

GIANTESS AND OTHER STORIES:

A CREATIVE DISSERTATION

by

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In Memoriam

Kathleen M. DiNuzzo

(1940-2013)

Sr. Kathy Costello

(1939-2009)

Dedicated to JYZ

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DISSERTATION

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A CREATIVE DISSERTATION

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The University of Texas at Dallas, 2019

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This creative dissertation comprises a short story collection titled *Giantess and Other Stories* and a scholarly component that provides background for the creation of the collection. The story collection, which accounts for the first portion of the work, consists of ten independent, unrelated short stories, many of which touch on the illusion of control and interpersonal relationships. The second half of the work, the critical component, examines elements of short story convention that contributed to the reconstruction of the creative process.

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# CHAPTER 1

## GIANTESS AND OTHER STORIES

Giantess

Nicole stretched her massive legs. She cracked the vertebrae in her neck, cracked her knuckles, too, popped buds into her ears, and suited up: an elbow brace, weight gloves, wrist straps, and a head band for her mousse-stiffened hair. She wore spandex leggings and a sports bra with a tank top cover. A splash of neon pink laced her running shoes.

Nicole punched the pin into the upright row machine's weight stack, strapped her hands to the close-grip bar, and heaved. The stack leaped, and the muscles in Nicole's arms and upper back bulged, her veins thickening like cooked spaghetti. Between sets, Nicole drank from a gallon-size bottle filled with slushy pink liquid and flexed in the mirror, nodding at what she saw.

While I finished my treadmill run, Nicole charged around the weight room, jerking dumbbells overhead, lifting her chin past the pull-up bar. Sweat soon darkened her tank top, slicked her arms and brow. I worked my way toward her, and the closer I got, the bigger she got. I had been noticing Nicole for the last few weeks, since I joined the gym. She was hard to miss because the weight room was so small and Nicole was so big. Since my divorce, I had been looking for a challenge—to date a girl I normally wouldn't date, to date her and dump her the way I did with my ex-wife. It's always better to do the dumping, and since high school, at least, I made a practice of quitting on girls before they quit on me. My heart had been broken once—May Sue Hamburg, fifth grade, Valentine's Day—and I would never let that happen again. Now



was my chance to meet Nicole, to date her, to use her, and then to discard her. I know it sounds callous but when it came to broken hearts, better hers than mine. And I had to admit that taking such a massive chick for a ride would be fun, a little spice in an otherwise bland life. Yes, I would make Nicole mine.

"I'm Brent," I said, and she crushed my hand. We stood eye-to-eye, but only I was smiling. Nicole chugged from her pink drink. "Looks like a Martian cocktail," I joked.

Nicole half chuckled and her dense shoulders quaked. She shook out the last drops from the bottle and wiped her chin with her hand. "This stuff is packed with enough protein for a gorilla." She sounded like a nutritional bio-chemist, and I thought, Michelangelo would love this chick.

As we talked, I stretched my back, which had begun to spasm. Not long ago I'd been heavier, a lazy, fat dog. "But I'm under 200 pounds for the first time in years." She congratulated my progress. "I want to get down to one eighty," I said, patting my belly. "Warrior-lean." I knew this kind of talk would interest Nicole. She probably sat around all day counting calories and measuring her biceps.

Nicole brightened. "I'm trying to get up to one eighty. I have a competition next week and big always wins." Nicole had recently begun entering bodybuilding competitions, local affairs with few prizes and minimal acclaim. Still, she enjoyed the sport and the art of flexing and posing for judges. She clutched her gym bag, made to leave.

"What do you say we continue this conversation over dinner?" I asked.

Nicole hesitated, her brow creasing. "During training, my diet is non-negotiable. Every calorie counts."

"Then why don't *you* choose the place?"

\*\*\*

Nicole knew the host at Michael's, knew the waitress, even knew Michael himself. She sported a large wool-knit sweater and jeans that accentuated her gluteus maximus and her tree-trunk quads. She wore makeup applied with a hand used to wielding kettlebells. Diners eyed Nicole, awed by her immensity, curious about her sprayed-on tan. She ordered chicken breast—lean, grilled, no butter, no sauce—along with fresh vegetables, steamed. She drank water. I considered the cheese-smothered fried steak with butter-baked biscuits but ordered a carrot and tomato salad. No croutons. Nicole made the slightest nod of approval. Of course, I knew she wouldn't accept a second date if we didn't have any similarities, so I played the budding health nut.

Our dinner conversation centered on Nicole's next bodybuilding competition six days away. She discussed strategy, preparation, and tricks of the trade—like taking diuretics to decrease water weight and make muscles look bigger, like having a sugary snack to engorge veins for that ripped effect. In fact, we mostly talked about Nicole, how we would both turn twenty-eight by year's end, how she'd been in the Air Force Reserves out of high school and spent time in California and the Philippines, how her family—a dad, an aunt, and a brother—worked for an Evangelical church and were always shuttling youth missionaries to Kenya and Uganda, building water and sewage systems. Nicole's religion was body building, and she was perfectly happy living at a distance from her family.

I was just six months older than Nicole, working in the office of a sheet metal company whose president required slacks and a collar but no tie. I was in charge of shipping and supplies.

The work was uninteresting but afforded a decent existence. But this first date wasn't about me. Nicole was the focus, and the more I could learn about her, the more I could use the information to nab her. Attraction to power spurred me on, not attraction to Nicole. When it came to women, I was more interested in quantity than quality.

Nicole's voice—part feminine, part pre-pubescent gymnast—rose out of a thick, brutish neck. Nicole had had brief relationships with two sailors, one marine, and a reservist with three fingers on his left hand. She had been single for more than a year, and when she wasn't pumping iron, she was inspecting gas stations for the state E.P.A., taking pleasure in fining a station owner or shutting the whole place down for grievous violations. Aside from going out to the gym or job, Nicole, like me, was a homebody. I told her enough about me to keep her interest: my job, my unfriendly coworkers, my move here from the East Coast, my pathetic ex-wife who was probably still in love with me. But when Nicole asked follow-up questions, I dexterously moved the conversation back to her. For the rest of the meal, I talked only to agree with Nicole or to ask her to elaborate.

"You have no idea how hard it is to find cute heels that can carry me across a stage. Imagine erecting a skyscraper on stilts. The judges will catch you wobble and you won't win."

I nodded. She had done so much chattering and I had done so much listening that I didn't finish my salad, even though I was starving. Etiquette be damned, Nicole ate with her hands and talked with a full mouth and didn't wipe her chin as often as she should have. I pretended not to notice, because I was too busy thinking about how easy it was going to be to become her lover. And when I had my fill, I'd move on. I tingled at the thought of dumping a chick who could lift me over her head. When the tab came, I paid, included a hefty tip, and shot around the table to

take Nicole's hand as she stood. Chicks, no matter how large, love this. I helped her into her coat, and we held hands from that point on. I drove her home, hoping she'd ask me inside.

"Muscles need rest," Nicole explained. "And you don't win competitions with bags under your eyes."

I wanted a kiss goodnight and planted myself on the porch, still latched to her hand.

"Well, goodnight, Brent."

"Not so fast," I said. I leaned in, lips puckered, and Nicole jerked back. "What are you doing?"

I told her I liked her, had a great time, wanted to go out again, and thought that a kiss was a fine way to show affection and conclude the evening. My honesty must have surprised her because she couldn't immediately reply and couldn't resist as I leaned in and pecked her lips. The kiss awakened Nicole and in two powerful moves she broke my handhold and zipped inside. I lingered on the doorstep, half-hoping the door would pop open again and Nicole would invite me in. But no. I guess, if she were that easy, if she had been a quick lay, I would have been disappointed. After all, a challenge is supposed to be difficult.

On the drive home I found my eyes in the rearview mirror glowing with excitement and anticipation.

\*\*\*

Nicole and I met at the gym the next day, every day. I wooed her with gifts: organic fruit, a tub of her favorite Monster Muscle protein powder, an expensive glass scale from Brookstone. All she talked about was the competition. I had to be cool, to be patient. In time she would be talking about how much she loved me.

The night prior to the contest, Nicole came to my place, her nails and hair done. I'd spent half the afternoon vacuuming, dusting, tidying, and planned to seduce her with Barry White and candles and two sprays of Polo on my neck. Just after she arrived, when I leaned in for a kiss, she shoved me to the couch and said, "I want to show you something."

She unzipped her glittery evening dress and slipped out of it. She wasn't naked as I'd hoped. Perched on new heels, she wore a sequined bikini. Her dark, oiled skin glimmered in the candlelight. "I need to practice just a few more times." Nicole walked around the room, stopping to pose and turn, smiling all the while. "Am I wobbling?" she asked. She turned to display her legs. "How do my calves look?" She groaned when I didn't answer. "It's too dark. Is that it?" she said and strode to the light switch. The room bloomed with electric brightness, and in the time it took for my eyes to adjust, the mood nearly wilted.

Nicole shut off the stereo. "Focus," she commanded. "How do I look?" She puffed out her chest and flexed her biceps, all while smiling pleasantly, her abs ripped. "Can you tell I have a blemish on my quad?" she asked. "It must be an old bruise or something. You can't see it, can you?" She stepped and flexed and her quadriceps jumped, every muscle fiber visible. "Do I need to bleach my teeth?" she asked. "I should, shouldn't I?" Nicole continued around the room like an enormous exotic bird, feathers fluffed, trying to catch the attention of a mate.

I slouched into the couch, watching Nicole pose here, walk there, pose again. I didn't love her bigness, her face, her fake orange tan. Rather, I loved the idea of a day when I could look back and say I possessed a strength even a brawny she-beast couldn't overcome. And a new, more vile idea came to mind: I imagined the striations and veins fading from Nicole's legs, her facial lines vanishing, her callused hands becoming smooth, and her sprayed-on bronzer

replaced by natural color. More than just breaking her heart, wouldn't it be enticing to take the thing she loved? I raised the stakes with myself: Could I turn a buff broad into a chubster? The possibility of this aroused me.

Nicole moved from a Most Muscular pose into a Double Back Biceps pose. Her lats expanded, her gluteus maximus clenched, and her rear deltoids looked like carved rock. She had no flab. Even under the harsh electric light, her body was flawless, and my desire to conquer that terrain grew.

I unzipped my pants and pulled myself out, diddling. Nicole kept asking how she looked. I told her to back up. She backed toward me and I hooked her by the hips and pulled her onto my lap. "You look just fine, baby. Just fine." I kissed the rock wall of her back, trying to find a tender spot. She wiggled in my lap and for an instant it felt heavenly. Then it hurt. She was crushing me, wiggling to free herself not to arouse me further. I imagined her steel-clap buns breaking my manhood in half.

"What are you doing?" Nicole demanded. "Stop! The competition is tomorrow. I need to conserve energy." She pushed away, wrapped herself in her dress, and stood apart from me, glaring.

"You're such a turn-on, baby," I said, though my erection was already gone, flattened. I'd possibly be bruised and discolored by morning. "You're just so hot."

"I have to go home," Nicole replied. "It's already late and I need at least ten hours of sleep." She snatched her coat. I caught her at the door, tried to convince her to stay just a little while longer. We could just talk. "Why don't you zip your pants," she said and left.

\*\*\*

Despite my antics the evening prior, Nicole placed first in the bodybuilding competition. She returned with a trophy and a dozen coupons for The Supplement Store. Her picture made the sports section of the local newspaper, and I apologized for my rude, offensive advances. In the end, we agreed to keep our amorousness PG-rated. I told Nicole what she wanted to hear in order for us to keep our relationship going. I'd say anything if I had to, make any promise. Eventually, she would cave, admit her love for me, and once that happened, we'd rocket past PG and straight to X. Once Nicole loved me, I would have the upper hand and my domination over her would begin. My outward sincerity surprised Nicole and she took me back with a warning not to be so *grabby*. Really, she needed someone to share her trophy, her victory, her story. "There was no competition, actually," she bragged. "I was bigger, prettier, more defined. I was stacked and glamorous. They were chubby skanks."

By the end of the month, I reached my dream weight of one hundred and eighty pounds thanks to all the cardio exercise I had been doing and because this challenge to win Nicole had stolen my appetite. The word *challenge*, however, seemed so crass, while the word *love* seemed righteous. So, I thought of myself as "in love" rather than "challenged." No longer was my belly so flabby; no longer did I get winded walking up a flight of stairs, and no longer did my pants fit.

Later in the week, Nicole took me to the mall and helped me pick out a new belt. At the register, she put down her credit card, saying, "My treat." I thought we would start having sex after that, but we didn't. Nicole was hyper-conscious of her calorie intake and expenditure. At the same time, I wasn't about to force the issue. Anticipation is quite arousing, and I wanted Nicole to give herself to me, to submit.

\*\*\*

Since the competition, Nicole and I were basically inseparable. She'd spend weekends at my apartment, sleeping in my bed though fully clothed, and we'd rendezvous at the community center every week day. I'd spot her at the bench press and she'd coach me through the stationary bike's Fat Burning program. We'd leave the gym together, sweaty, sore, tired, and many times Nicole would buy me lunch at the super-healthy, organic bistro in town. I'd eat salad and high-fiber wheat crackers with hummus, the same diet as Ethiopian marathoners. She'd devour the best parts of a turkey or chicken or fish. And I made no attempt to get in her spandex tights, never forced a hand under her sports bra. I had not forgotten about my goal, just kept it tucked away for the moment.

At the squat rack, I asked Nicole to move in with me. She wasn't stupid enough to agree right away; she'd consider it. Then she squatted more than three-hundred pounds.

Two days passed. Nicole stood beside my treadmill, hung an arm on the guardrail. Between gasps, I said, "I've never run this fast or this far."

"How much time do you have left?"

"One more hill before the cool down."

Nicole shouted encouragement: "Come on! Tough it out. Beat that hill. Run!"

I couldn't ignore the acidic pain in my thighs, my boiling feet, my booming heart. I started to falter, decided to quit.

"I want to move in," Nicole said.

A jolt of adrenaline shot through me, and I ran another two miles. When I got off the treadmill, Nicole hugged me, lifted me clear off the ground. "Wow! You're light." I hovered around one hundred and seventy pounds, not far from what I weighed in high school.



\*\*\*

Three Saturdays later, I met Nicole at her place. All of her belongings had already been packed and loaded into the moving van. I wondered who had helped her.

"No one. I took care of it."

"Even the dresser, the desk?"

"Yes."

"The couch?"

Nicole did a Side Triceps pose. "Piece of cake."

She drove the van while I tinkered with the radio. "I'm so excited," Nicole said and thumped the steering wheel. Soon, we would turn our platonic relationship into a physical free-for-all. No longer would we stop at kisses and hugs and heavy petting. She backed the van to my door and shut off the engine. The first several trips were easy: bags full of socks and underwear and scarves, boxes of sleeveless tee shirts and shorts, a sandwich maker, a toaster, a blender. We hurried back and forth, working up a sweat. Shortly, I became exhausted.

"It's been a long week," Nicole said, consoling me. "You have been hitting the step climber pretty hard."

I filled a mug with cool water and drank. Together we lugged Nicole's home gym: barbells, dumbbells, a pec deck, an incline bench. I carried some of the forty-five-pound plates.

"I don't feel good," I said.

Nicole touched my forehead. "You're clammy. You're dehydrated." She sat me on the floor below an open window. "Rest. Drink some more water. I'll take it from here."

I attempted to follow her but felt too dizzy to move and drooped, trying to catch my breath. Nicole fluttered through the door with her oak desk and gently set it down. "Let me help," I called.

"Don't you worry, baby. You relax. I can handle it."

I tried again to get up, but the room swooned and I slumped back. I sat under the window, recuperating, watching Nicole whisk her dresser through the door then up the stairs. She raced back to the van for the kitchen table. She would not be undone by the size of an item, its weight, its inherent immovability. Nicole alone walked the three-seater couch into the living room and set it down like a bag of fluff. "That's everything," she proclaimed, raising her gigantic arms in triumph.

The day Nicole moved in with me, I weighed one hundred and fifty-eight pounds, exactly what I weighed eleven years ago, as a high school junior. Perhaps I had lost too much weight too fast. Sure, I'd burned off the fat, had become leaner, but when I looked at myself, I saw an Ethiopian marathoner, bones held together by rubber bands. Perhaps my diet, though low on fat, was also low on protein or essential vitamins and minerals.

Nicole helped me to the couch. "Feeling any better?" Her palms were red and raw, her brow wet.

"How much do you weigh?" I asked casually.

Nicole stepped on her glass scale. "One hundred and eighty-two pounds," she bragged.

I wanted to complain about how I felt puny next to Nicole's girth, but once more my vision tumbled and I had to shut my eyes.

\*\*\*

"I'm getting hungry," Nicole said. "What do you have for dinner?"

I had nothing.

We drove to the mega food store and overfilled a cart with choice meats and whole grains, the ripest fruits and vegetables, cans of tuna fish, cartons of eggs, and spring water from the Alps. Plus, Nicole brought a list: protein concentrate, amino acid capsules, fat-burner and mass-builder powders, flax seed and fish oil, and bottles of complex vitamins and triple-strength omegas. At the checkout, Nicole filled shopping bags and placed them in the cart, leaving me to pay the enormous tab. I'd demand repayment later. Though Nicole had eighteen-inch biceps, my strength was of a greater kind. One of these days she would give me the green light, and after the sex, after she got attached to me, that was when I would leave her.

I took one shopping bag in each hand and started toward the front door. When I looked back, Nicole was gaining on me, four bags in each hand, her trapeziuses bulging. We set the bags on the kitchen floor.

"Heavy, huh?" I asked Nicole.

"Not bad."

We made another trip.

Gasping, I said, "My arms are killing. My tank is empty." I was still recovering from the day Nicole moved in. Nicole, hardly winded, offered to bring in the rest of the bags. "Great," I said, and in the back of my head, I was thinking about my love-her-and-leave-her plan. Why not have Nicole do my bidding while I was at it? Imagine domesticating a giantess, having such a behemoth as my slave. I wondered if I should give up all the cardio, grow fat like a king. Shouldn't I conserve my energy for when Nicole finally gave herself to me?

She said, "Why don't you start dinner, baby?" Exactly. So Nicole brought in the groceries and I stayed in the kitchen. I set a pot of water to boil and put a sauce pan on the stove. I could get used to Nicole being my laborer.

"Smells good," Nicole said, putting her nose into the steam rising from the stove. I took a jar of tomato sauce into my hands but, despite several attempts, the lid would not budge. I tapped the lid against the edge of the counter.

"What are you doing?" Nicole asked.

"Nicole, I want you to go back to that food store and complain to the manager. This jar seems to be defective. The cap is jammed."

Nicole caught the jar of sauce I thrust at her. She started away—obeying nicely—stopped, and turned back to me.

"Didn't you hear me, Nicole? I said go back to the store, get a new jar, and a refund for our trouble."

She put out her hands: in one palm the lid, in the other the jar.

"What happened?" I said, pissed off. "What did you do?" I took the jar and lid, told Nicole to leave the kitchen so I could finish making dinner: prime cuts of steak for her, salad for me.

\*\*\*

I'd gotten so good at losing weight that even the last notch on my belt couldn't keep my pants on my hips. So Nicole bought me several new outfits, including designer jeans. Her treat. While always plotting and planning to control Nicole, I sometimes skipped meals or starved

myself. Some days sped by so fast I forgot to shower, and I all but quit shaving. My hair grew over my ears and into my eyes.

Somehow, I'd gotten into the habit of making breakfast for Nicole and, because I came home from work first, it made sense that I should cook dinner, too. When I wasn't on a cardio machine burning 500-plus calories, I was in the kitchen. Something seemed very out of place about this arrangement. And we still had not had sex yet.

\*\*\*

Just before spring arrived, Nicole came home in her string Y-back tank top, her biceps blazing. "Are you getting bigger?" I said.

"I sure hope so."

Nicole had decided to leave her E.P.A. job and turn pro, and wanted not just to win her first national competition but, as she put it, *dominate the field*. She'd been doubling the serving sizes of her protein-packed muscle-builder shakes, adding extra weight plates to each set. "I want to knock the judges out of their seats." Her voice was now all brute and all beast. She was likely shooting steroids laced with buffalo testosterone.

Nicole kissed my cheek, then balked. "I hate kissing a hairy cheek," she said, pawing at her lips. "Why don't you shave and get a haircut? My treat."

Nicole wanted to dominate more than nationals, and I wouldn't stand for it. "Here," I said, pushing a plate at her. "Take your dinner and go. The kitchen is my domain. And keep your money. I'm not cutting one single hair."

I'd almost fallen into a trap, had almost forgotten who was in charge here. Nicole had made me fitter and thinner, but she'd never dictate my appearance. Well, I wore the jeans she'd

bought me, but that was different. I would wear my hair and beard as long and as scraggly as I damn well chose. If she was trying to rule me, she had failed.

\*\*\*

I never wanted to get married but had, and divorced after just two years. Nicole always wanted to get married but never had. She was constantly saying we made a great team, had a million common interests. Even our fights, she said, weren't really anything to get upset about. "Don't our fights invariably end in a draw, anyway?" she said.

No, I thought, each fight is me winning and you losing, only it's so subtle that you don't even know it's happening. That's how I win. And that's why I decided to marry her. With Nicole living in my apartment, with her as my wife, we'd finally have sex. We'd romp and play, and once I had my fill, I'd be gone. I'd waited too long, invested too much time now not to get rewarded. Maybe, the sinister thought came to me like a flash of brilliance, I'd dump Nicole on our wedding night, after I had my fun.

Nicole invited everyone she knew to the wedding: her family and friends, other gym rats, her co-workers. Her father and brother flew in from Louisiana, a bunch of ornery Cajun alligators whom I met along with the bridal party at the rehearsal dinner the night before. None of them cared about my personality. They were only happy that Nicole was happy, that she had found her "special guy." They all acted like I was doing them a favor. When asked where my family was, I lowered my voice: "We're estranged." No one asked follow-up questions. Some of my co-workers would be at the wedding; we had an unspoken arrangement. They would get dinner and cake, and I would get envelopes of money.

\*\*\*

I only got a makeover because Nicole had a coupon from Le Mollasson downtown. Fifi stroked my scalp with shampoo and conditioner then sat me under a dryer alongside three bouffant ladies who chattered about menopause and the effects of male enhancement drugs. "A four-hour erection: life is beautiful!" They cackled.

Fifi promised she'd hardly do more than shape my hair, but she flat lied. She shaved away the hair hanging over my ears, forehead, and neck. It was my fault for being distracted by the only magazine in the salon, *Cosmo's* summer SEX-tacular issue. Nicole and I had been together for months, and we'd never gone all the way, but the wedding was soon, and nothing seemed more fitting than to consummate our relationship on our wedding night. I would take her to the heights of ecstasy then drop her in the pit of rejection. What a perfect ending. Fifi got my head, but I wouldn't allow her to touch my beard. I couldn't let Nicole think she'd won some small victory. But Fifi pointed me toward the mirror and said, "You can't have a fresh cut and a stale beard." She put her hands over my cheeks and chin. "See how much better you'd look? Why would you hide all that beauty under a beard?" She had a point and in seconds my chin was smooth.

"But..."

"But what, Fifi?"

"Dry skin and blemishes. I can't let you leave like that. If somebody sees you exit my shop like this, I might as well shut the place down." First Fifi slathered moisturizer into every pore, then she used a baseline concealer to hide minor skin discoloration. She spritzed me with a dainty *eau de toilette* before letting me up. "You look gorgeous—I mean, handsome."

When I got home, Nicole cornered me. "I want to show you something." She came downstairs a few minutes later in a white wedding gown. "How do I look?" The dress, a custom number, was sleeveless and backless to accentuate and accommodate her muscles. She twirled several times. "What do you think?"

"Ugly," I mumbled and Nicole got in my face.

"What did you say?" She took hold of me, raging and squeezing the blood out of my arms.

"Um, you look great."

"That's right. This dress costs as much as a used car." I smoothed out my wrinkled shirt, tried to slip out of the corner. "Wait a second." Nicole cuffed me. I couldn't break her grip.

"Let me see you." She looked me over, head to toe and back. "You got a haircut and shave."

"So what?"

She tightened her grip, sniffed the air. "Are you wearing cologne? You smell good. And your skin, is that make-up?"

"It's concealer and it's for minor blemishes."

"Well, you look beautiful, baby," she said and let me go.

\*\*\*

I hardly slept at all the night prior to the wedding. Nicole hogged the bed, but when I tried to slink away to the couch, she caught me by the waist. "Where are you going? Aren't you going to cuddle with me? We have to remember this night forever."

In the morning, Nicole roused me from bed, pushed my tuxedo at me, and shoved me out the door. "We can't see each other before the wedding. It's bad luck."



From the other side of the door, I cursed her and said, "How about I don't show up to the church?"

Nicole yanked open the door. "I heard that!"

"What? I didn't say anything."

"That's right. The only mother-fudging words you need to remember today are 'I and 'do!'" She left me shivering in the hallway.

On my way to the church, I wondered if I should just call off the wedding. How would Nicole take getting dumped at the altar? Not well. The steroids had made her volatile and unpredictable. While I was getting smaller, thinner, Nicole became imposing, monstrous. How far I could get before Nicole hunted me down. She'd find me in California, she'd nab me in Alaska, she'd sniff me out in Kathmandu, and what would she do once she caught me? I could run, run where cars couldn't go. Nicole was stronger, but, thanks to all the treadmilling and step climbing and bike riding, I was quicker, had more stamina and, since the weight loss, could fit into all manner of crevices and crannies too narrow for Nicole's proportions. Yet, at some point, I'd get tired just like I did on the day she moved in. And I'd have to venture out, and Nicole would come—hard-charging—and pulverize me. No, I couldn't leave. I was already caught, and caught by myself. We would have sex that night. Wasn't that what I wanted?

The ceremony gave me time to think, time to try to understand what went wrong. How did I end up here—in the church, about to marry, but not on my terms? Nicole was supposed to marry me, and once we consummated the marriage, I was going to leave her and move on to another conquest. Only now, I was marrying her. She held the dominant position in our

relationship. Was I Nicole's trophy, her victory, her story? The tear that rolled out of my eye started Nicole, the minister, the bridal party, and the guests crying.

At the reception, Nicole blocked my attempt to smear wedding cake into her face. She wouldn't let so much as a speck of fattening frosting past her lips. She smashed a boot-sized wedge down my throat. I thought I'd lost teeth, and nearly choked to death. When we finally got back home, Nicole stopped me outside our door. I wanted a divorce. I never wanted to see another giantess in my life.

"You know tradition," she said, and before I knew it, Nicole had me in her arms, like an infant, like a damsel. Grinning, she booted open the door, proclaimed, "This is the beginning of our life together," and carried me over the threshold. I cringed and held tight to her enormous neck, afraid to be dropped.

## Victories<sup>1</sup>

Getting out of bed was a victory. Brushing her teeth, changing out of sweats and into jeans and a sweater, coming to work. All victories. Indira scurried inside the shelter, savored the heat that washed over her from the ceiling vents. Cold had been gnawing her fingers to nubs all winter, and spring felt no closer. Indira pulled off her knit hat, stuffed it in her coat pocket, and punched her time card, the start of a twelve-hour shift.

"Snowing yet?" the receptionist asked.

Indira curled her lip, gave a quick head shake, and walked toward the maintenance closet. Home was a victory, and Indira couldn't wait to snuggle into bed with her cats. The thought soothed her mind.

A doctor had taught Indira about counting victories because stress and anxiety had clogged her thinking. Victories, the doc had explained, banished the blues. "They can be small, almost invisible. But you have to find them. Large or small, Indira, you need victories." He was a nice man, if effeminate, wore grandpa sweaters and neurotically adjusted his droopy eyeglasses, played relaxation music on the office sound system. Crying, the doc believed, could be a victory, too. "Find them," he had instructed. "They cure the sour mind."

Indira unlocked the closet and wheeled out a bucket and mop. She shook a carton of powdered soap into the bucket and entered the shower room. Sounds echoed back from the tile. Indira sat the bucket under the spray of shower water. Steam swarmed around her like spirits

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<sup>1</sup> Originally appeared in *Writing Texas* (No. 4).

rising through the floor, wrapping her legs, swirling into her nostrils, filling her with ethereal warmth. Soap foamed and bubbled around the mop handle, and lilac and lavender filled the room. Indira walked the mop across the floor, under dripping shower heads, around rusty drains. Permanent stains remained permanent. She collected Brillo pads of black hair and tongues of old soap. Sometimes she found junk store jewelry, a shampoo bottle cap, or loose change. She never kept what she found—though the thought crossed her mind—but brought lost items to the desk, logged the date and time, in case anyone claimed them.

When Indira finished the showers, she dragged her mop and bucket around the dividing wall to the sinks and toilets. She used glass-cleaner and paper towels on the mirrors, poured pink hand soap into the dispensers.

She had been overlooking the most obvious victory: fifteen consecutive months. Her flow had always been a nuisance, the bloating, the meandering moods and foolish impulses. She didn't miss bleeding, waking in the middle of the night when the last pad had failed and blood had leaked straight through to the mattress. She didn't miss cleaning the insides of her thighs, overflowing the waste basket with paper towels. She didn't miss any of it.

The absence was a victory.

It was a loss, too. She couldn't deny that. Hadn't the doc also instructed her to be honest, to deal in honesty? Could something be a victory and a loss at the same time? Weren't victories and losses always flip-flopping?

The doc and later the gyno had agreed that the absence might only be temporary. Traumatic events jumbled a woman's cycle. Happened all the time, actually. Nature's way. But, given time, her cycle might return. That was fifteen cycles ago.

Barney had corrupted Indira's cycle, stolen her time. For a decade, he had shackled her. But would he marry her? Indira hadn't needed a marriage license; she was simply resigned to a shared life. Kids? Whatever. And while she had grown older, Barney had planned his escape and said no to fatherhood, at thirty-five, thirty-eight, and forty-two. Barney's clock ticked differently, more slowly. He was fifty and could change his mind. Indira could never give birth now, could never be a mother, not in the natural way, the honest way.

Barney had left her with a cold mattress but no clothes and no dough hidden in the spice jar. The world had him now and he had someone whose cycle still cycled. "You are better off," the doc had said, though Barney owned a new house in a new state with a new wife ready to nurture a million babies while Indira rented a one-bedroom, rescued two sibling cats, and worked at the women's shelter. Victories without losses?

Impossible.

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The old tenants had already checked out and new tenants waited in the registration line for a shower, a meal, and a bed. Indira leaned on the wooden broom handle, watching, studying faces, postures, their clothing assembled together from thrift stores and dumpsters. A man talked to himself, muttering obscenities at invisible people with women's names.

"I'm sorry, sir," the receptionist behind the desk said. "Only women and children." She handed him a business card with the location of the men's shelter and gave walking directions. He turned on confused legs and, on his way back into the cold, pitched the card to the floor. After final check-in, Indira would sweep away the discarded paper.

The women came alone in torn scarves and gloves and boots, layered in sweat pants over men's jeans over more sweat pants, in oversized sweaters and sweatshirts and jackets, which hid their hands and their bodies. They pressed knit caps atop whatever hair they had. Dirty faces, red with cold, drawn with deep furrows around eyes and mouths, their eyes pale pinpoints, bleached by cold sleepless nights in alleyways guarding themselves.

The security guard searched the women as they filed past. Street women, war women, beast women sometimes carried sharpened glass or screwdrivers, aluminum daggers or needles. They arrived starved and sleep-deprived, eyes glazed or bewildered, hands cut by cold, dried blood frozen in the cracks of split lips. They moved on raw knees, sucked swill from discarded water bottles, numbed themselves to cold and emotion. Most entered with nothing, their clothes in the closet of a house they'd never see again, a car abandoned on the driveway.

The rules said three nights, then you had to go. You could re-register after twenty-four hours had passed, space permitting. Three meals per day, all the canned corn, carrots, beets, and instant mashed potatoes you could eat. Sometimes hamburger meat, sometimes Spam. A cot, the showers, a day room to talk or to play cards or board games or watch TV. A tiny bit of warmth and security. Twice per month a psych counselor offered sessions and diligently completed forms that rotted in a dusty file.

The line out the door disappeared. Dozens of women had already been admitted and congregated in the cafeteria, plunging plastic spoons into bowls of soupy, steaming gruel. One woman hustled to the registration line, clutching a boy by the wrist, his thick hair swallowing his face. The kid wore sneakers strapped to the wrong feet, hands covered with oven mitts, and a jacket stained by motor oil, fry grease, or old blood.

She tugged and jerked him, giving commands to stay and obey. He whimpered about being hot, and his mother pulled off the mittens and jacket. "Stop your complaining." The boy brushed hair out of his eyes.

The pair stepped to the counter and the receptionist asked the same questions she asked everyone and put the answers on a form. The woman called herself Bibi. "Just a bit of bad luck," she said, forcing a chuckle. "We just need a few days." She leaned far forward over the counter, watching every mark made on the admittance form. "My boy," Bibi said. "I have Jordan here." The receptionist stretched her back to see the boy. "We're very hungry and very tired and...."

