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The Third Incident of JP Mercer a collection of short fiction

Lauren Picard

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The Third Incident of JP Mercer

Marie Floating Over the Backyard

When I was five, I thought I saw a woman fly. She was only sixteen at the time, but she was a woman in my eyes. I was out near the watermill, playing by the stream that ran through our backyard. I had discovered that when you pull a dandelion out of the ground there was this whole other half to them that nobody sees. Normally, all you can see are the soft fuzzy seeds that dance in the wind and get caught on your tongue if you breathe too close to them. At first, the weeds were hard to pull out. I had to tug and lean back on my heels before they gave way and sent me crashing to the ground.

That's when I saw the shadow.

There she was, floating in the air above me. Her arms were open and her eyes were shut and her head was thrown back to catch the breeze against her face. The wind carried her fragile body. For a moment, she laid suspended, only her hair dancing behind her. I had always loved Marie's hair. Thinking about it still reminds me of late night lullabies and naps under the shade of orchard trees. Maybe that's why I can still see her perfect bronze waves rustling in the breeze while the rest of her body stayed immobile, rigid.

She looked so peaceful, so free. I only have two other concrete memories of Marie, and she's crying in both. In the first because of the bruises on her wrist and in the second because my parents understood when she later showed up at our door with a suitcase. We watched Mom and Dad unpack her things through the guest room window from the orchard. She promised me

that they were tears of joy. It didn't seem like the same sense of joy she felt the day she flew. She had no roots, no strings keeping her to the world.

My parents and I had different ways of labeling things then. What I called torture, they called chores. What I called floating, they called falling. Actually 'jumping' may have been the specific word that they used.

At five, I never heard the rumors. At nine, I still loved her. Well, not love – but I was still infatuated with her. I could still hear her voice and feel her arms pick me up in my dreams and sit me down on the old tire swing. By 14, I realized what she had done. It was hard for me to keep believing that her tears in the orchard had been of gratitude and hope. It was hard for me to hear her voice in my dreams and not wonder why I hadn't heard her more clearly when I still had the chance.

As I watched her that day soar overhead, I tried to jump up and touch the hem of her dress. The thick weeds at my ankles reached up as if to touch her too, but we were all held firmly to the ground. Her soft mauve loafers had been left behind on the roof of the watermill. I don't know if she took them off before she leaped or if some stronger adhesive refused to let them follow her into the air, if perhaps they had roots of their own.

I heard my mother scream from the guest room window. I heard her loud footsteps as she ran down the old staircase. For weeks after, my mother kept talking about the sickening thud.

I just remember the splash.

They say they never found her body. They say that she must have been

paralyzed when she hit the shallow bottom of the water and floated downstream. But even now, I swear I saw her surface, shake out her long locks, press her finger to her lips, and disappear into the water again.

Mel's Blog

“Did you read Mel's blog today?”

“Apparently all is well.”

The Storeowner nodded, scrunching his nose to secure his square rimmed glasses.

The Neurologist beamed a perfectly white smile. “That's seven hundred and twenty-three days in a row. That's good news.”

The Storeowner slipped a hand-written receipt inside the Neurologist's canvas shopping bag along with two dimes. The Neurologist brought two quarters into the General Store each morning. His favorite juice box cost thirty cents. Seven hundred and twenty-four days prior, the juice box cost him thirty-seven cents. Seven hundred and twenty-four days prior, Mel had announced on his blog that all was just okay. The juice box was how he knew Mel was right.

The Neurologist passed the High School Geography Teacher and his wife, the Aeronautic Engineer, on his way out the door. He tipped his hat and wished them, “Merry Tuesday.”

The couple walked hand in hand to the General Store's counter, with the High School Geography Teacher always on the left. His walking on the left of her was something Mel suggested for men in the blog, something Mel said was debonair, something Mel said about cars and sidewalks. The High School Geography Teacher didn't understand why Mel had posted this, as there was only one car to be found on the island, a rental car.

But the bumbling High School Geography Teacher won the heart of the Aeronautic Engineer by adherently following Mel's courtship outlines. In fact, when the High School Geography Teacher held the door open for her and brought her chocolates and a new bottle of window cleaner, the Aeronautic Engineer proclaimed "Why, how very Mel of you!"

They had wanted to invite Mel to the wedding, but there was no contact information featured on the "about the webmaster" link. There was just a picture of a smiling clam commenting on a high tide.

"Did you two see Mel's blog today?"

The High School Geography Teacher smiled at his wife. "All is well."

"It's supposed to be sunny, high of seventy-five," the Storeowner added.

Mel posted enough information on his blog to sustain day long chit chat, something he declared to be the hallmark of a truly united community. The Storeowner's favorite section of the blog was the talking points - horoscopes, history trivia, updates on the three high-profile citizens living in the mansion, origami how-to's. Sometimes the school children would barter for soda pop with origami cranes and hats. Sometimes the adults would secretly envy their small hands and slender fingers – they produced very pristine folds.

"Again? That is quite the good weather streak." The Aeronautic Engineer snapped her bubble gum. Mel had encouraged women to keep their youthful appeal by adopting adolescent habits.

The red ribbon she tied in her mousy brunette pony tail was what caught the High School Geography Teacher's attention in the first place. "I'd say. It's been eight hundred and sixty-seven days since that the overcast day."

"Did you see the stuff about the Celebrity?" the Storeowner mused as he scribbled out their receipt.

"Who does she think she is?" demanded the High School Geography Teacher. "I can't believe she put out her garbage without removing the recyclables. So self-centered. This isn't her personal wasteland."

The Aeronautic Engineer shrugged and left a haphazard origami frog for the Storeowner as a tip.

The Storeowner didn't watch as the happy couple skipped out of the store. He noticed that the Carpenter wasn't searching through the produce for her breakfast kiwis, as she did every morning. Instead, she seemed to be lost in the dog biscuit aisle.

"Is something wrong?" he asked. It dawned on the Storeowner that almost nine hundred days had gone by without him having asked that. Nine hundred was a rough estimate. Mel wouldn't blog about such things so it was difficult to keep track. The only thing the townsfolk could keep track of without Mel's help was the frequency of their lovemaking, and that mainly concerned the younger population.

"It's just... I think..." the Carpenter mumbled. The Storeowner had never heard anyone mumble, except for the Nervous Pediatrician. Not even the pre-kindergarteners mumbled. They were told to keep their mouths shut in

public until they could carry-on articulate conversations with adults. Mel thought this would improve childhood literacy and vocabulary.

“Did you read Mel’s blog yet?”

“I did,” the Carpenter exclaimed. “Did you?”

“Of course I did. All is well.”

“Well sure, according to Mel.”

“I don’t understand.”

The Carpenter looked around. No one was within ear shot. “Someone replied to Mel’s blog.”

The Storeowner could feel his chest cavity collapsing. “Someone replied? Who?”

The Carpenter lowered her voice and hunched over the counter, leaving no room for wandering ears. “I don’t know. Have you heard of the Anarchist?”

“No! Never!”

“Well, he asked Mel how he could be so sure that all is well. And then he said that some of Mel’s ideas and advice columns seem a bit... old fashioned.”

“Oh no,” the Storeowner shook his head. “Are people going to talk about this? Are they already talking about this?”

A small bell announced the arrival of a new customer. The Nervous Pediatrician shuffled in and made his way to the Snapple display without raising his eyes.

“I walked by the Florist’s this morning. Not one mention of Mel’s talking points, just murmurs and whispered accusations,” the Carpenter said.

The Nervous Pediatrician looked up to the sound of her voice. His cheeks turned scarlet and his lips meandered into a toothless grin. The Carpenter tucked a strand of her strawberry hair behind her ear and waved at him. He waved back still holding the Snapple. Looking to the door and back to the pyramid of refreshing drinks, he dropped the Snapple and headed for the exit.

“Remember the Yoga breathing,” the Carpenter said softly, trying to swallow her concerns.

He pushed at the door closest to its hinge, nodded to her, and successfully tried again to leave the store.

On Wednesday, the Florist rose from bed to perform her typical routine. She watered her plants before checking Mel’s weekly edition of “From the Politician to the People.” She tried to guess what message the Politician had left her and what Mel had posted. The Florist used her keen observational skills to gauge reactions from people walking by. Mel rejected the notion of voyeurism. *What was wrong with a peeping tom?* he had written. *What kind of caring citizen doesn’t check in on their neighbors? How can we be a self-governing body if we don’t self-monitor?* The Florist’s keen observation skills also let her keep up with the gossip that didn’t make it into Mel’s daily talking points. She felt a certain responsibility as an elder to have

full awareness of her surroundings.

Between watering the lilacs and the gardenias, the Florist noticed that voices drifting into her garden were tense and erratic. People walked by with their hands in their pockets, looking anxiously to the sky as if it might turn a different color or fall down upon them all. The Milkman couldn't keep his bicycle stable and toppled over onto the crates of milk in his side car.

The Nervous Pediatrician stopped mid-stride near her fence and kicked at one of the loose milk bottles. On Wednesdays, he stopped by to purchase a week's supply of a relaxing herbal tea. Very rarely did he make eye-contact during the exchange. This may have been what startled her, the Nervous Politician looking up at her and staring deeply into her eyes. The Florist had never even noticed how rich the caramels of his irises were, or his jaw line, his bone structure. She gestured to the tea plant, but he shook his head and wandered away without a word.

The Florist ran inside. Mel's blog at first appeared normal. The weather was to be sunny again. The Angry Musician, who lived in the high-profile citizen's mansion, appeared in the talking points. He had remembered to separate the recyclables from the garbage, but the recycling bin was full of empty beer bottles. The Politician did his usual summary of the town meeting and thoughtful meanderings he came up with while showering the night before, closing with a sentiment of "If I were still a Bee, my tummy would be full of sweet nectar." The Florist rolled her eyes and looked for the reassuring "All is well."

Mel's Blog said nothing about the state of affairs. It only suggested that this new writer, the Anarchist, lacked the natural writing talent and proverbial power of the webmaster.

By dinner time, everyone had noticed a new comment on Mel's Blog.

Mel's writing, frankly, lacks emotion and flair. He is a little semi-colon happy and switches tenses frequently. Also, I was wondering if you could tell us the date – other than, of course, merely 'Wednesday.' Thank you.
– the Anarchist.

The Florist passed the rental car agency the following morning on her walk to her boutique. The Athletic Has-Been, who owned and operated the one rent-a-car, jumped up from his sitting position on the stoop to greet her.

“Have you seen the morning's blog?” the Athletic Has-Been asked.

“Yes, unfortunately,” the Florist replied. “It'll be okay. Maybe tomorrow he'll write more.”

“No one's going to rent my car if there's nothing to talk about during the drive,” the Athletic Has-Been pouted.

“That may be the least of our problems today,” the Florist said, quickly adding, “No offense.”

Mel's Blog had been bare that morning. The only piece of information was a brief *I am hereby discontinuing the comments option on the Blog.,- M.* Without talking points, no one knew what to say. Apart from the occasional sneeze or throat clearing, the town was eerily mute.

On Friday, the Storeowner was relieved to see that Mel had blogged about the weather and some enticing card games that families could play together. *Family game nights are a lost treasure of the past*, Mel regretted. *Family game nights ensure the brightest and most wholesome future for the community's youth.*

The Storeowner looked to his only son. "What do you say? Want to play Rummy? Looks like business is slow this hour."

"That's because we haven't opened yet, Dad."

"Well, it's not my fault that your friend can't read a watch."

The Storeowner refused to open the store until his computer was fixed. In an unusual fit of frustration, the Storeowner had kicked his computer after reading Mel's Blog. He meant to kick something lighter and less valuable. Mel hadn't said anything about the state of affairs in his morning blog.

Just as the Storeowner dug out his deck of cards and jar of plastic betting chips, the Computer Technician knocked at the door. The Storeowner's son dropped his mop onto a pyramid display of cereal packages and ran for the door. In his excitement, he kicked over a bucket of musky water, dampening the fallen breakfast boxes.

The Storeowner could see what captivated his son about the young Computer Technician. Her midnight hair swept across her fierce green eyes, forcing her to constantly flip her head. The Storeowner knew that the Computer Technician fancied his son. The only time anyone saw her smile

was when he tripped over himself to greet her.

He never brought her flowers, though. And anytime anyone saw them walking hand in hand, she was standing on the left. The Storeowner refused to call them sweethearts. They were only twenty-four. What did they know about romance and relationships? The few times his son had asked the Storeowner for permission to take the Computer Technician on a date, his son had snuck out a window to meet her because he didn't like the Storeowner's response. That wasn't responsible dating.

The Storeowner snapped out of his drifting thoughts to find the green eyed vixen drumming her fingers along the fully operational computer.

“All done, sir.”

“Thank you! Thank you thank you.” The Storeowner rushed toward the machine, hoping for an update on the blog.

The arrival of the Carpenter shifted the Storeowner's attention.

“Why the late open?” she asked.

“I kicked my computer,” the Storeowner nervously chuckled.

The Carpenter nodded pleasantly. “It's been a rough day for us all.” She wandered over to the produce to methodically squeeze kiwis at random.

“Oh no!” The Storeowner yelled in a fluster. “Mel's Blog isn't even showing.”

The Carpenter dropped her kiwi. “What do you mean? How can it not be showing?”

“Look. Whenever I hit the homepage, I end up at this ‘Anarchist's

Blog.' I didn't even know we could see other websites on this thing." The Storeowner scratched his head.

"Is that a bad thing?" The Computer Technician stood up from her hiding spot behind the Slush-Puppies dispenser. She brushed off her skirt and straightened her blouse. The Storeowner's son soon popped up by her side, wiping the lipstick from his cheek. "That we can see other blogs?"

"Why do we need to? Mel tells us everything we want to know," the Storeowner retorted.

"How do we know that Mel tells us everything we want to know if we don't know what else is out there?"

The small bell announced the arrival of the Nervous Pediatrician. He looked up from his feet to find four sets of eyes glaring back. The Nervous Pediatrician had not expected to walk in on a heated scene. He glanced at the Snapple display, second guessed his thirst, and made a run for the door.

"Wait! Wait! Did you see?" the Storeowner shouted.

"No! I didn't see anything! I just came in for a Snapple. I can get one later. I have patients to see, children to measure and weigh and give stickers to, I have... I have... I didn't see anything!"

The Carpenter grabbed the Nervous Pediatrician's arm before he could make his escape. He quickly submitted to the struggle once he felt her fingers wrap around his tender skin. Still, his stomach churned and his bladder felt tight.

Everyone knew that he was very anxious, and this was before the blog

drama. He was the only medical doctor in town. The Neurologist was more of a theoretical scientist – another town scholar. Mel realized that they only needed a Pediatrician in town to check on the development of the soon-to-be-citizens. No adult had been sick for one thousand eight hundred and thirty four days, and that was an accident. The Athletic Has-Been had tipped his canoe while trying to impress the Florist and caught a chest cold.

Without adult patients to treat, the Nervous Pediatrician had come to believe his medical knowledge had withered away. And now that all of this Anarchist stuff had erupted, he had been getting calls from people with headaches, chest pains, sore knuckles from punching things, and what he believed to be, but wasn't fully positive, ulcers. At least he thought they were ulcers, from what he remembered of ulcers. It could just as well be that thing that affects one's appendix.

The Carpenter dragged the Nervous Pediatrician toward the computer. "Surely you've tried to read Mel's Blog this morning."

