempt to domesticate one of the others, a feral kitten that I once found curled up on my doormat as I left for work on one of the coldest mornings of the year, has become a mini-drama recently. So far her efforts to catch Buster and take him to an animal hospital have been unsuccessful. She had gotten as far as coaxing him onto her lap, but last week I came out to find her sitting on a nearby stoop and sobbing, three fresh scratches running up the inside of her arm. Buster stared at her from the other side of a locked gate that protected his alley. She wasn’t crying from the pain, Melania explained, but for all the days it would take to earn the

cat's trust again. So far she has ignored my sister, a lab tech at a veterinary hospital whose advice I solicited, about getting a cat trap instead.

When she sees the box and realizes what's inside, she throws up her hands and paces back and forth, not sure what to do with herself. For someone in his late thirties, I feel like I've had surprisingly little experience consoling others after a loss. I can see, though, that it doesn't require much practice: assume what you hope is a sympathetic expression, and nod with conviction at everything the mourner says, whether you agree with it or not. Keep controversial opinions, like your feelings about whether or not one should feed stray cats to begin with, to yourself.

"Who the hell could run over a cat like that and just leave it to die in the street?" she asks. "And I'm sorry, but he'd have to be driving pretty damn fast to hit one in the first place."

While I agree with the first comment and act like I do for the second, I find that have a hard time sympathizing with Melania's response. She is choosing to see what has happened as a crime against the cat. And in one way, I agree. All this just confirms something I don't like about my neighborhood, reinforces my belief that ultimately I'll never stay, will live here for now because the rent is cheap and the location convenient but never buy, something that separates me from Melania and Bobbie and most of the other residents on Pierce Street. But in another way, the cat's death is just the law of averages kicking in, a probability that Melania, through her daily bowls of cat food, inadvertently increased.

She goes inside to see about having the cat cremated ("My God, we have to do something - we can't just throw her in the trash!"). I'm about to as well - I'm wasting

time and my friend should be arriving any minute now – when Lisa opens the screen door next to mine and says hello. She and her husband Mark moved in after the gunslingers were carted away and the landlord gutted and renovated the place. Mark works in pharmaceuticals outside the city; Lisa is five months pregnant with their first child. They're a nice couple and a sign that gentrification, for better or worse, may finally be arriving, even here on Pierce Street.

We strike up a conversation about my job. She knows from some previous exchanges that I'm an English teacher, and asks me if I know someone she once had in high school, a Catholic parochial school for girls not far from our neighborhood. I don't know the guy, explaining that private schools like mine don't interact much with the archdiocesan ones.

“Was he a good teacher?” I ask.

“Oh yeah, he was great. I had him for AP English. He's taught there for like, 35 years.”

“It's great to have one who really mattered, huh?”

“Oh yeah. He was like, the only good thing about that place.” She smiles when she says this, although the pain of the memory breaks in on the innocence of the smile.

“So what else is going on?” she asks.

“Oh, not much ... oh, well, actually, it's too bad, one of those stray cats just got hit by a car.” I try to adjust my tone to something more serious but it's too late. Lisa's face goes blank with confusion. Just then Melania comes back out, still beside herself.

“Melania?” she asks. “Which one?”

“Muggsy,” Melania answers, wiping her eyes. “The one you were worried about.”

“Is he ... ?” Lisa’s eyes darken and soften as she begins to comprehend. “Will you excuse me?” she asks, not really conscious of who I am anymore.

I can’t make out the muffled words behind her front door as she tells her husband the news, but I can hear clearly what comes after that: the sounds of her sobbing uncontrollably. Mark comes out a minute later. “I’ve never seen her so upset,” he says quietly, lighting a cigarette, and I nod with real empathy this time, keeping to myself the unexpected gratitude I feel for the high-pitched gasps I can still hear inside. Someone is doing what none of us had been capable of, on this hot July night in the city. Someone is grieving at last.

Milk and Cookies

Miss Scherling stands at the microphone, her guitar hoisted on her hip. It’s Milk and Cookies hour at the local coffee shop, and the show’s about to begin. She scans the crowd. It can be broken down into two groups who are competing for the limited number of tables and chairs. The first group is the patrons like me, the customers who have been poring over their laptops and Sunday newspapers for the last hour or so. Hovering over us is Miss Scherling’s crowd, the parents and children who have arrived more recently, raising the volume and the energy level of this once quiet café considerably in the process. Straining under the weight of their blank-faced toddlers, the parents eye our tables longingly.

Miss Scherling steps up to the microphone. Her ensemble is Hippie Chic: suede clogs, faded jeans, woven Indian belt, loose blouse. But the look in her eye reminds me more of Madeline Kahn when she first falls for the monster in *Young Frankenstein*.

“Hello there, good people,” she says, giving those of us who have yet to surrender our seats a nod. “I haven’t had to make this announcement in quite a while. But I notice some folks here who are drinking their coffee and hanging out. Which of course you’re *perfectly* welcome to keep doing. But just so you know, we’re going to have some little ones rocking out to some *crazy freaking songs* for the next hour!” The parents let loose some encouraging whoops at this plan. “So you might want to adjust your plans accordingly.”

Her announcement hasn’t taken me by surprise. I saw it coming an hour ago, back when Miss Scherling’s sole roadie – Jay, her henpecked husband, who Miss Scherling seems to have no qualms about bossing around – first arrived and started setting up some speakers.

Some less loyal comrades take the hint and start packing up. The parents who are still standing hustle their children to the available tables. Miss Scherling surveys the crowd again, looking more satisfied this time. She knows that what comes next will flush out the few remaining holdouts, and seems willing to ignore us as a result.

“Alright my little monkeys,” she says to her audience, strumming her some G chords on her acoustic guitar and raising her voice a notch, to an appropriate kiddie-fervor pitch. “Here we go! *Five little monkeys swinging in a tree* – can we get a little more volume on the microphone, Jay? – *five little monkeys swinging in a tree, teasing Mr. Alligator can’t catch me ...*”

I stay planted in my seat and keep on grading, a task that’s considerably tougher when one must cover one’s ears with both hands but also scribble comments like *vague thesis* in the margin of yet another essay at the same time. I’m sticking to my guns, I’ve

decided. I've had similar Sunday mornings interrupted by this woman before. Those times, I accommodated her. I shoved my papers into my bag and stormed out in a huff, looking a lot like the middle-aged crank I've no doubt become.