Bibi's anxiousness pulsed and skittered. The skin around her fingernails had been chewed red. She twitched sometimes as if trapped inside herself. Was she a scammer, a troublemaker? The security guard gave Bibi a look. Later, while sweeping, Indira would spy Bibi's registration card: no home address, no phone number, no P.O. Box, no last place of employment, no emergency contact, no relations of any kind.

Indira swept the foyer, shook rock salt from the mats, then passed her broom through the hallways. Some women said hello, most ignored her. She heaved trash bags into the dumpster, returned with numb hands, and headed straight for the hot cocoa in the main room, a former gymnasium. Army cots covered with wool blankets formed lines and rows. Some women snored; others lay with blankets tucked to their chins, staring at the ceiling, defrosting.

Indira poured hot water into a paper cup and shook out a packet of powdered cocoa. She singed her lips, stirred in a second packet, and sat at a folding table. Napkins swiped from a fast-food restaurant stood in the center of the table. Heat from the cup radiated into Indira's palms,

up to her wrists. She wished for spring. The bitter cold could be so unforgiving, and without snow, winter seemed spiteful.

Bibi entered, yanking Jordan after her. They moved among the cots, found an empty pair. Bibi shrugged off her outer coat, exposing an equally filthy under-coat. His cheeks crusted with dirt, the boy needed a shower. A long-sleeve shirt swallowed his hands.

Bibi stacked grub onto a paper plate and sat near Indira. She nearly gagged she ate so fast. Jordan, on his toes, worked a spoon into a vat of beans but hadn't the coordination to do anything but make a mess. After several attempts to serve himself, Jordan joined his mother, crying, frustrated, holding an empty plate.

"Don't," Bibi said. "Sit, and I'll feed you."

The boy struggled but finally mounted the metal folding chair, scratching at his tears. Whenever Jordan's mouth trembled to speak, Bibi hushed him. She worked food from one side of her mouth to the other, swallowed, breathed, and packed her mouth again. When she had scraped the last morsels from the plate, she collapsed back in her chair, sucked food from her teeth, and cradled her belly, eye lids half shut. She belched long and low, deflating her chest.

"Ma," the boy said, rising onto his knees now.

"Shush." Bibi never looked at the boy, just sat there semi-conscious, sated, in a haze.

Jordan turned, noticing Indira for the first time. His dirty cheeks plumped, rounding his face, concealing his chin. His eyes, deep brown, contained a neglected innocence, glowing with caution and fright. He swung back to his mother, sobbed for food.



Before she left for afternoon rounds, Indira filled a plate and slid it under the boy's round face. "Go ahead." Indira presented a plastic spoon and smiled. "Sweet corn ain't bad with some toast." The boy attacked the mashed potatoes. "My name is Indira. You're Jordan, right?"

He ate fast like his mother.

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By late afternoon, the women—warm, clean, relieved, and full—lounged on cots, slouched in chairs, snapped pages of outdated magazines, watched TV, swapped stories, played gin rummy. While on break, Indira passed the time thinking about Jordan and Bibi, inventing their origins, how and where they had lived, who they had been. When the stories turned tragic, Indira left them and took the mop into the shower room again.

Bibi barged in, pulling Jordan by the wrist, and propped him on a bench like a dog. "Sit. Stay." Bibi stepped from tattered shoes and dry dirt fell around them. She removed sweaters and shirts, a belt, two pairs of pants, mismatched socks; she peeled herself from dirty underwear. A pungent odor wafted. Jordan dropped his chin, played one hand against the other in his lap. A filth-tan darkened Bibi's hands, elbows, neck, and knees. She posed shamelessly beside the pile of rags. Jordan would not look up.

"I need this," Bibi said and stepped over a lip of tile into the shower area, her hair a wiry halo. "How's the hot water in this place?" she called to Indira as she cranked the nob and tested the spray. Steam rose, and Bibi eased herself in: feet, legs, back. The spray melted her halo and brown water swirled to the drain. Tiny hairs darkened on her thighs and shins. She had no belly. A few bars of ribs showed beneath wallowing, sagging breasts, and scabbed sores colored her

elbows. Bibi was like a cable, strong yet pliable. Her spine curved just the slightest bit where her shoulders met her neck. Some day she might need a cane to keep from falling over.

Indira moved around the boy, saying hello, smiling and waving quickly. "How was lunch?" she asked. The boy said nothing, only looked to where his feet dangled above the floor.

Indira gathered Bibi's smelly clothes, folded them, and placed them on the bench beside Jordan and moved Bibi's shoes under the bench. Indira mopped the dirty floor and tried to make friends with Jordan. The little he said confessed an unhappiness. She parked beside Jordan, clamping the mop handle between her knees. "Can I show you a picture?" Indira worked a photo of her cats out of a sleeve in her wallet. Jordan leaned in and Indira gave him the photo. She pointed. "That's Ike, and that's his sister Liz."

Jordan wanted to know all about the cats: Where did they live? Did they fight? What was their favorite food? Indira answered his questions, told stories of the cats' silliness.

"Where did they come from?" Jordan asked.

"Near railroad tracks, behind an old building, and they were sad," Indira said as Bibi worked soap over her nakedness. "Now, they live with me. They sleep in my bed, and we keep each other warm." Indira pretended to shiver, wriggling her whole body; this made the boy laugh, his teeth yellow pebbles.

Jordan studied the photo between his fingers as if imagining himself with the felines. Indira left him to dream. She raked the mop back and forth, peeking at the boy and his mother. As Jordan had transported himself into the photo, Bibi seemed to transport herself to a tropical spa. She showered with her eyes shut, lathered and re-lathered her body, until her red flesh plumped and her fingertips shriveled.

Bibi cranked the knob, and the spray stopped. She shook water from her body, wrung her hair, and stepped into a towel, craning her head back and exhaling in one motion. The wet Bibi could have worked in an office or hosted a soiree, with her clean face and sharp features, and a towel turned into a white cocktail dress. "That felt good." Her smile widened, and her eyes popped brightly. But when she dressed in the same dirty clothes, the lustrous shine that had surrounded her after the shower tarnished and her face hardened.

Jordan waited for his turn in the shower but never got one. Bibi pulled on her shoes and led the boy out. "Say," Bibi said to Indira. "How do people pass the night here?"

Indira didn't know how to answer.

"Oh, never mind."

As Bibi hauled Jordan out, he handed back Indira's photo. A new trail of dirt led from the bench back to the door.

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By the time Indira entered the hallway, no one was around. The receptionist had gone home for the night, and the security guard was making his rounds. The shelter doors had been locked, allowing exits but no entries. In the main room, women cozied onto their cots or watched TV.

Indira wanted to go home. The cats would be hungry and might hold a grudge if they didn't get dinner at the usual time. She had to make the late bus.

Indira hurried to the custodial closet. She hoped to see Jordan again, to wish him a good-night, to assure him that the shelter would be safe and that she would be back in the morning with more pictures of her cats. The first night in a strange place could frighten a little boy.

When Indira opened the door, she found Jordan held against his mother's side. Bibi, her back to the door, rifled through shelves of solvents, cleansers, and sprays. Caught, Bibi flinched, but that tough face in dirty clothes remained steady. "Got moisturizer? My hands, they hurt something fierce. The cold...." Bibi swiped some paper towels. "This'll do. Thanks," and before Indira could speak, Bibi dragged Jordan out of the closet and down the hallway.

The shelves had been disrupted, ammonia and bleach and soap bottles turned every which way. Sometimes shelter women answered their vices, succumbed to habit. Even mothers. Mothers should be shelters for their children. Just as Indira had been when she rescued poor Ike and Liz, had saved them from short, miserable lives. Now, Indira unhooked her coat from the nail in the door and secured the buttons, but when she reached the lobby, rather than exit the building, she turned right. She had to see the boy, to see the peace of sleep cradle his face. Light from the open door bathed the cots in yellow dust. Women slept on their backs or sides, snoring dissonant hymns.

Indira slipped between the rows, tracking a scent only a custodian could know. The boy lay on his side, staring at his mother. A speech worked itself into Indira's head. Someone had to speak truth to Bibi, to reorder the woman's priorities, not self first but child first. She knelt between the cots. Quick hisses sounded from the blanket Bibi had pulled over her head. Indira shook the cocooned woman. The blanket opened and out belched a chemical fume followed by a canister of bug spray, which clattered and rolled onto the wooden floor. Bibi floated in semi-consciousness: eyes lulled in liquid sockets and drool smeared one cheek, her body slack. Bibi dribbled nonsense words, her tongue fishtailing between her teeth. She sank back, eyes rolled white, arms floundered.

"Bibi," Indira said to the wasted woman. She wanted to tell Bibi about victories but didn't know how to begin. She eyed Jordan. "I am taking him," she said without anger or condemnation, careful to keep her voice low.

Indira leaned close and whispered to Jordan about the bus she rode to get home and the sibling cats who were probably whining for dinner at this very moment. During Indira's exchange with Jordan, Bibi stirred once, gurgled, and drifted away. The other women in the shelter kept to themselves, hearing and seeing nothing. When Indira asked the boy to put on his shoes and his coat, Jordan obeyed without complaint. She helped him with his oven mitts, and the pair walked into the hallway holding hands. In the lobby, Indira stopped and knelt before Jordan. "It's going to be better. You'll see." She looked at her watch.

"Cold," Jordan said and shivered as they passed through the first set of doors.

"I know. But we'll get warm soon enough."

Indira pushed open the outer door and held it for Jordan. He stepped into the darkness ahead of her. As the door eased back, panic seized Indira. What was she thinking? She could not get away with this. Bibi would regain her faculties, the police would be called. But if Indira was lucky, she and Jordan would have the night together, and that was enough, enough to risk her job, to risk jail. A child in her home... she wanted nothing more, and to have that just once... the memory would sustain her for years. The door slid on its hinge. Indira lunged and caught the handle with two fingertips while Jordan gripped her other hand and tugged hard toward the late bus waiting at the corner. He wanted to see the cats, to be on the bus and out of the cold. He wanted this escape as much as Indira did.

Arms extended, Indira held the door in one hand and a wriggling Jordan in the other. The icy wind gusted around them, swirling hair about Indira's cheeks. Snowflakes fluttered like white butterflies. Her fingers were slipping, slipping. The cold brought tears to her eyes, blinding her. Finally, she let go, not of the boy but of the door, and together they hustled to the late bus, eager to be out of the cold. They'd have the night and some of the morning together, Indira calculated, before Bibi regained consciousness and alerted shelter officials, and that would sustain Indira, a brief yet enduring victory.

## The Pub Runner

City lights fragment the dark as a dozen of us crowd the sidewalk wearing shorts, a number pinned to our cotton tee shirts. Some of us stave off the cold by bouncing in place or stretching hamstrings one last time. An official marks the starting line, keeping runners back with a hockey stick held horizontally, his face blue from the light of his smartphone. Runs always begin with such seriousness, the runners eager, excited, unsure. Most have never done this before.

At exactly the top of the hour, the official claps his hockey stick loudly on the cement, simulating a starter's pistol, and the race begins. Not far from Oregon Street, we charge northeast on West Passyunk. For the first quarter-mile, I always want to quit. Runners pass me on both sides and will tell their buddies later that, at least for a second, they were ahead of Rick Trestle. I let the college kids go, let them make the mistake. They won't be around when I get to Walnut Street.

The middle of the pack welcomes me.

Black ink scrawls across my forearm like a tattoo gone awry, listing the stops along the route. Ooglies, four-tenths of a mile from the start, mimics a schoolhouse with its brick facade and large wooden door. The only window is stuffed with a battered A/C unit. I have been here before, when I turned twenty-one and again when Leanne and I first started dating three years ago. She danced to Springsteen's "Cover Me" on the jukebox. We laughed the whole night, and it would have been the perfect date, but Leanne trounced me at darts. I don't know how that happened.

The race leaders hurry out, scowling at us middle-packers as we run in. Another official monitors from inside Ooglies, hands on his hips, ready to call an infraction. Mugs of foaming amber wait for us middle-packers. While some gulp and some sip, I hold my breath and guzzle, a tactic to minimize air bubbles and burping. Bloating is dangerous for a pub runner.

We down our brews, confirmed by the official, and sprint to the exit. Jacked ankles and tweaked knees happen most often when runners enter or exit a pub, but we middle-packers are fine. I've seen runners bang blindly through pub doors, miss the steps, and crash on the beer-dampened floor. Some only tear ligaments, others break jaws and crack teeth.

The night feels warmer now, and I'm beginning to sweat. Already, a few of the slowpokes have quit running and shuffle along far behind. They'll never get to the second stop.

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On our second date, Leanne, of the sparkling brown eyes and raggy spiked hair, talked a lot. She would pause only to touch a finger to her lip and say, "Um...", before her mouth reloaded and a new round of words flowed forth. She soliloquized and I listened. We ate at an Italian restaurant tucked into the basement of a brick building, a candle in glass between us, a bowl of rigatoni to share, and enough tomato sauce to swim in. I told Leanne that school had brought me to Philly, but school didn't pay, so I left for life as a small cog in a large media development company. They paid well and, as long as I completed my job tasks, they left me alone. Leanne blabbered about all of her jobs in the last year: barista, shoe saleswoman, dog-walker, house-sitter, and tutor/nanny to a well-to-do family out in Chestnut Hill. Leanne was half way to her bachelor's degree in psychology.



At the end of the night, our bellies packed, leftover tiramisu in a take-home bag, I asked Leanne out again. She was fun to be around, and I loved the excitement of taking her out, loved how people looked at us as we entered a restaurant or bar. She said yes immediately.

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Squires Pub and Meeting House, a white-walled square on the corner of Thirteenth and Morre, claims to have been established in 1776. The slogan on their napkins reads: *Serving patriots since day one!* A standing cinderblock acts as doorstep, and we middle-packers stampede into a boiling box. The official greets us: "Just try and cheat, you bastards." He's drunk.

All the men of Squires wear ball caps and week-old scruff and hover protectively over their mugs, not speaking a damn word. Johnny Winter's "Be Careful with a Fool" wails in the background, his Gibson bellyaching and rambling. The televisions broadcast the last innings of another Phillies debacle.

When I first crossed the Delaware and took up residence here, not knowing one block from the next, one person from the next, I frequented Squires for its quiet depression, its blues, and its chicken fingers. I enjoyed listening to drunks commiserate, thought it fun to try to follow their beer-warped logic. But I made no friends. More than school or work, Leanne kept me from leaving Philly, and I kept her from getting all too comfortable with loneliness. She had trouble making friends, too.

The other runners and I hoist full mugs to our lips, the official glaring, his whistle plugging the corner of his mouth. The beer at Squires tastes like it was brewed in 1776 and left in a warm room for more than two centuries. A skinny, young runner tip toes out of a beer

puddle, shaking droplets from his brand new sneakers. He won't last. Most runners don't have the disposition for discomfort, for a distressed digestive system, for a swirling head and a pounding heart, for a belly full of booze and a palpable insidious nausea. They don't care about winning or finishing, really. Their mission is fun and severe intoxication, even blackout. The run is just a coincidence.

I hustle back into the night, warm suds sloshing around inside. The intersection of Passyunk and Carpenter buzzes with traffic. Until now, runners could just zip across streets with only a glance in either direction. Carpenter is all about timing, finding gaps between the flow of cars, so you don't break stride. All the while, cabbies actively hunt pub runners: horns blare, fists shake out of open windows, and the night fills with curses in Swahili, Urdu, and Igbo. Running blindly from one block to the next could cost a runner his life or limbs. The field thins as three loafers quit at the curb and turn back for another Squires brew. Soon only the stubborn and determined will remain.

One half-block ahead, the leaders' sneaker reflectors flutter like lightning bugs. After a mile, the two pints I've drunk strike my thighs. The muscles threaten to spasm; my stride shortens, my toes tense.

\*\*\*

I practiced for my first race by buying a six pack and a one-day pass to the Christian Street Y. I selected a concealed treadmill and started running. Every half mile, I paused, chugged a beer, and hopped back on. Five beers and nearly three miles later, an attendant with a giant Y on her shirt confronted me.

"Sir," she began. "What do you have in the bag, sir?"

"Nothing." I played sober.

"I smell beer, sir." She reached for my bag.

"That's private property. You have no right!"

"I could call the police, sir" she said.

"Listen, I'm in training."

She walked away but not very far, and at the three-mile mark, I cracked another beer and chugged.

"Sir, alcoholic beverages are—"

I quit listening because, I noticed, my legs worked effortlessly. Somehow, I possessed an innate talent for running drunk.

The attendant reached for the emergency stop button, but I smacked her hand away.

"That's dangerous," I said. She reached again and we tussled. My foot caught the guardrail and the rolling belt threw me. The empty beer cans spilled out of the bag, clattering like pathetic sleigh bells. The attendant accosted me, stood me up, and told me to get out. I responded by puking all over her Y shirt.

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Most of the pub runners are natural drinkers. They can guzzle gallons and stay upright, walk straight lines, touch their noses with their eyes closed, balance on one foot, solve quadratic equations, and operate motorized vehicles. They don't puke and they don't pass out. But they don't run well, either. They think a few laps in Rittenhouse Square will make them runners. Not so. Running is hard on the soles, the ankles, the shins, the knees, the quads, the hip joints, the back. Alcohol tolerance isn't enough, pub runners need a Kenyan's heart and a cheetah's lungs.

It's better to be a runner who learns to drink than a drinker who attempts to run. Most of all, pub runners need a mental escape.

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After Leanne and I moved in together, I would run home, excited to find her reclining on the couch, watching reruns, her smooth stomach peeking out of her tank top, hair on end, her scent filling the place. She'd wear my boxer shorts, those long legs inviting, those tiny blue toes winking. We couldn't stay away from each other. Leanne would catch me watching her and attack me. We'd practically dehydrate ourselves. I'd pull and she'd pinch; I'd nibble and she'd tug. Besides being bedroom compatible, we were friends. We loved watching movies together and eating egg rolls in Chinatown. Most of all Leanne's mind kept me interested. She was a natural at brain-teasers and puzzles and gave me fits whenever we played checkers or chess or video games because she always won. A while back, I got mad and slammed my controller into the coffee table and said I wasn't going to play anymore, not until I learned how to beat her.

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The Keg 'n Barrel's sign uses gilded Old English lettering on a black background. Inside, the stained-wood booths appear sturdy but lack cushions. On one wall a Union Jack glows under a spotlight. The brass taps gleam with regal affluence and are topped with uniquely carved handles: a Bass bowling pin, a Fuller's shield, a Newcastle Brown arrow, and an undeniable Guinness pint.

Four race leaders are raising their mugs when I jog over. They glower because I have caught up to them. One leader, Trevor, has a red nose and cheeks, his shirt sweat-glued to his body. Trevor shoves past me, grumbling something that sounds like a black magic spell for my

legs to go limp. Whatever. Intimidation doesn't work. My thighs have dismissed any sluggishness, my feet crave pavement, and my gut has quelled revolt. And mentally, I'm not even here. Mentally, I'm on the couch with Leanne, frolicking.

I hold my breath, guzzle, and plunk down the mug. My vision blurs only when I quick-turn my head or eyes.

I bank right out of the door. Monroe inclines deceptively, slowly. Runners wonder why their knees whine, why their hearts hurt, why I have just caught and passed them. At the top of the slope a runner stumbles, crumbling into the shadows, landing face down at the base of a building. As I approach, Trevor's groaning like a whiskey-laden bum, a soupy halo of puke surrounding his head. He opens his eyes just enough to see me pass and hisses, "Fuck you. I hope you lose."

Ahead, the Monroe and Fourth Street traffic light beams red so I downshift, slowing, waiting. When it turns green, I fly. The leaders are not far ahead now.

I join the lead pack, and we pit stop at bars four, five and six. These runners have developed a tolerance for alcohol. At this stage, six pints and more than two miles down, runners welcome beer's numbing properties. If their feet blister, they can't tell. If their calves seize, they don't notice. Some of them puke on purpose, to purge the alcohol. There's no rule against it.

Confusion is a bigger problem than numbness. A wrong turn, the wrong bar can end a runner's chances. Other runners make the worse mistake of over-thinking, rationalizing: Why did I believe pounding beer and running would be fun? Why run when I can jog? Why jog

when I can walk? Why leave the bar when I can just stay? Who cares about a trophy and trivial glory?

I'm drunk now but not so bad that I can't hear Leanne giggling as I plant kisses on her belly.

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Leanne fell in love with me first. She showed love in little ways: a handhold, a quick kiss, an admiring glance. Leanne and I slept, shopped, and dined together. We didn't get bored or anxious or claustrophobic. We thrived.

We joined the first pub run together. Our goal was to finish, not win. Leanne had worn black tights with pink lightning bolts down each leg and a sports bra that packaged her tits nicely. Pink sneakers and tiny white ankle socks completed the ensemble. I dreamed that she was the race I was trying to finish.

Within half a mile, Leanne wanted to quit. She'd been complaining since the first block about fatigue and knee pain. One swig into her second beer, she choked and coughed. "I hate beer," she said. "Tastes like goat piss."

While on our way to the third pub—Leanne floundering badly—I slipped in behind her, shouting, "Let's go, Leanne. Come on."

Her neck and back were sweat-shiny, her spiky hair wilting. "I don't feel good."

"You can do it." I was careful to maintain an encouraging, supportive tone.

She told me to shut up.

"But our goal," I said. "We can do it."

That quieted her, but only for a moment.

Just before the next stop, Leanne, in mid-stride, sprayed puke all over the sidewalk, her sneakers and tights, her sports bra. Vomit-reeking of hops and barley-misted back into my face. Her hair and nostrils dripped beige slime. I offered my shirttail but she slapped it away. "Don't touch. Get off!" Leanne kept saying. "I'm done. This is stupid, Rick. I mean, who willingly does this kind of thing?" I thought the same thing about the games that she always won. Why couldn't I be smarter? Why couldn't Leanne be stronger?

The next pub stop, Cobb's, stood a stride away. We were so far behind the other runners that the official had already put his whistle away. "You must be bringing up the rear," he slurred.

I drained my mug, but Leanne sipped and dribbled and beer ran over her lips, down her chin, mixing with the vomit. She put her mug next to mine.

"What's that?" the official said, peering. "Gotta finish the whole thing."

"It's close enough," Leanne said, wavering on her feet.

"Just a few more gulps," I said to Leanne. "You can do it."

She stared at the mug a long time, stifling burps, then said, "No. I can't, not a bit more." Leanne turned away from the mug.

"You're disqualified," the official said and recorded Leanne's number on a card he'd removed from his shirt pocket. "Your race is done, sugar."

Outside, Leanne apologized to me. "You should keep going," she said. "I'll meet you at the finish." I took off running, chasing the end. Meanwhile, Leanne pursued a different finish line.

From that day, Leanne hid behind headaches and sleepiness and menstruation and work and exhaustion. First, her kisses lacked power, then they gradually ended altogether. She no

longer wanted to watch movies together or food shop or stroll through the park. We ate meals separately and cordoned ourselves at opposing ends of the apartment. I would goad her sometimes to get a reaction—clenched fists, stomped feet, a bared-teeth growl: "You're infuriating!" Soon, she quit reacting altogether. Nothing I said or did bothered her. She was neither kind nor unkind, neither civil nor uncivil, yet something seethed inside. Leanne settled into a nonplussed, apathetic version of herself. And I mimicked her withdrawal. We began to feel like strangers.

Despite this, she didn't leave.

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After Spruce comes Eighteenth Street then a diagonal sprint across Rittenhouse Square. The finish line sits two blocks up Walnut. But before that is Cannon's Taproom.

I catch the heels of a pale-armed waif with the number fourteen pinned to his old Masterman High X-country shirt. He's hardly sweating, hardly exhaling, and can't be more than a week over legal. He'd fit right in at Penn Law with those crisp brown locks and that economical gait. He probably wears a fit tracker and carries a photo of Larry Page in his wallet. In a straight race, this Road Runner would destroy me—that lean frame, those monolithic calves. But this is pub running.

I pull stride for stride with him. We burst through Cannon's door at exactly the same time, hoist mugs and drink. He may be fast on his feet, but I'll pull ahead in one gulp and get out first. I'll win by a mug.



I knock back my beer in record time and give the Road Runner a sarcastic "So long, pal!" but he's done, too, and as we charge outside, other runners wobble in, sallow-faced, puke-stained. They stink.

The Road Runner and I bolt across Eighteenth and enter Rittenhouse Square, matching step for step. Rather than quaver and weave, he runs steadily, appears Olympic. "Think you can't be beaten?" he says.

He tries to pass me but I cut him off. There's no rule against it. Every time he makes a move, I block him with a shoulder, an elbow, a hip. Sometimes our legs swipe and slash each other like a quartet of dueling sabers, but he's got no hope of passing me and I can practically coast to the finish.

I whip onto Walnut and when I peek, my challenger dashes into the street. He's got no choice but take the perilous way to get around me. No way has he got the gas for this gamble.

As we're flying past Holy Trinity, an engine roars, tires screech, and a cabbie curses. The cab cuts the Road Runner's legs out from under him. He caroms onto the hood, then rolls over the front bumper and onto the pavement. Ever determined, the kid attempts to stand but stumbles and collapses, his leg disjointed at a sickening angle. He cries himself into shock. The tug of humanity grips me, begs me to stop, to quit, but I slip away, fleeing the scene. Mentally, I'm not even here. Mentally, I'm with Leanne, trying to reconcile, trying to stop her from leaving.

To this point, Leanne has stayed because she's had nowhere to go. These last weeks, she's been saving to get her own place and purposely waited for tonight's run, when she knew I'd

be gone, to make her move. I'm not supposed to know she's moving, but it's hard to hide boxes and bubble wrap and packing tape from a person who shares the same address.

My thighs might be burning, my fine-motor skills failing, but I wouldn't know it. I run myself into long corridors of deep contemplation. The run is a personal test, a choice, free and clear, to move, to drink, to court illness and injury, to stop. I can quit anytime I choose but don't because it's easy. Leanne thinks the best pub runners must be supreme masochists. I can't disagree.

The finish line is not actually a line; it's The Mercury Tavern, a sliver in the wall between a bodega and a laundromat. I amble in to pound the last beer and claim victory. The crowd cheers. Spots like black and white firecrackers fill my eyes. Sweat drips from my wrists. Spectators wave napkins, clink glasses, and hurrah. As I draw the final mug to my lips, they chant: "Chug, chug, chug!"

Two officials stand close, assessing then confirming with nods and raised arms. Not a drop gets away from me.

People take video and pictures of me holding the trophy. "What's your secret?" they ask.

To separate yourself from the pain, I think. I tell them that Kenyan marathoners conquer distances not because they seek the finish line; their end, their glory, is somewhere farther, in a deeper consciousness, in the recesses of the heart. The Mercury erupts with loud music and dancing and shouting. Everyone knocks back shots, and in the madness I sneak away. I suddenly don't feel good, and it has nothing to do with combining strenuous physical activity and beer-guzzling. The trophy, once I examine it closely, looks as cheap as it feels, and all that I have done to attain it seems so unimportant now. I want to be out of this bar, away from these

boozers who won't remember anything by tomorrow. All this time I have been running another race, one with Leanne in the lead and me struggling to keep pace. I may have fallen behind, but this race is not yet done.

Just outside, I bump into the Road Runner, ghostly and ruined, his leg dragging behind, his arm draped over the shoulder of the cabbie who hit him. The cabbie says, "Jeez, man. He won't go to the hospital. The fool."

"Here," I say and push my trophy at the Road Runner. It feels right to free myself of the cheap trinket, the pointless burden. The Road Runner can only stare in awe at tiny golden sprinter on the plastic pedestal. "That's right!" he says proudly, forgetting his injured leg. "My rightful prize." His high-handed arrogance doesn't faze me. A more important race with a more important prize has begun, and I'm woefully behind.

I scamper up the street. I should be tired, but a second-wind powers my step. My new finish line lies blocks ahead and time is short, so I take my chances in the street and run home as fast as I can. My stride lengthens, churning up asphalt, and the taxi cabs are too slow to threaten me. I bound onto the sidewalk, dodge pedestrians and trash cans, and take the stairs of our building two at a time.

I expect to find Leanne in our half-empty apartment, a last box at her feet, her key on the counter, on her way to a rented van parked against the curb. I imagine snatching the box from her, asking her to wait, to give us another night or week not because I won the race and want her to hear all about it, but because our race is more important.

My key hits the entrance door and I bypass the elevator for the stairs. No elevator could beat me now, and as I thunder from one flight to the next, I picture a surprised Leanne bent over

a moving box. By the time she straightens, I will have her in my arms. I'll tell her about how I almost lost, but in the final stretch, when it counted, I was first across the line.

In two breaths, I burst into our apartment. "Wait, Leanne," I shout, and momentum carries me into the center of the room. But the apartment is dark and empty. I was wrong about Leanne still being there, filling her last box. I was wrong about how fast I could run, that in the final stretch I would have the energy to surge ahead. I was wrong to think that a runner needed only himself to compete. The only thing I am not wrong about is the key, brass colored, abandoned on the counter. There isn't even a note. Now, my legs give out, my calves seize, and everything I have ingested comes pouring out of me.

Augustana<sup>2</sup>

Augustana presses against my back. Her heavy arm and leg drape me, and I begin to sweat at those places where our flesh meets. She finds my hand and holds it. "This is good, isn't it?" She's not talking about our hands. Augustana is like a puppy, restless, exuberant, burning my neck with her hot breath, and I try to slink away but the heat has welded us together.

"Don't you ever think of getting married, because I do. It's downright embarrassing to have a boyfriend at my age." Augustana grips me tighter. "Wouldn't it be weird to have a kid running around? Picture a three- or four-year-old who looks like you, calls you 'daddy,' a kid who learns about the world from you?"

Instead of imagining all that, I wonder how much a one-way ticket to Bucharest costs. Thirty is not so old, and I don't know what the rush is. I'd rather not think about any of this.

Augustana goes quiet for a second. "Do you ever think we will get married?" Her words are firecrackers in the dark. "Maybe I'll ask *you* to marry *me*," she says. "It's more common than you think."

I imagine myself on a plane, speeding away from this bedroom at three-hundred-feet-per-second.

"What would you say if I asked you to get married?"

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<sup>2</sup> Originally appeared in *Reunion: The Dallas Review* (Vol. 7).

We meet Robinson and Maisie at Krazy's Barbeque Joint. Maisie's so pregnant she can't fit into a booth and we have to take a table near the soda fountain. The last time we saw Maisie she was a petite thing with lean legs coming out of size four shorts. She had worn a white bikini that week the four of us spent in Corpus. Now, Maisie's huge, hefty, her face inflated, the delicacy of her wrists and ankles gone. The baby could pop out at any second.

Now, I wouldn't say I tried for Maisie; that wouldn't be accurate, but I did gently probe. Before Augustana, I opened myself to Maisie, very subtly, smiled more, offered a helping hand, minded my manners. But nothing happened. I think about the what-if sometimes: that she could be my wife, with my ring on her finger and our baby in her womb. Anyway, everything has changed from those older days. Maisie has allowed her bob cut to grow out, and the color is not as blonde as I recall. Her fingers are plump and once prominent clavicles are imperceptible.

Maisie and Robinson talk about becoming parents, building a nursery, buying a crib. They mention Lamaze, maternity leave, baby food, and onesies. They joke about diaper changing and late-night feeding, sleep loss and spit-up. Though they won't become parents for weeks more, they speculate on first steps, first words, and the first day of school. They anticipate tattoos and curfews and arguments. They expect to contract empty-nest syndrome.

Augustana sets her head in hand; she can listen to these stories all day. Not me. I'm hungry.

The tables around us fill and soon Krazy's is buzzing. The waitresses—coeds on break from UT—pack themselves into cheek-hugging denim shorts and tied-off flannel shirts bearing Krazy's logo; their curves are sleek as sports cars. Their goods jiggle as they scoot from table to table, ponytails swinging after. These sexy cowgirls can ride a steed, twirl a lasso. They wear

fuchsia eye shadow and make music with their boot heels. If they notice me staring, they don't seem to mind. Only their perfume remains as they zip past the table—candied pecan tarts. I want to corral them with my lasso, count the colors in their eyes, and hear them say their names: Crystal, Darla, Carol Leigh.

Augustana asks if I'm okay, and my bubble bursts. "What are you thinking about?" I wish Augustana would stop elbowing me. The cowgirls might realize we are together. A new cowgirl struts past, her hat tipped back, her white top so tight I can see her ribs.

"What are you going to order?" Augustana wants to know.

"Ribs," I say, wondering how short shorts and long legs can so quickly devastate a man. I try to convince myself that these cowgirls would be mean, selfish, conceited, that they and I would never get along. But my body is doing things my mind hasn't sanctioned. My car keys clang to the floor and before I can grab them, a hand swoops in—an unblemished hand topped with red nails and a silver thumb ring. I follow hand to arm to torso to cleavage.

"I believe y'all dropped these." She sounds like a Texan and looks like a goddess. The cowgirl lays the keys in my open palm; flesh brushes flesh, and sparks light up my loins.

