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Auto Shop Boys: A Collection of Short Stories

Daniel T. McNamara

Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College, dmcnam1@lsu.edu

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AUTO SHOP BOYS:
A COLLECTION
OF SHORT STORIES

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts

in

The Department of English

by
Daniel T. McNamara
B.A., Southern Illinois University, 1996
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Auto Shop Boys

There are hundreds of ways to die in a high school auto shop, especially one as well equipped as ours. Say you're working on a strut and you accidentally unscrew the top before relieving the pressure on it, the spring inside is coiled so tightly that it'll fire out and go right through your face. If you're under a car on the hoist and you pull the wrong lever on the air jack, it'll swing right up and tear your head off and throw it into the alignment machine. Connect a battery the wrong way and it'll explode in your face. Even stupid little things, like changing a tire, can be dangerous. If you don't hold onto the tire iron when you're peeling a tire off a rim it can fly up and break your jaw. You can lose an eye buffing a valve if you don't have your safety glasses on. Mr. E told every kid these things the first day they took his class. It was always going to be, "One of you damn kids is gonna get himself fucking killed in here," but now he's dead on the Auto Shop floor, and it just doesn't make any sense.

It was a heart attack. Or a stroke. None of us is really sure, all we know is that he's dead. Paul already tried CPR a few times, but he doesn't know it that well. He was a lifeguard for about a month over the summer, but he got fired for chatting up girls all day. Dave already called 911 from the office and Steve ran off crying to tell what happened to God knows who in the main building. Our shop isn't connected to the rest of the school. It's an old bus garage across campus with one huge roll-up door and enough space to fit 12 cars. It's fully equipped with its own air compressor, drainage, and ventilation systems. We also have three hoists (two air powered, one electric), a cage for engines and parts, a supply closet, 17 wall

mounted tool cabinets, our own underground oil disposal tank, a welder, a tire machine, a tire room, and our own lockers. Mr. E has his own office. We have our own huge sink too, the kind you see in baseball parks. It's a nice thing to have around, but it doesn't always help. Sometimes, if you've had a really messy day in the shop, you have to peel off your jumpsuit and walk across the parking lot to the main building just to take a shower in the gym locker room before your next class. Otherwise, the rest of the day you wind up smelling like transmission fluid or anti-freeze. Most of us do anyway.

So as soon as Mr. E dropped, Steve took off across the parking lot and we haven't seen him since. That was about 5 minutes ago. Since then, the rest of us have been standing around, watching Paul try to save him. No one is talking except Patrick who keeps saying, "He's fuckin' dead man," over and over. Patrick has always been the jittery one, ever since he got jumped by some Latin Kings last year.

We've had weird days in the shop before. Like when Dweeze and Ricky were screwing around and started throwing fluids at each other. Next thing you know, Dweeze's fat ass is on the ground and Ricky has him pinned with his knees on his shoulders dumping gas around his head. Mr. E broke it up, screamed at them for a while and sent them to the showers. It never got reported to the school board. It was always like that. There were school rules, and then there were Auto Shop rules. Besides, Dweeze and Ricky were partners. You can't break up auto partners. The next day they were doing a tune-up on Dweeze's mom's Buick and laughing like children.

This was totally different though. As soon as we got to school we all knew something was wrong. One of the benefits of being in Auto Shop is we have our own parking right behind the building. There's a little road that leads off from the main lot and winds around to the back of the garage, and no one is allowed to park there except us. And every morning Mr. E opens the side door with a grin and lets us all in saying things like, "Damn, Reed, you look like shit," and "Ted, how many times have I told you to keep that piece of junk off my lot." (Ted has a rusted-out, bondo-bucket '76 Monte Carlo he can't let go of.) But today the door was wide open. We figured he was working on something and didn't bother with the morning ritual. When we got inside there was no sign of him. He wasn't in his office, or the tire room, or the cage, no where.

"Yo, E! Where you at man?" Ryan said.

"Must be in the main," Steve said, so we all took our seats in our makeshift "classroom" section of the shop. It was nothing but a bunch of chairs in a cleared spot to the right of the electric hoist, in front of the supply room. 13 chairs, twelve of us, six pairs of partners. There's Ricky and Dweeze, Dave and Patrick, Johnny and Steve, Josh and Paul, Ted and Ryan, and Reed and Wright. A bunch of shaggy-haired, white-boy, grease-monkeys. Mr. E. also set up a small chalkboard so he could draw diagrams of starters, carburetors, whatever we were learning about that day. Today we learned a whole lot of nothing as we sat there for twenty minutes with no sign of the man.

"Dude, he's gotta be here," Johnny said. "His car's out in the lot and we would've had a sub in here by now if he wasn't."

“I think you’re right,” Paul said.

“Maybe we should just get to work. I mean, he might’ve left the door open because he knew he was gonna be late,” Ricky said.

“Let’s just hang out. If he shows he shows, and if not, well...” Josh leaned back in his chair.

“Fuck it,” Johnny said, got up, walked over to his locker and put his jumpsuit on. The rest of us suited up and eventually Ricky hit the button for the main door. Our jumpsuits are bright red, and when we’re wearing them we look like a pack of licorice. Ted pulled in his Monte onto the roll-up hoist to change his exhaust system, Steve and Ryan went to work on Steve’s van, and Reed and Wright balanced their tires. The rest of us went to work on the “loaner” cars. These were cars donated to us by people because they didn’t work, and as projects, we were supposed to “fix” them. The thing was, these cars were usually so screwed up they were beyond repair. There was an ’86 Nissan that we redid the head on and changed the whole fuel system, and it still caught on fire when we tried to start it. It got scrapped.

A few of the guys were working on an old Chrysler station wagon we had and Ted was tuning the radio when he yelled, “Holy shit!” Lying in the back of the wagon was Mr. E, under a tarp, dead asleep. Ted sprung from the car like it was about to explode. “Fuck, man, I didn’t even see him there.”

We all gathered around the car to look in at the old man. He was really only 39, but we called him “old man” because his hair had already gone completely gray, almost white. “It’s because of you damn kids,” he’d say. His mustache was the same

color and together they made him look at least 50. Today he looked 126. His skin was pale, lighter than his hair, and his lips were dry and cracked. One of his feet was sticking out from under the tarp, covered in a dark brown sock with a hole in the toe. Near his head there were a few empty cans of Old Style and an empty bottle of Old Granddad.

“Holy shit, man,” Johnny said. “Holy shit.”

“So, whatta we do?” Dave said.

“We should wake him up, I guess,” Johnny said.

“How? If he ain’t awake now...” Dweeze said.

“Oh, Jesus,” Ricky said, “just wake him up. Here, I’ll do it.” Ricky leaned in the back window of the wagon and touched Mr. E’s ankle, right above the exposed sock. “Yo. Yo, E, are you all right, man? You awake?” Mr. E lay there, still as a boulder.

“Shake him again,” Steve said. By now, everyone in the class was standing around the car, arms folded, staring at the old man.

“You wanna fucking wake him?” Ricky said.

“Honk the horn,” Josh said.

“Shut up, Josh. Fucking idiot,” Johnny said as he opened the back door of the wagon with a thunk.

“What’re you gonna do?” Ryan said.

“I don’t know, I thought that might wake him up.” Johnny started knocking lightly on the top of the car. “Eeeee. Mr. E? Hey, man,” he started banging on the roof, “get up!”

“Are you fucking crazy?” Ricky said.

“Well, we gotta get him up don’t we?” Johnny said. “You guys wanna help?” He looked to Reed and Wright who said nothing, as they usually did. Just then a grunt came from the mound under the tarp, then a moan, like a walrus caught in a net. Slowly, Mr. E pushed the tarp off of himself and leaned up, one hand on the bed of the car, the other on his face.

“Oh, God,” he said.

We all stood and stared at one another, looking for answers to a question no one asked. With the tarp completely off, our teacher pulled himself from the wagon and wobbled to his feet.

“Where are my shoes?” he said.

“Ummmm, we don’t know,” Ted said. Just then Reed and Wright turned around without a word, and went back to work on the tire machine across the garage.

“Are you all right, Mr. E?” Paul said. “I mean, do you need anything?”

The old man scratched his face, it was obvious he hadn’t shaved over the weekend. The hair on his head stood straight up, still molded into the shape it made on the bed of the car. His shirt was unbuttoned and his belt was unbuckled. He looked like he just got rolled. Looking at his watch, he said, “Aren’t you guys supposed to be working?”

“Well, we...”

“Get to work!” he screamed, and we all froze. “Steve you’re doing a tune-up today, right?”

“Uh, yeah.”

“Get to fucking work! Ted, Johnny, you’re doing an exhaust system on that piece of shit Monte Carlo, aren’t you?”

“Yeah.”

“Then why the fuck aren’t you over there. Jesus Christ, I see you standing here with your jumpsuits on, but I don’t see any fucking work being done. Except for Reed and Wright. Why are they the only ones working?” Everyone took a second to glance over at them, and there they were, spinning up the tire machine, their backs to everyone. “The rest of you, I want these loaner cars up and running by the end of the week. Understand? We need to get ‘em the fuck out of here anyway.”

“What?” Dave said.

“You’ve been dickin’ around with them long enough. It’s time to get them out of here. Everything is going.”

“So, if we fix them, where do they go?” Josh said.

“Why? You want one? Is that it?” Mr. E got right in Josh’s face. The liquor was still ripe on his breath and he was obviously still drunk. “You think you *deserve* one? All that hard work?” Josh didn’t answer. “Fuck it. Why not?” He backed off and spread his arms wide, making his proclamation. “You boys, you get the cars. Josh, you little shit, you can have the Aries K. Patrick, you and Dave can have the Chrysler wagon. Reed and Wright!” he shouted at them from across the garage. They didn’t bother turning around. “I give you two the Nova. The rest of you, well, most of you have cars, so that’s that. The rest is mine. Get to work.” Mr. E stumbled

off to his office, his socked feet sliding on the concrete, and he shut the door behind him. The blinds were pulled down, none of us could see inside.

“Is he serious?” Patrick said.

“Dude, I don’t know what the fuck is going on,” Ricky said.

“We’re getting shut down, that’s what’s going on,” Paul said.

“What? Fuck that,” Ricky said.

“What, you think all that shit is a joke? All that stuff he says?” Paul said.

Mr. E had a habit of yelling at us, “You want them to turn this place into a parking lot? You just keep fucking around,” and “No one at this school gives a shit about us. You know that, right?”

“They’re not gonna shut this place down, what the fuck are they gonna do with all this stuff?” Johnny said.

“Sell it. To other schools. Something like that,” Paul said.

“You know, they didn’t take our picture for the yearbook this year,” Ted said. “Maybe he’s right.”

“So what the fuck is gonna happen? They can’t do it now. Right in the middle of a semester,” Ricky said.

“Jesus, we’ll probably wind up in Metals or Wood Shop,” Ryan said.

Metals was for the stoners who wanted to make better pipes. Their hands were always burnt and they got high on the gas from the torches. Skate rats took Wood Shop. We were Auto, plain and simple. When we were junior high and the counselors from the high school came to sign us up for our freshman classes, they took one look at us and said, “You would probably like Intro to Small Engines.”

That's where we paid our dues, fixing lawn mowers and snow blowers. Then we moved up to Auto Tech, taking apart an entire engine and putting it back together, and now it's Auto Repair. Mr. E taught every class.

“No. No, fuck that,” Steve said, and walked over to Mr. E's office. That's when we found him. Steve opened the door and he was slumped over his desk with his eyes wide open, so was his mouth, like he was screaming at someone. When Steve touched him, he fell over. His whole body flopped to the ground like a wet sack of flour. Steve screamed and the rest of us all came running over. When Ted saw him he puked. Paul grabbed him by the legs and dragged him out. Now we're all watching him try to save the old man, but it looks pretty pointless. He's dead. And we all know, even if the Shop wasn't going to be shut down, it is now. Mr. E was the only teacher, and he's dead on the floor. We don't know where we're going to wind up. We don't know where we're going.

Johnny and Jeopardy at Lassen's Tap

It was 4:30 on a Wednesday, so Johnny knew he'd be there.

The bar had hardly changed from the times when he was little and his Dad would take him there on Saturday afternoons to get hot dogs. The video games in the back corner were newer, *Golden Tee* instead of *Galaga*, and the music in the jukebox was a little more up to date, but everything else was pretty much the same. There were always the same glowing beer signs advertising Miller and Old Style, the same dark, smoky air, the same sports mirrors on the walls, one reading "The Sox will rise again" and another immediately under it saying "Fuck the Cubs." And in the corner, next to the front door just like every Christmas season, stood a disgracefully shabby tree trimmed with crude ornaments the patrons would bring in and hang with pride: old fashioned bubble lights, mini Bears helmets, popcorn, condoms, pictures, garland made from beer cans and fishing line. Johnny remembered when he was eleven someone hung a plastic bag full of piss on it. The same bartender, Tommy Riggs, was always there and so was the most permanent fixture of Lassen's Tap, Johnny's dad, sitting in his corner stool, facing the TV, always at 4:30.

Johnny sat down next to him as Tommy turned the TV to channel 5 just in time to hear the announcer say "*This-is-Jeopardy!*"

"Hey, Pop," he said.

"Heeey, Johnny," he said, looking away from the TV long enough to slap him on the back a few times. "You're in town, huh? Up from school?" His question

was to his son, but his attention was toward Alex Trebek introducing the day's players.

"Yeah, something like that," Johnny said.

"Good, good...hey, you want a beer? Tommy?" he said, getting the bartender's attention with a quick wave.

"Hey, Johnny, long time no see. What can I get'cha?" said Tommy Riggs, a short, chubby man with glasses and a bald head hidden by a floppy Santa's hat. He was an old friend of Johnny's dad and had known Johnny his entire life. When Johnny was a kid Tommy served him 7-Up with grenadine and it made him feel special.

"Guinness," Johnny said, unzipping his black leather jacket and setting on the stool next to him.

"Draft?"

"Yep. Thanks, Tommy."

Tommy went to pour the beer and Johnny glanced down at his father's glass of Budweiser with ice. "I can't believe you drink it like that," he said.

His father glanced down at the beer and then back to the TV. "It's how I like it," he said.

"I know, it's just," Johnny shook his head. "Doesn't it get watered down?"

Shooting him a glance, he said through a grin, "Not if you drink it fast enough." His eyes were getting dull and his skin was red. His skin was always red. It was burnt by the sun in the summer and by the cold in the winter. Tommy set the

beer down, Johnny took a sip and watched Gene from Michigan pick mythology for \$300.

In Greek mythology, she was born from her father's head wearing a full set of armor.

“Who is Athena?” they both said, and they sipped. By the first commercial break, his dad was beating him \$2700 to \$1500. They ignored the daily double and took credit for it at face value.

“So, still never cut your hair, huh?” he asked, as a Ford Explorer commercial came on. Tommy set down another bottle Budweiser with a glass of ice.

“Nope. Not yet,” he said, and stared across the bar. Two other local drunks sat quietly at the other end.

“Jesus. Y’know, you kinda look like Jesus.”

Johnny didn’t answer.

“So, how’s school then?”

“Good. I guess.”

“You guess?”

“It’s fine, Dad.”

“What’re you taking?”

“English, sociology, shit like that.”

“Not much money in that stuff, is there?”

“I guess not.”

“Well, you better be careful, or else you might wind up delivering mail. And we all know horrible that would be, right Johnny?” His eyes flashed and then dimmed again.

When Johnny was a kid, his father asked him what he wanted to be when he grew up. His answer was that he didn’t want to be a mailman. The old man thought Johnny was insulting him because that’s what he was. “What, you’re better than that? Too fuckin’ smart to deliver mail?” he said. When Johnny got a little older he tried to explain that he just didn’t want to be pissed off all the time. “I’m pissed off because I work hard. It’s hard work.” It became pointless to argue about it.

All right, we’re back, Alex said, and halfway through round one Julie is in the lead with \$1200...

Johnny took a piss during the next commercial break while his dad talked to Tommy about the “fuckin’ union”. It was a daily conversation that rarely changed. “I got a new nigger boss, she’s real nice but she don’t know what the hell is goin’ on.” By the end of double Jeopardy, his dad was at \$12,700 and Johnny was at \$9300.

Today’s final Jeopardy topic: Modern Poets. Should be interesting, stay tuned...

“So, are you staying with your mother?”

It was a subject Johnny didn’t want to discuss. “Yeah.”

“How is she?”

“She’s good. She’s good. She’s lost weight.”

“Oh, yeah? Wow.” His dad stared into nothing for a moment, picturing what his ex-wife looked like fifteen pounds thinner. “She never lost weight when she was with me. She just put it on,” he laughed.

“Yeah, well...”

“She was thin when we first met though. She was really pretty, your mother.”

“I bet.”

“Y’know, Johnny,” he sat up in his chair and set his beer down, “she left me, y’know. I mean, I moved out of the house, she got the house, but **she** wanted the divorce.”

Johnny didn’t want to think about it.

“It wasn’t completely my fault.”

He tries not to think about it.

“I’m not so bad. She could’ve done a lot worse.”

Johnny bites his cheek until he tastes blood, but it doesn’t work. The memory invades him like a virus, and he’s waking up in his old bed. He’s in high school again and the familiar knock at the bedroom door will continue until he answers it. The clock tells him it’s 2:30 in the morning and he’s not surprised. He’s only been asleep for an hour. He doesn’t want to get out of bed, but the knock is there and he knows he has to answer it. He gets up, opens the door, and sees exactly who he expected. His gray hair is matted, his beer gut juts out between his undershirt and boxer shorts, his breath is coated in stale beer, saying, “Johnny, would you come downstairs, please? I’d like to talk to you.”

“Yeah, I’ll be down in a minute.”

He lumbers away, down the stairs, and Johnny stands in his doorway, swearing to himself and digging his knuckles into his leg, preparing for his late-night routine. The door next to his opens a crack and his brother sticks his shaved head out far enough to see Johnny trembling. They don’t speak, they just look at one another, like always. His brother is bigger, stronger. He gets in fights and hurts people. When his brow is down, he looks like a dragon with a sharp, pointed chin. It scares people. But now his brow is up and his eyes widen. They say, *Sorry, bro. I’m sorry, but thank God he knocked on your door and not mine.* He shuts his door without a word and Johnny makes his way down the steps.

His father is in his usual place in his large, brown recliner with a beer dangling between his thumb and index finger. There is a smaller chair from the kitchen in front of him and Johnny promptly sits in it. He wishes he could sit on the couch to avoid his father’s breath. He stares at the floor.

“I thought I told you to get a haircut.”

“I did.”

He smiles, but his eyes burn with anger. “No, you didn’t. Whaddya think I am, some kind of fucking idiot?”

“No.”

“Then why didn’t you get a haircut?”

Johnny hesitates. He knows what his father is waiting for and he doesn’t want to give it to him, but he has no choice. There’s just no other answer. “I dunno.”

That's all he needed. The beer drops to the floor and the arms go up, flailing. It's most of the usual. "Every time I tell you to do something, you do the goddamn opposite..."

Johnny never says a word.

"I'm not such a bad guy..."