"Actually," the Nervous Pediatrician squeaked in a whisper, "I've been too busy skimming through my old Medical Encyclopedia volumes 1 and 21. Very, uh, interesting stuff."

"Someone has blocked access to Mel's Blog. And redirected us to this 'Anarchist's Blog.' It's an outrage!" The Storeowner went to kick the computer again, but his son stopped him. "By the way, do you think you could check out my toe?"

"Well," the Nervous Pediatrician cocked his head to the ceiling and

averted his eyes, “What, uh, what does that other blog say?”

“We didn’t actually check,” the Carpenter hesitated. “Why haven’t we checked the other blog yet?”

The two young lovers shrugged and looked to the Storeowner. He sighed and made room for the other four to stand around the computer.

If a good community self-governs by self-monitoring, why doesn’t Mel want to be monitored? Who’s monitoring Mel? – the Anarchist.

“He has a good point,” the Nervous Pediatrician said.

The Carpenter inhaled sharply.

“You think so?” asked the Computer Technician.

The Nervous Pediatrician looked to the Computer Technician, and then to the Carpenter – the Carpenter’s doe eyes repeating the question, the Computer Technician’s eyes demanding the answer.

“Well, er, Mel’s Blog is still, you know,” the Nervous Pediatrician muttered. “I should get back to the shots and stickers and stuff.”

A small crowd had gathered near the Florist’s garden when she awoke Saturday morning. Her penchant for reading Mel’s Blog while waiting for the morning coffee to brew was disrupted by the ruckus. Twelve or so murmured back and forth, bundled shoulder to shoulder. Still sporting her daisy patterned slippers and nightgown, she maneuvered toward the center of the circle.

A newspaper. The Neurologist poked at it with a stick. The Florist wished that she had taken off her slippers and her cotton embroidered gown

and oval glasses and let her salty gray hair down and put on eye liner and mascara and blush and earrings and brushed her teeth. Luckily, the Neurologist allotted all of his attention to the paper.

They all stood like this, staring, waiting. After sixteen minutes of murmurs and hushed silence, the Neurologist turned to the crowd. He spotted the Florist and winked. He spotted the Athletic Has-Been and glared. “Well,” the Neurologist exhaled, “Should we read it?”

“Read it?” barked the Athletic Has-Been. “Why would we do that? Let me get some salad tongs and we can put it back where it belongs – in the trash.”

“Why wouldn’t we read it?” the Aeronautic Engineer asked, despite a nudge from her husband.

The Athletic Has-Been would have normally displayed certain consternation at a wife’s dismissal of her husband’s request. The Anarchist had fertilized a seed of doubt amongst the townsfolk about Mel’s relational practices. ‘Archaic’ practices. The Aeronautic Engineer was missing her usual red ribbon.

A collective gasp washed over the street corner when the Neurologist bent down to touch it with his bare hands. The Florist quickly tossed him her gardening gloves. With a strong clear of the throat and glance to the crowd, the Neurologist read aloud the headline:

How do the trees stay alive and green? How do the birds not get famished? It doesn’t rain here! Why doesn’t it rain?! – the Anarchist and the

Skeptic Writer

The Carpenter broke the silence. “Why doesn’t it rain here?”

The townsfolk tried to remember rain, what it was, what it felt like, what they carried for a forecast of rain, how many picnics and weddings it had ruined, how many dates and heat waves and sporting events it had enhanced. A lot of them realized that they missed rain.

“Why *doesn’t* it rain?” the Aeronautic Engineer repeated. She turned to her husband, her mousy mane bouncing without restraint. “Where are we?”

“You mean coordinately?” the High School Geography Teacher asked. “I don’t know the specific longitude and latitude,” he trailed off.

“How do your flowers thrive?” the Carpenter snapped at the Florist.

“What are the birds drinking?” the Athletic Has-Been asked.

The curious murmurs escalated into an angry roar. The Neurologist dropped the paper and threw his hands up to quell the crowd. As he distracted the buzzing neighbors, the Nervous Pediatrician picked up the fallen newspaper. The Neurologist had neglected to read a second, longer headline.

Why does Mel spend an exuberant amount of energy detailing the lives of those in the Mansion? Do we need to know their recycling habits? Aren’t there more pressing matters at hand? And besides, what makes them so special? They aren’t any better at what they do than the Athletic Has-Been, why wasn’t he chosen? At least the Athletic Has-Been is up-to-date on town activities. The Politician doesn’t even know what, or who, his old girlfriend is up to.

The next morning, the Nervous Pediatrician was glad to be greeted by the smiling Storeowner. The newspaper incident had provoked many people to disregard their responsibilities.

“Snapple?” the Storeowner beamed and held out his arm in the direction of the drink cooler.

“Not today, I’m afraid,” the Nervous Pediatrician mumbled. “House call. How about some orange juice? I’m sure it’s just a head cold.”

The Storeowner retrieved a gallon of orange juice from the back room and began sketching the receipt on a post-it note.

“I’m sure you’ve heard about the paper-ban?”

“N-no,” the Nervous Pediatrician said, “but it makes sense. I guess. It’ll make things a hassle around here.”

“Who’s the house call?” The Storeowner carefully wrapped the quart of orange juice in bubble wrap and set it inside a canvas shopping bag.

“Up at the Mansion.”

“The Mansion?” The Storeowner smirked, but quickly erased the excitement from his face. “That’s no head cold. That Musician’s dead.”

“Wh-wh-what?” The Nervous Pediatrician could feel a pulse in his face. “Someone’s dead?”

“Don’t ask me how I know,” the Storeowner said with bravado, “but he off-ed himself this morning. Big surprise, right? Have you ever heard his stuff?” The Storeowner passed the canvas bag over the counter. “You look

pale, Doc. Drink up.”

The Nervous Pediatrician pulled his rental car off the road three times during the cross-island trip to empty his bladder. He chugged the gallon of orange juice on the way to prepare his nerves and relax his stomach. In the moments between ringing the Mansion’s doorbell and hearing the bronze knob twist open, he practiced the Yoga breathing that the Carpenter had showed him.

The heavy, gold-flaked door opened with a creak and the Nervous Pediatrician screamed. The Angry Musician was standing there, shocked.

“Z-zombie,” the Nervous Pediatrician choked, slowly backing away.

“Excuse me?” he asked.

“You’re,” the Nervous Pediatrician said, collecting his breath, “You’re supposed to be dead.”

“I’m sorry to disappoint, but it wasn’t me,” the Angry Musician whispered. “The Policeman has already been by to take the body.”

“Whose body?”

The Angry Musician opened the door and waved the Nervous Pediatrician inside. “That guy who used to run the rental car agency-”

“Died? I rented a car from him this morning.”

“No, he showed up with a new badge. The Politician died,” the Angry Musician said, handing the Nervous Pediatrician a torn newspaper page. “That came yesterday.”

Someone had written across the newspaper in a silver pen, *You want to*

know what happened to your old girlfriend? The Neurologist is banging her. –

M

“He told us that before Mel offered him political office, he ran the Laundromat and was engaged. Mel told him he could stay with the girl and spend the rest of his life airing out someone else’s dirty laundry, or he could move here and air out the community’s dirty laundry,” the Angsty Musician said, fishing his coat pockets. “He told us that it was the mistake he regretted the most, and Mel never let him go back. Then he, well,” he paused, tapping on the bottom of the cigarette carton he had found, “It’s bad news, Doc.”

The Nervous Pediatrician ran his hands through his thick, shaggy hair. “I’m sorry. I’d offer you some orange juice, but I’m afraid I drank it all on the car ride.”

“You’re kind. I have some orange juice here. Would you want to stay for dinner?” The Angsty Musician turned his head toward the Celebrity’s bedroom. “She’s not coming out for a while. He was like a father to her.”

“Thanks for the offer,” the Nervous Pediatrician said, hiding his shaky hands. “I should get the rental back before the store closes.” He turned to go, but added, “Where do you get beer?”

The Angsty Musician blushed.

“I’m not trying to offend you or anything, but I read about the empties in your recycling. Where did you find beer?”

“Down there,” he said, pointing to the basement. “Each time I try to finish it off and give it up, I wake up to find more. It’s terrible.” The Angsty

Musician perked up. “Do you want to take some? Please?”

The Nervous Pediatrician drove out to the ledge on Lover’s Lane and cracked open one of his six new beers. A rustle in the brush startled him as he took the first sip. The Nervous Pediatrician looked up to spot the Computer Technician and the Storeowner’s son emerging from the woods hand-in-hand.

“What are you two doing out so late? Didn’t you know that we have Policemen around here now?” he scoffed. “Apparently so. Badges and everything, imagine that.”

“Is that alcohol? Where did you score alcohol?” the Storeowner’s son marveled.

“At the Mansion.”

“We heard about the Politician,” the Computer Technician expressed empathetically.

“Want to know why he died?” Years of sobriety let the alcohol strike swiftly.

“That’s really none of our business,” the Storeowner’s son said. “It’s his life and death to do what he pleases with. We could at least give him the dignity of privacy.”

“Do you know what your birthday is?” the Nervous Pediatrician slurred.

“It was a Tuesday” the Storeowner’s son replied. “I know that.”

“March 31,” the Nervous Pediatrician beamed. “Mine was a Tuesday,

as well. But it was March 31. I couldn't even tell you what fucking season it is now." The Nervous Pediatrician chuckled. "He wasn't the only one who had to give people up, you know."

The Storeowner's son glanced over at the Computer Technician. She shrugged and put a hand on the Nervous Pediatrician's shoulder.

"Shit," he whispered. "And for what?"

The Nervous Pediatrician arrived at his practice Monday morning with a hangover. Finding his office door covered in post-it notes aggravated his sensitive neurons.

"What's all this?" he groaned at his part-time receptionist, the Nail Technician. "The paper ban," she said. "When I got in this morning, the filing cabinet was gone and this pile of stickies was on my desk. I transcribed what I could remember of your appointments' charts."

"You know that we keep all those files on the computer, too, right?"

"We do? Wow. I guess I've just never looked." She chewed on a pen cap until it cracked between her teeth. "Well, your first patient is over there," she grumbled through clenched teeth, glaring at the Storeowner. She, too, preferred to start her day with a pack of bubble gum, but had found the Storeowner sitting in her office rather than behind the counter of the General Store that morning.

"What's wrong with you?" the Nervous Pediatrician demanded.

"It isn't me, it's the cat," the Storeowner replied in a hushed voice. "I

mean, I guess you could take a look at my toe again?”

The Nervous Pediatrician beckoned him into the examination room. He let out a sigh as he closed the door behind them and asked, “What happened this time?”

“I don’t know, something just,” he paused. “I shouldn’t be mad about the paper ban – it doesn’t really hurt my business. But it’s been a week since this all started, and I don’t think it’s ever going back.”

“What do you mean?”

“Things are different. Kids are talking to me! They are demanding answers to questions about the politics of the town, questions that I can’t answer! Questions that I want answers to, too.”

“It’s been quite the awakening,” the Nervous Pediatrician nodded, inspecting the Storeowner’s toe.

“I saw the Florist out in her garden this morning, crying, and holding the Neurologist,” the Storeowner lowered his eyes and slumped his shoulders. “I just don’t know what to say anymore. I haven’t had a good conversation in four days – Mel stopped posting talking points on the Blog.”

“You may not have been having pleasant conversations, but you’ve been having authentic ones,” the Nervous Pediatrician said.

The Storeowner shrugged. “What do these people want?”

“Mel’s just one man,” the Nervous Pediatrician replied with a hesitant stare.

“Not Mel,” the Storeowner huffed, “This Anarchist and Skeptic

Writer. What do they want?"

"I don't know. Maybe they're just unhappy with the way things have been going, the way things run around here."

"Just because they're unhappy, does that entitle them to sabotage it for the rest of us? I mean, sure, some things may not make sense around here, but nothing's ever been this bad before. Everyone seemed happy enough."

The Nervous Pediatrician tugged at his shirt collar, loosening its grasp on his neck. "Look, I'm not a veterinarian. But take the cat over to the Dog Breeder. She'll at least have a little more insight than me."

"Thanks, Doc." The Storeowner held out his hand, his eyes glistening. "And don't think I haven't noticed about you."

The Nervous Pediatrician smiled and shook his hand. He waited for the Storeowner to leave before collecting and reading the post-its that covered his door. The Nail Technician purposefully avoided making eye-contact, even after he politely coughed.

Two handfuls of sticky notes into his task, he found a message written not in his playful receptionist's green sparkle pen but in black ink.

We need your help, and we believe that you want to help. Meet here tonight at 9. Eat beforehand, because the pizza joint closes at 8. – The Anarchist and the Skeptic Writer.

The Nervous Pediatrician was surprised to find his office light on when he returned that evening. The Computer Technician and the

Storeowner's son were waiting for him. She pretended to look in his ear with a tongue depressor. He was listened to her heart with an unplugged defibrillator. They quickly hid their tools upon hearing the door close.

“What are you two doing here?”

“Did you read Mel's blog this morning?” the Anarchist asked.

“Why bother?” the Nervous Pediatrician exhaled.

“No mention of the Politician. We hold Mel responsible. Last night, you sounded like you had proof,” she swiftly retorted.

The Nervous Pediatrician pulled a small piece of paper from his wallet. “The Musician gave this to me,” he said handing it to the green-eyed activist.

“Enough with the cute stuff,” the Anarchist pounded her fist into her free palm. “It's time for action.”

“The school has a copier and a printer,” the Skeptic Writer said, his eyes glued to the Anarchist. “We figured that Mel wouldn't have confiscated the sanitary roll that your patients sit on. If you are with us, let's go.” He paused. “If not, uh, could we still have that paper?”

The three moved swiftly through the streets, slinking in the shadows, avoiding the street lights. They hopped the small picket fence that enclosed the school yard. An eerie silence lingered on the playground, making the Nervous Pediatrician anxious as he waited for the Anarchist to pick the door's lock.

The Anarchist took the first shift as watch guard, but the Nervous

Pediatrician continued to scan the horizon for signs of intrusion. The Skeptic Writer cut and inked and typed and printed and wrote and pressed and cropped and stenciled for what seemed like an eternity. He coughed to alert the other two. It was done.

“What do you think?” he beamed.

What really happened at the mansion that day? The Politician is dead. We know what kind of laundry detergent he used, but no mention of his passing?

Why did Mel usurp all of our paper? Is he that scared of our public forum? Is he that afraid of the power we have when we can openly and freely talk to one another?

Who the Hell is Mel?

“If you two like it, we can start photocopying.”

The Anarchist abandoned her post and kissed him passionately. This made the Nervous Pediatrician feel a bit awkward.

A small burst of light interrupted the lover’s embrace. The muffled cry from the school yard was familiar.

“I can hear that printer running,” the old-Athletic Has-Been now-Policeman called out. “You two should have learned your lesson about these newspapers.”

“Shit!” the Skeptic Writer whispered.

“God damnit!” the Anarchist agreed. “Okay, he’s only looking for two people,” she turned to the Nervous Pediatrician. “We can outrun that washed-

up asshole. But you need to stay here!”

“Wh-what?”

“We are going to distract him,” she repeated, running for the exit.

“You need to stay here and finish.”

“We’re counting on you,” the Skeptic Writer said. He kissed the Anarchist under the doorframe.

“What if you get caught?” The Nervous Pediatrician’s hands were shaking, his voice cracking. “What if Mel tracks me down?”