Not this time. So many things about this scenario make it essential that I stand my ground, not the least of which is my conviction that three and four-year-olds "rocking out" is a notion that should be opposed by everyone, everywhere, at any time.

Jerome

As he walks toward the podium to receive his diploma, it occurs to me that Jerome Clarke might be my favorite student. I'm not crazy about my boss, our principal, control freak that he is, but I'll say one thing on his behalf: I liked how he drove Jerome to and from the train station every day for four years, so Jerome could catch the R7 that carried him from our lily-white boys' prep school in the suburbs to his parents' row house in North Philadelphia.

I first met Jerome when he was a sophomore. Every day, he would approach my podium at the start of class to shake my hand.

"Are you running for office?" I asked him after the third handshake, ready to root out the brown noser, but the question seemed to baffle him. Shaking his English teacher's hand before class was part of his shtick, I came to realize, right up there with the deliberately fake smile he would produce when he passed me in the hallway, like the Cheshire cat, but with braces. Or the way his responses in class would often begin with a series of interjections.

“Research paper topics,” I announced one day from the podium. “Let’s hear them.” I braced myself for the usual sorts of inspiration that spring from the minds of teenage boys, like what are the effects of steroids on professional athletes, or what is the psychological profile of a serial killer.

“Yes Jerome?”

“Yeah, so, like, uh, basically ... there’s like, uh, a lot of liquor stores and gun shops in my neighborhood? And um, I was thinking that maybe I would look at the effects of those kinds of places on somebody’s neighborhood?”

This was not a topic that a student of mine had ever volunteered before.

“That’s a great idea,” I replied. “You should look into it.”

“Thank you sir,” he replied with his usual mock formality, staring out from behind the thick lenses of his Poindexter glasses. Their black frame was held together by a tightly wound band of Scotch tape, a repair that Jerome was forced to make after being punched in the face during an attempted robbery last month. He and a friend were standing on Germantown Avenue, waiting for the bus that would cover the last leg of his commute home, when they were confronted by some kids from the neighborhood. Jerome was back in school the next day, acting as if nothing at all had happened, as if he hadn’t been asked to wait at the police station until midnight, answering the officers’ questions about potential suspects.

“Mr. Jordan!” he called out that day, raising his hand in the middle of a mind-numbing lesson on MLA citations. “Do you remember how all the seniors got dressed up as ghosts last October for Halloween?”

“No Jerome,” I said, grateful for the change of subject. “I don’t.”

“Well, um, you know, they did, and uh, I was down in the locker room getting my books for class and stuff? And they were all down there, like, wearing these sheets and dancing around like crazy people? And I’ve never lived down South, but I’ve seen movies about guys who get dressed up in sheets and dance around, and I’ve got to tell you, I was scared!”

There was only one way to play a story like that.

“That must have been quite traumatic for you,” I replied, working hard not to burst out laughing.

“Oh yes,” he said, wide-eyed and poker-faced, nodding from behind the tape and the glasses. “Very scared indeed.”

Mr. Justin Sands

Matt,

I’ve done the entire locker room duty by myself this entire semester and have only seen you in there once, and that time you said you were ‘going to check outside’ and stayed for barely 5 minutes. It’s the halfway point of the semester, for the rest of it, the locker room is your duty and yours alone.

*Best,
Justin*

So read the note that was sent, according to my email account, by Mr. Justin Sands, the new teacher of Catholic Doctrine and Social Justice at the boys’ prep school where I have worked for the last 11 years. When other teachers send me an email, their names appear in the address box without a formal title. Peg Newman is Peg Newman, and Mike O’Toole is Mike O’Toole. After reading that message for about the fifth time, I started to wonder what steps one must take to ensure that one’s name appears to the addressee not as Justin Sands, but as Mr. Justin Sands. I still don’t know.

The email rattled me the first time I read it, I do know that. I hate confrontations as a rule, and will do just about anything to avoid one. This one felt like an ambush, coming as it did from a colleague with whom I had barely spoken since his arrival at our school six months before. It was also jarring to receive the news not in person, as I might have expected from someone whose classroom was only a couple of stairwells and hallways down from mine, but via email. I was sitting in the computer lab when I opened it, surrounded by the student editors of our literary magazine. We were reviewing the latest submissions, in our usual after-school haze of camaraderie and exhaustion. Reading the message, however, I felt as if the world's population had been reduced to two: me and this unforeseen enemy.

Mr. Justin Sands. Although I hardly knew the young man who had sent the email, I knew him a bit better after I had read it. But not by much. What did I know? I knew a teacher who had arrived the previous August, with the same evangelical enthusiasm as many of the young religion teachers my school has hired over the years. Bright-eyed and freshly scrubbed, he made optimistic predictions about our kids' spiritual potential, and his ability to help them realize it. Sitting at a picnic table with some other teachers during faculty orientation, I listened politely to his ideas about making faculty participation in our students' spiritual retreats mandatory, an initiative I knew neither I nor just about any other teacher in our school would ever endorse.

That enthusiasm didn't carry over once the school year began, at least not socially. Justin remained something of an enigma during the few times that he sat down at the table in the faculty lunch room, never offering much about himself beyond a few surface comments and questions about the day-to-day running of the school. Eventually

he disappeared from the lunch room altogether, except in the morning, when he would sweep through in a dashing London Fog overcoat, to check his mailbox before heading for his classroom. Where, according to some stray comments I overheard students making before the bell for my own class rang, I gathered that things weren't going too well. To them, he was one more Catholic Doctrine teacher whose attempts to lead our largely ambivalent boys onto the divine battlefield of spiritual formation weren't gaining much traction. The only other news I ever heard of him came from Pat, the school secretary, and my go-to person for good dirt on campus, who informed me that he had begun calling out sick a lot more often lately, even though, as she put it, in her typically sardonic way – eyes averted, lips pursed, palms helplessly raised – “he looks just fine to me when he comes back to work the next day.”