"Thank you."

The goddess-cowgirl saunters away and I watch every inch of her go.

"Are you okay?" Augustana asks.

I am not okay, but I would never tell Augustana that. She'd want details, and I don't have the courage to say the truth, that I am more attracted to my cowgirl beauties than to the girl on my arm. I can't quit the habit of wanting what I don't have and neglecting what I do have.

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After the meal I stand outside, observing the cowgirl-waitresses through the large windows. A brunette with the body of a pole-vaulter—tall, lean, full of pep—stands out among the others. I would invite her to my place if Augustana wasn't already living there. The pole-vaulter would not just be a great lover, she'd be a soulmate. She'd know to leave me alone when I got moody, and she wouldn't mind cleaning the bathroom. She'd even pull the hairballs from the shower drain.

I tell Augustana I am fine because I can't tell her about the cowgirls two-stepping in my head, their belly-button jewels winking, their legs like Grecian pillars, their curves rocking my boat. I can't tell Augustana that I still feel the exact spot where the goddess-cowgirl brushed my palm when she handed back my keys.

Robinson and Maisie want to walk. "I need to work off what I've eaten," Maisie says, patting her pregnant belly. She ate more barbeque ribs than I or Robinson ate. As we stroll Main Street, still talking about babies and parenthood, I drift to the back.

Maisie's goose waddle distracts me; her once little ringer-bell behind is now a gong. What will Maisie look like after the baby arrives? Will her body bounce back? Will she keep the baby weight? Will she forever be classified as pre-pregnancy Maisie and post-pregnancy Maisie?

I interrupt, "What are you going to do after the baby is born, Maisie?" She's surprised because I haven't said much all afternoon. "I mean, right after the baby is born."

Maisie doesn't hesitate. "Get a beer, smoke a joint, and eat a half gallon of fudge-pretzel ice cream."



I'm saddened because she'll never again be cute, petite Maisie. Instead she'll be a chubby mom with permanent bags under her eyes and a slowly hunching spine. I should have pursued Maisie before she got serious with Robinson, before Augustana moved in with me. We could have totally different lives right now.

A tall cowgirl with a star on her chest and a toy pistol on her hip moseys past and I nearly break my neck. Hotness like that should be outlawed.

The good-byes take half an hour because Augustana doesn't want her friends to leave. "The next time I see you, Maisie, you'll be a mom." They weep and hug, and I roll my eyes at Robinson, but he doesn't get it. If I'm not careful, I will become Robinson and Augustana will become Maisie. Already, Augustana has developed a love for cinnamon rolls and Salted Caramel Mocha coffee. I have found her some Sunday mornings on the couch in sweatpants stuffing her face. She has been slowly changing out her lean-fit jeans for relaxed-fit. And when one of her T-shirts feels tight, she just borrows mine. Augustana used to wear make-up, but now she doesn't see the point. She's also been talking about cutting her hair, too, saying that short black hair is chic. She's wrong. Only women past their prime have short hair.

I am in bed first, trying to knock the cowgirls out of my thoughts with a novel, trying to fall asleep, trying not to think about the start of another work week. Augustana climbs on me, kisses my belly. I know what this means, but I'd rather read or sleep. Augustana persists, and again my body is doing things my mind hasn't sanctioned. "You don't want to read," Augustana says. "You want to play." Augustana's already playing, and no amount of reading can help me.

I say, "Remember, Aug, we don't have any more condoms." Augustana straddles me. "So what? Who needs condoms?" She feels so good I can't resist.

"What's wrong with having a baby?"

This numbs me, and though Augustana's riding away, I don't feel anything. She writhes, bounces and bobs. I shut my eyes and pretend I'm paraplegic. I won't be complicit. No babies. No thank you.

Cowgirls appear in the darkness of my mind. The goddess-cowgirl has my keys, twirling them on her red-tipped finger, saying, "Are these yours?" She's giving a little shake and I can't tell if she's talking about my keys or her tits. "Are these yours?" The cowgirl-sheriff draws her pistol, shooting blanks into the air. A posse of cowgirls in hats and braids and shirts so tight they don't need bras. Their midriffs invite caress. Their denim shorts are cut so high on the thigh that their pocket linings show. Their legs are toothsome, juicy, ripe. Their boot spurs sparkle.

We're in a Main Street standoff, a duel. I'm at one end of Main Street, staring down five, six hot cowgirls. Sinister intentions glow in their eyes. Their gun belts slant across their bounteous hips. As they step forward, their spurs chime.

Dry, dusty air sloughs over the rooftops, and suddenly Main Street is barren, as all of the townsfolk have cleared out. Spectators peek from shaded windows and doorways, from around corners and behind water troughs. Twenty paces separate the beauties from me. Only, when I check my hip, its bare—no gun belt, no pistol. My throat clogs. The cowgirls draw and I brace for hot lead tearing through my innards. In a second, I'll be a bloody heap in the dust, trying to craft some immortal, vengeful last words.

But the cowgirls don't shoot. Two swing lassos, catching me, pinning my arms to my sides. They reel me in, surround me. I struggle against the rope but can't get free.

"We could kill you," the cowgirls say. "But we don't want to kill you. We have other ideas." They swarm. Soft hands with long fingers and nails painted red spread over my body, unbuttoning my shirt, exposing my chest. The cute assailants moan with anticipation. They unbuckle my belt, lower my chaps and jeans to my ankles. I do have a pistol after all! They notice, too, and draw it from my boxers. They are rough, eager, hungry. And right there, in the middle of Main Street, the posse of cowgirls has its way with me. In a minute, my pistol fires.

The blasts shake the town, shake me out of my daydream just as Augustana collapses on top of me. We are both gasping and sweaty. Heaving, Augustana says, "That was... the best... ever." Still aroused, she rolls her hips a bit more, her lips burning red, her breasts glistening. "That was the first time," she says. "First time in my entire life."

"What?"

"That was the first time... during... that I..." Augustana finally peels off of me. "This is a milestone."

When I look down, I want to see a condom I know isn't there. "Do you mean I...? We...? Without?"

"Aren't we naughty?" Augustana giggles. "I can still feel you inside. I feel *insemination*."

"You feel what?" I can't, I don't want to believe what I'm hearing. "Why did you...? Why did you let me? We shouldn't have—"

Augustana finds my hand and holds it between her bare breasts. "You seemed to be having a pretty good time. In fact, you seemed more jazzed than usual. What were you thinking about that got you so...?"

I don't say a damn thing about what I think.

My mind has already replaced the cowgirls with a fast-motion film starring Augustana. The film opens with Augustana high-fiving her obstetrician. Then she's at the kitchen table with a pen and a piece of paper full of names.

Boys:

Ryan Matthew

Christopher Paul

Matthew Ryan

James Brian

Jimmy Paul

Girls:

Katelyn Sue

Caitlyn Ann

Margaret Ann

Christine Ann

Cindy Christina

The next scene she's at a mirror and her belly is inflating at record speed, and she's buying bigger and bigger dresses and pants, and then Augustana is sweaty and fast-breathing and pushing when the doctor says and, and before long the doctor hands over a slimy wailing, little alien that is ours, Augustana's and mine. And the rest of the movie is unbearable; the plot turns from science fiction to horror—from late nights to early mornings to screaming baby, from bags under eyes to hunched backs to screaming baby, from diarrhea diapers to puked-on pants to screaming baby. I smack myself, trying to stop the movie. These flicks always end the same, with eighteen years of sleep deprivation, eighteen years of utter exhaustion, eighteen years of thanklessness. The final scene shows two white-haired and wrinkled fossils, miserable, regretful, hollow, waiting to keel over in this same stupid apartment. What a depressing story. I fear we will end up like everyone else.

Somehow it's the next morning and I haven't been lucky enough to die in my sleep. But I feel dead. My body is a sore and rusted stump stuck to the mattress. I don't want to move, don't want to go to work.

At my work station, I go through the motions, punch keys, click mouse, file forms. If Augustana and I broke up, sleepless nights and alcohol would follow. I'd visit the free clinic's counselor who would say, "Accept that you are in a transition period." I'd have to remind myself of that advice when I started making all of my own meals again, tidying the apartment, doing laundry and food shopping, especially when I had to clean the bathroom and pull filth from the drain.

I'd have no one to hear my complaints about work or traffic or the outrageous price of deli meat. And the teenagers at the theater would point me out and snigger. "Poor loser comes to the movies all alone. Couldn't even pay a hooker to sit beside him." Holidays would suck, too. But I would get over it, the counselor would assure me. I would have more time to read and could go out whenever and wherever I wanted. I could watch TV all day if that suited me and not shower or shave.

And yet, Augustana is a saint for putting up with me; she deserves a prize. She reminds me that I am kind and good, that my co-workers are slackers and I should be running the department. She makes my chest puff out. Still, indifference lurks behind my kisses, and hugs are a chore. The passion is gone, covered by cobwebs of sameness, replaced by an urge to scam. Augustana likes the calm of routine. I am bored. It feels like there are two me's: the committed boyfriend and lone desperado.

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Leaves and the smells of autumn follow Augustana through the door. I pretend I don't know where she's been, don't know what today is. My priorities are this couch and the Big 12 game on TV and a nap at halftime. She plays it cool, makes sandwiches for both of us, tidies the kitchen, finally joins me on the couch, making me sit up, even though I was perfectly comfortable. "Can we talk?"

"Sure."

"This is important. Can you turn off the TV?"

"Can it wait until halftime?"

Augustana gives me a death stare. A commercial comes on.

"So the doctor said—"

"Right. You went to the doctor's today. What happened?"

Augustana's chin crinkles and her eyes pour tears. She shakes her head before collapsing on me. I catch her, my shirt already dotted with her teardrops. I want to let go but don't and anyway, Augustana is gripping me so tightly I could never get free. The OB said she's not pregnant even though the store-bought kit, which is supposed to be 99.45% accurate, said positive. Her oven is empty.

The air is suddenly sweet, refreshing, and I inhale deeply. First, I want to give thanks at a house of worship, then I want to throw a party. I don't have friends to invite, but I know where to find a stable of hot Texas cowgirls. That'd be fun. Only, Augustana would be there, too. I wonder if I could find a one-horse town where Augustana would never think to look, where every so often cowgirls—an ever-changing variety—would trot into town on their lovely steeds, their make-up perfect, their midriffs exposed, to spend a night or two with a mysterious loner, a man appearing lazy and selfish but really in pursuit of ripe passion and constant love.

For days and days, Augustana mopes, trying to gather the frayed ends of her sanity. She cries as she cleans the apartment, cooks dinner. I sneak off alone and dream of a posse of cowgirls. Augustana wants more affection than I can give.

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It's full October, sunny, warm, and we are back to our old routines. I've dug a hole within our relationship where I can hide, where I can escape, where I have all I want. A game is on TV and I race back from the kitchen with my sloppy joe and hunker down in a hole the size of a one-horse town. Augustana wants to know what I'm doing. I'm living, content but not in love.

Augustana squeezes onto the couch. I've got chips and a soda and I should have bet everything on this game. The odds always favor the home team, and the money could get me to Bucharest. During a commercial, I admit to myself that I haven't loved Augustana for a long time, but I stay with her out of habit. She's a good woman though, certainly deserves love and affection. But I keep my distance, hide my duplicity.

At the next timeout, Augustana leans over and says, "I love you." She plants a kiss on my cheek. She wants more than kisses, and the only way to get rid of her is to kiss her back, until she's satisfied and leaves me be. But these are false kisses, lips without passion. The game's about to resume when Augustana, hanging on me now, says she wants to talk; it's something serious. She makes me turn off the game. Augustana tells me to hold her, to look her in the eyes. She clears her throat, and I think: She's going to leave me, and that would be so much easier than me leaving her.

"Will you marry me?"

"What?" Mendelsohn's brass horns blare in my head.

"I am asking you to marry me."

My only option is to kiss Augustana, to kiss rather than speak, to keep her lips busy so she can't say another word. Lips locked, she pulls me toward the bedroom. Along the way, we lose our shirts, she loses her bra, I lose my pants. I'm pinned to the mattress, Augustana above me, straddling. My kisses are fake; my caresses perfunctory. She's naked, we're naked, she's bucking. Bells and dresses, aisles and altars fill my thoughts. Rings and oaths and clergy and guests and limousines and toasts and cake, too. I want none of it. Augustana's riding and saying, "We're gonna get married... married!"



I haven't said no yet, haven't stopped Augustana, and this is exactly what our relationship has been these last months. We keep marching forward, as though duty bound. We march because I don't stop Augustana and say, "Listen, Augustana. I don't want to march anymore, and I certainly don't want to march toward any altar." Why can't I bring myself to say it? Why am I so scared?

She's bouncing harder and faster, thumping against my pelvis, the mattress squealing. She's moaning and calling heaven, calling my name, and I am trapped, stuck beneath Augustana, unable to escape. She rides, powered by abandon; her eyelids flicker and her chest convulses. I close my eyes and a posse of hot cowgirls rides into the one-horse town in my head. Far off, I hear someone who sounds like Augustana say, "Let's have a baby!"

But I am surrounded by cowgirls. One has my keys; one is beanstalk tall; two have lassos and rope me; one wears a sheriff's star. And, at once, I can see my future: When Augustana demands hugs, I will embrace my sweet cowgirls. When she wants kisses, I will kiss my cowgirls, and when she wants to straddle me, I will be the steed between the legs of my denim-wearing cowgirls, and they will ride me across the prairie, clear to the horizon, even beyond. Like everyone else, we will marry and have a family and live unhappily, except when we can escape into our fantasies.

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It's July already, and I am leading Augustana into our apartment. We haven't been home in thirty-four hours, and when we bustle through the door, nothing feels better than to have our own space. Augustana walks gingerly and eases herself onto the couch. On the drive over from the hospital—a drive that took twice as long because I could not bring myself to take any

highways—I was planning my day: Wimbledon followed by a baseball double-header, some take-out, a bowl of nachos, and later my band of cowgirls. But then Augustana falls asleep on the couch watching a home decorating show, and I am left with our baby, Christopher Paul, cradled in my arms.

He fusses and my heart stops. I have never been so scared to hold something so small and precious. I try to remember where I put my phone, what the number to the hospital is. But Christopher Paul settles again, yawns, and sleeps, and for a long time I admire our child. In the light of his face I see my future and my past, one giving way to the other. My past has been filled with selfishness and self-indulgence. But it isn't until this moment—me alone with my boy—that the past begins to fade, and the future is just getting revved-up. A deep-seated part of my brain awakens, a genetic code that, until this moment, lay dormant, and I am overwhelmed with a new directive—to give everything I can to this child. This is my chance to do better, to teach him all the things I should have learned and am only now just beginning to understand—that I must give more and take less, that only the delusional can function within a fantasy, that a fantasy cannot cradle a child, and that the creation of life is considerably more terrific and awesome than escapism and avoidance.

Once Augustana feeds Christopher Paul, I burp him and change his diaper and walk him around his new home. I set up the crib we bought, and the next thing I know, it's well past dark. I have missed the games on TV, skipped dinner, and haven't hardly sat down. Weary legs are but a small concern.

After Augustana and our baby are asleep, my cowgirls come calling. They thunder into town on horseback, pistols popping, looking to round me up. Only now, I'm not interested.

Their horse and pony show does not thrill me nor do their tight shirts and skimpy denim. Their lassos fall short, and the spectacle they once were has become quite ordinary. They draw but are run out of town by a cry and a fuss. Christopher Paul is asking to be fed and changed and I am ready.

## Leaving

On Christmas Eve, Knoxville Airport was dead empty. Periodically, a recorded announcement regarding safe travel tips played over the public address system, and somewhere out of sight a cable news station reported and re-reported nonsense: the folly of last-minute shoppers, the current Dow averages, the slate of films opening today, and the pop diva defending her latest album even as fans snatched up copies by the thousands.

Gabe Pender threw himself into a seat, one with a direct view of Gate 10 and no view of planes taking off or landing. He wouldn't even glance out the large terminal windows because he didn't want to think about where he was. A month ago, when Gabe purchased the plane ticket, flying seemed inconsequential, an obvious travel choice, preferable to crawling along the highways in a rental car or loafing along rails by train. He hated travelling and the shorter the duration, the better. And if practically everyone else flew, why couldn't he? Flying had been an easy decision when he was at his apartment near the university, removed from the security checkpoint, the confusing terminal, the uncomfortable seats.

A custodian marched her long-handled dust pan from one waiting area to the next, catching scraps of paper, candy wrappers, and old luggage tags, and dumping them into her wheeled trash can. The muffled flare of salsa sizzled through her headphones as she ambled here and there in the terminal. Gabe remembered his own pair of headphones, stuffed into the small suitcase at his feet. He didn't need them now, not with his feet still on the ground, not with an hour till boarding. If he boarded—and if he needed musical distraction at all—it would be at takeoff, to forget takeoff.

Two years ago, a prospective employer had flown Gabe to Seattle. In mid-flight, Gabe suffered a severe panic attack, which stunned him, rolling out like a frigid wave from his brain to his limbs. He'd begun shaking, gasping almost. His saliva dried and his lips stuck to his teeth. Though this had never happened before, he didn't call the flight attendant for help. Bewildered but safely arrived, Gabe regrouped and charged on to the interview. He performed well, felt good about his chances of getting hired. A hiring committee member had asked, "What is your weakness?"

"I'm too content to suffer quietly."

After the interview, Gabe Pender had gotten on the return flight, despite his mind and body raging against it. Once in his seat, he tried to drug himself with a quartet of sleeping pills purchased at an airport gift shop. He waited and waited—through the close of the cabin door, the safety demonstration, the taxi to the runway—for the pills to work. He crunched two more pills in his back teeth, yet for the next five hours, all Gabe could do was sweat and shiver, and wait for the terrible, unstoppable panic to destroy him. Sleep could not overtake him; his body's alert system refused. However, once the plane had landed and the cabin door opened, Gabe pushed his way off, his seatback, like his shirt, drenched through. Then, in the terminal, the sleeping pills activated, and Gabe slept all afternoon on Knoxville Airport's floor. He awoke, swearing never to fly again.

Gabe was not offered the job in Seattle.

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Gabe did not want to think about the last time he was on a plane. In fact, he'd been practicing forgetting the past, as one might practice meditation or sobriety. The shrink Gabe

used to visit had named the problems: "You hold on to things too tightly for too long," and "You remember the bad and forget the good." Dr. Applewhite had said Gabe lived a life cluttered with worry.

The custodian smiled at Gabe as she loafed past, her teeth crooked, gapped, or gone. Compelled, Gabe smiled back then eyed the book in his lap: the *Odyssey*, a hardcover edition missing its dust jacket. Gabe had registered for a continuing education class at the university to start after the new year and wanted to get a head start on the World Literatures reading list. A class, he thought, would keep his brain occupied, give him something other than work at a mail-and-copy shop to think about. He read a few pages and a few pages more but tired of the characters, troubled by the constant references to lineage: Kaleb, son of Atreus; Hermes, daughter of Eurythēs; and Mentēs, son of Anchialus, chief of the Taphians. Gabe squirmed in his seat, wishing never to be known through his relatives. I am unique. My experiences are unique, he told himself.

A woman with the winged emblem of an airline company on her uniform led her roller bag down the concourse. She hid her age under dark eye-shadow and rosy blush and slipped through a security door using the pass card dangling around her neck.

Gabe forgot Seattle, but when it wouldn't stay forgotten, he squinched his eyes shut, reminded himself that old events were not related to new events—especially those that hadn't happened yet—just like ancestors had no effect on offspring. Each was independent of the other: Gabe, son of... who cares? This was not Seattle; Seattle was Seattle—and he'd survived Seattle, anyway—hence, this could never be Seattle, and since that was true, Seattle-Gabe could not be Knoxville-Gabe: Gabe was Gabe and could never again be Seattle-Gabe. Obviously, there were

similarities between the two—airport, gate, runway, plane, uncomfortable seats, luggage, Gabe, loads of nervousness creeping up his spine—but similar did not mean same.

Just because there was a plane and Gabe waiting to board it, that did not mean the result would be the same. Just because his mother had died, that did not mean.... But that *would* be the same. Gabe leaned down and pushed the *Odyssey* into the outer pocket of his suitcase and removed his journal. Dr. Applewhite had told Gabe that his thoughts were like knick-knacks and his head like a trunk, and, because he held onto his thoughts (the bad ones) too long, the trunk had gotten cluttered, dangerously so. The shrink had encouraged Gabe to unload his thoughts in a journal.

Gabe picked at the thick rubber band securing the journal as a few passengers entered the waiting area and sat. He watched a family of three, the little blonde child pulling a roller bag splashed with Disney characters in bright pinks and yellows. The child's parents dressed neatly, wearing leather shoes, pressed pants and shirts. Their hair expertly coiffed. Though breathing hard from the hurried walk to Gate 10, they did not appear nervous. Gabe followed the child with his eyes. She was excited and interested in air travel. "Daddy, which plane is ours?"

Someone slid into the seat beside Gabe, said, "That's a wicked cover."

Gabe followed the remark to a teenaged girl with a braid sweeping across her forehead and behind one ear. She pressed an unpolished fingernail to the journal. The cover itself, made from a faux hide, contained an ancient-looking map drawn as if by the hand of Columbus's chief cartographer. The map centered on Europe. West, across the sea called Mar Del Nort, only a brief coastal outline had been drawn on a continent labeled America Septentrionalis.

Gabe scouted for the girl's parents, expecting to see two squares in pastel polo shirts scowling in his direction. He saw no one looking his way.

"I'm Maddie."

Gabe, as though trying to shrug off the teen, shifted in his seat.

"What's your name?" she asked.

He told her his name and she shook his hand, saying, "Nice to meet you."

When Maddie smiled, her cheeks plumped and gleaming teeth showed between pink lips. Miniscule pimples dotted her chin. "I'm flying alone," Maddie said. "It's my first time."

"That's great," Gabe said dully. He sensed a sting; strangers, especially young girls, did not just start talking to a thirty-three-year-old loner. He proceeded cautiously. "My sister Bianca gave me this journal some years ago." The journal weighed as much as a full box of cereal; a pen marked Gabe's place among the tan, lined pages.

"It's as thick as a double-decker cheeseburger," Maddie said.

"I've been making entries for about two years and haven't even reached the midpoint."

From her carry-on, Maddie removed a simple pocket notebook dressed with a collage of stickers cramming the front and back covers—the logos of rock bands Gabe had never heard of. She asked, "What do you write about, 'cause I write about, like, everything. Whatever's bothering me, stuff like that."

"Me, too."

"Will you write about this? Will you write about us meeting, how a stranger named Maddie liked your journal?"

"I don't know."



Now, enough passengers filled the waiting area to create an audible buzz. Among them were retirees and vacationers, travelers heading somewhere to see the important people in their lives.

"I'm going to write about you," Maddie said, her grin widening. She told Gabe that New York City was her first stop, then she'd take another flight to St. Louis next week. "My grandparents, they don't get along, not since forever. You can put that in your journal, if you want."

The door to Gate 10 opened and arriving passengers filed out, trailing their roller bags behind. They looked suddenly revived, relieved to be out of the aircraft, back on land. As the passengers whizzed by, Maddie asked, "Do you ever just, like, read back through old entries and go: 'What was I thinking? I was so stupid then, scared for no reason'?"

"No."

At Gate 9, Maddie's New York City flight started to board. "Too bad we're not on the same plane," she said. "We could read each other's journals and laugh at ourselves." As Maddie moved to the other gate, she looked back. "Safe travels."

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The heavily made-up flight attendant Gabe had seen earlier settled behind the Gate 10 counter and, using the intercom, announced that the Sacramento flight would begin boarding. The passengers around Gabe gathered their belongings, readied their boarding passes, crowded forward. Some carried, or wore, inflatable neck pillows, other held magazines or smartphones, distractions for the flight.

Gabe checked his ticket: an aisle seat, toward the stern. A sparkle caught his eye; a tiny bead of sweat had pooled on his thumb. He smeared it back into his skin but another appeared, prickling forth, and now his heart started slamming against his chest. "Don't think," he reminded himself. "Relax," he reminded himself. Needing his own distraction, Gabe texted Bianca: "Leaving."

The flight attendant welcomed the first-class passengers aboard.

Gabe's phone vibrated with a reply from Bianca: "*Bon voyage.*" He tried to focus on Bianca's face, but it continually morphed into the face of their mother, dead less than a year from cancer. Until the end, his mother had sworn she was fine. In fact, she had done most of the talking that last time: "How's life in Knoxville?" "What's new at work?" "I aim to visit you one of these days. When's a good time?"

Gabe gripped the memory: His mother had not been fine. She had been scared of dying, sad and terrified to leave. He wished he'd said something: "Can't we get another second opinion?" "What are all these doctors doing, anyway?" "Can't they just cut that lump out of your chest?"

Gabe's mother had died alone, just one hour after that last conversation. She had waited for Gabe to leave.

"Zones Two and Three," the flight attendant called. Vacationers and business travelers in suits shuffled forward to present their tickets. Gabe Pender stood but did not move toward the boarding line.

"I'm just not going," he told himself. Bianca would have to understand; he had an illness whose symptoms cowered inside: anxiety, fear, bad memories, and a heap of worry. Irrational guilt, Dr. Applewhite would call this, sweeping his arm high. "Relax."

Gabe wasn't ready to die (more irrational guilt).

The line of passengers dwindled.

Gabe's thoughts persisted: non-refundable tickets; Bianca's supreme fury at his absence. Why hadn't he planned ahead? He couldn't back out now, not now. He would never make it to Sacramento, to the ceremony, in time, not even on a bullet train. He would be absent from the photos, miss the catered meal afterward. He'd disappoint everyone. What kind of example would he be to his niece? His sweaty hands worked like jaws, chewing the boarding pass. Somehow, he lurched on numb legs to the back of the line.

His mother must have experienced tremendous worry, too. She had been mad when the cancer arrived, vowed to crush it and did. But when it returned, she told no one. She'd lost twenty then thirty pounds and could no longer go to work. Her back had kept her awake every night. Then her breathing soured and she had to sleep sitting up. When she coughed, veins lined her face. Thick mucus choked her.

Gabe let a family of late-comers go ahead of him. He knelt beside his suitcase, opening pockets, rifling through them, repeating a prayer. He pushed aside his headphones, dug into the corners of each pocket until, finally, he pulled free a loop of cheap plastic Rosary Beads. They had been one of many pairs hanging from his mother's hospital bed.

All other passengers had boarded. Gabe clenched the beads, asked to forget.

"Sir?" the flight attendant called. "Are you on this flight?"

Gabe said nothing and didn't budge. His ticket was a soggy, wrinkled leaf unwinding on the floor.

Could it be, Gabe wondered, that a person, having lived a long life, felt ready to die? His mother had raised two children virtually by herself; they turned out to be hard workers and decent people, self-sufficient and urbane. Perhaps his mother had known this and, content, was ready, to reunite with relatives and friends, to see her own parents: Mom, daughter of Carl and Sue.

"Sir, if you're getting on this flight, the time is now."

His knees bent, his feet rose and planted, each leg catching his weight. The air around Gabe Pender moved; he did not retreat but advanced. He relinquished the mangled boarding pass; the flight attendant smoothed it against the countertop and scanned it.

Gabe looked across to Gate 9 and spotted Maddie. She waved her arm overhead, in her hand a sticker-covered journal.

"Sir," the flight attendant said, handing back the creased ticket. "It's time, sir."

"I'm ready." Gabe, before entering the jet bridge, waved to Maddie.

"Enjoy your trip, sir."

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The light in the jet bridge came from electric bulbs cased in thick plastic. Gabe's entire body turned cold. The plane waited at the end of the long tunnel. A flight attendant welcomed Gabe aboard and, hunching low, he weaseled his way through the cabin to his seat.

He wanted to get off the plane or wanted someone to knock him unconscious. This time he'd packed Dramamine tablets and chewed them two at a time. The vaguely orange flavor

reminded him of children's vitamins. The cabin door shut and Gabe's chest constricted. His breathing labored; his stomach knotted. He swung his headphones over his ears and hit play, hoping the songs would transport him. Gabe shut his eyes rather than watch the safety demonstration.

Gabe wanted to get off the flight. He was going to be sick, to die, if he wasn't allowed to leave. But he told himself lies: that he was not on a plane, that his heart was not galloping, that this was not like Seattle, that he was not panicking.

The plane jerked once before rolling back from the gate and turning toward the runway. Gabe pictured himself in a dark, safe womb, but the image crumbled. He cranked the music louder and opened his journal, leafing back several pages, through months, years. He skimmed passages about Bianca first announcing her pregnancy, then giving birth, then asking Gabe to come to Sacramento and serve as godfather. He read about his mother's funeral, how she was no longer suffering in the ICU, no longer choking on mucus. And last he read about waking in Knoxville Airport, how he swore he'd never fly again because he didn't want to die.

"What was I thinking?" Gabe said to himself. "I was so stupid then, scared for no reason." The plane turned; the turbines surged louder and louder, and Gabe was knocked back in his seat. The plane tilted as the forewheel leaped off the runway. And in his lap, Gabe found his journal already opened to a new page, the pen already in hand, the first line already written: "This strange girl named Maddie said she liked my journal." He continued to write, through the take-off, through the cruising altitude, through the drink service. It was in the act of writing that Gabe felt relief, that, on the page, he could pour out his anxiety in blue ink and confine it in lines and margins. He was on his way to becoming a godfather, entrusted to the care of his niece, and

he would not be stopped. The more he wrote the more confident he felt. He controlled the words on the page, could scratch out words he didn't like, could change fear for courage, despair for hope, leaving for arriving. Having written several pages, his hand throbbing from use, Gabe closed the journal, held it in his lap, and eagerly awaited his arrival.

For the first time he raised his head, observed the cabin and the seated passengers. What were their destinations, their reasons for flying? Gabe considered Seattle and realized that, as bad as that trip had been, he had survived just like he would survive this trip and the next. Would there be others? The question surprised him. Of course, there would be other flights. There would be plenty, he knew. By this time tomorrow, Gabe would be godfather to his niece, and he promised himself he'd be a tangible part of her life. Yes, he would fly again and quite regularly, and for the first time, the thought of flying did not paralyze his heart. Instead, Gabe re-opened his journal, turned to a new page, and wrote out a plan for travel, and when this was done, he stretched in his seat, started a conversation with his row-mate, and prepared for landing.

## Clones

With a little dickering, I got Einstein's tooth for \$72. The doc who had taken Einstein's brain before cremation, also took a tooth, and that tooth ended up in the hands of an odd-artifacts collector known only as Lance. If I hadn't been so eager, I could have gotten it for under \$60.

Eggy cost me more.

Eggy wanted a *Miami Vice* yacht, a vessel with tinted glass and thick carpet and air conditioning, a 100-watt sound system, a Jacuzzi and a bar, a master suite and satellite TV, plus a motor with giddy-up for jaunts to Key West. Eggy wanted an out-of-his-league woman, as well, Russian, accented, young but not a girl, one with runway-model legs and super-high high heels. Katya had to be flown over. I saved a little by going Ukrainian; Eggy would never know the difference.

After Katya escorted Eggy around town for a while, Eggy worked his magic on Einstein's tooth. Eggy was tops—or as close to tops as such illegal operations could buy—when it came to cloning. His résumé included a dozen cloned sheep, four cloned donkeys and a nestful of cloned rats. Eggy was part of the international team that—under cloak of secrecy—cloned a chimpanzee, our closest relative, genetically speaking.

"Can they clone *people*?" I had asked Eggy.

"The practice is already perfected," he said, "in theory, anyway. Something this revolutionary takes the right kind of benefactor, someone with the will and the means to subvert the law." Eggy knew about my connections to the black market. I could get the samples he needed.

Eggy called me six weeks later and said, "Al is ready to go." We rendezvoused at the abandoned piers on the southern tip of the city, just two average cars parking at what used to be a Navy shiphouse, then a mall, then nothing, left to rot and topple over. Not even the junkies got juiced there.

Eggy was in a good mood and that put me at ease, somewhat. If I didn't need Eggy, I'd never look twice at him. He always had a runny nose, was always sniffing, said it was allergies. I begrudgingly shook his hand. Eggy said, "Sorry, I'm late. But I'm in love with Katya. She's a dream. These Russian women.... American women are stone. Russians are amenable." Eggy had already asked Katya to move in with him. "She's at my place all the time, anyway."

Al was sitting in the passenger seat of Eggy's Subaru, and I couldn't wait to get my hands on him, to look at him up close, and I didn't want to be seen with Eggy any longer than necessary.

"I can see myself marrying this girl," Eggy said. He assumed I had stopped paying Katya to hang around. Eggy promised that Al was ready to go, no waiting for an infant Einstein to grow out of diapers or finish puberty. "He was made middle-aged. Oh, you didn't think we knew how to speed up cell division? You have no idea what we're capable of. We're learning new tricks every day. If you've seen it in a sci-fi flick, we've probably done it."

I followed Eggy to his car. "Hey, Al," Eggy called. "I want you to meet someone."