He learned a long time ago that talking back only made it worse and dragged things out for hours on occasion.

"You wear that fucking leather jacket I told you not to get..."

Instead, he puts his hands in his pockets and pinches the meat of his thigh.

"Do you know how hard I work..."

He counts while he does it, seeing how long it takes to make a bruise.

"Your friends with their long, faggot hair..."

The next day, depending on how dark the bruise is, he'll know how much sleep he missed and take a nap after school.

"My father beat the shit out of me, and he had only three fingers on his right hand..."

Johnny almost always laughs at this. He imagines an old three-fingered man slapping his young father and leaving a red mark shaped like a pitchfork across his face. He pinches his leg harder.

"Your mother and I, we're not getting along real well."

Johnny knows they never got along "real well", but they have been fighting a lot lately. More than usual anyway.

"Y'know, Johnny? It's probably your fault we're going to get a divorce..."

Johnny releases the grip on his leg. His neck tightens and his teeth grind like stone on stone.

“Don’t you understand that you’re fucking up my entire life?”

Johnny wants a punch. A simple punch in the face. He wants to feel a tight row of big callused knuckles slamming into his nose, breaking the cartilage, causing blood to hit the wall and a pain so intense that it knocks him out cold. He wants to wake up on the living room floor the next morning with a throbbing headache and his face stuck to the carpet. He thinks maybe if he talks back, maybe if he says: *Dad you’re a drunk, leave me alone*, maybe he’ll get it. But he knows he won’t. He knows his father would never do him the common courtesy of breaking his nose. He would just keep talking.

“I’ll get my hair cut tomorrow.”

“What?”

“I said, I’ll get my hair cut tomorrow.” Johnny still stares at the floor, his feet pressing harder and harder into it. The knuckles in his toes crack.

“You should have done it when I told you to.”

“You’re right. I’ll do it tomorrow. I promise.”

And finally, silence. Just for a bit. “Fine, that’s all I wanna hear.”

“Can I go now?”

“What, you don’t wanna talk to me?”

“Well, it’s like, a quarter to three in the morning and I’ve got school tomorrow.”

“All right, go to bed. Good night.”

Johnny doesn't say anything and walks out of the living room. Up the stairs he finds his brother standing in his doorway. His complexion is lighter than Johnny's, and he seems to glow in the dark. "Was it bad?" he asks.

"Yeah."

"Yeah. What'd he say this time?"

"I just want to go to sleep," Johnny says, shaking his head.

"Fine," his brother says, shutting his door behind him.

Johnny sits on his bed. His hand is in a fist pressed against his mouth, his mother's voice in his head says: *You don't have things that bad*. He tangles a curl of his thick, wavy hair around the pinky on his other hand: *You'll be gone tomorrow*. An old commercial about child abuse pops in and says: *Words hit harder than a fist*. Johnny smiles. *What I wouldn't give for a three-fingered slap*, and he starts to laugh. He thinks he should be crying, but he doesn't want to do either. Instead, he laughs and bites his fist, right across the knuckles. He bites hard, and he feels the blood begin to ooze between his teeth and down his throat as it chokes away the laughing and the tears. He wants the whole night to just bleed out through his fist.

But it didn't.

Mickey Rourke played the lead role in the movie "Barfly", written by this 20th century American poet, Alex said.

"Bukowski," Johnny said.

"What?" his father said.

"It's Bukowski," Johnny said, finishing his beer.

"It is?"

“Yeah, Dad, that’s an easy one.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah, I’m sure.”

“Wait-“

“Look, um, I’m gonna take off, all right. I mean, if that’s cool. I got stuff to do,” He hopped off of his bar stool and swung the hard, chapped leather around himself.

“No, wait, let’s see if you’re right.”

As the contestants’ answers and wagers were revealed, Johnny pulled a small package out from the inside pocket of his coat. “Here, Pop, I got you something.”

Julie wins the game by betting it all on Bukowski.

“Well, you were right, Johnny. It’s Bukowski, you...what’s this?” he said, taking the gift, staring at it as if it were a bomb.

“It’s nothin’. Just something I picked up for you.”

“Thanks, I’ll open it later,” he said, setting it on the bar.

“All right, well, I’m gonna settle my tab.” Johnny pulled out his wallet.

“No, no, no, I got it. Actually,” he waved to Tommy who was trying to wake up one of the other drunks.

“Yeah,” Tommy said as he walked over.

“Hey, get Johnny two of those, what are they?” He glanced at him for a second. “Four-packs?”

Johnny nodded.

“Yeah, two four-packs of Guinness cans. Put it on my tab, wouldja, Tommy?
Thanks.”

“You got it,” Tommy said and went to the back, into the walk-in cooler.

“You like those cans, right Johnny? Never the bottles.”

“That’s right, Dad. Never the bottles.”

Tommy came back from the cooler with a large paper bag and set it on the
bar.

“Thanks, Tommy,” Johnny said.

“Hey, Merry Christmas, huh?” Tommy said, slapping the bar as he walked
away.

“Yeah, you too.” Johnny turned to his dad and put out his hand. “Merry
Christmas, Dad.”

“All right, Johnny,” he said, shaking. “I’ll see ya around.”

Johnny grabbed the bag and walked out of the bar.

Waking Me

The first time I ever read the obituaries I was surprised to find out that I was dead. I was reading the Chicago Tribune, sitting in the basement of the Cook County Court House on 112th, taking one of the seventeen “coffee breaks” I would take that day. I had a lame job as an “assistant janitor,” which basically meant that I did nothing aside from sweeping the parking lot in the morning and cleaning the holding cells after lunch. I got the job through a cousin of mine who was really high up in Chicago politics. It was just a summer thing, a position created by the city to give “connected” kids like me something to do while school was out. In the fall I’d have to look for something more permanent though, since I dropped out of college that year. I got busted for dealing and my cousin kept me out of jail, but I had to leave the school. It’s not like I wanted to be there anyway.

The cement basement was cool and dank, and the table I sat at was surrounded by floor buffers on one side and broken vacuum cleaners on the other. Across the table from me sat Darnell, a tall, lanky black guy I had known since junior high. When we were younger, everyone used to tease him about his high voice, but as he got older it got deep and throaty, like a bull. He sat there practicing a card game called Bidwhist. He tried to teach it to me once, but I just didn’t get it. “That’s all right,” he said, “white folks don’t play this game anyhow.” His uncle was a circuit judge.

“Yo D,” I said, “check this shit out.”

He looked up long enough to take a quick glance at the obituary I pointed to, which read:

Ryan T. Sheehan, beloved husband of the late Mary K. Sheehan, nee Hasty; devoted father of Mary Anne (William) Sullivan and James D. Sheehan; cherished grandfather of Dolores, Mark, Michael, and John; great-grandfather of six; loving brother of Olive Moorhead. Visitation Friday, 3 to 9 p.m. Funeral Saturday, 10 a.m. from **Andrew J. McGann & Son Funeral Home**, 10727 S. Pulaski Rd., to Our Lady of the Ridge Church, for mass at 11 a.m. Interment Holy Sepulcher Cemetery. For information call 708-799-4924.

“You dead, man,” Darnell said, and went back to his cards.

“Ain’t that wild?” I said. Darnell didn’t answer. “I wonder who he was. He ain’t a relative of mine, at least, not that I know of. I mean, I’ve never heard of any these people in here. Still, we have the exact same name. Ain’t that weird? God, I wonder if I even look like him.”

“Why’doncha find out?” he said, still not looking up.

“Whaddaya mean?”

“Go see.”

I thought about it for a second while Darnell slapped the cards down. “Hey man, that’s really not a bad idea. I could go see what I’m gonna look like when I’m old. And this guy’s obviously Irish so there’ll be some kinda party or something afterwards. It might be fun.” He kept slapping his cards. “I’m gonna go. Why don’t you come with me?”

Darnell glared at me from his cards for a moment and then looked back down. “I don’t go to funerals. Especially for dead white folks I don’t know.”

“Not the funeral, man, the wake.”

“Don’t go to them either.”

“Have you ever been to an Irish wake?” Darnell silently shook his head. “Oh man, they’re not bad at all. Especially if the person is *old*. I mean, when someone is *old* everyone is *expecting* them to die, y’know? It’s not depressing. And this guy had great-grandkids, so he had to be *really* old. And then afterwards everyone goes out to a bar or something and gets hammered. It’s kinda cool, you should come with.”

Darnell stayed silent.

“C’mon, it’s that place on Pulaski, right down the street. My Aunt Jen’s funeral was there, I know right where it is. I’ll drive.”

Darnell didn’t say anything and continued to flip his cards down.

“Well, I’m gonna go,” I said.

§ § §

The late Ryan Sheehan’s wake was the thirteenth wake I went to by the time I was 22, so I was pretty used to them. Those thirteen included my father’s, all of my grandparents’, my Aunt Jen’s and my cousin Jimmy’s. Jimmy’s was the only really sad one because he was only 28 when he killed himself. Everyone just cried and cried. They cried at the wake, the cried at the bar afterwards, then the cried at

the funeral and at the lunch after that. At all the other ones everyone just stood around, talking and laughing like it was some kind of family reunion, only there was a corpse in the room. There would always be a couple of people crying in the front row, like my mom, but it was never really depressing. I guess my dad's was, but I was too young to realize it. All I could remember from that was my cousin Jimmy sneaking me my first shot of whiskey and that made me cry.

It surprised me when I walked into Ryan Sheehan's wake and it was quiet. It was silent. No one was saying a word. Even the people who were crying, and there were a lot, were crying quietly. They buried their faces in their hands and kept their mouths closed. The air of the room looked yellow and fuzzy because of the lighting, the way wakes always do. Everyone was sitting down in the rows of chairs to the right of the brown casket against the far wall. Everyone except for what I assumed was the family, who stood in a row leading to the casket. There were five of them, one looking more morbid than the next. Two were young, two were old, the last was really old. Guy+girl, man+woman, old lady. "Two grandkids, his kids, and the other one must be his sister," I thought to myself. It was obvious there was no way I was going to get a look at Ryan Sheehan without speaking to the family, so I walked up and introduced myself.

"You must be Dolores," I said in true Catholic fashion, kind and pitiful, as I shook the young girl's hand. She looked around 25 and would have been pretty if her eyes weren't so swollen. I was glad she was the first in line because I knew Ryan Sheehan had only one granddaughter, and I wanted to act like I knew him. It was a bit of a risk though, because she could've been someone's wife.

“Yes, I am,” she said and I was relieved.

“Hello, my name is Ted O’Connell, I used to live in the neighborhood and I used to cut your grandfather’s grass when I was younger.” It was another risk but I couldn’t think of anything to say. “He was a good man.”

“Oh, yes, I...I think I remember you. Thank you. Thank you for coming. This is my brother John, and our parents.” Her *brother* John, not husband. She suddenly looked much prettier to me. Her hair was long and blonde, growing out of a perm. I almost asked her right then and there where everyone would be “celebrating” Ryan Sheehan’s life afterwards and if she needed a ride. It sounded incredibly tacky in my head. Still, I had cleaned myself up pretty well that day, a shirt and tie, a shave, I even got my hair cut.

“Hello, my condolences,” I said to each of them and shook their hands. They all had ruddy faces and dark hair. The mom had freckles.

“I’m Olive,” said the old woman at the end of the line. “I’m his sister.” I shook her wrinkled hand very gently and she reached up with her other hand and touched my face. “Bless your heart,” she said.

I stood there and opened my mouth to talk but nothing came out. Then she smiled at me and I felt bad, so I just smiled back and let go of her hand.

There was a long, white, padded bar in front of Ryan Sheehan’s casket which I knelt down on like you’re supposed to, and I put my hands together, like you’re supposed to, and I didn’t pray. Instead, I left my eyes open and looked him over, at least as much as I could. I noticed his pressed blue suit, probably the one he wore to church every week, but I couldn’t see his shoes because the bottom half of

the casket was closed. He was bald. No one in my family was bald. What hair he had left looked fake, like strands of ash ready to crumble at any second. I stared at Ryan Sheehan's face. I didn't look anything like him. His nose was long and lean and mine was flat. My wide, square jaw didn't match his cleft chin. There was something about his eyes though. Even though they were closed, there was something familiar about them. They didn't look like mine, but they should've. They didn't look like my dad's either, or my brothers' or my cousins' or anyone else in my family. They looked like someone's eyes, but no one that I knew. I wanted to know them though, and it made me angry. So angry I got mad at Ryan Sheehan. I got mad at him for not looking like my dad and not like me and I wanted to punch him right in his frozen, dead face.

And I did. It happened before I could even think about it. My right hand let go of the left and slammed Ryan Sheehan right in the eye. It was a quick punch, a jab, and it was like hitting a piece of hard wax covered in rubber. Horrified, I leaned back on my heels and spun my head around, waiting for an angry mob to grab me by the shoulders and escort me out. But everyone stood still. No one moved, there was no line behind me. No one was watching. Everyone just silently wept and my punch went unnoticed.

When I looked back at Ryan Sheehan's face, I saw that the eye that I punched had popped open. The socket was empty and a few of the stitches were hanging out from under the lid. They looked like wire eyelashes. I wanted to fix it, maybe try to close it or punch the other eye and pop that one open too, but I knew someone would notice if I did it again. Instead, I got up, quickly made the sign of

the cross, and said “Dammit” under my breath. I walked to the back of the room, not looking any of the strangers in the face and sat in one of the few remaining chairs in the back row. My whole body was warm with anger and embarrassment and I couldn’t stop it. I covered my face with my hands and sat still trying to think of something else. My arms were flexed, so were legs, and I was frozen. Trying to ignore my muscles tensing further and further, I finally prayed. I prayed that no one else noticed Ryan Sheehan’s eye. Finally, someone spoke.

“Hello, I’m Edward Barron and I was a good friend of Ryan’s as some of you may know.” A little, old man in a dark blue suit and thick glasses was standing at the front of the room when I took my hands off of my face. He looked like he weighed 90 pounds. “Before we leave this place let us all take a brief moment of silence to reflect on Ryan’s life which ended so tragically, and let us pray that his soul...” This was what I was waiting for, the moment of reflection and then the bar announcement. I just wanted it to end quickly so I could get the hell out of there. There was a cramp in my leg. “...after fighting so hard over the last few days, will now rest in peace and his attackers will be brought to justice.”

“Oh, Jesus Christ!” I shouted, and it sounded just as sarcastic as anything possibly could.

I didn’t mean to say it. It just happened. It was like the punch, I couldn’t control it. Except this time, there was no avoiding the crowd. One by one they all turned around and stared. Some had tears in their eyes, some just looked angry.

“Ryan, you are a fucking asshole,” I said out loud.

I didn't go to the bar afterwards. I didn't know where it was and I didn't care. In fact, I'm surprised no one kicked my ass right there in the funeral parlor. But they let me walk out, and nothing was said to me.

A few weeks later, I still felt bad, so I found out where Ryan Sheehan was buried. It was a local place, where most old Micks from the neighborhood wound up. "This place'll probably be filled by the time I'm dead," I said, standing in the field of headstones. His grave still had plenty of flowers on it. Someone had been coming by. "Wouldn't that be a kick? Huh? Two Ryan Sheehans, right next to each other?" It wasn't raining that day. Usually, when you think of cemeteries you think of rain or fog or snow. But it was nice out. "There are probably a few more of us in here somewhere." I pulled a bottle out of my pocket. "By the way, I'm sorry about the wake and all." I dumped some of the whiskey on the grave, and I took a shot myself. The Irish thing to do. "Especially the thing with your eye. I hope no one else noticed." I eased myself onto the ground. It was cool and damp on my hand. Still fresh. "So I'm saying I'm sorry." It was a gray stone. Simple and small.

Ryan T. Sheehan

Father, Husband, Friend

"Must've been nice," I said, and I poured him another drink, and then me. And we sat that way for most of the afternoon, drinking together.

8-Ball

There is a one-armed deaf man that I hate. This doesn't mean that I hate all one-armed deaf men, although he's the only one I know of. I just hope that if there are any others, they're not as cocky and bitter as he is. He shoots pool at the same bar I do and every time I go in there, he's in there too. At first, like everyone else, I was impressed by him. I mean, watching a guy shoot pool with one arm is pretty damn impressive, *at first*. But after a while, I wasn't so impressed, for a couple of reasons. For one, he only plays 9-ball which is a bullshit game. You can win the whole thing with one lucky, easy shot. Not like 8-ball. 8-ball takes time and skill. That's why it's the only game I'll play for money. No tricks, no slop, no bullshit. The other thing is, he's really not that good. There's only so much you can do by laying the stick on the rail and shooting with one hand. And besides, I don't think he would be that good even if he had two hands. I watch his games. I see him win a lot, but he doesn't do it himself. His opponents beat themselves. I don't know if it's because they feel sorry for him or because they're intimidated by him or what, but when people play him they practically give him the game, along with their money. It pisses me off to see people getting taken by a mediocre, one-armed, deaf pool hustler.

This still doesn't explain why I hate him. It has nothing to do with the fact that he's deaf or because he has one arm or even because he's not that good at pool. I hate him because of his attitude. You see, I have a brother who's been deaf since birth so I can sign just as good as any deaf person, including the one-armed man. Even though his language is a little different than most, I can still understand what

he's saying. All he does is spell out the words with one hand that would normally require two. And when he speaks, I listen. The only guy he talks to is this bouncer that I call "the Interpreter," who also knows sign language. He must have a deaf relative too because I know he can hear. What they'll do is, the Interpreter will set up a game between the one-armed man and someone else, and then he'll watch and translate whatever they have to say to each other. The thing is, the one-armed man doesn't do anything but talk shit about the other players and the Interpreter just cleans it up. He cheats too. And, of course, who's gonna say anything? That's why I hate him. Not only does he hustle people out of their money playing a shitty game of 9-ball, but he insults them the entire time without them realizing it. I've never played against him myself, and I've never let on that I understand him or the Interpreter, but I have a feeling that's all going to change.

I walk into Lucky's with my buddy Dweeze and I feel good. We walk directly past the booths covered in torn, green plastic and the pizza window up front. Matt is in the window as usual, perched on his high stool, reading a book, rubbing his shaved head. "Hey, Matt," we say. His hand waves and he never looks up. On a slow night he'll sit like that for hours. I go to the bar while Dweeze gets us a table. "You want anything?" I ask.

"Yeah, uh, get me a Miller Lite," he says.

The bar is huge and sits right in the middle of the place like an island. It's a square bar, and Jessica, the bartender, looks as if someone barricaded her into a wooden fortress and covered it with an arsenal of multicolored liquors. I order two

Miller Lites from her and a shot of Wild Turkey which I down at the bar. It tastes sticky sweet and burns my throat at the same time, like swallowing hot syrup. Then I grab the beers and head for the back where the tables are, four across and three deep. The whole back half of the bar is a pool hall, without anywhere to sit. Dweeze is in the back corner, rolling up the sleeves of his flannel shirt and racking for a game of 8-ball. As I walk to our table I glance around to my right. Not a lot of people playing, but he's there. He's at his favorite table right next to the DJ booth built into the far wall. I don't know why he likes that table so much, it's not like he's going to request a song, the deaf bastard. With his gray mustache and his white hair, his empty shirt sleeve tucked into his vest pocket. I slow my pace enough to watch him knock in the 9-ball against some Asian kid. After he takes the kid's money, he signs to a big, swollen blonde guy in a green LUCKY'S SECURITY T-shirt, "When are these stupid fucking kids going to learn to stop playing me for money?"

