

University of Nevada, Reno

**AN ACCUMULATION OF SMALL THINGS**

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Master of Fine Arts in English

by

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May 2018



THE GRADUATE SCHOOL

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prepared under our supervision by

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Entitled

**An Accumulation Of Small Things**

be accepted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

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May, 2018

## ABSTRACT

*An Accumulation of Small Things* is a collection of short stories rooted heavily in place – both the Texas Gulf Coast and the American West. Drawing on the traditions of other masters of the short story and Southern humor such as Barry Hannah and George Singleton, this is a collection which repeatedly explores the complexity of relationships, men navigating the expectations of masculinity, and the idea of self-mythologizing. Leaning heavily on first-person narration, these are stories particularly concerned with character, dialect, and voice.

Spanning ten short stories, *An Accumulation of Small Things* is a completed work at approximately 40,000 words.

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## SUCH HEALING IN SMALL SPACES

The tablecloth in front of him was wrinkled, just like Arthur's shirt. His pants rode up a little, the cuffs revealing maybe just a bit too much of his white tube socks. This was, however, the best that could be managed given that he had worked all week and had no time to run an extra load of laundry. Arthur looked around the exhibition hall. A gentleman neatly stacked astrological charts in the far corner of the exhibition hall. Judging by the care the man had taken with his chinstrap beard, surely he could be trusted to pore over astrological charts in a manner that was sufficiently exacting. Arthur wondered how long it had taken to acquire all of the charts and whether or not the man stored them openly or was this some sort of secret he kept from all but those closest to him.

People milled around making small talk and completed last minute assembly of displays. Arthur's table was a modest one – a reflection of his true aims, perhaps. He had hastily written out a sign on a word document and brought it to Kinko's to have blown up on a large poster board, which he hung on a cheap easel acquired from Walmart in the middle of the night – the night before his big debut in this place. It read: *My name is Arthur McGowan. I'm an intuitive card reader adept at helping you read the future and clarify your past. I'm a sensitive skilled in listening to the other side. Please allow me to help you help yourself.* He hated the sign, but he had to live with it. He wasn't really there to provide answers, so much as to see how others were able to dole out advice – and to live, really – in a way that seemed so certain. He imagined the people around him, like the smaller black man wearing a white robe that dropped nearly to the floor, were people

who acted decisively and with positivity about the outcomes. Consulting them for answers wasn't enough, anymore. Arthur felt compelled to learn from the inside. He considered this to be like the charter fishing trip he'd taken a few years ago, when he learned to fish by watching the skilled hand of Captain Tom as he sight-casted for redfish in the shallow flats of Galveston Bay. Just as Captain Tom knew where the fish were, these people found the answers to people's lives. Arthur felt sure he could learn.

The space was wall-to-wall with paraphernalia of the metaphysic. This was normal, of course, given that the exhibition hall held The Fifth Annual Gulf Coast Conference of Mediums, Psychic, Spiritualists, Healers, and Astrologers – open to the public, naturally, for the cost of \$5 per day or \$12 for the entire conference which ran from Friday through Sunday morning. Obviously, the proper name was too long, longer than it needed to be, but the organizer of the event and founder of the Galveston Psychic Research Center, Sidney Drake Jackman, felt compelled to be as inclusive as possible to every kind of metaphysical seeker. However, he hadn't included the various vendors or aura readers, nor the musicians that oft performed at these events. In advertisements, he simply referred to it as The Great Gulf Coast Psychic Conference and Convention (TGGCPCC).

The organization of these events was strategic out of necessity. For the novice attendee, Jackman felt – knew – the importance in not overwhelming potentially fragile psyches with too much energy. Many of the people manning the booths for readings – mediums, in particular – have a look that can quite easily prove to be too much for those patrons unused to the deep, penetrating gaze. Thus, they had to be kept farther away from

the vendors selling healing crystals, water from the River Jordan, and – always -- salt harvested from the Dead Sea. This was all easier to take in, Jackman had reasoned, given that many of these items were base enough to be found in mall kiosks. A fact he'd recently noted when a swarthy man with a full head of jet black hair asked for his hand in order to prove the healing qualities of mud dredged from a holy site near the Sea of Galilee. In addition, retail vendors paid more for booth space given their square footage needs, the time that it took for them to set up, and to account for the fact that almost all the psychics detested their ridiculous commercial ploys – with the exception of the crystals. The crystals must be respected. They would always have a place in the TGGCPCC.

The palmistry experts, astrologers working with charts, and aura readers were all next to each other along the back wall closest to the musicians because, after all, these services were mostly mechanical in nature and didn't require the concentration of the real talent. The quiet space in the opposite corner was reserved for those truly possessing the gift. The tarot readers separated them and were organized roughly by their talent as intuited by Jackman, as he'd long ago given up on tarot as an accurate divination technique and could not, accurately, judge the merits of the readers himself. The more talented – more sensitive – were closer to the psychics, mediums, and spiritualists who benefitted from the peacefulness away from the hustle and bustle. In addition, having all of them together in one space seemed to encourage them and the patrons coming to receive their services. The ability to look at all of the booths, to be able to watch the interactions, proved their authenticity in many cases. The multiplier of seeing them all working in unison was a joy to the organizer. Such healing as it was in a small space.

Jackman detested the commercial elements and wished that he could find a way to make the TGGCPCC run without them, but such an outcome was unfeasible. He thought on this as he walked by a display selling fossilized wood harvested from Mount Sinai. He accidentally kicked down the obnoxious cardboard display proclaiming that this wood may have been recovered quite close to where Moses received the Ten Commandments. A young man with a beard rushed from around the table to preemptively forgive Jackman's clumsiness, while his wife remained seated with their three young children. Jackman pretended not to hear the man as he continued walking.

Arthur smoothed the tablecloth at his small table. The choice of color was a regrettable one. He looked around and noticed a sea of earth tones: soothing tan, sea green and powder blue. His own tablecloth was fire engine red. It was made of a cheap-looking slick plastic and it was set on top of a wobbly folding card table. He bought these items specifically for the purpose they now served. The thinking, then, was that the color would help Arthur's table to stand out, much in the same way that red cars get pulled over by police – they grabbed more attention.

He noted that this tablecloth probably drew attention, but in a way that made him look like a clownish amateur. If the convention hall were a hand, Arthur's hideous red table must be the ugliest appendage: the thumb. He'd read so much research, he was disgusted to have misstepped, blundered, in such visible and embarrassing ways. He had never felt like more of a phony, and he was sure that all those around him knew it, too. He was a faker; these people around him made their living uncovering the obscure in strangers. Surely they'd uncover his motives as soon as he spoke, if they hadn't already.

His motives were unclear, even to himself, in this moment. He knew he was desperate. A slow kind of desperate, that had crept up on him almost without him realizing until it was fully upon him. He'd been happy before. He'd dated a beautiful woman in college. Her name was Carina, and she had the most beautiful suntanned skin, and teeth that practically glowed white. She'd left him to pursue a job in Dallas, the city that he hated most. She had gone on without him and he'd spent the intervening years hating himself, calling her to talk, going on dates that led nowhere. His twenties were supposed to be his best, most carefree years, but what he'd experienced was not carefree and he hoped desperately that he wouldn't look back on dinners of Chick-fil-A chicken nuggets and Bud Light as his best moments.

Nearly all aspects of his life had been worse in the months leading up to his decision to dive into the world of mystics. He'd gotten the tarot cards as a ploy, of sorts, initially. He was always stymied by his apparent lack of interesting hobbies or jobs. The cards were a way to make conversation, hopefully have a laugh, if nothing else.

Eventually the dates always devolved into those soft questions that meant the end was beginning on an already young relationship. After a couple dates, he'd hear something like, "So, this is where you live?" and Arthur would catch their eyes drifting towards the banker's box under a table which he hadn't unpacked or opened in years, just carted around, knowing full well he could neither look at nor throw away pictures from his only real happiness with Carina. Other times he'd talk about his job, as a bookkeeper, and they'd say, "Oh, that sounds interesting." But his response – his conversation, in general -- was never so interesting that there were any follow-up questions to save the interaction from drifting into a silence after Arthur described how many businesses had

trouble with billing and that he was happy to work for small businesses with their accounting. He wasn't a CPA, which hindered him, and he was reminded of this every time someone followed up with that – and when he spoke to his mother who asked him monthly when he was going to take the exam. He just needed more time. And, fewer late nights full of Bud Lights and bad television.

His first night with the cards made him feel a sense of control, like if he could even have a glimpse of his future, then maybe he wasn't so adrift. If he had an idea of what was coming, maybe he could be more in the present in his conversations and they wouldn't lull when he thought about his professional failures, his mother asking him questions on the phone. He laid them out in the pattern according to *Tarot for Dummies*, and it was soothing, the routine of it. He felt that the most adept practitioners must be even more at ease, otherwise, how could they manage to perform it in front of others?

At thirty, Arthur felt as though he was closing the book on the good times and that his situation would only worsen without dramatic action. He felt as though he'd taken action before, at some point. He needed now to push further.

Jackman wandered down the aisles just as the doors opened for the general public to begin to filter in. He admired the largest Himalayan salt crystal he'd ever seen, glowing so pinkly that he felt like he might be able to reach out and touch the light. How magnificent. He reached into the pocket of his linen pants and pulled out his iPhone. He opened Instagram and crouched to align the salt crystal just so, hoping that the camera could capture the glow that so captured him. He snapped a picture and posted, "One of

many wonderful displays at the TGGCPCC. \$7 admission at the door, \$5 online. Kids free. #TGGCPCC #nofilter.”

He reached the tarot readers -- farther back from the real talent, as it were. His first pass through yielded the usual suspects, save for a garish red tablecloth set atop a table manned by a new face. One that was perceptibly sweating and radiating energy that Jackman could not make sense of. He moved forward.

Xavier, an old acquaintance, adjusted his stacks of DVDs on a table beneath a large banner adorned with a six-foot tall picture of Xavier’s torso and face. A small television played on a back table. Today Xavier was wearing his customary black suit and a purple metallic tie. Jackman picked up a DVD and turned it over to the back: *For the first-time, Xavier, is releasing his Tarot techniques. Inside this DVD you will learn the Celtic Cross Spread, as well as tips and techniques not only in evaluating cards, but in how to become a more intuitive reader yourself! This DVD is guaranteed to make your readings more powerful and insight --*

Xavier grabbed Jackman by the upper arm and waited for Jackman to make eye contact with him, head tilted slightly to his left.

Xavier spoke first. “How are things, Sidney?”

“Well,” said Jackman, still grasping the DVD and desperately hoping to break eye contact with Xavier.

Xavier looked down and said, “Oh, I see you’ve found my latest little project. I know it may seem so, unseemly, to sell a how-to, but I can assure you of the quality of this – the techniques are powerful.” He popped the “P” in powerful and spread the fingers on both of his hands. “Please take one, Sidney. Gratis.”

Jackman set the DVD down in the pile, slightly askew and Xavier immediately bent to straighten it. “Maybe later,” said Jackman.

“Peace be with you.”

Jackman continued his tour around the exposition hall, blankly staring at booths, and nodding in the sort of empty way that he imagined belied deep thought and tranquility. He ran his finger along a tapestry hung over the edge of a table. He looked up at the sign. *Merilee Cook-Swanson: Astrological Charts and Projections*. A base industry, the reading of charts with no regard for the subject of the reading, himself, or herself. Not all could be as charming as Xavier with his head tilt and clear, wide-eyed gaze.

They’d come up in this world together, in a manner of speaking. Jackman remembered Xavier when he still went by his given name, Olek Petleshkov. That was before his facial treatments that concealed his acne scars, and when he wore shirts with sleeves that came halfway down his hands. Jackman was just out of the Marines in those days. He’d served in the First Gulf War with the 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Regiment as part of Task Force Papa Bear.

Jackman had come home after that and couldn’t sleep. Wary of military shrinks, he turned to homeopathic methods. Unable to turn off the focus and drive that the Corps had instilled in him, he became a voracious reader and, eventual organizer, of most homeopathic and metaphysic goings-on on the Gulf Coast. It had come at a cost, one that Jackman was beginning to question. When he came back stateside, he had a woman waiting for him that he thought he’d marry. He’d put a down payment on his house with

an enlistment bonus and inheritance from his father, a house that now had a second mortgage. Jackman was leveraged to the hilt trying to keep up the wellness in the Coastal Bend at tremendous cost to himself. A cost that, forced him to make concessions, to allow some that maybe weren't genuine. At night, alone, he would stare out into the hallway from his bed, gun loaded in the dresser and he would wonder how much he'd healed, how much these people surrounding him now could heal others. He had to keep trying, he would finally think before shutting his eyes to search for sleep.

Even though Xavier and Jackman had grown in the community together, Xavier wasn't what Jackman would consider a friend. Jackman felt uncomfortable by him. Even when Xavier was known as Olek, he'd always seemed to be in character. He always had the look. He was always completely unflappable in ways that Jackman, who regrettably was still prone to the occasional outburst, could not make sense of. It was off-putting. As was his ridiculous habit of ending conversations with "peace be with you," like Jackman was some sort of shill.

He could hear Ben now, around the corner – that full-throated laugh that was so loud people generally recoiled a step or two – and he knew he'd get the gossip whether he asked for it or not. Ben was family and these were things that you did for family. Jackman's mother assured him of this.

When Jackman turned the corner, Ben was holding a large lemurian crystal up, trying to look through it using the fluorescent bulbs buzzing overhead as a backlight.

"What do you call this? Lenoran?"

"Sir, would you please be careful?"

“Where do these come from anyhow? Lenora?”

Jackman threw his arm over Ben’s shoulder and forced a smile. With his free hand, he grabbed the crystal and set it down on the table.

“Lemurian crystals or Lemurian Star Seeds from the ancient civilization of Lemuria,” said Jackman.

“Huh, it wasn’t as heavy as I thought it’d be. Not much for clarity neither.”

“Well, that’s not really what’s important,” Jackman told him.

“Well, it was nice talking to you,” Ben said, as he threw up a hand, gesturing at a vendor who’d just found it safe to retreat back to the lawn chair stationed behind the table.

Jackman led Ben away from the table, arm still over his shoulder. Ben was wearing one of his “nice” shirts, a sort of chartreuse polo. He would’ve been as at home at an off-track betting parlor as here and Jackman knew that. And by his look, so did many others.

Arthur stared out from behind his modest table and watched a man with an impossibly thick beard wearing a full outfit made of un-dyed linen turn a DVD over in his hands. The man that Arthur had met while making out the check to acquire the booth and the predicament he now found himself in. The booth operator, Xavier – Arthur could see his name in at least a half dozen places – was speaking to him. He looked so confident, both of them did, really. The man tossed the DVD down rather sloppily on the table and Arthur watched the TV playing towards the back of Xavier’s booth. He thought he could make out two people, but all he really saw was a large woman shaking – Arthur

assumed, sobbing – in the grainy footage. It was a small DVD/VCR combo television and Arthur wondered why someone so successful would have such a crappy TV, or at the very least, hadn't converted his VCR tapes into digital.

People began filtering in, slowly and uncertainly. A mountain of a woman at the booth next to Xavier's moved out to the front greeting every single person as they walked by. This looked exhausting. Her name was Mary Jane Sweetwater-Jackson. She wore what Arthur could only describe as a muumuu in a sort of pale yellow. Her gray hair hung down to her waist, unrestrained in any way as it seemed to clamber around her body like creeping vines left untended.

She made eye contact and waved. Arthur immediately looked away in embarrassment. She'd caught him staring, admiring her way with the patrons walking by. He stared at his hands, the chewed, jagged nails. He curled his fingers and sat with his hands in half-fists, smiling at a woman and, Arthur presumed, son, though it could very well have been a young-looking boyfriend who still suffered from acne flare-ups. The probable mother looked at Arthur, looked at his sign advertising his rates: \$15 for twenty minutes, \$25 for a half hour. They were amongst the lowest --though not the absolute lowest-- prices, reflective of Arthur's ability as he saw it. She grabbed the back of the empty chair adjacent to Arthur.

*Don't sit.*

*Don't sit.*

She sat.

Arthur spread out the cards before the woman. She had sent her son off with some money to find a reading of his own, leaving just the two of them at the table. What Arthur

had first heard as a sort of murmur coming from the other vendors and booths had become a roar in his ears.

“Your sign says you are an intuitive tarot reader. What does that mean?”

Arthur cleared his throat. “Well, ma’am, what that means is, is that I use the tarot cards as a starting point, but I’m not bound to them. I use my natural sensitivity and intuition to go further and deeper in your reading than just a regular spreading of the cards would allow.”

She stared at him. Arthur felt crushed by the weight of expectation.

“My name is Arthur,” he said as he extended his hand towards her.

“Eileen.”

“A true pleasure.”

Arthur was turning it on now and he could feel the adrenaline surging in a way that had him focused in ways that he couldn’t quite understand. “As you can see,” he said, grabbing the placard next to him, “these are my rates. Would you be interested in a fifteen or thirty minute session? Of course, we can start with fifteen and go from there as well since I don’t have anyone signed up after you, yet.”

“Let’s do that.”

“Wonderful.”

Arthur desperately tried to remember how this was supposed to begin. He was blank, but tried to keep smiling. He took the Rider-Waite tarot cards and made a pile.

“Please cut the deck.”

Eileen did as requested and Arthur spread out the cards on the table in a swirl.

“Now, what I’ll need you to do is pick, uh, ten cards, please.” Was that the right number? Should he have asked her to pick more, just in case? Now they’d have to go back if he forgot something.

Eileen selected tens cards from the swirl that Arthur was now realizing more resembled a messy pile. The cards were slick as he tried to scoop them together to set aside. The seven of cups and the nine of swords fell onto the floor to the side of the table and Arthur instinctively pulled them under the table with his foot. He looked up and smiled and set the pile off to the corner of the table. “Are you ready to begin?”

He held the ten cards in his hand and tried to remember the order. It had been so easy, automatic even when he sat in his apartment practicing while watching CNN in the evenings. There were four cards that ran lengthwise down the side -- start there. Now, he needed two cards together in the middle. He had four cards left. He needed to organize them around the two main cards in the middle but couldn’t remember if there was an order. If the two cards were the middle of a compass, he set one card where the “N” for north would be, then moved to east, and around until he was out of cards.

There they lay in front of him forming a sort of cross in the middle of the table, with another row lengthwise down the side of the table. He cleared his throat again.

“Most people begin their readings with a question or subject that’s been weighing on them. Do you have such a concern?”

She nodded. “I have concerns, sure. My husband, well, work has been tough.”

Arthur noticed her hands, they were dry and her cuticles cracked.

“I guess I just want to know how things look for us moving forward. This has been a rough couple of months.”

“Let’s see what we can do here. This, this card right in the middle is the Page of Cups, which is good news, but not always, notice how, the ace of cups sits directly behind it?”

She nodded again.

They were off.

Jackman continued through the hall chatting with Ben. They came to a stop at the table of the Reverend Wilburn Lewis. Jackman knew him as a kind-hearted, if unevenly tempered, jack-of-all-trades metaphysician. Rev. Lewis was an ordained minister, certified massage therapist, Reiki healer, tarot reader, licensed family counselor, and an irascible poonhound. He was flawed, certainly, but Jackman found him refreshing from all the stuffier types like Xavier. A nice balance between his cousin, Ben, who knew nothing of these things other than he enjoyed the people, and the Xavier-types who took the craft so seriously that they failed to admire beauty.

The Rev. Lewis was an extra-large man who’d stuffed himself into a large blue and yellow Hawaiian-print shirt. Jackman didn’t need to look to know the Reverend was wearing flip flop sandals and khaki cargo shorts underneath the table he was sitting at. Next to the Reverend’s booth was Xavier, already with someone at his table, speaking softly, box of tissues nearby. Across the way was that same loud tablecloth, and now Jackman noticed the unusual intensity emanating from the man that sat behind it.

Jackman had registered him for the small card-reading space, sure, but he hadn’t known much about this, this, Arthur McGowan -- except that he claimed to be an intuitive tarot reader, and his check for \$250 cleared.

The Rev. Lewis greeted Jackman and Ben as they came up to the table, saying, “Good morning, fellow travelers.”

“Morning,” was muttered by both as Jackman remained focused on the reader at the red table across the aisle. Ben was more quiet for other reasons. On paper, his and Wilburn Lewis’s relationship seemed like a perfect match. In practice, however, their similarities extended often to their romantic lives which were often complicated by the shallow dating pool they both occupied amongst those in the community.

Jackman watched as the man reading tarot grabbed the cards hastily off the table, not even stopping to organize them before setting them to the edge, knocking several onto the ground. So engaged was this reader that he focused on nothing but this woman and the cards she had chosen. He moved from card to card, the manner was unorthodox to Jackman, but it seemed effective. She had hardly broken eye contact and she moved closer and closer, as if he was telling her things that must only be whispered and gestured at. This reader was clearly gifted, though perhaps, a little raw.

Arthur stared at the cards, searching for more meaning, but found that the words didn’t come so easily to him when facing a woman who was clearly in need.

“What all of this is to say, is that you are in possession of creativity, possibly an intense relationship.”

The woman nodded.

“And, I must say, that doesn’t sound like such a bad place to be, often these cards together are the harbinger of good things – and, I haven’t often seen them together like this.”

Arthur was trembling and thinking about how he hadn't pulled these creativity cards for himself before, only knew of them in the abstract.

"I – this is unprofessional – I'm sorry, I don't know what you're going through exactly, but, by the looks of these cards – I'd be happy if that was my problem. It looks like someone cares deeply about you. Possibly your husband?"