Albert Einstein opened the door and climbed out, his hair a shocked splatter of gray and white, his mustache hiding his upper lip.

"It's amazing, amazing," I said. He was the Einstein I knew from photos. He was exactly what I had ordered.



Eggy introduced us. "Al, this is Pops. Pops, this is Albert Einstein."

He was taller than I expected, and he shook my hand like anyone else would. "It's a pleasure to meet you," Einstein said. "Where are we?"

"Eggy," I said, "he doesn't sound German."

"Of course not. He's been around me and the other eggheads his whole short existence. But if you want to teach him German, it'll be cake. He has a genetic aptitude for the German language."

"Amazing, amazing."

Eggy yanked a piece of luggage from his Subaru's trunk and walked it over to my car and told Al goodbye.

Into Eggy's hand I dropped a key to a cabin in the Poconos. Eggy couldn't wait to invite Katya for a romantic weekend getaway. For an extra grand, she'd go anywhere I told her to go. Eggy deserved a brief, stimulating vacation. He'd done good.

Einstein was polite. He sat in the passenger seat, hands folded in his lap, seatbelt fastened, observing his surroundings: the car's interior, the crumbling pier, me. Einstein was filling that super brain of his, revving the motor. Perhaps he'd invent something before we got back to my place, something I could patent and monopolize. Einstein was worth Eggy and the yacht and Katya and the cabin.

Wealth was one thing but renown was something else. My name was going to appear in history books and journals like the ones Eggy read. They would make documentaries about my life, and cities would commission bronze statues of my likeness. I'd be featured prominently alongside other revolutionaries and actually become a legend in my own time.

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Einstein ate only a few bites of the PB & J I made for him. I showed him my laptop. He didn't say a word. I turned it on, jumped on the Internet, and gave him a quick tour. He didn't say a word. I showed him how to navigate, and as he started surfing, I eked out of the room to let the genius absorb. I felt like calling the *American Journal of Physics*, the *Physical Review*, or the *Today Show*—but it was too soon.

Einstein found me in the kitchen.

"What?" I asked. "Don't you like surfing the 'Net?"

Einstein rubbed his eyes. "Gives me a headache."

"Well, I was going to show you this later but...." I led him into the basement. "Your very own lab, Al." Well-lighted and heated, the lab had enough space to build a long-range rocket. A large chalkboard on wheels stood along the wall. Desks and tables, pencils and notepads, spectrometers and electromagnets waited for use. "All for you, Al, to create, to experiment, to theorize, to expound."

I showed him a stack of books I had been collecting—*A Brief History of Time*, *Feynman Lectures in Physics (Vols. I-III)*, *The Quantum Universe*, *Quantum Theory of Optical Coherence*. His mustache ruffled in what I took to be a happy way. I started to leave, to let the genius work undisturbed.

"Where are you going?" Einstein asked.

"I want to give you peace and privacy in which to work."

Einstein looked at me curiously. "Work on what?"

"I don't know. Maybe physics. Maybe  $E=MC^2$ ."

"What's that?" he asked, his mustache steady.

"Don't play with me, Al. You know  $E=MC^2$ ."

But he didn't know, so I walked over to the board and wrote out the formula in white chalk.

"Very interesting," he said. "But what can I do with that?"

"I don't know, Al. You're the genius."

I couldn't help scolding Einstein. My investments always promised a healthy return.

Einstein tried to follow me out of the basement. "No, Al! You stay here. Read a book. Theorize, for Pete's sake!" He gave me his best sad-boy look as I closed the door, locking him in.

I called Eggy's phone. The connection was spotty. "Can you hear me, Eggy?" I wanted to make sure there was no confusion because I aimed to castigate him. His voice cut in and out.

"Es, I can ear you."

"You made me an Einstein that doesn't know jack-squat about physics or relativity or energy. What the hell! What am I supposed to do with him?"

"You wanted Stein; I ot you an exact genetic copy of the an."

"He's worthless! What good is a dumb Albert Einstein?"

"You can each him. Et im some books or something. He has a genetic aptitude for math and science."

"Am I supposed to be his teacher now? I was hoping he'd invent some new theory that would make history and put me at the center of it." I stopped myself from threatening Eggy's life because Al Green was playing in the background. "Where are you, Eggy?"

"Poconos. With Katya. I'll be in the lab on Monday. We'll alk then. I have a surprise for you." Before I could say I hated surprises, the cell signal vanished, and I couldn't get Eggy back on the line. Perhaps Eggy was getting too comfortable living the good life. I seriously considered how easy it would be to get rid of him, to take Katya from him, to bound him and pitch him into the river alongside the Navy shiphouse. Who would miss a knuckle-head geneticist?

Einstein tapped on the basement door, asked to be fed. I told him to work. He begged for a glass of water at least.

"Show me a new theory, Al, and I'll give you all the water you can drink."

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The Navy shiphouse looked the same as always, abandoned, a blight along the river, a sore left to fester. When Eggy got out of his car, I strangled him. I berated him about Einstein, said I should take back the yacht, the cabin, and send Katya back to Ukraine. His face turned red in my gloved hands, yet he managed one word that saved his life: "King."

I eased up. "What?"

He needed a moment to breathe again. "Did you say, 'Ukraine'?"

"Focus, Eggy. Who's the dark-haired guy in your car?"

Eggy whistled to his passenger, and Elvis Presley strode to us, guitar in hand. He was dressed in jeans and cowboy boots, a white undershirt. This was the young and fit Elvis, the pre-drugs, hound dog, rock-and-roller. His lip lifted. "Howdy, partner," he said to me and snapped and pointed.

Eggy said, "You know, the thing about science is it's always improving on itself. We are always tinkering."

"Does Elvis play guitar?" I felt like I was about to buy shoddy stocks.

"Show him, King."

Elvis slung the acoustic over his freshly greased coif and set his hips. As his guitar pick hovered, ready for a massive downstroke, my heart crammed my throat: This is The King! Elvis ripped through "Jailhouse Rock" and "Blue Suede Shoes." I couldn't believe what I was hearing, definitely not some imitator. I had gone all wrong with Einstein, thinking a brainiac could make me famous. Now that I saw The King, I knew that starting with a celebrity would make stardom that much easier. Eggy had redeemed himself.

Eggy said, "It took a little tweaking of the gene sequence, but The King has the entire Elvis catalog memorized. You're going to be rich."

"I'm already rich." But I wanted more.

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The woman at Sony Records, Kandy Coulé was her name, broke out in red hives when she saw The King in her office. "I've seen some impersonators, let me tell you. I lived in Vegas for six years, so I know a good Elvis when I see one." She asked The King who his surgeon was, where he bought that nose, who gave him those lips. Elvis idly plucked a guitar string.

"He knows all the songs," I told her, "and he sounds even better than the digitally remastered collection."

When I winked at The King, he strapped on the guitar, swiveled his hips, and lifted that lip. The guitar pick paused dramatically and fired. The King—such a showman—seduced Kandy

with "Love Me Tender" and leveled her with "Can't Help Falling in Love." She slouched in her leather desk chair like a wet towel. Her brow glistened. "Amazing, amazing," she managed. "If I wasn't happily re-married...."

I stepped between Kandy and The King. "As his manager," I said, "we are prepared to give Sony first, exclusive negotiating rights. We want to be part of the Sony family." I invited her to make an opening offer.

"Huh? What?" Kandy Coulé came out of her lullaby. "What are we negotiating?"

"We're prepared to sign a contract today," I assured her.

Kandy sat up, her features hardened. "He sings great, plays great, and my goodness does he look great, but on the Strip, he's a dime a dozen. Granted not many play the young Elvis but...."

But this is the *real* Elvis, I nearly blurted.

"We've heard these songs before," Kandy said. "We've seen this act before, and we've already bought every reissued album. Now, if you can give me something new...."

"New? This is *The King!* Songs swim in his blood. Play her one, partner."

Elvis started to play "All Shook Up."

"Play something new," I said, and Elvis looked at me, jerked his head so that a curl of hair fell between his eyebrows. I pulled him aside. "Play a song we haven't head. Something new."

He eyed the fretboard, urged his hand to make a move. "I don't know any songs that aren't songs I already know."

"What? Can't you wing it? Can't you write something right now? What about the songs swimming in your blood?"

"Maybe they're in my blood, but they sure ain't swimming."

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On the ride back to the airport, I let Elvis have it: "You embarrassed yourself, me, us. You're Elvis frickin' Presley, and you can't come up with one of your own songs! Kandy loved you. We could have a deal right now. We could be famous!"

The King said that the real Elvis didn't write many of those songs we think of as his.

"Shut up! You *are* the real Elvis."

At the stopover in Dallas, I headed to Applebee's for a quick meal. The King said he wasn't hungry. After I finished and paid, I couldn't find The King anywhere, so I flagged down an airport security guard.

"What's your friend look like," the guard asked.

"I told you. He looks like the young Elvis, pre-sequin jumpsuit, carrying a guitar."

The guard radioed the description, adding, "No, this is not a joke; no, this is not a drill."

An hour later, the guard, with a smirk he couldn't hide, told me a guy fitting The King's description boarded a bus headed toward Memphis. I had to run to catch my own flight and let The King go.

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When I got home, finally, all I wanted to do was shower and change, lie in bed with a bowl of cookie dough ice cream and watch *Cops*, only the ice cream was gone and a stupid reality show about tattoos was on. After a ten-and-a-half-hour nap, I rose and wandered the

house, trying to decide how to repair my frayed life and get famous. I realized I'd been hurting myself by keeping my cloning operation a secret. Why *couldn't* I include the media? The hype would make people pay attention and curiosity would get them to stay tuned in. But first I called Lance to see if he had any more teeth for sale.

Elvis had been a mistake. I had let personal glory cloud my judgment; I had let the idea of a thousand screaming girls with wads of cash in hand influence me. Even if Elvis could write his own songs, there was no guarantee he could make it big in the current music scene—not with Auto-Tune and a million American Idols, and bands that don't know how to play any instruments. The music industry was too slick, too phony.

And Einstein was a mistake because—Einstein! I forgot that I had locked him in the basement four days ago.

The door was still locked solid and a peculiar odor wafted from behind it. A white fold of paper sat in the slit beneath the door. I unfolded it and stood.

"Dear, sir," Einstein wrote. "I do not deserve to be treated like this. I am a human being and I have rights. Please, let me go. I'm so hungry! and thirsty! that if I don't do something drastic quick, I won't survive. I hold you responsible for this. Liberate me!" Einstein signed his letter "with most sincere respect."

I held my breath when I opened the door and peeked inside, afraid of what I might see when I reached the bottom of the stairs. I flicked on the lights and made my way down. The smell brought tears to my eyes and gave me the sniffles. But there was no Einstein, no corpse. Instead, a chemistry book sat open to the chapter on caustic substances, and the locks on the tiny basement windows had been eroded, turned to liquid, and Einstein had shimmied to freedom.



Within a day, I had lost Einstein and The King.

What a waste!

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Eggy called me for two reasons: He got the tooth I sent him, and he proposed to Katya at the Poconos cabin. She didn't say no, and I thought, now I can stop paying her bill. She was Eggy's expense now.

Some weeks later, Eggy and I met again at the pier. Two people sat in his car.

"I have someone I'd like you to meet. I think you'll be very pleased. She turned out better than I could have hoped. It's all in the genes," Eggy joked.

Katya reluctantly got out of the car and strode like a runway model to us. Her long legs poured out of a short skirt. She wore sky-high heels and metallic eye shadow, her hair teased. Katya was flat-out hot, but not gorgeous. Up close, she looked used, much older than twenty-four.

"Tell him the news," Eggy said to Katya.

"That guy in there," she pointed at the car, "is a sweetheart."

"No. The news about us." Eggy grabbed Katya's hand to hold.

Katya wiggled the chunky diamond on her finger. "We're married!"

Eggy said, "Best move I ever made. I can't wait until we start having babies!"

"Congratulations," I said, not meaning it. "But where's my guy?"

Eggy called out. "Hey, Johnny!"

A man in a suit, hair parted to the side, stepped out of the Subaru. Eggy introduced me to John F. Kennedy and we shook hands. His eyes stuck to Katya.

"Does he know who he is?" I asked Eggy. "Does he know the history?"

"He knows everything. A tweak of some key brain-memory cells was all it took. We also filled him with the history since 1963." Eggy made a finger-gun and pointed it at his skull.

I handed over two first-class tickets to Hawaii. Katya took the tickets. "I've never been to Hawaii!" She gave a quick wink to JFK and headed back to the car.

Eggy followed her but called back to me. "What ever happened to Al and The King?"

"They didn't work out." And I thought, if this JFK-character doesn't work out, Katya's going to become the fastest widow in history.

Eggy waved at me. "I'll send you a postcard from Maui."

When I looked at JFK, he had a hand on his chin. He straightened. "They seem like good people. Katya's a darling."

I told JFK to get in the car. He looked like President Kennedy, talked and gestured like him, had the same charisma. He wanted to change the world as we knew it.

"What do you know about the world?" I asked. "You are only weeks' old."

"They gave me a pair of history textbooks to read at the lab. I got the gist. How much could have changed? Better dead than red. Am I right?"

"Well..." I told him that we were friends with Vietnam now and Cuba. "Yeah, the Vietnamese make our clothes and Cuba is the latest vacation hotspot, and our relationship with China is improving."

JFK looked sick. "Please tell me we still hate the Soviets."

"We do, and they're not too happy with us, either. The Cold War never really ended." I could see his mind working, plotting, scheming. He understood that politics was more about posturing and perception than anything.

"As long as the American people have a villain...." He put a hand on my shoulder. "They'll need a hero."

I sent a release to the media.

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When the calls started and news reporters showed up at the house, they asked the same question and I gave the same answer. "No, he is not the former president brought back to life. He is not some clone manufactured in some lab. That's unethical and illegal. His name is John Francis Kennedy." I told the media JFK would run for president because he believed America could regain its place as the greatest nation on Earth. The blow-hard politicians had been mucking around in our nation's capital for too long. America was falling behind. JFK played well on TV; the ladies of *The View* loved him, Oprah, too. He appeared on *Good Morning, America* with expensive chocolates for the hosts. Jimmy Kimmel thought JFK was the coolest. The *Times* and the *Washington Post* endorsed JFK and the primary was a cinch. Each evening, JFK excused himself and retired to the study. There, behind the closed door, he sipped malted Scotch and read book after book about his genetic twin John Fitzgerald Kennedy.

One night I joined him in the study for a drink and JFK thanked me. "Someday, I'd like very much to return the favor."

"What do you mean?"

"If you die, I'd like to clone you."

"Hush! Don't say the C-word. You never know who could be listening. And who's talking about death anyway?"

JFK was already returning the favor. As his campaign manager and confidant, my name was in the news as much as his and, after victory, he'd put me in his cabinet, though I wouldn't object to being named ambassador to the Bahamas. I would be right alongside JFK making and molding the direction of the country and the world, shaping history. We would cement our names in the heart of the nation. Maybe I could get a holiday in my honor and a monument near the Capitol.

JFK leaned forward in his chair, slid his tumbler onto the table, and said, "I don't think Oswald acted alone."

"What?" My tongue went limp in my mouth.

"I don't have any proof, just a feeling, a hunch in every nucleus of every cell in me, as if my genes know."

By the time I got Eggy's Maui postcard, he was back at the Poconos cabin, enjoying married life. I didn't pay much attention to Eggy anymore; the campaign took all of my time. And who needed him? I couldn't allow myself to be linked to such an unethical runt. He finally got my clone right, so our dealings were done.

JFK left the house for fundraisers and rallies, where huge, enthusiastic crowds chanted his name. In the evenings, JFK snuck away to practice his speeches. He spent hours, he said, in a rented motel room, rehearsing, trying to capture the perfect pitch, cadence, and tone to hammer home his messages of change and rebirth.

A week before the general election, with JFK more than ten points ahead in the polls, I got a call from a reporter who told me he had evidence, lurid and undeniable, of JFK and some married woman. I told him to take his piss-poor attempt at blackmail and shove it.

When JFK returned from speech practice at the motel, I asked him how it went. He told me he had crafted a speech that would titillate and inspire. "We're going to win this election," he promised.

I asked JFK if he was really at the motel.

"Yes."

"And were you really working on your speech?"

"Yes."

But that was not true. The truth was that JFK had been gallivanting with a married woman, several actually. I sent JFK to bed immediately and without his glass of Scotch, and ordered him to keep his pants on until after the election.

The day before the election, we scheduled a rally in the city; the governor and mayor would attend along with thousands of sign-waving, T-shirt-wearing JFK supporters. It would be a great photo-op. JFK walloped the crowd with a speech that could energize even the most disaffected and apathetic.

Later, when we returned to my place and I switched on the TV expecting a bump in poll numbers, I found a different story. All the major media outlets, even those who favored us, carried versions of the same damning headline: *Scandal!* The *Times*, the *Post*, all of them ran the same photos of JFK and claimed that he was sleeping with married women, plying them with Scotch, nibbling on their earlobes. The media even had audio of JFK offering governmental

favors in exchange for sexual favors. I put out a stock release calling into question the legitimacy of the reports, and behind the scenes, I offered money to make the story go away. But not even I had enough cash, and by election day, JFK was trounced, hands down.

I started to blame JFK, thought of all the ways I could hurt him, but, actually, this was Eggy's fault. Again, Eggy let me down.

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We met at the shiphouse, JFK at my side.

Eggy, his face red, his eyes wet, said, "She left me," his voice cracking. "Katya's gone! Before she left, she told me she slept with JFK and when I asked why, she said she didn't love me. She wasn't even Russian!"

"Well, it's not JFK's fault," I started to say, but Eggy reached an arm back, gesturing to his car. Out stepped Katya, only she wasn't as tall as I remembered, wasn't as voluptuous either. She wore the usual tight dress, but now a belly protruded. Her teeth were crooked, her hair frizzed, her flesh wrinkled.

"Katya?" I said, confused.

"Not quite," Eggy said, tears bubbling from his eyes. "I simply cannot get the sequencing right. I tried a million times, but how do you clone true love and immaculate beauty?"

"Well whose fault is that, Eggy?" I said. "You created these things. It's your fault. You cost me the genius of Einstein, the fame of The King, and the power of JFK. Do you know why you lost Katya? You lost her because I stopped paying her to kiss your sniveling rat face." I told JFK to get the nine iron from my trunk. I was going to pulverize Eggy and dump him in the cold river. "Move, JFK!" I hollered, but he only stared at me.

Eggy made a gesture and JFK nodded, took off his suit coat and slowly rolled up his sleeves. Eggy signaled to his car again and this time Einstein and The King emerged. "Do you hear that, gang? Pops says this is my fault, that *you* are my fault, that you are *mistakes*." Einstein unfolded a pocket knife and The King held his guitar like a club. "But what he never understood was that all this time I had the power and the genius, and once you are gone, Pops, I will tell the media about my clones, and I will have the fame, too." Eggy's proclamation echoed against the rusted rooftop.

I promised Eggy I could get the real Katya back with one phone call. I'd pay her so much that she would love Eggy forever. "This is all a misunderstanding," I said, but Eggy wasn't listening. I threw myself at Eggy, but never reached him. The clones captured me and taped my mouth shut.

"Take care of this fool," Eggy ordered.

The King whacked me with his guitar and blood gushed down my face. I went down hard, dazed. While JFK taped my wrists and ankles, Einstein collected a sample of my blood.

"Hey, gang, get rid of this trash." Eggy smiled.

JFK and The King carried me toward the river's edge. I begged, offered any amount of money, promised ten Katyas, anything, but Eggy wasn't moved. His attention was on my blood sample in his hands. "I don't need you anymore, Pops. I can do better than you."

## So I Go to Church

So I go to church, which I never do, and this guy comes into my pew. He comes in about forty minutes late, just when the mass is in its final turn, and he's crowding me, crowding me in this side-aisle pew. And he's got a bicycle helmet with him and a satchel that he lets fall loudly on the pew, and he's huffing and puffing. The guy has on cargo shorts—highly inappropriate for church—and this green-and-orange, checkered dress shirt. Again, inappropriate because first, who would checker green and orange, and second who would buy a green-and-orange checkered dress shirt?

The guy's a little short and I'm a little tall and we must look like brothers standing next to each other, me being the older brother, him being the younger. And he's breathing heavily and wiping sweat away from his forehead and into his hair, which he's combing flat with his fingers.

But I'm doing the nice thing and ignoring him. I don't want to make him feel worse for showing up so late and breathing heavily and sweating and wearing shorts.

Then a part of the mass comes where everyone prays a prayer, and this guy next to me puts out his hand for me to take it, and I'm obliged because that's what everyone else is doing. I lay my hand in his and hold it and the prayer, which I don't even know the words to, goes on. It doesn't matter that I don't know the prayer because this guy's hand is distracting me. He has a small hand of course. What would you expect from a short guy? And it's cold, like he stuck his hand into an ice chest before he invited me to hold it, and worse, it's smooth. Men with smooth hands, that's disconcerting. I hate to think about how he keeps his hands so smooth. Probably lotion. I have never bought lotion in my life. Never will.



But I'm obliged and doing my good deed for the week and mumbling along to the prayer I don't know, and thinking about how I'm holding his hand too tightly. He's just a short guy after all, and more importantly, I don't want him thinking that I'm so eager to hold a stranger's hand that I have to grip it like I am. But if I ease up, he'll notice and probably think that I'm not so Christian with the love thy neighbor, and aren't we all brothers anyway? And what will the people around us think of me for dropping this guy's hand, for moving away slightly, for scowling? So I keep the grip I have, and finally the prayer is over, and I can have my hand back, and I wipe my hand on the back of my pants, but make it look like I was checking on my wallet. I don't think anyone from the congregation notices.

The mass ends and the pews clear out and the short guy leaves, and I stay and kneel down to do some talking to The Man Upstairs. I have some questions for Him, like "Why did you give my mom lung cancer?" and "How long before you'll let me get out from under this funk?" "And how is it that I always want to be alone and yet hate to be alone?"

I shut my eyes as I'm doing this and fold my hands very tightly and listen very closely but don't hear anything. And I open my eyes because I'm getting tired of the darkness there. The priest and deacon come back into the church to shut out the lights, tidy the altar, and I make sure they see me. I'm not one of those heathens who can't wait for the mass to end so they can get back on their couches and watch the Titans play the Panthers. I dip my head, more penitent, more remorseful than anyone. When the clergy are out of sight, I raise my head again.

At the front-side of the altar, the woman who was sitting in front of me is lighting a candle. I met her—though I can't remember her name or even if she told me her name—about four weeks ago. She was with her husband.

Today, she is lighting a candle for him, I suspect. I remember him coughing as he told me he and his wife were from Syracuse, moved down here about fifteen years ago and will never go back to Yankeeland. He probably has cancer too. Everyone has cancer; it's the only thing people are dying from these days, if they're not getting done in by accidents. Accidents will always get people. Been happening since the beginning of time, you know, hit by a car, struck by lightning, a slip and a fall. That's why you always have to be in good graces, 'cause you never know when your turn will come, and you don't know if Peter will find your name in his book.

The woman lights the candle and kneels before it, hoping the fire will get the Big Man's attention, get Him to look her husband's way and *poof* the specks of cancer in his trachea or larynx into oblivion. Does she get any answers? That's another question I pose to the Big Man and don't get a reply. Does she also see only darkness when she closes her eyes? I should light my own memorial candle, maybe two, and make a performance of adding my donation to the collection box. I don't want anyone thinking I'm cheating God.

I restart my prayers, think of everyone I know and love—there aren't many—and ask Him to, you know, watch over and protect, keep safe, keep well, keep happy, and I bounce up, not waiting for a reply. The church is practically empty now, and I'm tired and hungry and kicking myself for not having gone to the later mass.

Despite it all, I come out of the pew not feeling so rotten. I made it through another week. I haven't killed anybody, haven't been in any fights, haven't started drinking, haven't quit my stinking job. Those are accomplishments I can celebrate. That's my feeling, a subdued celebration for making it to thirty-seven without any major fuck-ups, without a record, without

debt. That's better than most people. At the same time, suffering feels good, part of the Christian duty, and that thought brightens my mood.

The holy water I dip my fingertips into is cold and colder when I touch it to my forehead and leave damp spots on my chest and shoulders. I'll walk home slowly, I decide, in order to enjoy the sunny day. What's the rush, anyway? I have no one waiting for me at my apartment down the hill, don't even have a hamster or goldfish. Maybe I'll stop at a park or pause under a berry tree and cup the red fruit in my palm and pretend like I know something about horticulture and lifecycles and the symbolism of the seasons.

As I come into the foyer, who almost runs right into me but the short guy. He follows me out the church door, which I kindly hold for him, and down the ivory steps. I don't like him trailing me so closely. Clearly, he has no idea what it means to be Christian.

"Hey, what's your name?" he says kind of meanly, like he hasn't talked to anyone in a while.

I turn slowly, thinking that maybe he's addressing someone else. He's not. I could return his meanness, but so fresh from church, I, instead, stay quiet.

"I'm Michael," the short guy says. We shake. Haven't I held this guy's hand enough for one day? Now that I'm facing him in the light of day, he does kind of look like the younger brother I don't have. Our eyes are the same, our jawlines. But he really doesn't seem very pious, not with those raggy clothes and the lines between his eyebrows that make him look upset.

I tell him my name, and he says, "Can I give you something, Edgar?" And he's already reaching into his pants, and I'm thinking, we just left church. In fact, we're still on church

property and this short guy's going to sin right in front of me. Sin *against* me. "Can I give you something, Edgar?"

"I guess it depends on what you're going to give me?" It's a joke and not a joke, said in a way that Michael can interpret however he wants. The fact is you can't trust people these days, even when they follow you out of church.

"It's just paper," he says, and his wallet is already open and he's pulling out a business card with his name on one side and the name of his business on the other side. His slogan is "The city's only bicycle courier."

This whole time we keep walking and now I find myself next to Michael's bicycle. It's a taped up, rusty piece of shit chained to a stop sign on the corner. Who would steal it? Except as a joke, maybe.

"This is my ride," he says at the same time I say, "This must be your ride."

He says, "I did the same thing in New York and I'm trying to get it going down here."

I tell him that's great, wish him luck, and turn his business card over and over in my hand. The truth is I don't care about his bike-courier business. I don't care about this person I don't even know, and if he doesn't move along pretty soon, I might show him how much I don't care. I have been in plenty of fights before.

"It's tough going," Michael says, unlocking his wheels. "Most people don't want bicycle couriers when car couriers are available, and these hills around here are murder. New York doesn't have hills like these."

Now that I've been looking at him for a while, he's older and uglier than I first thought, or maybe he's just weather-beaten, been out in the elements so long they've wrinkled and hardened his face. Poor bastard.

To get rid of him, I wish him well and tell him to have a good week and keep my feet moving. The conversation has gone on long enough, and I just hate when it gets awkward. I'll probably never see him again. He doesn't look like the church-going type. If he says something else, I ignore it.

I take the long way home, through downtown, even though most of the shops are closed. The weather is what you want it to be every day of the year, warm but cool, sunny and breezy. Perfect fall.

I pass a craft store with the lights out and remind myself to buy something for my mom and have it shipped north. I wonder if I moved here just to get away from her, to watch her slow demise from a blurry distance. I pass the theatre but don't recognize the title on the marquee. The bums in the park look relaxed, but I'm annoyed that they're hogging the benches. And who rides up from behind me? Michael skids to a stop at my feet. He's smiling, breathing heavily, calls me Edgar like we've known each other since birth. "Fancy running into you here," he says in a joking way. I wonder if he's been following me the whole time and feel a rage that no church-going Sunday could dispel. "What I was thinking," Michael says, coming off his bike seat, planting his feet on the sidewalk. "What would you think about joining me?"

A good Christian smiles and offers pleasantries but inside just wants the annoyances of the world to go away. If Michael can't take a hint, maybe I'll kick him and his crappy bike to the ground. As tough as it's been watching my mother die from three states away, I have no room in

my life for new friends, for distractions. My penance is the malaise that surrounds me, the anger that burns within, and Michael isn't helping the situation one bit.

"What do you say we become partners?" Michael says. "Do you know how to ride a bike?"

I am not sure if I am offended more by the first question or the second. Either way, I tell him I have a job. In three months most, the short guy's business will fail. No way do I want to partake in a catastrophe about to happen. It takes several more no's before Michael stops begging. "I'm going to go now," I say and back away.

"Can I give you a ride at least? You can sit on the handle bars. It'll be fun."

"Listen," I say, feeling my face go hot, then white-cold. "Take your bike and shove it. What part of get lost are you having trouble with? I don't want to be your buddy or your business partner. A courier? Here? You can't compete with cars. Come on." It's mean but effective, and if Michael tries a hang-dog look, I don't see it.

Out of the park, I pass a sidewalk café, grab an iced coffee, and come to a bookstore. Hardcover stands in a display in the big window. The place, because it's dark and closed, looks magical, like you could pick up any book in there and be whisked to holy-type places. The shop reminds me of the church after mass, when the pews are empty except for the bereaved, and the lights go out, so that the only way to see is by the light of the memorial candles. One of the books on display is a large Bible, big enough to answer all of life's questions, like, "How can I be more tolerant of people?" and "How can I be kinder?" I suddenly feel guilty for how I treated Michael and make a quick promise to myself: If I see him again, I'll apologize.

My eyes unfocus, no longer looking at the book display but at the reflection in the glass. Blue and red lights whir, and when I turn and look for the lights I first see a police car, then a pickup truck, then Michael laid out in the street, his bicycle about fifteen feet away, his green-and-orange, checkered dress shirt torn through at the elbows.

Everything is quiet. The cop is just standing there with his hands on his gunbelt looking at the short guy in the road. A few dog-walkers have gathered on the opposite corner. Not even the dogs make a sound. Poor bastard is all I can think. Had I not ditched him so quickly at the park, maybe....

I already know where I'll be next Sunday. I'll be at church after everyone else has left, when the church is dark, and I'll rise and light a memorial candle and say a prayer for little Michael, and hope, finally, I will be heard.

## Undeniable Proof of the Bigfoot

Grandpa Charlie shot a bigfoot the day I was born. The bigfoot survived but Mom did not.

Grandpa Charlie had been telling this story all over the state for the last eleven years, and earlier this summer, he spoke at the Elks Club, the V.F.W. Post, and the Shriners' Temple. He—and I his assistant—even trekked to the Lawson Volunteer Fire Company. When the county librarians invited Grandpa Charlie to kick off Myths and Legends Month, of course, he accepted.

The kind-hearted but stodgy librarians placed two dozen folding chairs and a long table between the obsolete computers and the Story-Time Play Area. With archeological care, I covered the table with Grandpa Charlie's collection of bigfoot artifacts, evidence, and memorabilia. Soon, the chairs filled with rural folks drawn to the county seat, recognizable in their dingy denim and battered boots, camouflage ball caps and scruffy beards or goatees. The curious but shy folks loitered at the back.

Grandpa Charlie paced behind the table, his belly pulling against the buttons of a red-and-black flannel shirt tucked into his jeans. As he moved, his thumbs rode up and down the elastic straps of his black suspenders. "The world is a lot more wild and mysterious than we think." Grandpa Charlie worked from a script he had memorized long ago. Normally, he spoke with all the authority of a forensic scientist, as if he had studied criminology (or even anthropology) at the university, which, of course, he had not. This time, Grandpa Charlie strained to sound professorial. Was it the presence of thousands of books that turned his tone, or was it simply fatigue projected in the voice of a man who otherwise loved talking about the bigfoot? Had I been slightly older, fourteen or fifteen, I might have asked him directly.



Either way, before long, Grandpa Charlie would conclude, bend to the applause, and attendees would line up to purchase bigfoot T-shirts, postcards, and bumper stickers. They'd buy "rare" photos and books, DVDs packed with never-before-seen footage, and they'd ask for Grandpa Charlie's autograph. And later, I'd help him load the truck and we'd get lunch at Larry's Dogs, ice cream included. These presentations were our thing alone. And, anyway, Dad would rather spend Saturdays loafing on the couch at home, watching the Reds blast through the National League.

Grandpa Charlie pointed at me. "The day Cole, here, was being born, I was hunting turkey." Grandpa Charlie's eyes drifted beyond the library's large tinted windows to a grassy field which sloped toward the old Hocking River. He caught himself and came back to his script. "I heard a commotion that wasn't no coon or possum; this thing sounded bigger. *Much bigger.*" Grandpa Charlie puffed out his chest and widened his shoulders. "The air went sour." He mimed loading a shotgun and crept forward. "I've been in war, and I know when danger is close." He lowered his voice, and the audience leaned in, eyes enlarged, expressions harrowed. "Woods have a way of teasing the mind. They turn branches into AK-47s and palm leaves into VC boonie hats."

A man with a thick goatee and construction boots caked in dried mud raised a hand. "What'd you see?" he asked eagerly. Grandpa Charlie captivated the crowd, even mothers from the play area stopped to look over.