"You're mine tonight, fucker," I say in his direction.

Dweeze and I start playing. He plays good. I play better. I beat him four out of five games, drinking a beer each game. I line the bottles up along the worn, chipped railing that runs around the wall of the entire bar. I want to know how much I've had to drink. Not too much. Although, I shoot better when I drink, at least I think I do. I'm more relaxed, I have more fun. If I don't enjoy the game, I play like shit, then I lose, I get angry, and I play worse. After a few beers, if I lose, at least it's with a smile on my face. Dweeze is racking for another game. I look across the room. He's still there.

“So, y’know we got that new foreman at the plant now, right? Well, I says to the guy-“

“I’m gonna play him Dweeze.”

“Who, the new foreman?”

“No. Idiot. That fucking one-armed bandit. I’m gonna play him.”

“The deaf guy?”

“Yeah.”

“He’s pretty good.”

“He’s not that good. I’m better, I know I am.”

“He ain’t playing anyone right now.” I glance over and see that Dweeze is right. “Why don’t you go over there, hot shot?”

“I think I will,” I say grabbing my beer off the ledge. “Keep the table. I’ll be back.”

I walk over to his table, directly up to the Interpreter. “Tell him I wanna play him.”

The Interpreter makes the signs and the one-armed man looks at me and then points to the 9-ball with his cue stick. I shake my head. Searching through the pockets, I find the 8-ball which I hold up and point to. He shakes his head and signs to the Interpreter.

“Get him out of here,” he says. “He’s probably broke anyway.”

I look at the Interpreter like I don’t know what he said. “He only plays 9-ball,” the Interpreter says.

I pull a twenty dollar bill out of my pocket, slam it down on the table, and I hold up the 8-ball again and stare at the one-armed man. He glares back at me for a second, then looks at the Interpreter and signs, “Okay, if the dumb kid wants to lose his money, I’ll play him.”

“He’ll play. You rack.”

I rack, he breaks. It’s not a bad break, even though nothing goes in. I have a good shot at either stripes or solids and I take solids, knocking in three in a row. I point out each shot for the one-armed man before I do it and call it out loud for the Interpreter. I have a shitty leave so I try a ridiculous bank shot, which I miss. He knocks in four in a row, most of them easy shots, and then pulls a safety, leaving the ball against the rail and me with nothing.

“Safeties are for pussies,” I say out loud. I look at the table and the only shot I have is a double bank, which I’m not very good at but I try anyway.

“Double bank,” I say, swinging my stick back and forth and then to the pocket. I shoot. It goes in.

“Tell him he didn’t call that,” the one-armed man signs.

“He says you didn’t call that.”

“What?” I ask.

“He says you didn’t call that.”

“I called it. You heard me.”

“Yeah, but he didn’t,” the Interpreter says.

“Of course he didn’t, he’s fucking deaf! You heard me though, and I even pointed it out to him.”

The Interpreter signs, "He did call that, you know. I heard him."

"I don't give a damn what he says," the one-armed man signs. "And remember, you're supposed to be on *my* side." He emphasizes the "*my*" with a soft grunt. "It's my shot."

"He says you didn't call it," the Interpreter says.

"But you heard me! Admit it. You heard me call it."

"He says you didn't."

The one-armed man just stands and stares at me with a cigarette hanging from his mouth, long ash curling off the end. He's always got that goddamn cigarette.

"Great. So, he doesn't see me and suddenly you're just as deaf as he is, so the shot doesn't count right?" The Interpreter shrugs. "And you," I say to the one-armed man. "You're fucking blind now too, right?" He stares back at me with a disgusted look, cigarette still hanging from his lips, as if he can understand what I'm saying. "Fuck it," I say, "Cry me a river for old *lefty*, here," and I back away to let the one-armed man shoot.

He knocks in two more balls and then scratches. I pull the cue ball out, smiling. After one in the side I make a long rail shot in the corner. We each have only one ball left on the table. I can try a nearly impossible cut at my own or pull a safety so he can't shoot at his.

"I'm gonna cut this like your mother's back hair," I say. And I do it. The 8-ball is a duck and I drop it in the corner. And the goddamn cue ball follows it in. "Son-of-a-bitch." He wins, and it's my own fault.

Not looking him in the eye, I hold out my left hand for the one-armed man to shake it with his. Instead of shaking, he holds his hand out for the money, very business-like. I pull the twenty from my pocket and drop it in his hand. As I start to walk away, I watch him turn to the Interpreter and sign, "The kid should've known better. 8-ball is a bullshit game."

I turn around. I walk right up to him and stare straight into his face. I decide it's about time I say something to him, maybe something important or profound, something that'll make him think about the way he is towards people. Maybe something that'll make him a better person. But instead, I just say "Fuck you," not with my mouth, or with my finger the way most people would. I say it in a way that he understands, by tapping both my wrists together twice, crossing one another, and then pointing at him. I say it triumphantly, in a way that he never can.

The Wolf

I didn't come all the way to Chicago for this shit. Like every other day, we're sitting in some dive restaurant with stains on the counter, grabbing a quick bite and a smoke between shows. I'm already sweaty from the first one and I still haven't got to take a shit today. I would've done it at the first school, but they locked the damn teachers' lounge on us and the toilets in the "boys" room are always too small for me. Just another reason to hate children's theater.

Like an idiot, I thought this job would be fun, so I took it. And because I couldn't find work anywhere else I kind of had to take it. Six months ago I'm doing *Our Town* in Arizona, now I'm on my second month of doing *Peter and the Wolf* for grammar school kids in the Windy City. And every day is the same. It's either snotty North Side white kids, wearing Tommy Hilfiger and carrying cell phones, or noisy South Side black kids, yelling things at us while we're trying to perform, or little West Side Mexicans, who smile politely, even if they don't understand us. At least they're quiet. Today we have two shows in the south suburbs, which means all of the above with some well-behaved Asians kids thrown in the mix.

The first show today was at Bloom Elementary in Chicago Heights. It went as well as it could, which is not all that well considering the play is horrendous. Even by children's theater standards. In our version, the wolf eats peanut butter sandwiches, doesn't kill anything, and gets let go in the end. It's ridiculous. It makes *Peter Pan* look like *Vampire Lesbians of Sodom*. I can't believe I left Marcie for this. I can't believe she told me to go. "Go to Chicago," she said. "There's work for you there. Make your mark."

“You missed your mark today, man,” Josh says.

“What?” I say, sipping my coffee.

“That part where I throw the lasso around you. You’re supposed to go to the left. You went to the right. I almost missed.”

“Sorry,” I say.

“That’s twice this week you did that. It’s not like we haven’t done this a thousand times.”

“I’m sorry, man. Must have slipped my mind.” We’re still sitting at the counter of The Looking Glass Café in Chicago Heights and my bowels are hurting too much to worry about Josh’s bitching. He’s the only local, and coincidentally, the one that takes this play seriously. Maybe it’s because he plays Peter, the lead. I could play Peter, but because I’m so much bigger than him I have to play the Wolf. He’s also really good looking, like one of those young newscasters you see on TV with perfect hair and a name like “Troy Landen.” I look more like a linebacker named “Mazurkiewicz.”

Stacy, from Texas, is tiny and plain looking, so she plays the Bird. She hates it because she gets the worst lines like, “Wings don’t fail me now!” and crap like that. We call her “chicken wing” sometimes because her arms are so small. Lauren, however, has strong arms and strong legs because she studied dance in New York. She was the obvious choice for playing the Cat because she’s also really exotic looking, with blue-black hair and eyelashes like shag carpet. Her and I used to be tight but now we’re not talking to each other unless it’s in, or about, the play, which is not a whole lot. I should have expected it.

About a month ago she knocked on my apartment door at 3:15 in the morning. Being a pretty light sleeper, I threw on the robe I stole from a hotel in Phoenix, ran to the door and looked through the peephole. She was in the hallway, shaking and crying and smiling all at the same time. When I opened the door she said, “Hey, Derek, mind if I come in?” and ran right past me into my kitchen.

“Um, hello?” I said, following her. She was already in my refrigerator, digging through the empty drawers: the crisper, the meat drawer, the place where you keep the butter.

“Jesus Christ, don’t you have any beer in here?” she said.

“Not today. Hey, was the hell is wrong with you?” I said.

“Nothing.”

She stared up at me and it looked like she was crying ink, but there was still a dopey grin on her face like she couldn’t wipe it off. Then she started laughing. Not a happy laugh, or a mournful laugh, but more like a laugh that was choking on the air. Choppy and quiet.

“All right, seriously, what’s wrong?”

“I told you, nothing. I just came over to have a drink. Do you have anything to drink?” she said, and started looking through my cabinets. “Jesus, you don’t have much food either.”

“There are bars still open all over the city. Why did you come here?”

“You know, for a drink. Needed to take the edge off.” Her whole body was still shaking when she sat on the cracked tiles of my kitchen floor. She tried to put her hands up to her face, but instead they stumbled around in her hair, twitching.

“What are you on?” I said, squatting down on my heels.

“Just a little coke. You know, just a little too much coke. I just need a drink, you know, to take the edge off.” She laughed again, dark tears streaming down her face.

I took her hand and lead her over to the couch, the only piece of furniture in my apartment aside from my bed, and we sat down. We sat on the same cushion and she put her face on my shoulder, staining it black.

“Are you fucking stupid?” I asked. Then she really started crying. Long and hard and choking, like her laughter.

“No,” she mumbled.

“Then why do you fuck with that stuff?”

She didn’t answer, she just shook and heaved until the sun came up, and I stayed up with her. Three hours later, she was the Cat and I was the Wolf at Glenview Elementary.

Later that night, she called and asked if she could come over again and crash on my couch. She said she wanted to get away from her place. “I don’t feel safe here,” she said.

I said, “No problem.” This time she seemed fine, no shaking, no running mascara, a real smile on her face. We rehearsed the play a few times (not that we needed to), watched a movie, and went to bed early. She went to sleep on my couch, and I slept in my bed. Then at about four in the morning, I felt her crawl into bed with me without saying anything. “Lauren?” I said. The next thing I know, she’s pulling my underwear down and giving me a blowjob. Still, without a word. “What

are you...?” I decided not to finish the question, because I didn’t know how she’d react. I just let her finish, and when she did she rolled over and went to sleep. The next morning she went out and got us bagels and we had breakfast before work. It was like that for about two weeks and I didn’t mind at all. Sometimes we’d talk about things like acting or plays or books or movies. Or sometimes we wouldn’t talk at all, we would just read or smoke. Sometimes she’d buy beer or even clean up the place for me if I was out. And every night was the same. But I liked having her around, and not just for that. She was good company.

One Saturday night we decided to have a small party at my place for whole theater group, but I didn’t really want to because we saw those people everyday. She got kind of insistent and I caved in.

About three hours into the party I was talking to Angie from *The Little Mermaid* cast, standing in line for my own bathroom when the door opened and Lauren came out with Josh behind her. I grabbed Lauren’s arm and he walked right past me as Angie slipped into the bathroom and closed the door.

“What the fuck was that?” I asked.

“What?”

“That. What were you doing?”

“Nothing.”

“Were you doing coke in there?”

“No.”

“Were you?”

“I said no. What the fuck?”

“Then what were you doing?”

“I wasn’t doing coke, now let the fuck go of me!”

She didn’t stay that night and we haven’t talked about it since. We haven’t talked about anything, except the play.

“We really need to get going,” Lauren says. “We’re supposed to be in Hazel Crest by noon.”

“I need to hit the bathroom,” I say.

“There’s no time for that,” Josh says. “We’re running late as it is.”

“It’ll just take a second,” I say, as I stand up and hurry to the tarnished Men’s Room door next to the cash register at the end of the counter. It’s locked.

Josh pays the bill and says, “You can go at the school. We really need to get going. By the way, you owe me seven bucks.”

We’re setting up in the tiny gym of Wildwood Elementary, and as usual, I’m carrying all the heavy stuff. The girls carry the costumes, Josh carries the stereo equipment, and I carry the three giant pieces of folding plywood that make up the set. And as usual, we’re doing it on the gym floor instead of using the stage they have. We don’t talk or point to each other, we know where everything goes. We’ve done this so many times it only takes about ten minutes to set up. But today that ten minutes still doesn’t leave me enough time to go to the bathroom as kids start lining up on the floor fifteen feet in front of us, holding hands, single file by single file. They’re looking at us in awe, with hockey player grins and messy hair.

“You better get your costumes on, they’re starting to come in,” Josh says.

“Look, I need to hit the bathroom first,” I say.

“Why didn’t you go when we first got here?” Stacy says.

“Cuz of this asshole,” I say, pointing to Josh. “He was all, ‘we need to get-’”

“Hey, if those kids hear you swear that’s a fifty dollar fine from the theater and I know you can’t afford it, so watch your mouth.” He was whispering now.

“You knew we were running late so you should’ve taken care of it earlier. Let’s just get this over with.”

We’re all hiding behind the plywood now, and I look over at Lauren as she’s slipping into her sleek Cat costume, unamused. A minute later, Josh puts on his costume that makes him look like he’s part of the gay Russian military. With his best bullshit smile, he steps in front of the plywood and starts the show.

“Boys and girls, today we present to you, Peter and the Wolf...”

He goes through the regular schpiel that we all have memorized, explaining the whole dumbed down version to the kids, introducing the music and the characters. Of course I’m last.

“Now when the wolf comes out he’s supposed to be scary, so you have to act like you’re scared, okay kids?” That’s my cue to lumber out. My costume is nothing more than a hat shaped like a wolf’s head and two long poles with gray feet on the end. They’re supposed to be my front legs, but they look more like crutches. It’s not a very frightening costume at all, but when I come out and growl at the kids they scream and squeal and pretend like they’re frightened. This pretty much goes on the whole show. I chase the Bird, I chase the Cat, I chase Peter, I growl, the kids scream. That’s my job. Then Peter catches me.

Josh is standing, holding the lasso off to his left side, waiting for me to run at him. *Go to the left, go to the left.* I charge to his left side and he throws the lasso around me, only instead of getting me around the waist like it's supposed to, it catches me around the neck and tightens hard against my throat. I go flying backward with a hard thump against the gym floor. My eyes feel like they're going to burst and I can't breathe. Josh stays in character, ignoring my puffing, purple face.

"Well, that pesky wolf won't be bothering us any more," he says, and actually puts his foot on my chest which is not in the script. He looks smug and proud and his smile is genuine.

I've had enough.

Still lying on the floor, I pull the rope off my neck and grab a firm hold of one of my "front leg" poles. I swing it hard and it comes slamming down on Josh's knee. He yelps and cries and falls backwards into the middle part of the set, knocking Stacy off of a ladder behind it that serves as her "perch" during the play. Josh is rolling on the floor, grasping his knee, drooling and crying. Lauren runs over and yells, "What is hell is wrong with you?" into my face.

"That's a fifty dollar fine," I say back, and I sneer at her. Then I remember the kids. They're all watching in puzzled amusement, some laughing out loud, some just staring, wide-eyed and silent. The teachers are confused, still wondering if this is part of the show. I decide to stay in character as well, and I run at them and growl. Only, I don't just growl. I roar, I scream, I howl at them. And they're scared. One by one, the children's laughter is silenced, and they begin to cry. They sob, they

weep, and I feel that I've done my job. Leaping onto the stage to our right, I yell, "White Fang has left the building," with the kiddies moaning in my wake, and I take a bow.

There is a curtain, and I pull it aside. On the other side, there is a beautiful open stage, large and full, unused and unkempt. It would be a great scene for Shakespeare, Miller, Wilde, or even Sophocles. I imagine elaborate costumes and sets, screams of joy and agony, laughter and pain, life and death. And it's here where I decide to do my business. The business I've been meaning to do all day. I pull down my pants, squat, and release. And when I'm done it feels gratifying and complete. Pulling up my pants, I see an exit through a door on the left side of the stage. After a short walk down a thin corridor, I go through another door and find myself in the hallway of the school, surrounded by tiny lockers, cubby holes, and various drawings stuck to the walls, done by adolescent hands all mismatched in color and shape. I suddenly realize I'm still wearing my costume when a small, feeble teacher spots me and steps out into the hall to ask, "Excuse me, son, but do you belong in here?"

"Of course I don't," I say. "I'm the goddamn Wolf."

Mr. Walters' Savior

If I have to touch one more guy's dick today, I swear to God I'm going to quit this job. I was just prepping Mr. Alegria for urology and he actually got hard in my hand. He came into the ER complaining about his penis hurting and it turned out it was just a kidney stone, so I knew I had to send him upstairs. He's about 35 years old, going bald, with a slight Spanish accent, and I'm holding his penis, swabbing it and cleaning it and whatnot, and he gets hard. The whole time he's just laying back saying things like, "Oh...Well, that's...Well...Hm...Okay..." He didn't seem too embarrassed, but I sure as hell was. And I'm supposed to be the doctor.

I work in the ER at Cook County Hospital in Chicago. It's the same place where that TV show *ER* is supposed to happen, but I don't watch it because it's a crock. First of all, hardly any white people come to this hospital voluntarily because they're afraid of it. It's not in a very good neighborhood and not many of our patients have any kind of insurance. There's none of that bullshit romance here, every week one of us does not "find new hope." And they definitely don't show what really goes on around here, like people bleeding in the waiting room filling out forms, gang fights in the parking lot, junkies with rotten limbs begging for pills, or a guy like me holding a middle-aged Mexican's hard dick. Noah Wyle can kiss my ass.

I'm in my first year of residency and every day I find a new reason to quit, but I never do. They say, "Don't worry, you'll get used to it," but I'm still skeptical. You can only look at so many stab wounds and crack babies before you say to yourself, "I *want* to be doing this?" And it's not all the blood and guts, you get

numb to that stuff in medical school. It's the anger and stupidity that's hard to get used to. It starts to affect you. My girlfriend has started calling me Mr. Freeze and I hardly play with my dog anymore. In fact, I don't feel like doing much of anything when I'm not in the hospital. I used to run along the lake at sunset, now I don't even like to go outside. The last time Jenny and I went to Grant Park for a picnic, she could tell I was starting to lose it.

She was making me a roast beef sandwich and said, "God, I love the skyline on days like this. I could never stop looking at it. Could you?"

I looked up at the buildings and tried to see the beauty in them like I used to, the height and the magnitude of them, like looking at giant, jagged waves of steel and concrete. But I didn't see that any more. Instead, I saw men cutting each other with broken bottles over \$10 bar tabs. I saw bosses fucking their secretaries and getting gonorrhea. I saw homeless people with diabetes and hookers with broken arms.

"These fucking people," I said.

"Don't be like that," Jenny said. "Don't ever be like that."