Arthur turned over all the cards rapidly. He couldn't remember the order and could only vaguely remember their meaning in each position.

"This is Death, but not in a bad way. It simply signifies the end of something, perhaps a period of struggle, but, again, look at all the love here."

He waved his hands over the cards and thought about how it would be to be in this sort of intense, loving relationship.

"I'm glad the wall is here behind me, after Wild Bill died like he did when we ran together, it unsettles me to sit with my back exposed," said Reverend Lewis.

Ben grunted and said, "You think somebody would get famous from shooting you?"

"Hardly, but, you know, I'm sure there are men out there who could find a reason."

The Reverend Wilburn Lewis could remember in explicit detail nineteen previous lives down to the time and place of his death, the last time he'd had carnal relations with a woman (or man) and what he'd eaten for his last meal. Jackman had spent years hoping to notice some alteration to these past lives, but he had not. Rev. Lewis claimed to have seen Christ in an early life, though not as a disciple, but rather as a fruit-seller whose cart

was ransacked by people eager to throw fruit at the heretic. He claimed to have taken a break from getting cycled through some time in the Dark Ages but had lived more or less continuously in various incarnations since about the 15<sup>th</sup> century. In this life, Wilburn was descended from ranching magnates in Central Texas before posh oil money had pulled him and his many talents toward the coast.

“Meeting Wild Bill was a new revelation for me. What an experience it was learning new details about my life in the Old West.”

“And how’d that come about?” asked Ben.

Jackman could feel Ben shift his weight and move his hands into his pockets.

“Oh, you wouldn’t know her.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t? I know everybody here.”

“Calm down, Benjamin. That’s not how I meant it. I’m no longer interested in this,” Wilburn said, motioning with his arm extended around the exposition hall. “She lives in a cave, just southeast of El Paso right out in Comanche country. Difficult to find, naturally, and only available to those that may be able to avail themselves to her completely.”

Jackman had been only half-listening to the jabbering between Rev. Lewis and Ben. He was trying to understand how the tarot reader, whom he didn’t know and hadn’t seen at any seminars – and Jackman would know because his memory for names and faces was a great source of pride to him, personally – was capable of such electric energy.

He watched as the young man in the wrinkled shirt grow redder in the face as the reading progressed. When the reading had begun, Jackman could see him handling the

cards gently. He'd arranged them in an unorthodox way. It looked like a Celtic Cross spread, but the order in which he arrayed them on the table was out of sequence with what Jackman knew of the tarot. He touched the center cards in the reading first. He turned two over at once, an unusual step.

A woman, he couldn't determine her age, wearing a denim jacket with curly brunette hair sat facing this unusual card reader with her back to Jackman. He saw her bend her head as if she could hear him, then straighten up and shake her head. He watched this cycle repeat several times.

Eventually, all the cards were face up. The tarot reader was gesturing wildly at the cards with both hands and the woman had reached across the table to grab his hands. This settled the man down and he began to speak more calmly it seemed. She conversed with him as she leaned into the table to hear him better, no doubt because of the type of chatter going on next to Jackman at that moment. Yes, this man seemed to have a gift. Jackman hadn't seen this type of emotion and power from a reader in some time. The woman was fully-engaged with whatever he was saying, and, now, nodding in agreement. It was remarkable. Jackman made a note to visit this booth to get to know this man better.

He turned back to the conversation with Ben and the Rev. Lewis, joined by Xavier who had recently finished a reading and was taking a smoke break in their company. He lit a clove cigarette and exhaled a ribbon of blue smoke out his nose, softly.

"I wish you wouldn't do that in here," Jackman said softly, leaning in towards Xavier.

"Oh, relax, would you? Who amongst these people would take offense to my little habit?"

“I’ve never done much past-life shit. Just couldn’t get in the right space, I guess,” said Ben.

“Well, I can’t say I’m surprised,” said Rev. Lewis, “I had the gift quite naturally, but it’s rare to find in others.”

“Talking about past lives again?” asked Xavier, staring out across the room with one arm across his torso the elbow of his other arm resting atop it with a cigarette. Posed like some sort of French model.

That’s when Jackman heard it: a loud sob, almost a wail, if, perhaps, that poor tarot reader hadn’t covered his mouth with his hand. The woman stood up to hug him. They both were crying. This was likely to cause a scene and could’ve disrupted the energy in the entire room. Jackman crossed the aisle and threw an arm around the young man. The woman borrowed Kleenex from an adjacent table and thanked Arthur again.

“Sidney Drake Jackman,” he said, extending his hand.

“I remember you. My name is Arthur.” His face was streaked with tears and he was still red in the face and breathing quite heavily.

“Come. Visit with us for a few moments. Take a break to re-center yourself. You look as though you may be able to use a diversion, if only briefly.”

“Thank you. I’d like that.”

The men arrived back at the table.

“You look like you’ve been off your macrobiotic diet, Wilburn,” said Xavier, “I can nearly see your skin between those buttons, so stretched is the fabric.”

“This again. Always coming back to my weight. Now, clearly none of you suffered the devastation to your metabolism as I did. I had a real childhood. I played

football. Putting on the necessary weight to play on the line, it does terrible things for the body. It shall be my burden forever. This shirt is a large, and I think it fits fine.”

“I don’t think people will have to worry about that much longer. Football is going extinct,” said Arthur, still staring off into the crowd away from the group milling around Rev. Wilburn Lewis’s table.

“Beg your pardon?” asked Ben.

“Science does not make mistakes on this. People will cease to play football.”

Arthur paused. “Science will take away all that we cherish most.”

“What the fuck –ahem, pardon me – are you talking about, uh, Arthur?” asked Jackman.

“Just that science is killing everything around us. It will kill football, too. It is the cycle. That’s why I’m here, to find something deeper.”

Xavier wet his finger and tapped it against the glowing ember of his cigarette, extinguishing it. “No loss here. I don’t much care for sports,” he said.

Ben had been silently observing this but couldn’t contain himself anymore. His balled fists flew out of his pocket and leaned in, spittle flying from his mouth as he said, “Well, of course you wouldn’t you rotten sonofabitch. Everyone look here! The only man in Texas that doesn’t like football. Ain’t anything in the world makes a man out of a boy faster than getting rolled by a senior twice your size because you didn’t have your head on a swivel. But you learn. Keep coming back. Not that you’d know anything about it.”

Rev. Lewis said, “I believe there is something transcendent about concussion. Visions, feelings come easier as the barriers in the brain are eroded. I’ve seen high

schools in West Texas where Oklahoma drills are practically a form of meditation. Seen it with my own two eyes, the power.”

“Is that so?”

“Of course it is.”

Arthur spoke again saying, “I’ve had several.”

Jackman moved closer to Arthur. He knew there was something special and they were finding it right in the moment. It was a wonderful moment.

“And?” asked the Rev. Lewis.

“I don’t guess I feel any closer to knowing anything.”

“Well, how would you know?” asked Xavier.

“I don’t feel like I got anything figured out and if I could see things clearly I don’t guess I’d be here. I came here to understand things I don’t. I thought I could learn by trying to be all of you.”

They all looked at each other.

“Hell, I just come here for the coffee and the conversation,” said Ben.

“It can be difficult to understand. It took me centuries to see it and I can look back now at those moments and laugh, but they were fraught with pain. I remember feeling the pull in my guts, the visions in my dreams as a shepherd in Anatolia in the late 15<sup>th</sup> century.”

“What were the visions?”

“That he needed to fuck another sheep probably. You pervert,” said Ben.

“I learned that fruit is the root of all evil. The devil tempted us with sweets – those are the real killer. Had man no taste for sugar, there would be no evil in the world, all of

us would still be existing in the Garden together. Instead, we have diabetes – a lasting punishment for our base impulses.”

“What?”

Arthur had been anxious walking up to the group, but this conversation was disorienting him further. He sensed an opportunity to interact with these men that he felt had the certainty and gifts that he sought, but he couldn't get the words out. Blackness began to creep in around his vision and his head felt light and unstable, like he'd had too much to drink despite having had nothing at all. He gripped the back of a chair. Christ, Arthur was scared. Scared of the life he might have wasted, what lay out ahead of him. And damn it, someone, here, if anywhere, should have some fucking answers.

“I don't want visions! And I don't want diabetes! I just want to be certain about something, anything, for once in my fucking life! How do I do that?”

The men stared at him and shifted their weight.

“Science can't answer my unhappiness. All you men do is help others and I want to know how you achieve the stability yourself to do that.”

Jackman stared at him and said, “Please, I know you are wide open emotionally right now. When you are as sensitive as yourself, it can be difficult to rein in. I've seen this before.”

“What?”

“You have the gift, son, I see it in you.”

The group assembled all nodded.

“I just want to love and be loved! My life has been vacant, but I need some sort of certainty to move forward! I’m miserable in my job, rote numbers with no feelings. I masturbate nightly in my bathroom, though I never share my living space with anyone else. I feel shame! How do you all love?”

Most of the men looked horrified, but Rev. Lewis smiled and looked around, “Well, son, none of us do it particularly well, I’m afraid. Or we do it very well, so well in fact we have trouble maintaining a steady partner.”

Arthur began slamming his palms on the table so that it bounced as it recoiled off the floor. His wailing was almost certainly drawing attention.

“Why won’t anyone love me?”

“Look, I’ve owned about a hundred different types of pets since I’ve started walking this earth. I’m a damn animal whisperer, though I don’t advertise it.”

“So?” said Arthur pulling at the sleeves of his shirt.

“Why don’t you start there? See if we can’t take this love thing in steps?”

“I’m allergic to birds.”

“Nobody said anything about birds, hell, we’ll get you the opposite. I’ve had hundreds of cats; I can spot your soul mate from across the room. I even bred them for Louis XXV. We’ll head on across the street to the shelter and find you a big, fat tabby cat.”

Arthur looked around. There was a younger man staring at the placard with his prices. He straightened his shirt. “I’d like that very much, Rev. Lewis.”

“Happy to help in the healing.”

The men disbanded and Arthur returned to his table.

“Hello, sir, how may I help you this beautiful day? A reading, perhaps?”

Jackman turned back to the men and nodded, continuing his pilgrimage through the convention hall. He moved back towards those of lesser emotional openness and felt saddened for them. They would be unable to provide the quality of reading that Arthur would because they simply didn't feel like he did. Jackman himself knew he would never feel it either, but he could sense it in others – even tarot readers. Skeptical though he was of them, there were some good ones and he was happy to have met one. Even a believer could have faith renewed.

There was such healing to be offered by those that truly had the gift to feel, however chaotic it could be. Arthur would be all right, he would help those in need. Jackman proceeded through the number readers and chart-handlers, failing to make eye contact with any of them.

## AN ACCUMULATION OF SMALL THINGS

The sweat is starting to weigh my shirt down and it's sticking to me and bunching up. I don't even think it's hot out outside. All I've got it in me to do is sit on a folded towel and hope it soaks up some of the beer I spilled. I want to turn on the TV but can't. The subtitles make me dizzy sick after I've been drinking. I had a good deal to drink. Ellen, my wife, should be home in a couple of hours and I'm thinking this might be it – the end, that is. She told me she couldn't take me being an idiot anymore. She's been telling me I need to get right for a while, but I just can't seem to make anything good I do stick.

Small stuff has a way of accumulating into bigger problems, and I know that. I fancy myself a bit of a historian. I didn't graduate from college, but I've taken it upon myself to learn some things. For example, I know that World War I started because Franz's Ferdinand's driver didn't know the directions for their drive. One wrong turn, a guy coming out of a sandwich shop and boom: The Archduke is dead. Move ahead a couple of years and ten million people are dead, just like that. And a guy can look back and think, "If only that damn driver had known his way around Sarajevo, maybe it would've saved a lot of people dying."

Given history like that, and the consequence of something so small, it would make sense that the number of stolen pre-1986 machine guns stashed in the closet -- and the fact that I'm such a fuck up I can't help falling asleep on our new sofa without spilling a full beer on it – would doom what's left of my marriage to Ellen. I can't stand

to lose her and just the thought of it makes me sick at night and I toss and turn with that sort of sad adrenaline that comes with knowing the end is close and inevitable. The thing is, I need her more than she needs me and she knows that. So, she's always telling me – warning, really – that I need to fly right. I need to get my act together. I'm a boy in man's body, says she. I need to cut out the drinking. I need to stop prowling the internet for WWII memorabilia and other crap at gun shows.

Last week, she told me she wants a partner. Says that I'm not. We haven't had children because Ellen told me she's just never felt that maternal, but I know she's feeling like she's my mother sometimes and I'm eat up with guilt over feeling like that. All her mothering is on me, how could we have a kid?

I'm worried that if she's gone, I'll just wind up alone in an apartment full of shit like the old man, DeWitt Lawson, who I maybe robbed. Except I wouldn't even have any kids to tell people what a piece of shit I was. I'll just be gone.

The thing is, I should've just gone to bed when I got home, after I unloaded all the guns. Ellen was at work, I could've been good. Hell, I was stone sober when I got home. I could've taken my boots off at the door like she likes for me to do. I could've cleaned myself up. I could've laid there -- juiced on adrenaline like I was -- in bed and tried to sleep and I could've gotten up in the morning feeling tired, but satisfied in my decision-making. But I didn't do any of that. I was too pumped up to even remember to kick my boots off to save tracking dirt through the house, and I sure didn't go shower. I sat right down on the couch in my grubbies – my work clothes – and popped more than one beer, fell asleep and woke up with this awful stain underneath. A full can of Bud Light deposited neatly in a pile underneath me, soaking in while I slept.

I get off the couch and survey the stain. It isn't terrible, but it sure ain't good. But this isn't really about the stain, is it? What I need to do is quit with all this, gather up the empties I've set down next to the couch and throw them out in the trash on the driveway. There's some newspaper on the table, and my first thought is to try and soak the liquid up with that, but, of course I start unfolding it and think: there might be some work in here. Work that pays more than the margins of a Mauser replica that I'm trying to pass as the real deal to a father outside Port Lavaca who's just in it to impress his son and his kid's girlfriend with his worldliness and so forth. I'm going to need real work since this property management thing isn't going to work out. I can't trust myself after this fiasco to be the safe keeper of anything. Hell, I can't even keep my marriage together. What am I doing managing all these properties around town?

Ellen has routinely voiced her discomfort with the armory I've slowly been amassing in the spare bedroom. I need to tidy up in there, move the stack of machine guns off the bed, into the closet. Hell, I need a gun safe, but we can't afford that. There's an ugly old quilt in there I could wrap everything up in to make it look a little more inconspicuous. A gift from her grandmother, but I can't think of any other use for a quilt like that. It's the type of fabric that's a little too thick for the fall, but it doesn't provide any real heat in the winter, either. I'm fully in the throes of paralysis, see? And all I'm really thinking about is what I should be doing, without actually doing any of it. I envy a man that possess a real fight-or-flight instinct. Even if he's wrong and he fights when he should flight, at least he's in action. Meanwhile, I can't do anything except think and wait to apologize to my wife when she gets up. The TV is black and my reflection comes

through from across the room, backlit from the kitchen light. I move so I don't have to watch my constant failure.

When me and Ellen were first going, I thought I had a good gig. I really did. Ellen, then was a waitress at sort of a trendy joint – the type where people throw peanut shells on the ground, but in a nice, chic way, not like those shitty dumps in Oklahoma with floors that never get swept. But I didn't meet here there. We met – the first time – at a diner next door to there when she was counting tips. I was having a slice of pie and some coffee, and when I saw her – it was the way she moved her dirty blonde hair behind her ear, and had her legs crossed with her toe sort of bouncing in the air – I couldn't look away. I had been dating someone at the time, but I had to talk to Ellen. Couldn't leave without saying something, which isn't like me at all.

She was sitting there on the counter with a stack of singles, turning and facing them all in the same direction and I sat down right next to her, and knew I'd better speak up quick.

She looked slantwise at me as soon as I sat down and clattered my plate and silverware on the green formica countertop.

I wiped my sweaty hands on my khaki workpants.

“You rob a strip joint to get all them singles? I bet nobody'd suspect a robber wearing an apron like that.”

I don't even think she looked at me again, just picked up her things, left cash even though the server hadn't brung the bill, and walked out.

It wasn't until I saw her again, when I was fishing out at Bob Hall pier a month or so later, that I got to know her. She was just sitting there, looking around like she was lost and I pulled a beer out of my cooler and walked it over to her.

"I tried to meet you before, but I was so nervous, I just said stupid things. I'm Bobby."

"I'm Ellen."

"You want a beer or something?"

She took the beer and told me she was meeting some folks, but they didn't end up showing. So I showed her how to bait a hook and we caught three redfish.

Our first date I fried those fish up for us.

We moved in pretty quick with each other, as far as that goes, but I knew right away she was what I'd been missing. See, I've always been handy. I can fix about anything and that's how I got my job as a property manager of sorts. Thing is, I always needed a sort of overbearing boss to stay on me about what I needed to do, because I'm naturally lazy. Ellen did that for me, but in our personal life, and I loved it. The structure, you see. The idea that I was doing things that she wanted that made her happy. Because that made me happy. I'd wake up with a list of things to do on my day off and I'd spend the whole day at it if I needed to. In one summer, I redid all our sprinklers and got them to cover the places that were always brown, fully painted the house inside and out, and pulled up the shitty old shag carpet and polished the wood floor underneath it.

I loved those lists and the way she made me feel important. We were really in love then, and if there was trouble I didn't see it. I just saw a good day's work and a cold beer and us naked in the hammock at night. Can't think of anything better.

At some point though, I guess I just ran out of things to do around the house, though. Ellen finally got a job as a nurse once she finished school and that left me more time alone in the evening since nurses are always starting off on graveyard. I was having trouble falling asleep without her. So, when she started with those shifts, I'd stay up late watching the Military Channel, drinking beer – sometimes a glass or two of whiskey. Liquor seemed to be sinking its hooks deeper into me and that was something Ellen had been making me increasingly aware of. I was also developing an increasing fascination with history, especially the guns and warfare stuff. Anything on the World Wars – one or two – and I couldn't stop watching.

Then, DeWitt Lawson died in that dumpy old apartment on Alameda. I'd been working –still am, technically, but not for much longer – for a nationwide rental agency as the lone property guy down here in Corpus. Economy being what it was – is – with the housing market going busto, the company I work for wasn't too interested in what I've been doing except making sure nobody complained too much, and have me check-in if the money stopped coming in. Well, DeWitt's checks stopped coming. I'd met him a few times servicing the A/C, and he was polite, had a lot of interesting things around his place that I'd wanted to talk to him about but hadn't. I went to knock on the door: nothing.

I called an emergency contact, his daughter.

“Hi, my name is Bobby Hendricks, I manage the apartment complex your fath —”

“He’s not my father. We haven’t spoken in ten years since my mother died.”

“Well, I’m sorry to hear that, but the thing is, he ain’t paid rent this month, and I haven’t been able to get in touch with him.”

“He’s probably spent it all on those whores, and he’s avoiding you. He’ll turn up.”

“Well, I’m not so sure.”

“Well, for what it’s worth, I hope he doesn’t.”

Then she hung up on me. Just like that.

I went over there again a couple days later. I knocked on the door, knocked on the windows, and generally tried to snoop to see if I could find anything. It looked like maybe the TV was on because there was blue light flickering on a wall. I walked out into the grassy area and looked at the little apartment from a distance. I thought about cops, but then they’d want paperwork, of course, and who knows what would happen to the old man if his daughter wouldn’t even claim him. I had the keys and I thought maybe I’d just peek in and see if he was dead or just ducking me. At that point I wasn’t really sure. But, I’ll tell you, as soon as I cracked the door I was sure. That old man smelled like a dumpster that had been filled up and left in the sun for a week. As soon as I opened that door and caught a whiff, I’d shut it to run out on the grass to gag and heave. I looked around and the complex was quiet. It was mostly Mexicans, anyways, and they must’ve been mostly at work.

I pulled my t-shirt up from under my work shirt and pulled it up over my face and nose and tried again. I was breathing through my mouth, but I still retched a couple times

as I walked in the door, like I could taste the stink. I shut the door behind me and flipped on a light. There wasn't much to Lawson's apartment. He didn't have a thing hanging on the walls, the TV was stuck on Fox News, and his foot was hanging off the edge of a brown recliner. I circled around to face him, and even though I could smell that he'd been dead for a while, I rocked the chair with my foot.

“Hey, Mr. Lawson? You all right?”

He was gray, and his mouth was locked up, but open, and his head was sort of tilted to the side, almost on his shoulder. If it hadn't been for his color, smell, or rigor, you might've thought he was just having a nap while Sean Hannity screamed at America on the TV.

I moved around his apartment, trying to be quiet, though I can't explain why. There's just that sort of reverence a person has for dead people, like, at any moment he might just wake up and ask me what the hell I'm doing in his apartment. I walked into the kitchen and opened the fridge: French's mustard, a package of hot dogs, and Natural Light. I grabbed a beer. I walked into the back bedroom. No pictures or decorations anywhere. He had a twin bed in the corner and it was made up military style. The sheets were so tight, it didn't look like anybody had ever even slept in the bed, almost like a display in a museum or something about how beds were made up in barracks.

I opened up the bedroom closet and looked inside: A couple of pressed white t-shirts hanging, some button-ups, two M16A2 rifles in the corner, a Tommy gun, a Nazi helmet, and a Hitler Youth dagger.