The Skeptic Writer pulled his lips away from the Anarchist’s long enough to shout, “Who the hell is Mel? Cut. Print.”

The Nervous Pediatrician watched in terrified silence as the two ran out into the flood light. He heard the Anarchist curse at the Policeman and then order the Skeptic Writer to part ways. Through the window, he could see the short-of-breath Policeman chase after the young and surprisingly limber Anarchist. After a few moments, once the snapping of twigs and rustling of brush had stopped, the Nervous Pediatrician was left alone with only the sound of his hyperactive heart.

Using the Carpenter’s Yoga breathing, he made his way to the photocopier with the roll of paper. He carefully dismantled the paper feed’s cover, but it crashed to the floor with an unusual plastic rattle. The Nervous Pediatrician could have sworn it sounded like a cough.

He wiped the sweat from his forehead onto his sleeve before it could stain the paper. In the meticulous silence, he heard another cough. Jumping to

his feet and spinning toward the door, the Nervous Pediatrician squealed.

“Wh-what?” He stammered. “Who’s there?”

A voice coughed again, beckoning him.

“What do you want?”

“To explain,” the voice cracked. “Look, please come here.”

The Nervous Pediatrician took a few hesitant steps forward.

“That’s enough,” the voice barked. “Don’t- uh – don’t come any closer.”

“Who are you?”

“I don’t know how it got like this, I don’t know how it escalated so quickly,” the voice moaned. “At the Mansion yesterday. That was never supposed to... I never intended,” the voice stopped.

“You?” The Pediatrician could feel his clenched fists get warm.

“That’s exactly what you intended. You left the note there for him to find. What did you think was going to happen?”

“Not that. Not any of this.”

The Pediatrician stepped forward again.

“Get in here. Show yourself.”

“You need to give me time to fix this. You can’t print that newspaper, at least not now. Not yet.”

“You aren’t the only one around here with something to say. You don’t think the people here have a right to know what you did?”

“It wasn’t me, at least not entirely me. I’m sorry,” the voice pleaded.

“What gives you the right, the privilege, to say whatever you want, no matter how much it muddles things?”

“I haven’t fucked it all up, there’s still time for me to clean up my mess.”

“You’re pathetic.”

“Any more than you?” the voice asked, suddenly booming with authority. “You stop sputtering like a jackass for one day, and now you have some type of superiority over me? You still don’t have the cahones to ask out the girl.”

The Nervous Pediatrician looked down at his hands, covered in ink from the copier, and shoved them into his pockets.

“Look, I may have let things get out of hand, but you three started this all. Do you know how long things had been going well until those two little shitheads stirred up trouble?”

“Seven-hundred and twenty-three days,” The Nervous Pediatrician answered.

“Longer than that. You don’t believe there was real happiness out there?”

“Maybe. Yes, probably some.”

“After everything I’ve fucking given them, of course there was. And you took that away, under the guise of ‘enlightenment.’ Sure, you may get the girl and be the hero, but you can’t imagine what that paper would do if everybody read it,” the voice said. “You’ve already disillusioned them. Now

you're setting them up to rip each other apart, to destroy all that they know. How satisfying will it be to get the girl then? How long will that paradise last?"

The Anarchist's voice echoed outside, calling out to the Nervous Pediatrician and to the Skeptic Writer. She was still too far away for him to hear her footsteps.

"Things won't go back to the way they used to be, you made sure of that. But give me a few days to at least salvage what I can."

Silence seeped in through the cracks in the doors and windows. The Nervous Pediatrician stood with his hands still in his pockets, waiting for the voice to speak again.

Instead, the Skeptic Writer called back to the Anarchist. The voice outside had quieted.

The Nervous Pediatrician ran to the door and found no one. He hadn't really expected to. The young lovers' footsteps grew louder and echoed closer. They squealed in ecstasy and shouted back and forth about a mission accomplished. The Nervous Pediatrician shuffled his tired body back to the photocopier. The dry ink didn't smudge as he folded the prototype newspaper into a small square and tucked it in his inner coat pocket, next to the piece of paper from the Angsty Musician. He pushed open the back door with his elbow, using his free arms to unwrap a lollipop that had been sitting in the same inner coat pocket. The Nervous Pediatrician hoped that the flavor would at least last for the entire walk home.

The Good Thing About Quitting

The dull orange light blinks and flashes green as the strong aroma of Columbian supreme invades my senses. My right hand reaches up to open the middle cabinet, looking for my favorite mug. The shelves are stocked with Nalgens and Odwalla bars. The cabinet to the left is similarly disappointing, holding only Solo cups and ping pong balls. I check the cabinet on the right and find a sparse collection of plates, bowls and cups. There's one clean mug left. The door to the basement creaks open and a few sock-softened footsteps patter into the kitchen.

“Sorry. Do you mind if I, uh?” I ask.

“No. Go for it,” Steve-o says. I think his name is Steve-o. I never really knew the guys that JP and Ryan left the house to.

“Do you want any?” I hold up his coffee pot.

“Nah,” he chuckles. “Wouldn't mix well.” He reaches by me to the wine fridge filled with Honey Brown. “You comin' back downstairs?”

“Eventually.”

I wait until he's gone before pouring the coffee and putting on my coat.

The night air chills my finger tips and nips at my ears out on the porch. The cushions for the wicker chairs and loveseat have either been thrown away or stolen by the neighborhood's wild cats. We've been gone only six months, but already the place is foreign. I sit on the porch's banister, one leg tucked

under and the other swinging rhythmically against the posts. My view of the barren street is interrupted by a blinding incandescent light. I almost spill my coffee. Ryan stands in the doorway.

“Didn’t mean to scare ya,” he says. “On or off?”

“Off. Has there always been a light out here?”

“It was broken last year.” He flips a switch in the hallway and closes the door behind him. “I thought you left.”

“Where would I go?” My eyes readjust to the darkness. “Everyone I knew’s gone by now. Or at least anyone I’d want to see tonight.”

He sits down on the bare loveseat and pulls the warped pea-colored ottoman closer with his foot. Tapping the bottom of a Djarum pack against his palm, he pulls out two and holds them between his warm lips. Before I can stop him, Ryan runs a lighter along the wood paneling and cups his hand around the small flame.

“I quit,” I tell him.

“What?” His eyes widen.

“Last month. I’ve been good.” My dangling leg bounces and my fingers dance against the smooth ceramic.

“I’ve already lit it.” He forces away a smile and furrows his eyebrows. “It’s just one. You can still quit and just have one.”

“Moderation?”

He reaches out to me. “Moderation.”

I inhale, leaning my head back to rest against the support beam, keeping my eyes open only enough to make out the rusty glow of my clove. My leg stills. My head quiets. I've missed this smell. Like preserved plums, or dried orange rinds, mixed with pourpori.

"It's strange to see you out here without JP," Ryan says.

"He looked busy, catching up," I shrug. "How's he doing? I can never tell."

"Who can?" he laughs. "Probably good. He spends all his free time with Jen now that she's moved into the city."

"Poor Ryan, ditched for a girl."

He looks down at JP's left-behind handcrafted ashtray on the ottoman between us, overflowing with our old soggy filters, and flicks away the soft ash from his clove. "I didn't know that you left the wicker chairs." He runs this slender fingers along a protruding spoke and I think of the night we broke it.

I shrug. "They belong here."

"What time are you going back tomorrow?"

"I don't think I am." I flick my ashes into the bushes that hug the posts.

He shifts in the uncomfortable wicker furniture. "How come?"

"I'm not staying for anything here," I unintentionally whisper, then cough to regain my voice. "There's just nothing there."

“Come to Boston with us. JP may have filled up his girl quota, but I haven’t.”

I want to clench my fist or roll my eyes, but I just move my coffee mug in small circles to create a whirlpool.

“I’m kidding.” He sits up and tosses the filter into the driveway. “I’m just kidding.” He pauses. “It’s weird not having you around. I miss coming home to drunk Shane throwing herself at me on the porch.”

A charcoaled smudge on the railing marks the spot where we once convinced JP to extinguish his clove when he insisted putting it out on his arm. Twirling my clove stub in small half circles on top of the blemish, I press until the glow disappears. I jump down from my perch but my foot has gone numb. The pins and needles sweep past my heel and up into my calf. My knee buckles and I wince.

The feeling of his touch fires in my spine. It creeps up my back into my shoulders. I can feel it in my hair.

“I didn’t mean that, Shane. I don’t know why I said it.”

He quickly pulls his hand away and tucks his fingers into the tight front pocket of his jeans. I shake my foot out and let it strike the banister to check for sensation.

“It’s been a while,” he finally says, parting his full lips. “Would you want to come?”

“To Boston?”

He pulls out his carton of Djarums and taps it against his palm, gliding toward the wicker seats. “One nice thing about not having those cushions, you don’t have to worry about sitting in cat piss.”

“About that,” I say, waiting for him to look up. “You didn’t sit in cat piss. JP was really drunk on the way back from the bars and couldn’t hold it. He was too embarrassed to tell you.”

Ryan’s smile quickly fades and he looks to the ghost of the old argyle patterned cushion.

Laughter pierces the floorboards and resonates in the bones of the porch, JP’s above the rest. We both look down at where we think the basement couches should be, where we had them last year, back when we called this place home.

“Don’t make me smoke alone,” he says.

“I quit.” I sit next to him and hold out my hand.

A Love Letter to Ultimate Frisbee

Or :

Disc is My Favorite Four Letter Word

This all started when I thought of you in the store today. That's sort of an awkward way to break the silence. I'm sorry that I disappeared, but there's really only so much pain a person can willingly subject themselves to – and being around you hurt too bad for too long. I still got the scars on my knee and obliques to prove it. The silence was a stipulation imposed by doctors with the added guilt coming from parents, employers, and a girlfriend. If Jeanie knew that I was writing you this letter, she'd probably kick me out on the couch tonight or call Dr. Roberts to have him strong-arm me. The world's still against us – that tiger don't change its stripes.

But thinking of you earlier in the checkout line got my heart beating, a much needed jump-start for a rusted old battery. I guess it would be hard in a place like that to not think about you. My fingers tingled in anticipation of you, of reaching out and snatching your cool plastic exterior. I could feel the fibers of my hamstrings quiver, waking the adrenaline up in order to meet you in the cutting lane. You know, and the pain had just started to fade away. That's really what makes this the hardest. I had starting wondering if I was ready for you again. I promised everyone that I would take some time away from you, let the scars heal, and now that everything was looking up, Jeanie goes and demands that I make the hardest decision of my adult life.

How am I supposed to give you up? You've been a part of my life since I was sixteen. Am I supposed to go back to the way I felt before I knew you, before Sticky Fingers introduced us? God, the anticipation and excitement of that day, I don't think I can ever pay him back. I had seen him with you some weekends out on the soccer field or in that lot behind the supermarket. Those first moments together are still seared into my granite sensory cortex, engraved for all to see. How smooth you felt in my hands, how nervous I was trying to look good for you, how it felt like lightning bolts every time you came soaring back into my arms.

You know, I haven't seen my mother since the hospital, but Jeanie decided to call her today after the incident at the store. Can you fucking believe that? You wouldn't have called my mother. Well, of course you wouldn't have, my mother hates you. She never gave you a chance.

My mother had heard rumors about you, about the people surrounding you, rumors that you and I both know aren't true. She confused you with those fucking stoners in the Birkenstocks who think that throwing around in a circle constitutes physical activity. She saw tie-dye where there were Gaia jerseys, cleats and all. Sure, I've met some crunchy do-gooders who listen to too much Creedence Clearwater Revival and are obsessed with *Scooby Doo*. But does she know about Joel Silver? Not only did that guy invent the sport, but he fucking produced *Die Hard*. And *Predator*.

When my mother heard about us, she asked Sticky about it. But not me. Of course not me – when has my mother ever asked how I feel? Had she

asked me back then, I would have told her: “Yes, and I’m in love.” Then I would have stormed off and jumped in my car and gone to you, just to spite her. Or maybe I would have pulled a disc from my bag, brandishing it like a weapon, and her appalled that you had been there the whole time, under her nose, lurking in the shadows. But none of that happened.

Before she really knew about us, back when she’d just catch me covered in mud and grass sneaking in at dinner time, she’d accost me nightly at the door: “Where have you been?” At first I told her I had joined the Italian Club, but I forgot that she spoke fluent Italian. So I told her that I had joined the football team. This got her off my back. She had been telling me to get with football since I was a kid. Everyone respected football. I could see her eyes light up when I lied to her. I felt guilty, but at least we were safe.

Until she saw us. She read my name in the school’s paper and came to watch and find out for herself. She searched my drawers and constantly checked my eyes and threw out all my Visine eye drops. That was a real bitch during allergy season. “Why not Football? Or Lacrosse? You’re wasting your time with Frisbee.” She’d talk down to me like that, and belittle you. She didn’t get it – she didn’t know how we were, the thrill, the chase, the excitement. She only knew that I’d come home covered in dirt and blood, sweat drenching the Under Armour she had bought for me and football.

After starting off my adolescence void of meaning and stuck in a constant state of monotony, meeting you made everything fall into place – especially once I got to college. Maybe that’s why it was so hard to leave. We

had finally found those who accepted us unconditionally. I never thought that I'd find a crowd like my college team. The companionships you build being around people who share the same zest, the same drive, as you – it was truly remarkable. They even let me ditch my old identity, branding me with a nickname to complete my metamorphosis. Explain to me how a girl is supposed to compete with that?

And I'm sorry about the girls. You know that. You always came first. Sure they were fun, but they were nothing compared to those few minutes sitting on some poorly cut grassy knoll that the universities reserved for us, lacing up, taping up, preparing myself for a tussle and rumble with you. Pure, unadulterated, libidic release. Thrusting. Chasing. Throwing my body around, despite the pain, despite not knowing where or how I'd land, just to get my hands on you. And how good it felt when I got my hands on you, either completing an offensive pass or skying some chump on defense. I was never the tallest out there, but you made me feel giant. Was it Chekhov who said that we really ought to be giants? Whoever it was, that's how you made me feel. And when no one else could.

Remember that time one of those girls' birthday almost made me miss being with you at Regionals? Did I let that happen? Didn't I play my best that day? I got a Callahan for you. Didn't that prove that all of those girls were just for show and fucking?

I even picked you over them once you started to wear me out. I picked you over everything, against the warning of my professors and parents and

non-teammate friends. By junior year, it was too much. I felt old. Not mentally, but physically. I'd show up to class with six or seven ice-packs duct taped to my body. By spring semester, I had shin splints. My advisor pulled me aside before Sectionals. "Are you limping?" "Yeah." "Why do you do this to yourself? You know, you're going to need your legs in life" ('real life' he called it). He was right. But I couldn't quit.

Then I heard the one voice I couldn't ignore. Although I knew she was worried about my legs, and my GPA, she didn't really try to stop me. She came to watch us at that year's Sectionals. She was so beautiful that day, even just in jeans and my team hoodie. Jeanie was so hot back then. I mean, she still is now, but back then she wasn't nagging me about taxes and phone bills and making babies. And she wasn't jealous of our love – the first person who understood. I think it was because she had a love like ours of her own, alpinism. Her rock hard body felt tough and smooth under my hand, just like you. She thought the scars on my sides and elbows were sexy. I thought it was cute when she started picking up on the terminology and cheered me on for getting a D or heckled me to throw a hammer. She supported me, well – supported us, up through senior year.