After I send Mr. Alegria on his way, a nurse walks up and hands me a chart in the noisy, cluttered hallway and tells me to check out Mr. Walters in room 11. It's Saturday night, so it's busy, and sometimes it's hard to move around in the stink of blood and liquor and bile.

"What's his story?" I ask.

"You'll see," she says, and disappears down the hall.

Barely looking at the chart, I step into room 11 and see a large, black man standing in front of me with straightened hair and kind eyes. He's around 55 years old, his fingers clasped together in front of him and he has a tight grin on his face, like he's been waiting for me all day.

"Mr. Walters?" I ask.

"Yes sir," he says, polite and soft.

"Hi, I'm Doctor Willard. How are you doing today?"

"Oh, not so bad."

"Okay, well then, what seems to be the trouble?"

He examines his shoes for a moment and says, "Well, sir. I can't go."

I'm pretty sure I know what he's talking about, but I want to be wrong so I ask, "How do you mean?"

"I can't- I mean, I can't go, sir. To the bathroom. I can't pee."

Son-of-a-bitch, I say to myself. *I gotta look at this guy's cock. SON OF A BITCH.* I want to turn around and walk right of the door, and if he was some little hard-ass, gang-banger thug, I probably would. But he seems like a kind man, a quiet man.

"All right, let's see what's going on here," I say. "Could you please drop your pants and underwear?"

He does it and I immediately don't know what to do. Usually, when someone tells you their symptoms and you take a look at them you get an idea of where to go from there. But instead of continuing the examination I can only stare at the thing hanging between this man's legs. We have a running joke around the

hospital about how much bigger black guys are, and the nurses, white and black, agree. But this is ridiculous. It's about the length and girth of a Pringles Potato Chip canister, and it's about the same bright, red color, which tells me I'm looking at an infection. Other than that, I'm clueless.

"Is that, um, normal?" I ask, pointing. "I mean the size, and color."

"Normal for me I guess." He's still grinning.

"I see. And you say you can't urinate?"

"No sir, not for about three days now."

"Not at all?"

"No sir."

I decide I'm going to need some help, no matter what the problem is. And I just have to show this to someone else. "Okay, Mr. Walters, wait right here and I'll be back with another doctor and we're going to try to figure out what's wrong. All right?"

"Yes sir, I'll wait."

I leave the room and walk down the crowded hallway, past the beeps and blings of monitors and mumbling patients strapped to gurneys, to the rotunda near the entrance.

"Jackie, could you page Dr. Love- I mean, Dr. Lowell for me?"

We call Lowell "Dr. Love" because he's nailed half the nurses in the hospital, and a few interns as well.

"No problem," Jackie says, and the call goes out over the intercom.

Afterwards, I hear her mumble the word "motherfucker" under her breath.

This reminds me of a case I had to deal with a few months ago. The nurses sent me into a room where an obviously fake blonde guy was laying on a bed at an angle, feet above the head, which isn't normal. When I moved his gown I found out why. His testicles were the size of cantaloupes and his penis was turning black from lack of circulation. He was a male dancer at a gay club called "The Manhole" and wore a cock-ring on stage to "Get a quick stiffy" for lap-dances. The surgical steel ring fit around his penis and scrotum at the same time, but apparently fit a little too well and he had left it on for two days.

"What the fuck are you gonna do?" he said.

"I'm going to try to help you."

I tried cutting through it with a cast saw, but it didn't work and the whole time he was screaming, "If you cut me I'll sue! So help me God, if you cut me I'll sue your ass off!" so we had to borrow a drill from maintenance with a diamond drill bit. It worked, but it heated up the metal and he kept screaming, "You're burning me! You're burning me!" Every thirty seconds we had to stop and pour water on it. Two days later he was fine and didn't even bother to say "thank you."

"Pually, how's it hangin'?" Dr. Love says and slaps and knuckles my fingers. He's only 30, three years older than I am, so we consider each other friends and hang out occasionally. He's tall, black, and really good looking with a goatee that looks like it's carved out of slate rock. If I didn't have a girlfriend I'd probably be jealous of him.

"Oh, it's not how am *I* hanging," I say, "it's one of my patients. You gotta see this shit."

Standing in front of Mr. Walters, Dr. Love has just about the same reaction I did, a blank unknowing stare, until he says, “That’s quite a member you’ve got there.”

“Thank you,” says Mr. Walters, still polite and smiling.

“Um, can you use that thing?” Dr. Love asks.

“Well, no,” Mr. Walters says, “that’s what I’ve been telling your partner here.”

“Right, you can’t urinate. I mean, can you use it for other- things?”

“Oh, you mean like love-making?”

“Yeah,” I say.

“Well, that’s another thing, I can’t use it for that either,” he says.

“But you’ve tried?” says Dr. Love.

“Of course,” says Mr. Walters. He then gets a knowing, familiar look in his eyes and says, “Are you religious men?”

We learned in med school that to get information out of a patient you need to tell them what they want to hear.

“Of course,” I say.

“I thought so, you gentlemen have the look of it about you.” As Dr. Love and I quickly look each other over, Mr. Walters says, “Then you’ll understand. You’ll understand who I am.”

“And that is?” I say.

“I am the Second Coming. I’m the Messiah.”

“Oh really? Okay,” I say. Dr. Love just curls his lips in and bites them to keep himself from laughing.

“Now you understand that it’s important that I be strong. That I be virile.”

“Right, right, so, how does this affect your- situation?” I ask.

“I need my loins to be strong as well.”

“I see. So have you been doing anything to keep your- member strong?” Dr. Love asks.

“I keep it healthy. I need to keep it big and strong.”

“With what?” I ask.

“Vitamin C.”

“And how do you use this Vitamin C?” Dr. Love asks.

“I inject it.”

“You inject Vitamin C into your penis?” I ask.

“No. Orange juice.”

* * *

He lost most of it. Dr. Love did the surgery and I assisted him. At first, we cut it open to try to relieve the swelling, but it was filled with so much pus and bacteria it looked like a sausage bleeding Vaseline after the incision. We had no choice. The sugars from the orange juice created a breeding ground for massive infection, so we had to cut most of it off. When it was all said and done he had only about two inches left. Two days later I went to see him in the OPSRCU.

“Hey, Mr. Walters, how you doing today?”

“Fine, just fine.” When I walked in he was sitting up in his bed, grinning just like before, not looking at anything in particular. His hands were folded across his chest. The TV wasn’t on, or the radio, and he was alone in his room.

“You gonna make it out of here okay?” I asked.

“Oh, sure,” he said.

“Good, that’s good. Well, I just wanted to check up on you.” I wanted to turn around and leave, but for some reason I just stood there, at the edge of his bed.

“What’s your name?” he asked.

“My first name is Paul.”

“Well, Dr. Paul, I’d just like to thank you.”

I was a bit surprised. I practically cut this guy’s dick off and he was thanking me for it. “You’re welcome,” I said.

“The other doctor told me I could have died. If I let the infection go too far I could have died. But you saved me.”

“That’s what I’m supposed to do.”

“And you know I can’t go yet. There’s still work I have to do. You know that.”

We found out from psych that Mr. Walters had a history of schizophrenia, but was too poor for medication or treatment. This wasn’t his first time in Cook County Hospital.

“I know.”

“So you did a great thing. And there will be rewards for that. If I would have gone it would have changed everything, and nothing would be right. It wasn’t my time to go yet. So you were my savior. You’ll be remembered for that.”

“I’m just doing my job,” I said and walked out of the room. When I got back to the ER I found a gunshot wound to the neck waiting for me. He was only 15 and was in pretty bad shape. He was crying and the hole in his throat was making a slurping sound, but it didn’t really bother me. Not then. I just tried to keep pressure on his jugular to slow the bleeding down. And then it started. At first it was just a giggle, but after a few seconds, still pressing on this kid’s neck, I was really laughing. And in the middle of all the blood and screaming and suction, I just laughed and laughed at the idea that I had saved the whole world.

Johnny at Home

I grabbed the brown paper bag off of the passenger seat of my car, closed the door, and walked up the icy sidewalk to the front door of my mother's house.

Before I even opened the door I could hear the muffled conversations of my relatives and non-relatives, while Elvis moaned Christmas songs in the background.

"Hey, everybody!" I yelled as I took off my coat and stomped the snow from my boots, just inside the door. A general "Hey!" rose from everyone as my favorite aunt ran up to kiss me.

"Oh, Johnny, honey," she squealed, rushing at me, vodka tonic in one hand, lit cigarette in the other. She never really kissed me. She just mashed the side of her face into mine and made a kissing sound with her lips so she didn't ruin her lipstick.

"Hi, Aunt Joanie, merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas to you too, hon."

"Another new hairdo?" I said.

"Yeah, you like?" she said putting her hand behind her head like a model holding a cigarette. "I tell you, Char is amazing. She could do your hair."

"I dunno, yours is kinda short."

"Well, I know, Johnny, but she could do yours and still leave it long. It'll look 'cool,'" she said, making quote marks with her fingers, drink and cigarette still in hand.

"We'll see. Hey, Sam, how're you?" I said, putting my free hand out for Joanie's boyfriend who seemed to be wandering around the living room.

“Hey, Johnny, good to see ya,” he said as he shook. Sam was a tall, good – looking, Italian guy. Kinda dumb, but that was his charm I guess. I liked him.

“How long have you guys been here?” I asked as I made my way to the couch where Uncle Mick was sitting with his new girlfriend, Betty, and her daughter, Beth.

“Oh, about twenty minutes. We all just kinda showed up at the same time,” he said, shaking my hand. “While you were out.”

“We’ve been wondering where you were, Johnny, it’s almost time to eat.” I didn’t like Betty. She talked too much and wore too much eye make-up. But, then again, I guess she had to make up for her daughter who never said a word. Beth was a sweet kid though. She had a round, little face like a cherub about to hit puberty.

“Yeah, well, I had some stuff to do,” I said. “Where’s mom?”

“In the kitchen, Johnny,” my uncle said. “Finishing everything up. Why don’t you see if she needs any help?”

“All right.”

I put the brown paper bag down on the table as my mother scurried around the kitchen. “There you are!” she yelled. “Where did you go? We’re about to eat here. What’s in the bag?”

“Guinness. I went to Dad’s for a little while.”

“Oh, really?” she said, pausing for a second, and then began scurrying again. “How is he?”

“Fine, I guess. Same as usual. Gave me shit about my hair. Look, do you need some help? You’re wearing a hole in the carpet.” My mother had the only carpeted kitchen in America.

“No, everything’s almost ready. Just relax.”

“*You want me to relax?* Okay,” I said pulling the two four-packs from the bag. “Y’know, Ma, I noticed everyone has a date this year. Why don’t-“

“HA! No way, never again,” she said, and as I made my way to the refrigerator my mom made the same speech that I had heard a thousand times already about how everyone else in the family could get remarried if they wanted to, but twenty-seven years with my father was “enough.” I didn’t blame her, really. It was enough for anyone. I know it was enough for me.

I remembered the last Christmas we spent with my father. When it was all over and done with we couldn’t get the tree out of the stand, as usual. My father struggled with it and Mom tried to help. “Move it to the Northeast!” he said. My mother started laughing, and so did I. We were indoors, who the hell could tell which way Northeast was? Dad didn’t think it was funny. Instead of laughing, he grabbed the tree stand, dragged the tree outside through the front door and threw it into the front yard. He didn’t come back inside. Instead, he just got into his car and went straight to the bar. The next year Mom bought a fake tree, like she always wanted to.

“That’s all right, Ma,” I said. “I don’t have a date this year either. How ‘bout I be your date tonight. Later, we’ll dance to ‘Blue Christmas’ like we used to.”

“Aw, thanks hon, that’d be fun.” She gave me a small hug around the waist.

I opened the refrigerator door to put the beer in only to find two four-packs of Guinness cans already sitting there. *She must've picked them up while I was out.*

"Thanks, Ma," I said into the fridge.

"No problem. Just don't drink all that and then what you've got there! That's all I need today."

I helped my mom set the table and everyone sat down for dinner, which was quiet for the most part. Aside from grace, and an occasional "Could you pass this?" or "Could you pass that?" no one really talked. I didn't find it that strange, considering I barely knew half the people there. My older brother was in St. Louis with his wife's family (they weren't married long enough to be divorced yet) and my last grandparent had died earlier that year.

"So, how's school goin', Johnny?" my uncle finally threw in.

"Good. Fine. Y'know."

"Isn't there something going on down there? About the bars or something?" Aunt Joanie said.

"Yeah, it's weird. It's like, you can get into a bar when you're nineteen, but you can't drink until you're twenty-one. At least, you're not supposed to. I don't know, they keep changing it. When you guys were younger wasn't the drinking age eighteen?"

"Actually," Joanie said, smiling, "when your mother and I turned eighteen they just changed it to twenty-one. But that didn't matter because we had fake I.D.'s and went to the bars anyway. HA!" Even though they were cousins, not sisters, Joanie and my mom shared the same laugh.

“Well, I don’t know what you were doing, drinking at eighteen, but I had responsibilities!” Betty erupted. Everyone was now either staring at her or trying not to. “By the time I was eighteen, I had my first daughter, a husband, a house, a mortgage, and two cars in the garage I had to take care of.”

Everyone was silent. I thought, *Well, a lot of good that did you, Betty. Considering you’re now divorced and dating my uncle. By the way, where is that older daughter of yours? Rehab?* Instead, I sat in polite silence as Joanie spoke. “Well, I guess all we did was party,” she said with a smirk. I smiled at her from across the table as she winked at me and sipped her drink.

Betty rambled on, unfazed. “I had no time to party. I had a house to run. People these days don’t know what it’s like to take care of things. They expect everyone else to do it for them. Not me. I learned the hard way.”

“Could you pass me a roll, Joanie?” I said, almost laughing. I didn’t even want one, I just wanted to change the subject.

“Sure, hon-“

“I think that’s the problem with kids today. They feel like they have no responsibilities.”

Joanie didn’t even bother with the roll. She just sat with her chin in her hand, staring at Betty.

“Well, I don’t know about you Irishmen,” Sam said, standing, “but I need another beer.”

“Don’t touch my Guinness,” I said, half joking, as Sam went into the kitchen.

“Oh, I would nev-“

“Irishmen!” Betty screamed. “You come by my house on St. Patrick’s Day and see how much you like Irishmen, Sam. They’re out there screamin’ and yellin’. Playin’ their music and acting like idiots.”

“I wouldn’t say that at this table, Betty,” Joanie said, quite seriously.

I was in shock. *She’s drunk*, I thought. *She has to be drunk. Either that or she’s trying to be funny, which she’s not.*

“Oh, I know you guys are Irish,” Betty said, waving her hands through the air as though she were casting a spell on us, “but, you’re not like them. I mean, not like the ones in my neighborhood. They’re right off the boat.”

My mother grabbed my hand to keep me from tapping my fork against my plate, which I didn’t even notice myself doing. “And where would that be, Betty?” she asked. “Your neighborhood.”

“Around 111th and Western.”

My face collapsed and I looked at my mother. Her eyebrows rode up her forehead. I know we were thinking the same thing. Betty couldn’t have been more wrong about us. 111th and Western was Beverly, and Beverly was the most Irish part of Chicago. It’s exactly where we were from. We were “them.” My parents moved to the suburbs right after I was born. Uncle Mick still lived there.

I glanced over at him. His face was as hard and worn as ever, caused by smoking too many cigarettes and fighting too many fires. He said nothing. He just ate his Christmas dinner as slowly as he could, staring into his plate as though it was the only thing in the world. I almost felt sorry for him.

“So, then Betty, what nationality are you?” Aunt Joanie said, sipping her drink again. “If you don’t mind me asking.”

“English.”

The word stopped everyone. Even Sam paused halfway before sitting down again. No one moved, no one spoke, the room was frozen for the moment. I didn’t remember ever having a British person in our house, or at least anyone that would admit it. If my brother was there he probably would have spit at her. Our family was proud, as most Irish families are, but my brother was a fanatic. He had a thing about the IRA. It was a good thing he wasn’t there.

“Well, England, Ireland, Scotland, they’re all the same.” My mother, always the peacemaker.

“No, they’re not!” I yelled.

“They’re not,” a quiet voice said. I looked at Beth in astonishment. The silent child had spoken. Through a wicked smile she said, “That’s okay, we’ve been kicking your asses for hundreds of years.”

I was enraged. I stood up, pointed at her like a priest to a sinner and screamed, “And you’ve been kicked out of every country you’ve ever fucking invaded!”

“That’s it, dinner is OVER!” my mother announced by throwing her red and green napkin on the table.

I stared at Beth. She was still smiling, but her eyes were somewhere else. They stared back at me somewhere between fear and hate. *My God*, I thought,

they've already gotten to you too, haven't they? They really fucked you up. You poor thing. You poor, stupid, little bitch.

I was still furious, but there was nothing I could say. Not now. Instead, I grabbed the now empty pint glass from the table and went to the kitchen. I took two cans of Guinness from the fridge and stormed upstairs without saying a word to anyone. Kicking the door open to my old room, I flopped down on my old bed, setting the beers down on the shiny, new end table next to it. I hit the power button to the TV and, of course, *It's a Wonderful Life* was on. "Great," I growled as I cracked open a Guinness and poured it into the pint glass. Then I noticed something. Presents. There was a small stack of presents in the corner of the room next to the closet door. *They probably put 'em here while I was gone*, I thought. I leaned over the end table, grabbed the one on top and opened it.

It was a claddagh. One of the nicest claddaghs I've ever seen. A ring with hands, holding a heart topped with a crown. An Irish symbol of friendship, love, and loyalty. It wasn't the kind you wear on your finger, made of silver or gold, it was made of brass, on a larger scale and put in a frame so it could be hung up. It was beautiful.

I looked around for the tag and found it on the floor where it must have fallen off. It read:

To: Johnny

From: Betty and Beth

MERRY CHRISTMAS!

Uncle Mick probably picked it out, I thought. “Well, merry Christmas to you, too. Limey bitches,” I said. I thought of opening the rest of the gifts but decided not to. Instead, I tossed the claddagh on the floor, sipped my Guinness, and watched Jimmy Stewart run all the way home to his family.

Slamdancing

“Is this Ted?”

“Yeah,” I said into the phone as I pulled up my pants. It was around 4:00 and I had to be at work at 5:00. I had just got out of the shower.

“Ted O’Connell?” It sounded familiar but I couldn’t place it, like when you hear a line from a movie but you can’t figure out which one and it tortures you all day.

“Yeah?”

“Ted O’Connell who went to Rich South?” I could tell by her voice she was trying to be cute, probably smiling into her phone.

“Yeah, who’s this? Some radio station? Did I win something?” I fumbled around my room looking for a clean work shirt.

“Actually, it’s Ali Corso. Do you remember me?”

A warm shiver went up my back and into my neck. “Yeah, right,” I said, frozen. “Ali Corso.”

“It is. What, you don’t believe me?” she said, laughing.

“Not really,” I said, beginning my search again. “Unless this call is about our five year class reunion which isn’t for another year, I can’t imagine why Ali Corso would call me.” I picked up shirt after shirt from the floor and tossed them onto my bed until I found a semi-clean, black “Record Swap” T and put it on.