So far as Justin's case against me regarding our shared locker room duty was concerned, I was guilty as charged on all counts. I despised that duty, not only for its humid, window-less setting; and not only for the responsibilities it entailed: of watching sleep-deprived high school boys socialize with one another in a manner that Jane Goodall or Dian Fossey might have appreciated. More than that, I hated the coverage for making me feel like the kind of teacher I sometimes helplessly felt myself becoming – the middle-aged man with nothing left to do in life but watch groups of hormonally charged boys leap on top of one another for no reason at all, other than that they found themselves at the precipice of an unknown future, one full of promise, and wanted to celebrate the fact. The feeling usually dissipated once I stood in front of them again at the start of ninth period, ready to play the role of teacher that I much preferred. But those thirty minutes of

supervision were a kind of torture to me, and it was for this reason that I abdicated our shared Locker Room Duty to Mr. Justin Sands.

Driving home from work that day, I couldn't shake the guilt that I was feeling, nor the anger. I take pride in doing my job well, and not shirking its responsibilities. On this occasion, I was forced to admit that I had done just that. But I was also offended at being called out in such an aggressive yet (thanks to email's powers of avoidance) evasive way. I considered a few possible responses. Retaliation, where I responded with the same belligerence with which Justin had confronted me? Some paternal (and possibly patronizing) words of advice, where I invoked some implied (and completely non-existent) privileges of seniority, while expressing mild disdain for a rookie faculty member who had clearly crossed a line? Or should I simply ignore the email, and Justin himself, thereby making clear my lack of regard for both message and messenger? The problem was, any complaint I might have about the email's tone was trumped by its content – by Justin's legitimate grievance over ditching him with 50 raving juniors and seniors over a series of stressful afternoons.

I went for a run when I got home, trying to rid myself of such depressing implications. But as I trudged around my town's overcast streets at dusk, all I felt was old. I'm a veteran teacher now. And even though I can say with a good degree of certainty that I find my job fulfilling in more ways than many working people I know, the options of living some of the lives I had once imagined for myself seem far fewer now. It's entirely possible that I will spend many future days wandering through a trash-strewn locker room, hoping that none of our boys' post-lunch rowdiness will spill over into a fistfight before the 1:02 bell. And no doubt the yearbooks that line my bottom bookshelf

will include the portraits of many more religion teachers like Justin Sands, whose existence I may or may not remember long after he inevitably moves on. How far down the road had I traveled toward becoming that private school cliché – the veteran teacher so burned out by his job that he blows off his professional responsibilities with impunity, or simply foists them upon his less senior, more naïve colleagues? Pretty far, apparently.

My gloom lifted the next day, after I emailed Justin my reply: a simple apology, free of excuses. I agreed to shoulder the locker room load on my own for the rest of the school year, phrasing my response so that it read like a decision mutually agreed upon, rather than the compliance to a demand that it actually was. I made no mention of the email's hostile, written as it was by a young man who had felt himself taken advantage of, and had reacted badly in return.

DUI in NYC, Part I

The next time you decide to drive drunk around New York City, be sure that your car documents -- driver's license, car registration, proof of insurance -- are all within easy reach should a police car pull you over. To drivers anywhere this precaution may seem obvious, but not following it helped trigger one of the most harrowing adventures of my life up to now, as I traveled for 17 hours through the bowels of Brooklyn, an unwilling tourist of the New York City criminal justice system.

My evening began in a much different setting. On a late afternoon in mid-November, my friend and I left the Park Avenue private school on the Upper East Side where we both taught and walked two blocks west to the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The Met had begun staying open late on Fridays, Joann told me. We could stroll through

the galleries until nine or avail ourselves of some refined live entertainment. A string quartet would be on hand to perform for the Met's usual patrons – tourists, students, senior citizens (New York's have always struck me as an especially ravenous group of culture vultures) – as well as the young professionals the museum could manage to lure away from the theme bars on 23rd Street for one night.

Best of all, cocktails would be served from five to nine. As teachers who had the option of ending their working days an hour or two before most working stiffs, Joann and I had first crack at all the happy hours New York City's hundreds of bars and restaurants were willing to offer. We undertook our quest of finding the best ones with the conviction of Spanish explorers searching for a new world. We scoured the city's neighborhoods for the drink specials that would best accommodate our fiscally challenged teacher salaries, and discovered some favorites. Like the Lakeside Lounge, an alternative honkytonk bar on Avenue B, where Pete the punk bartender sliced a seemingly endless quantity of limes and lemons in preparation for the late night crowd. Or Tortilla Flats, in the far West Village, where, with our 4:00 arrival, we could beat the Wall Street crowd to the popular barstools and order a pitcher of Margaritas for \$22, a relative bargain we agreed four glasses later, our faces flushed and the pitcher empty. Or, off the island and convenient to Joann's home in Queens and mine in Brooklyn, the Montague Street Saloon in Brooklyn Heights, whose generous two-for-one specials from 4-8 and buybacks throughout the night allowed us to extend our libations further and more cheaply into the evening.

For it was an unspoken prerequisite on these outings between Joann and me that liquor be available. We might kick off the afternoon with a social activity that registered higher on the cultural scale - a movie at the Angelica; a visit to the Museum of the City of

New York, where she, the History teacher, filled me, the English teacher, in on the dirty politics of the city's former mayors; maybe even a poetry reading - but invariably these evenings would end with us searching whatever neighborhood we happened to find ourselves in for an old oak bar, two empty barstools, a jukebox with a favorable selection, and a bar menu available.

Drinking lubricated the friction that was always between us and helped us ignore the facts of our relationship. She ignored the fact that, although she was in love with me, I wasn't interested in anything more than friendship with her. I ignored the same fact because I was lonely living in New York, in a group house in Brooklyn full of relative strangers. The house had been advertised in the *Voice* as an "intentional community," but there was nothing communal about the way my housemates treated one another. I had hoped to find some friends there, but the truth was that Joann was the only close friend I had made in the four years since I had moved to the city.

We were good friends, and depending on you how one looked at it, possibly more than that. We were allies at school. Each of us taught the 50 students who comprised the entire freshman class; after four years, both of us had taught every kid in the school. We traded stories about them, and modified our approaches based on the other's feedback. Over her Manhattan straight up and my Dewar's on the rocks, we identified the quiet achiever who received no recognition for her efforts, or the class clown whose popularity disguised a mean streak. We commiserated over the pettiness of certain faculty members, or the ineptitude of the school's administration. Booze allowed us the temporary belief that we were nothing more than good colleagues.