I don't know what changed after graduation. She still let me be with you, but I could see – well, hear actually, she was quite vocal about this – that she didn't approve. For some reason, to her, spending all of my money and effort trying to join a club team was immature. I knew that she wanted to spend our weekends traveling and hosting dinner parties, but she let me sneak

off to you, even if it was ‘my attempt to escape responsibilities of adulthood.’ Joining a club team was something I was meant to do after graduation, it wasn’t some inane attempt to relive four years of undergraduate education. In those first few months, she’d run off to her own lover, to the mountains or to that rock gym on I-95N. I could see that my devotion to you was a lot for her to handle, but I couldn’t pick one over the other.

I couldn’t talk to her about the stress of my job, or the lingering bitterness within my family. But I could go to you, and sprint until the acid pumping through my veins replaced the chaos and resentment and frustration. I could huck upwind until my arms felt like anvils and I could jump until my calves gave out, like a star that burned too long and caved in on itself. You made everything go away.

And what does that even mean, ‘escaping the responsibilities of adulthood?’ Why does everyone think that I can’t have a balance? In college, my mother thought that you would distract me. She warned me that you’d bring me down and throw me out and leave me hopeless and jobless. You’d think that making the Dean’s list in chemical engineering five of my eight semesters there would’ve proven her wrong. And I don’t know what Jeanie’s problem is – I still have my job. She got upset when I took two days off in order to play in Club Nationals a few years ago. But it was Nationals. What do people want from me? I pay my rent. I contribute to society. One day, my company is going to solve the energy crisis. Maybe then everyone will get off my back.

That's what was great about Jeanie in the beginning. Even though she never knew the world in which you and I live, she understood my passion. She used to be so gung-ho about climbing. Over summer break before senior year, she and her housemates built a practice bouldering wall in their basement. That's love. That's commitment. In the same sense, I never understood her mumbo jumbo about belays and static ropes and that bullshit – but I understood the thrill of the climb. With the technical skill and pure athleticism that is demanded to challenge the mountain, she was really only challenging herself. Seeing how far she could push her body, how close she could get to the sky. That's how she used to talk about it.

I asked her not too long ago what it's like to feel something that strong, you know that overwhelming passion, fade away. She's still a recreational climber, sure, but that enthusiasm that I loved in her is gone. “We all have to grow up eventually,” she told me. This may have been what set her off about the last time I went to Nationals. With my condition, there was no way that I could play – but Sticky's team had made it and they had a really good chance of placing first that year. She wouldn't have known about it either if my intern hadn't called the house to see how my flu was doing.

But if she can just suddenly decide that it's beneath her to care that deeply about climbing, the thing that once gave her a sense of meaning and exaltation, what's to stop her from outgrowing me? That's how she put it – she “outgrew” climbing, just as I was supposed to have outgrown you.

To be fair, she never said specifically that I outgrew you – my friends

and coworkers and parents said that. Jeanie pretends to think that, but she knows the truth. You were stripped away from me. You were ripped from my bleeding, clammy hands as I wept like a child. At least I got the layout D on that douche bag who called three bogus fouls against me. But it wasn't the right time. It wasn't even in the championship series – it was so Goddamn early in the season. Losing you was more painful than losing my ACL. Who fucking needs an ACL? Well, I suppose everybody does, that's why I had to get a new one, grafted from my hamstring. Aren't scientists making clones yet? I thought that by now I could have just shown them my right ACL and they could've cloned me a left one. Do cripples need ACLs? I thought their issue is a nerve thing – couldn't I just have the ACL one of them isn't using?

Is that terrible? Oh God, that's probably a terrible thing to say. I'm sorry. I didn't actually mean that. But that's what thinking about us does to me. It makes me crazy. The shock of it all. Coming to terms with the prognosis. I didn't think I'd get over it. Sticky Fingers came to visit me soon after the surgery. "Look what they did to you," he said. "Fucking Commie pricks." I told him the stipulation, about the severity of the injury. "I'll go with the Man, I'll tell you to take it easy and maybe give it up for a few years," he said, "But it's on you if you actually follow that pile-of-shit advice."

I didn't feel as hopeful about the whole thing when my mother came to visit me. I didn't even want to tell her, but Jeanie insisted upon it. Lying in that bed, prodded by needles and tubes, I didn't want to face her – I didn't

want to give her the satisfaction of being right. Maybe I was a little harsh when she showed up, I know that now. Let's call it a byproduct of the pain killers. Seeing her cry was alarming, though. She told me that she'd always been proud of me, that I wasn't a disappointment, but my recklessness was. "Didn't I tell you this would happen?" she said. "I've only wanted to look out for you."

Too many people 'just wanted to look out for me.' My mother. My doctors. Even Sticky's advice was a little hard to swallow. Going back to work was a nightmare. I still completed all of my assignments in time, but I guess my "attitude" wasn't up to par. The guys in my project group held some type of touchy-feely by-the-self-help-book intervention for me in the break room. Alright, so maybe throwing Susan's potted plant against the wall was a bit of an overreaction. But sentiments like "it's not the end of the world" aren't really helpful. Truthfully, I didn't see anything wrong with my performance. Sure, I was drinking in the morning, but the quality of my work didn't change.

I've stopped drinking in the morning, if that's what you were wondering. It was really hard to accept the truth about us for a while. The pain that creeps in when I'm not expecting it is overwhelming. You love something for so long, and you'll never fully stop loving it. I know that I can't have you. It kills me that others can. A giant fucking metaphorical knife slowly eases its way into my stomach every time I see someone else with you – not the quick jab to the heart, but the slow, gruesome bleed-out.

The pain crept in today, at the store. I was in a place designed for people like me and Jeanie and Sticky – people who have fallen in love with the unacceptable ones, not the footballs and ballets and soccers. Girls like Jeanie and guys like Sticky get turned on in places like REI. In fact, I'm pretty sure I once caught him jerking off to the REI catalogue. The store is our Mecca, it's our haven, it's where we can come to celebrate our love.

And yet our love was mocked, ridiculed.

Standing in line at Recreation Equipment Inc. with a pair of Black Vipers to give Jeanie for Valentine's Day, I passed the 'family recreation and dog' aisle. And there you were, packaged in that goofy 'Life is Good' bubblegum crap next to leashes and discgolf sets. Fuck these granola-crunching yuppies who associate you with dogs and leisure. Fuck them all. If they had been talking about the team, Death or Glory, I would have cheered. But they were talking about cockapoos and labrador retrievers. They had debased you, stripped you naked and called you a whore. That's what they did. How dare they treat you like that?

Some large Brawny Men escorted me from the premises after I kicked over the display racks and called them all Northface-loving assholes. I called them all sell-outs. Communists. I don't know why, but it felt like something Sticky would have yelled if after defending his true love he was knocked unconscious with a kayaking oar and dragged to the curb. I kicked the display rack with my good leg, but somewhere in the mix I heard my knee pop and I haven't exactly had a full range of motion since. That's what I do for you,

still, even now when I'm supposed to have "outgrown" you.

I couldn't even look Jeanie in the face, and it wasn't because of the icepack or the black eye. She started crying, something about a personality disorder or psychotic behavior. It was hard to make it out, between her tears and my concussion, but I got the gist of it. She didn't make the ultimatum until later, until the swelling had gone down and I had calmed down from my mother's phone call. I still wasn't a disappointment to her, but she didn't pretend to be proud of me. She and Jeanie were just relieved that REI didn't decide to press charges.

Fuck.

Now I feel awful. Saying it out loud, how could I have put Jeanie through that after all that she's done for me? She really was incredible after the injury – I don't think anyone else would have put up with me. I had spiraled down into a depression. Maybe I wasn't completely honest about what a mess I was at work – the mood swings did get a little out of hand. I just felt so cheated, so confused and angry. A few of my friends stopped talking to me. Sticky refused to let me go out drinking with him, he told me to get a grip on myself first. And through it all, Jeanie was there to comfort me, to let me know that things would eventually get better, that people can almost fully recover from knee surgeries. To distract me, she used to take me on "light to moderate" hikes as the doctors told me to avoid "moderate to severe" activity. I wonder what the doctors consider "light to moderate" activity? (Jeanie strained a ligament in her knee and figured sex was still a "light to moderate"

activity until she got on top and I had to take her to the ER.)

Lately, I've been trying to make it up to her, thank her, you know? A few weeks ago, I took her out to the restaurant where we had our second-year anniversary. As a surprise, I bought her tickets to some Off Broadway show that she won't shut up about. I can't give them to her now, the spontaneity is ruined – she'll just think they are my way of apologizing. No matter what I do, I'm gonna look like the bad guy.

Oh, God. What have I done? I've just jeopardized losing the two best things that ever happened to me. How am I supposed to pick? If I pick Jeanie, I'll always resent her for taking you away from me. If I pick you, I'll always wonder if I threw away the love of my life. Jeanie makes me feel desirable. You make me feel alive.

Maybe I don't have to decide just yet. Maybe Jeanie will cool down and this will all just blow over. She has to come around, she has to understand. She's the person who knows me the best, the only one – other than you – that's seen me at my lowest. That's gotta mean something, right? So I just won't tell her about the spring league I've signed up for, or the physical therapist I'm going to see after work. She'll come around. That, or you and I will have to end it all in a blaze of glory, as everything I know and depend on burns to an ash. Part of me still believes that it'd all be worth it.

Don't Worry Baby

The door gives easily to the force of her shoulder. She runs into the room panting, thankful that it's empty, wiping away the blood and sweat on her eyebrow with her sleeve. A reflection in the mirror atop an oak dresser is at first alarming. It could have been someone else lurking there, a stranger, one of them. She inspects herself in it. No cuts. It must be splatter on her brow. The blood on her arm is not splatter, it's fresh and it's her own. Holding the shotgun between her knees, she tears off the blood-soaked flannel to investigate the wound. It's deep. *God damn it.* She quickly rips the shirt into long strips. Her teeth clench the sleeve cuff as her free hand maneuvers the thick fabric into a tourniquet. She tugs.

Placing the Winchester she found in the foyer on the bed, she moves toward the dresser. The top drawer holds pantyhose and slippers. In the drawer below, she finds what she needs – a man's dark work shirt. The right arm delicately through, careful not to let blood stain the new sleeve, the left arm in quickly. Thumbs and fingers moving meticulously, independently. Only one button remains untouched near the collar of her shirt. She notices the framed sepia picture of a gingerly old couple sitting atop the bureau. The back of her throat becomes dry and her heart feels like it's swelling within her chest. *I didn't check the other rooms on this floor.* Hopefully he will. A better scenario would be if homeowners had made it out already. Or at least were unrecognizable.

Her nostrils widen and her eyes feel heavy as they hold back tears. She can't, not now. She's beyond that. She is far enough away, she prays, to no longer encounter recognizable faces. Those are the hardest to kill.

The door slams open against the wall, shaking the room and setting her blood at a boil. *Fuck ,he scared the shit out of me.* She finishes the top button and pumps the 12 gauge. He's lucky it wasn't aimed and ready when he fell into the room. He's lucky she hadn't decided to ditch him at the last gas station, or left him to fend for himself at the bridge in the first place.

He winces and falls to his knees. "My hand, my fucking hand." From the ground, he uses his feet to shut the door. The handle of a rusted revolver is nestled between the small of his back and his belt.

"Be more careful with that."

"Did you hear me? I burnt my fucking hand," he shouts.

She shushes him and reaches for the handgun. "What did you do?"

"I tried to get rid of the stairs."

"You set the stairs on fire?" She can't tell if he or the wound is making her feel uneasy, lightheaded. The room goes dark briefly, but she pulls herself back.

"No, I tried to, but I set my hand on fire instead," he says rising to his feet.

"I swear to God, if you ever do something that stupid again," she says, "Risk my life when I've done nothing but protect yours, I'll get you before they do."

The words sting like ice when they roll off her tongue. It makes her stomach churn to address them, to label them.

There's a booming crash below at the front door. He looks at her. The vacant fear that had blackened his eyes the day on the bridge returns. She wonders how that look could be emulated, how the horror of standing over the body of an older brother could ever be equaled. She wonders what he looked like before his turning point.

"Are you okay?" she asks. She never told him about her turning point, about the little girl.

He nods. "Are you ready?"

She wipes the revolver barrel clean using her shirt and places it in his good hand. "I guess as ready as I'll ever be."

The crash resounds again. Waves of force rattle the house. A window breaks. *He's been nothing but a burden.* A voice shouts at her limbs, commanding her to run, to leave him, to cower in the corner and put a bullet through her skull. The pain in her arm returns. The sleeve has dampened from her blood. Why should she save him? He's already doomed her. He's already doomed himself. What obligation does she have left to a twenty-three-year-old stranger? Her neck aches and buckles under the weight of her dizzy head.

Momentarily, she gives in to gravity, gives in to the panic, to the exhaustion, to the blisters on her feet from four days of running. She lets her body go through the motions of anxiety, she lets in the fear. She lets in the image of that girl's face, of those eyes, of all the recognizable eyes she

watched fade grey before turning a sickening fallow. She lets in her fiancé, his name, his salty smell, accepting the grave truth about her own strength, her denial. The gravity of the situation allowed for her actions. Killing him wasn't her turning point. She surrenders to the memory of the little girl, letting the terror chill her blood. But she doesn't let it linger long. With one deep exhale, it's gone and she's back in her own house days before this all happened.

His voice brings her back. Five burnt fingers dance along the pockets of his jeans. Five toes tap to a familiar rhythm.

"Then she looks in my eyes, and makes me realize," his whispers in melody, "And she says 'don't worry baby.'"

"Are you humming the Beach Boys?"

He clears his throat. "Yeah?"

"Don't."

"Okay." His toes stop dancing briefly. A creaking stair snaps the hushed air. "Feels so good you're coming home soon," he sings to himself.

"That's even worse."

"Sorry."

Another stair creaks.

The muscles in her back tense. Her thighs quiver. The walls begin to spin, the ground no longer feels stable beneath her swollen feet. He takes her slender fingers in his burnt hand and turns to her with pouty lips. But her sleeve distracts him.

"What happened to your arm?" he asks.

She shrugs and the dam breaks, she can't control the violent heaving of her sobs. The momentum makes her cough up blood.

"Jesus," he cries out, pointing his handgun at her.

"Do it."

"No, I won't," he says. "I won't treat you like one of them, not yet."

"I'm just as bad as they are, it doesn't even faze me to kill anymore."

Her fingers go numb as she drops the shotgun.

"What's," he stammers, "What's wrong with your eyes?"

"I've done all that I can, and you still have time to get out through the back stairs. Please. Take me out."

"How can you expect me to do that? You're the only person I have left."

She limps towards him and stops once the barrel of his revolver is pressed against her clammy forehead. "Let me keep my humanity, whatever little remains." It takes all of her energy to raise her arm and cock the revolver. "Do it."

"You aren't one of them."

"Do it," she shouts and he pulls back against the trigger.

Alone Again Or

The first package came on Tuesday. Crammed between his bank statement and a subscription reminder for the daily paper, the manila envelope was already slightly bent when Charlie stuffed it into his weathered messenger bag. At least he'd have something to read on the train. According to his mail, he was already three weeks behind on his *Globe* payments.

The postmark said Oregon. There was no name. Charlie didn't know anyone in Oregon. He dug his chewed finger nail beneath the seal, tearing it open to find a fragile Polaroid picture. Charlie dumped it onto his lap, hoping to discover more clues, but only the lonely Polaroid fell out. Someone had mailed him a picture of a miniature model boat, the sails made of soft canvas, the hull painted blue with a single red stripe.