“Well, it’s quite interesting actually.”

“I’m sure it is,” I said, pacing the narrow space between my bed and my doorway. I stopped. “Is this really Ali Corso?”

“Yes. Why would I lie?”

“Well, I’m still trying to figure out why you would call me in the first place.” The thought didn’t even make sense. *I’m talking to Ali Corso on the phone.* Impossible. Ali was the type of popular girl in high school that no one really had a problem with. She was hot, but she wasn’t a cheerleader. She always got nominated for Homecoming Queen of her class, but never won. She aced English, but sucked at math. And everyone knew absolutely everything about her because they all wanted to either be her, or be with her. Even guys like me who took Auto Shop.

“Um, well, first of all, how are you?”

“I’m...fine, hey, how did you find me? I mean, how’d you get this number?”

I gritted my teeth and cursed myself for asking such a stupid question.

“Why? Did you not want to be found?”

“No, no, not at all. I’m just surprised by the call, that’s all.”

“I have friends. You have friends. You know.”

“I guess.” I tried to imagine myself calling one of her friends and asking for her number. Impossible.

“So anyway, I work for the Illinois Entertainer now.”

“Really? Cool gig. When did you start working there?” The Illinois Entertainer was a local, free magazine that covered every kind of music scene in the Chicago area. I read it every week at work, but I didn’t recall ever seeing her name in it. I would’ve noticed.

“Oh, I just started. I just got out of school and got the job. I don’t think it’s going to be that permanent or anything, but, it’s not so bad,” she said, “pays the

bills. Barely.” She laughed a fake laugh and I did the same. “The reason I’m calling you is because I got this, shall we say, ‘unique’, assignment that I thought you might be able to help me with it.”

“What is it?” I asked, sitting on my bed, slowly pulling on my ratty black and white Nikes.

“Okay, I’m supposed to go to some kind of an ‘underground’ concert,” she said “underground” sarcastically, like she lost half her IQ when it passed her lips, “like a punk or a metal show and write an article about it.”

“Okay...” I was waiting for the punchline.

“Well, I don’t know anything about punk or metal shows, because I’ve never been to one. And then I remembered you, and your friends, and that you listened to that kind of stuff in high school, so I thought I’d give you a call.”

“And...” Still waiting.

“AND, I thought you might know of a good show I could go to. For my assignment.”

“Uh, yeah. Sure.”

“I mean, something really interesting, something crazy.”

“Didn’t they offer any suggestions? The magazine, I mean.” I realized that I was acting kind of smarmy and I hoped she didn’t take offense. I just couldn’t imagine why she’d call me for help, for anything. *If she’s fucking with me, I’m going to beat the shit out of whoever put her up to this.*

“Yeah, but they sounded boring. Goth clubs and stuff like that. You can see that crap on Ricki Lake these days.”

“Yeah,” I smiled.

“So, do you know of anything?”

“Actually,” I said, standing up and pacing the room again, “there’s a Suffocation show at the Thirsty Whale in about two weeks.”

“Suffocation?”

“There a death metal band from Buffalo, New York. They’re really good.”

“Sounds perfect. Are you going?”

“I was thinking about it,” I lied. I actually didn’t plan on going to the show at all because I had no one to go with. No one had the time or money, including myself. Besides, I had seen them 3 times on their first tour in ‘93, back when they were my favorite band.

“How about this,” she said. “I’ll get us both tickets from the Entertainer and you give me a ride. Do you have a car?”

“Sure,” I lied again. *I’ll have to borrow Ryan’s.*

“My car’s in the shop, which sucks, cause it’s a pain in the ass to get anywhere now.”

“Yeah, I know how that is. I’ll give you a ride to the Whale. No problem.” She gave me directions to her apartment on the north side of the city which I wrote down on a Subway napkin. I told her I’d pick her up around 6:30 because it was an “All Ages” show and probably started at 7:00. If we missed any of the opening act, Vader, it wouldn’t matter because they sucked anyway. I’d seen them before too.

“All right, see you on the 20th,” she said.

“See ya then.” She hung up and I stood, staring at the napkin with her address on it, thanking God my mother didn’t answer the phone. *I’m going to a Suffocation show with Ali Corso. What the fuck is going on?*

When I got to Ali’s apartment building in Ryan’s ‘86 Cougar, Ali was already waiting out front. I was two minutes late. She peered into the passenger window and said, “Ted?”

“Hey, Ali. I hope you didn’t have to wait long.”

“Well, look at you,” she said as she climbed into the car. “Your hair sure grew long since high school.”

“Look at you,” I said. “You haven’t changed a bit.” Actually, she looked a lot different, only because everything about her looked more mature. She still had long, dark hair, but without the silly curls and hair spray. Her body was still filled out in all the right places, but in a rounded, sexy way that a woman has and not a sixteen-year-old girl. The top she had on was tight and black, showing off her chest but without any cleavage and her blue jeans looked like they had been bought from the store pre-faded and worn. “You look great.”

“So do you,” she said, grinning. She was full of shit, but it was a nice thing for her to say. I was wearing naturally faded and worn blue jeans, and an old Entombed T-shirt with an artsy skull and crossbones on it, and I AM DEAD written underneath. I thought she might think it was funny, but then realized I was being stupid. *Metal clothes are metal clothes, they don’t impress anyone but us.*

On the way to the show we caught up on old times that we never shared. We talked about parties we were never at the same time and people that we knew existed but never knew:

“What ever happened to that Nikki girl you used to hang out with? The cheerleader.”

“Oh my God, right after high school she had a kid with that guy Dave Greene-”

“The hockey player, right?”

“Yeah, him. And one night they were sleeping with the baby and Dave accidentally suffocated it while they were sleeping.”

“Oh, man. That’s horrible. I think I heard something about that, actually.”

And:

“Do you still hang out with those two guys? The quiet ones. Everyone thought they were twins?”

“Oh, you mean Reed and Wright.”

“Yeah, them.”

“No, we haven’t hung out in a while.”

“Why not?”

“Crackheads.”

Traffic was bad, so we didn’t pull into the parking lot of the Thirsty Whale until around 7:15. We got out of the car and the muffled roar of the opening band could barely be heard outside. There were few long-haired, metal guys still out in

the parking lot, drinking beers, trading demo tapes and listening to them from their car stereos. Some of them leaned against the weathered, rusty cars with the doors wide open and screamed along with the music:

“WARRIORS OF FILTH! FROM THE KINGDOM OF SLIME...”

“Interesting,” Ali said with wide eyes as she slung her small, black purse over her shoulder.

“Yeah, um...” I pointed to the purse. “You’re not going to bring that in are you?”

“Why, I shouldn’t?”

I sucked my teeth and squinted. “It’s probably not the best idea. It’s not like you’ll get robbed or anything. It’s just, you should probably just bring in what you need. Just in case.”

“Of...”

“If it happens, you’ll know. These shows can get kind of crazy.”

“Okay,” she said with what almost sounded like enthusiasm. Opening her purse, she debated on what to bring in. “Let’s see, money, tickets,” she handed me mine, “I guess I can’t bring my cigarettes.”

“I’ll carry them,” I said, “I’ve got big pockets.”

She handed them to me and said, “Well, all right, lets rock and roll.” And right then, I wished I could hold her hand for the short the walk from the car to the entrance.

After I got frisked and Ali didn’t, we gave the bouncer our tickets and stepped into the wood and concrete cave known as the Thirsty Whale. Vader, the

opening band, was churning through their set on stage. The cigarette and dope smoke cast a haze over everything and mixed with the sweat and stink of the crowd. Ventilation at the Whale was always really bad, so it always got disgustingly hot inside and anyone that went to the pit in front of the stage always came back wet. The stage itself was only three feet off the ground and the light rigging was lined along the nine foot ceiling just above the thrashing crowd. Flying sweat would smoke and sizzle and burn on the lights as crowd-surfing kids would swing and flail, their arms and legs hitting the lights and ceiling. Above the stage the ceiling was much higher.

Behind the pit, on the right side were the bathrooms, a small soft-drink bar and long, wooden merchandise tables. Dainty metal chicks, with tight black dresses on and long, nightmare-black hair sold Suffocation T-shirts to the swarming crowd of scrawny, doe-eyed metal kids. Their blood-red lips asked, "Large or extra-large, long-sleeved or short?" The kids would hold up the shirts and say, "Wow! Bad ass!" gazing at the "Pierced From Within" album cover silk-screened to the black, cotton T-shirt. Almost everything was black in the Whale: clothes, hair, fingernail polish, boots and pants. Everything was painted black too, except the cement floor in front of the stage, slick with sweat, and the small bar, separated from the rest of the club by two, flimsy, fake oak walls. The only way into the bar was through a door directly to the left of the entrance.

"It's pretty loud in here," Ali screamed, taking in the whole scene.

"Yeah," I screamed back. "Hey, do you wanna go into the bar until Suffocation comes on? These guys suck anyway."

“How can you tell?”

I laughed with her. “Believe me, they do.”

It was surprisingly quiet inside the bar despite the noise pounding at the walls from the outside. There were groups of older metal guys sitting at small, crowded tables, growling and laughing with each other. Ali and I opted for two torn up stools against the bar itself. “Must be sound-proofed.”

“At least a little.” We could talk to each other without yelling.

“So, do you do any of that moshing stuff?” she asked with a cigarette hanging from the corner of her mouth, lighting a match on the first strike.

“Sometimes. I used to a lot when I was younger. To tell you the truth I don’t go to shows much anymore. I’ve kinda outgrown it.”

“Ever get hurt?” She blew out the match with a breath of smoke and dropped it in an ashtray. The cigarette dangled from her fingers and looked like it could fall at any second.

“Not really. It’s not as dangerous as it looks. I mean, I’ve gotten a couple bruises and scrapes but nothing serious. The only ones that really do get hurt are the ones that try to hurt other people. If you go in swinging and punching at people, you’re gonna get your ass kicked.”

“I don’t get it,” she said.

“Well, there are rules. There are these unwritten rules. No one is there to hurt each other, so people obey the rules.”

“Which are?”

I took a sip of my Old Style draft and thought about the question. “Well, for starters, no intentional punching or hitting.”

“Okay.”

“If someone falls, pick them up.”

“How polite.”

I took another sip. “I don’t know, just stuff like that. Just don’t try to hurt anyone. Try to be careful. Be cool.”

“Then why bother doing it at all? Why take the risk?”

“Because it’s fun,” I said and I drowned my smile in Old Style.

Ali smiled back, but then raised her eyebrows as a burly, biker-looking thrasher took a spot next to me at the bar. With his back facing us, I turned around to see what she was reading. What I saw didn’t shock me, because I had seen it before, but it made me nervous. The words JESUS IS A CUNT were proudly displayed across the back of his T-shirt. Neither of us said a word until he walked away.

“Niiiiice...” Ali said, mashing out her cigarette.

“I know.” I closed my eyes and nodded. *Why did she have to see that?*

“I gotta pick me up one of those.”

“I know. I’m sorry. That’s a Cradle of Filth shirt. Sorry. They’re-”

“What are you sorry about?”

“Well, you know-“

“It’s okay, Ted. I’m a big girl. I’ve heard the word ‘cunt’ before.” The word made her smile and made me look away from her face. “I’ve even used it on occasion.”

Still looking away, I said, “Yeah, well, anyway, they’re a black-metal band from England.”

“They’re black?”

“No, they play black-metal. It’s a type of metal music. It’s really satanic. It’s also a lot more popular in Europe than it is here.”

“Does Suffocation play black-metal?”

“No, they don’t. But don’t worry, you won’t be able to understand what they’re saying anyway.”

“I’m not worried.” She was still smiling at me.

“I guess not. But oddly enough there are two black guys in Suffocation.”

“Hmm, go figure.”

“Shouldn’t you be writing any of this stuff down, by the way?”

“Don’t worry,” she said, “I’m sure I won’t forget a thing.”

Vader finally finished their set. Ali and I had one more beer between sets and she decided she wanted to get up close for Suffocation, but not too close. She wanted to “see what it was really like,” but she didn’t want to actually be in the pit. I told her we’d stay on the outside of it and watch.

“Just stick close to me,” I said.

Ali and I picked a spot to stand right where the cigarette-tortured carpet met the cement floor of the pit as the lights went down again. Young, limber bodies flew past us in a hurry to get a spot on the floor. The bigger guys just plowed through. A moist sea of flesh rocked and swayed in front of us as they packed themselves together as tightly as they could, like bullets in a gun clip, ready to go off. We could see the boys from Buffalo taking the stage in the dark and the crowd began to cheer and scream. Frank Mullen, the pale, puny singer with the deepest, darkest voice grunted at us from the stage:

“All right Chicago, let’s fuck some shit uuuuUUUUP!!!”

The grunt ascended into his familiar, guttural roar, the music began and the crowd erupted. Bodies flew back and forth to the “wapwapwapwapwapwap” blast beat of the drums and the grinding guitars. Eventually the pit became a swirling, human whirlpool. Ali and I stayed just out of reach, while in the front, rows of bodies were pinned against the stage, hopeless, unable to move against the force smashing behind them. Spinning, swirling kids would rise on top of them and float on the crowd only to get swallowed whole again and maybe crash to the ground if someone didn’t catch them. Hair whipped, skin pounded, and metal freaks young and old screeched in pain and delight. The song was “Liege of Inveracity,” a crowd favorite. It was my favorite song off the first album and I caught myself singing along:

“Hopeful peaceful life

Compassion all but gone

Effigy of what’s to come

Hopeless, worthless dreams...”

Ali caught me and grinned at me as I mouthed the words.

Then the “jumping part” came. The part of the song that everyone looked forward to. Every show it created just a little order out of chaos. The crowd knew the song, and they knew how to react. It was a simple, fat, chunky guitar riff:

JUNT-junt-JUNT-junt-JUNT-JUNT-junt-JUNT-junt...

Every time, no matter how wild or crazy the pit was, everyone would stop what they were doing and just jump up and down, in pogo unison. This time was the same. Everyone in the place jumped up and down. The pit jumped, the band jumped, the people in the back jumped, I jumped. Ali jumped too. She jumped high and hard, further away from me and deeper into the crowd, into the pit.

Oh, shit.

The solo began, the “jumping” part ended, and so did the calm. The crowd exploded, more charged than before. I couldn’t see Ali. I threw myself into the pit, rhythmically swinging my arms and legs, trying to keep my head still so I could see. I went around the circle three or four times until I spotted her tight, black top, pressed against the wall of people between the pit and the stage. I grabbed her around the waist, she never looked up at me, she just leaned into me with the lower half of her face buried in her hands. There was blood pouring through her fingers and onto the swarm around her. Not a drop hit the floor. Putting my free arm up, I used my forearm as a guard to keep anyone else from crashing into her as we got caught in the flow of the circle and rode it to the back edge. We sprung from the pit and I pushed us through the crowd behind it to some open space near the entrance, cursing and apologizing the whole time:

“Oh God, oh shit. I am so sorry. Oh fuck, shit. I can’t believe...”

Her eyes were wet and she took her hands away from her face long enough to scream at me. Her beautiful nose was swollen, with a small bump sitting on the once perfect slope. Two trails of red ran over her full lips and dripped off of her chin. “Those people are fucking animals!”

“Ali, I’m so sorry, no one meant to-”

“Take me home,” she said, covering her face with her sticky, bloody hands.

“Do you want to go to the hospital? Or-”

“Please. Just take me home. Please.” Tears ran from her eyes, under her fingers, and mixed with the blood on her hands.

I gave her an old T-shirt that was in the back seat to cover her nose. It was all I could find. She covered her face with it and cried the whole way home. We didn’t say a word to each other the entire time, except when I asked her again if she wanted to go to the hospital. She didn’t answer. *This is not my fault*, I thought.

I could’ve watched her closer.

This was her idea.

I should have warned her.

This is not my fault.

When she got out, she threw the bloody shirt onto the hood of Ryan’s car and walked away without a word. She never even looked back at me, and I didn’t go after her. There was nothing I could do, I realized that. But I wanted to do something. I wanted to eat, but I wasn’t hungry. I wanted to sleep, but I wasn’t tired.

So I just drove away, not for long, just for a little while. No where in particular, just away. Then I drove as fast as I could back to the Thirsty Whale. I hoped, I prayed I could catch the end of Suffocation's set. Or at least the encore. Something. Anything.

Reed and Wright

At 7:00 every morning, Reed and Wright would walk through the front gate of the Ravisloe Country Club together. They would walk in unison, like soldiers, towels slung over their left shoulders, stone-faced. Their uniforms matched, green V-neck shirts with the club emblem on the right breast and khaki shorts. They even sported the same crew cuts and cheap gym shoes. They were always the first in, roll call was different everyday, but it was never as early as 7:00. Roll call meant waiting, and they couldn't do that. They needed to get a loop in and be back at the shack by noon, so they could go out again. There are few jobs you can have when you're an addict. Waiting around for paychecks at the end of the week doesn't work when you need to score. You need cash, everyday, and there are few jobs that work like that. Being a caddy just happens to be one of them.

Most caddies are known by a number or a nickname or both. As in, "33, Snag!" Snag had fangs. It was as simple as that. You become a caddy, you get a number, and maybe you get a nickname. "Number 15, Damnit!" Damnit had a stuttering problem. At roll call, all the caddies would show up, throw their numbers in a bucket, and the order they got picked was the order they got out. A list would be made, and the rest of the day, Ray, the dwarfish caddymaster, would scream numbers from his crowded, non-air-conditioned office, and maybe he'd attach a name. "74, 74!" A kid would come running from the basketball court or from watching TV inside the caddyshack to the small window of Ray's office, get his assignment on a ticket, and take off for the first tee.

This wasn't how it worked with Reed and Wright. Because they showed up early, they got out early, sometimes before roll call even happened. When they finished their first loop, they'd leave the club to "go get lunch," and a half hour later they'd come walking back in, sit down on a bench and wait to be called again. They didn't have numbers. They didn't need nicknames. They didn't work alone either. It was always, "Reed and Wright!" and they'd stand up together and walk to the window. They'd carry for anyone, real jocks. It didn't matter if it was the leather skinned Tan Fran and her partner, Mrs. Glick, at 8:00 in the morning, or carrying doubles at 2:00 for four hacks just visiting from another club. To them, money was money, and to Ray, business was business. Ray was already retired, but he still ran the shack like it was his career. If they wanted to be worked like grunts, he would work them. They never complained, they didn't ask to be made "captains" to get higher paying bags. They came, did two loops per day at least, and they left. He didn't care where they went or what they spent their money on.

Everyone knew though, even Ray. They all knew Reed and Wright were fiends. Their eyes were always glassy and they would fidget constantly. Usually, when they had to wait, they would play cards to keep their hands busy. Sometimes they would just disappear for an hour or two, and when they came back they'd just sit on a bench and stare. On the course, they were always quiet and sweat a lot. By the end of a round, if they got out late, they'd get sick. Usually they hid it well.

"Nice drive," Reed said. Although they didn't like to kiss ass, they always knew to do it when it counted, like on the 18th hole. Dr. Hart didn't say anything as

he handed the driver to Reed and pulled off his golf glove and stuffed it in his back pocket.