It wasn't the volume of weapons necessarily that impressed me, but I'll tell you right now, from browsing forums at night while Ellen is asleep, I know that those M16s

are worth about about thirty-five thousand dollars apiece due to the NFA that outlawed all automatic weapons made after 1986. I walked back into the living room and kicked the chair again and more smells emerged from the old man and I wretched again.

I walked outside and sat in my truck and thought about how there was maybe a hundred thousand dollars' worth of guns in that old man's closet. I started the engine. Then I turned it back off.

“The hell with it.”

I walked back into the apartment, grabbed some towels out of the bathroom closet and laid all the guns down on the floors and wrapped them up. I grabbed a trash bag from under the counter and put the helmet and dagger inside. I took a washcloth and tried to wipe everything down that I touched in there, threw the beer can in the trash bag also. I grabbed everything up, locked the door behind me and threw everything in the back of my truck all casual. Just like that.

By the time I started the engine though, my damn hands were shaking and I craved a cigarette like I hadn't in years since I quit. I was like week two of my quit all over again. That old man was sitting on a gold mine, didn't have a kid that would speak to him and he died all alone in there with nobody except me to even miss him. And now I was rich.

I drove around for quite a while after that, must've been about five and I knew Ellen would be getting up to go to work soon, so I just kept driving. I called her and told her that I was dealing with an emergency: washing machine that was backing up and that I was waiting to meet with a plumber and I didn't know if I'd be home before she went to work.

At about nine or so at night, I figured it was probably safe to drive on back home. I walked in and put everything in the closet in our back bedroom. Flipped on the TV and paced around, tracking dirt everywhere because I forgot to take my boots off at the door like an idiot. By the time I settled into our new couch with a beer I had the Military Channel on and they were talking about how maybe Hitler got away into South America or some such crazy thing, but I wasn't really paying attention. Instead, I was still smelling that dead old man on me, like it was in my nose or something. I thought it was my shirt, but every time I'd sniff something, it just smelled like, well, laundry detergent and sweat, but when I pulled away, it was that same rotten smell.

At some point, after a few more beers, I fell asleep.

Now, I'm awake and I'm staring at the mess I've made. I got several years in prison worth of stolen shit in the closet, Ellen still isn't home and I got a stain on our brand new couch that I got to get cleaned up in the next couple of hours or I'm going to have too many things going wrong all at once, and she might just tell me it's time for us to quit trying to make it work. And, all I'm really thinking about is how, in that moment she leaves me, I'm going to wind up in a dump apartment because I can't afford anything better, just like Lawson, and I'm never going to be able to unload these guns because I don't hold a title on any of them and I don't know if he did or not.

First things first. She won't know about the guns unless I tell her. I need to fix this couch. The newspaper is already out there, but I move to paper towels. I unroll the whole thing and fold it into a large sheet and start pressing down. I'm nervous and sweat is

practically dripping off my nose. I look at the clock in the kitchen: midnight. I got a little time before I end up alone.

I get some spot cleaner and start on the edges of the brown stain, moving inward, but the stain is already dried and set in and I got to scrub it but the paper towels are just balling up and making a bigger mess. I grab some scrubber sponges from under the sink and try that, but now all that's happening is a faint, green tint.

At this point I turned the TV off, I need no distractions from this. I practically ran into the kitchen again looking for supplies. Bleach. The couch is pure white, bleach will help this. In my increasing panic, I don't even think to dilute it, I just run over and pour some straight from the bottle onto the couch and start scrubbing away.

After a half hour, I don't have the rotten smell in my nose anymore and I can't tell if I'm dizzy from the beer hitting me or lack of food. All I can smell is bleach. My house smells like a prison hospital and I'm a damn bad orderly I'll tell you. Another roll of paper towels to soak it up.

I can't even lift them up to look if the stain is lifted. I just pace around.

Now, I could spend a lot of time, talking about how maybe I did lift up the paper towel. And when I did, I realized that the couch wasn't in fact pure white. So, in my haste I began wiping down the rest of the couch with bleach trying to make it uniform. But none of that matters and, is, frankly embarrassing because when the deadbolts gets thrown open in a house that is completely quiet, you hear it. And when you're slick from bleach up the elbows: you're fucked. Suddenly a whole image of your life starts fast-forwarding through your mind like you're watching a movie on an old VCR and I say

that because my ears were buzzing I was so nervous, just like that. There I am, with a fridge with nothing much in it, I got a bed that's a mess because I don't have any discipline and then someday I die, but I maybe don't even have anyone to contact because I couldn't keep a wife and I couldn't ever get her feel settled enough for kid. And I know that's the real reason she says she doesn't want children.

Ellen walks in, home early, and she actually -- for a brief moment -- looked like she was happy to see me. I saw the corner of her mouth raise up as I jerked my head to peek around the wall as she came in. And that smile evaporates and she says -- and she rarely curses: What in the fuck are you doing?

“Well, I made a bit of a mess on the couch, and I'm sorry, baby, and I know you been mad at me and I'm trying to not be a fuck-up, but I just can't help it, and if you could ever find it in yourself to appreciate the amount of effort and strain I've gone through to clean this goddamn couch -- that we never Scotchguarded because you thought it wasn't necessary -- and look at it as an act of love in the way that some people bake a cake or crochet a placemat, I would appreciate it.”

“Wha -- Why are you doing that to the couch? Why is the bleach out? My eyes are burning, Bobby.”

“I just -- I made a stain on accident, here. And I saw a dead guy and I knew that you haven't been in love with me like you used to and I know that little things can all build up to big things. And here I stand, on the precipice of that moment where I die alone and nobody even knows about it, like DeWitt Lawson.”

“I don't have any idea what you're talking about. Just come here.”

I went to her and she held me like I was a child. I held her like I hadn't since we'd first made love, when I was so nervous that my breath came out shaky. My breath was shaking in that moment.

I could feel her looking over my shoulder and finally Ellen said, "This is a fucking mess, Bobby. I'll make you a list of things to do in the morning, but in the meantime, lets grab a blanket go out to the hammock. I'm too tired for this tonight."

"You know what? Don't worry about making up a list. I'll take care of it, unless you're looking for something particular."

I grabbed a blanket from the closet and met her outside. She was waiting for me out there in our beautiful backyard, with the planter boxes I'd built a few years ago and the grass I maintain meticulously.

## THE PANTY INCIDENT OF SPRING, 2006

I'm not typically a man inclined towards answering the door when the doorbell rings. In fact, I'm more the type of man who is naturally inclined to freeze in place like some sort of lizard, hoping I blend in, hoping that the presumed threat at my door will sense that the TV is on much too loudly for anyone to be home and that it is an elaborate show and that this presumed threat at my door will have to move along, hopefully to Merv and Ellen's house next door. Thus was the case the night that the first pair of panties arrived on our doorstep.

The bell rang and I was watching the news, feverishly writing down stock names; stocks I needed to be buying according to the bald man on MSNBC. That I'd never, in fact, bought any stocks though I've long had an E\*TRADE account with five hundred dollars loaded in it which I treat as more of a savings account, is not important. What is important is that I was busy, and that I don't like answering the door at night. A fear I've held for years too long, though it is not pathological like it was in my youth when I used to have hobbies that included dragging a chair to the door so that I could observe the outside world through a peephole and turning off all the lights inside so that I could look out the windows at night to check for possible child murderers.

So when the bell did ring, you see I was busy with the news and so forth and so I called out to my wife Louise, "Can you get the door? I'm in the middle of something." And I was met with silence. I waited long enough that I thought any possible home intruders would've grown impatient before I set down my pen and paper, lowered the volume on the TV and traversed across the living room to check the door. When I got

there, I slowly opened the door to reveal a pair of crumpled panties set right there on the stoop. Now, not knowing what to make of this -- and really, how do you explain it? -- I walked them out to the trash in the driveway, opened up a bag inside and buried them. Then I looked down the street in both directions. Nothing save for Merv's -- that's my neighbor -- house music which was at a tolerably low level, something he'd been acutely careful of since the last HOA meeting.

I sat back down in my recliner, facing the TV, and wondered if I'd missed the big-stock-tip-of-the-century. I leaned my head back and thought about what kind of sickos would leave panties at the door as a prank. Surely this person didn't realize the type of marital distress something such as that would cause my wife. Round and round have we gone before about why there is a long hair in the bed and she would not be persuaded by my telling her it was simply the dog who was badly in need of a groomer. I slept on the couch that week during the dog hair incident. I wouldn't chance it during the panty incident.

Louise woke me. It was still dark and I said, "That price is ridiculous -- who would pay for such a thing?"

Louise said, "What?"

I pointed to the TV and there was a man smashing his hand on top of a contraption filled with onions, chopping them to tiny bits. "That," I said, "what a ridiculous contraption." It was a contrived response. I'd been thinking about it for months, and I was impressed I was finally able to use it and show Louise that I wasn't simply sleeping on the recliner to avoid going to bed.

"You're out here, at this time, watching infomercials?"

“Well, yeah.” My response had fallen apart.

“Come to bed, Arnie.”

“Yeah.” She drug her feet across the carpet back towards the bedroom, but I took my time. I wrote down the number for the chopping machine and set it in the side pocket of my recliner with all of the other notes I left about stocks and other kitchen gadgetry.

Then I followed her, eventually, to bed.

It bothered me though, the panties. I wished that I had saved them for more examination and that panic hadn't enveloped my lizard brain, causing me to take them immediately to the trash to avoid any sort of possible conflict with Louise. I couldn't even remember the size. Where they familiar to me? Panties I'd seen before? It'd been years since I'd seen panties on anyone else except for Louise. I threw myself in my work, my hobbies, to try and avoid thinking about what kind of a person would leave a pair of panties on the doorstep of a married man. God forbid Louise had answered. Would've been a chorus of, “I just think it's funny how,” then she would've filled it in creatively like, “those get dropped off right when you start having to work late.” And that would've been a ridiculous argument because I scrupulously save my office hour punch-outs for particularly that sort of conversation.

There were other issues as well though that had been driving me into MSNBC and the shed out back. Louise had become sort of critical of me in ways I didn't really appreciate. She was critical in ways that made our relationship lack the intimacy maybe it used to have. Which is to say that we probably hadn't had sex in a full fiscal quarter, or so. When we were younger, like many couples, I simply could not get enough of her.

Wherever we were in the house, I'd just see her and want her and she wanted me. None of this had yielded any children, on my account, mostly. Weak swimmers is what I'd call them, but it wasn't ever anything that important to us in the early years. We were simply so in love with each other that it seemed crazy to have to share that love with another.

The criticism of me started sort of soft. When we first got together, even the first few years we were married she would say things like, "Aw, I love your little belly, Arnie." But that turned into a conversation about how maybe I needed to get shirts that fit a little bit better, or maybe I needed to drink less beer, or how about after I got a raise we could afford for me to get to the gym.

Those conversations made me reticent towards intimacy. Ruined it really. And I know this isn't fair to Louise, it's simply a rut that couples seem to go through, but it can be difficult to see clearly when you're submerged like we were in that rut. Soon enough, that turned into, "We never have sex anymore." And I'm sorry if that didn't just rev my engines right up and hop into the sack. Also, I'm not eighteen anymore, so there's that.

The other things occupying my time besides the usual television diversions were that I'd been woodworking – custom cutting boards and small tabletops cut in the shape of Texas or various counties, congressional districts and so forth, within the state. I'd been taking my wares down to the flea market and figuring my hourly as that of a journeyman carpenter (which I am not) and the supplies (which were mercifully inexpensive otherwise I'd never hear the end of it) I'd been managing to cover my hourly costs and I hoped that given more time I could be more efficient to allow for increased profits. I was hoping to have enough money to buy a more professional set-up as my

current rotary saw only allowed for me to craft very thin tabletops and that's where the big money was – tabletops.

I had just finished up a cutting board in the shape of Hardin County which anyone will tell you is not easy with the crooked southern and western edges like they are. I got done and was wiping the saw dust off my arms, but it was sticking like usual because if there wasn't a thousand percent humidity here it wouldn't be East Texas. I mean to say, I was distracted looking at my arms when I stepped on something as I came out of the shed and onto the concrete slab. I thought that maybe the dog had shit right there outside the door, and that would've been just typical. But it wasn't a shit, it was another pair of panties. This time a red pair with a sort of lace around the edges. I grabbed them up and looked around the yard. I went back into the shed and grabbed a flashlight, scanning for footprints like some sort of man-hunter. I looked over the fence on all sides, looking for any sort of disturbance. Of course, the only thing I disturbed was Merv, who had a bunch of rocks laid out in a pattern and was walking around dressed like an Indian. He said, "Jesus, Arnie, what's with that military flashlight? Just come knock on the door if you want in on this crystal cleanse."

I did not want a crystal cleanse. I wanted to know who kept leaving panties.

"Hey, Merv, you hear anybody or see anybody walking through my yard?"

"How could anybody hear anything in your yard when you've got that saw and AC/DC blasting in that shed? And that reminds me that I need to tell you that quiet hours, per the HOA, begin at 9 p.m. on weekdays."

"Shut up."

I went back and looked around the shed for a place to stash the panties. I didn't want to wonder "what if" like the last pair and now that I was satisfied this wasn't isolated, I needed to be careful.

Things resumed as usual. I mean, I was still a little worried that the toolbox in the shed wasn't a great stash spot, and I kept thinking that I'd go off to work and the one damn time in five years that we'd been together that she decided to hang a picture or tighten a screw somewhere. At the same time, I had to take my chances. Nowhere is completely safe in a shared living space, it's just a pure numbers game about getting exposed.

Louise had sort of been getting softer, too, with what was a near constant barrage of criticism. It had slowed to more of a trickle. I'd been changing, too. The invasion of my space like that, right into my backyard, had forced me to padlock the shed. An action that I'd thought ridiculous under normal circumstances. I was also much quicker to the door. There were times where we'd be watching TV in the evening and I'd just stand up and preemptively get close to the door and just wait, listening for sounds outside. One night when I was doing that, Louise said, "What're you doing over there?"

"Nothing. I just thought I heard something. I been thinking maybe there's been people getting into the backyard."

"Really?"

"Yeah, last week there was – I thought someone was in the backyard while I was coming out of the shed."

“It was probably just Merv doing some weird shit in his back yard. Come sit back down.”

Commercials were over and I wanted to see who the killer was on TV, so I went and sat back down in my recliner.

By the time I found the third pair I was looking at the most economical ways to secure the house, put out cameras and recording devices. Somebody was invading my privacy and they were doing it in the type of way that was going to upset my wife and, in turn, upset the balance of my life, which would be upsetting to me.

I found them in the door handle of my car before I went to work, nearly two weeks after the first pair appeared on my doorstep. This time there was a note attached that read: “COME GET ME.” How could I when I didn’t even know what the hell was going on? Some sick bastard was playing games with me, I was sure of it.

Maybe this is a good time to discuss some of my work relationships. I’ll tell you straight off: they are completely above-board. At the time, there was a recently divorced woman named Erin, however. I should back up by saying that I’m quite happy at my job. I sell wine. Everywhere that sells alcohol needs wine and I give it to them. My job requires an amount of finesse that I probably lack at home, but I travel sometimes with my co-workers and we have drinks at new bars, as is expected. Me and Erin were spending a decent amount of time together is what I’m saying. And I’d be lying if I said I hadn’t thought about what it would be like to have more than a drink with her, and I’d suspected based on her offers to go out, that maybe she wondered the same. I was feeling guilty, even though I don’t think I could’ve helped but been attracted to her. She just

seemed interested in me, and not sexually. She just liked to talk. When I told her about my carving, she just listened intently, asked questions. It was something that had been lacking with me and Louise: engagement. Anyways, those thoughts probably clouded my judgment. As Nietzsche would say, I'm human, all too human.

Anyhow, I scanned the neighbors across the street. I'd never spoken to them in the two years since we'd moved in. My interactions had been limited to a series of averted gazes by both parties, though I'll admit I was usually to blame, and HOA letters about the appropriate colors of trim for a house, what sort of plant life was acceptable to grow, noise ordinances, and all that. When I go out to my car in the morning or I'm doing lawn work, I'm not out there to chat. I do not find that unusual. An unfortunate byproduct of this, perhaps strained relationship with the neighbors is that I don't know any of them - save Merv -- well enough to actually fit any of them into the psychological profile I'd constructed.

I couldn't place the handwriting. It was done with care -- that much was clear -- but it wasn't one that I recognized. Though, who would write a note in a hand that I could recognize if they weren't even sticking around to see their panty-drop through to my reception? This was problematic. As was the intent of the note. Clearly the panty-leaver was playing with me. I was a deliberate target and the message of torment was made clear by the note. I drove to the office to spend the day agonizing about the damn panties, instead of the usual driving around and ordering that I normally handled. I just had my clients call it in, told them I wasn't feeling well. I spent most of the day researching how to use cornstarch to draw fingerprints off of something and, also, cursing myself for so badly contaminating the scene of the crime: the door handle of my Toyota Corolla. I

didn't get any of the paperwork faxed to the warehouse that I was supposed to, and I made no progress on the harassment training packet I'd volunteered to put together. I simply researched forensic techniques and home security devices on the internet.

Louise called me while I was on my lunch, which incited a slight amount of panic only because it was so unlike her. She was just calling to say hello, tell me about her morning and so on since I'd left so early. I was relieved to hear her say that, that she hadn't noticed the damn panties and the damn note attached to them that were consuming my waking hours.

I went home early, shortly after lunch, to see if there were any more panties around the house and do some preliminary planning for the security cameras that I was planning to install. I needed to cover the maximum amount of area with the fewest cameras, so it was important that I found the most efficient sightlines possible around the property. After I got done with that, deciding that I needed three cameras, I went inside to have a beer and relax before Louise came home.

I must have fallen asleep because I woke up and Louise was behind the recliner, running her long nails through my hair like when we first started dating years ago.

She leaned in and said, "Did you get my note?"

I shot up in the recliner. "Note?"

"Yeah, I thought maybe you needed a little convincing since the first couple hints didn't work."

"Wait, what?"

"What have you been doing with them?" She leaned in again and said, "Have you been keeping them and thinking about me?"

I stood up. “So that was you with the note on the doorhandle?”

She laughed like it was totally obvious. “Of course it was me. I know things have been a little weird lately so I was just trying to stoke the fires so maybe you’d come back to me a little.”

I stood up from the couch and put my arms around her waist, leaned in and kissed her. She kissed me back and it felt good, like it used to before we got so distracted by everything else that we forgot about each other. She took my hand and walked me back to the bedroom, where we laid down on the bed. She was unbuttoning my shirt when she said, “What did you do with all the other panties that I’d been leaving around for you? Have you been hiding them somewhere?”

I pulled away a little, not sure how to explain my responses to previous panty discoveries. I said, “What?”

“The other panties. Where is the blue pair? They were my favorite, but I saw an article while I was at the store the other day. You know, one of those ‘how-to-rekindle-the-spark’ type of things. It said that leaving panties around might make you think of me without them, turn you on.”

“Oh? The blue ones? Wait. Think about you without them on?” The first pair on the doorstep was blue. The pair I’d thrown away. “Oh, I, uh, maybe, got rid of those.”

“What? Why?”

“Well because I didn’t know they were yours! I thought somebody was playing a trick on me or something. That’s a ridiculous thing to do, leaving panties around. Why wouldn’t you just call me back to the bedroom or something?”

“You don’t recognize your own wife’s panties? I was trying to rekindle the spark, damn it!”

“Well, it was panties though. I’m sorry my first inclination wasn’t to think that they were yours! We haven’t been romantic like that in a while. What with work and everything else going on.”

“Who else would be leaving panties? We don’t have that much going on, anyways, Arnie.” She was upset.

“I just felt weird about asking you about panties. What if they weren’t yours, then you’d think they were somebody else’s maybe.”

“Oh, so that’s what you were worried about? Guilty conscience slowing you down, Arnie?”

“Wait, hold on, that’s not what I was saying.”

“You think: panties on the doorstep, don’t know who they’re from, better conceal it. That’s not normal! Who is she?”

“Who’s who?”

“The other person whose panties you thought they were.”

“Nobody, there’s nobody else.”

“Mmmhmm.” She had her hands on her hips and she was staring at me. She was off the bed, sizing me up.

“What?”

“Oh, nothing,” was all that she said before she went into the bathroom and shut the door. I heard the water running for a bath I wasn’t invited to.

I walked back to the living room and turned on the TV and moved it to MSNBC. I needed to get some stock tips since this whole panty debacle had disrupted everything. I wondered what I had missed. I was anxious, still, but it was the familiar kind again. Next time, I'd be ready.

## BURNING LOVE

He was thirty-seven, a masterfully self-educated pyrotechnician, and he had not pulled off the finale that would convince Diana she'd made the wrong decision. He had raised and spent a fortune, enough to do something noble in Africa, perhaps, trying to impress her with his patriotic zeal and the way he controlled fire in ways akin to a Greek god. His name was Henry Gano, though to most in town he went, unfortunately, by the name "Mud."

He had some of everything, it seemed like. That's what the man at the Alamo Fireworks Megastore had assured him for the last three years running, just like the Mexican on the other side of Progreso who promised him some of the commercial jobbers stored in his garage. But sometimes the wet salt air would spoil the powder, they'd say the day after, maybe that was why they didn't go off like planned. The Mexican who had sold him the mortars two years back he had not heard from again, even though Mud's anger would be legitimate by any standard considering that one of the mortars, and thank Christ it was the last on the rack, blew out, not up, shattering the windows of his truck and giving all of his food a sort of metallic taste for weeks after.

Mud had paid good money for these fireworks, though. He may have been fooled once or twice, but he had learned from those mistakes.