The Polaroid sat on his desk all day. Between spurts of productivity and lengthy exploration of *Lost* blogs, Charlie would let his mind drift to the sail boat. Why had someone sent him that picture? What was he supposed to think about it? Should he remember something? It had a warm familiarity that he could feel in his stomach and palms, he just couldn't place the memory. He looked once more at the inscription scrawled on the back.

My landlocked boat.

A strange urgency surged through his veins. It made sense now. The penmanship. The Polaroid. The crude craftsmanship and paint job. The landlocked boat without a dock in rural New Hampshire. Abby had sent it.

Abby, the girl next door, the one standing barefoot in her yard sporting a yellow sundress when they moved into their new house, had contacted him. She apparently lived in Oregon now. The last Charlie had heard from her, she was simply “venturing west.” Charlie instructed his legs to jump up and his lungs to scream, but somehow the neurons had shut off. He remained immobile in his cubicle with an unwavering hand holding the Polaroid before his face.

She kept my boat.

“I don’t think I can buy you a bra for your birthday. I don’t think they’d let me into the store.”

Abby sighed and collapsed next to him on the porch swing. They were twelve. Charlie had overheard an argument with her parents about some new right as a woman to wear a bra. When her father stuttered a booming no, Abby ran across the street and called up to Charlie’s window. He wanted to put his arm around her, but he figured with all the talk about bras and body parts, she’d misconstrue his intentions. It had been much easier for him when she was a ten-year-old tomboy in mud-covered sundresses.

“Is there anything else you’d want for your birthday?”

“I want a boat,” she said. “I want to sail away from this place. And my dog,” she paused. “You can come too I guess.”

Charlie didn’t know what to say. “We’re landlocked. There’s just a pond.”

She started crying. He offered to get her some tissues and a coke from his kitchen. Inside, Charlie's mother explained about the surge of hormones infiltrating her unsuspecting body.

“What do I do for her?”

Charlie's mother smiled. “I don't know. And don't expect to know for a while.”

On her birthday, Charlie waited until her guests had left before presenting her with a small, cardboard box. “What is it?” she asked as she fished through the tissue paper. Abby smiled as she cupped the tiny model ship in her hand.

“You wanted a boat.”

Charlie pinned the Polaroid on the corkboard behind his desk. He tried to get back to work, but his eyes kept drifting to the boat. *You really couldn't have picked a better time, Abby.* Charlie wondered what would have happened had she sent it a few days sooner. Would he have agreed to go out with Maggie had he received Abby's picture on Thursday?

The Friday before, Charlie had unsuccessfully avoided Maggie, the girl from HR, in the elevator. Ever since the office party in June, Maggie had been tracking him down in the building. Luckily, they worked on different floors. He could usually time his arrival to evade her come-ons. Somehow she had figured out his schedule and timed her entrance perfectly. They were the only two on the elevator that morning.

“Charlie, come out with me tonight.”

“I, uh,” Charlie tried not to look in her eyes. When he did, he remembered how attractive she was. “I don’t know. I was supposed to watch the game with some friends.”

“Want to come to the game?”

“It’s sold out.”

“I can get us in. C’mon, Charlie.” She let the last syllable linger in a playful plea.

“You can get us in to the Yankees game? How?” He turned to her. He was swept into her dark doe eyes and snug knit sweater. He didn’t want to look at her ass, but she always wore snug low-rise jeans on casual Fridays.

“You’ll have to come out with me to find out. Meet me by Gate E. How old are you? I’m 23 and can’t read you.”

“I’m, um, I’m only 27.”

“You don’t have herpes or anything like that, do you?”

“Jesus. No. Why do you?”

“No,” she said, stepping off the elevator onto her floor. “Remember. Gate E. Around six-ish.”

Charlie noticed at Gate E that her features seemed softer, her make-up less severe, her clothes hung more naturally. He wondered though if his borderline-sexual-excitement for a free Sox-Yankees game was carrying over. She spotted him in the crowd.

“You made it.”

“Sorry I’m late, Mary.” His face felt hot. “Uh. Fuck. I’m sorry. I know your name is Maggie. I don’t know why I did that.”

“It’s fine.” She faked a smile. “Come on, my uncle’s waiting for us.” She tugged on his arm and led him through the swarm of intoxicated local fans. “Do you smoke? I have an extra matchbox if you don’t.”

“I use a lighter.”

Maggie ripped the covers off of two matchboxes and flattened them out. “Here, put this in your coat pocket. My uncle collects tickets here. Hand him this. He needs to rip something. He’ll give you back a ‘stub’ and then we just find some good standing room. Are you going to want a beer? Of course you are. You buy. I’m getting us in.”

Charlie laughed. “Fine. I’ll buy. How often do you do this?”

“Whenever he’s working. I got into the series last year. And the opening show for the last Rolling Stone’s tour. I snuck down to the front of a field box with some lame excuse about how the guys in my row were trying to grab my ass. I’ll hand it to you Boston guys, you don’t let girls take any shit.” She looked over at Charlie. “Thanks for giving me a second chance. I fucking hate that place, the office, it makes me into this weird corporate nightmare. Real-world-Maggie is much more-”

“Interesting?” Charlie offered, then quickly turned to her. “That wasn’t an insult. I’m glad I came out tonight.”

Charlie's excitement had lingered through Saturday, Sunday and Monday. Although he still hadn't seen Maggie around the building, he had been planning on calling her again after the Sox-Yankees series. He didn't want her to think that he was just using her, in case he actually was – he hadn't figured that part out yet. As he walked to the train after work on Tuesday, Abby's Polaroid in his breast pocket, Charlie wondered what he would say to Maggie.

Before he took off his shoes and hung his keys by the door, Charlie went to his bedroom closet. On the top shelf, beneath his college yearbook and family photo album, he kept a converse shoe-box. The converse that came in them ten years prior had been thrown out. He kept memories of Abby in the box now. He took the box down and placed it on his bed. Charlie stared at it for a few minutes, wary of the Pandora effect he was sure would come upon opening it. His cell phone erupted in a furious buzz.

“Hi Ma.”

“So I just ran into Nathan's mother. Nathan just bought a hybrid for his girlfriend - those little green cars that are good for us, right? Have you thought about getting one? It might be nice to get some color on the road. Silver cars are too drab.”

“They aren't necessarily painted green, Ma. It means they are environmentally friendly.”

“Do you want your father and I to help you get one? I don't want to give you LinkPasses for Christmas again.”

“I don’t need a car in the city. I take the T everywhere.”

“You could come visit. Your father and I repainted the house. Danielle wants to turn your room into some sort of yoga studio for when she comes home.”

“Don’t let her. I’ll be home in a few months.”

“When Charlie?”

“Thanksgiving. I’ll see you then, okay? I need to do this assignment for work, though. So,” he stalled, “I’ll call you soon. Say hi to Dad.”

“Call your father, Charlie. I love you.”

Maggie found him during lunch hour the next day.

“I haven’t heard from you. Was your hangover that bad?”

“Nah, no hangover.” Charlie motioned for her to take the seat next to him. “I just felt bad calling. I didn’t want you to get the wrong idea.”

“That you like me?”

“That I just wanted free Sox games.”

“Well, they’re away tonight. So if I invite you out to a bar to catch the game after work, I won’t think you’re using me. I’ll just think you’re interested. But if I’d be getting the wrong idea then, too-”

“No, no,” Charlie cut her off. “Purple Shamrock? We can just walk over at 5.”

“Okay. I’ll meet you outside.”

As they walked down Union Street, Maggie put her hand on Charlie's arm.

"I'm sorry about earlier, about 'office-Maggie.' Did I come on too strong?"

"No, not at all. Sorry," he said shuffling his feet. "I'm not trying to be aloof. Things are just sort of complicated for me."

"Is it that girl again? The one you weren't over the last ten times I've asked you to get a drink with me?"

"Yes. But it isn't. I mean, she sent me something in the mail recently. But it's over, and I'm over it." Charlie stopped to read the business hours posted on the door of an industrial design firm. "I don't think I want to talk about it."

"Oh, wow," Maggie tightened her grip on his arm. "You're really torn up about this. I just thought you had always used her as a cop-out. It's really taken you three months to move on?"

"Six years. It's taken me six years. I've – I had been in love with her for seventeen." Charlie began walking again. "Love that starts at age ten really isn't realistic. So, let's just not talk about it."

Maggie shrugged and loosened her grasp.

Two days later, Charlie arrived early for work to pace in the lobby. He had awoken that morning to find another package from Abby. Rather than open it, he decided to ask out Maggie. He felt as though the two women were

calling his bluff, teasing him with affection, calling him chicken as they offer him hope and a taunting “you won’t do it.” “You won’t give up the past and come with me.” “You won’t wait for me, you won’t blow off everything else for me, like you once promised you would.”

Once he spotted her, Charlie spurted out across the lobby, “Come out with me tonight.”

She waited until they were closer before asking, “And do what?”

“Whatever you’d like. Let’s just go out.”

“Do you party?” She asked in a whisper.

“Do I party? No. I don’t do that anymore.” Charlie noticed that she was wearing her casual Friday jeans. “I smoke, but usually alone. I don’t, uh, party anymore.”

“That’s fine,” Maggie said. “There’s a film I really want to see playing in Kendall Square at 8 o’clock.”

“Great. Perfect.” Charlie was speaking unusually fast. “I’ll meet you there?” He turned to walk away before she could answer. His face was red and his palms were clammy.

He had calmed down by 8 o’clock. He waited for Maggie on a bench with two tickets peaking up from his shirt pocket. She arrived with a small backpack slung over one of thins straps of her dress. The peach and maroon paisley printed fabric bounced and swirled with each stride.

“What, were you a hippie in a past life?”

“You don’t like?”

“No. I do. You look beautiful. Uh,” Charlie blushed. “What’s in the bag?”

“I stopped at the corner store back there. I’m not paying four dollars for a can of soda. I picked up some candy, too. You seem like a Mike&Ikes guy.”

Once they had found seats and stashed the goodies under his coat, Maggie leaned in toward Charlie.

“I’ve been really embarrassed about these last few months. I really like you. I regret that we were physically intimate before we got to know each other. I blame the intern in marketing, he putting too much vodka in that punch. Hopefully, you can get past all that. I’d really like for us to have a shot at developing some emotional intimacy.”

“It’s, uh,” Charlie felt a little overwhelmed. He wasn’t used to bluntness. “No worries. I understand. I was pretty drunk, too.”

“Here’s to a clean slate.” She kissed his cheek and handed him a box of Mike&Ikes.

Charlie finished the half-eaten box of Mike&Ikes for breakfast the next morning. It felt weird to open Abby’s second package while he tasted Maggie. The small brown box sat quietly on the counter as he read the paper, reorganized his bookshelf, and watched a two-hour infomercial for a magic blender. As hard as he tried to ignore it, the package silently demanded attention.

Abby had sent him a used popsicle stick and a photocopied image of a hospital admittance bracelet. He could barely make out *Winters, Charles P* on the hospital ID. His throat began to itch so he put down the photocopy and examined the popsicle stick. “What did one snowman say to another?” The red-stained end answered, “Smells like carrots.” Charlie smiled. It was a joke that Abby would have liked.

When Charlie was eleven-years-old, his doctor recommended a tonsillectomy after three cases of strep throat within a span of eight months. His mother would blame these eight months for his chronic lankiness that haunted him even at 27. At 11, the lankiness did not concern him as much as the hospitalization and surgery.

“I’ll be there when you wake up,” Abby promised.

“You’ll be in school when I wake up. I’m going under in the morning.”

“Then just don’t wake up ‘til school’s out.”

Charlie woke up well before school got out. He kept forcing his weary eyes to remain closed until he finally awoke to find Abby sitting on his bed, her legs dangled over the side, flipping through the limited channels on a hanging ten-inch black and white TV, eating ice cream.

“You’re up. Happy Tonsils Out, Charlie,” she giddily declared. She looked down at the pint of ice cream in her hand and then held it out to him. “I hope you don’t mind, I started without you. I got tired of listening to you snore. You sound like my Grandpa.”

“I just got throat surgery, you dork,” Charlie wheezed.

Abby laughed. “Sorry. I’m Sorry.” She couldn’t stop.

“You’re not very nice to me.”

“I brought you ice cream!”

“You ate most of it.”

She brought two pints the next day. He let her keep his ID bracelet for her memory boxes as a thank you.

Seven years later, Abby’s doctor recommended that she get her impacted wisdom teeth removed. Charlie had been in school when she woke up from the anesthesia. He told her not to wake up until he could come over with a few Disney movies and popsicles.

It was a mixture of the painkillers, the animated movies, and the sugar high from an entire box of popsicles that catapulted them into hysterics. Abby moaned through laughter that it hurt to laugh. Charlie kept reading the popsicle sticks. When they ran out, Charlie reached into his reservoir of puns and old-man jokes.

“So two muffins are sitting in an oven…”

“Stop Charlie,” she squealed. “My face hurts.”

“One turns to the other and says, ‘Man, it’s hot as hell in here, ain’t it?’”

“I’m gonna kill you.”

“The other turns to him and goes, ‘Holy Shit! A talking muffin!’”

Tears streamed down Abby’s face.

“What did the fish say when he swam into a concrete wall? Dam!”

Charlie managed through laughter. “When Danielle was little, she didn’t get the joke. She’d go, ‘What did the fish say when he swam into a concrete wall? Shoot!’”

“I would have laughed at that.”

“You are laughing at that.”

It was this night that implanted in Charlie a desire to finally act, although he wouldn’t go through with it until a few months later. He would have kissed her then and there, but her jaw was still numb and she was drooling. Charlie didn’t ever think that he’d still find a girl attractive while they laughed about her drool.

“It looks like blood.”

“It isn’t. I just ate all the red popsicles.”

After they had laughed themselves into a punch-drunk stupor, Charlie offered to clean up the mess they had made of her bedroom. She insisted that he leave the popsicle sticks.

“For my box.”

Charlie’s eyes dropped to the ground. “Why?”

He knew why. Abby had given him two reasons why she kept the box for middle school, the box for summer vacations, the box for high school, and the box for boys. She confessed that she encoded her memories to prevent hackers from getting easy access to them, and to retain control over the recollection of events.

An ambiguous movie stub of a first date is much more controllable than a fucking cheesy diary entry. I don't want to be told how to remember these things, Charlie. We only have so much storage space.

That's what these things were, thumbnails for the movie and document files she kept in the spongy folds of her cortex. As he watched her file away movie stubs, hand written notes, mementos, pictures, gifts, flyers, it hurt him to know that there would be moments she would always remember and he would inevitably forget.

"I don't know. To remember?" she shrugged.

"Remember what? Corny jokes on popsicle sticks? Jesus, Abby. This sucks. You're just trivializing this. All this. Us."

"I'm not trivializing us, Charlie."

Charlie exploded. "Yes you are. Damnit, Abby. What happens in five years? Ten years? Even next year? You're saving bits and pieces of me. One day, I'm just going to be reduced to popsicles in a fucking box."

Abby's eyes glossed over. "That's not true. That's not how it works. And besides, do you really think there's anyway you won't be a part of my life in ten years? You're all that I've got."

Charlie began drafting a letter to Abby during his lunch hour on Monday. Maybe she'd put a return address on the next package. Maybe she'd give him some hint, some insight into her life now. In case she did, he wanted

to be ready – there was six year void to fill. He started with the last time he had talked to her, sitting in South Station, waiting to get picked up.