Expecting the question, Grandpa Charlie, with all the theatrical flair he could muster, said, "I saw a *bigfoot.*" The room went still a moment. "Well," Grandpa Charlie continued, "I spooked the old boy and the Remington jumped. The shot grazed its shoulder. It stumbled

backward, balanced, and in a few giant strides disappeared." Grandpa Charlie took a breath. "I never set out to find a bigfoot. A bigfoot found me, and I tell you, they exist. The evidence proves it." He stretched an arm over the table of artifacts and worked methodically through the pieces, first exhibiting 8x10 photos of scarred tree trunks, of shadowy figures peering between evergreens, of mutilated deer. Grandpa Charlie showed off arrowheads and brass and silver shell casings and dozens of books about the mythic beasts of Western Appalachia. He had marked and dog-eared pages, even corresponded with a few of the authors. "Colleagues to the Cause," he called them. More than anything, Grandpa Charlie liked to stay in touch. Since Grandma died, he was in that cabin all by himself.

"Cliff Barrett is a good friend of mine," Grandpa Charlie said, using two hands to display Barrett's book. "Back in the eighties, Cliff tracked a pod of bigfoot from California to Washington, until they eluded him at the Canadian border."

A man I had not noticed before stood slowly, leaning on a wood-handle cane. He bowed slightly, straightened his shirt collar, a satchel resting at his feet. "Stories," he said, letting the word reverberate. "The bigfoot are myth, fantasy."

I tensed, annoyed by the interruption, but Grandpa Charlie remained composed. I had seen him dispatch skeptics before.

The man with the cane, it turned out, was Yurrie Welker, esteemed professor emeritus at the university. "Tell me, sir, why, in all this time, has not one strand of bigfoot hair, not one lost tooth, not one bit of DNA been recovered?" He raised his cane like a scepter. "You, sir, are peddling fakes, forgeries, and fictions. Where's the proof?" I waited for the old man to sit back down, but he remained standing, the lines on his face like arrows directed at me and my grandpa.

Grandpa Charlie told the crowd about Blaze, his long-departed hound. "One night, years ago, Blaze woke me, barking hell at something in the yard. By the time I opened the door, my apple tree had been half-ravaged."

"What does that prove?" Professor Welker countered. "Science deals with proof, with verifiable evidence, not speculations and inventions. Anything could have been in your yard, sir." The way he used the word "sir" forced my hands into fists. He might as well have said "jerk."

"Exactly," Grandpa Charlie said. "All I know is Blaze don't bark at nothing and apples don't just disappear." He paused, losing then finding his place. "I want the truth just like everyone else."

The audience grumbled. Grandpa Charlie came around the table so that nothing separated him from them. "What got Blaze in a tizzy and ate those apples? Who and what shares the planet with us? A bigfoot, I tell you, and I shot one the day Cole was born." When I heard my name, I straightened, looked at the old professor. Who was the jerk now?

"Horses and bears eat apples," Professor Welker said, refusing to yield. "It's more likely that a foraging bear startled your dog and ran off with your apples. Strange thing about the mind, we believe what we want to believe even if it's wrong. People accept that a man in a monkey suit is actually some undiscovered species."

I wanted to tell the crippled professor to shut up and sit down, to stop badgering Grandpa Charlie and let him finish the presentation so we could get some hot dogs and ice cream.

"I know the difference between a bear and a bigfoot," Grandpa Charlie said. "I've been up close to a bigfoot, and, believe me, they're real." Enduring the interruption, Grandpa Charlie

moved to the end of the table and, with a flourish, unveiled some of his more prized pieces. If that old professor wanted proof, he was about to get all he could handle. "This is a 1964 California cast of a bigfoot print." He held the white plaster mold high for all to see; the thing was nearly as long as my arm. The print could not have belonged to a bear nor a gorilla, and certainly not to a human. Awed audience members whispered among themselves. Hauntingly, Grandpa Charlie added, "The body that belongs to a foot this large—as confirmed by an anthropologist at West Virginia University—has to be over eight-and-a-half-feet and weigh at least seven hundred pounds. And a creature of those dimensions would be awfully powerful."

Grandpa Charlie held a second plaster cast, this a partial print, missing the heel and cracked along the instep. The cast was misshapen, with twigs and dirt caught in the plaster. "Now this one I myself pulled from right here in our own county. No bear could leave a print like this." The cast looked to me like a hollowed splotch; it could have been anything. "If this is real," Grandpa Charlie said, "and I believe it is, this bigfoot would stand ten feet tall and weigh over eight hundred pounds. A bigfoot like that could easily shrug off a shotgun blast and disappear into the woods. Many folks think that the bigfoot are slow, lumbering oafs that plod about using hikers' trails. Not so." Grandpa Charlie touched his chest. "The bigfoot are quick and cunning, highly intelligent, and tremendous self-healers."

Professor Yurrie Welker groaned derisively. "Fairy tales. That's all this is."

"I beg to differ." Deviating from the usual script, Grandpa Charlie snapped his fingers at me, and I fetched a photo album from the far corner of the table. The album contained a hundred pages of pictures in plastic sleeves and weighed at least ten pounds. "Give it here, Cole," Grandpa Charlie said, aiming to silence his critic.

The photos consisted of graphic depictions of half-devoured elk and cows, headless goats, blackbirds turned to feathery mush, and wild turkeys whose bones had been gnawed. Along with pictures of vertebrae and four-inch hooked claws, Grandpa Charlie kept grainy autopsy photos of a large furry beast laid out on a steel slab, its skull uncapped and squiggles of brain oozing out. "More than one has been caught and dissected by the government, but you won't hear about that on the news, and you sure won't read about it in any fancy science journal."

Side conversations about government conspiracies and secret military operations erupted in the audience. Grandpa Charlie let the chatter continue a while. Finally, he said, "Also, a connection exists between UFOs and the bigfoot. Statistically, the chance of seeing a bigfoot after seeing a UFO increases some one-hundred-and-fifty percent." He peered at Yurrie Welker. "This could explain why the bigfoot have not been captured, why we haven't found teeth or hair or DNA."

The audience percolated now about alien intervention and abduction. Patrons waiting on the check-out line swiveled their heads, drawn to the rising furor. People wanted so much to believe in the bigfoot. I wanted to believe, too, but who knew for sure? Grandpa Charlie's lectures were just performance to me. I had been listening to his stories all my life; they seemed as real as not.

"This proves nothing." Professor Welker reached into his satchel and revealed his own plaster cast, one which looked every bit as authentic as Grandpa Charlie's plaster casts. "I made this with simple wood cutouts." Professor Welker showed off the cast. "You claim to have shot a bigfoot. But you, sir, a so-called expert, didn't collect blood, tissue, or hair samples. Why?"

Grandpa Charlie faltered, as if he had been struggling forever to answer this question. "My grandson was being born that day. His mother, my daughter—I had no time. She was *dying*." I didn't like seeing Grandpa Charlie thrown. That pesky professor, he was just selfish, petty, a stupid know-it-all. A bully. I stepped toward him, started to say the meanest thing I could think of, a string of curses I had heard some boys at school say before they were hauled off to the principal's office. But I was cut off by a man in overalls, a red kerchief tied around his neck.

"If one cast can be faked, so can other casts."

"It's all a bunch of phony nonsense," another man said. "You can't prove it wasn't a bear."

Grandpa Charlie made a strange face—equal parts anger and uncertainty, as if losing more than just control of the room.

Professor Welker continued his interrogation. "Do you really think a 'highly intelligent' creature would reveal itself only to you and a band of backwoods louts? You don't really believe a whole race of bigfoot is out there, do you?" Yurrie Welker, exposing tawny teeth, wheezed laughter. "How much do you make off these good people?"

"You haven't been face to face with a bigfoot," Grandpa Charlie said. "You've never sensed its mystery, its magic, its power. I know what I saw." But strength and surety drained from his words. I wanted to say something, to yell back at Welker, to have the librarians escort him outside.

"You are perpetuating deceit, sir. Conning people. Bigfoot do not exist."

"Who...? What...?" Grandpa Charlie could not recall his script, could not make a rebuttal. His cheeks sagged, and he looked at me for help. Scared and unsure, I went to him. "Maybe he's right," he told me. "If I had just thought for a moment... but I panicked. That's the truth. I got the call that your momma was dying and I panicked. I could have gotten some undeniable proof of the bigfoot." Grandpa Charlie's gaze moved away from me. He turned frail, quivered, and in the light from the tinted windows, became a weak, old man. By the time he had reached the hospital, I had arrived but Mom was gone. All these years Grandpa Charlie relived that day, told the same stories, yet hoped for a different ending. Now, fresh loss bowed his shoulders, dulled his eyes.

Yurrie Welker, having rested his case, hobbled out of the crowd, saying, "If you want to be duped and give your money to this fraud, go ahead." He passed close to me, and I charged him. We collided, grappling like wrestlers, Welker's cane caught between our bodies. He was a strong old man, but I was quick, and when we separated, I came away with the cane. Enraged, holding the cane aloft, I said, "I've had enough of you. Get out of here. You're not welcome no more." I reared back with the cane, but several men from the crowd prevent me from taking a swing. Welker's eyes widened with shock and fear; his lower lip trembled, for he knew I meant to bruise him, but he dared not utter a smallest remark. The men who had intervened kept us apart until the library doors opened and Professor Welker limped through them. Several of the professor's supporters followed after. I threw down the cane and it rolled against the wall.

Before anyone else could leave, I spoke. I realized I knew a lot about the bigfoot—how they use odor to discourage confrontation, how they are migratory, and how they change their coat color for camouflage. I also knew all of Grandpa Charlie's bigfoot stories—how a bigfoot

once hurled rocks at his truck or that time a juvenile bigfoot plundered his garbage cans. I knew about all of Grandpa Charlie's encounters with unknown creatures and his feelings of being watched in the woods, followed, even hunted—and I shared them with listeners. I spoke with the same gusto I had seen Grandpa Charlie use, emphasized key terms like he did: "*creatures*," "*suspicious*," "*uncertainty*."

At the end of the presentation, the audience offered polite, brief applause, and my face turned hot. Believers made purchases and, since Grandpa Charlie could not, I squiggled my name across the merchandise and chatted with people. An old lady who asked me to sign a mimeographed autopsy report said, "One day soon the bigfoot will reveal themselves." A plump librarian invited me and Grandpa Charlie back next year. I accepted on Grandpa Charlie's behalf then packed the plaster casts in foam and bubble wrap and put them in the truck. I was tired from talking and thirsty and craved hot dogs and ice cream. But Grandpa Charlie forgot about his promise to take me out to lunch, and I didn't remind him. Instead, I considered the stories I would tell about the man who shot a bigfoot the day I was born and was changed forever after.



Dynamo<sup>3</sup>

Hugh Weeb had been jealous of me from the start. During the phone interview he was so nervous he didn't know what to ask, and at the second round of interviews, Hugh's boss and his boss's boss led the conversation. I could have applied for—and gotten—Hugh's job, but the position of full-time nobody came open and I'd been looking for an office where I could stroll in, hit home runs, clock out at five, and forget I was ever there. My doc said a do-nothing job would be better for my head, too. He prescribed a stress-free lifestyle, and I had to agree. My last job was making my hair fall out, and the rumors about my inappropriateness with certain female staff were piling up.

In my final job interview, while I boastfully self-promoted, the bosses slid Hugh a note. He stiffened, cleared his throat. "You're obviously very qualified." Hugh's voice cracked. "No one would dispute that." Another crack. "But I want to make it very clear that I would be your boss. The person who gets this job won't be director, coordinator, or manager. *I* am the manager." He called the work I would do difficult, complex, intricate. I almost laughed out loud. "I understand," I said. "But my goals are different. I want this job because I like the frontlines, the ground-floor, hands-on work. Helping customers is my passion."

Hugh and the bosses nodded happily but didn't actually hire me right then. The limp toads couldn't make a bold move to save their lives. So I lied to them that another company had already offered me a high-ranking position with a better salary, and I had to make a decision by

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<sup>3</sup> Originally appeared in *Reunion: The Dallas Review* (Vol. 8).

the end of the week. Nothing like a little pressure to get Hugh and the big bosses to act. They offered me the job the next morning. My doc congratulated me, said he believed in fresh starts.

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On day one, Hugh welcomed me with a stiff smile and a cold handshake. He gave me an office tour, took me to the staff kitchen, which wasn't really a kitchen but a room with a mini-fridge and a microwave. "Nice," I said.

Hugh showed me a message board covered with customer accolades. "Every time a customer tells us we did a good job, I tack it here, as motivation, you see."

"Ingenious idea," I said. When I was a manager, I had displayed my own corkboard, only my board was filled with customer complaints in order to remind my team that they could always do better. Demand perfection of yourself, I had told them. Envision your own glory.

Hugh tapped on a door and whispered to the person inside. We entered the room and Hugh introduced me to Victorina, a soft-spoken old woman in a long skirt and sweater top. On the Org. Chart Victorina and I were equals, essentially doing the same work. She'd been at the job for ten years and reminded me of a small-town librarian. She stood and shook my hand, her round, blue eyes full of fear. Victorina swayed as she talked, crossed her arms over a flat chest. Nervous or scared, she tripped over her words. She was kind, though. Kind yet distant. "Welcome," Victorina said and her eyes moved as if trying to send me a coded message.

As Hugh walked me around, his anxiety, his jealousy, his worry showed. Hugh knew I could run the place; I had the experience, the vision, and the moxie to manage. It must have been tough for Hugh to know he was bossing a guy who could do his job better than he could. He must have felt like a fraud.

Hugh's office was big enough for an enormous L-shaped desk, on which sat a dual-screen computer, his personal printer, and a legal pad splattered with the worst penmanship I have ever seen. Hugh prominently displayed his master's degree in a Wal-Mart frame more valuable than the diploma itself. A limp potted plant rested on a cheap pedestal under a sunlight lamp, and a framed poster filled the expanse of an otherwise bare wall. The picture showed a mountain climber, muscles rippling under a skin-tight tank top, hanging by fingertips from a shelf of granite thousands of feet up. A wry, confident smile turned the climber's lips, his eyes hidden by dark shades, and in giant gold letters across the bottom, one word: LEADERSHIP.

On the orientation tour, Hugh asked what I thought of the new environment. Of course, it was too soon to give an honest answer, so I lied. "If you need anything," Hugh said, "let me know. I may veto your ideas, but that's my managerial prerogative."

The truth was I had already seen a dozen weaknesses that I would fix if I were manager. Hugh Weeb kept the office breathing, but I could give it life.

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At the end of my first month, Hugh called me to his office. The potted plant was pale-green, ill but alive. Hugh said, "I've been watching you work and I must say, incredible. You're good." Of course I'm good, I thought. I've been doing this since before Hugh finished junior high. And I hadn't just been a manager; I had earned training certificates and awards, published articles in the field, and even presented at a national conference.

"Keep up the good work," Hugh added. He must have started reading *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Management*. "There's just one more thing." He leaned back in his chair, folded

his hands. "I've noticed that you arrive at exactly nine in the morning, but I'd prefer you came in five minutes early. It's a small but important difference."

When I was a manager, such petty reprimands never happened. I didn't count my team's minutes; we were too busy creating an enviable office. For the next while, I arrived exactly five precious minutes before the hour and made sure Hugh noticed. In fact, I often stopped at his door to chat and learned that Hugh had been married for nineteen months to a self-employed party planner named Bethany.

Once, Bethany stopped by the office, pulsing with annoyance and looking for Hugh.

"He may be upstairs," I said.

A day in the office cubby hole with Hugh Weeb had a way of shrinking my soul, but Bethany's arrival changed that. She had curling red hair and a smile that suggested possibilities. She had gripped my hand a long moment, her thumb caressing my knuckles. "You are nothing like I imagined," she breathed. What lies had Hugh been telling her about me?

Whenever Hugh talked about Bethany, his cheeks colored and not from embarrassment but from a reluctance to get personal. Was Bethany Hugh's only lay? Often, I asked Hugh about his wife—her interests, hobbies, and habits. I enjoyed watching him squirm but could never figure out why such a beautiful woman had married such a stiff turd.

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Hugh caught me before I left his doorway. "We need to meet today," he said, "for your first performance review." Hugh explained that this would be the first of three performance reviews before I officially became a team member. "Policy here gives us the right to terminate you at any time, no questions asked, no reasons needed."

The review lasted all of five minutes, but I had spent the hour beforehand sweating. What if Hugh gave me a bad review and fired me? This was supposed to be my shift into neutral, my easy pay check, a vacation until my head cleared and I once again rose to the rank of manager, or better, leap-frogged Hugh and became associate director. That would be nice. I couldn't be bound by the whim of Hugh Weeb, couldn't be led by a boyish dolt who might do anything when he got cranky.

Reading from the review sheet, Hugh said he was very pleased with my work performance, gave me all "Meets Expectations." Actually, he said I "Exceeded Expectations" but he wouldn't check those boxes. "Let's give ourselves room to grow." I almost complained until I recalled the termination policy, shut my mouth, and signed the review just to be done with it.

Offended by Hugh's devaluation of my performance, I gradually stopped arriving early for work. As a result, Hugh started popping into my office undetected and unannounced. "What are you working on?" he'd ask, scaring me, trying to catch me slacking.

"The procedural document." But that wasn't true; I'd finished the document ages ago. Hugh was just snooping, looking for something he could write on my next performance review.

"If you ever need another assignment," he said, "let me know."

I turned the conversation to Bethany and watched Hugh tighten. "Can just anyone hire her to plan a party?"

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The busy part of the fiscal year commenced and, because of Hugh's laissez-faire leadership, the office became a den of tension with workers scrambling to meet demand.

Frightened Victorina stuttered all the time and could barely steady her tea cup. I couldn't stop thinking about how depressing it would be to get fired from such an inferior job and how absurd it was that the big bosses didn't immediately put me in charge. I waited for Hugh to skulk into my office and say, "You're fired, Brett," not because of any little indiscretions but because of my potential to run the office and make Hugh obsolete.

Hugh Weeb never set goals, never prepared us or supported us, so, aimless and stressed, we worked erratically, haphazardly, and ultimately floundered. Every two minutes Hugh scurried from behind the shield of his computer monitors and ran upstairs to ask the bosses questions. Meanwhile, when Hugh came around, the part-timers acted busy but really had nothing to do. Victorina lived in her office, typing away all day, scarcely stopping for lunch. Sometimes, I would pause at her door and watch her soul shrink in the glow of the computer monitor. I'd to chat with her, try to get her to take a rest and eat something. She was too frail and too old to starve. "Too busy," she'd say, fright filling her eyes. "I have to get this done. It's important." I sat with her for a minute longer and held her cold hands. She appreciated my concern, thanked me, but kept looking toward the door for Hugh. "You know, he can fire us at any time," she said, gave my hand a squeeze, and turned back to her computer monitor. Before I left, Victorina agreed to have lunch with me. She was the ally I needed.

I tried to prioritize—to aid customers, answer calls, file orders, organize the work flow. Still, chaos ensued. Our secretary double-booked appointments, got dates and times backwards, and confused out-going with in-coming. Then she called out sick the rest of the week. Over-run, we asked customers to come back later. They complained. Even with my experience, I could only do so much. I was the A-player on the B-team with the C-manager at the helm.

Days after, Hugh called me to his office. My customers were waiting, and stacks of files the secretary should have handled needed my immediate attention. Hugh danced around his point, tried to befriend me with meaningless small talk. "What do you want, Hugh?"

He wanted my honest opinion. He recognized that we were drowning, that his incompetence made the system of the office dysfunctional. I could think of a million improvements but distilled my response to the most vital. My second performance review was coming and this was my chance to exceed expectations. To protect Hugh's delicate ego, I lowered my voice. "It's simple, really. You need to set goals, assign tasks, and define completion deadlines. Our office meetings need purpose. Willy-nilly doesn't work."

Hugh scratched notes onto his legal pad, all the while nodding and saying, "Right, right" and "Brilliant." Then Hugh called a team meeting. He had typed out office goals based on my suggestions and assigned tasks with completion dates. "And from now on, our meetings will have purpose. Willy-nilly doesn't work. Dismissed."

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By my second performance review, I had forgiven Hugh for the first; the past was past. My advice about running an office resonated with Hugh and my sense of worth increased. Plus, every day I hit home runs with customers. The kitchen corkboard proved my excellence.

Hugh shut the door behind me, invited me to sit. I expected he'd start with a thank you. We'd gotten through the quarter's madness thanks to me and would be better prepared for next quarter. As before, Hugh gave me "Meets Expectations" for Quality of Work, Independence, Attendance, and Dependability. But for Cooperation with Others, Hugh checked "Fails to Meet Job Standards." He read his comments to me. "Brett needs to set goals, collaborate with fellow

team members, and meet completion deadlines. He needs to take initiative and bring issues to his supervisor. Improved communication and cooperation is needed."

Shocked, I signed the review before I knew what was happening. The devious bastard had tricked me. He had used my advice against me, to downgrade my excellence. He didn't want me to succeed; Hugh wanted to dominate.

For the next several weeks, I withdrew, avoiding Hugh Weeb. When he popped into my office with a demand, I acquiesced. I worked swiftly, precisely, and continued to rack up customer accolades on the kitchen corkboard. I even partnered with another department on an idea I had that would benefit all and gain new customers.

Hugh barged into the meeting, biting the insides of his cheeks, and plopped at the conference table. At once, he commandeered the meeting, saying, "Thanks for arranging this, Brett. That will be all. The managers need to talk." Hugh loved reminding me of his authority. Later, he reprimanded me in writing for going behind his back. "I was trying to take initiative," I said. "Like you noted on my performance review."

"Not that kind of initiative. You need to stay in the office, help customers, and write procedural documents." Hugh printed out my job description. "In case you forget, this is all that should concern you."

Fine. I would stick to helping customers, devote myself to customer service. Then Hugh would have nothing to criticize. I refused to let him see me upset.

I tapped on Victorina's door. She flinched and swung around, scared as always. Victorina and I had become each other's confidant, and on good days, we went out for lunch and commiserated. Complaining about Hugh's witless management style improved our spirits and



passed the time. Victorina simply accepted whatever idiotic decree Hugh unloaded on her. She was not interested in conflict or quitting this close to retirement. "Once I get my work done," Victorina said but never finished the thought.

Since the beginning, Victorina had been warning me to keep quiet and always look busy. "This office is a farce. Appearance matters, not reality." Victorina's hushed voice drew me near. "Just try to survive." Victorina reached back and opened a secret file on her computer. "This is my salvation." She scrolled through the opening chapters of a manuscript she hoped would become a Gothic novel of death and romance. "If I can get it published...." Victorina looked up, and for the first time fear drained from her eyes, replaced by intense hope. "I've dreamed of being a writer forever." I hugged Victorina, excited and happy for her. "I've made you a character, the charming prince, the hero who saves the damsel. That's me." Victorina stopped; she must have seen concern in my face. "Hugh won't allow you to exceed expectations. So let it go." This time Victorina took my hand and held it, and for the first time since I knew her, she smiled. Maybe we could run this office without Hugh, and anyway, how could I accept the lies Hugh told about me? How could I allow myself to be defamed, to be beaten into submission? How could I let this ridiculous job stain a mostly impeccable résumé? I felt as unwanted as the limp plant in Hugh's office. Worry mixed with fury. It had been a mistake to take the job. My head hurt.

My doc always said that I too often lived in black and white, good and bad, right and wrong. I was good and right; Hugh was bad and wrong. But, my doc said, there are always more than two options. He encouraged me to think broader, and that was how I got my head to stop throbbing. I was going to leap-frog Hugh, become his boss, and immediately fire him, no

questions asked. And after that, I would free Victorina from her hide-in-my-office-and-look-busy tactic, then liberate this office from the constraints of the incompetent.

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When I entered Hugh's office for my third performance review, I found the boss and the boss's boss cozily chatting. Their presence shocked me and could only mean one thing: Hugh didn't have the nerve to fire me himself. Hugh offered me a seat. The plant under the sunlight lamp had turned brown and brittle, its curled, dry leaves littered the carpet. No amount of love or water could revive the sapling now.

The boss's boss spoke. "As you know, Hugh is somewhat new, and we want to support him as he moves through the process of managing and evaluating his staff."

Hugh sat up proudly and passed me the performance review. I had already prepared myself not to react to an unjust evaluation, not to give Hugh the satisfaction of watching me fume. The document was blank. When I raised my eyes, the trio was staring at me. Hugh waved a type-written memo printed on company letterhead. He read aloud. "Assisting customers is the main function of Brett's job duties, yet he refuses to help customers."

The kitchen corkboard overflowed with the accolades I'd received, but rather than protest, I remained calm and quiet, afraid to appear petty or desperate.

In the end, the bosses decided—out of kindness—to extend my probationary period for one month. If I did not significantly improve my attitude and work performance, I would be fired. "It's not something we like to do," the boss's boss said. "But we are dissatisfied. Very dissatisfied." What lies had Hugh been telling them about me?

With the one-month extension, I doubled my efforts to please customers and file documents. I kept copies of all my work to show the bosses when the time came, and Victorina promised she'd support my efforts. She would be the witness to my greatness.

As a condition of the probation, I agreed to regular meetings with Hugh, so we could talk about our issues—without judgment or blame—and resolve them. The problem, for Hugh, was my rebelliousness, and the meetings devolved into a lesson in how I should obey my superior. Hugh schemed to make me miserable. Termination was too good for me; Hugh wanted me to quit.

Rather than quit or get fired, I resolved to win. I would not leave. I would have victory. I decided to throw a party, a pre-emptive victory celebration. I'd invite Victorina and the part-timers, and we'd share stories about Hugh's ineptitude and laugh.

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Bethany roamed my apartment, a clipboard held against her chest, her high heels clicking on the bare floor. She smelled of sweet berries. "This party will need a theme."

"Justice."

"I know exactly what you mean." The small, dull diamond Bethany wore had been bought by a guy who had never held a real job before and knew nothing about precious jewels.

"I envision tinsel and streamers, balloons, a long table outfitted with hors d'oeuvres and champagne, and dance music rocking the stereo. How many guests?"

"The boss, the boss's boss, Victorina, everybody," I said, running my gaze the length of her body.

"In that case," Bethany said, "let's make this an *event*."

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I skirted around the vending machines and up three steps, passed the bathrooms and the janitor's closet. The secretary ignored my entrance. Victorina, hidden in her room, typed away on her secret novel. Hugh rushed out of his office wielding a letter. "I warned you about your arrival time." I refused to sign the document. "It's going in your permanent file anyway," Hugh said, face plump and red. He followed me to my office, lecturing me on the value of respect for authority.

The boss and the boss's boss entered then. They heard Hugh berate me. "What's going on here?" they demanded.

"I am being unfairly targeted," I said, and that got the bosses' attention. "Mr. Weeb, here, is creating a hostile work environment for me. How easy would it be to bankrupt this company with a lawsuit? The bad press alone would put it under."

Hugh worked tears into his eyes. "I am almost certain Brett is sleeping with my wife. He's poison to this office." He staggered against the wall, cheeks drenched, voice brittle, and the bosses didn't know who to believe.

The door to Victorina's office opened slowly and she stepped out. She didn't look the least bit afraid.

"What do you have to say, Victorina?" She gave me the slightest wink and launched into a monologue about Hugh's incompetence and mistreatment.

The bosses wanted to fire him right then, but I proposed another solution: Make me manager and demote Hugh. They did, and as my first act I gave Hugh enough procedural documents to keep him busy for a year.

Later, when I went to Victorina's office to thank her again for supporting me, she stood and gave me a lengthy hug. "Don't you know we're a team?" she said.

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By 9 p.m. my apartment was packed with part-timers and the stereo pulsed dance music. Bethany and I escaped to the back bedroom for a little fun. We were drunk, and she was swearing that she was going to divorce Hugh and marry me. When we rejoined the party, the bosses had arrived and were stuffing themselves with salsa and nachos. The part-timers played drinking games and danced.

Victoria arrived. She stepped timidly into the apartment, clutching a small purse. She wore a dress that revealed her pale arms and shoulders. She had gotten her hair and nails done.

I took my arm from across Bethany's shoulders and made room for Victorina on the couch. "Come. Sit," I told her. She hesitated but sat.

The whole night Victorina looked distinctly miserable; she wouldn't dance, she wouldn't eat, she wouldn't relax. I pulled her into the kitchen and asked her what was wrong.

"I thought this would be a different kind of party. I thought it would be more of you and me and less of them." Victorina wanted to know what Bethany was doing here.

"She is the party planner."

"But I thought we were a team."

Before I could let Victorian down, before I could tell her that I liked Bethany, Hugh came through the door. I had trouble recognizing him outside of the office setting. Nobody had invited him. He just showed up, having followed Bethany in his car, and he was carrying a

baseball bat. He called out for me, challenged me, and I could not back down in front of the entire office.

I took a wooden mallet with me out of the kitchen as Hugh took his best swing at the stereo. The bass beats fizzled into sputters of electric static. Next, Hugh poured the bowl of salsa onto my carpet and stomped the puddle. He laughed at my threat to fire him, so I charged Hugh, missed his nose with the mallet, and crashed into the hors d'oeuvres table, collapsing the entire spread. The part-timers laughed at me and pointed.

I grabbed Hugh before he could swing his bat and we grappled until hitting the salsa puddle and sliding to the floor in a heap. Guests threw themselves on the pile.

“I’m going to murder you,” Hugh said.

“Let me see you try.”

When they got us to our feet and separated us, I fired Hugh and the horrified bosses backed me up, and we all agreed that if Hugh left right now, we wouldn’t call the cops. He did leave, nursing a bruised arm, and missing his baseball bat.

A lump rose over my right eye, and my shirt was torn, my pants doused with salsa. “What are you looking at?” I asked the part-timers, who were staring and whispering about me. They thought I had lost the fight, thought that Hugh had gotten the best of me. “He’s the loser,” I said. Bethany watched Hugh exit and hurried to the door, looking after him. “What are you doing, Bethany? This party ain’t over.” I pushed one of the part-timers toward the demolished stereo. “Fix that thing, will you?” The part-timer just stared at me. The stereo was beyond repair.

When I looked again for Bethany, she had already broken away into a full sprint and was running after Hugh. She caught him and wept against his shoulder, proclaimed her love for him. “We can make this work,” she kept saying as they walked off.

Everybody was staring at me, staring at my bruised eye and torn shirt. The bosses broke the silence first. “I think we’ll be leaving now.” They kept their heads down as they exited.

“Don’t leave. This is a celebration.” When I smiled, I could feel the bruise above my eye tighten. The part-timers left, too, wagging their heads like they were ashamed of me. “I’ll see you on Monday,” I said, trying to sound enthusiastic. “We’re going to have the best office ever.”

When I turned, I found Victorina on the couch, watching me. “Those part-timers,” I said. “Good-for-nothings. Now that I’m manager, things are going to change in the office. Come Monday, it’ll be a whole new place.”

The apartment was in shambles. The salsa-stained carpet would have to be replaced, so would a gash that appear in one wall. I’d have to buy a new stereo and a new shirt, too. I could not salvage the hors d’oeuvres, but maybe Victorina and I could have our own little party.

I slid in beside her on the couch and immediately she popped up. “I’m going to leave,” she said. “I’ll see you on Monday.” She was looking at the bruise over my eye.

“Do you think I lost to Hugh? I didn’t. He’s the one who got fired.” Victorina put the straps of her purse over one arm and headed for the door. “Stay,” I commanded. “Stay and let’s make something of this night.” She took another step. “Or I could fire you.”

Victorina paused, hand on the door knob.

“I don’t want to do it, but I will. It’s my office now.” I waved at her. “Come over here, won’t you?”

She opened the door and started through. “Okay. You’re fired.”

“Fired? You can’t fire me.”

“I just did. I’m the manager.”

“Why don’t you look around, Brett? You’re alone. Manage yourself,” Victorina said and walked out.

The stereo sparked and warbled and finally quit, and Victorina was right. I had lost the fight with Hugh and I had lost the trust and confidence of the office. When I arrived on Monday, Victorina was in her room, door shut, working on her secret novel. The part-timers were in their corner of the office, pretending to be busy. I entered Hugh’s old office, sat at Hugh’s old desk, stared at Hugh’s dead plant. At lunch time, I quietly took down my accolades from the kitchen corkboard and dropped them in the trash. I told the secretary I was heading out for lunch, and I did. I ordered a large sub sandwich, ate not a bite, and never returned to the office again.



## Illness

For the fourth time since July, Wayne Pelfer sits on the exam table. "How are you feeling, Wayne?" Dr. Stan smells of antiseptic and Dior, and is as blunt as ever. "Bad news, Wayne, your heart."

"How long?"

Dr. Stan looks past his tablet computer. "We have treatment options to slow this, and you never know what could happen three or six months from now."

"Three months? Like, by the end of autumn?"

"Statistically, many patients last up to a half year."

"What should I do?" The question comes out before Wayne can stop it, before he can exclaim, "You're telling me I won't see my thirty-seventh birthday." Wayne catches his head in his hands, and behind his closed eyes, he sees the years fly past and thinks that he's too young to die. He tries to speak but cannot even breathe.