Nothing else would go wrong.

It wouldn't be like the first time, three years ago when the whole fiasco had started, when he was still thoroughly lovesick and unthinking. The Fourth of July had been a favorite holiday of theirs, Mud and Diana. Mud remembered sitting in his boat, the

two of them cuddled up next to each other as fireworks popped and shimmered over the water.

That first year he'd solicited the money carefully; bought all the supplies; and met with the manager of the Megastore, Gerald, to plan the script so that it would be breathtaking as "I Will Always Love You" played in the penultimate volley of fireworks just before the finale was sent up to Lee Greenwood's "Proud to be an American." But, like Mike Tyson said about boxing -- everyone has a plan until they get punched in the mouth -- so too did this plan of Mud's go awry. Some morning beers had given way to afternoon whiskey and the CD playing "their" song began and soon after began to skip as it climbed towards the finale. This caused no small amount of panic as Mud lit all of the remaining fireworks to a halting, skipping Whitney Houston blaring on borrowed speakers just as the track climbed to a crescendo before abruptly the music cut. Mud, heartbroke, left the rigging out for days before David, his best friend, and David's wife, Dolly, had brought it back to Mud's house sometime in mid-July.

But she had missed all of it.

*She* was Diana Foster, formerly Gano, before the sonofabitching doctor came and seduced her right out from underneath him. Diana came from solid stock up north, a winter Texan who fell in love and stayed. She had made Mud happy. Deliriously so at times.

They used to go fishing early in the mornings. She'd wake him up and tell him she had a "good feeling" and they'd run the boat out to the flats where Mud would stand up on the console and scan the water looking for redfish while Diana cast out blindly, laughing and smiling. Often, she'd be the one with the fish and Mud loved her even more

for it. He'd tell himself, and her if she asked, why he never did very well out there with her: because he'd stand on the console and just watch her cast out; sometimes he wouldn't look for a fish for fifteen minutes at a time. He'd be too busy being happy at Diana's own simple happiness as she strained to toss her topwater lure out farther and farther. It was in those moments that Mud could see his whole life come together. All of the things that made him happy, all together, all at once.

He quit drinking for two years when they fell in love, which so happened to be about 700 days better than his previous sobriety record before they'd met. She saw potential in him is what she'd told him. With her help, he was able to buy clothes somewhere other than the Academy Sporting Goods store. She thought him a considerate lover, perhaps her most considerate, before she met Dr. Foster. This also, she told him.

Mud had eschewed electric timers and rigs with computer software to assist in timing the music to the launch of fireworks. He trusted his instincts. That he'd been planning this display for three years, experienced two abortive fireworks shows, and thought of little else through the rest of the year, was enough for him. He received a monthly newsletter from the American Fireworks News and he contributed frequently to online forums assisting others. He knew that the show would go off as planned tonight, that his hands could be trusted, and that it would mean more if a computer didn't do it all for him.

Gathering supplies was a year-round affair. In South Texas, there is no shortage of patriotic fervor, and, despite recent shortcomings, nobody else had volunteered in Mud's stead to handle the Fourth of July fireworks. This was especially pertinent given

the City Council's decision to suspend funding for displays anywhere in town other than out near where the USS Lexington is docked on a concrete slab for middle schoolers to tour. That was over the bridge and people on the Island had no time for that, so they paid money to Mud who kept scrupulous records of expenses. Handwritten ledger notes awaiting audit at any time. He imagined that if he saw Diana again, she'd be impressed by the records. She was always the organized one, after all.

Mud had some close calls. After he watched a father take the last Horsetail Barrage, a key component to the middle section of the display -- which would work in chorus with the My Favorite Martian cake and Gold Lightning that were already stored away ready for use -- Mud trailed the man and his children with his shopping cart; and as they ogled firecrackers, he quietly removed the Horsetail Barrage setup out of the man's cart. While he was checking out, he could see the man, his bald head sweating, face red, accompanied by children crying.

What you must know, though, is that Mud was no idiot. He had been a running back at Flour Bluff High School. Time had added a few extra pounds to his gut, but he still felt quick on his feet. His brown hair had a natural curl and when he could be bothered to shave he looked like a man ten years younger.

At every construction site he had worked since his early twenties, he was the man in charge of the crew. Mostly carpentry these days, though when he was younger he did lesser work: drywall hanging, some painting. This was a skill useful in building out the frames and rigging to accommodate the various devices that constituted his firework display.

In the spring prior to the big show, Mud had taken some mortars to his Uncle's derelict fishing cabin in the upper Laguna Madre. He was trying a new quick-chain method of linking the fuses together to blow them in sequence. Because Mud didn't enjoy running his boat at night, he'd gone in the early morning to set them off. They didn't go off as he'd planned -- something wrong with the fuses, he was sure -- and so he tried again. And again. In a frenzied hour he'd launched nearly one hundred mortars. He been so engrossed that he'd missed the game warden who'd already tied up his boat and was strutting down the sandy path. Mud didn't know exactly what happened; he waved as the warden got close. Wordlessly the man put a glove on his right hand, said something about the smoke -- how it upset the nesting gulls -- and Mud's next memory was waking up with a mouth full of sand and sea grass, a serene gull eating a mullet beside him. His jaw ached and he walked back to the boat, satisfied that he'd figured out the timing issue with the fuses.

Mud's father, a quiet man, had introduced him to explosives there as a boy on fishing trips with Mud's cousin, Hunter. While the men drank beer waiting for fish to bite, the boys would load firecrackers into PVC pipes, then aim them at each other like weapons.

Those were different times.

But they were happy times and it pleased Mud to be out there, despite overzealous game wardens upset about being called to a non-wildfire, non-emergency.

But what was Mud doing now?

He was sitting in a rented house on South Padre Island, just over the bridge from Corpus Christi. The financial impact of his decisions was catching up to him and while

Mr. Russell Bridgeport was back in Michigan for the summer, Mud was watching his house, paying the utilities. Everything else had been sunk into the show. Diana had informed some friends that she would be leaving Texas, moving to sunny California with Dr. Foster after the summer and Mud thought of little else other than how to get her to stay. How he could possibly show her he loved her, in ways that seemed to escape him when they were together.

Yesterday, Mud had decided to tie one on for the eve of the Fourth since he knew better than to drink on the big day after the “incident,” as the local paper, *The Moon*, had called it in 2007. On his way to the bar, he had stopped to gas his truck up. Normally, he would only put in a ten or twenty to get him through the next few days, but he decided to fill up in case he was in a rush and something came up the next day as was likely to happen, as he’d learned in the past. He stepped out from under the awning to have a cigarette while the tank filled and got distracted watching two birds fight over a perch. One had the tail and the other the head. This particular fish must’ve been at the top of the gene pool for perch because it was still alive and shaking, wrestling to get free. So the birds were back and forth tugging it while it writhed and flipped in both of their mouths. Mud was entranced, thinking about what a great bait fish it would’ve been on a hook, with so much spunk to lure the perfect fish.

Mud was so entranced he did not notice that behind him the latch did not kick off when the tank was full and that gas was streaming down the side of his truck, pooling in puddles, running through cracks in the cement. He was astonished watching it swirl around, stinking, burning his eyes and lungs. A family had gotten out of their van at an adjacent pump to gawk at the spectacle as Mud tried soaking up the gallons with paper

towels, wondering why there was no cap on the credit card amount for this pump. Was this the only pump in Texas that went over seventy-five dollars without reauthorization? Could he soak it up in paper towels to wring out into a bucket and ask for refund for the one hundred and twenty dollars' worth of gas that swirled around his feet as if there'd been some sort of hellish downpour? Surely faulty equipment and not his own lack of care had led to this problem before him.

The family had their cameras out now. Their license plate read OKLAHOMA. Taking pictures of a man trying to sop up gasoline with all of the paper towels pulled individually from every dispenser, outside, in the middle of summer. What a mess!

Finally, Mud got back in his truck – slammed the door. He didn't even bother to collect most of the paper towels to throw away. He left them there. Hoped the paper towels would dry up and that someone would not notice them, toss a cigarette butt onto the ground and whoosh. Next time, perhaps, the gas station would pay a little more attention to maintaining their equipment.

Too traumatized to go to a bar, and stinking of gasoline, Mud opted to drive down the road to the next Circle K, where he hadn't had a problem with a gas pump, to buy a six-pack --only a six-pack -- of Budweiser, so that he could retreat back to the safety of his rented-in home, with furniture not his own. At least it was quiet there.

Mr. Bridgeport had worked in the coal industry for years. Though Mud being from Texas -- where people only spoke of oil and gas -- did not know what exactly that meant other than it afforded Mr. Bridgeport at least two homes. And, at least in the one Mud was staying in, quite a lot of what appeared to be handmade deck furniture. The

kind Mud had watched TV shows about. No screws, no adhesives, every piece fitted into a wooden joint or joist. Amish-style carpentry.

The neighbor, Harrison, had told Mud while they were out at their respective mailboxes some time back that his house was haunted. He said that he'd bought the house for his family, but that, now, he was the only one who would go out there on weekends. It was the standard spooky stuff: lights on and off, clothes off hangers, rooms Harrison's rat terrier would not enter. Harrison was an engineer who worked in natural gas. He thought in figures, said he. His mechanical mind did not have room for that sort of unknown, or contemplation of it, so he kept going back weekend after weekend.

Mud contemplated this on expensive deck furniture, sipping a Coke. The beer had been left in the fridge and Mud decided after showering the gasoline off his hands and knees that he'd probably just stay sober after all. Mud stared up at the second floor window of his neighbor's house waiting for something to happen.

"That light," Harrison had said, as he pointed up to the window, "is always doing weird stuff. Let me know if you notice it too."

"Sure," Mud said. Though he wasn't really all that sure. How could he be when Harrison always had the blinds closed? How would he know if it was a ghost or not?

The Fourth of July was finally upon the country, the state, and especially, Mud. He woke early to set up his rigs. David joined him in the afternoon, clad in his lucky Led Zeppelin t-shirt. The one with the Hindenburg on the front of it.

"Ready for the big day?" David asked.

"Yeah, do you think Diana will be watching tonight?"

“Hard to say. They might’ve gone into town to watch fireworks over there. Doctor’s a little snooty like ‘at.”

“She’ll hear about this. I wrote her a letter,” Mud said.

And he had. At the end, right before she left, she told him that she needed someone with more ambition. It wasn’t anything personal, he just hadn’t fulfilled his potential. She tried to tell him it was OK, that lots of great men, like George H.W. Bush, had unfulfilled potential. Mud couldn’t be a hero in the traditional sense. He was too old for war, too fat for flag football on the weekends, and without a degree he could never lead an inner-city revolution through teaching high school children. But damn it, there wasn’t anything bigger than the Fourth and he was going to bring it. No more mishaps. Everything had been rigged ahead of time and transported in large sections to aid the setup time.

David and Mud set up the frames for the mortar racks, double-checked their fuses, both the timed-chain and quick-chained ones for the finale. The area had been cleared of debris days ahead of time, and the boat launch where they would launch fireworks from had been closed for the occasion.

Even the wind was being accounted for, to aim away from the spoil islands not far from the boat launch. The forecast was for the standard breeze coming out of the east, well away from any danger. They had been lucky not to encounter problems in years past when they had failed to aim the rockets in any particular direction other than up. A playlist had been produced on CD for those watching on their decks and cars to listen along at the start of the show. This eliminated previous pitfalls with the speaker system.

The show started, just some basic sparklers shooting off into the sky, a signal for everyone to turn on the music if they desired to follow along. As the sparklers crackled and fell, David, on the other side of the boat launch began sending up the mines and the Cremora pots that they'd spent the weekend before making with powdered creamer. The pots exploded up and out like mushroom clouds, while Mud ran over to light the Excellent Trip cakes, closely followed by the Squealing Pig cakes. By now it was becoming apparent to Mud that these fireworks were of a larger scale than they were used to and that the Cremora pots' exploding fireballs may have been a poor choice to start the show. He began to inhale the noxious fumes, struggled to see through the cloud to get to the mortar rack. He was waiting there to trigger them for the finale after David sent up the Horsetail Barrage and Gold Lightning, but something happened while he waited. There was a pause in the fireworks. He could hear people standing by at the edges of the parking lot speaking to themselves.

“When are the good fireworks going to go off, Dad?” a child said.

“I wish we'd just gone into town and dealt with the parking,” said another man.

Frustration began to build; it had been ten seconds of dead time as Whitney Houston sang acapella on CDs on decks all around the Island. Mud would not allow another embarrassment.

“Where are the good fireworks?” yelled a child.

Mud was incensed. “Here they are goddamn you!”

It was then that he broke the sequence agreed upon with David, and it was also in this moment that he felt the wind shift just slightly as he sent up all the mortars simultaneously. The Horsetail Barrage and Gold Lightning followed from across the boat

launch and the crowd cheered. Mud had made the charges explode lower to the ground over the water for effect, to make them larger and louder. He dreamt of the bright white, red and blue lighting up people's faces filling them with hope and joy.

A gust of wind.

The mortars were too low. They hadn't had time to extinguish as they drifted towards the spoil islands.

A woman shouted, "That's a black-necked stilt nesting area!"

"I heard they're protected!"

"Nobody will protect them now!"

A waterfall shot into the air from David's side of the boat launch. Mud ran, tripped on a crack and fell.

"Stop sending them up!" Mud yelled.

"What kind of monster does this?" said a woman.

Mud turned away from the crowd, ran down the boat launch and into the water towards the spoil island and the birds and the fire. He sat treading water in the canal, listening to children cry, and adults alternately scream and console their children.

He sold the remainder of his fuses, various framing and other miscellaneous supplies for a loss. He relocated to El Paso, closer to Diana, but only geographically.

In El Paso, Mud was known as Henry. And on the next Fourth of July, Henry crossed the border into Mexico to sit in silence.

## HUNLEY DAY

I probably knew my wife was cheating on me for a while. It was sort of like the tag on the back of a new shirt. You notice it when you're out with friends, something just feels a little bit strange, a little uncomfortable. But rather than try and rip it off and risk ruining the shirt, you just sort of deal with the annoyance. That's sort of what I was doing. I don't know for how long, exactly, probably most of the summer, maybe spring, too. And, you know, it's like talking about a fart when you're in a crowd; once you acknowledge it's out there, then you got to do something about it, either claim it or not. I wasn't sure I was ready to claim ownership of her cheating on me because then I'd have to do something about it. Taking ownership meant being willing to do something about it which would mean maybe having to break up our home, maybe lose Maria for good. As always at this time of year, the heat makes a man unreasonable out here so I was trying to be deliberate. I didn't need heat for Maria to be unreasonable, and that's the truth. I'd ask her about why she'd come home late from work, just asking, mostly to make conversation, let her vent about staying late and she'd lay into me.

“You want to know if I'm fucking somebody; is that it?”

“Well, I mean, I would. But no, I just wanted to know how your day was. You're home late. I thought it was work stuff.”

And so it went with conversations like that. I'd been working graveyard, which to Maria meant that I had a whole lot of time before I went to work to just lounge around while she was working all day, so, I'd been making a lot of dinner. Gotten pretty good at it. Started off just frying up some shrimp, making cocktail sauce, green salad out the bag.

Things like that. But now I run the kitchen. I'm the manager set with stocking the shelves of our pantry. Hell, I even started curing my own pimentos for what, I'll tell you right now, is the finest pimento cheese spread in East Texas. Now, I might get to making the cheese at some point. I got some books stacked up somewhere.

Not that I minded much. I mean besides the probable affair, I was eating well, at least. There was also, you know, that thing about still being in love with Maria.

Not to say that things were just wonderful as manager of our household kitchen and graveyard worker as the night security officer at the driving range on the edge of town. I'll give you an example: Maria came home from work at about her normal time and I was cleaning out the fridge, setting tupperware out on the counter, the things that had spoiled and needed to go. I was getting ready to dump and bag them up when she came home early. I mean it was normal time, but she'd been working late so much that it felt early.

“What're you doing with all that food stacked on the counter?”

“Hey, you're home early.”

I went over to kiss her and she set her hand on my chest and repeated her question.

“Oh, that? That's just food's no good so I was getting ready to take it out to the trash.”

Before I finished she was fishing the lids off the containers.

She held up the tuna casserole and said, “You just made this on Monday, right?”

“Well, yeah, but you said you didn’t care for the amount of oregano I seasoned it with.”

“That’s true but I thought you’d eat it. You’re just going to throw all of this away?”

“Well. I mean, yeah. There’s waste in any kitchen, Maria. It’s normal.”

“No, no I don’t believe it is normal. Re-heat this and save that roast in the oven.”

She handed me a tupperware of tuna casserole for myself and a sort of veggie lasagna made with layered zucchini as the pasta, for herself.

“Don’t throw away the rest of this either. We’ll eat it.”

She got in between me and the counter and started ordering the food according to when she thought it would go south. She pulled out a chicken and potatoes dish.

“We got to eat this too. It’s been almost a week since you made that.”

“Ok.”

So that night I watched her organize every item on our pale green formica counter-top and slide it into a fridge that always vaguely smelled of sulphur.

The tuna casserole was mushy since all the breadcrumbs had lost their crunch while sitting in the fridge, and Maria had taken over my duties as chef to microwave all the food so it was still a little cold. It was a little fishy, too. Sort of sour. I put a lot of hot sauce on it and got it down. Though, I did gag and start coughing at one point, at which time I walked out the front door of our home, waved to Jerry as he watered his flowers, calmly turned my back to him, and vomited in the low-lying ground cover that was slowly enveloping our yard. The type that you plant when you first move in thinking it’d be nice to have some green over there. Then pretty soon the leaves are practically

crawling the walls looking for space to grow and you can't kill it with anything except fire, which I wasn't ready to do, yet, seeing as it was attached to my house. Not that I hadn't maybe thought about it once or twice.

The moment I began to feel compelled to confront some of the growing misery of our domestic life probably came on Hunley Day. A former resident by the name of Miller got sunk in the *H.L. Hunley*, the Reb submarine, the first time it went down on August 29, 1863, so now the town of Goliath pays tribute to one of their own, tragically killed.

When I was a kid going to the festival, there'd be a little reenacting, some cowboys and Indians in tents talking about the "old ways." Now though, with oil and gas money like it is, it's just a full-on circus out there. Used to be that there'd be a little mockup of the *Hunley*. Ryan Lee would drag the thing out of his barn once a year on a trailer, meticulously welded in his free time over the course of several years. It would take most of the morning to unload several thousand pounds of welded steel and then the kids would climb all over the creaking mess until it was so hot that you'd catch a sunburn from standing too near the thing for more than a couple of minutes.

Cooper Iverson got some money wildcatting some years back and before he got broke like most of them did in the eighties, he thought it might be real nice to build a working replica of the *Hunley*, never mind that we were commemorating its lack of seaworthiness in the first place. So, on Hunley Day, there's no longer Ryan Lee's mockup that he made in his garage, but a first-class replica built by some engineers Mr. Iverson hired. There's still some guys walking around dressed as soldiers, too. And

Cowboys and Indians. But mostly people come to see if the *Hunley* can make its voyage of a half mile across Willard Lake.

For 364 days of the year, Willard Lake is home to all manner of coots and gulls that love nothing more than to make a horrible racket and destroy the greens of golf courses looking for worms. But on Hunley Day all those damn birds get displaced, and eight volunteers, each of whom has signed waivers and voided their life insurance, climb into a steel Civil War-era submarine with a hand-cranked propeller to make the journey across the lake. There's a crane parked on the far end of the lake, naturally, on the other side away from the festivities. There's also a team of paramedics on stand-by. We were there early, of course, to get a nice spot to set our blanket to watch those brave volunteers pay tribute to one of Goliath's own fallen heroes. We went with some other families, Maria's work friends mostly, and they were crowded around talking about how good my pimento cheese was and I was enjoying their praises, especially because Maria was complaining about how I always made too much food and it was an embarrassing sign of gluttony and wastefulness. We'd had that talk before we left and I'd pointed to the cooler full of a dozen Budweisers and told her, "I need to have something to eat if I'm going to drink all them."

"Why do you always have to drink so much whenever we're out with my friends?"

"What? I don't think I do that. Today's a special occasion: Hunley Day."

I excused myself to water the flowers. Turned on the hose, set in in a flowerbed and went into the shed out in the backyard, retrieved a pint of whiskey off the shelf and

had a good hard drink of it. The flowers were a little wilted so I sprayed everything real quick with the hose and went inside.

Away we went to the festival.

The thing about the guys that crew the sub is this: It's like the who's who of Goliath to be in that damn metal deathtrap. Almost every year it's the mayor who pilots it, except for when Big Joe Thomas was mayor and he couldn't fit through the hatch so he just emceed and, rather irresponsibly, manned the crane whilst singing "God Bless America" as the crew departed on their half mile journey.

I applied every year, but of course the damn city council elects their own into the crew; all the young, fit, up-and-comers in local politics. Also, Alex, who owns the ACE Hardware, seems to get in the sub every other damn year, too. I got in once; on account of some withdrawals they went down to me as an alternate. I was running for city council on a radical platform and I must have gained some respect somewhere to get on the list, probably because I'd been abusing Maria's access to the copiers and resources at Kinko's and was spending every free moment in the evenings spreading my brand, hanging unauthorized signage that read: Jay Rodgers: A Man Who Gets Things Done. Then there was a picture of me chopping a tree underneath it, fixing a car in another version of the poster. It wasn't important that I got blisters that covered most of my hands during the lumberjack photoshoot and that I borrowed my friend Andola's toolbox for the other where I was fixing my truck, before I just took it into the shop to have the battery replaced.