At \$10 a glass, the Scheurmann champagne was the most expensive offering on the Met's sparkling wine menu, and certainly pricier than the \$3 martini specials we tossed back after toasting Pete at the Lakeside, but the upscale environment persuaded us to adjust our drinking budgets accordingly. The fresh strawberries and gourmet pastries the museum restaurant offered seemed to be popular with the neighboring tables, but Joann and I remained loyal to the beverage side of the menu. As she had promised, a string quartet serenaded us with movements of Handel and Bach. Overlooking the balcony, our table afforded us a view of the Great Hall, the museum's grand lobby that had been built in the Beaux Arts style, where well-heeled natives and tourists meandered in and out of the reception area.

Three glasses later, we strolled through the dimly lit Arms and Armor gallery. Hollow figures of etched steel faced one another in two rows of plexiglass cases that extended down the corridor's length. Joann pointed out the diverse weaponry and surprisingly small suits of armor.

"The guys who wore them couldn't have been more than five feet tall!" I bellowed, my exclamation echoing throughout the empty gallery.

"Oh yeah, they were itty bitty guys back then," she confirmed, with her usual amusing blend of Queens-speak and academic accuracy.

"Savage little guys," I slurred.

We stopped in front of one of the cases, where the lack of available light forced her to bend down to read the accompanying card. "Sir James Scudamore. 1558-1619. Praised in Spenser's *The Faerie Queen* as chivalry personified."

I held up an imaginary glass to the steel figure before me. “Bravo, Sir James. Bravo. Christ, these suits look *impenetrable*. What could possibly pierce them?”

Wordlessly Joanne pointed to the taller cases filled with weapons against the wall behind us. Halberds, glaives, partisans – staff weapons I had never heard of but instruments that seemed fully capable of carrying out their bearer’s commands.

“Oh.”

At a liquor store on 72nd Street and 2nd Avenue, I pulled over so Joann and I could purchase the necessary supplies for our trip downtown: paper cups and, to my delight, a cold bottle of Scheurmann’s champagne, conveniently refrigerated and now available at the much more affordable rate of \$20 a bottle. Usually I took the FDR Drive as the fastest route to the bars below 14th Street, but again our refined evening seemed to call for something different.

“What the hell,” I muttered, making a right back toward Midtown. “Let’s do this right.”

We sipped champagne from paper cups as my old Datsun wound its way around the one-way road that circled the interior of Central Park. Night had fallen. As we drove south through the park, pleasantly buzzed, the lights of the pre-war hotels that lined Central Park South and towered over the trees before us seemed to capture for me in a single moment all of the promise that New York had to offer, the dreams that had first propelled me toward the city three years before. Now those dreams seemed buried under the reality of the life I was living, only re-ignited anymore at moments like this when, well-oiled by my fifth glass of champagne, I could cruise down the city’s most prominent

streets and somehow feel like I was part of it. I had first come to New York with dreams as far reaching and glorious as the movies I was planning to make; I was teaching high school English instead. Apart from my Brooklyn housemates, a few oddball friendships made here and there, and my students and colleagues at school, no one really knew me.

Following the sporadically moving traffic down 5th Avenue, Joann and I gaped at the buildings that towered over us on either side.

“The Christmas displays are already up,” I said.

“Yeah,” Joann sighed, refilling my cup from our nearly empty bottle. “Gotta get those shoppers in the mood early. Ah, look!” she exclaimed, pointing at the new Disney store that had opened up just in time for the holidays. “Mickey the Capitalist Rat invades midtown!”

The evening’s events grow hazier in my memory once we reach downtown. Sharing an appetizer and glasses of wine at Lumina, a Southwestern restaurant in the East Village. Rounds of Dewars at Alcatraz, a biker bar across the street. Trying to strike up a conversation with a couple of women at the bar. Arguing with Joann outside of Alcatraz, and convincing her not to leave.

We finally reached Brooklyn at one in the morning. Joann suggested the all-night Greek diner on 7th Avenue, but I nixed the idea. Starving but exhausted, I could imagine nothing more for the evening than dropping her off at Flatbush Avenue so she could flag a cab, and I could drive the final few blocks home and collapse into bed.

With that in mind, I looked to my right before turning left at the red light in front of me. Park Slope’s 8th Avenue appeared deserted at that hour, but as soon as I turned I

saw the police car in my rearview mirror pull away from the curb, flash its lights, and swing into the lane behind me.

I was alarmed but not panicked when I realized that the flashing red and yellow lights were meant for me. After all, I had been pulled over once before with a buzz like this on and managed to fake sobriety enough to escape trouble.

“License, registration, and proof of insurance, please,” said the officer through my window. The cops, a white guy and a Hispanic woman, stood like valets next to the doors on both sides of the car. Both of them were young, younger than we were. Their demeanor toward us seemed casual. Either they recognized that they had not just nabbed Bonnie and Clyde, or for them this was just another event in a job less exciting than the one I had seen dramatized so often on television.

Although I was a responsible enough driver to possess all of the documents my cop requested, actually producing them was another story.

“Sir, do you know that this license is expired?” the officer asked while he examined the only card I had given him.

“Yes, I know,” I replied. I was a legal driver, but when I had renewed my license a few weeks before, the one the DMV employee handed back to me featured perhaps the worst photo of me anyone had ever taken. I have never been able to smile convincingly on command, and never did a photo documenting that fact seem quite so dreadful. I looked like a cross between a ferret and a weasel.

To satisfy my vanity, I kept my old license in my wallet on top of the new one. That way I could use the new, valid license if I needed it, but not embarrass myself if

anyone I knew ever happened to peek inside my wallet. The solution worked fine until I lost the new license a few weeks before these cops pulled me over.

Nor were my registration and proof of insurance safely in the glove compartment where they belonged. They were stashed somewhere under the driver's seat. I kept them there because, among the many idiosyncrasies of the beat-up '79 Datsun I was driving, was a glove compartment door that would fly open at random, usually when the car passed over one of New York's potholes, and slam the passenger, usually Joann, on the knees. I had solved the problem by sealing the compartment shut with four black strips of electrical tape (my solution, and not the best adhesive), and keeping the documents stored under the driver's seat.

In terms of my extricating us from our present situation, these were not insurmountable obstacles, but they required from me a presence of mind and, more seriously, an ability to articulate that had departed somewhere around Alcatraz about an hour before.