Dr. Stan suggests a third opinion, a specialist, an experimental drug therapy. Instead, Wayne blacks out and falls off of the exam table. When he comes to, Wayne has a lump on his forehead and can't feel his arms. "I gave you a mild sedative," Dr. Stan says, as if it were nothing special. "People in your situation... you may want to take a vacation, somewhere you always dreamed of going, see family and friends, go skydiving. Bucket list kind of stuff."

An hour later, when Wayne can stand and balance himself, he follows a cute nurse to the exit. "What's your name?"

"Kaylie."

"Would you like to go out tonight?" Again, Wayne surprises himself. He doesn't really want to go on a date; he just wants to prove to himself that he can ask. What has he got to lose?

Kaylie reddens. "That's sweet, but I'm married." Kaylie walks away, her ring finger bare.

Wayne spends lunch at an iron picnic table in the shade writing in a notebook and eating a sandwich that tastes like burlap. Emotions pour out: frustration, annoyance, aggravation. Curses splash across the lines and the ballpoint nearly tears the page. Longing chases sadness, sadness chases anger.

Wayne considers calling his brothers, his sister in Binghamton. He could empty his bank account, fly to them, hand them each a check. He should leave them something. Wayne brushes away the tears that shimmer on his cheeks. He sets his chin on the table, holds his gut, breathes through what feels like a sucker-punch.

His boss—young, dense—is waiting, eyeing his wristwatch. "An hour for lunch, Wayne. You know that." He asks how the project is going.

"Steadily." This pleases the boss and he leaves.

Wayne decides to write a will, but doesn't know how to begin. In his apartment, he finds in his desk the manuscript of a story without an ending and gets sidetracked. He tries to recall the plot, wonders if a publishing house would be interested. Becoming a famous author is on his bucket list.

The next morning, Wayne hits the alarm clock and slips into his routine: eat, shower, dress, pack lunch and notebook, comb hair. The usual traffic lights are red, and the DJs on the

car stereo crack themselves up with lame innuendoes and lude insinuations. Wayne can't find a song to sing to.

He recalls how his girlfriend Jana's father handles illness—by ignoring it. The guy would reject the *possibility* of a headache, then ride his squeaky stationary bike while smoking Marlboros and watching the Reds lose. He likes to tell the story of how a mugger punched him and he talked himself out of a broken jaw.

Work is pointless, so Wayne surfs the Web, trying to figure out how to write a will, but his search results eventually lead him to law offices and mortuaries, advertisements for the desperate and dying. Before long, lunch arrives and Wayne heads to the iron picnic table outside. A young man he doesn't know sits bent over a bowl of noodles, chop sticks in hand. He's watching a karate movie on his phone, headphones over his ears. Wayne considers saying, "I'm dying. Do you mind if I sit here?" but keeps quiet. He finds a dry spot of grass, sits, and eats. He wishes he had made a second sandwich or packed some snack crackers.

He heads back inside early.

"That's the spirit, Wayne," his boss says.

The evening rush creeps along. Wayne rolls through a stop sign and gets slapped with a traffic ticket. As he restarts his car, the officer drives past, saying, "Now, be safe." At the end of the block the police cruiser rolls through a stop sign and disappears. I don't have to be safe, he thinks, and I won't pay this ticket, either.

Wayne spends the night cleaning the apartment and filling garbage bags with nonessentials—hats he'll never wear, outdated suits, winter sweaters. When he's done, Wayne looks to the trash bags piled at the door, "What a waste."

Two weeks later, Wayne wakes with a stiff neck and the remnants of a dream flutter away. His brain pulses as if from proofing trigonometric equations all night. He sits up, shakes off the feeling, and steps into the shower, into clean clothes, out of the apartment. He knows what he should do now.

Wayne slaloms through traffic, beats the stop lights. He knocks on Jana's door. She peeks past the security chain, her face drab with sleep.

"It's me. Let me in."

Jana removes the chain, steps back, and lowers the paring knife gripped in her left hand. She shuffles into the kitchen and Wayne follows. She throws oil and minced garlic into a pan.

"I know what I want," Wayne says.

Jana starts an omelet, dusts it with onion powder.

"I want you to marry me." Wayne slides to one knee, takes Jana's hands. "I don't have a ring right now," he says, "But I can get one."

"What?" she utters.

"I want you to marry me." Wayne pops to his feet. "There's more," he says and tells Jana about his visit with Dr. Stan. "At first, I thought I would ignore it, but if Dr. Stan is right and I only have months more.... I asked myself what was important." He breathes. "You are important."

The sauce pan sizzles and spits and smokes. Jana swears and removes the pan from the heat, but it's too late; the omelet is charred to the bottom of the pan. "What a waste!" she says, slamming the pan against the stove top. "I'm not marrying you, Wayne. We haven't talked in weeks. Honestly, I thought we were already broken up."

A month after Dr. Stan's diagnosis, Wayne Pelfer powers down his office computer, crams his trash basket with file folders, and goes in search of his boss. Jack is eating a nutty chocolate bar and playing *Magi's Quest*. "Research," Jack says through a mouthful of peanuts and caramel. He pauses play, chocolate staining his keyboard.

"I quit," Wayne says.

Jack flinches, chokes. "Is it a raise you want?"

When Wayne gets home, his apartment suddenly feels like a museum. He grabs the couch by one corner and hauls it outside. He does the same with the side tables, the lamps, the kitchen chairs. His heart warbles at the exertion.

Patty, the leasing manager, says, "This is a violation."

Curious residents drift over and browse the items.

Except for the mattress, some boxes, and whatever food is in the refrigerator, the apartment is empty. The place echoes. Wayne lays down, shoulders heavy, unable to raise his head. Death come early, he thinks, feeling cheated. But the episode passes quickly, leaving his back wet with sweat, his heart pulsating. When he can, Wayne picks through the cardboard box where his desk used to be, takes his manuscript back to bed, and reads.

It's past 8 a.m. when Wayne wakes, the manuscript caught under him. He dumps the pages back into a moving box; it's a boring novel but a wonderful sleep aid. He dresses and sprints to the door, where Patty has taped an eviction notice; he has a week to turn in his key and clear out. He won't get the security deposit back.

Wayne tells the bank teller he wants to close his account. "I'm sorry to hear that. Can we do anything to improve your customer experience?"

"I'll take cash."

Wayne enters Osweiler's Funeral Home: wooden floors and paneling, a decorative table carved from Balsam, supporting a vase overflowing with flowers. Wayne can't take two steps before he is accosted by an Osweiler in a black suit. "May I help you, sir?"

"I'd like to make arrangements. For me."

Osweiler walks Wayne into a side office: more wood, more flowers. Osweiler hauls over a thick binder and launches into a spiel about "eternal memories" and "lasting dignities."

Wayne lays a band of bills on the table. He doesn't want to be sold to; he wants to buy, starting with a casket. Osweiler is quick to oblige, and Wayne leaves the funeral home in under an hour. He pulls into a cemetery off the highway. "I can put you under a pine tree," the memorial representative says. "How would that be?" Wayne buys the plot, then stops at the stone etcher's shop for a headstone.

Later, Wayne buys a sandwich wrapped in wax paper and eats while scribbling a letter to his sister and brothers, telling them about his illness. He assures them that he feels no pain, that there are worse ways to croak. He packs money into the envelope and closes the letter "With love."

The hospice is nothing like Wayne pictured, and he double-checks the address. The house is three stories and has been a half-way house, a bed and breakfast, and, for a brief spell in the 1970s, a town hall and a motel. No signs are posted on the lawn naming the hospice. The house stands upon a low hill, a musty gray structure amid a lush green acre. The dark soil smells of burned wood.

“May I help you?” The woman’s voice is pleasant, welcoming, but the sun blinds Wayne, and he can’t make out her face until they step under the covered porch. Mary’s upper incisors lean slightly left and show some discoloration, suggesting an inability to resist sweets. Mary pulls off a pair of gardening gloves to shake his hand. “Have you come for a tour?” Mary asks.

“I’m actually moving in. I called earlier.”

“You’re Wayne. I thought you were calling for a grandfather.”

“As I said, I can pay cash.” Wayne lifts bills from his pocket.

Mary looks at the money, says, "Why don't I show you the place?"

Wayne is keenly aware of money’s power to cut through the bullshit.

Mary is younger than Wayne first thought with striking blue eyes and the kind of blonde hair that looks good at any length. Right now, Mary has her hair pulled back. She wears an oversized flannel shirt open at the collar, rolled at the wrists, and the knees of her jeans are brown. Her boots hit the porch steps with hollow thuds and before crossing the threshold, Mary steps out of the dirty footwear. Mary looks back, raises her blue eyes, and Wayne’s limbs go cold. She looks at his sneakers. Wayne pauses and takes off his shoes before entering the hospice house. Mary thanks him and says, "You want to be careful about flashing your money. You're liable to wake with a knot on the head and empty pockets." Wayne chuckles, hoping she’s joking.

They begin in a large sitting room: couches, card tables, bookshelves. "At one time, this used to belong to the church. Ten or fifteen retired priests lived here before the parish dissolved and the house went to the township." They move into a hallway adorned with framed photos on

the walls: headshots of smiling people, smiling despite vacuous gazes. “We try to celebrate those who came before us, both patients and staff.” They enter the kitchen, where a banquet table stands beneath a high ceiling. “It doesn’t always happen, but we try to share meals together, too.” The appliances and the walls are immaculate white, and Wayne has to search hard for dirt and dust. Each room looks unused, as if no one lived at the hospice.

Mary takes Wayne to the top of a long, curling staircase. “The upper floors are additions to the original house. Patients’ quarters on each level.” Mary flips her hands as she talks, her slender fingers pressed together. A green Irish knot colors the nape of her neck—an old tattoo, sun-faded and beginning to blur. They stop at a closed door at the end of the hallway, and Mary uses her key. The room is odorless, off-white walls, a green quilt on the bed, and beside that a night table with a lamp. A dresser and desk complete the room.

Wayne stands at the window, uses a finger to hold back the curtain. He sees, among the suburban homes, a park—a rippling field rolling into a grove of trees, and in the distance farmland, where a lone man and his dog herd sheep across a hillside. “Nice view.”

They enter the back yard. A lazy cloud pauses overhead but not for long. A narrow brick path winds among the tall grass and trees. “In the sixties,” Mary says, “a writers' colony moved in, looking for inspiration. They didn’t stay long.”

A searing pain stabs Wayne’s chest, and he goes down on one knee in the dry grass.

“What's wrong?”

Wayne waits for the pain to subside, then finds one of the pills prescribed by Dr. Stan and puts it on his tongue. His heart again finds its usual rhythm, though the pain is slow to subside.

Mary offers Wayne a glass of water. “I thought this was a scam, but you’re really ill.”



Back inside the house, at the kitchen table, Wayne looks over the patient registration forms, all of which say the same thing: neither the hospice nor its staff are liable in any way, shape, or form. Neither patients nor their family can sue. Wayne thinks about dying in this house and asks, “Where are the other patients?”

“You will be the first,” Mary admits with an embarrassed smile. As it turns out, Mary just bought the hospice. She had managed the place for the last five years, but the previous owner—Morton Holdings, LLC—unhappy with the profit margin, got out of the hospice business. “All the previous patients were transferred to Barnwell.” Mary stopped for a moment. “We provide a real service here, and I could not watch this old house become a bed and breakfast again.”

Wayne finishes signing the registration documents and slides them back to Mary, and she welcomes him with a firm handshake.

Wayne doesn't have much in the car so, by early afternoon, he has settled in his room and goes exploring. He discovers Mary in the kitchen, which now smells of cinnamon and raspberry, and before he can ask, she offers him lunch. They agree to sit on the patio outside, under the shade of an umbrella.

Wayne admires Mary's garden.

“Honestly, I don't know a thing about gardens, but if any place needs flowers and tomato plants, this place does. When families visit, they want to see a manicured lawn and a garden. It's comforting to know granny or pa is never too far from vegetation.” Mary, Wayne discovers, is hard working and organized, committed to keeping the hospice solvent. She holds degrees in psychology and business management and worked for the township right out of college. After

two years, the mayor herself recommended Mary for the hospice management opportunity.

“And we would have been fine if Morton Holdings cared more about people than its portfolio.”

Mary folds the edges of her napkin. “We should have more patients by the end of the week.

Then I can think about hiring the old staff back. Do you know those people did not get any severance?”

Wayne cannot stop himself from imagining a relationship with Mary. He blames his hidden but persistent romantic side for such silly thoughts. But he simply cannot resist: What does holding Mary’s hand feel like, he wonders, or cuddling with her on a cold winter night? The only thing stupider than dreaming about what his life could have been is dreaming of what it still could be. Wayne’s future withers a little more each day, and hope is in short supply.

The sandwich Mary made is light and tasty, and goes well with the glass of iced tea. Wayne tells Mary about his illness. “I can’t even pronounce the real name of the disease,” he says. “All I know is that the chambers of the heart corrode and, well, the heart gives up.” He says he is on all of the appropriate donor lists and faithfully takes the prescribed medication. “I’m even in a chat room for others with my condition, but all they do is wallow and complain. Who wants to hear that depressing bullshit?” The admission comes easy for Wayne now; he is suddenly incautious about sharing the most intimate details of his illness, something with which he previously struggled. Emboldened, Wayne talks about his failed proposal to Jana.

Mary stops chewing, and Wayne realizes his timing stinks. The poor woman doesn’t want to hear his woe-is-me story. Maybe this was why his book-length manuscript fizzled after the first chapter. Mary tends to her tea cup, stares out at the lawn, becomes mute. Fluffy clouds block the sun, reminding Wayne that the afternoon is ending. Mary empties her tea cup, stands,

and heads to the backdoor. Wayne pursues her into the kitchen. Before Wayne can apologize, Mary turns and hugs his neck.

"Now what?" he says when Mary releases him.

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Over the course of the week, Wayne and Mary fall into a routine. She makes the meals, tidies his room, works in the garden, maintains the hospice house. Wayne does all he can to be a good guest, making his bed in the morning, clearing his plate after every meal. He walks the neighborhood after breakfast. The neighbors have gone to work, their kids to school, but Wayne welcomes the peaceful solitude. The walks afford him time to reflect on his life, on his wrongs and rights. He remembers a priest or talk show host or college professor, someone, saying that the secret to life was simple: Do more right than wrong. Wayne draws out two lists in his head but quits before the wrongs overwhelm the rights. He should have done more right. In a small attempt to tip the scales in a more hopeful direction, Wayne resolves to treat Mary with utmost respect, to do his best not to burden her with any more work than she already has.

Returning from his walk that Friday, Wayne finds Mary pushing a noisy lawn mower across the front yard. A kind of chauvinistic guilt keeps Wayne from walking inside for an afternoon nap. He insists that Mary let him help. "Aren't the new patients arriving today?" he says, standing beside Mary at the back of the lawn mower. "I'll finish the lawn."

She protests, calls him a patient, says he should be convalescing, concentrating only on improving his health, insuring his own comfort. Wayne won't let go of the lawn mower until Mary acquiesces. She trots inside to mop the floors before the new people appear, and Wayne cranks the mower to life.

Two patients, along with their families, arrive at the same time, and Wayne stops the mower to watch from the side of the house. Mr. Ryder uses a walker and is so hunched over that Mary has to squat to look him in the face. A tube curls over Mr. Ryder's ears and under his enormous nose, feeding him fresh oxygen, and he wears the supply bottle on a strap over one shoulder. Mrs. Connor gets wheeled out of a custom van driven by her gray-haired son, her grandson—arm raised—manages the IV bag. Mrs. Connor's eyes register fright, discomfort, and bewilderment, and when Mary greets her, she won't talk. "Today is not a good day," her son reports.

Wayne restarts the lawn mower only after the patients and their families are inside. He hustles the noisy machine back and forth and is reminded of his adolescence, summers cutting people's lawns for a few bucks. Wayne looks back to check his progress, imagines that Mary will be proud, anticipates the good feeling her attention will bring. His gaze runs the border between tall and short grass, and for a second, Wayne is lost in all that green. Then the grass rushes at him as he drops to a knee and collapses forward.

Wayne is enveloped by vivid green and the airy, fragrant scent of cut grass, but when he opens his eyes, he is back in his room, in bed. A mottled light diffused by the curtains comes through the window, and Wayne can't determine the time of day. The bedroom door opens and Mary pushes her head inside. She whispers. "You're awake. How do you feel?"

Wayne has his own set of questions and whispers back. "What happened? How did I get up here?"

Mary comes into the room but leaves the door open. She sits on the edge of the bed. "All I know is that I was helping Mr. Ryder into his room when I found myself frowning.

‘Something happened,’ I said to myself, and that was when I realized that I couldn’t hear the lawn mower anymore. I peeked out of the window and saw you, down in the grass.” Mary puts her hands in her lap. “Mrs. Connor’s son and grandson carried you up here.”

“How long have I been out?”

“A few hours. But I have been monitoring your breathing, heart rate, and pulse every fifteen minutes. I do have EMT training, you know.” She gives a little smile then that makes one cheek dimple. Had he enough strength to lean forward, Wayne would have put his lips to the spot.

For the next few days, as Wayne recovers from what he terms “a minor episode,” Mary motors about the hospice house. Mr. Ryder won’t eat, and Mrs. Connor has not adjusted well to the change of environment. The old woman still won’t talk, won’t look Mary in the eye, and won’t use the toilet when she defecates. Between the cleaning, the cooking, and the care, Mary makes a point of visiting Wayne several times throughout the day. He insists that he is feeling better and does not need all the attention. But each time Mary appears, Wayne cannot stop a smile from forming. In fact, one particular time he challenges himself to keep a straight face and fails. Despite Mary’s take-it-easy advice, Wayne gets out of bed and roams his room. He says he hasn’t forgotten about the lawn and wants to finish the job, and that if Mary does not let him out of his room he’ll go crazy before his heart gives out. They agree to two more days of bed rest and confinement.

In the meantime, Mary meets with Candace. She used to work in the house when Morton Holdings, LLC, ran the business, and Mary hires her back. Later, Wayne finds out that Mary kept Candace at the salary she formerly had, a figure that Mary’s current business model cannot

sustain. “We’ll get more patients,” Mary says to Wayne during one of her visits to his room. “We’ll fill every bed in here, and I’ll get the entire staff to return.” At the same time, Mary has not collected a pay check for herself since taking over the business.

Candace is quiet, with thick wrists and ankles. She’s an expert cleaner and can bend at the waist or squat for long stretches of time without aches or pains. Candace, like Mary, lives in one of the third-floor rooms. She is a hard worker and sleeps little, but even two staff are not enough to care for three terminal patients and the upkeep on the entire house.

Wayne, about to be freed from his room that Friday, makes two decisions. The first is that he will never again think of himself as terminal. Instead, he is going to live his life. The second decision is what he tells himself in the bathroom mirror just before he exits his room. He is not scared of dying, of the afterlife, of his prospects of getting into heaven or wallowing in hell. “The truth is that I have fallen in love with Mary, and I will never tell her.”

Wayne finds in the kitchen Mary and Candace leaning their elbows on the table and sipping from mugs of hot tea. When they turn to Wayne, he sees the seriousness in their faces of the conversation that preceded his entrance, so he cracks a joke: “Now where is that lawn mower?” Every time Mary or Candace ask how he’s feeling, Wayne quips, “Strong enough to mow ten lawns!”

By the next week, Wayne is back to his routine. He walks in the mornings, naps after lunch, reads, perhaps watches some TV in the evenings, though most shows simply baffle and annoy him. Really, Wayne looks for moments in the day where Mary is not inundated with chores. He prizes the conversations he shares with her and replays them in his head as he falls asleep each night.

Mary had grown up in a strict, Christian-conservative family and as a consequence looks for the hand of God in life's daily events. She is the first truly moral person Wayne has ever known, one who strives to do right even at cost to herself. Kind does not capture Mary's optimism.

Wayne ends his walk around the neighborhood early. That weird sensation he had felt while mowing the lawn has returned and is not going away—the feeling is that his heart might drop out of his chest at any moment. When he reaches the hospice house, Wayne finds a team of firemen crowded around their red truck. None wears a helmet. They are smiling, joking with each other. An ambulance sits in the driveway with its back doors flung open. "What happened?" Wayne asks the firemen, but they don't have to answer.

The front door opens. Mary leads the way and holds the door for the gurney. A white sheet covers the body strapped there. Both Mary and Candace wipe tears from their eyes. The old man died, Wayne guesses and walks across the front lawn to the two women. "His lungs finally quit, huh?" Wayne says. "Mr. Ryder, the oxygen tube wasn't enough."

Actually, Mrs. Connor is the one being loaded into the ambulance. She had been at the hospice house for nine days and never said a word. Candace tells Mary not to blame herself, and says the death is really no one's fault, not even Mrs. Connor's. That night, after Mr. Ryder is fed and put to bed, Candace, Mary, and Wayne eat a quiet dinner in the kitchen. Wayne watches Mary keenly, imagining how she will react when his turn comes. Outwardly, at least, Mary gives little away; she is neither sullen nor relieved, neither dour nor mellow. Wayne figures that she feels like he does, like an open wound, sensitive and only just beginning to heal.

Despite Mrs. Connor's death, the bed does not stay empty long. New patients moved in almost every day and within two weeks the entire second floor is occupied. To help with the twelve patients, Mary hires back two more women who had worked at the house previously. The women function well thanks to their history together, and the patients are as comfortable and content as possible.

Now Wayne's heart warbles all the time. His heart slows, slows, before beating again at its normal pace. His fingers and toes are always cold. He resolves to stay quiet about this change, but Mary notices. Wayne quits his walks around the neighborhood, rarely comes downstairs for his meals anymore. He's always trying to catch his breath, always feels tired. And soon, Wayne decides that he'd much prefer just to stay in bed all day. He admits to being exhausted but will tell Mary nothing else. He certainly won't say anything about love now that his condition is changing.

When Wayne can no longer get out of bed, Mary comes to his door with his meals. She spends time feeding him and keeps him company whenever she can. He listens to her talk about the business, how it is going to boom one of these days. "By the end of the year, I hope to have the whole staff back and every bed filled." Mary's dream is that her patients will live comfortably for as long as possible, that she will always have the money to pay her staff well, that she will develop a reputation in the community as a fair business owner. Wayne closes his eyes sometimes and imagines that he is in Mary's future. As she accepts an award from the Chamber of Commerce, he is at the head table recording everything, beaming from ear to ear.

Mary taps the door, pokes her head in, says, "Awake?" Wayne nods, and Mary rolls into the room with his meal. Since Wayne stopped going for walks, stopped leaving the room, his



condition has worsened. He has lost weight and his appetite. His joints do not flex and rotate as they once did. For the last several days, Wayne has been attached to a heart monitor stationed bedside. His blood pressure and heart rate are below average and declining little by little.

Wayne peeks at the tray Mary sets on the side table. "Tell me you brought me one of those wonderful sandwiches of yours, with a tomato slice cut straight from the garden."

"Sorry." Mary gives a cute shake of her head and her hair bounces against her cheeks.

"Tell me it's homemade soup, at least." Wayne knows as well as Mary that he cannot manage even chicken noodle soup anymore. As per Dr. Stan, Wayne is on a diet of high-calorie, high-protein, vitamin-rich nutrition shakes that taste just awful.

Mary uncaps one bottle and directs the straw to Wayne's mouth. He says, "Well, you cannot stop me from imagining that this is your famous sandwich." She gives him a look.

Wayne wants to hear about Mary's day; he wants her to talk for hours even if all she has are stories of cleaning, cooking, and nursing patients. He needs to hear her voice instead of the machine beating irregularly at his bedside. Mary talks about her trip to the hardware store that morning. She bought a bird bath, a watering can, and potted herbs: rosemary, thyme, basil, and mint. "I'm expanding the garden," Mary says proudly. "Three more staffers are coming back on board this weekend, so I'll have time."

Wayne listens to her talk and imagines that they are married and the hospice is their home.

Mary takes the empty bottle from Wayne and holds his hand. Her eyes are steady, serious, but not without heartfelt concern. Wayne will never forget the look, how Mary is framed by his bedroom, how she leans toward him, sharing the mattress. He thinks she might

burst out laughing and crying simultaneously and feels tears stinging his own eyes. Wayne can no longer keep quiet about his love for Mary. He has already prepared himself for a lukewarm response, has told himself that Mary's reply is not as important as unburdening his heart.

"Mary, I.... You are wonderful." He squeezes her hand with every ounce of energy he can muster.

"You're a kind man."

They share an adolescent giggle. Wayne hides his cowardice but never breaks his handhold. Candace comes to the door, requesting Mary's help.

Mary looks back at Wayne. "Go," he says. "I'll still be here."

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Days later, Wayne wakes in the county hospital's I.C.U. hooked to a ventilator. He can answer questions with nods and shakes of his head but cannot talk with the endotracheal tube in place. Mary enters after some oily doctors leave. She says, "We almost lost you." The lines around Mary's eyes deepen as she pulls her hair into a ponytail.

Thirty-six hours pass before the doctors grant Wayne's request. He can leave the hospital but, Mary tells him, "The ventilator is coming with us."

There is no way to safely get Wayne up to his bedroom, so Mary and some of the other women clear a space for him off the kitchen, near a window with a view of the backyard and garden. Mary checks on Wayne constantly throughout the day. He uses a pencil and paper to communicate, and most of the time he writes sarcastic replies to let everyone know his sense of humor thrives. But each day, Wayne's penmanship deteriorates. And if he can't talk and can't

write to Mary, how will he finally tell her how he feels? He gives up on trying to write the word “love,” and attempts a heart that looks like a childish swirl.

Mary comes in from the garden with mint sprigs and basil leaves, cups them in each hand, and approaches Wayne's bed. He can only blink. "I have something for you. Smell." She puts one hand under Wayne's nose. He can't sniff the way he used to, not hooked to the ventilator, but when the machine clicks and draws air into Wayne's body, he catches the scents, first of basil, then of mint. And with each, he is carried back in time. In Mary's first hand, he recalls every slice of pizza he has ever eaten, and when Mary's other hand moves in, he savors the reminder of mint chocolate chip ice cream served in a deep bowl. The odors comprise a meal and dessert, favorite flavors from Wayne's life—pizza parties and favorite family dinners and special occasions.

Now, Mary becomes part of these memories, synonymous with the smells: the basil, soft, aromatic, peppery and the mint with its cool, enlivening bite. These herbs describe Mary perfectly, her soft patience, her hard-working bite. She leaves some herbs on the bedside table and begins preparing meals for the patients in her care.

The ventilator beeps and Wayne's flustered heart beats, and with the new breath he sniffs at the fragrant air. If he could talk, he would say, "I love you" until his throat stung. Instead, he closes his eyes, listening to Mary in the kitchen, working the pots, the pans, humming just louder than the ventilator. And the fragrance—of the garden, of the meal, of Mary—surrounds him, and the ventilator keeps a steady pulse even though Wayne's heart has stopped.

## CHAPTER 2

### GIANTESS AND OTHER STORIES: A CREATIVE PROCESS

When Did I Start Writing?

I began writing in college in 1999. My first creative writing workshop at the local county college was “Introduction to Creative Writing.” In the class, we practiced in a variety of genres but focused mainly on poetry and short fiction. We completed writing assignments meant to improve our skills in description, setting, rhyme, and dialogue. We also read and critiqued our peers’ work. By the close of the semester, I had written three poems, “Buttermilk,” “Fastback,” and “Rounders,” a sarcastic sonnet about baseball, and one short story entitled “Bring Me the Night,” a poor imitation of Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*.

As an undergraduate student, I wrote for classes, and most of the writing I did was within the context of such classes as Introduction to British Literature, Introduction to Journalism, Feature Writing, Writing and Reporting, Western Philosophy, and American Literature I & II. As an upperclassman, I took a playwriting class, which was not all that different from a creative writing workshop in its design and organization. We were required to compose a one-act play. I wrote a fifteen-page play called *Confession*, a drama about a condemned convict who finally confesses to his crimes, hoping to find redemption before his execution. The play included two roles: Frank, the convict and Joe, the cop.

*Confession* was featured in a student-run playwriting showcase and was performed in the campus auxiliary theater with volunteer actors in front of a live audience. Because I had written *Confession*, I was made director of *Confession*, and the two actors in my play looked to me for

character motivation. This forced me to talk about what was *not* written in the script. I had to think about why the convict grew remorseful or why the cop became belligerent. In talking about the characters with the actors, I realized that their impressions of the cop and convict were different from my own. My audience, I learned, might view my writing in ways I had not considered. The following year, I wrote another play, a full-length, hour-long drama called *Skeletons* and once again found actors to perform the piece. *Skeletons* was set in the walk-in closet of a family home on the wedding day of the family's eldest daughter, Vivian. All of the action takes place in the closet and includes scenes of sibling gossip about the wedding and Vivian expressing to her mother her reservations about getting married to Roger. In the end, Vivian and Roger marry and live happily ever after.

By the time I applied for and got accepted to the master's program at Rowan University, my taste for live theatre died out. In 2004, Rowan offered fiction workshops but not playwriting. In the short story workshops I took at Rowan, I produced stories that reflected my enjoyment of reading Stephen King. King has written several story collections with themes ranging from macabre to speculative to science fiction, and I mimicked these themes in my own stories. I wrote about horrible diseases, creatures from the grave, children with mysterious powers, and haunted places. Peer critics made clear in their comments that I was "taking" from Stephen King, and I have to admit he was an enormous influence in those days. King's influence most obviously shows itself (in this collection) in my story "Clones." King has written about creatures that wreak havoc and about experiments gone wrong, and "Clones" is of the same ilk. "Clones" tells the story of a wealthy narrator, Pops, who enlists the help of a geneticist named Eggy to clone some of history's most note-worthy men: Albert Einstein, Elvis Presley, and John F.

Kennedy. For my foray into King-esque sci-fi, I maintained the reality and present-day world we know rather than using a post-apocalyptic world as King does in stories like *The Dark Tower* series or *Running Man*. Otherwise, “Clones” contains all I have learned from King: the maniacal and wealthy kook, the mad scientist, and, as in King’s “The Lawnmower Man,” the attempt of Man to play God. Like King, “Clones” is packed with suspense: Will the clones take over? Will their creators survive?

In 2007, I pursued an MFA in Creative Writing at Fairleigh Dickinson University. This was a more hands-on degree, focused on creating short fictions. I produced a story collection as my final thesis. The eight stories were connected by a common narrator, one Walter Walsh, and each story followed a different aspect of Walsh’s life. For instance, “Mr. Walsh” portrayed the narrator at his night-shift job as a radio producer for a sports show. “Daddy” told the story of Walter’s life as a father to two young girls. “Walt” focused on the narrator’s married life, how he married young and struggled to understand his wife. There were even stories of Walter Walsh as an adolescent and as a senior citizen.

Five years later, The University of Texas at Dallas accepted me into its PhD in Humanities program, where I continued my study of the short story. Once more, I took writing workshops which included: Creating Short Fiction with Dr. R. Clay Reynolds, Creating Fiction: Intermediate with Dr. Betty Wiesepepe, and Creating Short Fiction: Intermediate with Dr. Manuel Martinez.

My story “Victories” came to life in Dr. Betty Wiesepepe’s writing workshop. During one class, Dr. Wiesepepe brought some old photographs for her students to sift through. These were pictures—some in color, some black and white—of people’s faces, of streets and shops,

and portraits of families. I chose a somewhat unfocused black and white image of a woman with dark hair. She was bundled in a wool coat, gloves and a hat, her black purse hung over one wrist. She could have been heading off to church services or to a relative's house. As I recall, the image suggested the late 1940s or early 1950s. I guessed that this woman did not often dress this way, that she was a working woman, one who worked in the home now but had once worked in a factory during the Second World War.

That was really all I had to go on when I started the story. I recall writing an early draft about a female factory worker who, now that the war was done, had taken her skills back to her home. But I could not tell that story. Writing outside of contemporary America was a struggle for me, due to the research required to achieve an authentic story. I was not sure if the woman should be married or a widow. She did not seem to have kids and I did not want to force kids on the character forming in my head.

In the first draft, the woman's shelter in the story began as a hospital for the insane until I realized I was borrowing ideas from Ken Kesey. Indira, the protagonist of "Victories," was definitely a worker, but instead of Chief mopping the floors of the psychiatric ward, Indira would be a janitor at a women's shelter. Once I had the character and the location, I put Indira to work, and all she did was work since her husband had left her and she had no family of her own. Hence, the plot became that she would start a family of her own, first with her cats, then with a neglected boy who visits the shelter. Indira would rescue herself by rescuing the boy.

The inspiration for "Giantess" came from Dr. Manuel Martinez's writing workshop. This time, students were directed to delve into their past, to talk about their family background. Since my father left the family when I was young, I did not know much about my Italian heritage, nor

my Italian-American cousins, grandparents, and great-grandparents. My only recourse was to contact my older sister, the self-appointed historian of the family.