Anyways, the year I got in on a technicality was also the only year that people can remember the damn thing getting canceled. Early in the week there was talk of some storms rolling through, which is why most of the guys pulled out, considerate politicians that they were. I got a call about it on a Friday and a guy dropped off a Confederate Naval uniform in my size and everything. Then the next morning, the day of the event, the damn thing gets cancelled. Found out about it watching the news that morning. They called about getting the uniform back but it's still in my closet. I really only notice it around the times that Maria is gone out late more than usual, and in late August around festival time. Never even tried it on.

There we were, watching the boys in gray nobly walk out, waving to their wives. "Dixie" played in the background and I got goosebumps, of course, even though it's a stupid thing to get emotional over. The mayor came out leading the crew, with Preston Newsome right behind him as the First Mate. Maria had, up to this point, been neither speaking towards nor looking at me as she spoke to her coworker, Charlene. Man, Charlene is a looker, too. If I were talking to her, I probably wouldn't be paying attention to my significant other, either. As the crew walked out though, Maria started jabbing me with her elbow and I jumped because I was kind of drunk and was watching a lady spread out her blanket a few groups over.

"Uh, what?"

"Why are you so jumpy?"

"I'm not."

She leaned in and said, “Don’t they look nice up there? I bet your uniform would look just as nice as Preston’s.”

It did look nice. Cuffs perfectly hanging over his watch, minimal break at the hem of his pants. Clearly a professional job.

“I doubt it. He’s had it tailored. Mine isn’t tailored, it’s just off the rack.”

“Well, maybe if you followed through on something for once, you’d have a tailored one too. And you’d be out there.”

“Well, I was about to be that year I ran for city council.”

She was already looking away, but I listened to her conversation with Charlene.

Maria said, “Oh, I hope they’ll be alright. I hope they make it across.”

“I’m sure they’ll be just fine.” And then Charlene rubbed her back in that sort of way you do when you’re consoling somebody. And Maria had her hands sort of clenched into a ball on her lap. And I’d had about half a dozen beers by that point and my ability to process was getting fuzzy.

I said, “I’m sure they’ll be —”

I realized Maria was too fixated on the spectacle to listen to me, so I opened another beer. Nobody’d ever gotten hurt doing this thing. Worst case, it sinks, but the lake is only about thirty feet deep so they just pull it out with the crane. There’s oxygen pumped inside the sub so the crew just waits for the divers if the thing bottoms out. I’d imagine the worst thing about it is that Preston’s perfectly tailored suit would stink from the scummy pondwater and he’d probably never be able to get that smell out. He’d need to buy a new uniform. I wished that sub would sink and all those arrogant movers-and-shakers would have to get new uniforms.

The crew all waved and climbed aboard. Unfortunately, it made it across and they were the heroes of the day, spending the rest of the afternoon posing for pictures outside the sub.

Maria said, “Don’t you think it’d be nice to get one with the sub?”

“What? Why?”

“I’ve never done it before. It was so exciting!”

“We’ve been coming here since high school. What’re you talking about?”

“I want to take a picture with the crew.”

And so she did. Maria went right on over and got a picture taken with the damn Mayor and Preston Newsome.

After she came back over her face was flushed, maybe from the heat. It was hot out, maybe my face was flushed, too, I thought. I excused myself to the restroom to look in the mirror to see if my face was flushed. I tried to make my way through a sea of towels and blankets covering the grass, carving a path until I looked back to check on Maria and tripped over a cooler. I splayed out across the quilt and groaned, one leg propped on the side of the cooler still, ice covering my legs. I turned my head and noticed the large tear in my shorts and my shirt was slid up over my gut. A young couple was holding each other right next to me, my head nearly in their laps.

“Pardon me.”

The crotch was blown wide open. I pulled my shirt down and breathed a sigh of relief that I hadn’t pissed myself on impact.

I turned around to get Maria, figuring I could hold it until we got home since we’d beat the crowd by leaving a little early.

“Hey.”

“Hey.”

“We got to go.”

“Oh my god. What happened to you?”

“I, uh, I fell down. Ripped my shorts.” I gestured to the tear.

“That’s disgusting. Let’s get out of here before you cause any more of a scene. I hope nobody important sees this.”

“Like who?”

The car ride was quiet. Maria was obviously upset and I knew that she’d just leave if I did anything more to upset her. There was a lot of food in the fridge that was going bad soon, but I knew she wasn’t going to let us waste it.

I stumbled down the hallway when we got home and changed shorts. When I went to the kitchen Maria was silently making all of the food from the week that we needed to eat that night. Heaping mounds of sweet potatoes, garlic mashed, pot roast, two fried chicken legs, and some boiled shrimp that I hoped weren’t going on my plate.

I got the shrimp cocktail, chicken legs, sweet potatoes and the fatty end of pot roast when we took our plates to the coffee table. Maria was so upset with me and focused on the food that she hadn’t even turned on the TV. I couldn’t stop thinking about earlier.

“Why are you always getting so damn drunk when we go out?” She looked at me like a police interrogator, arms folded across her chest.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that you’re so fucking drunk that you fall and blow the crotch out of your shorts.”

“Oh, yeah. Well, I been dealing with some things.”

“Oh, like what, exactly?”

My mind was fuzzy and I wasn’t sure what her game was. I knew that if I upset her she’d likely storm out after dinner. I thought maybe she was talking about earlier when I was checking out that woman and she caught me, but she probably would’ve said something then.

“It’s nothing.”

“Oh yeah? It’s so hard being the night guard at a driving range, hitting golf balls under the lights. Is that it? The stress of your life? So stressful I have to remind you to vacuum the floors because you still never remember?”

“Whoa. What are – Is this what we’re doing tonight?”

She sat across from me shoving food into her mouth. She was about to finish her plate, an unbelievable display given the conversation.

“Are you sleeping with Preston Newsome?”

She started eating faster. She wouldn’t answer me.

I got up to go to the kitchen with my plate. I didn’t want the shrimp.

“Where’re you taking that plate? We can’t waste that food. Especially not on a Sunday.”

She chose that moment to invoke a religious implication of my food waste.

“Look, I think you are. I mean, it makes sense. You work with the guy, you had your picture taken –”

“Shut up and let’s just have this dinner, then we can talk.”

I sat back down and swallowed the shrimp one-by-one, chewing as little as possible, just enough so that I wouldn’t choke. When I finished, she had already stood up and was walking to the sink with her plate.

“Can you take care of this? I got to go get some work done.”

“No. I want to talk about this; I’m not finished.”

“We’ll talk later. I don’t have time for this silly conversation right now. You’re drunk anyways.”

“I’m not – that doesn’t matter.” She was grabbing her keys. “Hold on.”

I ran to the kitchen and started pulling frozen pies out of the fridge. “We’ve got to eat dessert.”

“Don’t you waste all that food.”

I was already busy ripping everything out of the freezer and stuffing it in the microwave. Maria was frozen at the door watching me as I grabbed one bag of vegetables after another and shoved them in the microwave. I set the oven to preheat the pies. I started the microwave with six bags of green beans. My only shot to have the conversation was if she stayed to make sure I took care of the food and didn’t waste. That’s what I thought.

“Are you kidding me? Right now? This is what you’re doing. Clearing out the fridge.”

I was pulling bags of chips out of the cupboard and pouring them in bowls while the microwave was cooking enough green beans for a Thanksgiving feast.

“I want to talk about this! It’s important that I know.”

“I’m not having this conversation with you. You’re a wreck.”

By that time, I was crying and I pulled liquor bottles out of the cupboard and I was measuring out a large-batch of Manhattans when I looked up to see the door slam. It wasn’t enough. The pies were sweating on the countertop, the green beans were cooked, chips were in the bowl, and all I needed to do was add bitters to the eight servings of Manhattans sitting in the pitcher.

I added bitters to the pitcher, put the pies back in the freezer, set the bowls of chips on the living room table. I figured I’d drink the Manhattans over ice and eat some chips, maybe catch a basketball game while Maria cooled off. Then I set my feet on the table, which felt nice, considering that I really only did it privately, and carefully, so as not to mark the wood. This time I didn’t care. At halftime I noticed the food still sitting on the counter and stuffed in the microwave. Maria, I’m sure, wanted – expected-- me to put it all away orderly like she would’ve done. But instead I threw all that food straight into the trash. I was tired of eating old food, bad food and food she didn’t care for anymore. I went back to the couch, set my feet back onto the table, poured another Manhattan and waited for Maria to come home to me and an empty fridge.

## RANDAL-LIFE CRISIS

When the world gets just a little bit too tough, I generally take to drinking. At this point, I'm not too proud to admit that fact about myself. I'll generally just shoot on down to Snoopy's and pull up a seat at the bar. The place sits right on the intracoastal waterway and a hot breeze runs through the screens that sit where the windows should be and the beer sweats like it just got out of the shower and hadn't had time to dry off when you came knockin'. The conversation -- this day I'm thinking of, was with Jason, and, hell, it's with Jason most of the time because he's always there it seems -- is pretty straightforward in the sort of routine like you got in church when everybody files out of the pews and walks up to the front to receive communion. Me and Jason, we're consistent with each other and that's comforting.

I was raised a Catholic; though, here, I generally keep this information to myself. Jason threw down a Bud Light coaster and I said, "I'll just have a beer." He turned to grab me my Miller, because Bud, though it may be official beer of the NFL -- and don't we all love football -- gives me a headache like I've recently been concussed. Maybe it's a fitting beer to have an endorsement deal with another product that produces such similar physical ailments. As he turns away, and this is always how it goes on these days where I'm here to escape, and this is how it goes on the day I'm thinking about, I said, "And maybe a little something to go with it."

Jason set the bottle down with a napkin wrapped around it like someone might wrap a towel around them after drying off, and then he produced a bottle of Jim Beam. He set down two glasses and we raised them up, tapped them against each other, tapped

them on the bar and down they went. Hot, and then cold bubbles as the beer washed it down.

I knew that Marcus was out fishing for drum and I was sort of half expecting my buddy to come in and sit with me, but mostly I just needed out of the house. I'd beaten a fairly hasty retreat earlier in the day and had been scooting around town killing a little bit of time, trying to figure out how exactly to proceed with Kelli.

Jason came back around to my end of the bar and said, "What's new, man?"

I lied and said, "There ain't nothing new."

But that wasn't exactly true. There was quite a bit new going on and it wasn't any of Jason's business and that's fine and he meant well, but I'd been thinking about a hell of a lot. See, I live down on South Padre Island now, right on the coast and it's beautiful, but I had been back home for a funeral. The sort of impromptu reunion that happens when your great aunt dies, and your mother guilt trips you into coming back for the funeral because your cousins will be there and nobody understands why you weren't at Thanksgiving and, oh, the Cowboys lost again, and so forth. So, I went back to Canyon where I grew up.

The funeral was what you expect with the polite mourning. Uncle Jerry got up and made it religious, even though he told everyone he wouldn't, and he went on about how Judy was fortunate to touch so many lives. He went on to compare Judy to Jesus in a manner of speaking, mostly remarking on how much longer she lived than Him and the impact she had on so many. And that was probably true given how many people were crammed into the First Methodist Church, and it was so damn hot I about passed out. Maybe I did, because I had one of those type of dreams you have when you hear what

somebody is saying, but it manifests itself a little different. In my dream, Jesus was a guy I played on the tennis team with in high school and that was sort of a nice idea.

Aunt Judy hadn't been to church in twenty years, is what my mother told me when we were outside while they loaded the casket into the hearse. And that's about right, at the end, it's always religion, I guess.

By the time we got to the cemetery, I was jonesing for a smoke, and that coincided with making eye contact with Cousin Rodney. He's the cousin that puts whatever that shit is in his hair that always makes it look like it's wet, grows a mustache to cover his hair lip, and was wearing his black jeans to the funeral of his grandmother.

I wasn't trying to talk to him so I ducked my head, worked through the crowd and crossed the street towards the courthouse. I lit up a cigarette and, not able to make eye contact with anyone from the funeral procession across the street as they waited for the hearse to arrive, I pretended to look busy reading the placard out front of the Randall County Courthouse.

I must've learned it in school but, turns out that Randall County, like a lot of counties is named after somebody. Just so happens like a lot of counties in Texas, I suppose, that this particular county was named after a Confederate Civil War general. Going further, ol' Horace Randal (yeah, they spelled it wrong when they made the county, I learned that, too) was quite the hero – or he must've been because he died during the war of something or another based on the dates next to his name on the placard. Said he was thirty-one when he died. Thirty-one and he done enough to get a county named after him. Go figure.

So, when I was at Snoopy's the truth of it is that I was thinking about quite a bit. I was thinking about how I was nearing thirty-one myself, and I hadn't done a thing that would warrant having my name on it save a tombstone. I'd done a bit more research on Horace Randal when I got back from the reunion/funeral and it only served to cement some issues further. The man was a hero and here I was, a product of the county that bore his name, meanwhile I'm doing bookkeeping for a housepainting company, inputting numbers and billable hours that I don't guess are correct. And that *was* fine. That was fine until I started looking at my life on a larger scale after seeing that stupid placard after Aunt Judy died. And if I'd never been back in Canyon, trying to stay away from Rodney, I wouldn't be thinking about the nobility of my actions and their lasting consequences. But it was too late for that.

Marcus came in with a hammer packed in his lip that was so big he sometimes would involuntarily sort of dribble spit down his chin and lisp his words trying to keep his dip in place. He hadn't even taken off his white rubber boots, which are a ridiculous thing to wear unless you're a shrimper or somebody sloshing around in the water. I hadn't called him, but I was happy to see him.

"Billy boy! What's going on, brother?"

"Just layin' low for a little bit, let things sort of cool off down at the homestead," I said.

"Trouble with Kelli?"

"In a manner of speaking, yeah."

"Well, shit," he said and order a Bud for himself and a couple of shots for us.

We sat there for a while watching the Astros game on TV, not saying a word.

“She knows about Tina,” I said as the game went to a commercial break because A.J. Hinch finally decided to get Keuchel out of the game after he loaded the bases.

“No shit?” He turned away from the TV and waited.

“Well, sort of.”

Tina was a girl I’d known in high school who reconnected with me a few months before when she decided that living up in the Panhandle was too damn hot and too damn dirty or something, and decided hot, dirty Gulf beaches were better. We’d been fooling around rather casually for no good reason other than she pressed me on it and I couldn’t find it in me to say no. It wasn’t like a big thing like that, but as I’m not naturally inclined towards conflict, I just sort of let both relationships ride, as it were. It caused me a little bit of anguish, sure, but was that anguish worse than the pain of ending a relationship? I thought not.

“So, what’d she do?”

“Nothing, really,” I said. And that wasn’t not true.

“Really?”

“Well, yeah, I mean, it was sort of strange.”

Marcus let that sit out there and we watched the game come back on and I ordered another beer.

“How’d she find out?” He asked when the game went back to a commercial.

“I was in the shower and Tina’s name popped up on my phone.”

“You had her saved under her real name?”

“Well, yeah, why not?”

“Huh.”

By that time, I'd been out of the house for most of the day and it looked like the afternoon winds were starting to die down. I was anxious about going back.

"I get out of the shower, right? She hands me the phone and asks me to explain. I got it locked so she couldn't look in on her own. I'm still in the bathroom wearing only my chonies. And I'm hungover because it's Sunday. I fully panicked, man."

Marcus sipped his beer, idly watching the game but it was out of hand at this point, so there wasn't any need to watch it too close.

"I grabbed the phone out of her hand and tossed it against the tile on the wall of the shower. Just ripped it at the wall sidearm like I'm playing second base and I'm trying to turn a double play. The screen cracked. She picked the phone back up and was just sort of frozen. She was mad, but she also just stood there, like, shocked. Then I took it out of her hand and put it in the toilet and, I shouldn't of flushed it, but I did and I could hear it backing up but by that point I was already putting my clothes on and getting ready to get the hell out of there and Kelli is still standing in the bathroom staring at the toilet and the last thing she's yelling as I'm slamming the front door behind me is I had better get back there and clean that goddamn mess up because the toilet was overflowing."

Marcus sat there some more, and finally, said, "Damn, man. What're you doing?"

I didn't need to answer and, so, I didn't.

"I got to get back home to Maria," Marcus said after a little while, "I think maybe we aren't as young as we used to be." And he stood and his back cracked all the way up, ass-to-shoulders. Then he rubbed his head and shook it. "I'll catch you tomorrow. I got to get and filet these fish."

As he turned to walk out I asked him, "Do you and Maria fight?"

He turned and stared at me and said, "Of course, we do, man."

"Oh."

Me and Kelli never really did. This was as close as we'd got and we hadn't even really done it yet.

The afternoon wore on and into evening more liars came in and sat down, I listened to them tell their stories and I thought about where I was. Everyone had thought - and I know this is true because I'd had this conversation in various forms about what a nice couple we were -- we always looked so happy. But, maybe we weren't so happy, as we were conflict free. I couldn't shake that idea of Horace Randal getting a whole damn county named after him on the merits of what seemed like one thing: he fought. He died dismounting his horse and charging the enemy on foot, gallantly. Meanwhile, I'm a guy who'd spent the better part of the day handling fishing lures at Academy Sporting Goods, drinking beer, watching baseball and listening to old men talk about how many damn fish they caught when the drum were running the night before.

"Hey, Jason. I got a question."

He walked over with a rack of glasses that he'd just pulled out of the dishwasher and started putting them away near me. "What's up?" he said.

"You ever fight?"

"Yeah, all the fuckin' time when I was younger. You never seen this?" And he opened up his right hand, but not all the way, like it was stuck in a tiny invisible glove. His right index finger only got about halfway open. "I busted it up pretty bad a few years

back. Missed the SOB I was aiming for and went through the window behind him. I never seen so much blood.”

“I, uh, I don’t know if I meant it like that.”

“Oh,” he said and set the empty dish rack down and leaned against the bar with both hands pressed against the edge, “what did you mean then?”

“Like other stuff.”

“Like do I fight with my old lady like this? Is that what you mean? Because that’s some kind of questions to come in here and --”

“No, that’s not what I meant. I meant like smaller stuff, like when Ray schedules you for shifts you don’t want or the girl at the grocery store packs the groceries with the loaf of bread down at the bottom and it gets smashed or something.”

“Yeah, I guess I do.”

I thought about all the times I hadn’t. I thought about how I hated the bedroom set we got and the payments that came with it. I thought about how we’d changed the paint color of the kitchen three times and none of them were colors I’d picked. If it wasn’t for Tina texting me and Kelli seeing it on my phone, I’d be having to help her clean up the house because it was our day off together, even though I had Mondays off too and could easily do it then. But she wasn’t around to see it on Mondays, so Sundays it was, and goodbye watching any football. I’d not once – not a single time -- thought of a moment that I’d objected to anything. I’d never objected or even bothered to ask questions about the men in her office that she often went to lunch and had drinks with after work.

I was a coward.

I was a coward no more. Those few beers and Horace Randal had bucked me up a little and I was going to do a few things I wanted.

I went back to Academy with a list in my head. No more retreating. I wanted a hammock for the yard: check. I wanted a new fishing pole: check. I was going to tell Kelli that I wanted to go fishing more. Some fishing lures, new boots, and some artisanal jerky and I was done. Damn it, it felt good and I wasn't going to justify myself to anyone, and I'd fight for each and every one of these decisions.

I was also going to tell Kelli all the things she did that made me uncomfortable, like the fact that we only have sex once or twice a month, and that I would like to have more. I was also going to tell her about all the things she did with her coworker Kyle: weekend meetings, drinks after work to discuss projects, charity golf tournaments. All that shit made me uncomfortable and I'd never said anything. No more retreating. I was going to go down a hero if I went down at the end of all this.

I was also wondering what Kelli was up to since I didn't have a phone anymore. What if she was really mad and I was driving straight towards a hornet's nest?

I was driving my truck back over the bridge heading back to South Padre Island and my knee started to bounce. I lit a cigarette even though I'd just had one and, really, I didn't need another. Suddenly, I thought, Horace Randal fucking died because he was too brave. There are a lot more cowards than heroes that made it out of that damn war and maybe that's something I needed to think about.

The cigarette was down to the filter when I pulled up to the house and there was the manicured palm tree that I'd spent a good part of last weekend working on, and the grass I had to mow once a week, instead of once every two weeks like most people I

know because Bermuda grows slow, but Kelli wouldn't be persuaded otherwise. "It looks awful. Look at how it hangs over the sidewalk," she'd say. And I would do my due diligence and go out there and push the mower regardless of time of day whenever she asked me to. I would come in and she'd have a cold beer set on the counter for me and I'd sit on the stool and she'd scratch my back and things seemed right, even though I missed the fourth quarter of the football game.

It was dark out, but the lights were on in the house and I wondered if she was upset. I wondered what it would be like for us to fight. I was ready now, because maybe I wouldn't have a county named after me and I sure hoped that I wouldn't get myself killed at thirty-one because I was doing something stupid, or reckless. But I sure didn't want to be remembered as a coward, either. I think Horace Randal would agree with those sentiments. He was after all a cavalry commander and it's important for them to choose their battles prudently. But I was facing an enemy of unknown strength in there, but I'd have to take my chances to make it right, to make it like it was before we settled in and I let her load me up and I let her continue on building me up to my breaking point.

I stubbed out my cigarette and I dismounted my horse – got out of the truck, rather – and I determined that I was going to stand and fight for myself and her and us.