"Well Officer," I began confidently, "you're not going to believe this, but the reason that that license is expired is ... well, have you ever had someone take a *really bad* picture of you? One that you wouldn't want anyone to see? Well, that happened to me the last time I went to the DMV ..." I was talking too much, but the explanation seemed to require so much information that I didn't know how to shut up. "... So I lost that license but I'm going to get new one as soon as I get back there. I *am* a licensed dri--"

"Sir, what are you looking for?" he asked, referring to my effort to locate the elusive documents underneath my seat.

“My glove compartment . . .” I began, and stopped. My brain seemed incapable of formulating an explanation, no matter how truthful, and my mouth seemed just as incapable of sounding out the words. I considered getting out of the car and continuing my search for the other things on my hands and knees, but humiliating myself further seemed pointless. By that point the officer’s next two questions were inevitable.

“Sir, have you been drinking this evening?”

“Sir, could you step out of the car please?”

I had never been arrested before. My knowledge of the process was mostly limited to watching it take place on shows like *Law and Order*. Those scenes intrigued me long before my own arrest. I would watch Detectives Logan and Briscoe knock on question the suspect until they felt they had enough information. What fascinated me most was watching an individual being taken against his or her will. Two cops show up at the door of a free man who seems innocent, ask him some questions and, sometime during the ensuing conversation, make a decision to take him away in handcuffs. His life is not his own anymore.

And so it was with me. My arrest was not nearly as dramatic as the ones I had seen on television. No angry actor in a blue uniform delivered the words that strike fear into the heart of anyone who ever played a bad guy: “Mr. Jordan, you’re under arrest for driving while intoxicated on the streets of this city and threatening the lives of its citizens!” The low, forbidding strings on the soundtrack that accompany arrests on *Law and Order* were absent from my apprehension.

Mine happened quietly. It began with a simple nod from one cop to the other. *This one's going to the station.* The cops took a gentle approach. They read me my rights quietly, perhaps to avoid upsetting me further than I was already. Joann, her face pale and tear-streaked, thrust quarters into my pants pocket and promised she would do everything she could to get me out. I held my wrists obediently behind my back while the handcuffs were applied. I remember Officer Santiago asking me to watch my head as she eased me into the back of the police car. I felt like a hospital patient with a rare affliction who, because of his courage, was getting some really terrific bedside attention from the doctors and nurses.

I was taken to the local precinct. I had been arrested so close to my house that where I was taken was where I would have gone as a free, tax-paying citizen if I had any special requests or concerns about law enforcement in my neighborhood. For example, if I would have liked a special task force to take out the Scottish Terrier that barked throughout the night behind my house, I could have dropped in on this station and requested one. If I had wanted to file a complaint on the day that my worthless car battery was stolen from under the hood of my equally worthless car, I would have filed it there.

Very little happened during my two hours at Brooklyn Precinct 38. I took a breathalyzer test that would prove helpful to the District Attorney's office. My request for water was ignored by the officers in the next room; my request to use the bathroom was granted. As I sat on the metal-slatted bench in my six by eight foot cell, Officer Santiago sat on a stool on the other side of the bars and took notes while she interviewed me about the evening's events. The impulse to confess in these situations is strong: after trying to

pass myself off as a responsible, sober driver when I was arrested, it was a relief to admit that I was just an irresponsible, drunken one.

But a drunk with style, I reflected, as I remembered my evening to my interviewer in a benign light, still floating on the champagne and Scotch I now admitted to consuming. I told her about my sins at the Met and later at Alcatraz. I omitted the facts about the open bottle of champagne in the car for fear of additional charges.

I developed a sort of camaraderie with Officer Santiago during the interview. Although she only asked questions, and offered no opinion on my behavior, I speculated that she seemed sympathetic to my troubles. In her voice I sensed I could hear my own beliefs reflected. That I was more innocent than her usual interviewee. That I was the solid citizen she spent her nights trying to protect, not the criminal she was trying to incarcerate. I confessed that I taught high school English, and she never asked what my students would think if they could see me now. It occurred to me that, in my rumpled but stylish charcoal slacks and shirt and gray silk tie, I might be one of the most sharply dressed individuals she had ever interviewed in this place. I flattered myself into thinking that if circumstances were different, she might want to go out with me. At the end of the interview, however, what she gave me was not her phone number, but four orange envelopes, traffic citations for driving without a valid license, proper registration, or proof of insurance; and making an illegal left turn at a red light. The more serious charge of Driving Under the Influence would be handled later, she told me before leaving me alone again, at a place called Central Booking, words that meant nothing to me then but pack quite a wallop for me now.

DUI in NYC, Part 2

In the morning rush hour, commuters driving down Atlantic Avenue on their way to the Brooklyn Bridge pass by the Brooklyn House of Detention. It's about what you would expect from a building erected by the state to detain the borough's lawbreakers. Passersby who look closely will notice that the windows are barred both inside and out. I never looked closely, or even at all, as I cheerfully drove past the building twice a day on my way to and from work. Inside and underneath the place is the underworld of the Brooklyn criminal justice system, a labyrinth of cells, tunnels; and the processing rooms where I would be held for a period of time that I could only guess when I arrived.

On any given night in Brooklyn, hundreds of people are arrested and taken into custody. The local precincts have cells to hold them temporarily, but usually the number of men and women picked up in one night is much greater than the number of cells available. Law enforcement officials must have realized long ago that with so many criminals and so few cells, some sort of repository would be necessary to process them all, a place where every accused robber, rapist, arsonist, and yes, drunk driver could go to be housed, held, fingerprinted, photographed, fed (more on that later), and, finally, arraigned before a judge. In Brooklyn this place was called Central Booking, what a lawyer-friend of mine familiar with the city's criminal system recently told me was the worst holding pen of its kind in the United States.

At four in the morning three cellmates and I were led out of the precinct and into the dark November morning, where a police van was waiting for us. The seats had been removed from the back so we sat on the floor, our backs against the sides. A metal shield kept us away from the cops in the front seat, but with our hands cuffed behind our backs

again, they were safe. A set of handcuffs is not designed to make its captive feel comfortable, I heard a police commissioner once say genially in an interview on NPR, and he was right. The metal clamped my wrists behind my back in a way that made not squirming impossible. Trying to escape their grip only tightened them even more.