Mr. Silver, a short, squatish, old man drove from the tee, straight, but not very far. Wright didn't talk, he just took back the driver and replaced the plush Mickey Mouse head cover. His hands shook.

The two golfers walked a few paces behind the caddies, as they usually did, and spoke of some party to go to or a business to invest in. Reed looked at his partner struggling with the bag he was carrying.

“How you holdin' up, man?”

“I'm not good. I'm gettin' sick, man. It's too hot.”

“Last hole, man. Last hole.”

It was an awful day, burning and wet, and Mr. Silver had Wright running all over the course that day. Zigzag patterns, traps, and deep rough. His white leather PING bag was too nice for a hack like him and was weighed down with as much as the bag could hold without snapping the strap. Five woods, the 3 through 9 irons, four wedges, twenty-eight balls stuffed in a single pocket. It had Wright leaning hard to the left and occasionally stumbling.

“One more hole,” Reed said.

After a few unsuccessful shots at the green, Dr. Hart wound up in a bunker on the right while Mr. Silver landed on the cart path leading to the clubhouse to the far left. As a debate started of how a ball should be played from a cart path, “It's one club length.” “No it's a drop!” Wright rubbed his face with the wet side of his towel,

despite the fresh dirt and grass stains. Reed called out from the other side of the green.

“Dr. Hart! You’re phone is ringing!”

“Answer it for me would you, son?”

While the debate continued, Reed pulled the cell phone from the front pocket of the golf bag, as he had done for so many other golfers, and answered it.

“Dr. Hart’s phone, this is his caddy speaking.”

“Hello?” the female voice said.

“Hello? Yes?”

“Um, I’m looking for Dr. Hart.”

“He’ll be here in just a sec, he’s in a discussion on the golf course right now.”

“Oh, well, tell him it’s his nurse.”

“Will do.”

The debate ended in a compromise, a drop inside a club length. Mr. Silver swung and dubbed the ball a few feet ahead of him. Wright leaned hard on the bag and pressed his forehead to his hands before picking it up. “Are you all right son?”

Mr. Silver asked.

“I’m okay. It’s just the heat.”

Dr. Hart removed his visor and wiped the sweat from his balding head.

“He’ll be fine,” he said and walked away.

“It’s your nurse,” Reed said as he handed the doctor the phone.

“Thank you, son,” he said. “Hello, Mary? Yes. What’s up?...Oh... Oh, really...and, nothing?...I see...Okay...and...Okay, I understand...Well, I’m no where near there, so...All right...Okay, well, put her on the phone.”

Another chip shot and Mr. Silver was on the green. Wright pulled out the brass-head putter, traded it for the wedge and lay the bag down near the cart path, yanking off his towel and dabbing his head with it again.

“You don’t look well,” Mr. Silver said.

“It’s just the heat.”

The doctor started stroking his beard and his voice became soft, breathing into the phone. “Hello? Hello, Susan?” he said. “This is Dr. Hart...Yes...Yeah, well...Are you comfortable?...Are you in pain?...No?...That’s good...Well...Yeah...Yeah, well, it looks like this is it...Yeah...It looks like today is the day...” the doctor said in a whisper. “Yes, I’m very sorry, but...I know...You put up a heck of a fight, but...That’s right, well...there’s just nothing else we can do...Uh-huh...Uh-huh...Well, it looks like it’s time...Yes...All right...Good-bye, Susan.”

The doctor let out a heavy sigh as he hung up the phone and handed it back to Reed who stared at it as though it were something dirty in his hand and quickly shoved it back into the bag. The doctor took out his sand wedge and knocked his ball to the far side of the green. Reed handed him his putter without a word and began raking away the footprints that led into the sandtrap, over and over.

Wright quickly pulled the pin and walked off the green with it into the shade of an oak tree. The sweat was worse than ever and his eyes wouldn't let him focus on anything.

"What's wrong, Glen?" Mr. Silver asked the doctor.

"Well, I...I'm just going to pick up," he said, reaching over and picking up the ball off the green. "I can't concentrate. I just had to let a patient go."

"Oh," said Mr. Silver. "Oh, that's terrible. Here, we'll go have a drink as soon as I'm finished up." He putt the ball about two feet away from the hole and picked it up. The round was over.

"Yeah," the doctor said, "it was just her time."

"Try not to think about it," Mr. Silver said as they walked off the green. Wright stuck the flag back in the hole and almost fell over. Reed finally dropped the rake from his hand.

At the entrance to the clubhouse, Wright sat on the steps with his head in his hands. Mr. Silver and the doctor stood a few feet away, while the large PING bag leaned against the white, stucco wall.

"There you go, son," the doctor said, and handed Reed a few folded bills. Reed put the money in his pocket and didn't bother to count it.

"Thank you," Reed said, lowly.

"Is he going to be all right?" Mr. Silver asked.

"He'll be fine. I think he's got a bit of heatstroke," Reed said.

"I don't know about all that," Dr. Hart said. "There's something wrong with him, but I don't think it's heatstroke."

Reed didn't answer.

"Well, see that he gets this," Mr. Silver said, handing Reed some more money.

"Will do."

"You did a good job today. Here," the doctor said handing Kevin a pair of keys. "I want you to put our clubs in the trunk of my car. It's a blue, BMW convertible. All right? It's out in the lot. The license plate says HART DR. It's spelled just like my name. Just put the keys in the glove box when you're done. Thanks, son," he said and dropped the keys into Reed's hand. "And, uh, I'd prefer if you carried both bags yourself. Your partner doesn't seem up to it."

Wright still sat on the steps in a heap. As they passed him on their way into the clubhouse, the doctor leaned down to him and said, "I don't know what your problem is, son, but you better straighten it out. You can't be out here like this. It looks bad." Mr. Silver only shook his head as they went inside.

Reed leaned the doctor's bag against the wall, next to Mr. Silver's, and sat down on the steps. "Hey, you all right?"

"I'm fucked up, man. I'm sick."

"Well, let's go. I got the money, let's just go."

"Just let me sit here. Just for a little while. Let me get my head straight."

"All right, I'll be right back." He picked up the bags, one on each shoulder.

"Just stay here. I'll be back." Reed didn't move.

It was a beautiful car, the top was down and Reed stared at the leather interior. A blue, convertible Beamer, HART DR. on the plate. He held the keys out

trying to determine which one was for the trunk. Fumbling with them, flipping them one by one through his fingers, he started getting nauseous. His stomach cramped, and he got dizzy, the keys blurring one into the other. They clinked against one another until he got so frustrated and sick that he dropped the bags and threw the keys, as far as he could, down the back part of the lot, toward the cabanas where the Mexican lawn keepers lived. “Fucking...fuck!” he screamed, grabbing the golf bags and opening every pocket he could find. One after the other, Reed dumped the bags into the empty roof of the car. Clubs, balls, phones, tees, and gloves fell like hail as Reed shook them violently. Tossing the empty bags off to the side, he grabbed a club, a sand wedge. It snapped easily over his knee and he threw it back into the car.

Reed took all the blame and got fired. No one needed to tell him though, he just never came back. And Ray only had to yell “Wright!” once to realize no one was coming to the window.

A Girl Named Harley

When Harley was born, her parents had to sell their bike to pay the hospital bill. Her dad said, “Well, if I have to give up my bike, that girl is gonna remind me everyday of where it went.” About ten years later he got a new bike and she hasn’t seen him since. We’ve been friends just about as long as we can remember, and we’ve worked together for almost the same. Anything to make a buck or run a scam. When we were about seven we set up a lemonade stand in front of my house made of flimsy cardboard and yellow chalk and sold glasses for five cents. It had real lemon juice in it and way too much sugar, but it didn’t taste that bad. We made fifteen cents that day. We should have expected that from our neighborhood.

When we were about ten or eleven, we started a new business. Harley’s dad had left a mess of porn magazines lying around the house when he took off, all kinds of them. Not “Playboy” either, real raunchy stuff. Glossy, full color photos of naked women with their legs spread, touching themselves or other naked girls. Or maybe there’d be a naked guy too, all hard, looking like he was going to hurt someone. One day Harley asked me, “Do boys really like looking at this stuff?”

I said, “I guess,” and tried to act like I didn’t.

“I have an idea,” she said.

Behind Harley’s house we had a fort. We wanted a tree house, but there are no trees in Central Illinois, just cornfields and flat earth. So we built a small, square fort made of rotting wood and rusting nails and it leaned a little toward the highway running along the fence. It smelled of mildew and mold, but it was ours and we spent most of our time there, reading Marvel comics, plotting a scheme to get rich

and move to Chicago where there were real professional baseball teams and no tractors. I was sitting in the fort reading “X-Men” when Harley walked in with a big stack of the porn magazines and began mixing them in with the comics.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“We’re gonna make some money,” she said. “Go stand outside and collect it.”

“What? Why are you doing that?”

“So we don’t get caught. Now go get their money.”

“Whose?” I said as I moved the old green and orange shower curtain that was the door to our fort. Outside there were a couple other boys my age, standing about five feet away, stepping on their own shoes, nervously peeking in. I recognized one of them.

“What is Darren Naufel doing out there?” I asked. “And those other kids?”

“They’re waiting, now go get a dollar from each of them. And only let one of them in at a time.”

I wasn’t exactly sure what was going on but if we were going to get money, I didn’t care. I stepped out of the fort and stood by the door, not really sure what to do. Obviously, they didn’t either, and they just stood there, kicking their shoes into the dirt and spitting.

“Do you have a dollar?” I finally asked.

Darren Naufel looked up and said, “Yes.” He was ugly and I didn’t like to look at him. His eyes were too far apart and his chin was narrow, like a super-villain in the comic books we read. I held out my hand and he quickly put the dollar in.

“How long do we get to look?” he asked.

“Five minutes?” I guessed. It sounded reasonable at the time. “But you go by yourself.” I pointed to the other two boys. “If you want to go in that’s another dollar each.” They still stared at the dirt, nodding. Pleased with myself, I pulled back the curtain and Darren went in.

About two minutes later I heard Darren screaming, “I’m sorry, I’m sorry!” as he came barreling through the curtain and fell on his face, Harley behind him the whole time, slapping him furiously in the back with both hands.

“What happened?” I asked.

Harley stood up from pummeling Darren and said, “He was touching himself!”

“What?” I asked.

“He had his hand in one of his pockets and he was touching his thing!”

“Is that true?” I asked Darren. He didn’t say anything though. He just sat on the ground with his hand still jammed in the pocket of his torn Wranglers.

“All right, that’s it,” I said. “You guys-“

“If you touch your thing you can’t look anymore. That’s the rule,” Harley said, and she went back into the fort, red-faced and angry. I didn’t know what to say, so I didn’t say anything. I just stood there and waited. Eventually one of the other boys walked up to me and handed me a dollar. He was pale with purple lips and he didn’t say anything either. He just stared at the ground until he was inside the fort.

“And if you touch her, I’ll kill you,” I said.

We kept up our little business for about three weeks. Boys were coming from all over town, sometimes ten at a time. It was always the same. Harley would be inside the fort and I would stay outside, collecting the money. When they were all gone we would lie on the hard, dirt floor of the fort and count the money we made. Harley would always laugh and tell me stories of how they tried to hide their “little boners.” Eventually, Harley’s mom started wondering why there were so many boys coming by the house and one afternoon she came storming out to the fort in her bathrobe. She was a skinny woman, with weak, thin hair that always looked like it was going to fall out. There were about three boys waiting in line and they all ran when they saw her coming.

“What’s going on out here?” she screamed at them as they ran away.

When I stuck my head in through the shower curtain, Harley was sitting on the floor on one side of the magazine and a boy was sitting on his hands on the other side. She didn’t like the boys touching the magazines themselves because they had dirty hands. She turned the pages for them.

“Harley, your mom’s coming!” I said.

“What?” the boy said and his eyes immediately welled up with tears. Harley grabbed the magazine and stuffed it into the stack of comics in the corner, yelling, “Get in here!” at me. I quickly sat on the floor and Harley threw a “Silver Surfer” comic into my lap. She also threw one at the boy and as soon as her mother stuck her head in, Harley had a copy of “The Avengers” open in front of her face.

“What’s going on in here?” her mother demanded.

“Nothing, Mom, we’re just reading comics.” Harley didn’t look up from her book and neither did I. The boy didn’t look up either, but he also wasn’t pretending to read. He just sat on the floor, tears rolling off his chubby face onto the Surfer’s silver body lying in his hands.

“C’mere you,” and with a quick jerk of the arm, Harley was gone, dragged off by her mother. Outside the fort I could hear the distinctive sound of a hand smacking denim. The sound faded away toward the house, mixed with cries of, “We were only reading...”

But Harley never cracked, and although we had to stop our business, her mother never found out what was really happening, and I don’t think she really cared. When it was all over and done with, we had made a hundred and seventy-eight dollars in three weeks. We had planned on buying a car, but since we didn’t make enough we settled on a bike instead, along with seventeen comic books, a box of Snickers, a harmonica for me and lipstick for her, the color of licorice. That summer, and the next few summers after that, we rode everywhere with me driving and her riding on the handlebars. When Harley’s mom asked where the bike came from, Harley just said it was mine. And since my dad never asked me about anything, the bike was ours to keep. Bought and paid for by horny little eleven-year-olds. We never did make it to Chicago though.

Now I’m sitting at the door of B.J.’s, still taking the same kids’ money. Only now they’re men. At least, they think they are. And now, instead of looking at glossy pictures of naked skin on a page, they’re looking at real skin, Harley’s skin, dancing across the stage under the colored lights. Only here she’s not Harley, she’s

“Phoenix.” The club owner said that all the girls had to have “stage names.” Harely said that her real name was good enough, but the owner said it had be something different for “security reasons.” So she named herself after her favorite X-men character, Phoenix, because she always thought that she looked like her. Actually, Harley doesn’t look anything like Phoenix, but I never tell her that. Phoenix has wild, fire-red hair that seems to surround her like a fur instead of lay on her head. Harley’s hair is blonde and straight as straw on a broom. And Harley’s chest is almost as flat as her hair. She has small tits that don’t even move when she walks, nothing like the full, comic book tits of Phoenix. Compared to Phoenix, Harley looks like a thirteen-year-old boy.

She’s finishing up her second set of the night, wiggling and shaking to “Living Dead Girl” by Rob Zombie, a song I picked out for her. Before I started working here she was dancing to Def Leppard and shit like that. She’s been working here for about a year and a half now, I’ve only been here for three months. Harley got me the job right when I got out of prison. I did a three-year stretch in Vandalia for stealing a car. Darby’s car, actually. Darby owned the only grocery store in town and Harley and I worked there in high school. She was a cashier and I stocked the shelves. It wasn’t bad, except Darby himself was a total prick. He was tall and lanky with a bad mustache and breath that smelled like hot garbage. If Harley and I were working the same shift I’d always catch him whispering dirty jokes in her ear and slapping her on the ass. She would just smile and stare at something else and he’d walk away laughing. So I stole his car.

I picked up Harley that night at about three in the morning. She didn't seem really surprised to see me when I knocked on her window. She just looked at me, looked past me at the red Honda Civic parked in the driveway, and then looked back at me and said, "I'll get my bag." It only took her a few minutes to pack, some dirty clothes and make-up, and we were on I-57, heading north to Chicago. On the way, we drank cream soda, listened to Metallica tapes, and talked about what were going to do once we got there. My cousin Ricky grew up in the city and said I could crash at his place if I ever came up to visit. We figured we'd stay with him until we got jobs. Harley was going to be reporter for the *Chicago Tribune* and I was going to be her photographer. We were going to get an apartment right across the street from Wrigley Field and watch Cubs game for free from our rooftop.

We got as far as Kankakee.

They got me for Grand Theft Auto and Attempted Kidnapping. In the plea bargain, the DA agreed to drop the kidnapping charge if I pled guilty to Grand Theft Auto. I pled guilty and told the judge it was all my idea, which I guess it was. But I didn't want Harley to go to jail as an accomplice for the car, so I lied in court. During my testimony I said that Harley had no idea whose car it was and that I talked her into coming with me. It didn't really matter though, Harley was still a minor, one week shy of her seventeenth birthday. She got off scot-free. I had just turned eighteen and got three years. Turned out the judge was an old friend of Darby's.

I guess I should consider myself lucky, having this job. I'm not a big guy. I mean, I got bigger while I was in jail, but if it weren't for Harley this place never

would've hired me, and the only jobs to get around here are being a farmer, a bartender, or working at the strip club. I don't make a lot of money, but Harley does, and she lets me stay with her. It's not like I have anywhere else to go. She's got a little place above Walter's Feed Shop on Mulbray Street, I chip in when I can. She moved there when I was gone and it's usually clean. It's a one bedroom, I sleep on the couch.

It might sound cool to a lot of people, working at a strip club, but it's really not that great. First of all, every girl there is fucked in the head. Harley told me once that every single dancer she's met has been abused some time in their life. Then there's all the crank and coke and the jealous boyfriends and blah, blah, blah. Sometimes I feel more like a baby-sitter than a bouncer.

Plus, you get kind of numb to all the naked girls doing the same routines night in and night out and the lights and the music start to make you sick. The customers are no real treat either. You have the drunk, wide-eyed frat boys who drive in from the college twenty miles away and tip the girls pretty well but can't keep their mouths shut from under their white baseball caps. They get kicked out the most. Then there are the perverts who come in, don't drink, don't talk, just sit in the back, waiting for their favorite girl to walk up so they can get a private and blow their life savings. And then there are the locals who just want a place to hang out, there just happen to be naked girls here. Like Preacher Mike, an ex-minister who sits at the bar in his sport coat with no shirt on and burns candles, talking to the girls about the mysteries of God while sipping his vodka and Coke. He always wants to talk to me, but I avoid him. "I don't have God," I say, and he says, "Who does?" I

never take the bait. But the worst, the absolute worst is that bastard Darby. He comes in every Wednesday night and has been ever since he found out Harley works here. The first time he saw me working the door he didn't say anything. He just looked at me and laughed that same stupid laugh he had at the grocery store and to this day he still gives me a little chuckle every time he walks in. I'm not allowed to say anything to him either, because he always gets private dances from Harley and tips her huge. We always fight about it at home.

She would say, "What the fuck do you care?"

"That guy is a fucking sleaze!"

"He's a sleaze that pays the bills around this place."

"Oh, what's that supposed to mean? I'm not pulling my weight? That I'm just fucking worthless! I'm doing the best I can, Harley. In case you don't remember I just got out of fucking jail!"

"For stealing *his* car."

"Yeah, trying to get *you* out of here."

"Hey, don't do me any favors. I'm not like those other stupid bitches at that place. Sucking dick in the parking lot just to make a money to buy crank. I can take care of myself. And I do."

"Do you suck *his* dick?" and then she would slam the bedroom door in my face and the next day we'd act like it didn't happen.