The lights were on in the house, and I strode up ready to confront whatever may be inside. Though, I left all my new purchases in the truck, and kept the receipt just in case I needed to retreat. I opened the front door and said, "I got some things I want to talk about because I am not happy, Kelli."

My feet splashed on the hardwood floor and Kelli was sitting on the couch with her feet drawn up.

She took one look at me and said, “You need to clean this mess up.”

“Yeah, of course.”

I walked to the closet to grab the mop. Sometimes combat requires nuance. And, for me, everything started with getting all that damn water off the floor.

## FAMILY PROBLEMS

So here's the thing: I'm sitting in a bar just south of Texarkana in a little town called Domino. I'm unwinding from the past month where I've been hauling pulpwood back and forth from Shelby County up to Texarkana. I've been in much nicer places, I guess, but I like this one better. Yeah, the Bar C is my home spot when I'm not working. They keep Shiner stuck right in the ice in those aluminum troughs, keeping them cold in way a fridge can't. There're some signs on the wall some of the rusted, some defaced, all of them probably a little out of date. Hell, I can't remember the last time I seen somebody drink a damn Zima, but there's the sign -- \$3.

I like to come so that I can drink beer and watch other people dance. Now, I don't dance myself, you see, but I appreciate the gift in others. More importantly, in places like this, I appreciate a nice, solid effort. So here I am, contemplating Zima and Colt .45 and other bygone drinks of my youth, watching chubby couples prance and dawdle on the dance floor. The dance floor's got grooves from all the heavy feet and sharp-soled cowboy boots stamping and dragging on it. And I like that. It's like the dance floor is a record of all the romances around here recorded in scratches and grooves. Maybe scientists, the ones that look at old things, will see this place in a thousand years and reconstruct what it is people were doing. Or maybe they'll just see a worn out floor.

Dave comes in. He looks beat and he's got a scratch on the side of his face that I can see from across the bar. He's my cousin. My great granddaddy had nine kids when he came back from the war. Six of them survived and they had about twenty babies all together. Dave comes from someone in that crop, maybe Uncle Leroy, but I'm not sure.

He asks for a shot. I know him to be the type that shouldn't be drinking whiskey too often. He knows he's that type, too. Sometimes at family functions I've seen him turn away the bottle that was going around, talking about how his old lady didn't like it when he got whiskey on his breath. That sort of thing that guys trot out to other guys, like they're doing it for reasons bigger than themselves. But what it usually means is that he don't like the headache, or waking up with cotton mouth, or with bruises and cuts on his knuckles that he don't remember getting. I don't drink whiskey too often, either.

I get up and walk over to him because it would be rude not to, and because you can't ignore your kin in a bar, especially when it's looking like they might be getting into trouble later on. That sort of thing'll bring the whole family down. Now, our reputation really only hurts the ones after us, my nieces and nephews. My lot has already been cast as Dalton around here. But the kids, I worry about them if we don't try and shape up as a family. And since Dave bears the same mark as I do – Dalton – I got to do right by him, and those kids, and look out for trouble in a bar that's a little too dark, a little too smoky, and a little too armed for a hothead like him to go off in -- like he's liable if he keeps hitting that bottle. Which I imagine is that path he's taking since I don't know any man in my family to just have one shot of whiskey and settle down for the night. No, he's looking for something and I doubt it's anything good.

“Hey bubba, what're you doing drinking whiskey on a Thursday? Ain't you got work in the morning?”

He straightens and slides the glass sideways, away from me. “Ah shit. You've scared the hell out of me, Tuffy.”

“What's good?”

“Ain’t anything good. My old lady’s run off. Somewhere down Shelby County, I think.”

“Yeah, well, hard luck.” I raise my glass.

Dave leans in. “So I’m thinking I got to see her just one more time to try and get her back.”

I nod and stare into my beer. They’re taking a break on the dance floor, otherwise I’d be watching that. Marv and Mary are out there and they do a great two-step spiced up with some spins and twirls. It’s pure an art as there is out here, watching those two.

“I got to see her right? Because I wasn’t myself when she saw me last, what with my mother getting sick and all. So she wasn’t catching me at my best, there at the end, and I need her to know I’m better now, and I can’t get in touch with her. I know she been talking to somebody out in Dreka.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah, see I get the phone bill and I was going through it last month and I see all the daytime calls to some number I don’t know. So I ask her about it and, of course, she says something about, ‘It must be a mistake.’ But I know better so I call up a buddy who can look things up and he says it’s a number to some trailer out in Dreka, yeah?”

“And you’re going to go on down there and get her then?”

“Yeah, that’s what I’m about to do.” Dave raises his glass and yells at the bartender for another. I hate it when people call out like that. Bartenders got a hard job, people yelling at him all the time. It ain’t for me, that’s why I drive truck. Long periods of lonesome are fine by me.

The music comes back on and I turn away from Dave. I want to watch people in love dancing with each other, not have a conversation with a heartbroke man.

Dave is going on in the background about how he's got a good mind to kill that sumbitch that stole his woman away, and I hear him order a few more whiskies while I watch Marv twirl Mary around to the song "A Better Man." It's an underrated song, and they do it full justice stamping their feet, creating new record on that worn maple floor.

I've been drinking slow for several reasons: I'm entranced by the music and the elegance of the dance. And I'm worried about Dave, who's heading for shithoused.

Dave stands up and grabs me on the shoulder, says, "I guess I'll be getting out of here."

"And how're you getting where you're headed?"

"I'm driving my truck. How else?"

"Out to Dreka?"

"Yeah, I'm about to kill me a homewrecker is what I'm going to go do."

"What with?"

He lifts up his shirt and pulls a pistol out of the waistband of his jeans. It's a revolver, but somebody hacksawed the barrel off.

I grab his hand and pull it down and sit him back down in the stool. "Jesus Christ almighty, man. Showing me that in the middle of the bar."

"What like none of them are carrying?" He waves a hand around but I grab him by the shoulders.

“Shut the fuck up. Right now. You’re going home and you’re sleeping this off. I’m going to drive you home and you give me a call in the morning and I’ll bring you back to your truck.”

He pulls away and now I can see all the pain that’s been multiplying with every passing minute. “I reckon I’ll kill anybody tries to get in my way, too. I’m not funning here.”

“Settle down, now.”

I got to make sure he don’t do anything stupid now. It’d be just like Dalton to run off half-crazy on whiskey out to a town that don’t hardly have a name except to those living in it, to a trailer where there might be more guns than people inside. He’s liable to get himself killed, and that’s going to be on me. If he doesn’t, he’s going to manage to kill at least the man, and he’ll probably end up killing his old lady, after that it’s 50/50 whether he closes out the trifecta. I need to help him.

“I’ll go with you,” I tell him.

“Fuck off, man. This ain’t your business.”

I grab him by the collar and say, “Now listen to me, goddamnit. I’m not having your blood on my hands because I let you run off someplace you never been. Getting yourself hurt or in trouble.”

“You know your way around there?”

“Yeah. I been hauling pulpwood around there for going on three months.”

“Well, I wouldn’t mind the help. You always did OK in a fight.”

What he means is: I wasn’t always named Tuffy. My mother named me Daniel, like from the Bible. She knew that she was birthing me into a cruel, painful world and she

thought I'd need the constitution of a man who'd faced down lions. I got the name Tuffy for taking the punches of my old man. By the time I was 10, I knew I needed to be big and I knew I'd never outsmart or outfight somebody. But if I could just take a beating and keep coming, I'd more than likely wear somebody down. By the time I was 12, I was a big boy and could take a punch. Dave had seen the bruises and the cuts and he knew I could take it without complaint and dish it out without regret if I needed to. Though I did it without regret once it was done, I've been slow to act. I've had at least one busted lip, black eye, or broken nose from every fight I've ever been in. They always get one on me first.

#

We get into my truck and I ask for the gun again.

“No.”

I put the truck on the road heading south towards Big Thicket. The road is dark but the sky is awash with light from the stars and the occasional house through the trees. It's like sitting under a heavy blanket in a lit room: Darkness except for light peeking through the threadbare seams and cigarette burns.

I like driving because I like thinking. Not in a book way, but in the way where I wonder about people I've known, what they might be up to now. That sort of thing. I enjoy driving in that ocean of blackness without distraction except for the occasional car on the road. I enjoy that and the cigarettes that I only smoke while driving. They keep my mind sharp.

We've been in the car for a while and I start to worry about my breathing. There's smoke coming up from somewhere out there in the trees, likely where we've been hauling wood from, piles of dead pine out there. My nose is so broke that I can't hardly get a breath through it and I got so much weight on my chest from the beer and the sitting that I wheeze. I look over to Dave to see if he notices, but he doesn't. He's asleep.

Finally. I grab the gun, empty the cylinder and put the bullets into the bib of my overalls, and then I drop it out the window. It catches glints of the taillights as it bounces down the road away from us.

The smoke in my lungs reminds of when I was a kid. I was maybe junior high, hadn't dropped out, yet. My mother came in and shook me awake and there was a splashing on my window and on the walls outside the trailer like rain but it was coming in from the side. She held her finger over her mouth to shush me and grabbed me by the arm, through the hallway and out the kitchen window that faced a clearing. We got out the window, and ran towards a clump of trees. We huddled close to the trees as we watched my father roll up a newspaper, fire it, and set our house alight. He seemed so precise in his movement, until I watched him walk away back towards his truck, the engine still running. He was a little unsteady and he had the truck parked so close to our trailer that he clipped a corner of it while it was on fire as he sped away. The smoke crept into my lungs, but I didn't cough; tears fell out of my mother's eyes and down a swollen purple patch on her face, but she didn't cry.

I guess I was happy in a way. Burnt-down trailer seems a small price to be freed of the yoke he had on us. We never saw him again.

I roust Dave up when I think we're getting close, keep him busy looking out the window so that he can maybe sober up, and forget about looking for his pistol. We finally make it to where Dave thinks we need to be and the full weight of the liquor is on him. He's dragging his words as we pull onto a pea-gravel lane in a trailer park. Dave's guy has given him the address of the one we're looking for, and I find it fairly easy. Dave is slurring and starting to get revved up. He's pounding the dash. I stop the truck and he hops out, rips open the screen doors of a powder blue trailer with all the lights off and starts banging the door with a closed fist. I run over and wrap him up.

"Wrong house, man."

"Well, what the fuck. Why didn't you say something?"

I jerk my head toward a peach-colored double-wide, screen door off one hinge, car parked out front with three flats and a cinder. All sorts of trash scattered about.

"That's the one."

He walks over, calmer and picks up a chunk of a brick in the front dirt where maybe grass used to be. I think he wants to throw it at the door as a warning but it goes wide and runs through the large window in front.

"Get out here you fuckin' homewrecker! I fought narcos in Nicaragua you sonofabitch! I ain't scared of you!"

The lights turn on. Dave reaches to his waistband.

"Tuffy, where's my pistol at?"

"I got it." I pat my pocket.

"Well, give it here." He starts walking towards me when the door flies open and a man comes out. The man's got on a work shirt that's not buttoned, jeans and no shoes.

“You throw that brick through my window?”

“Yeah. You got my wife in there and I aim to get her back. I need a word with her.”

“That woman in there ain’t married to anybody. What the fuck are you talking about?”

“Hey, fuck you, man. You don’t know anything about me or my woman in there.”

“I don’t think you got a woman in there.”

The man, Len, if we got the right guy, comes down off the milk crate-step of his trailer.

“Tuffy, give me that pistol so I can kill this sumbitch.”

The man takes a step back and looks at me.

“Who’s that tub? Your backup?”

“I wouldn’t be talking like that to my kin. I’m already ‘bout to kill you. Tuffy, the gun.”

Dave holds his hand out and Len is stuck like his shoes filled up with lead.

“No,” I say, “You got to beat this man fair.”

“Fuck it.” Dave grabs a shovel with the head broke off, flips it around and comes down on Len right in between the neck and shoulder with the plastic handle. Len grunts and goes down and Dave takes a golf swing with the handle one more time at his face.

Before he can take another I stop him.

“It’s time for your talk.”

Dave tosses the shovel handle aside and wipes his face with his shirt sleeve.

I follow Dave inside and a woman with her hair wrapped in a towel is on the couch, crying, with a yellowed bruise on her neck.

“What did you do to Len?” she says.

“Who?”

“That man out there.”

“Oh, that guy. Yeah, he wouldn’t let me in, so I had to convince him a little.”

“Is he hurt bad?”

“It ain’t good.”

It’s all very calm, calmer than I’d imagined it, I think. She looks over at me.

“Who’s that? Your muscle?”

“That’s my cousin, Tuffy. I don’t need backup. He just drove. Tuffy, this is Kay.”

I nod my head, but she isn’t looking at me. She’s fixated on Dave.

“Come on. Let’s go home, Kay.”

“No.”

“You’re coming with me. It ain’t right walking out on a man like you did. I aim to show you I’m better than that.”

He walks closer to her and I’m in his shadow behind him. He grabs at her arm and she pulls away.

“I’m not going anywhere with you.”

Dave raises his hand and, in a moment, I’m a child again. I catch the crook of his elbow with mine and pull him back, then throw him to the ground. He’s on his back staring up as I come down on him with my full weight, the heel of my hand sinks through his throat and I can feel it crush like a half-full, plastic bottle of water. It sloshes and

crumples. Dave thrashes and clutches at his throat, but he's already killed. I draw a deep breath as he stops kicking. Kay looks at me with wide eyes, but they don't look sad, or surprised. She just watches.

I stand up and I don't know what to say. I look to Kay for forgiveness and see that I need none. I nod my head and look back to the body, back to her. Outside the front door I can hear groaning and I know that Len will be alright. I get in my truck to start the drive back up to Texarkana.

My cousin is dead, and I'll have to answer for that. Those are family problems, though. People here take care of their own, and I'll take the consequences as they come. I did what I thought was right. Far as I can see, there wasn't any other way. But I won't leave my home here, so anybody wants to come after me for this can find me. I'll just take it as it comes.

## ONLY TEMPORARY

My name is George Hunt Morgan, but I prefer to be called Thunderbolt.

I had to take on a different name, of course, so most people don't call me Thunderbolt, and nobody calls me George. I have a Jew name now, one that struck me as sounding unthreatening. So, my name tag and my tax forms and everything else bear the name of Herbert Greenfeld. I tell people to, please, call me Herb.

About a hundred and fifty years ago, when I was a drunk and a connoisseur of whores, I managed to get turned into a vampire. I started in California but I'd made my way out to Virginia City, a miner that had missed the big boom but still believed in miracles. I met the bastard who turned me at a faro table where I was losing my ass such that I was thinking hard about the value of my mule and wagon. His name was Malachi and he was a fat Irish pig with pale blue eyes. He kept talking about the steamer he'd taken to San Francisco and how he'd been looking for real Indians. He'd spent years reading about them, said he, but all he could find were drunk Indians in cities and not the real-deal-teepee-Indians with long hair who didn't smell of whiskey. I told him there was a reservation out in the desert. A mistake.

He offered me fifty dollars to haul him there in my wagon. I should've thought it peculiar when he loaded a coffin in my wagon and told me he'd sleep in there during the day, despising sunlight as he did. But, thus are the bad decisions that one makes on the tail-end of a weeklong drunk.

We stopped near Pyramid Lake after a couple days of traveling. Still on a drunk and being philosophical, I mentioned that I'd like to learn to get as lucky as him at the card tables.

With time, he said, you could learn.

I sure wouldn't mind, said I.

He offered me the fifty dollars or the knowledge. I should've taken the damn money.

I woke up buried in a hole, my shirt crusty with dried blood. I don't know how long I spent down there thinking: maybe this is what happens when you die. For a time, I thought I'd become a ghost. The whole ordeal is embarrassing. I finally dug my way out, convinced I was an apparition and was confronted with sunlight. Now, movies will tell you that vampires burst into flames or some other dramatic nonsense, but the reality is that sun exposure is, quite simply, like experiencing the most painful sunburn possible. Immediately I ran towards the lake, shedding clothes – and I thought clearly, this is why ghosts only come out at night – and dove into the water. I swam to the bottom and remained there for the rest of the day having stuffed rocks in my pockets to keep me submerged.

My first trip back into the civilization was, equally, an ordeal. By this time, I was naked and unwashed, but unconcerned. I hadn't seen any travelers at night while walking and assumed I could not be seen, ghost that I was.

The folly of my logic was made apparent to me when I walked through a yard while two women were taking clothes off a line. The younger woman screamed and ran

upon seeing me. The older one just stared at me for a moment, then calmly asked where my clothes were. She mentioned something about the cold weather and my small penis, as well. I panicked and ran towards her and ripped down as much clothing and fabric as I could before retreating back out to the desert.

I returned to town later with a blue sheet wrapped around my torso like a Roman senator and a pair of woolen pants that were about six inches too short and extremely tight.

My first real experiences with people were strange, like I could feel emotions as they were being felt by others around me. I had visions of things that I could not understand, an urge to consume blood. But I resisted for a long time – unsure how to justify this behavior to myself. My senses became heightened even as my strength began to wane. Finally, I gave in to my urges and drank the blood of a drunk that had passed out in an alley. The world moved into clearer focus and I began to understand what it was I had become.

I have been a roving vampire since then, sure of what I am. I work nights, mostly casino towns. There are times when I fast and I can see into the heart of things. Those instances make me feel connected in a world where I'm often adrift and detached. I long for moments where I can feel those fleeting impulses and fears that come from knowing you're mortal.

The only time I feel connected, generally, is working the stick at a hot craps table. There is no connection more spontaneously meaningful than a shooter that

holds the dice for thirty minutes, uniting everyone at the table, bringing together people of all types.

These moments are few and far between in Reno where things seem to be decaying all around me. I can't go back to Vegas, though. Las Vegas is a city built up on false hopes and glitz. A place full of fat tourists in cargo shorts with shirts that don't fit. They smell of fried food and crab legs from cheap buffets. The place itself is unnatural, a monument to human arrogance. It reminds me too much of me.

So, I remain in Reno stalking connections that elude me. Lusting after women that my flaccid penis cannot satisfy. A slug resting between my legs, dormant since I became a vampire. Still though, I try anyways.

Outside of Reno, just east of town, I went to a brothel. I hadn't fed in days – and, I'll tell you now, my mind went wild inside there. I have never been the same since.

The air is warm in here and I can feel it cover me like a blanket. A thick wet shock coming from the dry outside. The fluorescent bulbs buzz. My skin tingles.

On a small stage pressed against a corner of the room, there's a girl standing with her legs spread shoulder-width apart, toes curled over the front of the stage. She leans against a brass pole which runs along her spine, her hands grip the pole above her head. Her pelvis is pushed out and she is completely nude, completely hairless. From where I sit at the bar I see a small mole on her left thigh, and it wobbles as if to wave me closer. She leaps and rounds the pole and I see a swirl of white and she looks like a cotton sheet, pinned to a line swinging softly in the wind.

I look around and several men have come back from romps in their respective rooms and they are enraptured. A beer sweats against my cold hands and I feel everyone in this room all at once. I am hungry and their minds bleed outward and into my own. This woman – a girl, really -- on stage has opened the door to all the pain and happiness and regret all at once and it's on me. They tell me their desires, show me their wishes.

A man in a blue and white striped polo shirt fidgets with a gold wedding ring, rolling it around on his finger before standing up too quickly, knocking over the table full of drinks.

“My wedding is a sham,” he announces to friends too enraptured with the girl to notice him or the broken glass. She's lying down with her legs apart to beckon them.

The blue and white striped polo shirt takes off his wedding ring and throws it through a window.

Another man, smartly dressed in khakis, sheds his pants. He wads them up carefully into a ball, hides them under the table and begins to masturbate. He's moving his hand with the force, motion, and determination of a man driving nails with a hammer. He begins to cry and moans, “I'm a coward that will never know love! And I'm raising children who will be the same!”

The bartender is on his knees, praying. I can hear him reciting the Lord's Prayer, while two men rise from their chairs and walk towards the stage.

One of the men sit cross-legged on the stage, speaks of economic inequality and cradles the dancer's head in his lap as though they were young lovers. He strokes her blonde hair and says, “Trickle-down economics is a farce and my children won't pay for

that! I'm sorry for all that Reagan has done to you. I voted for him twice." She opens her mouth to speak and he spits in it.

The other man that rose from the table towards the stage is lying prostrate on the floor face-down, flailing like a drowning swimmer, banging his head against the stage. "I deserve – whap!– all the p –whap! – ain that is coming. I deserve a cancer!" He rolls over exposing his bloody nose and lights seven cigarettes. When he exhales, he pulls them from his mouth all at once in a closed fist. He crushes them and the ashes burn through his white button-down shirt.

There is something special about this place. The emotions and things I can see transcend all others. It is, simply, unreasonable.

I have lusted after no woman or man since then. I have not returned to the Mustang Ranch.

That is a lie.

But, I'm over one hundred years old and I imagine I'll live for a few hundred more. With a sense of permanence comes peace and I enjoy myself. I have a nice apartment. I watch QVC in the evenings and talk to the operators about their boyfriends and steak knives. Reba is my favorite although Jessica and Robin are sweeties, too.

You may find me dealing blackjack on a graveyard shift at any old casino. I'm the guy with long nails and pale skin. I'll be the one separating you from your money, smiling and saying, "This is only temporary. You can only lose for so long before it turns around."

## BAYOU CORNE

I was the first one to know that my father was going to die.

We'd been fishing a lot since he'd gotten sick, and that's what we were doing off a pier on Galveston Island when he told me. By the time my father mentioned his impending end, it was scorching hot and we were both maybe a little drunk. I probably was anyways. It was always a little hard to tell with him. I kept trying to grab shrimp out of the bait bucket but the shrimp kept flipping out of my hand, swimming to freedom in the water below.