After about twenty minutes our van turned off Atlantic Avenue and headed down a series of ramps that emptied into a loading dock, where we unboarded. Cinderblock walls fringed with coils of barbed wire secured the area. Beyond them, wisps of clouds raced across the pre-dawn sky. The wind whipping against my leather jacket reminded me that winter was coming on.

I was feeling lower than I had at any point in the evening. I was starting to realize that being transported to such a place meant that my journey was closer to its beginning than its end. Furthermore, the effects of the all the alcohol I had consumed were wearing off. The tide of euphoria that had allowed me to see my exploits that night like an adventure had ebbed, and was being replaced by the sober, hung over perspective in which I now recognized them as an ordeal.

We were led into the concrete foundation of the house of detention and seated in a corridor. Another prisoner who had made the trip from the precinct sat across from me. The only woman in the van, she wore a red, hooded sweatshirt that could not conceal the tears that fell down her acne-covered face. I looked away, too miserable about my own state of affairs to worry about hers.

After two hours we were led through a series of windowless rooms where the processing began. I was asked to remove my shoes and belt and empty my pockets. Another officer double-checked the information I gave to Officer Santiago. My ink-

stained thumb and fingers were pressed into five small boxes on a computer screen.

When I don't understand him the first time, another cop yells at me to stand in front of the white wall so he can take my picture.

I remember buying my sister a slim paperback of famous mug shots one Christmas as a gag gift. Each page included the celebrity's mug shot and the charges that necessitated it. I don't know how the book's editor found them; apparently such information is part of the public domain. Tim Allen, busted for cocaine possession. Hugh Grant after his moonlight tryst with Divine Brown. The woman from the old sitcom *Grace Under Fire*, her face darkened by bruises from a domestic abuse incident. At first I pored over its pages, fascinated to know what a person looked like after a run-in with the law. But soon I found my feelings about what I was looking at changing, my initial fascination giving way to a sick sense of complicity and guilt. These were pictures of human beings at some of the lowest points in their lives. True, most of them had rebounded just fine and are now probably living comfortably in various Beverly Hills mansions. But reading about their offenses and exploring the expressions on their faces suddenly seemed to me the worst violation of their privacy imaginable.

As I waited for the contents in my pockets to be returned, I studied the sheet that rolled out of the printer. In my mug shot, my lips are pursed together in an ironic half-smile. Looking at the photo, someone might guess that I'm smiling over the dark humor of the situation, but the expression actually reminded me of a yearbook photo that was taken of me when I was in ninth grade. An insecure freshman, I stood at the end of a group of equally insecure boys wearing the same smile. It's a smile of shame, the shame of knowing that I was not the popular kid that I so yearned to be and that this photo

would be a testament to that. It's a difficult picture for me to look at; even now I feel a quick spasm of anguish whenever I see it and have to remind myself that it's not the worst portrait of myself in the world. After all, had I been wearing the same expression when my driver's license photo had been taken, I might never have gotten into this mess.

A few floors above our underworld of imprisonment, far beyond our understanding of the judicial process, the cogs of time and justice were grinding forward. At nine in the morning, a justice of the peace for the state of New York took his seat on the bench and began to hear cases.

My fellow inmates and I were led down endlessly twisting corridors We toward the holding pens at the very base of the complex, where we would remain until our arraignments. There we would be formally charged, but for that to happen we would need to see an available judge.

Easier said than done. Apparently none of the judges was in a hurry to see *us*. For the next two hours I stood pressed against twenty other men in a 10' by 12' cubicle. We had been packed so tightly into such a small space that none of us were able to sit down. My adventure had reached a new low, as I continued to recover from my hangover consciously rather than through sleep's welcome reprieve.

Such close proximity made me even more aware, if possible, of an unavoidable fact: I was the only white person down here.

"Fuckin' Giuliani," a man next to me muttered, a comment that no one responded to, it seemed to be a sentiment that everyone accepted as a matter of course. I didn't lethead voted for Rudy in I had voted for in the last election.

The cops strolled freely through the corridor, frequently ducking into the office across from us. Through the doorway we could see them. They ate bagels and shot the breeze with one another. On the desk a 13-inch color television was playing Saturday morning cartoons. From our cell we hear the tinny sounds of the X Men as they applied their special powers to the crises at hand. The cops spoke over them it, trading stories on their adventures the night before. Listening to their conversations, Central Booking held more positive connotations for them than it did for us. They could fraternize with officers from other precincts, who they probably saw only rarely on their beats. Each man behind bars was their invitation and escort to the party. We lacked their camaraderie. We avoided eye contact with one another. Friendly banter required a lightness of heart that none of us could muster. Guards passed breakfast (mini boxes of Special K, half-pints of milk, no spoons) through the bars, but most of us, myself included, refused to eat. Silently we brooded on the events that had brought us to this moment. We contemplated how and when we might leave.

“Scuse me, sir. Do ya know when any more us called?” He was asking about the intermittent but infrequent roll calls for those of us who had been cleared to see a judge. To me the cop matched the stereotype for every Irish and Italian-American cop I had ever seen on TV. His thick neck and beefy arms stretched the seams of his light blue polyester shirt. His black shoes scuffed against the concrete floor as he walked past. It was not until I heard him reply that I realized he had heard the question at all.

“Lemme go check on that for ya. I’ll be right back,” he said without turning his head before walking out.

The man who had asked the question leaned back against the bars, looked at me and smiled.

“Every fuckin’ time,” he said.

I never hated cops the way some of my friends did. I know perfectly serene, law-abiding people who are seized by apoplectic spasms anytime someone tells a story where the police get involved.

“Pigs,” my friend Charlie muttered to me one day when two cops strolled past. We were walking along the sunny sidewalks of downtown Newport on a Saturday morning.

“What??” I asked, laughing. Charlie was teaching literature to summer school students, just as I was. Both of us were on hiatus from our regular jobs during the school year, enjoying our reduced teaching schedules, stipends, and the Rhode Island beaches.

“Fuckin’ pigs,” he growled, and we both started laughing.

“Why do you hate them?” I said, smiling and playing along.

“Oh, you know. That big power trip.” He looked almost mischievous when he said it, like a ten-year-old planning a good prank in spite of parents who would spank him if they found out about it.