They had planned to spend their junior year Spring Break visiting a friend from home. By the time Charlie had realized that Abby wasn't coming, Nathan was already too drunk to get him. As Charlie waited in line for a taxi, he tried calling her. She picked up on the third try. She was crying.

“Did you miss your flight?”

“No, Charlie.”

“Are you in Boston already? Did something happen? You okay?”

“Charlie,” her voice rose in pitch, “I'm not coming home. I'm flying out to San Francisco tomorrow morning to look at some schools and interview at a few places.”

“You're not coming to see me and Nathan?”

“I'll see you in May.”

“But, it's my birthday.”

“I'll make it up to you, babe. I promise. Nathan will throw you a better 21st anyways. I'm so sorry.”

His letter began with the taxi ride to Nathan's apartment near the Northeastern campus. He wrote how the pit in his stomach led him to believe what he now knew to be true – that he wouldn't see her in May, that she wouldn't make it up to him, that she was never coming home again. His letter went on to tell her about the girl at the bar that night, the girl with a tiny tattoo of infinity on her delicate wrist, the girl who liked Scorsese movies and

Neutral Milk Hotel, the girl who was going to see Spoon later that week at a club downtown, the girl who, in the morning, muttered a “happy birthday” to Charlie as she gathered her clothes.

Later, as he waited for the train after work, Charlie grabbed a *Metro* and a sharpie from his briefcase. He propped the paper up against the sweating walls of the subway to write a few more sentences, about how lonely his first adult job was, an internship actually. He asked her how her first job was, did she make it as a photographer? He folded the newspaper over his thigh to let a few more memories pour out. Graduation. A new kitten. Danielle’s first boyfriend. Uncle Jack’s death. Moving to Boston. Having to give his new kitten back to his parents because of a strict “no pets” policy in the one apartment he found within his means.

Once home, Charlie added the scribbled fragments on the newspaper to the file he started at work. He told her about how every date he had tried in the past five years had ended with him confessing to the girls, “I’m sorry, I guess I just haven’t gotten over someone.” He told Abby that sometimes this was just a cop-out, Maggie had been right, but Charlie thought that women preferred to be second to the seventeen-year-long dream girl than to just be undesirable.

But sometimes he meant it. He tried to use Abby as an excuse not to date the girl from HR who fellated him at an office party that summer. Now that he had gotten to know and fall for Maggie, there may have been more

truth to his initial cop-out. Sometimes he really couldn't let go of Abby, her laugh, her quirky impulses.

The abrupt and violent buzz of his cell phone startled him.

"Hi Ma."

"Hey Charlie. Have you heard from your sister?"

"Why?"

"I think her boyfriend is cheating on her," his mother said. "She seems to disagree, but it's their first semester at school and he was a little jackass."

"Okay." He waited for her to continue. "I don't understand what you want me to do."

"Nothing. Never mind. How are you? I haven't heard from you in a while." She waited momentarily for a response. "Seeing anyone?"

"Uh, not really," Charlie hesitated. "I guess I'm seeing this woman at work, but it's nothing serious yet."

"That's great, baby. You know how I hate you being down there by yourself."

"I'm not alone, Ma."

"I just worry about you."

"I'm actually about to go meet some guys from work for the game. I should run."

"Fine Charlie. Call your sister. And your father. And your mother once in a while, okay? You're only a state away, don't act like a stranger. I love you."

His screensaver popped up, stock nature images dissolving into promotional Red Sox photographs. Charlie sat down to edit his letter to Abby. He realized that everything he could have said about the last six years only filled up four paragraphs. Charlie deleted the word document and went to his couch to watch the baseball game.

A few days passed before he received her next package. It was another Polaroid, or rather a photocopy of one. The subject of the photograph was initially hard to discern, the photocopier had destroyed the contrast of the original. It didn't take Charlie long to recognize that it was his own image, bashfully looking away at the awkward age of thirteen.

He had been smiling timorously at a glowing Abby, eager to test out her new Polaroid camera. She talked that day of nature photography, of the west coast, and of Redwoods. She was determined to make them fit within the frame. Charlie told her to practice in his Uncle Jack's orchard.

“What kind of practice is that? Pretty soon I'll be taller than some of these trees. People drive cars through the Redwoods! Can I practice on you?”

“What kind of practice is that?” he asked.

Without any further politeness, Abby snapped her first Polaroid.

Maggie took him out dancing that Friday night. Charlie hadn't told her yet about the second two packages. He was too nervous about dancing in front of her. She ordered another round each time he complained about it. “Don't

worry,” she said, “it’s on your tab.” Even with four rounds in him, Charlie couldn’t muster the effort to finish a song. After the fourth drink, Maggie pulled him to the quiet corridor near the restrooms.

“Charlie,” she wouldn’t let him avert his eyes, “where is this going?”

“Huh?”

“You aren’t upset because I made you come out dancing with me. Most guys would take that as a hint – that I’m interested in sleeping with them, and going on more dates, and continuing to sleep with them. You aren’t upset because we are at a night club. Is it that girl?”

“You don’t understand. She was out of my life, and now she keeps sending me these sentimental photos and I don’t get it. She was my best friend and she fucking disappeared without warning.” Charlie knew that he was drunk, but he didn’t feel like stopping himself.

“She called me on my birthday, she stranded me at a bus stop, saying that she wasn’t coming home. She went out to California to get into art school and become a big fucking hot-shot photographer. The only thing she said before hanging up was that she always used the first picture she took of me in her shows. And she’d send me an invitation to her first gallery opening if she made it out there. That’s the last goddamn time I’ve heard from her.”

Maggie pulled away from him gently, her pupils contracting. “This girl was just your friend?”

“Don’t do that. Just because I didn’t fuck her doesn’t mean that she wasn’t the most important person in my life.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean it like that,” Maggie said. She spotted an empty table. “Come here. Tell me about her.”

“What? Why?”

“It might be therapeutic or something. Who the fuck knows? Just come here,” she patted on the seat of the chair beside her own. “When’s the last time you saw her?”

“Seven years ago. I flew out to spend a long weekend with her. She signed us up on this ski trip and lent me her friend’s student ID to get me on the bus. At the end of the day, she made me sit next to her roommate on the way back so that she could make out with some guy on her floor.”

“Jesus. Did she know you liked her?”

“She had to. Maybe.” Charlie shook around the ice cubes in his tumbler. “Nah. I dunno.”

“Girls aren’t mind-readers, Charlie.” She hunched over the table to find his eyes. “That’s not that bad. I’ve done worse.”

“Huh?”

“I hooked up with this older guy my friend was in love with. And, I mean, it was two years after my friend told me, and the guy was six years older than my friend,” she paused. “And my friend was gay and this guy wasn’t. But I still felt terrible about it.”

“That’s sort of a fucked-up story,” Charlie laughed.

“I guess.” She bit her lip.

“I don’t get you. What do you want from me?”

“Nothing,” Maggie said.

“Nothing?”

“You know what Smokey Robinson said?” she asked.

“I can think of more than a few Smokey songs that might apply to you and I.”

“‘If you can want, you can need, et cetera, et cetera.’ Do you want me?” Maggie asked, placing her hand on his arm.

“Yeah.”

“Then, whatever. Another drink?”

Charlie awoke on Saturday to a throbbing headache and another package from Abby. He wanted to see how long he could go without touching it. Maggie had offered him redemption on Friday night, the possibility of release. If he could ignore Abby’s package, if he could forgo the knowledge of her existence, he had a chance.

It sat in the mail slot until Wednesday morning. Charlie opted to open it on the subway, praying that the tedious commute would dull his reaction. It didn’t.

A wave of nausea hit Charlie once he recognized the concert poster she had sent him. A few weeks after they graduated from high school, a band from NYC was playing only forty-minutes from their town. Abby, Charlie and Nathan had been looking forward to the concert for weeks, mainly because the Winters were taking Danielle to visit their grandparents for the weekend.

Nathan let his beard grow in so that he could use his brother's license to buy liquor. A few hours before they left, Nathan's brother set them up with mushrooms.

Charlie woke up at 5 A.M. shirtless and in sweatpants lying on the edge of his bed. Several posters had been torn off his wall and one of his table lamps was shattered. His hair smelt like sweat, his shirt smelt like pickle juice, and there were a few vomit stains on his floor.

“What the fuck happened?”

Nathan was eating a sandwich and watching a comedy channel in Charlie's living room. He chuckled when he saw Charlie stumble down the stairs.

“Easy, sport. Sit down. Drink some water. Eat another pickle. It'll help make your hangover... less... miserable tomorrow. Do you remember the concert?”

“Yes. I think I remember most of what happened.” Charlie asked.

“Do you remember when you started freaking out and kicked me and tried to make out with Abby?” Nathan laughed. He held up his hand for a high five. “Priceless.”

“I did what?” Charlie couldn't breathe. “That actually happened?”

“Yeah man. It was so funny. She might be a little pissed at you, though. She put you to bed last night then stormed off. I think she was crying, dude.”

Charlie frantically called her phone as he threw on clothes. She didn't answer. He ran across the street and threw pebbles up at her window. A bedroom window on the second floor opened.

"What do you want, Charlie? Do you know what time it is?"

"I'm sorry. God, I'm so sorry."

"For what? Getting high when I asked you guys not to? Or the part when your trip went bad and you attacked us?" she asked.

"I – um," Charlie paused. His stomach cramped and his fingers went numb. "I would never do that to you, Abby. I would never hurt you."

"You did. I mean, you fight Nathan when you guys are sober. But you pushed me, Charlie. And then you kissed me and scratched me when I tried to get away. I don't know how to feel. Frankly, Charlie, I'm fucking pissed at you. That's about as much as I can figure out."

Charlie went home and wrote her a letter. He couldn't explain what had happened, how he had been in a different world. *No, 'world' isn't right. I don't know how to describe this. 'Place' is too ambiguous.* He explained how he had been in a different life, *and in this life we were together, we were in love and Nathan was trying to hurt you. He kept laughing at me as I tried to protect you. I wasn't trying to hurt you. But I didn't even know that I was still alive in this world, guh, I don't know what word I am looking for. I thought I had left this existence in order to be there... with you... I'm sorry for the way I acted.*

When she finished reading the letter, she put her hand on his shoulder. Charlie regretted not taking out the part about them being in love before he gave it to her.

“I’m so sorry you had to see me like that.”

“I was just worried about you,” she said. “Nathan didn’t even care that you were sick. He wanted to just drop you off and leave you alone. What kind of friend is that?”

“Thank you for helping me to bed.”

“Damn it Charlie,” Abby said, “Don’t pull shit like that again. I’ve never seen you like that before, so angry and possessed. It was really scary.” Abby could see the shame in Charlie’s eyes. She tried to laugh. “And if you really wanted to kiss me, you could have at least brushed your teeth first.”

“I didn’t want to kiss you – I mean, I did, or no, I wouldn’t have anything against that, but -”

“Shut up, Charlie.” The corners of her mouth eased into a smile.

“Do you think that I could have the note back?”

“Why?”

Charlie looked down at her hand, still clinging to his arm. “I’m just not sure that I want this to be a memory in a box.”

Charlie paced by the elevators as he waited for Maggie. He had attracted a few uneasy looks from patrons on the subway, and was still trying to get the feeling out of his system. The package had brought him to tears

somewhere around the Downtown Crossing stop. No one could tell until he started sniffing.

“Maggie,” his voiced boomed louder than he intended.

“Hi, Charlie,” she said. “What happened to your eyes?”

“Pollen. Listen, do you think you could get a drink with me after work?”

She seemed flattered. “Yeah. Sure.”

Charlie regretted leaving her on such an optimistic note. He felt guilty all day. She even bounced next to him all the way down to the bar. It was only after he downed his gin and tonic that she noticed his demeanor.

“I don’t want to keep leading you on. I just don’t think I can continue this.”

“Continue what? Nothing ever started.”

“Okay, well, then I can’t start anything with you, Maggie.”

Maggie looked down at her drink.

“It’s that girl, isn’t it?”

“Don’t take it like that. When we went to the game, she was out of my life. And then she contacted me. I think she’s trying to tell me something. She keeps sending me pieces of our past.”

“What past? You said you were always just friends.”

“She sent me this poster from the last time I tried to tell her I love her.”

She peeled away at the skin near her thumb with her index finger. “Did you ever like me? Or were you just biding your time?”

“I – I think that I liked you.”

Maggie started to cry. “You haven’t even spoken to her in six years. Why would you think that she’s trying to tell you she loves you? You don’t even know if she did when you were still in her life.”

“That’s not fair.”

“I don’t care anymore. I tried.” Maggie got up and left without paying or saying goodbye. Charlie wanted to be aggravated about the bill, but he figured he owed her a drink.

Charlie decided to walk home from the bar, he still hadn’t shook the crying sensation from the train that morning. When he got home, he saw that he had left his cell phone on his bed and that he had a new voice mail.

“Charlie, it’s your father. Your mom keeps complaining that you haven’t called me yet. I don’t give a shit. I know you’re fine. You’re probably busy. I told her that we talked, and that you’d call her soon. Call your mother Charlie. She still thinks of you as her eight-year-old little boy. I’ll snap her out of it eventually. Okay. Hope all’s well. Okay. Bye.”

The last package came on Saturday. It was a Polaroid of an old, lime green flashlight. Charlie could tell that it would be the last package because Abby had written *Three quick flashes* and a phone number. It was a message in their old Morse code. At ten-years-old, they discovered they could still talk

throughout the night through their facing bedroom windows. They had developed an intricate code that covered almost all topics, from monsters in the closet to trying to skip school the next day to a simple *good night*. *Three quick flashes* didn't enter the repertoire until middle school. It meant *call me*.

Charlie called the phone number that Abby had written on the Polaroid. He didn't know what to say. He reluctantly regretted deleting the letter that he had started writing her. At least that could have made good talking points. Maybe he could play coy and tell her that in order to get answers out of him, she needed to fly to Boston. Charlie knew that he'd probably end up spurting it all out at once, no filters, no inhibitions, no organization or guards. After six years of silence, Charlie knew that he couldn't keep it all in for long.

“Hello?”

“Abby?” he choked and cleared his voice. “Hi. It's Charlie. Charlie Winters.”

“Charlie,” she cried, “You got my letters? That's great. Hold on one moment, Charlie. Okay?” He heard Abby tell someone to order her a Tuscan chicken salad wrap. “Sorry about that. It's lunch time here and we're in the middle of packing everything up.”

“That's fine. Is this a bad time? I can call back.”

“Not a chance. How are you? How's life?”

“Uh, great, Abby. It's been awhile.”

“I know Charlie. I’m coming home for a few weeks. Am I going to get to see you?”

“I mean, I live in Boston now. You know that. When are you coming home?”

“About six weeks? It’s very exciting. I’ll have to come see you in Boston. How’s your apartment? Are you living with anybody?”

The question caught him off guard. “No, I live alone. I mean, there are a couple of cats that live in the neighborhood that remind me of my old ones. My landlord won’t allow pets, though. It’s sort of a shitty place. How’s Oregon?”

“It’s good, but I got a better job offer in the city. In three months, I’ll be moved into New York. I’m getting some studio space there, too. I found all my old boxes packing. Did you remember that stuff?”

“Yeah. I didn’t think they’d make it into your high school box.”

“What are you talking about? I kept a Charlie box.”