"I think it's too damn hot out here to be fishing, can't none of these fish want to eat in this heat."

My father set his rod in the PVC holder bolted to the end of the pier and sat down on the wooden bench with me, pulled a soft pack of Marlboro Reds out of his shirt pocket, and flipped open his tarnished Zippo.

"Enjoy these moments, son. Doctor says I'll be dead in six months."

He tilted his head back and blew out a chest-full of smoke. I could hear his lungs rattling like an old engine about to go.

Some wind came up and his can of Lone Star fell over and rolled off the side of the pier, joining all the shrimp I'd failed to hook. I watched it slide over the waves, rocking away from us.

"Shit," he said, "grab me another beer."

#

Things hadn't been great at home for my old man for some time after he got too sick to work, but the situation with mom – and everyone else, I guess -- broke down pretty bad after he found out he was dying. My mother thought that prayer, macrobiotic diet, and quitting smoking were the answers to save my father. He told her, with whiskey on his breath and a cigarette clamped between his fingers, that he'd never seen prayer save anybody in the jungle so he wouldn't count on it curing his cancer. He had no interest in any of her other suggestions pulled from articles in health magazines stacked neatly on tables in the waiting room of the doctor's office, either. He was determined to go on his own terms. At least that's how I saw it. He was determined to die happy. He was going to retreat to his broke down house boat that he had tied up down at the harbor, smoke grass and drink beer until the end came. We would fish occasionally before he moved out of the house, but we went all the time afterwards.

I moved into the house boat, too. I was in-between housing and in-between work and I guess I'd had about enough of the self-righteousness coming from the rest of the family, like my father had. So we stayed out there as expatriates from the family. Living life on nobody's terms but our own. Serving as his self-appointed caretaker, we spent most of our time fishing, smoking and watching the Military Channel. He still had a small pension coming in from the Army. He seemed to get a perverse joy out of buying drugs with his pension money.

“They owe me this much after giving me cancer, for Christ's sake.” He'd say something like that, then he'd laugh and I could hear his lungs breaking. Then he'd put his yellowed fingers back up to his mouth and draw on a cigarette. To him it was always the government's fault that he got cancer: Agent Orange.

Towards the end, my father talked more and more about his mortality at different times. Once, we were watching the Military Channel, like usual, something about helicopters.

“I went down in one of them piece a shit Huey choppers. We were just starting to take off maybe got forty, fifty feet in the air and it just went kaput. Fell straight back down. I guess we were lucky it’d been raining so much because it fell right into the mud. Hell, it buried so deep I had to step up to get out the door. Half the damn cockpit was in the ground.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“Well, why would you? Nobody cares about that shit anymore.”

He grabbed his bologna sandwich up off the paper towel laid on the coffee table, and I could tell he was about done talking. So I just enjoyed my beer and learned some more about helicopters while he grumbled softly about the ones he’d been on in the war.

Another night, we were watching Texas-Oklahoma football game and Oklahoma had just scored again putting them up by fourteen, so my father was back and forth between that and a show about sinkholes. We were both pretty high, and he was getting a little philosophical.

“I wonder what it’d be like at the bottom of one.”

“Bottom of what?” I said.

“A sinkhole, man, look at ‘em.”

I started paying more attention to the show than the old Sports Illustrated I’d taken off the table at the doctor’s office.

Later on, he said, "I think I'd like to be buried in one of them. Like a sailor at sea, but, you know, in a sinkhole instead. Explore the depths out there." Then he dropped the roach clip and the joint in it and it burned a hole right through the front of his yellow and blue Hawaiian shirt before he stood up and shook it out on the floor. The sudden movement got him to coughing and he shook out some disease onto the floor, too.

He didn't go like we thought he would. The family was busy praying across town, probably, when it happened. He told me he wasn't feeling well, grabbed a bottle of pills off the kitchen counter, and went down the hallway into the bedroom. I stretched out on the couch and kept drinking and watching TV until I fell asleep. I woke up and I was surprised the old man hadn't shoved my feet off the couch to make room for him to turn on the news, so I went to go check on him. He was asleep on top of the sheets, still had his jeans on. There was an open Percocet bottle on the nightstand and some saltines. I went to shake his foot and it was ice cold and stiff. He looked so peaceful though. Like he could finally relax and let go of all those things that would make him angry on TV, or when we went to the store and had to wait in line for more than ten minutes. It all looked washed away and he was finally peaceful and calm. I believe that.

Prayer didn't save him, and the cancer didn't kill him. In the end, he had a few too many Percocet, a little too much Early Times, and not enough food in his belly. Just sort of dozed off in a fog and drifted away, I'd imagine.

There wasn't a will, naturally. My father knew he was going to die for months, and he couldn't be bothered to make it easier on the family by filling out some

paperwork. It was still blank on the kitchen counter, stained with mustard from when we'd use his blank will as a makeshift plate to build sandwiches. Pretty much typical of him. And since he hadn't gotten a divorce, just moved out, my mother got everything. She told me I could keep the houseboat since she knew I was hard up for anywhere else to go.

What she said was, "I don't give a damn what happens to that piece of shit. Be better off at the bottom of the bay as far as I'm concerned."

I was happy for her generosity.

My mother, brother, and sister had decided long before -- and without my father's consent -- that he would have a proper Catholic burial. Both sides of the family would view his body and he'd be buried the next day. A wake would follow. This is what they told me.

We were at the kitchen table and there were menus spread out with various appetizers on them. My siblings were chattering away about how tiny cups of tomato bisque might make for nice comfort food, especially if it rained at the funeral.

I'd been trying to keep it together and not let my father's passing slide me into a weeklong bender and the sobriety was putting me in pain at the table and thinking about the food made me sick, so I mostly just stared at the table and nodded.

Hank, my brother, turned to me and said, "What do you think about the bisque?"

"Dad wanted to be buried in a sinkhole," I said.

I looked at my sister and mother and they were staring at me, mouths open.

My sister, Jolene, said, "Say that again?"

“Dad told me he wanted to be buried in a sinkhole. That’s what he told me about a month ago.”

Jolene said, “We are not putting daddy in a sinkhole.”

“Well, it’s what he wanted.”

My mother put her hand on mine and said, “Are you on drugs again Johnny?”

I pulled my hand away. “No, goddamnit. I’m serious.”

My brother stood up and said, “Hey, watch that language.”

“Fuck you, Hank.”

My mother said, “Quiet, both of you. We are not burying him in sinkhole.”

She used that same tone when we were kids. The tone that announced the decision was final. Like when she’d tell us we could not keep snakes in the bathtub, or that we couldn’t use trashcan lids as shields to joust each other on bicycles.

I stood up. “I don’t feel well. Goodnight”

I got back to the houseboat, cracked a beer and lit a joint. Decided to hell with sobriety. My head was feeling real big and everything was warm and the couch was soft. I kept catching shadows down the hallway and every time, I’d wait, just making sure my old man wasn’t going to come walking. I dozed off and woke to daylight creeping through the blinds.

I sat straight up. “Shit. I got to get to the viewing.”

Then I checked the clock on the microwave and it read: 4:30.

The TV was on low and the sinkholes were on again. Talking about one in Florida that just filled up with water and was more like a really deep pond.

There was rustling down the hallway in the bedroom and I got up, grabbed the baseball bat near the door and walked back there. I figured sure that old man had some damn debts that were getting collected. But it was just some hungry grackles eating crumbs of saltines off the bed. They ripped the sleeve apart and were eating right off the sheets my father had died on. I hadn't even gone back there after they'd moved his body out. Seemed like it'd be too real if I started staying in there. I didn't want to think about all the conversations we weren't going to have with him being gone. There wasn't any use in trying to go back to sleep after that. I just walked back into the living room and fired up another joint.

I already had pants on that were pretty clean, but I went back down the hall and grabbed the cleanest shirt I could out of my father's closet and put it on.

I sat back down on the couch and it was five and I got to thinking about what he'd said to me about how he wanted to be buried. I flipped on the TV and it was something about Vietnam and I remembered how he would nod his head and say things like, "Damn right. True test of a man is when he's staring death in the face. Strips all the bullshit right away." He'd growl it through tight lips when he wasn't fucked up, or lean back philosophically if he was. Either way, the message remained the same. And I knew I had to honor his truest wishes.

I drove down to the funeral home early, a little before seven maybe. I got in the old station wagon that my father'd gotten when we were kids to haul us around. I figured I'd get there early and talk to whoever was there about my predicament. I sat in the car for a while sort of trying to calm down. I was maybe a little too high because when I got

to the front door it was all wobbly and looked like it was breathing. I had trouble trying to find a landing spot for my hand. I started getting nervous. I walked to the edge of the porch, lit a cigarette. I took two pulls off the cigarette, flipped it in the bushes and began kicking the door with my steel toe boots, loud enough that they would be able to hear. A wreath fell off the door and that startled me since I hadn't noticed it before. I tried to put it back but couldn't, so I threw it off the porch altogether. I went back to kicking, hoping somebody might be in. I heard the lock slide and somebody mumbled, "We're closed."

"I'm sorry. I'm early. You have my father in there, and I was just hoping I could see him before the rest of the family showed up."

"Of course. I'm John Petrangelo. Come on in," he said. He extended his hand.

I grabbed his hand and got about halfway in before the inertia of everything – my father, the weed, impending hangover – hit me and I just about tumbled right back outside.

"Are you all right, friend?"

"I'm fine. You got any coffee?"

"I do. I just finished a pot, but I'll brew another. The deceased is just down there at the end of the hall. The door is open if you want to wait in there."

"Thank you."

I decided, looking at him wearing a black suit -- one that I'm sure my mother purchased only for this occasion -- that I'd just take him out of there and bury him proper the way he wanted. I moved fast, swinging open the bottom half of the casket and tried to throw him up over my shoulder to fireman carry him out. I hadn't considered how stiff

he'd be. And much lighter. I wrapped him up in my arms sort of like you might do if you're hauling a rolled-up rug. It was more awkward than anything else. I had to set him down when I got to the fire exit door. I was getting anxious again. It was still early, obviously, and nobody was outside yet, but I also wasn't sure how long Mr. Petrangelo would be back in the office. I figured speed to be the key for this operation, so I picked him back up and slid him into the back of the station wagon. There were some blankets back there from when I used to go out and sleep in the back to get a little alone time in. It smelled like wet and mildew in there, in a way I hadn't noticed before. I wrapped him up in that and ripped out of the parking lot. Destination: Florida.

I'd seen shows where they track people using their cell phones, so I tossed it out of the car, once I got on the 146 northbound. I also lit a joint. Kidnapping a body, or whatever it was I was doing was stressful and I can't function under that kind of stress. Had to mellow a little.

I cranked the Allman Brothers on the radio and I wasn't two songs in, driving through those piney woods when I started to get hungry. There wasn't any way I was stopping in Texas. For sure they'd be looking for me after everything got found out. I'd made a hell of a mess, too. Tipped over the casket on the way out. Knocked over a vase of flowers when that happened. Not right to do that in there, but I had to. Collateral damage. That's what my father would've said.

There ain't anything exciting about driving through east Texas and I found myself wandering a bit, maybe working off the stress and the high in some weird ways. I just started chattering away

“That was a close one, Pop. You should’ve seen the look on that guy’s face when I busted through the door. Pow! Right in the nose that door hit him, blood everywhere, out cold. Collateral damage, right?”

I looked out and there was a Little League advertisement stuck in the ground.

“Hey, remember how you used to coach Hank’s baseball team and then Jolene in softball? Why didn’t you ever coach mine? I know you were busy and all with the carpentry by then, two apprentices coming up. You’d tell me that. But you couldn’t make time?”

“I’m pretty high, Pop.”

It wasn’t until I was about to Lake Charles that I thought I was far enough away to maybe stop. I was starving and I had to shit. I pulled around the back of the gas station. There wasn’t anybody around so I climbed over the seat and into the back of the car. I tucked in the blanket in a few spots. Pull it down over the top of his head and over his feet. His thick black hair was peeking out the top of the blanket.

“Damn, Pop, I sure wish I got that hair instead of this.” I ran my hands through my hair. “How’m I the only one gets blonde hair in the whole family? And it’s so thin. What is it you used to say when I was a kid? ‘Wonders of genetics,’ or something, right?”

Then I came up, sat back, and realized: it looked just like a dead body. I tried to rustle the blanket to make the outline a little less obvious, tossed a length of rope on top of it, laid a sandbag on his feet which were a definite trouble spot.

“Back in a minute. I got to shit and get something to eat.”

I walked around the side and there was a kid smoking a cigarette out front with a name tag pinned to his shirt, “Petey.”

“Hey, uh, Petey. You need a key for the restroom?”

“Yeah, I’ll grab it for you.”

He balanced his cigarette on the end of the concrete step and I followed him inside.

He handed me the key.

“And, uh, this paper. Please.”

*American Press* – I needed it for the restroom. Not a time to be alone with one’s thoughts when there’s a dead body in the back of your car and your high is wearing off.

I was browsing the front page and it was something about residents of Assumption Parish and settlements to the residents for relocating. The article wasn’t mentioning why they’d relocated, then I saw it.

I finished up and threw open the door. Ran over to the counter and shoved the newspaper in Petey’s face.

“How do I get here?”

“Wha – Where?” He was backing up and I was leaning over the counter.

“Here!” I jabbed at the article with my finger.

Petey leaned in, looked at the article and struggling to read it outstretched in my trembling hands, set it down on the counter.

“The sinkhole?”

“Yeah man! How do I get there? I’ve got to get there.”

“Well, I never been there, but you’ll probably want to take the one east to Baton Rouge.”

“Is there a map or something?”

“Yeah, maybe, don’t you got a phone or something?”

“No.”

I swung the glass door open so hard that I thought I heard it crack, maybe, but I didn’t turn around. I rounded the corner and grabbed some boxes set out near the dumpster and took a few back to the car. I looked around and made sure Petey wasn’t around; he was probably looking at the door. I threw the boxes inside on top of the body.

“We got to camouflage you a little bit, old man. Can’t be driving around with a body round here. I think I got you a sinkhole though, nice and deep by the looks of it.”

We stopped at a Wal-Mart just outside Baton Rouge because it occurred to me that the old man’s body would just float out into the water like a piece of driftwood in a black suit if I just tossed him out there. We sat in the car, and I went over the plan.

“I think, what I need to get is like some sort of a raft or something to paddle you out in, maybe.”

I went inside and caught that nice blast of cool air, put my head down, grabbed a shopping cart, and went straight for sporting goods to see about some sort of raft. I got to the back there and wouldn’t you know they had about a dozen kinds of rafts. I got anxious with all the options and finally just grabbed a couple of boxes off the shelf.

When I finally got to the check stand my cart looked like this: two inner tubes like you'd use in a pool, one life preserver, twenty feet of heavy chain, a padlock, and a pocket knife.

I rattled across the parking lot with my shopping cart and unloaded all of it into the back with everything else back there and the car was starting to look awfully full.

“Just like when we used to drive out to the beach when we was kids, huh Pop?”

Then I started wondering what my mother might be doing. It was about 7:00 and I knew she would've gotten to the funeral home right when it opened. I hoped that they cleaned up the mess before she got there, at least.

Map in hand, we continued on towards Bayou Corne. Headed for the biggest damn sinkhole in Louisiana. 750 feet if the article in the paper was to be believed.

Now, I'd thought that there would be some access issues, but it turns out that the sinkhole is basically just a pond. I drove through the town and then down off a little dirt road, or what used to be a dirt road anyhow. There wasn't much moving in town and I passed by a bait stand and stopped in to grab some beer.

I got to the counter and asked the clerk, “People go fishing 'round here?”

“Oh yes, all the time.”

“Where might a fella go to sit down next to the water and have a beer?”

“Not fishing?”

“No, sir. Just looking to have a couple beers.”

“Well, if you keep taking this road down past the boat launch. Well, there ain't much back there after that.”

“Appreciate it.”

I got back in the car, set the beer on the front seat and said, “Looks like we found you a sinkhole, Pop.”

We got around and about fully had the sinkhole between us and the bait stand. I grabbed my pack of smokes and the beer and went and set down and looked at the black water. I needed to be fresh for the evening so that we could pull of a successful night operation and get my father to the bottom of that hole, so I drank slow.

“Wonder what kind of fish they got out here?”

And in that moment, I waited for a response and knew that I wasn't going to get one.

By the time it was fully dark, I'd already dragged out both inner tubes and blown them up. Then, when I was sure it was dark enough, and I'd at least see headlights if anyone was coming, I pulled my father out of the back of the station wagon. He sort of just slid out like an ironing board that'd been laying back there. I pulled him up onto the inner tube and set the sandbag that was in the back on top of him and started looping that twenty-foot chain around him up under his legs, around his belly and the sandbag, then up over his shoulders. I grabbed the life vest out of the car because thinking about that deep water made me shiver and turned on the reading light inside. Then I drug both of our inner tubes to the water, and gave his tube a good push, then I hopped in my own and grabbed hold of my old man's suit. We paddled out towards the middle of the sinkhole. I

had held on to my father with one hand and paddled with the other as we made slow progress out to where I hoped it was deepest.

The moon had just gotten bright by the time we were out in the middle and I could just barely see the light coming from the inside of the car. I flipped open my pocket knife.

“We did it, Pop.”

I stabbed the side of his inner tube and it sizzled softly and I hoped he was proud of me. He sank so fast it was like something from the bottom was pulling him. I just stuck my hand out, waving like he might see me, and watched him go under.

## THERE WAS NO WAY THAT LED ANYWHERE BUT HERE

I am a man of faith which I come by honest. My father was a Methodist preacher, same goes with my two brothers. Then there ended up me, an outlaw running out of hope, burning through attempts at salvation. I'm a used-to-be gunfighter and formerly fearsome man. Before I was those things, I broke horses and my body. My faith tells me that this was always the plan for me, that sometimes a man must plumb the deepest depths to find his forgiveness.

What I know, cooped up and laying low again in Joplin, is that I probably used up all the goodwill the world was ever going to extend towards me. I've had my fair share of it, I just couldn't ever use it the way it was intended. I'm a two-time free man from prison, and that's probably about enough. It's hot outside, there's a child crying in the other room, and I don't know how much more of this I can stand. It's the quiet life that pushes me. It's in these moments of what some might call bliss -- living in the house with Red and his young family -- that I feel my strongest impulses towards evil. I would reckon it's been this way since I was a boy.

There's a pistol in the drawer of my nightstand. It's newer than the ones we used to use. More moving parts though, and damned if they don't jam up at the slightest speck of dirt in the cylinder. These cheap bullets never seem to fire when you want them to and all this conspires to make me wonder how much luck a man can have. I've fired first at a man eighteen times in my life. I sometimes wonder what my life would be like if I hadn't gotten the first one off so many times.

Last night I went to a diner around the corner. Not because there wasn't dinner at the house, but because I needed to be out. I put my pistol in the waistband of my pants and threw my jacket on over the top to conceal it. Precautions that come with a cautious new society. Nobody feels this violence anymore. They watch it in films maybe, Westerns about bad men. They hear it in the streets with the rumbling, cranking and clacking of all those damn Fords kicking up dust on dirt roads, flying around so quick they're liable to kill you just for standing in the wrong place. It's all controlled now. Everything. Controlled and a little dull. I just robbed a bank a little while back in Asbury.

There's no feeling like holding the steel and controlling the moment. Likewise, those moments riding – it used to be a horse, now it's a damn automobile – where you can think back on it, slow it down and replay it are what make it for me. There's no other time like coming off that high, knowing you got away with it, and thinking back on how you done it, again.

This house I'm living in has a tablecloth on the table, clean sheets, and floors that get swept at least every other day. My clothes get laundered and I can get cleaned up in the bath any time I please. The outside isn't much with the grass grown right up to the edge, but Red doesn't seem to mind. His wife cooks and this little house fills up with the smell, such that I'm hungry nearly all the time thinking about her food. There isn't much else to think about once you settle back into the quiet life. Just wondering when the next meal is and how the weather is going to be tomorrow.

The thing is, Gibson is the deputy here in Joplin, and I imagine he'll find me soon. I'm losing speed and he knows it. He already got the drop on me once, a few years back. A younger version of myself would've killed him, sure as I'm sitting at this kitchen

table thinking right now. But he got there first and I gave up. I don't guess I'll be giving up again.

I was in one big gunfight. All the rest were fast, bang-bang and everybody starts running and shouting. It might have been one of the last of the big ones when Doolin and Dalton were still alive and everybody wrote about us in papers calling us the Wild Bunch. Other memories, even the tense ones seem to fade with time. There are robberies I can't much remember, quarrels I've forgotten. I can't remember what I did on Tuesday of last week and I barely remember even the best of times with my wife when I was a married man. But I remember every moment of that shootout in Ingalls. It hasn't faded a bit.

We had gone there to have a nice time and rest, but they found us. Such is the way these things go, such are the Lord's mysteries.

Dalton's big idea was for us to hole up in Ingalls for a day or so since we'd been hiding in the brush like Indians for going on a month. Some of the boys had already been in town a while, and they convinced the rest of us it was safe. To me, it seemed like as good a place as any to spend some of the money we'd been hauling around after robbing trains and sleeping in the damn dirt. In Ingalls, there were whores and card games and whiskey. If a man had money like we all did he could do all three of them things in a half hour or so. But not me. I was not well. Our last excursion into town had rendered me progressively more ill until I was near a breaking point from pain and shame. I left the boys at the card table – the chairs were too hard – and checked into a room next door at the O.K. Hotel. We'd gotten in late at night and they were ready to let loose. Folks in papers called us the Wild Bunch, but we tried to be good in town to keep the law off us.