As soon as "Living Dead Girl" ends, Tommy the DJ spouts his usual, "Let's put some green on the scene for the love-ly Phoe-nix..." as Harley picks up her clothes and money from the stage. Darby is in his usual spot right next to the stage,

waiting for her. I'm supposed to go with them, into the private room, to make sure nothing happens, but I've done it a million times before and nothing ever does. Darby always wants the "total," which means Harley is totally nude instead of the "half" where she still has on her panties and is less expensive. She's actually glad he gets the "total" because it means that he has to sit in a chair while she dances in front of him, instead of the "half" where she sits on his lap and grinds on him. Sometimes the guys cum in their pants and the girls are supposed to just smile and act like it's no big deal. It grosses Harley out. It grosses me out to even watch her dance in front of that scumbag, so half the time I just leave them alone.

"She's a big girl," I say to myself, and I stay in my chair. Raven is on the stage now, and I like to watch her dance. She's kind of a bitch, but she's at least interesting to watch. Pole tricks are her specialty. There's one that she does where she grabs the brass bar above her head, flips herself upside-down, splits her legs and bounces her hips like she's fucking the ceiling. It's always a crowd-pleaser and gets her a lot of tips. I fucked her once myself, right when she started working here which was about a month ago. One night after work she just took me out back and went to town on me. She didn't say anything except, "I got you. I'm gonna get her next." Now she hits on Harley all the time and it pisses me off because she knows I won't say anything. I want to tell her to lay off because Harley complains about it at home, but if I said anything to Raven she'd bust me out. Harley would kill me if she found out about me and Raven. She'd say, "I didn't get you that job just so you could fuck those nasty bitches." Then there would be another big fight.

Raven is really moving tonight, she's probably on speed. Everything on her seems to be moving. Her head, her arms, her legs are in constant motion. As usual, she's wearing her black vinyl outfit which matches her hair and clashes with her pale skin. Her lips are painted black too, so are her fingernails. She looks like a vampire whore. As she writhes on the floor of the raised stage, she pumps her hips to the rhythm of Type O Negative, a goth-metal band that I can't stand, all slow guitar riffs and moaning. Her lips are pursed, her eyes are closed and she's really working the crowd. Her top isn't even off yet and guys are already trying to tip her. But she won't let them. She likes to fuck with their heads. She ignores them. At the end of her set she'll get her money. For now, it's all about the dancing. That's why I watch her.

As Raven undoes the back of her black vinyl bra I notice Darby sneaking past me in a hurry and heading out the door. Next thing I know, Harley is running out from the back, completely naked, and starts smacking me in the head, face, and shoulders.

"Where were you? Goddammit, where were you? He stuck his finger in my fucking crotch you son-of-a-bitch! Where were you?"

She won't even let me answer. She just keeps hitting me. I can't see anything but her tiny fingers swiping at my face and I can't hear anything but her insults and her question, "Where were you?"

I want her to stop, but she won't. I ask her to stop, but she won't. I scream at her to stop, but she won't.

"Where were you?"

So I hit her. Not hard and not with a closed fist, but hard enough to knock her down, away from me. She just sits there, naked, on the beer and sweat soaked floor. She doesn't cry or anything, she just sits there. Then she stands up and says, "You are out. Do you understand me? You are out of the apartment, you are out of here. For good. You are out."

There was only one other time that Harley ever hit me, but that time I didn't hit her back. Harley and I had the same night off and while she stayed home, I went up to the club and got stinking drunk with Preacher Mike while he explained the nature of reincarnation. I didn't really like hanging out here, but Mike kept me entertained and drinks were free. I got home at about three in the morning and Harley's folded laundry was all over the couch. Mostly her stuff from work, silky G-strings and bras, short skirts and tight dresses. "Fuck this," I said, too drunk and lazy to move her things. When I opened the door to the bedroom she was dead asleep. "Harley? Harley, are you awake?" She didn't answer. "I'm gonna sleep in here okay? Your stuff is all over the couch." She still didn't answer. "Okay," I said and slowly climbed into bed with her. I didn't even bother taking off my shoes and was on the verge of passing out when she started elbowing me and punching me, screaming, "NO NO NO NO NO..." in her sleep.

"Harley! Harley, stop! Stop it, it's me!"

"NO NO NO NO NO..."

When I felt my lip split I rolled out of the bed onto the floor. The thud must have woke her up, and she looked over the side of the mattress saying, "What the fuck is wrong with you? What the fuck are you doing in here?"

There was blood running across my teeth and down my chin and I tried to stop it with my finger. “Your thtuff ith all over the couth.”

“So? You can’t move it? Jesus! You don’t *ever* come in here while I’m sleeping!”

“I’m thorry,” I said and hurried out of the room, trying to catch the dripping blood with my other hand.

While I cleaned myself up in the bathroom, fumbling with a washcloth and peroxide, Harley eventually came and stood in the doorway. She was wearing a long T-shirt and had her arms folded tightly against her chest.

“Are you all right?” she asked.

“Yeah, are you?”

“Look, you-“ she hesitated, “you don’t just come in like that. I mean, you don’t just come in while I’m sleeping.”

“I tried to wake you up.”

“Well, next time knock.” Then she sat me down on the toilet and kneeled in front of me, dabbing the blood away with the stinging rag. And for the first time, I wanted to lean forward and kiss her.

“I never tried anything,” I say.

“What?” she says.

“Did I ever try anything on you? Did I ever touch you?”

“I don’t fucking care, you are gone!”

“Did I ever try to fuck you?”

“Fuck you!”

“No, fuck you, you bitch! I never did anything. All I’ve tried to do is help you and you shit on me for it. Our whole lives, I’m always supposed to be there to help you out. Well I’m sick of it.”

“I told you, I don’t need your fucking help.”

“Yes you do. Look at you, you’re a mess.” No one is paying attention to Raven on stage anymore, they’re all looking at us. Our voices are even louder than the music, and some of them are pointing and laughing.

“*I*m a mess? Me? You’re a fucking ex-con with a job that *I* got you.”

“And you’re a whore,” I say.

I’m waiting for a swing, but it never comes. Harley doesn’t punch me, or kick me, or hit me. She’s still not crying, and she doesn’t yell or scream. She just turns around.

“What are you doing?” I say.

She doesn’t walk away or move. She just stands there, naked, with her back to me.

“Stop it, you’re being stupid,” I say and I reach out to grab her and turn her around, but I can’t. I can’t touch her, and she doesn’t move. And then I realize that I’m going to be alone for a very long time.

Every Other Sunday

Every other Sunday, me and Dave go to the Ryder's Retirement home for Veterans. Half the reason we go is to see Gramps; the other half is because Amy is always working the front desk. At least, every other Sunday she is.

"Hey, Amy, how are you this fine morning?" I say as Dave grabs the clipboard off the marble countertop and signs us in.

"Just fine. And how are you boys today?"

"A lot better after seeing you," Dave says. It's the same thing every two weeks. She doesn't say anything, she just rolls her eyes back and purses her lips, as if to say, *Oh, you.*

"So how's Gramps been? Causing any trouble?"

"No, he's been pretty mellow as usual. I check on him every once in a while for you guys."

"Well, that's nice. Isn't that nice?" I say, jabbing Dave in the ribs with my elbow.

"Yes. Nice," Dave says.

"Anything for you boys."

"Cool if we go see him now?" Dave asks.

"Of course." As we walk away, she flashes us the most beautiful goddamn smile I've ever seen along with a little wave, the kind where you tap your fingers against your palm.

"She is so fucking fine, man," Dave says as I hit the 3rd floor button on the sterile, medicine-smelling elevator.

“Dude, those eyes have to be fake. There’s no shade of blue that color.”

“Oh, and the tits too, man. They’re just, AHH!” Dave says as he holds up his hands to grab at the imaginary breasts.

“I’m telling you, chicks like that aren’t born. They’re made. There’s a big factory in California under the Hollywood sign. They just box ‘em up and ship ‘em out all over the place.”

“Interesting theory.”

When the door opens, we step out of the elevator and walk down the wide, bright hallway. We pass Merle, who’s right outside his room, sitting in his wheelchair with the empty legs of his pants hanging off.

“What up, Merle?” I say. He never talks to us.

Dave and I stop at door 309, which is halfway open. I peek in and see Gramps, sitting in his ancient rocking chair, staring out the window. He’s always humming some old song from the 40’s that sounds familiar but I don’t know the name of it. Dave doesn’t know it either.

“Anyone home?” I say, tapping on the door.

He turns his head and yells, “Hey, Micky!” through a toothless smile. His eyes are slits as usual and the skin on his face is plum colored and looks cracked. His nose sits on his face like a big, gnarled potato. Dave looks just like him, only not as old and weathered.

“So, how ya been, Gramps?” I ask as we rush over to him so he doesn’t have to get up.

“Oh, I’m good. You know. You?”

“Can’t complain.”

“Good, that’s good. Say, who’s your friend there?”

We go through this every two weeks.

“This is Dave, Gramps,” I say, putting my hands on Dave’s shoulders. “This is your grandson. Don’t you remember Dave?”

“Who?”

“Dave, he’s Tim’s son. You remember your son, Tim, right?”

“Aww, I don’t know what you’re talkin’ about,” he says as he waves his arms and looks away.

“I know, Gramps, I know.” I take a chair by his side, Dave sits across from us on the tightly made bed. He never remembers Dave. Actually, he never remembers anyone anymore, except me. And I’m not even related to him.

“So you gettin’ laid in here, Gramps, or what?” I ask.

“I tell ya, if I could get it up I would.” We all laugh.

“You’re nuts, Gramps,” I say.

“Yeah, and you’re Irish. Tell me you’re Irish,” he says.

“I’m Irish, Gramps.”

“Ah, Micky, you’re fulla beans.” The toothless grin lets out a hearty chuckle.

“You always were, Micky. Fulla beans.”

Micky isn’t even my name.

I met Gramps a couple of years back at a 4th of July party at Dave’s house. I was crashing at Dave’s for a while because my mom had kicked me out of her place for beating up her boyfriend. Needless to say, staying with Dave’s family wound up

being a permanent thing. I've tried to go home a couple times, but it never works out. Dave's family has always been cool though. They treat me like one of them.

They would always talk about Gramps, but he only came out to the house on special occasions. He's always been funny, just not as crazy as he is now. On the 4th, he flirted with all the girls and made me tell him I was Irish while he called me a liar. That day he told me I reminded him of an old war buddy of his, Micky Sheehan. He died over forty years ago.

"I know, Gramps, I know," I say.

Then we start the same routine that we do every other Sunday. He asks me about all these guys I've never heard of and I lie to him and tell him made-up stories about where they are and what they're doing and how great their lives are:

"How's Franklin doing?"

"Oh, he's great. He married a girl from Philadelphia. They've got five kids." The first couple of times I felt bad about lying to him and all, but after a while it got kind of fun and he seemed to enjoy it. I didn't really see any harm in it. At least it gave us something to talk about, not like poor Dave. He never said anything. He just sat there and listened while I spouted off fake tales of Gramps' old platoon buddies who were all probably dead and buried by now. Gramps would just smile and laugh and act like Dave wasn't even there. He used to do it to the whole family, before they stopped coming.

It was always strange to me how Gramps couldn't remember his family. Not because I don't think he's crazy, I *know* he's crazy. It's just that, all of them look just like him. I mean *all* of them. Dave, his brothers Eric and Chad, even Dave's

sister Connie, she looks just like him too. But Tim, Dave's dad, he was the worst. When he was in the same room as Gramps it was like they were both looking into some strange mirror that could warp time. But after a while, even Tim's face became unfamiliar. It was like Gramps forgot what his own face looked like.

It wasn't always like that. I remember the first time I went to the home with Dave's family, he remembered some of them, or he at least recognized them. Dave asked me the night before, "Hey, you wanna go see Gramps with us tomorrow?" They would usually go without even telling me about it.

"Sure, why not? How's he doing anyway?"

"Oh, you know. Crazy as ever. He asked about you last time."

"No shit? What did he say?"

"He was like, 'How's Irish?' We told him you were still staying with us. You should come see him."

"All right, I will. Wow, that's kinda weird that he asked about me."

"Yeah, considering the fact that he barely remembers who the fuck I am anymore." Dave laughed about it at the time but now I don't think he thinks it's funny.

When I went with the family the next day, sure enough, Gramps remembered me, but not really. He kept calling me Irish or Micky and everyone kept correcting him. "His name is Patrick." While I was there it seemed like I was the only one he wanted to talk to, about the war and "the guys" who I said I didn't know. He told me I was "fulla beans." That was before I started lying to him. When we left, the family said that it was the most they had heard him speak in months.

They said he got “confused” sometimes and thought it would be a good idea if I came along for now on. I said I would and I went with them, what used to be, every Sunday. We’d walk in and they’d try to talk to and he would try to be nice and talk back, but you could tell he didn’t really want to. He would bow his head or look out the window, and then he’d see me and you couldn’t shut him up. Eventually, he wouldn’t even try to talk to them because he didn’t know who they were. He just knew me, and the stories I began to tell. After that, everyone just stopped coming except me and Dave. I guess they got sick of me having to reintroduce them.

After I tell Gramps about Nick Bartolomucci, “you know, that big Italian machine gunner” (I made him the owner of a jewelry shop in Arkansas), I look at the clock on the wall and then at Dave and say, “Well, I guess we gotta get going.”

Gramps says, “Naw, c’mon, Irish. Stick around a little longer. We’ll get some broads up here and have a party.”

I laugh and grab his pointed, withered knee as I stand up. “Now we don’t wanna get you in trouble. My friend and I gotta be somewhere.”

“Oh, all right.”

“I’ll see ya around,” I say as I we walk out.

“See ya around,” he says.

“Bye,” Dave says.

“Bye, Timmy.”

I turn my head and walk back over to Gramps. “What, Gramps? What did you say?” But it’s too late. He’s already staring out the window, smiling, humming his old song with no title.

“Dave, did you-“ I turn around and see that Dave already left the room. I have to run down the hall to catch up to him in the elevator.

“Dave, did you hear what he said?”

“Yes.” Dave doesn’t look happy. In fact, Dave looks pretty upset as he stares at his faded, silvery reflection in the elevator door. He doesn’t say anything else when the door opens and we walk to front desk where Amy is sitting.

“How’s our man in 309 today?” she asks. Dave just ignores her and signs the clipboard.

“Uh, fine. He’s fine,” I say.

By the time she says, “That’s good,” Dave is already walking out the door to the parking lot.

“Uh, yeah, see ya in two weeks,” I say and run after Dave. When we reach the car, I look at him across the tattered roof and say, “What’s your problem?”

“We’re not coming here anymore,” he says as he opens the door and climbs in.

I want to disagree with him. I want to tell him that I’ll keep coming even if he doesn’t want me to. But Dave looks pretty pissed so we both stay quiet. I figure we’ll talk about it when we get home.

Feb. 14th

Every February 14th Steve sits in his brown recliner and watches porn. There is a bottle of Makers Mark whiskey on the small coffee table next to him with a tall glass. He doesn't bother mixing it or using ice. This year he's gone with a lesbian motif, *All-Girl Adventures 7* and *Boys Not Allowed*. The liquor and the movies were picked up the day before, because on February 14th, Steve doesn't leave his apartment. He also doesn't talk to anyone or go to work. He disconnects the phone and won't answer the door. When the whiskey is done and it's after midnight, he'll go to sleep.

It started with little things. In 3rd grade, he got less cards in his box than anyone else in class. In junior high, he saved up enough money to buy Becky McDermott half a dozen roses, and she broke up with him. Sophomore year in high school, he got in a car wreck and lost his big toe on his right foot. He'd only had his license for a week. When he was 20, his cat died. At 23, he got jumped in the alley behind his building and wound up in the hospital. Since then, every year Steve puts himself on lock-down in Apt. 44F for 24 hours.

This year, drinking his second glass of whiskey as he watches a redhead go down on moaning, busty blonde, lapping between her legs like a dog at a water dish, the phone rings. *No fucking way*, he thinks. He whips his head around and stares at black, cordless phone, sitting in its cradle, on the desk across the room.

RING.

Linda Fuller is working her eighteenth straight shift at Willcoast Telemarketing, coming in on days she can take off if she wants to. It's a job that

most people avoid, and when they get it, they don't keep it for long. The turnover rate is ridiculous, but Linda walks in every day at 9:00. Linda isn't even her real name, but it might as well be. Her real name is Wendy Sullivan. No one that works with her knows that. As a telemarketer, you're supposed to use a fake name, but when new people come into the office they never bother learning hers. "Hi, Linda," is the most conversation she gets out of them anyway.

Outside of work, Linda enters a room like a fart. People around her get uncomfortable and look to one another with accusing eyes. She is small, mousy, and has an unfortunate chin that isn't really there. It's as though her bottom lip runs straight into her neck. With her hair in a constant mess and no body to speak of, she covers herself in large sweaters and big, floppy hats, no matter what the weather. If she weren't so awkward she'd be utterly forgettable. She is constantly dropping things: books, candy, her glasses. The fact that she has never been mugged is laughable.

RING.

Steve's mind races against the liquor in his body and the sex on the TV. *No fucking way! I turned the phone off, I know I did.*

RING.

Oh, FUCK. I unplugged the one in the bedroom. How could I forget...

RING.

A decision has to be made. *If I answer it, it could be bad.* A few years ago, his mother called to tell him his sister's husband beat her up. That's when he started unplugging the phone. *But, if I don't answer it, it could be worse.* Hundreds of

scenarios run through his drunken head: “You’ve just won a million dollars for no good reason!” “Thank God you’re home, someone needs a blood transfusion and you’re the only possible donor.” “Steve, I’ve always loved you, I’ll be there in five minutes.” Not knowing would make him crazy. At least if the phone was disconnected, he’d be none the wiser. The call would come and go, and it would be like it never happened. But he remembered to turn the machine off so he couldn’t hear any messages, and the now the phone keeps ringing.

RING.

Steve lunges out of his chair, drink in hand, spilling brown droplets on the fake hardwood tile. His hand is shaking as his thumb tabs the TALK button and it beeps in his ear.

“Hello?”

“Hello, sir, is this the man of the house?”

Steve looks around the room. “I guess.”

“Great. And your name is Mr. Wilson?”

“Steve Wilson.”

“Hello, Mr. Wilson, my name is Linda.”

At work, Linda sits near the window in the back row. College kids with dreadlocks and face piercings surround her, occasionally smiling as she sits down. To them, she is familiar, a constant in a room of constantly changing faces. Most people don’t stay longer than three months. Linda Fuller is going on three years.

“Call me Steve.”

Linda is a bit put off. 85 percent of her callers usually hang up by now, and the other 15 aren't usually so friendly. "All right, Steve. Um, let me tell you—"

"Where are you calling me from, Linda?"

"Excuse me?"

"I'm in Chicago, is that where you're calling from?"

"Well, no. Actually, I'm in Philadelphia."

It's a brilliant plan. At least, Steve thinks it is. *Oh, this is good. This is great. Nothing bad can happen now. I don't know her, she can't hurt me. Just keep her on the phone, no one else can call. This is great.* Steve doesn't have call waiting. He thinks it's rude.

"Philly, huh? The City of Brotherly Love."

"Well, that's what some people call it."

"Do you call it that, Linda?"