Charlie’s heart pounded. The blood in his head melted away, gathering first in his stomach, and then in his groin. She had kept a Charlie box. Charlie didn’t even think that she kept boxes for her boyfriends, the real ones, the ones who had actually had the nerve to say something to her, to tell her how they felt, to kiss her at appropriate vomitless moments. But Abby had kept a box for the bumbling boy across the street who stuttered through his speech whenever she wore her yellow sundress and who snuck out of bed at ten-years-old to coax her dog out of a thorn bush.

“Yeah?”

“You didn’t know that? Oh. I thought you always knew I had a box for us.”

He wanted to tell her about his Abby box, but couldn’t form the words right. “How long are you going to be home, before going to New York?”

“Just in time to set things up for the wedding. Then we are coming back here to finish moving out.”

Charlie didn’t know what to say. His palms starting to spasm. The blood went back into his stomach, and he felt nauseous.

“Oh yeah?” he whispered.

“Now that I know your address, I can send you the invitation. Oh, I don’t even know if your mom told you. I’m getting married in January. Top of the Hub. I hope you can come.” A voice, a male voice, mumbled something in the background. “I’m so happy you called Charlie. Can I call you back in a few hours? Food just arrived, and I want to hear everything. It sucks that we haven’t spoken in a few years. That’s my fault, I know. I ran away and forgot to leave you my number. But I hope you’ll come see me in New York. I’m using that photo of you in my first opening.”

“I’ll come see it. I should go. Call me when you have time later.”

“Okay Charlie. It was great hearing from you.”

“Abby?”

“Yeah Charlie?”

“What was the point – you know, of the packages?”

“Oh,” she grew quiet. “I didn’t think I needed a point. I just miss you. We used to be inseparable.”

“And then you abandoned me.”

“I’m- I’m sorry if you thought that. I didn’t. You were the only thing that kept me from going sooner. I didn’t want to send you the wrong idea or anything. Did I?”

“No,” Charlie said.

“I just missed having you in my life. Maybe once I’m in New York, I’ll get to see you more.”

“Maybe. I’ll let you go. You sound busy. Good luck with the move.”

“Thanks, Charlie. I’ll call you in a few hours.”

The line disconnected.

Charlie stared out his window for a moment. Without registering the movement, his fingers dialed Maggie’s number.

“What do you want?”

“I’ve been thinking it over,” he managed.

“Save it. She turned you down, didn’t she?”

“I’m sorry I was rude to you,” Charlie said. “I really did like you.”

“You’re a fucking dirt bag.”

The line disconnected.

Charlie collapsed into the couch and surfed through the channels for the Sox game. The game was already in its third inning. His computer screen began to flash stock images of nature and publicity stills of the Red Sox.

Charlie considered writing another six-year summary for Abby, talking points for the phone call that he knew would come after midnight. Instead, he leapt up from the couch and kicked over his computer chair. He threw the coffee mug that held his pens across the room into a bookshelf. After three minutes, Charlie's heartbeat evened and his lungs allowed air into his body. He decided to clean up the broken ceramic and scattered books during the seventh inning stretch.

The concert flyer, the popsicle stick, the two photocopies, and the two Polaroids were all sitting on his kitchen counter. Charlie's first instinct was to throw them out, to burn them, to erase the past few weeks. The Polaroid of the flashlight was recent – she still had it. Before she moved across the country, back when she lived across the street, Charlie knew that he could talk to her whenever he pleased – all he had to do was signal to her from his bedroom window.

Charlie walked into his bedroom with the small collection of memories. He walked to his closet took down his Abby box. He added the concert flyer, the popsicle stick, the photocopies and the Polaroids to the box already holding pieces of her. A fishing lure. A clipping from their town paper announcing her accomplishment of Deans List. A flashlight. A Polaroid of a ten-year-old girl standing in a yellow sundress posing with her dog. A Polaroid of an eighteen-year-old girl in a yellow bikini with pink and green polka dots posing with a beer on a beach, mere days before departing for college. A few movie stubs, pictures, handwritten notes. Charlie removed the

Polaroid of Abby at the beach from the box before returning it to the closet.

He hung it on his refrigerator door and returned to the baseball game.

Blinking Lights (For You)

The first time I saw Abby was the day we moved into a real neighborhood the summer I turned eleven. She didn't see me right away. She stood barefoot on her lawn in a tattered but vibrantly colored sundress waving a stick in the air. Her golden retriever, Pluto according to his dog house, was trying to master the "sit" command. She looked like a conductor, gracefully leading her puppy through a repertoire of tricks.

When she finally looked up and waved, my head turned hot and my throat squeezed shut. I tried to wave back, but I dropped the box of comics I was carrying into the new house. The flimsy cardboard ripped when it hit the concrete, splattering my books on the ground. I dropped to my knees and quickly tried to sweep them all into one big pile in my arms. A few on the top spilled over when I stood. She was there to catch them.

"Who are you?" she asked.

"What?"

"I'm Abby."

"Okay," I said.

She thumbed through one of the books. "Can I borrow this? I haven't gotten my hands on new ones for awhile."

I nodded and turned toward my house, gliding up a flight of stairs into my nearly empty bedroom. I dropped the pile of comics by my closet and knelt down at the window. She had taken my book back to her front steps to

read, using Pluto as an ottoman. I watched her read every page of it, her fingers tracing along the storyboard, loose hair falling before her eyes every time she turned her head to scan the next page, the corners of her lips rising at each punch line and her eyebrows furrowing at the final cliff-hanger. When she finished, she crossed the street barefoot again to return the book. She carefully pushed it through the mail slot on our door and returned to her orchestra with Pluto.

Two days later, she rang the bell again.

“Can I have more?” she asked. “Sorry, I mean, can I borrow more?”

“How many more?”

“How many do you got?”

I invited her up to my room to rummage through my collection. We had to step over boxes, posters, the plastic army men I had spent the morning with, and my crumpled aviation themed comforter. We shut the door to drown out Danielle’s coughing. My eyes followed hers as she scanned the bare walls.

“I haven’t organized it yet.”

“Don’t worry about it.” Her khaki culottes were streaked with grass stains. “How do you like your new house?”

“It’s fine,” I said. “I used to have a bigger back yard, with a stream and an orchard. But at least here we have neighbors. Nathan, in the green house, he seems nice.”

She shrugged. “Why did you leave?”

“My parents never really told me,” I said.

“Why not?” she asked, eyeing the pile of posters and pull-outs strewn about my floor.

“Beats me.” My parents never actually told me a lot of things about the old place. They actually didn’t like to talk about anything before Danielle was born.

She squinted her eyes and scrunched her nose, waiting for me to elaborate. I pulled down on my ear lobe and waited for her to do something. “Well, I should get home, my sister’s waiting to make me lunch,” she finally said. “Thanks for the books.”

“Wait,” I said before I realized that I had opened my mouth to speak. “Nathan’s dad is taking me fishing tomorrow. Would, uh, you want to come?”

“I think I’m grounded,” she said. She tucked two books into her back pocket and glided out my door. I waited by the window to watch her skip across the street to her own house. As she disappeared behind the rusted storm door, I could hear a baritone voice barking about the dog’s gate.

Within two weeks, we discovered that our bedroom windows faced each other. Within three weeks, we had developed a secret Morse code with flashlights.

One quick flash meant “Hello? You there?” or “Yeah, I’m here,” depending on context. One long flash meant “Can’t sleep.” Two long flashes meant “Adventure Tomorrow?” That was my favorite one. If she sent me one long followed by one short, that meant that she was having nightmares again. I could usually predict those ones, from whatever happened earlier in the day.

Two quick ones meant “Emergency!” She only used that once, when Pluto ran away.

We snuck out to find the dog while our parents watched the news. We searched the neighborhood for an hour, squeezing Pluto’s favorite squeaky toy every so often. It was hard for me to come up with the right words, the right way of standing and shining my flashlight. I wanted to say something, to tell her that I’d find her dog for her and that she didn’t have to worry about her parents finding out about how she forgot to shut the fence. I couldn’t. I choked on any words that started to form in my mouth, so I just kept squeezing the toy. It finally worked and he barked at us from under a hedge.

“Go in there,” Abby said.

“You go in there! He’s your stupid dog.”

“I can’t ruin another dress! My Mom’s already fixed this one twice. She’ll kill me if I rip it again. Besides, you’re the boy.”

Crawling on my hands and knees, I did my best to avoid the painful pricks of the bush. I would have made her go, but I had remembered the day her mother first fixed the dress. When I finally reached Pluto, he bit my hand.

I dragged him out by his collar, shaking my bruised hand and trying to hold back a wince. She threw her arms around his neck and he licked her face. It wasn’t jealousy, I don’t think, but I wondered why he earned the hug. He was the one who ran away.

“What’s wrong?” she asked when she finally looked up at me.

“Hmm?” I was caught off guard. “Nothing.”

“You look sad.”

“It’s nothing,” I told her. “I just miss my cat.”

“Why?”

“Why do I miss him? I dunno. There was no one around but him before we moved here.”

“No,” she interrupted, “Where is he now?”

“Oh. Dead.”

She stroked Pluto’s head.

“It’s okay,” I reassured her.

“You’re bleeding,” she said, tugging at my shirt sleeve.

I couldn’t feel the thorn in my elbow. But I could feel her fingers brush against my skin as she rolled my sleeve down to inspect the cut. I could feel how cool the hem of her dress felt as she wiped away the blood around the protruding spike.

We didn’t get home until 10:30. I helped her tie Pluto’s leash to the doghouse and she kissed me on the cheek. I couldn’t feel it on my face. But my toes and fingers went numb, and my stomach felt queasy.

“Have you ever kissed a girl?” She asked and I shook my head. “Have you ever liked a girl?” She asked and I nodded.

“My old babysitter, Marie.” I told her. “I think she used to sing to me. I get this tune stuck in my head sometimes. She lived with us for a little while.”

“What happened?”

“She died, too.”

Abby took off her shoes and tiptoed up the back stairs to her house. Her parents had put her to bed a few hours earlier. “You don’t have good luck,” she whispered.

“What about your dress?” I asked, pointing at my blood stain.

“I’ll think of something. Thanks for helping me find Pluto.”

Later that night, I thought I saw one long flash of light followed by a short flash against my wall. But when I went to the window, Abby wasn’t there.

A few nights later, as my parents and I sat down for dinner, we could hear shouting through the open windows. The summer air was stifling and my father still hadn’t gotten around to installing the air conditioners. At first we tried to ignore the yells. Then it sounded like something shattered, a glass door or a vase. We went to the window and could see Abby and her older sister sitting on their front lawn. A car pulled up across the street and Abby’s sister hopped in and took off. Abby whistled to Pluto.

“Go ask her if she wants to eat dinner with us,” my father told me, giving me a slight push toward the door.

There was still a band-aid on my elbow, even though the small scratch had healed. It felt almost like a badge of honor, even though I hadn’t talked to her since the kiss. I hadn’t been avoiding her, exactly, but I just made sure that she wasn’t outside when I went for walks.

I could hear my mother tell my father: “It’s like Marie all over again,” before I shut our door.

“Do you want to come over and, like, eat? Or watch TV?”

She wiped tears away with her palms. “Are you sure that’s okay?”

I nodded.

“Could Pluto come?”

“Probably not,” I said, “Cause Danielle-”

“It’s okay. He’s fine here.”

Pluto tried to follow us across the street, but his leash stopped him.

“I still have some of your books,” she said looking back at her house.

“Should I go get them?”

“No,” I said thinking about whatever shattered. “Keep ‘em for now.”

“I’m sorry,” she said as we walked up my front steps.

“For what?” I asked as I held open the door.

She paused. “I don’t know.”

When temperatures were at their highest in August, Danielle’s coughing and restlessness got worse. I couldn’t help but notice my mother’s nerves got worse, too. Nothing I did helped. Once, I offered to feed Danielle, but I forgot to secure the bottle cap and formula drenched the plush high chair. I tried to hide the mess but my mother’s eyes quickly found the puddle and she burst into tears.

“God damn it, Charlie,” my father said from his hands and knees as he cleaned the floor. “Just stay outside or go over Nathan’s. You need to get out of your mother’s hair. She doesn’t need anything else to worry about.”

Grandma arrived on a Wednesday. I heard Dad tell her that Mom hadn’t slept for five days, that she was on the verge of a nervous breakdown. I didn’t know what that meant. It sounded like what happened when I spilt orange juice on the VCR. Grandma gave me a yo-yo and a coca-cola, and told me to go for a walk. I didn’t get very far. I sat on the curb outside Nathan’s house, waiting to make sure my mom wouldn’t break apart, waiting to hear if Danielle would ever be calm.

Abby walked by with her dog.

“Why are you just staring at your house?” she asked.

“I’m waiting to see if Nathan’s dad will take us fishing.”

“You sound pissed.”

“No,” I said as I sluggishly kicked at a small rock.

“Do you need a dad to go fishing?” Abby asked. “You can walk down to the pond on your own.”

“It’s no fun by yourself.”

“How about me and Pluto?”

“Just as long as he doesn’t bite me again.”

She hummed the same melody over and over again as we walked down to the pond. Eventually I picked it up and joined her. We fashioned makeshift fishing rods by tying willow branches to sturdy sticks. Most of the

time, we sat in silence. Occasionally Abby would turn to me with her emerald eyes.

“So why were you sitting outside?”

“They told me to.” I looked up at her and allowed myself to lock onto her eyes. “Something’s wrong with Dani.” I could feel my forehead wrinkle and my jaw clench, I didn’t want to stop myself. I always stopped myself.

“This summer has sort of sucked.”

“At least it’s just the summer,” she said, dipping her toes into the water and watching the ripples dance in concentric circles. Maybe it was because of the water, or maybe it was how closely she sat next to me, but I thought of Marie. “And you also have Nathan. You’re, like, the only person I’ve got.”

“Why were you sitting outside the other night?” I asked.

“Sometimes I think it would better if I had a sailboat instead of a mom and dad.”

She took me fishing every day that Grandma stayed with us. It was much easier to talk to her when we weren’t using flashlights or playing a neighborhood game of kick the can. It was much easier to think when it was just the two of us.

When Danielle’s spell passed and Grandma said goodbye, Abby stopped taking me on fishing trips. We went back to our old ways of wandering around the street and eating the peanut butter sandwiches her big

sister made. I missed it though. I prayed that Danielle would start coughing again so that Grandma would have to come back.

One Sunday at the end of August, it rained all day. My parents and Danielle spent the afternoon sleeping off the summer. I spent the afternoon watching Abby from the dining room window. She was conducting another orchestra with Pluto, guiding him through his mastered tricks and commands. She didn't notice the heavy rain, or she didn't really care. Every so often, her eyes would wander toward my bedroom, expecting to find me there, expecting me to come join her.

I stood in my room later that night trying to think of which code to use. It couldn't wait until morning, I wouldn't have the guts. In the morning I would worry about her saying no, and me ruining everything. It had to be then, I had to talk to her that night. I certainly couldn't do the simple one quick flash. That wasn't enough. And I couldn't give the emergency signal. I didn't want to worry her. My mind was blank. My head was on fire. We could say 'I have a fever,' and 'I just found a spider in my room,' but we hadn't come up with any way to say what I wanted to say.

I ran outside with my flashlight, my socks and the bottoms of my pajamas wet from the day's rain. When I got to her window, I did the only thing I could think of – I grabbed a handful of pebbles and threw them into the air. Most of them missed her window and came crashing down into my ears and hair. The tap against her window didn't wake her up, but my surprised yelps did.