Except for this time, in Ingalls, when things went bad very quickly.

To be fair, we knew there was a posse nearby. A boy in the stable had told us he'd seen near thirty or so of them camped out of town a ways. That's why the horses stayed saddled up while we divided up and found our way to our various vices. My health problems left me plopped in a bath soaking for most of the morning while my swollen member secreted yellow puss. The pain was sharp like a long, red hot needle running the full length. I'd procured some laudanum and thought it might be a good time to try it on account of the hurt. I laid down in bed -- sans pants to let myself air out a little -- popped the cork off medicine bottle with my thumb and took a pull of the warm numbness.

I could hear the boys hooting downstairs, but their voices got quieter. I adjusted the pillow and centered it on my bed and took inventory. There was a crawl space in the corner with a ladder attached to the wall. A dresser with a drawer missing. My rifle next to the bed. The voices moved further and further away. I felt as though I was drifting off to sea.

Though I was alone, I said, "I wonder how I get back to shore without a paddle. It's dark. I'll leave this in your hands, Lord, to guide me back. Amen."

I kept drifting. Drifting and sweating off a fever.

The shooting roused me, but I wasn't exactly moving quickly. I tripped coming out of bed on my way to the window. The colors moved through the window like it was made of stained glass. I reached for my rifle leaning against the wall and knocked it over. I bent down, wobbled and dropped to a knee to retrieve it and turned to the window with

such force that I almost fell straight through it as I drove the barrel of my rifle square through the center of the glass.

My talent in those days was with a Winchester repeating rifle. I was steady, accurate when I needed to be, which, back then, was often. I could count on one of my busted horse breaking hands how many men I knew who could lever a round and aim to kill faster than me.

Ingalls was different though. It was like being in a gunfight underwater. The rifle itself felt like a feather in my hands. I tried to rack a round and my arms couldn't hardly move fast enough to keep from jamming the rifle. I stood at the freshly broken window, heaving. My swollen penis caught a breeze. I said, "This feels nice."

George – that's Newcomb – was already on his horse and there was a small man holding the reins of the horse with his left hand and a pistol in his right. George was slumped over a little already and there were other horses on both sides of him including my own, Juanita, a beautiful paint mare that would come by name if called. I began to worry for her.

"Hey, god damn it! You be careful out there, there's innocents!" I yelled.

I squeezed a few shots in the direction of what I know now was a deputy U.S. Marshall – I might've hit him once because he turned sort of funny and dropped the reins to George's horse and looked straight up at me. I know I hit him that second time because I watched his insides exit his body out the side. I'd gut shot him and sprayed blood and shit all over the street around him.

Naturally, he started rolling on the ground making a fuss as men do when they are far from God and unacquainted with the cost of their decisions. While I stared at the

shades of brown the dirt was being colored, searching for patterns, a volley of bullets came crashing my direction, thumping into the walls. I fell to the floor and waited for them to ease up or reload. A window exploded and, to my ears, it sounded like rain. I got dizzy, leaned my head back and waited for the raindrops to cool me as it was becoming quite hot in there between the excitement and the rising sun.

“You fucking killed him!” said someone in the street below me.

Another, deeper voice, said, “We’re gonna string this sumbitch up right over there on that tree.” And though I’d heard that before, it accomplished little in resolving the situation, as if I’d prefer to hang and shit myself than fight down to my last bullet.

I drifted and imagined the tree that Christ died on for us. I thought about the garden. I crawled on my stomach toward the door, and satisfied that they were ceasing with the shooting for a minute in my absence I grabbed the dresser and slid it in front of the door to my room. It would not stop them, but I had hoped it may slow them down enough for me to get a few shots off, even in my diminished state.

There was the ladder leading upwards, on the wall across the room. By this point the shooting had become general and continuous. The sound in those moments seems to surround you and it’s easy to become lost in the noise. The Marshalls had turned their attention back towards the saloon where the boys were hiding out. I stood holding the ladder in my hands and listened to the walls around me breathe. My father once told me, “Son, there is nothing that can even a fight so quickly as artillery positioned on good ground with view of the enemy.”

I climbed. The attic was dark and disorienting. I tried to stand and smacked the top of my head on the ceiling. I crouched, crawled and ran my forehead into the roof as it

sloped down to the edges of the building. I wedged my head in the smallest, sharpest angle of where the roof met the attic floor. The walls breathed deeper in the darkness and for a moment I contemplated Jonah trapped in the whale. Panic set in quickly and I began smashing away with the butt of my rifle where my head had been resting. Light overwhelmed me and I vomited. The smell of vomit made me vomit again until I retched dry heaves. By the time I looked out, the shooting had stopped in the saloon and I saw the boys erupt out of the stable between the hotel and the saloon like a dam had broken and out forth flowed horses and unwashed men.

I said, "Oh, look at them go." Then I shot a very fat deputy in a light blue shirt. He didn't even turn to acknowledge me. Just fell face down in a little poof of dust. The firing of a couple dozen pistols and rifles was once again directed towards me and I retreated inward towards the middle of the attic.

The weight of the opium hit me hard laying in the darkness as the excitement began to fade away. I knew I was alone. The loneliest alone I'd ever been. My friends and compatriots had fled on horseback. I had no idea where Juanita was. I called out for her, but knew she would never find me here. I assumed one of the gang took her as I know there were several jealous amongst them of my beautiful horse.

"I'll miss you, Juanita," said I to the walls around me.

The walls felt like they were closer with every passing few minutes, progressively things got darker. Then the dark and the heat overtook my mind and I fell into a black hole.

My mind was with a prostitute in Fort Worth. She had the finest pubic hair, I'd ever seen. She took a brush to it to keep it supple such was the length and she let me

brush it softly. My nose tickled as I rolled on the floor, set my head on her bush like a pillow. I could smell every musty part of her as deeply as I pleased. I could've tasted, but the taste of average cooter has been spoiled for me by a woman that would set hard licorice inside herself in Laredo. The taste brought me back to childhood, and her womanly features combined to make for a very strange, powerful experience.

“Have ye a name?” someone said.

“I’m busy. I paid for twenty minutes,” said I.

“What in the fuck are you talking about?”

“My name is Tom. Arkansas Tom. Please allow me to finish, sir. My time is not finished. Rules must be followed, regulations abided. Natural order and so forth.”

I could hear murmuring and I wondered why these men were all so eager to be waiting outside my room for this particular whore. What had I missed?

“You’d better come out now, damn you! You’ve killed two U.S. Marshalls.”

“I’ve done no such thing. I’m a faithful follower of the Lord, our Savior. Leave me with this woman.”

There was more rustling and I thought that maybe I loved this woman I was on and drifting away with.

I fell asleep.

What the Marshalls will say conflicts with what I’ll tell you. They would have you believe they would not do something such as this, but that is a lie. Hand on the Bible, my recollection of this is true. The curious thing about being in a building subject to a dynamite blast is the flash of light and the feeling that no matter how hard you try and stand; the world feels sideways. The sensation of being inside a snow globe while it’s

being shaken by a small child. The ringing of the ears is standard, and, truthfully my ears weren't all that great to begin with what with the shooting and the laudanum. Wooden splinters stuck out of my left arm like quills of a porcupine and that brought some of my senses back to me. But by the time the law had climbed the ladder, I was still rolling around on the ground. They just paused when they got up there, staring at me. Naked and shamed like Adam in Eden. It felt like an eternity with an audience watching.

“My shame!” I yelled.

One of the men – Jim Masterson – walked over and kicked my rifle away from me.

“Does he have a fuckin’ hard-on?” said one of the younger amongst them.

I heard another ask, “What’s wrong with his pecker?”

“There is nothing the matter than cannot be fixed with time and I would appreciate some goddamn decency in a moment like this.” I tried to stand, and fell back down, a boot contacted my stomach. “You dynamited me,” I said.

“We did. I did,” said Jim.

“Fuck you, Jim.”

He flipped me over and put the irons on my wrist, and walked me to the to the opening of the attic and pushed me through, where I fell in a heap on the floor, though curiously I did not hurt. Not until the next day, then I was bruised all over like I’d been trampled by a horse.

I said, “Where’d ever’body go?”

“Got away for now, but we’ll be happy with just you,” said an older Marshall, the leader, by the name of Nix.

I saw a man winding a rope up into a noose about the same time Nix did and he ordered the man to put it away. I'd surrendered and I'd stand trial. What relief. My right leg tremored at the sight of the rope and I might've soiled myself had I not been having such excruciating issues.

I got a manslaughter charge and they sent me to The Black in Guthrie. Federal Penitentiary. Fifty years. I'm not a man built for a fifty-year stretch, and my brothers agreed. Methodist preachers that my brothers were, they were convinced of my repentance. They did a good deal of back-and-forth with the governor and, given my background, it was only natural that I ran the prison ministry. I wish there was some sort of high drama about prison, but in those days, it was just like seeing old friends. But slower because there wasn't much to do except walk around and talk. Sometimes somebody might read aloud. Not many sheep to shear, so to speak. I got out in 1910. Satisfied I had seen the error of my ways, the state of Oklahoma paroled me.

While I was inside, relaxing – boring, even – though it was, everybody in the old gang got shot by those bastards that hauled me to jail. Near as I could tell I was the only one they didn't shoot – just tried to blow me up, I guess. They all ran off and left me to get arrested in Ingalls and I outlived all of them. Doolin and Dalton still had a bigger name than ol' Arkansas Tom did, though, and this bothered me. I am not one inclined to question the fates of men or the paths of fate, but this sat with me.

So, way I figured it while I was sitting around that jail, was that they had me all beat as bank robbers. But once I got out, I started thinking that maybe I could be the last

of the Wild Bunch. I'd be the most recent one and people'd talk about me like they did those boys.

I went straight once, after the stretch I got for my involvement in Ingalls. They let me out on account of my good behavior and work in the ministry and some of it even seemed to take for a while. Of course, the urge is always there, but I got better at pushing it back down. I started up a restaurant in Drumright. Nobody was going to hire a famous felon like myself to tend bar, not that I was in a rush to work for anybody else anyhow. I bought out this place and started broiling steaks six days a week there. When I first started it up, it was about as good as robbing a place. I didn't have any help, so I took the order and cooked everything on my own. It was all coal-fire out there, so a man can get to moving pretty quick with the coal needing tending, meat cooking and people hollering about their food all at once.

I'd get done some nights after doing some big business and collapse in my armchair, so tired I couldn't even make it to the bed, whiskey sitting on the table beside me. I'd wake up and the whiskey would still be in the glass most of the time. I was dirty all the time from fooling with the coal, and my arms were burned up from catching a piece of hot metal every now and then, but I think I may have been happy. Those were in the early days when freedom itself felt exhilarating, but that changed with a family and a delegation of my own duties.

Abigail went to the First Methodist Church of Drumright, just like myself. I did a little work as a deacon, from time-to-time, when Rev. Miller was out on other business.

She was in the front row for one, daughter of an older businessman, who was thoroughly disapproving of my membership in the congregation, but too much of a coward to admit as much and call into question his faith in the Lord's immense capacity for forgiveness and salvation.

I was in the pulpit delivering a homily when she first caught my eye. There are some preachers that do a homily quiet. And there are some, like me, who deliver it like they've been yelling it to cons for a decade with enough vigor to impress not only the inmates but also the guards and prison warden.

My sleeves were rolled up and I was sweating through my shirt when I first locked eyes with her. I was preaching the Gospel of John: Jesus of the vine.

“Jesus says, ‘I am the true vine and my father is the vine-grower.’”

Everybody nodded solemnly as Methodists do.

“Every branch that bears fruit, must be pruned to bear more fruit. Do you understand? We must be constantly tending to our relationship with Christ and the fruits of our devotion.”

Abigail shifted and I noticed her large breasts under her blouse jostling, just a thin layer of cloth separating us. I moved behind the pulpit to shield my excitement and continued.

“We must remove that which will not reproduce – excuse me --produce! And tend to that which does.”

From there, the sermon fell apart, though those dullards in the congregation wouldn't have known or said anything. It was the only time I'd lost my train of thought

during a sermon. I still think about that sometimes. Abigail caused me to lose my way that Sunday.

We were married not long after and moved into a slightly larger house on the edge of town. The restaurant was busy enough that I was able to hire a staff. Abigail protested about the sooty clothes and late hours that were unbecoming of a gentleman. A staff was hired and most of my time was spent in that warm loving feeling that I hear newlyweds have and I suppose we weren't any different for about a month.

Part of my problem was, as I said, business was so good that I was able to step away from the day-to-day things that kept me so occupied. Once I did that, however, I was forced to spend more time at a desk managing costs, payroll, making deposits at the bank. Yes, I can appreciate the irony of all this. And that irony, of course, was the problem.

It used to be, I'd walk into the bank and be in a hurry to get somewhere else, so I never even thought about it. But then I wasn't in a hurry quite so much anymore.

I'd walk in when I wasn't in a hurry and I'd look at all the doors. Then I'd see who was behind the counter, make note if the bank manager was ever back there or not. I'd look around and see if any of the men looked like they were holding and if they were, if they'd try to be heroes. I'd take all that in as soon as I walked through the door.

Pretty soon after, I started changing my routine. Sometimes I'd go early in the morning – Greta was the morning gal, a mountain of a woman from the Rhineland – and I'd have a cup of coffee, peruse the paper and chat with her until the bank manager Barney Howard came in. After about two weeks of this, I was fairly certain that Barney

came in between 9:30 and 9:44 almost every day – never earlier than 9:20, even though the bank opened at 9:00. That was a twenty-minute window.

I repeated the same procedure at various parts of the day, until I determined that the best time was when the manager took a late lunch in the afternoon around 2:00, and the bank was nearly emptied out, since, generally it was busiest right before closing and right after opening.

Finally, I began carrying my deposits to the bank at around midafternoon, and I'd carry a pistol for, really, the first time since my release from prison. I'd walk in and after shutting the door behind me –never letting it slam, always making sure it was shut -- I'd shadow my hand over the deadbolt as if I were going to throw it and lock the door. I'd have my bank bag and gun both tucked in the waistband in the back of my pants and I'd pull out the bag, but really I was imagining it to be a gun, and I'd think about how I might yell, "Nobody do nothing! This is a robbery."

But instead, I'd take the deposit out, set it on the counter for the lady to sort, then I'd be on my way back home to ledgers and order forms and soft touches on my shoulder from a wife concerned about my well-being.

There was nothing at all wrong with Abigail, either, let me be clear. She was upright in all the ways a man would want. A fine wife. Her food was flavorless, consistently under-seasoned, but I forgave her what I can only think of as her only fault. Everything else that I found wrong with her is all of my own making.

She was a woman that was modest and virtuous, and it absolutely repelled me. On our wedding night, I squirted almost immediately after entering her. I'd been thinking

about it for so long – the month or so we had courted while I tried to impress her family – that when the time came to perform our respective matrimonial duties, and I saw her pink nipples the size of a silver-dollar on her skin, white as china I'd eaten off in fancy restaurants when I had real robbing money.

She sat down on me that first time, and pressed her breasts against me and I held her. I nearly wept such was the intensity, indeed I was trembling and shaking like I'd just broken a wild horse, that sort of rush and exhaustion all at once. There was a relief to it. But, that relief only lasted just that once.

Later on, I just got tired of her. I've been with some of the finest whores in Texas and Oklahoma. I'd try and flip her over, try something a little different, and she slap me in the chest and blush.

“Oh, Roy, stop it,” she'd say.

I would even push her on it. How can a man take a woman's modesty? Particularly when it's one of her defining characteristics. Her pussy tasted like wet dirt and reminded me of being a boy, horsing around and taking a fall and getting a mouthful of gritty mud. But she'd never let me stay down there for long, and the short durations would only frustrate me.

It wasn't that I loved the way she tasted, though I did feel a sort of nostalgia. I just wanted to do something for her that she'd never ask for, allowing her to keep her modesty, by never asking her to reciprocate on me.

Eventually, I tired out completely from the sex, and that's when I just couldn't stand living with her anymore. She would follow me around the house like a lost dog. She'd run her fingers through my hair and ask me if I was ok, and I'd grumble about

business, even though business was fine. I'd talk about meetings I needed to attend that consisted of afternoon whiskey in a bar two blocks from the house, alone.

She was massaging my shoulders, asking about Sunday dinner when I finally told her.

"I was thinking we'd have mother and fath --"

"I can't do this."

"Can't do what? Dinner? Oh, it won't even be a burden on yo --"

"I can't live in this house anymore."

The pistol came out of the closet and into my pants. I packed a bag of clothes and a razor. She was crying, but it was in a wide-eyed disbelief, which unnerved me. She stared at me, without squinting, while she watched me pack my things. I almost managed to say I was sorry, or something to that effect, but when I got close and reached to touch her arm, she retched like she was going to vomit. I jumped back. And, embarrassed, I left. I don't even know if I shut the door behind me.

I moved to Hollywood to act in Westerns.

Bill Tilghman had been a lawman of some repute in my outlaw days, and after he retired he must have had too much time on his hands because he started going to nickelodeons watching films. He must've been watching too damn many because he decided that he could make a movie about lawmen and bank robbers better than those folks in Hollywood. Because he mostly operated around Oklahoma, much like myself and because the biggest thing to happen in Oklahoma besides housing Indians and discovering oil was that little situation in Ingalls, he decided that's what he'd make his

movie about. Seeing as I was about the only person who was still alive that had been there, he sent me a letter asking if I'd be interested in playing myself in his film. It was mostly old guys like myself, playing younger guys. They screwed a few things up, made all of us look like we didn't know what was what. Amongst other things, at the end, they made it look like I just threw up my hands and surrendered, which is ridiculous.

I knew some of the guys working out in California from my younger cowboy days, before I was an outlaw. But the ones that got all the good roles weren't real cowboys. They were just pretending the whole time. They'd take their hats off and rub them around in the dirt to make them look like they been out on the trail for weeks. And that's an awfully damn stupid thing to do because I'll tell you right now from experience that if you're covered in dust coming into town, there's plenty of hookers that'll charge double for a fuck because they're going to have to wash you first. I know for certain that almost none of those boys had actually killed anybody, not even on accident, and they for damn sure hadn't had the same amount of guns pointed at them by people who wanted to kill them as I had. To be fair, I'd had a lot.

One day we were having a break on set, passing a bottle around to stay warm and I was talking to one of the old cowboys I used to run with in Texas about the little scrap in Ingalls I was in. All the youngsters – the ones that didn't know anything about real cowboyin', just movie cowboyin' – were sitting there slack-jawed. Pretty soon even the ones a little further away had stopped talking to their little friends, and everyone was staring in my direction, chairs turned toward me.

“You killed somebody?” asked a kid with red hair and a gap between his front teeth. He was a few rows of chairs away from me. Understand that all of us extras were

just expected to sit around all day and be ready for a scene, so in moments like this, we'd all just be piled in together on wooden stools. I didn't even know the kid's name, and he damn sure didn't know anything about what I'd done. He just suspected, I guess. But there wasn't any real knowing.

I just laughed, grabbed the bottle and pulled from it so hard it bubbled.

One of the other kids was fucking around with his pistol. He'd got it all jammed up with dirt and couldn't get the cylinder out to clean it up. All of the younger ones just looked around at each other and I realized not one of them knew how to use the pistols they were carrying.

"I think Paul could help," said one of them. Paul was the name I gave to people out there. Of course, my name was Roy. And, people had called me Arkansas Tom for a long time. But, I was trying to give those names a rest, start something new.

"Give me that goddamn thing," I said. I grabbed the pistol out of that boy's hand and opened the cylinder, blew the dust out of it that had gathered from that dumb bastard dropping it so much, trying to spin it on his finger like an idiot. I closed it and handed it back butt first to him. He pulled it away and set it on his lap pointing at me with his finger on the trigger. It was like he was getting ready to arrest me, but still trying to play nice, and get me to come easy. This was a movie set, though, and this kid was just a moron with dirt smeared on his face with holes in his pants that somebody had cut on purpose.

"Hey, watch that thing," I said. I pointed at the pistol.

"What?"

“Don’t point that thing at me,” said I. I was practicing my temper in these moments. I didn’t have a gun, but the savage tanning I was getting ready to give this kid would probably have made him wish I did.

“It ain’t even real bullets in here.”

“I don’t give a shit what – I’ll take that thing and shove – forget it,” I said. “I’m going home.”

I stood up and took a few steps towards the kid and he opened his eyes up and looked right at me, then put the pistol down on the ground. I told him, “Put that fucking thing in your holster, for God’s sake.” Then I turned and walked away from all of them. It wasn’t worth the damn money. I could do a lot of things and make more than six dollars a damn day sitting outside talking to morons.

Johnny, my old running buddy said, “See you at the house?”

“No. I’m going to Oklahoma.”

That gun is still sitting on the table, and I know I won’t make it out of this life without having to use it one more time. I don’t know how many more big scrapes I got in me, but I think I got at least one. Gibson is a good lawman, and steady. I know he’s looking for me, and I don’t know who is with him, but he might be enough. If I make it out of the next one, maybe it’ll be big enough to keep me settled until I’m too old and tired to do anything else. I’m about aged out as it is.

The chrome on the pistol is smudged, and I know I should clean it soon. And buy some better bullets. The cheap ones I have chambered now will always choose the worst time to jam you up.

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