She doesn't know how to answer the question. It's usually something she doesn't have to think about at work. Usually, the only questions people ask are about what she's trying to sell, how much, what's the catch, can I get that in writing? Outside of work, no one asks her anything.

"No. I don't suppose I do."

"What do you call it then?"

"I suppose I just call it Philadelphia."

"That's good. That makes sense. You see people from other places always calling cities different things. Like people always say, 'Chicago, the Windy City,

City of Big Shoulders, My Kind of Town, Chi-Town.’ But we don’t call it those things.”

“I see. Well, Mr. Wilson-“

“Steve.”

“Steve.” Linda tries to picture what Steve looks like. She has never known a Steve. In her mind, he’s tall and blonde with a cleft chin and small ears. He smiles constantly, and drinks everything from a sports bottle. The truth is, Steve doesn’t shave much. He isn’t that tall and his hands are always dirty.

“And your name is Linda.” To Steve, Lindas are always 35 and have curly hair.

“Yes, Steve, and I’d like to tell you about- “

“Linda what?”

“I’m sorry?”

Steve refills his glass with whiskey as he paces in front of the television, ignoring the lesbian 3-way on the screen. “I told you my whole name. What’s yours?”

“It’s, uh, Fuller. Linda Fuller. Is my name.”

“Your fuller name?” Steve laughs at this, and so does she, though neither of them really mean it. “Yes...Steve. And today-“

“Hey, how long are you allowed to talk to a customer?”

“Well, um, that would depend.”

“On what?”

“Well, if I’m making a sale-“

“Do they watch you? Is there a supervisor-type who watches you all the time?”

“Sort of...”

“I have one too. I hate that.”

“Really?” Linda leans forward a little on the cushion of her desk chair.

Reggie, her boss, is eyeing some of the new kids from his desk in the middle of the room. He slips his glasses on and off of his face constantly. He never looks her way anymore. His mustache sickens her. “What do you do?”

“I’m a mechanic.”

Linda imagines her Steve leaning over a car in a dirty white tank top, wrench in hand, wiping sweat away from his brow in slow motion. “That sounds interesting.”

“Yeah, well, cars break. I fix ‘em. What about you? Do you like your job? I mean, you call people from all over the country. That sounds cool.” Steve imagines the girls in the Time Life commercials he sees on TV, their heads all wired up with ear pieces and mouth pieces. They all have names like Tracy or Megan, and they swear that they’ll talk to you “real soon.”

“I, uh, I suppose.”

“You suppose? You don’t sound very convincing.”

“Well, it’s just, my job.” She has never even thought about it before. Until now, they were just people on a list, with different names, with different voices, with different numbers in different area codes. Where the names on the list came from never crossed her mind. They were just people to talk to.

“You’re not selling books are you?”

“Books?”

“Never mind. Look, Linda, I have this problem.”

She waits for him to finish.

“Hello, you still there?”

“Yes, Steve. I’m here.”

“Okay, see, Linda, I get real depressed around this time of year, and then I think about killing myself and blah, blah, blah... You know how it goes.” Linda looks around the office again. Reggie is still paying no attention to her as she ducks down in her cubicle.

“Yes,” she says.

“Yeah, so, I was thinking about offing myself.” Steve sets his glass down on the table, refills his drink and sits back in his recliner.

“Offing?”

“You know, killing myself.” He picks up the remote and begins to fast forward through the inane dialogue of the porn stars. Their bodies scramble and strip in high speed.

“Oh my God, are you serious?”

“Oh yeah, I have the gun in my hand right now.”

“OhmyGod, Steve, wait. Okay, wait.”

“Hey, hey, hey, relax. Don’t do anything crazy like call the cops or something like that. Just, y’know, act cool. Just talk to me.” He hits play and a hard

scream comes from the TV as an Asian girl gets nailed from behind with a strap-on dildo.

“What was that?”

“Nothing! Nothing.” Steve mouths the word “fuck” and grits his teeth as he turns down the volume. “I’m just, the radio was on. It’s off now.” He sets down the remote and grabs the glass of whiskey. “I’m fine.”

“Are you?”

“Yeah. I mean, no. I mean, you know, holidays, love, all that shit.”

“Yes, I...I think I understand,” she’s whispering now, practically hiding under her desk, “Steve, you...I don’t think you should kill yourself.”

He can’t help but smile. “Really? Why not?”

“Well, don’t you...don’t you have things? You know? To live for?”

“Like what?” Steve says, taking a long, hard, drink and almost coughing.

“Well, like family?”

“Parents divorced, sister moved to Taiwan. Next.”

“Friends?”

“They’re all fuck-ups, next.”

“Well, are you married, do you have a girlfriend?”

“That’d be no and no. Next.”

“Look, Steve, I’m sorry, but I’m not very good at this, okay?” Her eyes are starting to well up and he can tell. “I mean, I don’t understa-“

“No, no, no, you’re doing fine.” He pushes STOP on the VCR remote and the TV screen goes royal blue. “You’re doing fine. Look, I’m sorry, okay. I just want to talk, that’s all.”

Linda is imagining her Steve, no longer smiling, struggling to keep the gun barrel from his head, a picture of a long, lost love on the floor beside him. “Are you sure?”

“Yeah.”

“Are you going to shoot yourself? Because if you do-“

“No. I promise, that while I’m talking to you, I will *not* shoot myself. Deal?”

“But,” she was crying now, a soft whimper she was trying to hide, “what about when we hang up?”

“Well, we’ll just have to keep talking then, won’t we?”

“Okay.”

“Okay. So, Linda, tell me about yourself.”

She pulls a crusty Kleenex from the middle drawer of her desk and dabs her eyes and wipes her nose. There is nothing on her desktop but her phone, her phone list, and a picture of her cat. “Like what?”

“Same stuff you asked me. What’s your family like?”

“We don’t really talk much. My mother worries about me.”

“Okay, friends?”

“Next,” she laughs, and puts the tissue back in her drawer.

“Are you married, do you have a boyfriend?”

“Not at the moment.”

“Well, look at us, Linda. Two peas in a pod.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“Maybe if I ever come to Philadelphia we could hang out. Get a cheese steak or something.”

“Actually, I don’t like cheese steak.”

“Really? I thought everyone ate those things there.”

“Not me.”

“You see that, Linda. See what I mean about people?”

Linda straightens up in her chair. She looks directly at Reggie who finally looks her way. “Actually, it’s Wendy.”

“What?” Steve sets his drink on the table and flips the footrest of his recliner down.

“My name is Wendy Sullivan.” Reggie is staring at her, and she stares right back.

“Your name is Wendy?”

“Yes.”

“Then why did you tell me it was Linda?”

“Well, see, here at work-“ Reggie is off his chair, walking her way.

“So you lied.”

“Not really-“

“I mean, what the fuck is that?”

“No, see-“

“See what? You call people all day and fucking lie to them?”

“Let me just explain-“

“You can’t just be honest with them and tell them your fucking name?”

“There’s a reason-“

“This is bullshit. Linda. Wendy. Whatever your fucking name is. This is bullshit!”

“Linda, you’re not on a personal call, are you?” Reggie is standing behind her now, holding his glasses that hang from his neck by a thin chain.

“No. No, sir? Hello?”

“I mean, we’re talking. And I told you shit, man...”

“Because you know it’s against company policy to make personal calls while on the clock.”

“Yes, I know Reggie, hold on. Sir? Are you still there?”

“Fuck this.” Steve pushes the TALK button once again and tosses the phone on the table.

“If you need to make a personal call-“

Linda hangs up the phone. “It wasn’t personal. It was a customer.”

“Are you sure? Because it looked like-“

“It was just a customer. Okay, Reggie.” Linda stands up from her chair and slings her hand-knit bag over her shoulder. “Look, um, I’m gonna go... Yes, I think I’m gonna go.” Her wallet and a few tampons fall from her bag onto the ground, and she bends down to collect them.

“You’re leaving? Right now?”

“Yeah, I, I just can’t be here right now. Today. So I’m going to go home.”

Linda rushes out of the office, her floppy hat hiding her face.

In Apt. 44F, Steve refills his glass, hits PLAY on the VCR, and unplugs the phone.

Johnny on the Way

My husband's brother, Johnny, is here visiting with us and I really don't know what to do with him. I feel like there's some weird animal in the house, like I'm watching the neighbor's dog. I don't know how to entertain him, I don't even know what to feed him, neither does Sean, my husband. Johnny's only been here for one day and they've barely spoken. It doesn't surprise me really. Sean told me that they've never gotten along, even when they were kids. In fact, he told me about a brawl they had once when he was 13 and Johnny was around 11. They had a snowball fight in the backyard which eventually led to them throwing fists at each other. Johnny wound up kicking Sean in the face and splitting his lip open. Then Sean got Johnny on the ground, held up one of Johnny's arms and kned him in the rib cage. While Sean was in the house cleaning the blood off his lips and face, Johnny crawled through the ice and snow into the basement and lay on the floor crying until their mother came home from work. Sean wound up getting two stitches, Johnny had two broken ribs.

I'm still not sure why he's even here. He basically called us from the road on his way down from Chicago and asked for directions. Then when he got here he said, "Well, I've never really been to St. Louis," but ever since then he hasn't left the house, except to get beer. He's heading down south tomorrow to go back to school, he studies English or something like that, and said that our place was "on the way." I've only met him once before, and that was at our wedding two years ago. I remember I couldn't stop looking at him all night because I couldn't believe how different he looked from Sean. He still looks the exact same, you'd never think they

were brothers. Johnny has a wild mane of hair while Sean keeps his short and neat. Johnny's complexion is darker too, and he has a wide, strong jaw. Sean's face is more narrow and long, like an old bicycle seat. Still, I can see why girls would like Johnny, despite the hair.

“So, Johnny, are you still seeing that girl, oh...I can't think of her name. You know, the one you brought to the wedding?” The two of them are sitting in our tiny living room, watching the beginning of a college bowl game involving Notre Dame. Johnny is on our relatively new couch, a present from my parents. He had to sleep on it the night before because we really don't have room for him anywhere else. Sean is sitting on his beaten, green love seat, like he always is any time a game is on. One thing they do have in common is a passion for sports. Johnny barely looks up at me when he answers my question.

“Who, Becky? Oh, no. No, that ended a long time ago. It was nothing serious anyway.”

At our wedding, Johnny and Becky got really drunk. I mean, they were crazy drunk. They fell down on top of each other while dancing to Chuck Berry and Becky ran to the bathroom to throw up. She came back laughing and Johnny gave her a big kiss before she ordered another vodka tonic.

“That's too bad, you two looked cute together.”

“Susan, could you get me a Sprite?” Sean asks, staring at the TV.

“Sure,” I say, “Johnny can I get you anything? Sprite, juice, water?”

“Uh, yeah, I'll take a beer please. Thank you.”

I feel like mentioning to him that it's barely past noon, but I figure it would be a waste of breath. Sean told me it would be like this. "Johnny drinks," he said. "He just does." I don't think we've ever even had beer in our refrigerator and it looks strange to me when I open the door and see it sitting there. I might have a glass of wine every once in a while, but other than that, I don't drink. It just doesn't do anything for me. And Sean, I've never seen him take a sip of anything alcoholic. He wouldn't even do a toast at our wedding. He put water in his wineglass instead. Smiling at that thought, I grab a can of Sprite for him and a tall, black can of Guinness for his brother.

"So, Sean, you got any money on this game?" Johnny asks as I walk back into the living room. I stop so I can hear the answer.

"No, not me," Sean says. I walk to him and hand him the can of Sprite. He doesn't look up.

"Yeah, right. YOU didn't bet on a Notre Dame game. A fuckin' bowl game. Yeah, okay." Johnny doesn't look at me either when I hand him his beer. I sit on the love seat between the couch and the chair and wait for Sean's response. He stares deadpan at the 26" tube as the Irish offense leaves the field to bring on the kicking team.

"I didn't."

"Sure, man. Sure."

"Sean doesn't bet anymore," I say. I don't mean to say anything, but the words fly out of my mouth. I can see where Johnny is going at I want to stop him before he gets there.

“What?”

“Sean gave up gambling,” I say. I want them to be off the subject, quickly.

“Really?”

“Yeah,” Sean says, “I gave it up.”

“What, for Lent or something?”

“No, I just don’t do it anymore.” Sean’s voice becomes soft and sounds defeated, like a little kid explaining why he didn’t do his homework.

“Why not?”

“I just don’t, that’s all. Do I need a reason?”

“Not even on this game?”

“Did you bet on this game?”

“No, but I don’t gamble.”

Sean doesn’t respond and I’m glad he doesn’t. I don’t want them to talk about it anymore. Gambling has been talked about too much in our house. I’m sick of the subject.

“I bet Dad’s got a fortune on this game, especially with the points and all.”

“I bet,” Sean says.

“When was the last time you talked to him?” Johnny asks.

“It’s been a while…”

“I saw him on Christmas.”

Sean finally looks away from the television to Johnny with a quick, surprised look. “You did?”

“Yeah, I had a couple drinks with him.”

“I bet.” Back to the game.

“Mom missed you at Christmas dinner,” Johnny says.

“I called her.”

“Yeah, I know, but it ain’t the same.”

“How is your mother, Johnny?” I ask. I had talked to her on Christmas too, but only for a short while. She seems nice, but I barely know the woman. In fact, I barely know anyone in Sean’s family, a bunch of Irish people from the south side of Chicago with names like Kelly and Kevin. I met them at the wedding, but that’s about it, except for Sean’s father who didn’t show up. They’re a rugged looking crowd, all red-faced and squinty-eyed, except for Johnny. His eyes flash from his face. Sean never talks to them or about them. Every holiday we spend here, where I grew up. When we started living together, Sean said, “We should live in St. Louis so we can be closer to your family.” Now I think we live here just to be farther away from his.

“Oh, Mom’s great. She rocks. I don’t see her very much, so we hung a lot while I was home. We’re buds,” Johnny says.

“That’s nice,” I say. I try to imagine Johnny sitting with his mother at her kitchen table, his hair hanging in his face and playing gin with her. *Bam! Gin!* he would yell, throwing the cards down and clapping to himself. *You little shit*, she would say, smiling, shuffling the cards for another hand. Then I try imagining Sean doing the same thing and I can’t see it. I only see them reading the newspaper, not looking at each other. I always ask him why he isn’t very close with his family. He

tells me he “doesn’t want to talk about it,” and that’s the end of that conversation. He’s that way about a lot of things.

“So, Sean, if you were still a betting man, which you’re not, of course,” Johnny says, “who would you take here?”

“I don’t know,” Sean says.

“Oh, come on. I mean, if you had to.”

“Why would he have to?” I ask. I’m getting annoyed. I thought this conversation was over. “He doesn’t bet anymore.”

Sean turns to me and glares. His mouth is slightly open and I can see his teeth. “I’d take Notre Dame, with the points.” He stares directly at me when he says this. I look away and he turns his attention back to the game.

“That’s what I thought,” Johnny says, getting up for another beer. I want to kick him over.

By half time, it’s around 1:30 and Johnny is half-drunk. He gets louder with every beer, yelling things like, “Pick up the fucking block!” and “P.I., that was total P.I.!” Now he wants pizza.

“Dude, I’m fuckin’ starvin’,” he says. “Let’s get some ‘za. They got any good pizza joints around here, Suzy-Q?”

“Um, well-” I can’t think of anything because I’m trying to figure out a polite way to ask him not to call me ‘Suzy-Q’ in the future. I hate that name.

“I don’t eat pizza anymore.”

“What?” Johnny looks like he just walked onto a grisly crime scene.

“Oh, that’s right,” I say, “Sean is lactose intolerant.”

“Lac-tose in-toler-ant? When did you become lac-tose in-toler-ant?”

“I don’t know, I just am.”

“But when we were kids, you used to eat tons cheese, and you drank milk by like, the gallon. I mean, aren’t you born with that shit?”

“Maybe. I guess I’m just different now.”

“I guess.”

“Hey, that’s all right, we can order Chinese or something,” I say.

“Yeah, that’s cool,” Johnny says, “the pizza down here is probably bogus anyway.”

He is really getting on my nerves.

Despite eating a mountain of deep fried chicken covered in sticky, pink, sweet and sour sauce, he still has plenty of room to pound more beer during the second half, and his rants are becoming less coherent. “Catch the fuggin’...dammit!” and “That dude sucks!” Notre Dame was winning at half time, but now it’s the fourth quarter and they’re losing by 20. I can tell Sean is upset because his foot swings back and forth like a pendulum and he mumbles “shit” and “fuck” between his teeth. Every twenty minutes or so he gets up and goes into the bedroom to cool off. I can hear him talking to himself in there and when I ask through the door if he’s okay he just tells me he’ll be right out. It doesn’t help when Johnny laughs at how bad they’re doing.

“Oh, man, they are SCREWED!” He’s smiling a loose, dopey smile, lying on the couch with a beer resting on his belly.

“They could still pull it off,” Sean says. His foot shakes harder.

“No WAY!”

“They might.”

“They’re fucked.”

“They have a chance,” I say. I’m not really trying to be encouraging, I just want Johnny to shut up and for Sean’s foot to stop moving.

“You wanna bet?”

Sean doesn’t say anything, but his foot gets faster and faster.

“C’mon, lets’ bet. There’s no w-...oh, shit, look at this...”

A guy from the other team catches the ball.

“He’s fuckin’ off!”

I want him to shut up.

“He’s haulin’, man! Nobody’s gonna catch him!”

I want him to stop moving his foot.

“This shit is over!”

I want them to stop.

“Notre Dame fuckin’ loses!”

Stop.

A sports announcer comes onto the screen and says, *Well, it’s obvious that the Fighting Irish have been completely shut down here in the fourth quarter, they have no hope of-*

“Good thing you didn’t bet, huh, Sean?”

“SHUT UP!” Sean screams, and he stands up and kicks the announcer right in the face. The colors on the tube blur and twist in the cracks made by Sean’s foot.

He drops right to the floor and cries, clutching his bleeding ankle. “Goddamnit!” he sobs, over and over.

“Holy fuck.”

“This is all your fault!” I yell at Johnny as I slap him in the head, rushing to my husband.

“What the fuck?”

I’m furious, I’m panicked, but most of all, I want him out of my house.

“Why don’t you just get out? Why don’t you just leave?”

“But I-“

“This is because of you! Don’t you see that, you asshole? None of this would have happened if you weren’t here. Who invited you anyway?”

“Is there anything I-“

“You can leave!”

I try to get Sean to move his hand so I can see how bad it is, but he won’t budge. He just grips his ankle, tightly. “Goddamnit, goddamnit, goddamnit...” I turn around to yell at Johnny to dial 911, but he’s already stumbled out the door with his bag slung over his shoulder.

Vita

Daniel McNamara was born in Chicago, Illinois. He attended Southern Illinois University, where, in 1996, he was awarded his bachelor's degree in English with a concentration in Creative Writing. In 1998, Daniel pursued a Master of Fine Arts at Louisiana State University and graduated in December, 2001. While at Louisiana State, he taught freshman English, taught creative writing, and was part of the editorial staff for the *Exquisite Corpse* and *New Delta Review* literary magazines.