Laura ran through some of our relatives' histories, like Cousin Paul who had died a few years earlier from a prescription drug overdose and Uncle Tony, who was in jail. But it was not until Laura told me about my grandfather that I grew interested. Laura had learned from Cousin Bella, that my grandfather had a mistress back in the 1930s, and the mistress had been a bodybuilder. I do not recall the details of what Laura told me about the affair. Simply, I was struck by a man who, in photos, looked to be no more than five-feet, eight-inches tall, having an affair with a woman who was taller and bulkier.

“Giantess” to a great extent follows this idea: a guy of average height, a bit on the skinny side, meets a female bodybuilder, and she is not only physically imposing but has a dominant personality, too. How would a guy get out of this kind of relationship? Could he get out? Instead, maybe he is the kind of guy who seeks a challenge. I could not set the story in any time period but the present era. I tend to avoid starting stories that require research, and since I do not readily know much about New York in the 1930s, I placed “Giantess” in the present day. Of course, after the workshop class, peer feedback, and after working with the co-chairs of my dissertation committee, “Giantess” has morphed. Now, in the final draft, there is no infidelity, as was the case in the true story involving my grandfather. “Giantess” is really about a liaison that becomes permanent and inescapable. In the end, the narrator marries his giantess “and before I knew it, Nicole had me in her arms, like an infant, like a damsel. Grinning, she booted open the door, proclaimed, ‘This is the beginning of our life together,’ and carried me over the threshold. I cringed and held tight to her enormous neck, afraid to be dropped” (27).



In Professor Clay Reynolds's writing workshop, we were given the freedom to write about any topic we wanted. My best friend used to live on Oregon Street, the site of the opening of "The Pub Runner," in a studio apartment on the third floor of a neglected tenement building in Trenton, New Jersey. Richie was pre-med at The College of New Jersey.

On the way to visit Richie one evening, I witnessed a NJ Transit bus hop the curb and crash into the bus stop bench. The sound of the crash was tremendous, but thankfully no one was on the bench, and no one was hurt. Though a bitter cold night, onlookers filled the sidewalks and fire escapes. My fingertips went numb waiting for the cops to take my eyewitness statement. The bus had uprooted the bench and taken down a street sign. Before I reached my friend's apartment, a herd of revelers thundered down the block and fumbled their way into a pub, laughing and whooping, falling all over each other. These images stuck with me, and when I got back home, I made two notes: "bus crash" and "drunken joggers." The original setting for the story was Trenton, New Jersey, a city I know better than most. I liked the idea of Trenton's steel bridges and dirty streets serving as the backdrop for a story I thought would be about drunks running out of a bar and into traffic, like lemmings diving to their deaths.

As the story grew, as I put words to page for the first draft, the bus became a taxi, then several taxis, and my cast of characters became cab drivers, maniacal and homicidal. The plot centered on three or four cab drivers who were tired of Trenton's bar scene, tired of driving drunk people from the broken-down bars back to their broken-down row houses. The cabbies would be fed up with washing the puke out of their backseats, tired of getting shortchanged, tired of the loud annoyances of the inebriated. So, they begin taking matters into their own hands. They purposely hit the drunks with their vehicles, intending to maim rather than kill, but

certainly unremorseful for any “accidental” deaths they caused. The cabbies would also band together, to corroborate each other’s stories when the police showed up to find out what happened.

But as I drafted, the maniac-cabbies plot felt thin, simple, and set at a remove from the audience I thought would read the story. I did not know much about the lives of cab drivers, and did not think my readers would relate to it. Also, there were glaring holes in the logic of the plot. The cops had to act unrealistically dense to believe that the cabbies were having “accidents,” and readers would have to believe that no other witnesses would have been present to see what really happened to the drunks. It all seemed petty.

To address the distance cabbie-protagonists caused, I decided that a relationship would work better. Readers love a good interpersonal tale like Bobbie Ann Mason’s “Shiloh.” I changed the prospective from the cabbies to the drunks. Again, simply having drunks stumble into the road did not seem very interesting or appealing. But a boyfriend and girlfriend who literally ran from pub to pub, getting drunker along the way, was an avenue I wanted to explore in my writing, mostly because I did not know where it might lead. This feeling—the feeling of exploring “the odd” in my writing—appeals to me, and I have learned to write to this feeling.

By the time I finished the draft that I would bring to my writing workshop, the plot had become more or less what it is today: a young man joins an organized race from pub to pub on the same day that his girlfriend decides to officially break up with him and move out of their apartment. The only maniacal cab driver appears at the story’s climax, when a rival of the protagonist gets sideswiped and injured:

Just outside, I bump into the Road Runner, ghostly and ruined, his leg dragging behind, his arm draped over the shoulder of the cabbie who hit him. The cabbie says, “Jeez, man. He won’t go to the hospital. The fool.” (50)

After the workshop, though the story was generally received well, it became clear to me from peers’ comments that the setting was ill-chosen. The average reader had no understanding of Trenton, could not picture the place, and could not point to it on a map. This caused the setting to feel foreign, small, insignificant, and I thought the story, too, felt small and insignificant due to location. So, I moved the setting to the closest big city: Philadelphia. Both Trenton and Philadelphia can be dirty and gritty. Both are replete with bars and pubs and row houses. Both have a historical connection to the American Revolution. But Philadelphia had scale and size, a greater population, and more dangerous, traffic-clogged streets. Most importantly, readers could identify with Philadelphia more readily than Trenton, New Jersey.

Not only have these writing teachers, writing workshops and prompts, and peer critiques shaped and influenced this collection, the progression of my own writing has been greatly enhanced by my editorship of *Reunion: The Dallas Review*.

### The Challenge of Editing a Journal

One of the most distinctive features of the creative program at UT-Dallas is the production and publication of its literary journal. Published annually, *Reunion: The Dallas Review* is the student-run literary journal at UT-Dallas, supported by the School of Arts & Humanities. *Reunion* has been in its current iteration for more than twenty years and publishes in the

following genres: short fiction, poetry, creative non-fiction, translation, drama, and visual art.

The fact that *Reunion* publishes in six genres distinguishes it from most major university literary publications.

As an editor of *Reunion*, I have been exposed to so many submissions from such a diverse group of writers: international writers, novice and veteran writers, those living in all corners of America with all kinds of educational backgrounds. In my editorial role at *Reunion* for the last two years, I have read more short stories from contemporary writers than ever before in my life. With so many submissions to read, I have learned the importance of the first line, the first paragraph. Therefore, as a writer, I make sure my own openings are intriguing and eye-catching. A prime example of this comes in my story “Dynamo.” Movies like *Office Space* and *Horrible Bosses* and the TV series *The Office* inspired this story of a disgruntled employee battling an incompetent supervisor. The story begins with the lines: “Hugh Weeb had been jealous of me from the start. During the phone interview he was so nervous he didn’t know what to ask, and at the second round of interviews, Hugh’s boss and his boss’s boss led the conversation” (111). With this start, I have set up for readers the central conflict of the piece—the boss’s jealousy of the employee. I have also characterized the antagonist Hugh as the under-qualified boss that he is (at least in the narrator’s eyes) by showing that at the interview he was “jealous” and “nervous” and needed his supervisors’ support. This opening excerpt names the principle characters for readers, specifically the boss and the narrator. This allows the audience to get acquainted with characters integral to the story.

Moreover, I have learned from my editorship that trite expressions and hackneyed plots spell doom for stories. Many writers of short fiction are influenced by fads and popular culture

and politics, everything from the President of the United States to virtual reality to protesting athletes to the #MeToo movement to global warming to anime and driver-less cars. Frequently, such stories are so raw, so blatantly opinionated, so brand new as to be undercooked and not fully formed. A story writer, I realized, needs time to process current events before writing about them, and a good story needs to be as close to perfect in plot and grammar and spelling as possible.

As editor—first, as fiction editor, then as Editor-in-Chief—I also relied on the judgment and expertise of staff-readers. In my position as Fiction Editor, I received submissions of short stories and distributed them, via our online submission platform Submittable.com. Fiction Readers would read and grade each of about one hundred short story submissions. I, too, read and graded every submission. Later, I would examine the best of the submissions and choose five or six to send forward to the Executive Editors. The Executive Editors (the Managing Editor, the Assistant Editor, and the Editor-in-Chief) would then select two or three of my recommendations for publication. This meant that I would then contact the writers and have them sign the publication contract. Once the contracts are signed and returned, the story goes forward for final edits and publication.

Submissions to the journal encompass a wide range of writing styles and categories. Some submissions fall into a particular category; that is, we would receive horror stories, Westerns, fantasy, and science fiction alongside “literary” submissions, those one might find in *Tin House* or *The New Yorker*. As part of our training program, staff-readers were given several criteria to follow. First, they would read “blind” submissions so that no identifying information about the submitter would influence their reading.

Secondly, all staff adhere to Ezra Pound's philosophy on judging art, which Pound wrote about in "Patria Mia" from *Selected Prose 1909-1965*. *Reunion's* editors and readers ask themselves the following about each submission, regardless of genre:

1. Is this person a serious artist?
2. Does the work present what the artist intended it to present, effectively?
3. Does [the work] comply with the laws inherent in itself?
4. Does the manner fit close to the matter?

Additionally, we value originality in submissions and seek artists with something to say. We want the pieces selected for publication to elevate the journal as a whole. We ask our staff to monitor their reactions to the works they evaluate and ask: Will this submission be relevant in years to come? Lastly, we caution staff-readers to be wary of mechanical errors in writing: punctuation, grammar, spelling, usage, as this may be a sign of an inattentive artist.

Now, as Editor-in-Chief, I will decide not just what should be published in fiction but what offerings from the other five genres will be printed. Further, I will also decide the arrangement of the entire journal. Working closely with our layout designer and editorial board, I will approve every submission, every aspect of the journal, from the cover design to the font size and line spacing. I will be responsible for proofreading, too.

In my capacity as editor, I have also learned that the ending of a story is equally important and should feel appropriate and suitable to the rest of the story. O. Henry's twist endings would not fare well for the stories I read as editor; neither would a story like Raymond Carver's "Will You Please Be Quiet, Please," which feels lax and meanders toward the final quarter of the plot. Hence, I am conscious that all arrows must point to the ending; otherwise,

readers may feel hoodwinked or disappointed. This is exemplified in my story “So I Go to Church.” The story begins with the first-person narrator already at church when a man named Michael comes late into his pew. “So I Go to Church” includes a circular ending. In other words, the ending calls readers’ attention back to the beginning. Therefore, this story ends where it began, at church.

I already know where I’ll be next Sunday. I’ll be at church after everyone else has left, when the church is dark, and I’ll rise and light a memorial candle and say a prayer for little Michael, and hope, finally, I will be heard. (101)

Readers are meant to feel a sense of completion with a circular ending, and that was my goal in writing “So I Go to Church.”

Thanks to my editorship, I have refined my own writing. I apply Pound’s criteria to my work. I hold myself to the same strict mechanics, grammar, and usage rules. I attempt to push my stories as close as I can to perfection. I write with the idea that seasoned and trained readers and editors will be rating my submissions. Exposure to the inner workings of a journal has had the effect of tightening my story openings and closings.

### The Creation of a Short Story Collection

This collection is the culmination of years of writing and revising. Many of these stories are the result of my work in graduate writing workshops and, thus, most have gone through the workshop process: first draft, peer and professor critiques, revised draft. Two stories in this collection (“Augustana” and “Dynamo”) have won the Robert Bone Memorial Creative Writing

Contest in 2017 and 2018, respectively. As well, “Victories” took first place in the Texas Association of Creative Writing Teachers (TACWT) 2016 graduate fiction competition.

I have chosen to call this collection *Giantess and Other Stories* for two reasons. First, the word “giantess” is striking without being incomprehensible. “Giantess” suggests largeness, girth, enormity, and I hope the collection as a whole offers the same. I want the stories to feel like they have come from the same pen, the same writer, without being remakes or repetitions of themselves. Italo Calvino, a short story writer of the 1950s and 1960s, wrote speculative tales related to the cosmos. *The Complete Cosmicomics* is the collection of all of Calvino’s space-creation-biology stories in one book, virtually every tale narrated by Qfwfq. As entertaining as the stories are, one need not read all roughly 400 pages in the collection. After about six or ten stories, one realizes that Calvino is writing virtually the same basic story over and over again. He writes love stories: between single-celled organisms, between the earth and moon, between evolving amphibious creatures. Eventually, the stories get monotonous. I want my collection to have enough variety to keep readers on edge. Readers may not engage with one particular story but will hopefully find something new, different, and appealing in the next.

Many short story collections employ the familiar “and other stories” as part of the title, for instance: Richard Bausch’s *Spirits and Other Stories*, Ernest Hemingway’s *The Snows of Kilimanjaro and Other Stories*, Shirley Jackson’s *The Lottery and Other Stories*, and Karen Russell’s *Vampires in the Lemon Grove and Other Stories*. I have chosen the term for practical, as well as marketing purposes. I want readers to know, as I like to know, what book I hold in my hands. Using “selected stories” or something like *The Stories of John Cheever* would not work as well in my case. First, “selected stories” implies that a writer has had a long career, and in



that time, some stories were published while others were not. Hence, the published stories were “selected” over some of lesser quality. The Cheever title above implies that the *writer* has surpassed his creations; the writer transcends the work. He and his reputation are why consumers are buying the book. Cheever’s stories, though recognized as fine examples of story writing, are less important than the name affixed to those stories. Probably, it is Cheever the novelist who draws readers to his story collection.

The order of stories in my collection came about through careful consideration of the style and length of each story. *Giantess and Other Stories* aims to convey a sense of rhythm. In terms of length, “Giantess” is one of the longer stories in the collection. Leading with a longer (and more involved) story allows for readers to get acclimated to the collection. “Giantess” is also one of the stronger pieces in the collection due to its concentration on and development of the two main characters. Before iTunes, when bands released albums, much attention was given to the opening track, and sometimes that opening track could set the tone for the rest of the album. An opening track characterized the work to follow and often unified the work as well. I want “Giantess” to fulfill this role, to be the hit that introduces the work, my writing style and themes, and keeps readers moving to the beat.

One may notice that stories two through five (“Victories,” “The Pub Runner,” “Augustana,” and “Leaving”) are very close to the same length, approximately between ten and thirteen pages each, roughly 2,500 to 3,500 words. These shorter stories are meant to affect readers in a timelier manner, a quicker punch than the heftier “Giantess” could offer. Furthermore, the change in length gives readers a bit of a breather. My short stories are not

comparable in length to Henry James. James's masterfully creepy "The Turn of the Screw" is more of a novel or novella by today's standards.

My story "Clones" appears at just a little past the midway point of the collection. This seventeen-page tale is followed by the shortest stories of the collection ("So I Go to Church" and "Undeniable Proof of the Bigfoot"). As mentioned above, I have chosen a longer story followed by shorter, punchier stories. "Dynamo" and "Illness" round out the collection. Once again, these concluding stories are longer, with the last story, "Illness," the longest of all, at twenty-one pages. My hope is that readers will feel this listing undulation in my collection—short jabs interspersed by lumbering, heavy punches, a subliminal rhythm.

But length alone does not determine the placement of the stories; content matters. Four of the stories in the collection are "romantic relationship" stories: "Giantess," "The Pub Runner," "Augustana," and "Illness." In these stories, couples negotiate, to varying degrees, matters of the heart. "The Pub Runner" details a couple that has just broken-up. "Augustana" similarly shows a damaged relationship, wherein the narrator seeks to escape his relationship through highly involved fantasies. "Giantess" focuses on the power dynamic between a couple with the man trying to get the better of the woman and somehow always failing. "Illness," on the other hand, concerns a relationship between a terminally ill patient and his caregiver. This is more of a semi-requited love story, as the sick man struggles against his feelings in the face of his failing health, a more serious tale tonally than, say, "Clones."

The other stories are a bit harder to label. The "downcast employee" is evident in "Victories" and "Dynamo," with the former character being somewhat hapless and the latter being underappreciated. Many of the stories are told in first-person point of view, which

inherently suggests—and is true in most cases—that the narrators are deeply introspective. The protagonist of “Leaving” surely is introspective and grappling with his fear of flying, while the narrator from “So I Go to Church” is more of a wandering introvert, who harshly judges those around him. The idea of ethics appears in both “Victories” and “Undeniable Proof of the Bigfoot.” In the former Indira wants to do right by Jordan, to save him from his mother, even though doing so could cost her her job and more. In the latter story, the narrator Cole tries to protect his grandfather from the barbs of a know-it-all professor. He defends his grandfather against skeptics and critics even though he suspects the old man might be telling tall tales.

There are probably as many combinations for arrangement and structure as there are stories. One might choose theme as a guiding principle: the delusion of male power, for example. Or one might put “Victories,” for instance, in a different location because of its more serious tone and demeanor, or certainly avoid sandwiching it between “Giantess” and “The Pub Runner,” both of which have decidedly more humorous premises. Or one might keep the more mean-spirited and selfish narrators away from each other, as I have done with “Giantess,” “Augustana,” and “Dynamo.” Ultimately, I have chosen this arrangement with a mind to the kind of reader I am, the kind of reader I hope to attract, a reader who likes length-variety every bit as much as varieties in setting, tone, and narration.

### The Guiding Principles for Writing My Short Stories

Practically all craft and theory books regarding the short story will, at some point, mention Aristotle, Edgar Allan Poe, and Anton Chekhov. Aristotle, though not specifically talking about

short stories, believed in the idea that drama should have a recognizable beginning, middle, and end. Janet Burroway applies Aristotle's theory to both poems and stories in her standard for the creative writing classroom *Imaginative Writing: Elements of the Craft*. I agree that these elements seem logical enough and do fit the short story form well, but as teacher and editor, I have encountered countless stories that lack one or more of these parts. When I started writing stories, I found that I had beginnings and middles but never really finished a story. Either I grew bored or lazy, or the plot crumbled, and I abandoned the work. This happened with my early drafts of "Augustana." Originally, "Augustana" started with a double date at a barbeque restaurant. One of the boyfriends, the story's narrator, commented on the beautiful waitresses, but nothing happened. The couples left the restaurant and the story ended. But that was not the kind of ending Aristotle was promoting. My awakening came when I recognized that the story had no meaning because it had no ending; it left readers unfulfilled. To fix this problem, I added an ending by including a problem earlier in the story. The couple is experiencing relationship problems and may soon break-up. To cope, the narrator escapes into his fantasies of sexy cowgirls. Later, Augustana, the narrator's girlfriend, gets pregnant. These problems force a resolution. The narrator basically has to mature, not just as a boyfriend but as a father-to-be. Now, "Augustana" ends with a more satisfying resolution: "After Augustana and our baby are asleep, my cowgirls come calling. They thunder into town on horseback, pistols popping, looking to round me up. Only now, I'm not interested" (64). The narrator has changed as a character. He is not interested in frivolity and selfishness. For the beginning and middle of the story, the narrator was self-centered and self-concerned. In order to have a satisfying ending, the narrator must change; he must face the issues in his life instead of avoiding them. Only when he

does this can the story conclude. Because of this experience, when reviewing what I have written, I always check to see that I have followed Aristotle's advice: stories should have a recognizable beginning, middle, and end.

Nabokov, I think, was one of many who said that writers should throw away their first three pages and begin the story on page four. *In media res*, as some craft books call it; others refer to it as an inciting incident. The idea is for writers to begin as close to the end as possible and begin in the middle of the action. I agree with this outlook and believe it is compatible with Aristotle's beginning, middle, and end, the idea that the story is a journey that readers follow, and extended exposition is wasteful. Readers should sense that a story has begun, that they are in the thick of the plot, and that the end is fast approaching. My method for revision seeks to follow this advice. Most of what I cut from my stories is from the beginning: a lot of wasted words used just to get the story and character on the page. Like Sherwood Anderson and Ray Bradbury, I am always trying to compress and tighten. I want to move readers through the story as fast as possible. With the first sentence I am racing to get to the end. No matter how finely crafted those beginning words may be, if they do not serve to move the plot or develop the character, they have to be cut.

Again, my story "Augustana" is a prime example of a long-winded opening. The original draft begins like this:

I stay quiet when Augustana talks about marriage, and if she mentions kids, I sneak out of the room completely. Augustana said she needed a hug and called me to her. "Now wrap your arms around me, Anton. Like you mean it." This whole week past we've had friends visit. We take them to a restaurant; we get caught up on life. Of the three

couples, two are married and one is engaged. We're already invited to the wedding which won't happen until next summer. "Come on, Anton," Augustana says. "Hold me." I'm tired. We just spent the day out with the engaged couple Burt and Chelsea, and this was after I worked a full day at the university. I want to go to sleep. Augustana wants hugs. "Give me kisses, too," she says. Augustana wants kisses and hugs. "I need to feel you." I do my best, being so tired, so ill-tempered.

The first weakness of this quoted portion is extended exposition. The narrator tells more than shows, telling readers about double dating and how annoying Augustana's friends can be. In the final draft, readers will notice, the "We take them to a restaurant; we get caught up on life" exposition has become a fully formed scene, more completely showing the narrator's behavior. The second main difference is the characters' names. Only Augustana's name survives in the final draft. The original opening inundates readers with four character names in the first paragraph alone. This is a lot for readers to handle, especially at the start of the story, when readers are busy simply trying to acclimate themselves to the time period, setting, and mood of the piece. The final draft is more succinct:

Augustana presses against my back. Her heavy arm and leg drape me, and I begin to sweat at those places where our flesh meets. She finds my hand and holds it. "This is good, isn't it?" She's not talking about our hands. Augustana is like a puppy, restless, exuberant, burning my neck with her hot breath, and I try to slink away but the heat has welded us together. (52)

Many consider Edgar Allan Poe the first theorist of American short fiction. He devised the idea that a story should produce a single effect. Poe's idea relates closely to Anton

Chekhov's "manageable cast of characters" (qtd. in LaPlante 112-113), and both ideas together force writers (me, especially) from doing more than the form will allow. In this way, minor characters and background characters can remain flat, giving more time and attention to the two or three main characters, helping them become rounded and life-like.

The influences of Poe and Chekhov can be seen, in particular, in my story "Undeniable Proof of the Bigfoot." To create the single effect, I purposely and repeatedly make reference to Grandpa Charlie's shooting-the-Bigfoot flashback. In fact, the story opens with it:

Grandpa Charlie shot a bigfoot the day I was born. The bigfoot survived but Mom did not. Grandpa Charlie had been telling this story all over the state for the last eleven years, and earlier this summer, he spoke at the Elks Club, the V.F.W. Post, and the Shriners' Temple. (102)

Readers are reminded of this key incident six pages later in order to reinforce the single effect. Also, "Undeniable Proof of the Bigfoot" contains three main characters: Grandpa Charlie, his grandson (the narrator), and Professor Welker. I attempted to follow Chekhov's advice for most of the stories in this collection. "Dynamo," "Giantess," "Augustana," and "Leaving" have two main characters. "Victories," and "The Pub Runner" have three.

As well, I can use line breaks to speed the plot along and keep the emphasis on one event. This is shown in all of my stories but most prominently in "Augustana." The story opens, as seen above, with the narrator and his girlfriend together in bed. After the first break, a time jump occurs, and the couple is now at a restaurant, dining with friends. The next break, on page sixty, allows for a change in the seasons. Now, it is the start of autumn. The following two breaks take readers into October and then July, respectively. These last two breaks are crucial to the

telling of “Augustana” because Augustana is pregnant and readers are not going to wait long to see the results of the baby’s birth. Suddenly, because of Aristotle, Chekhov, and Poe, because of their parameters, writing a short story becomes manageable. A story like “Undeniable Proof of the Bigfoot” contains just three characters, focuses on one event (Grandpa’s talk), that occurs in one day, and can be told in approximately 2,700 words.

Another guiding principle for me is “Freytag’s Pyramid,” devised by nineteenth-century German writer Gustav Freytag (*Merriam-Webster’s Encyclopedia of Literature*). I adhere to Freytag’s Pyramid structure, not as a hard and fast rule, but as a guide and a diagnostic for clunky or sputtering stories. Freytag’s Pyramid, in its simplest form includes: exposition, inciting incident, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution (*Merriam-Webster’s Encyclopedia of Literature*). One can readily see the pyramid design playing out in dramas, movies, TV shows, novels, and stories. With each line of a story, readers should feel like the plot is building toward something—the crisis moment. This pay-off signals to readers that they have not wasted their time, that the story had a purpose and was worth reading.

One can see this crisis moment enacted in my story “Victories.” For the entire story, Indira, the lowly custodian at a women’s shelter, keeps her eye on Jordan, the little boy treated hostilely by his mother Bibi. Indira wants to rescue the boy but also wants the boy for herself, as the child she never had. Throughout the story, the tension rises: Indira witnesses Bibi roughly handling the boy, then Bibi neglects to feed Jordan or bathe him, and finally Indira catches Bibi huffing chemical solvents. Each event, readers will notice, is just a bit more dramatic than the previous one, as Freytag’s Pyramid advises. The story builds toward a solution: kidnap/rescue Jordan or allow him to remain with Bibi. The climax unfolds thusly:



Finally, she let go, not of the boy but of the door, and together they hustled to the late bus, eager to be out of the cold. They'd have the night and some of the morning together, Indira calculated, before Bibi regained consciousness and alerted shelter officials, and that would sustain Indira, a brief yet enduring victory. (38)

Indira runs off with another woman's child, but at the same time, she justifies her actions, believing that some relief for her and for Jordan is worth the repercussions. Readers will also notice another point of Freytag's Pyramid, that the resolution should come on the heels of the climax. In the excerpt above, the climax is contained in one sentence and the resolution is the very next and last sentence of the story. The pyramid is a good way for me to evaluate problems in my own work: Does the climax come too soon? Does the ending resolve the central conflict of the piece? Does the exposition drone on too long?

However, for me, too closely and rigidly following the pyramid can make storylines predictable, even boring. We see this in countless Hollywood movies, like *The Matrix*, where audiences watch a typical day in the life of the protagonist Neo (exposition), before he gets a phone call telling him his life is in danger and he takes the red pill (inciting incident). He spends much of his time learning about and navigating another world in an effort to defeat the evil antagonists, the Agents (rising tension). He defeats the Agents (climax), and restores order to life as we know it (resolution).

In my story "So I Go to Church" I have chosen to deviate from Freytag's model. The story begins with the narrator meeting the bike messenger, Michael, after church. The narrator, Edgar, wants nothing to do with the man and walks away. Edgar meanders through the town,

passing through a park, window shopping. There is no noticeable rise in tensions, and the climax is set at a remove from the narrator.

My eyes unfocus, no longer looking at the book display but at the reflection in the glass. Blue and red lights whir, and when I turn and look for the lights I first see a police car, then a pickup truck, then Michael laid out in the street, his bicycle about fifteen feet away, his green-and-orange, checkered dress shirt torn through at the elbows. (101)

The bike messenger has been struck and probably killed but the accident is never shown, only the aftermath. Of course, I have connected the narrator back to Michael to show that the accident does elicit a change in the narrator. “Poor bastard is all I can think. Had I not ditched him so quickly at the park, maybe...” (101). The story ends with the narrator predicting he will memorialize the bike messenger by lighting a candle in church the following Sunday. As a result, I have avoided the predictable Hollywood climax, taken the risk of deviating from Freytag’s Pyramid. I have taken this chance because I value experimentation in writing and abhor predictability in my stories.

As well, I am also influenced by Edith Wharton’s emphasis that story openings are crucial and must contain the germ of the tale on page one (50), and that, to attain story compactness and instantaneity, short story writers need to manipulate time and point of view (43). The former happens in Shirley Jackson’s “The Lottery.” Jackson opens “The Lottery” with a scene of children collecting and piling rocks. Readers do not know yet what this scene foretells, but by the end, when Tessie Hutchinson “wins” the lottery and is going to be stoned, the story comes together in a swift, violent action, like a stone hurled. I seek to employ this

suggestion in my writing. By the end of page one, I want my readers to sense where the story is going.

The first page of my story “Clones” sets the mood for the events that follow. On page one, there are several of Wharton’s “germs of the tale.” Since “Clones” is about the wealthy narrator hiring a geneticist to clone famous people, I must, by the end of the first page, give readers a sense of mood and voice of the piece. I must introduce readers to the main characters and set in motion the idea of cloning people as a reality. The story begins with the protagonist-narrator: “With a little dickering, I got Einstein’s tooth for \$72” (77). The use of the word “dickering” (as opposed to “negotiating” or “bartering”) connotes what kind of narrator this is, who he is, and what illicit behaviors he practices. A few paragraphs later, readers are introduced to a pair of principle characters: Eggy, the geneticist and Katya his “girlfriend.” By the end of page one, the conversation between the narrator and Eggy foretells the plot to come:

“Can they clone *people*?” I had asked Eggy.

“The practice is already perfected,” he said, “in theory, anyway. Something this revolutionary takes the right kind of benefactor, someone with the will and the means to subvert the law.” Eggy knew about my connections to the black market. I could get the samples he needed.

Eggy called me six weeks later and said, “Al is ready to go.” (78)

At this point, about 200 words into the story, readers know that illegal cloning is being done on people and that Albert Einstein has already been cloned and is about to be delivered to the narrator, thus setting the plot in motion.

Additionally, I use Wharton's advice on time and point of view to create a tight, sleek story. Readers of short stories should not be inundated with every minute action a character makes. Little skips in time, like getting a character out of her apartment and to the restaurant, can help move the story along. The best example of this appears in my story "Illness." The longest story of the collection, "Illness" follows the physical demise and eventual death of the protagonist Wayne Pelfer. The story begins in late summer and in about eighteen pages covers approximately three and a half months, the last months of Wayne's life. In order to cover so much time, I had to use something more than scene breaks to speed the timeline. I used suggestions of time in the narrative itself. For example, the narrator says, "For the fourth time since July, Wayne Pelfer sits on the exam table" (127). This tells readers that Wayne's illness extends into a past that begins before the story on the page. Readers can imagine all of the other visits to the doctor without me, the writer, having to provide all that exposition. Another way to move time and move the story along is with time signals, which appear throughout "Illness." I use phrases like "The next morning" (128); "Two weeks later" (130); and "A month after Dr. Stan's diagnosis" (131). The time signals keep the plot moving and keep readers from the minutia of a debilitating illness and death that may offend or irritate readers.

Point of view (POV) choices work the same way. A first-person perspective can provide readers with the narrator's direct thoughts, foregoing the authorial exposition. Or, in third-person POV, an omniscient narrator can bridge gaps in characters' reasoning and actions, and provide explanation or background in one sentence, thus eliminating the need for backstory or flashback. Most of the stories of this collection are written in first-person POV; the narrators are

typically the main characters of the story they tell. No other story in my collection uses first-person POV as a way into the mind of the narrator as well as “So I Go to Church.”

As noted, “So I Go to Church” follows Edgar, the first-person narrator and his encounter with Michael, the bike messenger. Throughout the tale, readers get direct glimpses into what Edgar is really thinking, about himself, about church, about his mother, about Michael, about the homeless people he sees in a park. To start, at the close of the mass, Edgar reveals his true feelings about himself:

Despite it all, I come out of the pew not feeling so rotten. I made it through another week. I haven't killed anybody, haven't been in any fights, haven't started drinking, haven't quit my stinking job. Those are accomplishments I can celebrate. That's my feeling, a subdued celebration for making it to thirty-seven without any major fuck-ups, without a record, without debt. That's better than most people. At the same time, suffering feels good, part of the Christian duty, and that thought brightens my mood. (97)

Such a passage would be hard for Edgar to communicate to another character, and anyway, he is certainly not the kind of person who would have a confidant or best friend. By letting readers into Edgar's mind, I, as writer, can forego clunky explanation or omit a needless second character that would only serve as Edgar's sounding board.

The access to the narrator's thoughts also serves to characterize him, especially since his outer and inner behaviors are in contrast. Outwardly, Edgar expresses no ill-will toward his mother, the homeless, or Michael. However, he is a different man internally. About his dying mother, Edgar says, “I wonder if I moved here just to get away from her, to watch her slow demise from a blurry distance” (99). About the homeless, he says, “The bums in the park look

relaxed, but I'm annoyed that they're hogging the benches" (99). And about Michael, Edgar has a lot to say.

During the mass, Edgar holds Michael's hand, as tradition dictates. Outwardly, Edgar shows no displeasure, but internally, he says,

"this guy's hand is distracting me. He has a small hand of course. What would you expect from a short guy? And it's cold, like he stuck his hand into an ice chest before he invited me to hold it, and worse, it's smooth. Men with smooth hands, that's disconcerting. I hate to think about how he keeps his hands so smooth. Probably lotion. I have never bought lotion in my life. Never will." (94)

Edgar may be expressing honesty with himself, but he is also rude and could not get away with verbally expressing his thoughts without repercussions. Later, Michael and Edgar meet again. As before, Edgar's internal thoughts belie his feelings:

I am not sure if I am offended more by the first question or the second. Either way, I tell him I have a job. In three months most, the short guy's business will fail. No way do I want to partake in a catastrophe about to happen. (100)

"So I Go to Church" must be told in first-person POV because such a direct perspective allows readers views of the character internally and externally. Therefore, readers are afforded a more complete glimpse of the narrator and can judge for themselves how they feel about him.