Charlie could talk. He lived next to a lake on a boarding school campus in rural Connecticut. I lived in Brooklyn. The day I moved there I watched a man assault a woman right in front of the house I was about to move into. The two movers I had hired and I had just pulled up in front of my new home in our Ryder truck when we heard them yelling. A fat guy in sweats and a t-shirt man from the was walking down our street with one shoe on his foot and the other, a white Nike basketball shoe, in his hand. When he

came within ten feet of the woman walking in front of him, he threw it at her at full force, striking her squarely in the back. Two old ladies from the neighborhood shook their heads and yelled scornfully, but no one made a move to stop him. Most people reacted as the movers and I in the truck's cab, staring in shock. He picked up the sneaker and crossed the street away from his victim and us. They must know each other, I thought, as I watched her follow her attacker down the street away from us, crying and yelling. The Ryder driver leaned over the steering wheel and looked at me.

“Are you *sure* you want to move here, man?”

After that I was always happy when I saw a police car turn down my street. Standing inside that cell two years later, watching two cops , was the first time I began to feel differently.

After the first roll call, we could spread out. The men standing next to the bench claimed it when those who had been sitting there left, but when a space became available in the far corner of the cell, I spread my black leather jacket out on the floor, lay down gratefully, and surveyed my surroundings. The city's efforts to make us comfortable in our . Besides the bench, the only accommodation was a seatless toilet bowl in the corner filled with empty Special K boxes and milk cartons. I hoped for my name to be called before I'd have to use it.

There was one surprising convenience in our cell: a pay phone that, contrary to many other New York public phones, actually worked. I gratefully remembered the quarters Joann had given me and dialed her number. Her mother answered.

“Y ‘ello?” Up until now, the friendly voice on the other end of the line only knew me as the nice young man who occasionally dropped her daughter off at night after they had gone out somewhere after work. Sometimes the nice young man would stay for dinner, where mother and daughter happily served him a second helping of penne a la vodka, which he happily devoured.

“Uh, hi. It’s Matt. Is Joann around?” Self-conscious about being overheard, I tried my best to make my voice sound normal. I wondered how much Joann had told her. Probably nothing yet, I figured. For all she knew, I could be calling from the comfort of my bedroom to make plans with her daughter for the weekend.

“Oh no, Matt. She’s down where you are. She went down to see if the cops knew when you’d be getting out of there.”

So much for that. “Oh, O.K. Well uh, great. Um, maybe I’ll try back a little later when she gets home.”

“O.K. Matt. Bye-bye.”

I leaned against the phone box and closed my eyes, listening to the dial tone. If I had just made it those few final blocks. I could be waking up in my own bed right now. Where I lived, pre-war brownstones walled in everyone’s backyards. Together they created the illusion of a small forest in the middle of our urban setting. My room, a seasonal dining room that had been converted into a bedroom, was attached to the back of the house and offered the best view. I remember waking up there the morning after I had moved in. Looking up through the tall windows from my mattress on the floor, I was thrilled to find the lush leaves of oak trees swaying gently in the summer wind. It was June; school had ended and the summer stretched out luxuriously before me. I had moved

six times in three years in an attempt to find a home like this. I can live here and be happy, I remember thinking ...

“Yo man....YO!!”

Reluctantly, I opened my eyes. Yelling at me from across the cell was the one person I had tried to avoid most during those early morning hours. I had deliberately been trying not to study my fellow inmates too closely, but I knew at a glance that for some reason he had rolled up his jeans, revealing faded beige construction boots and a knife scar on one of his legs that stretched from shin to knee. A deeper one curved across his cheek. He wasn't anywhere *near* that fuckin' store when it went down, he had informed us earlier that morning. When an old drunk from the cell next to ours complained about how loud he was getting, he dealt with him, nonchalantly reaching through the bars and slamming the man's shoulders against them a few times.

“Yo man, you got any more quarters on ya?”

Relieved, I went for my pants pocket, but he waved me away.

“Later, later.”

Later for me was the next hour, as I tried Joann's house again. This time she answered, a smooth voice from a distant outpost.

“Hello?”

“Hey, it's me,” I rasped gratefully.

“Hey...how are you?”

“Oh, great. So what are you up for today? Hey, I hear that Fellini series down at Film Forum is great. I've got some friends here who said they'd like to join us.”

She faked a laugh. Something was up.

“Listen,” I asked. “What’s the story? Did you talk to anyone who knows anything?”

“Mm-hmm. I was down there this morning. Just tracking you down has been a nightmare. I’ve been getting either lots of help or no help at all. That woman who arrested you, Officer Santiago? She was very helpful. She told me they’d moved you to Central Booking early this morning, so I went down there. The first guy I talked to was *not* cooperative. Basically he refused to give me any information at all about you. He absolutely wouldn’t let me see you, acted like an asshole the entire conv-“

“Look Joanne,” I interrupted, “what’s the story? Did you find out when I might be getting out of here?” This sizing up of another’s character, even after a single encounter, was just like her; in fact, she and I took pleasure in doing just that in bars all over town, but for this conversation, I wasn’t in the mood.

Joanne’s voice flattened but she tried to keep her tone neutral. “-so I left and came back in a few minutes to try and talk to someone else. I talked to another officer, a *much* nicer man than the one before. He went down and found your rap sheet.” My rap sheet. Another document welcoming me into the world of criminal activity.

“AND?!”

Her next words shut me up. “And he said you’d be down there until at least 5 or 6 o’clock tonight. That’s just before night court begins. Apparently two judges will begin hearing cases, instead of just one. So things should be moving much faster by then. In the meantime they’ve faxed your fingerprints to Albany, to see if you have a prior record.”

My knuckles whitened around the receiver. Five or six o’clock. All this time I had been expecting to be granted my freedom at any moment. Just an hour ago my name had

been called and I had been interviewed again by one of the cops. Because I'm not a criminal, I had been telling myself. Because a man with no record surely deserved to be ushered through the doors of justice ahead of these others. And, if I had truly bothered to sound the depths of my subconscious, I might have considered this: "Because you're a white man, a respectable citizen, and this place is not where you belong. It's only a matter of time before the other men who are holding you here realize that, and come to set you free." If the middle class was handing out cards, you'd be carrying one.

"So do you think you can hold out that long? This cop was really nice, he gave me his name and told me to call him back at four o'clock. I should know more then. If all goes well, you'll be arraigned at night court. I can meet you down there and pick you up."

"Sure," I sighed. It wasn't like I had much choice. "Thanks."

"Call me at four," she said, and hung up.

I put down the receiver and leaned against the wall. So I would be staying here for the rest of the day, at the least. I closed my eyes and let myself stop worrying over the same questions I had been asking since I had been caught, of how and when I would get out of here. Strangely, my heart lightened. Joanne's news had stripped me of the one thing I had left: hope. Before talking to her I had been torturing myself with a fantasy that things could change for the better at any moment. Now I could relax knowing that they would not, at least not for the next six hours. I often feel this way about things, that accepting the guaranteed bad outcome is a much better state of mind than hoping for the uncertain good one. Even better was the realization that, after sinking to new lows about every other minute over the last four hours, I was actually capable of feeling good again. Eyes still closed, I smiled.

No good mood goes unnoticed in a holding pen.

“Yo, man...YO!” It was my friend from across the cell. “Lemme have that quarter now.” My newfound serenity must have convinced him that whatever magic on the other end of that phone was making me so damn happy, he was due for some of it too.

I searched my pocket and found, to my dismay, a single coin at the bottom of it. I needed that quarter now. Without it, how would I know when I was getting out of here? I didn't have a calling card, nor, in the face of this unexpected crisis, the presence of mind to realize that if I had wanted to talk to Joanne, I could simply call her collect. I had to hold on to what was mine.

“Uh, I'm really sorry, but I can't give it to you.”

“WHAT?!” He pushed himself off the bench that no one else dared occupy and rose to his feet. For the second time that night I found myself attempting an unsatisfactory explanation to an unreceptive audience.

“Yeah,” I said with a fake laugh, trying to make a joke of my refusal. “I just talked to my friend on the phone and I'm gonna need to call her again later. I'm really sorry.”

His mouth open, he stared at a point just over my shoulder as he grasped the concept that I was denying him what he wanted. “You mean you gonna go back on something you *promised* me? I oughta kick your mothafuckin' teeth in for that!”

For a moment I was able to look outside the cloud of panic that was enveloping me and see that I had violated a code that in a way made sense even to me. Now I really was sorry. But I had already said so twice, and to repeat it once more seemed like just the

thing that would push him over the threshold of thought into action, where I did not want him to go. I retreated to my corner of the cell and sat down on my jacket.

He circled slowly, stepping between the other inmates who occupied the limited floor space. My knees drawn up to my chest, I focused on his construction boots, only looking up when it was clear that he was moving toward me. He didn't return my glance. Hands clasped behind his back, he shuffled past me. He was brooding on his own circumstances, on places and events I could only try to imagine. He completed his circle and heaved himself back onto the bench with a sigh. Our little cell wasn't the best place to attempt a morning stroll as a way of working out his thoughts, but he had done his best.

On the liner notes of his concert album *Johnny Cash at Folsom Prison*, Johnny Cash writes about what life was like during some involuntary stays behind bars. Mostly he writes about waiting, about searching for any diversion he could find to distract himself from the burden of killing time. To an audience of prisoners he opens his show with the song, "Folsom Prison Blues":

I hear the train a comin'. It's rollin' round the bend.

And I ain't seen the sunshine since I don't know when.

I'm stuck in Folsom Prison and time keeps draggin' on.

When I was a kid I would listen to the song over and over, thrilled by the way the prisoners cheered and screamed in fierce identity when they heard those lines.

In Central Booking, my cellmates and I endured the morning and afternoon's passage. I summoned the courage to use the toilet in front of a crowd of strange men,

aiming my fire among the empty cereal boxes and half-pint milk cartons that had been tossed into the bowl. Cops meandered in and out of the office across from us. The television had been switched over to a college football game, Purdue vs. Michigan. A cop leaned back to put his feet up on the desk watch. I listened to the roars of the crowd. Somewhere in the Midwest about 80,000 people were gathered outside on a brisk fall afternoon, screaming their lungs out for the home team. Under the order to put our hands behind our backs, one by one we were permitted to walk out of the cell, take a sandwich from the cardboard box at the end of the room, and walk back in. I ate half of a stale baloney and cheese sandwich and threw the rest away.

At irregular intervals an officer would appear and call four or five names. Only a few men were taken from our cell, and they were quickly replaced with other arrestees. One of those named was the man who wanted my quarter. Scowling and silent, he was led away with the other lucky few.

With each brief roll call, the tension in the cell ratcheted up another notch. New York state law requires that anyone arrested on the street be arraigned within 24 hours. Many of these men must have known, however, as I did not, that the wheels of justice do not automatically spin faster to accommodate any law. I later learned that it is not uncommon for some detainees to be held for as many as 60 hours before seeing a judge. At that point the Legal Aid Society actually steps in on their behalf, filing writs of habeas corpus to try and free them.

Every time it became clear that the cop had finished naming names, the other men began banging on the walls and spitting curses into the air in an increasingly frightening display of group frustration. I quietly kept to myself in the back corner, waiting to place

my 4:00 call to Joanne. When I did, she was able to give me the information my cellmates didn't have. Good Cop had confirmed that yes, my paperwork had been processed, another judge would soon be sitting on the Night Court bench, and my name would be called any time now. 15 minutes later the name "Jordan!" rang throughout the basement, the 7th of 25 names called by the officer in charge.

I walked out of the cell and stood the designated five feet behind the man in front of me as the cop bellowed the next man's name.

"Jackson, Walter!....Jackson, Walter!.....Is there a *Walter Jackson* in here!?"

A man on the bench pushed his foot against another man who lay stretched out on the floor beneath him.

"Yo man, ain't that you he's callin'?"

Walter Jackson pushed himself up onto his elbows and shook his head in an effort to wake himself up. "Mnm....Wha' man, wha'?"

Reeking of booze, Walter had joined us earlier that morning. As soon as some floor space became available, he lay down, stretched out and fell asleep. He spent the entire day there, his ankles crossed and arms folded behind his head, snoring contentedly for the next eight hours.

Fully refreshed, he rubbed his eyes and hummed a tuneless melody as he strolled over to take his place in line behind me. Good fortune was a commodity that was hard for any of us to come by, but of all the men I met on my side of the bars that day, he was by far the luckiest.