In third-person POV, an omniscient narrator can also provide for readers a character's thoughts or history without extended explanation. However, unlike first-person POV, third-person POV positions the main character at a slight distance from readers. A third-person narrator tells readers *about* a character's thoughts and feelings while a first-person narrator more

directly *experiences* those thoughts and feelings. This third-person perspective is evidenced in my story “Leaving.” The protagonist of “Leaving,” Gabe Pender, finds himself in an airport on Christmas Eve. He aims to visit his sister in Sacramento for the baptism of his niece. However, Gabe has a fear of flying. Along the way, Gabe meets an adolescent named Maddie who shares none of Gabe’s anxieties about flight.

Gabe hides his fears internally, and much of the story details the mental struggles Gabe endures. “He wouldn’t even glance out the large terminal windows because he didn’t want to think about where he was” (66). To the public, to Maddie, to the airline employees, Gabe seems no different from anyone else, just another passenger on another flight. Of course, for Gabe the act of flying is the act of giving up control. He must adhere to the rules of air travel, become a passive passenger, present his boarding pass, and remain in his seat.

The use of third-person POV in the following passage exemplifies the slight remove that is not present with first-person POV.

Gabe remembered his own pair of headphones, stuffed into the small suitcase at his feet. He didn’t need them now, not with his feet still on the ground, not with an hour till boarding. If he boarded—and if he needed musical distraction at all—it would be at takeoff, to forget takeoff. (66)

Switching from third-person POV to first-person POV is not as simple as changing pronouns. Certainly, the quoted passage could be read and understood in first-person POV. A writer could make the story work:

I remembered my pair of headphones, stuffed into the small suitcase at my feet. I didn’t need them now, not with my feet still on the ground, not with an hour till boarding. If I

boarded—and if I needed musical distraction at all—it would be at takeoff, to forget takeoff.

Notice, however, how the first-person selection attempts to move readers closer to the “I” character, yet for me, the change makes my story feel claustrophobic; in my estimations, readers are too close to the character to see him whole. A slight sense of distance does remain in first-person POV but now suggests that the “I” character is talking to himself rather than thinking his thoughts. This subtle difference colors the texture of the entire story and changes how readers perceive Gabe. “Leaving” requires some narratorial distance so that readers feel they are watching Gabe instead of living in his head, experiencing his direct thoughts. With such an anxious character, readers might reject being in a perspective that would require them to live Gabe’s phobias firsthand.

### My Affinities with Other Writers

As a writer, I am influenced by motion pictures and TV shows and by other writers. Already, I have discussed Edgar Allan Poe, Anton Chekhov, Aristotle, Edith Wharton, and Gustav Freytag for their theories about story purpose and structure. I have mentioned Stephen King’s science fiction and horror influence on me as a writer and how my story “Dynamo” was influenced by the films *Office Space* and *Horrible Bosses* and the TV series *The Office*. Further, I have shown how my editorship on *Reunion* has changed the way I think about stories, writing and reading them.



Moreover, I must credit Animal Planet and the Discovery Channel for their TV series *Finding Bigfoot*, which inspired me to write “Undeniable Proof of the Bigfoot.” During a long weekend of bad weather, I binge-watched the somewhat silly, mostly wonky “reality” show. Essentially, each episode follows so-called experts as they go into the woods with night-vision video recorders and sound recorders. They camp out and creep about looking for signs of Bigfoot. They interpret bumps in the night and scratches on tree trunks as evidence of the mythic creature’s existence. Yet, they never find any concrete proof. For “Undeniable Proof of the Bigfoot,” I put one of these Bigfoot hunters in a room with a skeptic and let them argue.

As the story begins, Grandpa Charlie, the Bigfoot expert, launches into his lecture at the local library. His grandson Cole, the narrator, notices that something with Grandpa Charlie is different.

Normally, he spoke with all the authority of a forensic scientist, as if he had studied criminology (or even anthropology) at the university, which, of course, he had not. This time, Grandpa Charlie strained to sound professorial. Was it the presence of thousands of books that turned his tone, or was it simply fatigue projected in the voice of a man who otherwise loved talking about the bigfoot? (102)

But the central conflict of the piece occurs when an audience member, Dr. Yurrie Welker, challenges Grandpa Charlie’s claims. “‘Stories,’ [Welker] said, letting the word reverberate. ‘The bigfoot are myth, fantasy’” (104). The two men spar verbally about the possibility of real Bigfoot walking the Earth, and this debate is essentially what fuels the TV series *Finding Bigfoot*. Viewers typically want to believe that myths are real, that the unlikely or impossible is in fact true. The Bigfoot myth also feeds into conspiracy theories; the idea that, for

whatever reason, the public is not told the whole truth. This last idea in particular attracted me to the Bigfoot mythology and to writing about and dramatizing the debate.

Literarily, I am influenced by the post-modernist Donald Barthelme. I enjoy the oddity, compactness, and levels of interpretation of his stories. Barthelme's "Game," for instance, is a first-person account of two soldiers—the narrator and Shotwell—manning the launch console in a nuclear rocket silo. The men have been locked underground for more than one hundred and thirty days, and they are suspicious and paranoid of each other. Their orders are to kill the other if he behaves strangely, but, of course, they are both behaving strangely. I suppose living underground so long will do that to a person.

To tell the story, Barthelme writes terse prose and compact sentences, and utilizes repetition. No less than four times the narrator of "Game" makes reference to Shotwell's jacks and rubber ball. Readers are continuously told that both men are not well, that they control the locks to launch the rocket, and that they carry concealed side arms. Further, Barthelme is not afraid to use short, declarative sentences, to be concise, even blunt, and he often does so at the start of a paragraph: "Shotwell and I watch the console" (par. 3); "In the beginning I took care to behave normally" (par. 5); and "Shotwell is not himself" (par. 10). Moreover, Barthelme gives readers a glimpse into a narrator's troubled mind, one whose sanity must be called into question. ..In "Game" Barthelme offers a character, in first-person, chock full of paranoia. "[Shotwell] has made certain overtures, certain overtures have been made. I am not sure that I understand them. They have something to do with the keys, with the locks" (Barthelme 684). As well, Barthelme presents a psychological undercurrent to his narrator: "... perhaps the whole thing is an

experiment and the experiment is very successful. I do not know” (683). Readers cannot be sure, either, and will ad infinitum ponder this story’s truth and the narrator’s reliability.

When it comes to terse prose and compact, concise sentences, I have learned much from Donald Barthelme. His writing style can be found in several stories in my collection. In “Clones,” for example, the narrator’s first conversation with the cloned Albert Einstein is purposely designed to be direct and to the point.

“Where are you going?” Einstein asked.

“I want to give you peace and privacy in which to work.”

Einstein looked at me curiously. “Work on what?”

“I don’t know. Maybe physics. Maybe  $E=MC^2$ .”

“What’s that?” he asked, his mustache steady.

“Don’t play with me, Al. You know  $E=MC^2$ .”

But he didn’t know, so I walked over to the board and wrote out the formula in white chalk.

“Very interesting,” he said. “But what can I do with that?” (81)

Readers will notice that all of the sentences are virtually one line long, and the vast majority of words is two syllables or shorter, which contributes to the compactness of the reading. Line length and syllable length help to produce a quick and punchy conversation.

“Dynamo,” another story in my collection, performs similarly. Just as Barthelme uses short, blunt statements in “Game,” I have peppered throughout “Dynamo” my own straightforward prose. On page 112, for example, readers are introduced to the narrator’s co-worker Victorina and are told quite matter-of-factly: “She was kind, though. Kind yet distant.”

Just a few paragraphs later, the narrator succinctly sums up his new boss: “He must have felt like a fraud” (112). A third example comes directly after Hugh, the boss, has reprimanded his new employee, the narrator: “Fine. I would stick to helping customers, devote myself to customer service. Then Hugh would have nothing to criticize. I refused to let him see me upset” (118). These kinds of short, direct statements work not only to characterize the narrator but, as in “Game,” to forego over-embellished language for a more direct narratorial voice.

Like Barthelme, I also include a refrain. In “Dynamo” I make reference to the boss Hugh’s potted office plant all throughout the story (113, 119, 120, 126). In fact, each time the plant is mentioned, it appears closer and closer to dying, a metaphor for the working conditions in this office. Repetition also appears in my story “Victories.” Here, I use repetition not just for its rhythmic quality but to impress upon readers some of the important themes of the story. The word “victory” (or its variations) is the guiding principle of the story and appears seven times on the first page alone and fourteen times in the full ten-page story. Additionally, I apply the poetic repetition known as anaphora:

She didn’t miss bleeding, waking in the middle of the night when the last pad had failed and blood had leaked straight through to the mattress. She didn’t miss cleaning the insides of her thighs, overflowing the waste basket with paper towels. She didn’t miss any of it. (29)

As poets know, use of anaphora repetition serves to emphasize lines or stanzas. In the quote above, I wanted to emphasize that omission (“She didn’t miss”) did not always have to be viewed negatively, as a loss, that in this case, omission could be a victory. Hence, I hope to

impress upon readers the theme of the story (victory) and to expand the meaning of the word “victory.”

If Barthelme’s “Game” gives readers a glimpse into the mind of a madman, so do my stories. My narrators are just as untrustworthy and unreliable. This collection is inundated with eccentric (if not mad) narrators. Brent, the narrator from “Giantess,” thinks he can dominate his body-building girlfriend, when readers know he cannot. Initially, he asks himself “Could I turn a buff broad into a chubster? The possibility of this aroused me” (15). But by story’s end, Brent finally realizes that *he* has been conquered. When he threatens not to show for the wedding, Nicole sets him straight. “‘That’s right’ [Nicole said.] ‘The only mother-fudging words you need to remember today are ‘I’ and ‘do’!’ She left me shivering in the hallway” (26). The narrator from “The Pub Runner” likes to drink beer and run while the narrator from “Augustana” has visions of sexy cowgirls dancing in his head, and the narrator from “Clones” hires a Ukrainian escort to appease a rogue geneticist so he will clone celebrities. Perhaps the most illogical narrator is from my story “Dynamo,” because he accepts a job he is overqualified for, stays at the job even though he dislikes his boss, offends his co-worker, and sleeps with his boss’s wife to spite the boss. He lives in and contributes to the toxic work environment.

Similarly, I enjoy quirkiness in stories, the feeling that something is askew. We see this in George Saunders, the literary progeny of Barthelme. Like his predecessor, George Saunders writes about the odd and unsettling, and often locates his stories in supposedly placid suburbia. One example can be found in Saunders’ story “Victory Lap.” The hero of the tale, Kyle Boot, is introduced as a typical teenager, quite obedient to his parents, a good student and a good kid. One day, while home alone, Kyle witnesses the abduction of his neighbor and fellow student

Alison Pope. He debates with himself about getting involved. “Dimly he noted that Alison had been punched. Eyes on the geode, he heard the little *oof*” (Saunders 78). Should he break his parents’ house rules in order to intervene? “No. No, no, no. [The abductors would] be gone soon” (Saunders 78). But before he knows what he’s doing, Kyle incapacitates the would-be abductors and rescues Alison. Abduction, assault, rape, and murder are unexpected in this otherwise idyllic suburban neighborhood of politeness and manners, and Saunders’ description of this gruesomeness is simultaneously subtle and disturbing. About what might happen to Alison Pope, Saunders writes, “[Kyle] imagined the guy bending Alison in two like a pale garment bag while pulling her hair and thrusting bluntly...” (79). The simile here works to bring the image to readers’ minds. A garment bag suggests lifelessness and ruin, and the adverb “bluntly” connotes images of a deadly weapon and a mindless sub-human wielding that weapon.

Flannery O’Connor’s 1955 “A Good Man Is Hard to Find” is another example of the odd in an otherwise normal world. The story follows a family’s car ride through the South. As much as the protagonist-grandmother is against driving to Florida due to reports of a dangerous escaped convict called The Misfit, who is lurking in the area with his gang, the family heads out, anyway. The old woman’s fears are realized when her family encounters The Misfit, to disastrous, deadly consequences. Readers are meant to be shocked by the presence of evil and death in the normally beatific rural South.

Hemingway, too, brings the odd and the violent to tranquil small-town America. “The Killers” exemplifies a dark mood and subject matter. The story opens in a small town diner where the protagonist Nick has come to satisfy his appetite. At first, the diner’s atmosphere is unremarkable. It is only when the hitmen are told that what they want to eat is not available that

a worrisome tension arises. These hitmen are operating outside of the law, apart from the rules, bucking tradition. They do not care when dinner is served; they want what they want, regardless. They are anarchists invading a picturesque, wholesome American town.

Similarly, “Clones,” from my collection, suggests the same kind of quirkiness, the feeling that all is *not* right with the world. Why would a wealthy man want to involve himself in the black market business of cloning? Something about this world is off-kilter. The narrator Pops thinks he will become historically famous, not just wealthy.

Wealth was one thing but renown was something else. My name was going to appear in history books and journals like the ones Eggy read. They would make documentaries about my life, and cities would commission bronze statues of my likeness. I’d be featured prominently alongside other revolutionaries and actually become a legend in my own time. (79)

The story is packed with oddities. The clone of Albert Einstein does not know the first thing about physics. The clone of Elvis Presley can play all of the music in the real Elvis’ catalog but has no ability to create new music. The clone of President John F. Kennedy runs for office and, ironically, gets assassinated *before* the election. The geneticist Eggy falls in love with a Ukrainian prostitute, is scorned, and takes out his revenge on Pops.

“Victories” is another Saunders-O’Connor-Hemingway-like story in my collection. The story is set in a shelter for women—the battered, abused, homeless, destitute, and wayward. Because this is a shelter, one might think that its guests would be safe, protected. The women would be able to find comfort and regroup, before heading back into the world. But, like

“Victory Lap,” “A Good Man Is Hard to Find,” and “The Killers,” a dark undercurrent flows through the story. The women at the shelter are described thusly,

The women came alone in torn scarves and gloves and boots, layered in sweat pants over men’s jeans over more sweat pants, in oversized sweaters and sweatshirts and jackets, which hid their hands and their bodies. They pressed knit caps atop whatever hair they had. Dirty faces, red with cold, drawn with deep furrows around eyes and mouths, their eyes pale pinpoints, bleached by cold sleepless nights in alleyways guarding themselves.

(30)

The women resemble war-time refugees, destroyed by the hostilities of life on the streets, life in the elements.

Indira, the janitor and protagonist of “Victories,” discovers that one woman, Bibi, does not treat her young son Jordan very well. Bibi, readers learn, is also addicted to huffing, inhaling chemical fumes to get high. If this were not enough, the story gets even darker, when Indira decides one cold night to *take* Jordan out of the shelter and back to her home. “She eyed Jordan. ‘I am taking him,’ she said without anger or condemnation, careful to keep her voice low” (37). In short, Indira unlawfully takes the boy, knows she will only get a night with him before the authorities track her down. Regardless of intent, Indira is no less an abductor than the villains in Saunders’ “Victory Lap.”

My affinity for the odd, the weird, and the quirky extends to the macabre, so I also gravitate toward story writers like Edgar Allan Poe, Guy de Maupassant, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman. These writers’ stories offer readers the macabre with a dose of psychology by situating



readers inside the minds of their protagonists as they experience neglect, guilt, fear, or utter madness. “The Tell-Tale Heart” illustrates this point:

If still you think me mad, you will think so no longer when I describe the wise precautions I took for the concealment of the body. The night waned, and I worked hastily, but in silence. First of all I dismembered the corpse. I cut off the head and the arms and the legs. (Poe 6)

Clearly, readers will notice how calm and rational Poe’s narrator seems as he reports rather matter-of-factly how one kills and conceals a corpse. Added to this, Poe places his readers *with* the narrator (he uses the informal, familiar pronoun “you”) as he whispers to readers, takes them into his confidence. Moreover, the narrator is lucid enough to anticipate possible objections or revulsion from his audience. “The Tell-Tale Heart,” after all, is an argument for the narrator’s sanity: “If still you think me mad” and “you will no longer...” (Poe 6). If this were not creepy enough, one might note Poe’s use of rhetorical strategies: the diction, juxtaposing “mad” and “wise” or the bustle of “worked hastily” with the hush of “but in silence”; the claim and the rebuttal that is the first sentence, and the presentation of evidence beginning the third sentence, “First of all...” (Poe 6), a transitional phrase leading to support for the arguer’s claim. What readers must not forget is that the narrator is trying to convince them that the murder of the old man was justified.

The narrator of my story “The Pub Runner” is just as methodical, maybe even neurotic or plain crazy for taking something as silly and inconsequential as drinking and running so seriously. The narrator actually trains for the run, forces his girlfriend to try it, and is systematic in his approach to imbibing. He knows all the tricks of the trade. “While some gulp and some

sip, I hold my breath and guzzle, a tactic to minimize air bubbles and burping. Bloating is dangerous for a pub runner” (40), and “[Crossing] Carpenter [Street] is all about timing, finding gaps between the flow of cars, so you don’t break stride” (42). Though “The Pub Runner” does not qualify as horror, the narrator is akin to Poe’s “The Tell-Tale Heart” narrator in that both rationalize their eccentric behavior.

In a similar way, Maupassant, the French counterpart to Poe, delves into horror by delving into a narrator’s disturbed mind. Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper,” likewise, is horrific because readers cannot be sure if the protagonist is insane or the world she inhabits is. Maupassant’s “La Horla” is written in diary form and centers on an unnamed protagonist, a young man who has recurring nightmares that he is being attacked by an unknown beast (102). The narrator attempts to burn La Horla in a fire but suspects he is unsuccessful, concluding that the only way to kill La Horla is to kill himself. Sad and depressing, indeed, but this story is also enough to keep readers engaged and unable to sleep.

Presenting a world askew (peopled with odd characters) is my attempt to reach readers, to excite and provoke their imaginations. This quirkiness shows in my own work, which includes a female bodybuilder, a pub runner, a janitor at a women’s shelter, an aviophobe, a terminally ill patient, and a geneticist who clones celebrities. I gravitate toward the weird in an otherwise normal world and have created such worlds in this collection: a world of clones, a world of Bigfoot hunters, a middle-management office world.

Additionally, I align myself with Junot Diaz, who, like Hemingway and Barthelme, uses terse narration and tense dialogue, and writes with unadorned truth. I am drawn to and have learned from Diaz’s writing about boyfriend-girlfriend relationships. “The Sun, the Moon, the

Stars,” the lead story to his collection *This Is How You Lose Her*, follows Yuniór, a young Dominican American, who takes a trip to the Dominican Republic with his girlfriend Magda. For much of the story Yuniór, as narrator, vacillates between regret for cheating on Magda and feeling beholden to his lustful desires for other women. While trying to reconnect at a dance club, Magda rebuffs Yuniór. He tells readers: “This is the endgame, and instead of pulling out all the stops, instead of *pongándome más chivo que un chivo* [being brave], I’m feeling sorry for myself, *como un parigüayo sin suerte* [like a luckless chump] (my translations) (Diaz 22-23). There is a relationship somehow gone sour, and readers are meant to feel that this last chance at love will fail. In a moment of contemplation, Yuniór wonders how such a good relationship could have gotten to this point. “As soon as you start thinking about the beginning it’s the end” (Diaz 24). In the end, the couple finally breaks up, and readers realize that “The Sun, the Moon, the Stars” is Yuniór’s confession, his admission that he was a rotten boyfriend.

My story “Augustana” follows a similar trajectory. As already mentioned above, the narrator is dating Augustana but is clearly in an unhappy relationship. When she mentions marriage, he “wonder[s] how much a one-way ticket to Bucharest costs” (52). During a double date, he is simultaneously attracted to and repulsed by their pregnant friend Maisie, and soon retreats into a daydream about the coed cowgirl waitresses at the restaurant. These cowgirl fantasies resurface every time Augustana seeks his commitment, his affection, his love. Rather than face his relationship in a mature way, the narrator looks for escapes. “I close my eyes and a posse of hot cowgirls rides into the one-horse town in my head” (63). But “Augustana” is not completely like “The Sun, the Moon, and the Stars.” Instead of Diaz’s sorrowful break-up story,

my story ends more hopefully, with Augustana getting pregnant and the narrator quitting his fantasies for the reality of fatherhood.

### The Encounter with Difficulties while Writing Short Stories

Without question the story that received the most attention and the most rewriting and revising was “Illness.” This story is also the best example of how I write a short story. My recent trip to Ireland inspired the setting and location for the story, if for no other reason than the feeling of being a stranger in a strange land. The newness of Ireland—the unique shops and markets, the street signs written also in Gaelic, the extraordinarily kind natives, the landscapes and vistas, the local food options—appealed to me as a writer. I recall walking the streets and driving the roadways with a hyperawareness of my surroundings. I paid close attention to everything I saw and did, from visits to seaside ports to strolls through urban parks, from treks to natural landmarks to excursions to cultural sites. It was not one moment, one place in particular, that inspired me to write “Illness”; rather, the general spirit of the country stayed with me and remained in my thoughts as I composed the story.

The first drafts of “Illness” follow a terminally ill man, who, in seven days, is expected to die of an unnamed affliction of the heart. With death looming, the protagonist Wayne quits his job, empties his bank account, and flies across the pond to the Emerald Isle, intent on spending his remaining time on vacation. There, Wayne meets his supporting cast, a cab driver named Bernie and a tour guide named Mary.

Bernie drives Wayne to a castle hotel somewhere outside of Dublin. Before Wayne can even check in as a hotel guest, he spots Mary and asks her to give him a tour of the castle and grounds. Initially, Mary politely declines but eventually acquiesces. The tour begins in the basement of the castle and passes through a banquet hall embellished with Medieval regalia. The tour ends at the top of the castle, and Wayne begs to be shown the bell tower. Mary obliges.

Later, the pair walks the grounds and enters the castle's cemetery. Mary provides a history of the castle grounds, first as a monastery, then a military base, then a writers' colony, and now a hotel. The tombstones show the final resting places of clergy, soldiers, and poets. Wayne takes Mary to the hotel café and reveals that he is going to die very soon. Initially upset, Mary enters the hotel lobby and unexpectedly kisses Wayne, a kiss of compassion more than passion. From there, the couple goes on a little adventure. Bernie drives them to a dock-side yacht, and, thanks to Wayne's life savings, Wayne and Mary get a quick maritime trip along the coast.

Soon, they are back at the hotel, enjoying room service, indulging in the amenities of the hotel. Following, Mary takes Wayne on a second tour of the castle, a behind-the-scenes tour. This time, they come upon the hotel's chapel and Wayne says a prayer. Midnight arrives and Mary must leave; she needs some sleep before her early-morning shift the next day. Wayne, meanwhile, realizes that his time has run out. The seventh day has arrived. Wayne lies in his hotel bed and never wakes again. The story cuts to a week later. Mary is back at work, conducting a tour through the cemetery. She reflects on her last visit to the cemetery with Wayne, grieves a moment, but leads the group out of the cemetery with a smile on her face. This

version of the story, it must be noted, is segmented by headings—Day 1, Day 2, etc.—to reflect the seven days Wayne has left to live. For example, the original draft opens like this:

#### DAY 1

For the fourth time since July, Wayne Pelfer sits on the exam table. “How are you feeling, Wayne?” Dr. Stan smells of antiseptic and Dior, and is as blunt as ever. “Bad news, Wayne. Your heart. The end will be quick.”

So, each day corresponds to a section of the story with a DAY 14 added to the end.

In this original form, the problems this story presented were numerous. First, the story was not properly balanced. This eleven-page original draft contained eight scene breaks, noted by the day and number (i.e., Day 4). The first five days/scenes are each approximately one- to one-and-a-quarter-pages long. In that time Wayne gets the news of his diagnosis, empties his apartment, quits his job, and tries and fails to reconnect with his estranged girlfriend. In actuality, nothing happens. Instead of plodding forward, the plot idles, and the reader simply must wait for Wayne to do something more proactive. Day 6 is when Wayne decides to spend his savings on a trip abroad, and the Day 6 section goes on for five pages. As a result, the story is imbalanced because Day 6 is four times longer than the other sections. The sections following Day 6 further exacerbate the imbalance, for they are about two-thirds of a page each. This is not to say that the story, any story, should force itself into symmetrical sections alone, but for short stories readers can sense such a large disparity, and this simple structural error could take them out of the story.

Furthermore, the story should have ended with Day 7, but I added an ill-conceived coda:  
Day 14.

#### DAY 14

Mary gives her first castle tour to a throng of Americans who love her Irish brogue and snigger every time she speaks. She starts in the Grand Cellar, recounting how the monastery had been sacked by Vikings. They enter the Great Battle Hall. “Each mark is of a life maimed or lost,” she says and traces a line etched into a stone.

Here, I made the mistake of stating a premise for readers that I did not deliver. On page one, Wayne learns that he has seven days to live, and the sections are labeled by day; hence, readers would assume the story would end on Day 7. They anticipate that ending. However, I added Day 14 because I wanted readers to see how Wayne’s death affected Mary. Again, this ruined any chance of story balance, because, by ending with Mary—and making another error of switching to her third-person perspective, when the rest of the story is limited to Wayne’s perspective—the story awkwardly *feels* like Mary’s story when it had felt like Wayne’s.

Moreover, as I reflect on the original conception of “Illness” in this first draft, the story feels unfinished, undeveloped, and problematic in its telling. Though medical science has made great advances in recent decades, there is simply no way for a doctor to know the exact day a patient will die. A doctor would not say—despite what Hollywood may tell us—“You have exactly a week to live.” Even if the illness had a name and was well studied, pinpointing the death day is highly suspect. Further, since the illness is a heart condition, the patient would also have a range of treatment options available: transplant and surgery, for starters.

Conversely, one might call “Illness” a fairy tale or an analogy, a type of Dickens’ *Carol* or *It’s a Wonderful Life* where the protagonist has a finite amount of time to turn his life around and learn a lesson in the process. None of that happens in “Illness.” As well, nothing really happens in Ireland. The story does not even need to be set there. Wayne meets Mary, and maybe they are infatuated with each other, but there are no consequences because the relationship goes nowhere, and Wayne dies the next day. Because they know from page one that Wayne will die, readers have little anticipation, and I as a writer have failed to create much tension or conflict. Worst of all, “Illness” was predictable and boring, and readers had little reason to care about Wayne or what happens to him because he is not particularly likeable.

In thinking about my first drafts of “Illness” and how to begin revising, I turned to *Great American Short Stories*, edited by Wallace and Mary Stegner. When I get stuck on a story, when I know it is not working and yet cannot pinpoint where to begin revising, I retreat to other story writers, partly for inspiration, mostly to study technique. I compare myself to an auto mechanic who thinks about cars from the inside, from the motor and transmission not from the body design or paint color. I read a few stories from the collection not for surface enjoyment but for plot, for the mechanics of characterization, for structure, and stumbled upon Katherine Anne Porter.

Porter’s story “He” traces the life of the Whipple family, their meek and arduous existence in a farming community. Though the Whipple family has three children, the story focuses on their “second son, the simple-minded one” (Porter 354), who remains unnamed throughout the story. On one hand, the boy’s parents are proud of him. He complains less than the other children, works harder, behaves, and goes without extra blankets in the winter. And Mrs. Whipple, in particular, will not let anyone—including her husband—disparage the boy.



In addition to the pride the Whipples feel, guilt and fear pervade their conversations and lives. Mrs. Whipple blames herself for how her son turned out, and she spends considerable time keeping up appearances for the neighbors. She will allow no one to call her a bad mother, no one to pity the boy, and no one to tell her how to raise and care for him. The boy, on the other hand, hardly talks, seems to have no fear, and is practically impervious to the elements. Because of this, the Whipples, ironically, deny the boy a coat, give his bedclothes to the other children, and feed him less. But the boy never gripes.

The story ends with the boy, years older now, having a second accident, a second blow to the head from a slip and fall, and “was having some sort of fit” (Porter 363). After months of bed-rest and ill health for the child, the attending doctor suggests the boy be remanded to a convalescence home. Mr. Whipple agrees with the diagnosis, but his wife is decidedly more hesitant. Again, her pride surfaces. She does not want to appear needy; she does not want neighbors to talk. In the end, they must take the boy to the home. Mrs. Whipple rides in the back of the carriage with her son, and she “couldn’t believe what she saw” (Porter 365). The boy appears to be lucid, of sound mind. Despite this suspicion, Mrs. Whipple still sends him away, wishing he was never born.

Serendipitously, I happened to read about this sick boy while struggling with my story about a sick man. By story’s end, Porter had me invested not just in the boy, who, being ill, naturally garners empathy, but in his mother, Mrs. Whipple. So how did Porter accomplish this and how could I learn from her in revising “Illness”?

To start, Porter spends much of the story pointing readers in one direction only to offer a quick change at the close. The boy in “Him” is odd, out of place, ill, different; that is, until the

end when he may not be as dense or strange as first suspected. Mrs. Whipple changes, too. She says to the boy, ““Oh, Honey, you don’t feel so bad, do you?”” (Porter 365). Then she begins to reflect on all the horrible parenting moves she has made over the years. Regret floods Mrs. Whipple, but she “couldn’t bear to think of it” (Porter 365). Porter allows Mrs. Whipple to carry out the exile of her son; after all, “there were [her two other children] who had to be thought of too...” (365). Here, Mrs. Whipple has a moment of stark realization about her son and herself, but rather than face it, Mrs. Whipple simply wishes the boy had never been born. Her realization is to deny her realization, and readers feel that impact.

All of this is to say that I, in my story, had not spent enough time developing my main characters. Readers care about Porter’s ill boy because she reports on his pleasant, kind, hard-working behavior. He is the boy every parent desires, save for his illness; he is a selfless child. And Mrs. Whipple, too, begins as a good mother, protective, nurturing, and fiercely matriarchal. She will not tolerate aspersions from anyone, friend or family.

“Illness,” before revision, stood out in this collection because of its poorly planned premise. Rather than make patchwork changes, I decided to jettison that which was giving me the most trouble: the story’s focus. Instead of being focused on the illness, I would turn the attention to Wayne and Mary’s relationship. The *story* would still be about a terminally ill man, but the *plot* would be about interpersonal connections. Also, I deleted the Irish setting and removed the idea of “seven days to live.”

In order to approach verisimilitude in my new draft, I sent Wayne to a funeral home to make arrangements for himself; this new version of “Illness” would be more realistic, less Hollywood, less allegorical. As Wayne’s illness progresses and he can no longer take care of

himself, he checks in to a hospice that is more home than hospital, a facility that takes a more holistic, natural-medicine approach to healing. Here, he meets Mary, who is proprietor, nurse, cook, gardener, and janitor.

During his stay, Wayne develops feelings for his care-giver. “She makes the meals, tidies his room, works in the garden, maintains the hospice house. Wayne does all he can to be a good guest, making his bed in the morning, clearing his plate after every meal” (137). And for a time, all is well, including Wayne’s health. But more gradually than in the original draft, Wayne’s health eventually deteriorates, and he can no longer help out around the house or take care of himself. But that does not stop Wayne and Mary from connecting.

When Wayne can no longer get out of bed, Mary comes to his door with his meals. She spends time feeding him and keeps him company whenever she can. He listens to her talk about the business, how it is going to boom one of these days. (142)

Interestingly, as Wayne’s health declines, his feelings for Mary increase. He uses these amorous feelings to distract himself from the biological pain and discomfort with which he must live.

As stated, in this version of “Illness,” I moved the focus to Mary and Wayne’s relationship and moved the climax away from an “I love you” moment and toward something deeper and more complicated: the connection between care-giver and care-receiver. “Wayne can no longer keep quiet about his love for Mary. He has already prepared himself for a lukewarm response, has told himself that Mary’s reply is not as important as unburdening his heart” (144). Ironically, Wayne has a life-threatening episode and when he wakes is hooked to a ventilator and cannot talk. He cannot write either, and cannot express his love in any way but to accept the care

Mary gives. For her part, Mary expresses her love for Wayne by tending to him. “Mary comes in from the garden with mint sprigs and basil leaves, cups them in each hand, and approaches Wayne’s bed” (145). Throughout the story, Wayne has identified Mary with her garden, with its natural herbs and vegetables. Mary leaves the mint and basil at his bedside. “The ventilator beeps and Wayne’s flustered heart beats, and with the new breath he sniffs at the fragrant air... And the fragrance—of the garden, of the meal, of Mary—surrounds him, and the ventilator keeps a steady pulse even though Wayne’s heart has stopped” (145). Now, Wayne’s death matters to readers because readers have a better understanding of who Wayne is. His relationship with Mary is also more realistic, more relatable, and instead of the climax being Wayne’s death, which is a foregone conclusion, the climax is now that Mary, too, loved Wayne, and not just as a caregiver.

Though many ways to create and arrange a story collection exist, though many methods for revision and for reconceptualization exist, the methods discussed herein have proved invaluable for me in undertaking this project. This collection, of course, is more than the summation of what I have learned in graduate coursework or from craft and theory books; it is the culmination of a life dedicated to writing well.

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