When she finally appeared, I couldn't speak.

"Why didn't you put on shoes?" she asked.

"Why did you stop going fishing with me?"

"I thought Dani was all better," she said leaning further out the window.

"But, that wasn't the only reason we went," I paused and double checked, "right?"

"It wasn't?"

I began to regret running over.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"Nothing," I said. "Never mind."

"Charlie, I didn't mean," she paused. "Charlie, I can't."

"No, yeah. I know." I looked down at my wet feet and pants. "I should have put shoes on."

"I'm sorry."

"Well, would you want to go fishing tomorrow?"

"Maybe. Ask me again tomorrow, Charlie," she said as she slowly closed her window.

The Third Incident of JP Mercer

“If the conquest of a great peak brings moments of exultation and bliss, which in the monotonous, materialistic existence of modern times nothing else can approach, it also presents great dangers. It is not the goal of 'grand alpinisme' to face peril, but it is one of the tests one must undergo to deserve the joy of rising for an instant above the state of crawling grubs. On this proud and beautiful mountain we have lived hours of fraternal, warm, and exalting nobility. Here for a few days we have ceased to be slaves and have really been men. It is hard to return to servitude.”

Lionel Terray

French Alpinist

1921-1965

The Mickey Mouse wrist watch JP wore read 3:42 when he got stuck at step 6 of tying his shoe-laces, his mind meandering elsewhere. At 3:58, JP noticed that the quiet river he had made camp next to was suddenly overflowing. Years spent in the outdoors had programmed JP's body to react without conscious command. Within minutes, all of his gear was neatly tucked away in his rucksack, the fire was out, and JP was standing in six inches of water.

JP watched as his flimsy carton of Pall Mall cigarettes was pulled into the rapids. The rain made his head heavy and brought strands of brown hair into his eyes. His body began to shiver. *My fucking feet are cold.*

A small book with a worn lilac cover drifted past JP. When he saw the river claim it, when he saw the current pull it under, some taut catapult in JP snapped, launching him forward onto his hands and knees, thrashing through the water. Of all the things that JP figured could push him over the edge, he never guessed that *a fucking book* would finally do the trick.

There on his hands and knees, JP wondered why he hadn't just stayed at a shelter with the other climbers, and why he had decided that breaking trail and extending his trip was the right move. Earlier, the radio had announced that the Nor'easter had changed course, again, and was heading back inland. JP had shut the radio off. He had scoffed at the people he saw waiting out the rain in their cars. He grabbed a lightweight tarp and headed up the mountain.

It was the silence before the thundering crash that prompted JP to look up. When he did, he saw a surge of water rushing toward him.

* * *

The pain brought him back into consciousness. The steady beat of rain forced open his eyes. The water that slowly filled his nostrils temporarily distracted JP from the agony in his leg. He was in no rush to investigate his injuries. He could tell that he must have been tossed around like a rag-doll by the way his body was slumped over a jagged boulder.

JP didn't recognize where the current had taken him, but he guessed he was a mile or so from where he made camp. His Mickey Mouse watch was

broken, giving him no way to determine how long he had been lying in the water unconscious. *This makes three.* He finally gave in to temptation and looked down at his right leg. It was pinned between two smaller and sharper rocks. His left shoe was missing. He had only made it to step 6 of tying his shoe-laces before the current dragged him away.

JP wanted to think about first aid, he wanted to think about the rain, about the inaccurate itinerary he left in his car. He wanted to think about his father, already worried that JP was two days late. But he could only think of the girl in the green sweater and his college housemates.

* * *

“So, do you approve?” Ryan had asked Jen after the three of them had unpacked the last of the boxes. Ryan and JP stood quietly in their new Southie apartment, waiting for her feminine approval. They had lost Shane to Connecticut after graduation, she had always kept the two in check. JP, Ryan and Jen had flocked to the place where they had all pretended to live. As far as their Upstate New York classmates were concerned, “Boston” was close enough to their actual suburbs.

“Hand soap,” Jen laughed. “You guys need hand soap.” Jen made a mix tape for their house warming party. She started it off with a song from *Avenue Q*, the “What Do You Do With a B.A. in English?” one. JP hoped that there was a slight difference between an English degree and his B.A. in

Philosophy. Jen had a B.S. in Psychology. She really didn't know what to do with her degree either. She figured that graduate school in Boston would buy her more time. "Girls really like that, Ryan."

"I knew there was a reason I missed having you around. Thanks for taking that asshole back," Ryan said.

This was on the litany of good things in his life that JP had reflected upon nightly. It was easy to remember "Getting back with Jen" on his mental checklist because he usually performed this quiet ritual as Jen fell asleep in his arms. "Getting back with Jen" was checked off first on the nights they had sex – which had been often. "Lots of sex" was another thing JP frequently added to the list.

"Lots of sex" had been missing from his checklist recently. Jen had been missing from his checklist for four months. He only had himself to blame. And Cole.

* * *

Oh fuck. Oh fuck.

With all of the books he had read, all of the people he had talked to, all of the various ways he had prepared himself through years of climbing for emergency situations, the only thing he could think of was *oh fuck*.

Pull yourself up. Get yourself out of this mess. Think. Do something.

"Help!"

JP groaned at the sound of his own helplessness. He shouldn't have panicked. He knew he could handle it. He was a survivor.

He hadn't panicked when the fatigue hit him and Ryan on Mt. Washington's Central Gully, one hundred feet up a simultaneous free-solo ice-climb. Each had been attached to the mountain by two ice axes, four front-points of their crampons, their ability, confidence, and desire to live. But no ropes. They took turns leading and avoided each other's fall lines. The first ice pitch took them up seventy-five feet of ice at a sixty degree slope. Now, on the second, they were committed. *What if we fall? We'd rocket over the ice cliff and then tumble down a rocky slope for four hundred feet.* Neither of them could answer it aloud. They merely grunted and shouted encouragement back and forth.

"Halfway," JP announced.

"Only halfway?" Ryan screamed. "I'm gonna fucking kill you."

JP believed him. He wondered if Ryan would use his Black Diamond Vipers or just throw him off the mountain.

"You know, ice climbing is a lot safer than other forms of climbing. Here, you only have to worry about falling once. After that, you don't ice climb anymore."

"Shit, J, maybe we should have belayed this pitch."

"It's too late for ropes."

"Well," Ryan yelled up, "What the hell were we thinking not setting a goddamn anchor."

"Reinhold Messner didn't need that shit." Adrenaline surged through JP's arms, pulling his body closer to the top. "If we set up a belay, we bring the mountain down to us. Do you want to do that?"

"No!" Ryan felt the surge, too.

When they had topped out, they ripped off their helmets, stood at the edge of the cliff, and let out barbaric warrior cries, brandishing their ice axes like trophies. They hadn't surrendered. They had survived.

Up until he had been swept away in a flash flood and gotten his leg jammed in a rock, he had wanted to believe that he was good enough and that he could handle anything.

* * *

If not good enough, JP had always believed that he could get by, that he was passable. When JP thought of his family, of his father Paul and mother Desi and sister Catherine, he preferred to think of the first fifteen years. He could handle those years. When he thought of his baby sister, he didn't like to think of a broken twenty-year-old girl with vomit stains on her skirt and a hospital ID around her bony wrist. He liked to think of a fourteen-year-old in GAP sweatshirts donning a New England Patriots scrunchy in her hair. He liked to think of the girl who plastered her walls with boy-band posters and spent her weekend mornings watching Disney movies.

JP remembered a summer afternoon when he had picked Catherine up

early from the community swimming pool. She whined all the way to the car, demanding to know why he dragged her away from her friends, demanding to know what was so damn important.

“Paul wants us to visit him at work and get lunch in the city.”

“I wish you wouldn’t call Dad that.”

JP hadn't called Paul “Dad” for two years by that point.

“Come on, get your stuff together. We're gonna be late.”

“I didn't get to work on the other side of my tan yet,” Catherine pouted.

“You can see how concerned I am. But Paul asked me to bring you.”

“It's a shame that you grew up so fast. I don't need two dads, J.”

“Yeah, well, you need two parents.” JP immediately regretted his slip-up.

* * *

JP’s jacket was soaked. The REI Taku was designed for repelling rain, not rapids. He ran his hands through his hair in a panic. *No hat*. JP hadn’t been wearing any protection when his unconscious body was tossed around like a rag doll amidst the elements and his loose equipment. Luckily, his skull was still intact. Beads of cold salty sweat clung to his skin as rain water gently made its way into the river.

He really wanted a cigarette. JP was sure that if he found the Pall Malls, they'd be in the same condition as his jacket. An itch at the back of his throat demanded water. He needed something to settle his mind, he needed to clear his head before he could plan his escape and survival. Despite the rain, the river had become eerily quiet.

A flash of yellow material in the water caught JP's eye. A body with its face submerged floated by.

The terror that replaced the blood in his veins paralyzed JP. He watched the current sweep the corpse downstream. He waited until the yellow jacket had drifted out of sight. When it was gone, JP emptied his stomach into the same current.

* * *

JP cried out for the only person who could help without shaming him. Shane had always been the one to unconditionally support him. Outwardly, anyway. He had occasionally overheard humbling conversations between she and Ryan. Had Ryan showed up in the river with a cavalry, JP's rescue would have been ornamented with spurts of "You fucking idiot" and "I can't believe you did this, you piece of shit." Ryan would have then blamed JP's history for the incident, as Ryan did with most of JP's screw-ups.

That was the thing JP liked about Shane in college— she knew nothing of his past. Whatever it was that drew her to him, whatever reason she flirted

and bickered with him and let him crash in her room whenever he made a momentous mistake, it wasn't sympathy. She eventually confessed that she noticed him for his Tufts University hat – that was where her ex-boyfriend went. That's why she had insisted on keeping him in the "Friend Zone." That wasn't what kept her. It wasn't a baseball cap or a dead mother. Shane didn't even find out about the dead mother until Paul and Catherine came to their commencement ceremonies. She told Paul how sorry she was that other engagements had kept Desi from coming, too.

When JP later explained those other engagements, Shane had asked him how he survived a tragedy like that. He smiled and answered, "Climbing."

Although they had begun planning in their freshmen year to eventually move off campus together, the house they wanted deemed a fourth tenant. Shane's friend Amy was the only person comfortable moving in with the trio. As much as he liked her, JP couldn't stand Amy. Her tragic romanticism made him sick to his stomach, but JP needed it. He needed the balance. She and her boyfriend proved that twenty-year-olds could have committed relationships, that there was hope for his generation. It wasn't the public affection or baby talk that provoked nausea. It was her away messages.

"Love is...taking a nap together on the quad and accidentally sleeping through class," or "love is...spending \$2.25 in a gum ball machine to get my favorite color." Shane didn't notice the away messages. Ryan thought they were kind of cute.

JP came up with a few counter away messages. “Love is... a curse upon humanity.” “Love is... letting her finish first.” “Love is... a chemical reaction based off of smell, the firing of neurons in the brain that stimulates adrenalin and endorphins in order to better find a suitable mate and continue the species.” He thought “love is... throwing up after catching your girlfriend with her tongue down your friend's throat at AEPi” was a bit much.

Shane was the reason JP didn't lose all faith in womankind. This was a lot of pressure for Shane, well aware of what she represented to JP. During the nights that she let him into her bedroom to share in the solace of her balcony, they compared battle scars. “I don't how much help I am, JP. You know I'm crazy. People crazy,” she usually clarified, “not girl crazy.”

“Yeah, well, we both got bad wiring.”

* * *

JP let some rain into his mouth and spit the remnants of vomit out in to the river. His stomach growled, determined to empty his already emptied system. He was starving but JP was glad that he had no food on him. He didn't want to throw up again. He searched his pockets for carbohydrate gel but found nothing.

“Fuck,” he shouted, hoping the echo would shove birds from their treetop perches. *This is not happening. Not to me. Not now.* “Where is everybody? God damn it, where the fuck are you?”

The breeze rustled the tops of pines, gently cooing with the birds. Distance muted the sound of rushing water crashing against rocks. No one answered him.

How the hell did this happen?

Only four months before, in late December, JP had successfully soloed Damnation Gully on Mt. Washington. He hit the trail in the pre-dawn calm, the first one on the trail. Without contacting another soul, JP felt as if he owned the mountain that day. He stopped for lunch just before breaking through tree line into the snow-covered talus field of Huntington Ravine. He didn't stop for too long as he was following Mark Twight's 'light and fast' alpinism style. When he topped out of Damnation, crossed the summit and started down the ridge, the notorious wind picked up, flooring him and halting all forward movement.

As JP approached the tree line, he realized that the small evergreens he had noticed from a distance were actually the tops of buried pines. The winter snow had completely covered cairns. He sunk to his waist with every step. He was off-route. JP fashioned a pair of primitive snowshoes for his hands and knees using crossed sticks, crawling atop powdery snow until he broke onto an avalanche slide trail. He didn't give up, he didn't panic, he didn't consider the possibility of death. He knew Jen would be angry if Ryan told her where he was, but the thought of her got him down the trail. JP finally reached the parking lot and collapsed in his car.

Even in those conditions, far worse than *a little fucking rain in April*, JP had made it through his adventure unscathed. What was so different about that climb? What was he missing now that landed him in this trouble?

Jen. I'm missing Jen.

* * *

Before the day she first wore the sweater, JP only knew Jen as the girl who struggled to keep from giggling at a story about a gang of high school hipsters getting into a tiff with a gang of high school preppies. They shared an intimate three hours each Tuesday in a creative fiction workshop for juniors with the Colonel. JP was a little better at suppressing his laughter, but smiled whenever he saw Jen bite her lip. That was her tell.

Office hours for the Colonel were invitation only. Interaction with other students, *those* students, the ones he regretted teaching, were via e-mail. Jen, in a green sweater he would come to know well, was meeting with the Colonel when JP arrived for office hours. She was laughing even though her eyes were glazed over and her nose was running.

The Colonel looked at the piece of torn perforated paper one more time before handing it back to her and combing worn hands through his thick salty hair. He cleaned his eye glasses with the bottom of his sweater. He mumbled something about decency and pain. He mumbled something about life and death. And then he laughed and said, "The whole thing is all bullshit

anyways. Life, that is.”

It was as she left and the Colonel invited her to his dinner party that JP learned her name. And it was only after learning her name that JP accepted the Colonel’s invitation.

“Thank god,” Jen whispered to JP when he took a seat at her table.

“Someone I know.”

“I recognize some graduate students.” JP was glad that Shane talked him into wearing a suit to the dinner party. The Colonel had only hinted at formal wear, failing to mention how formal the other faculty and colleagues would be.

“You look nice,” she said.

The Colonel spotted the two and worked his way through his guests with three glasses of champagne.

“Finally. Normal people.” He put his hand on JP’s shoulder. “Glad to see you made it.”

Jen smiled and watched the bubbles rise in her champagne flute. The Colonel threw his back like a shot, reveling in crisp relief.

“I don’t know how women do it,” the Colonel said. “I can’t fake it for that long. It gets exhausting.” The flush of his cheeks drained as he scanned the room. He hung his head to look down at JP. “You clean up nice. I expected to see you here covered in carabineers. That’s where you were yesterday, right?”

“No. I went to a concert in the city with my housemate,” JP said, scratching his throat. “It was an interesting, uh, experience. I actually wanted to ask you something about it. I know why I’ve been losing sleep lately,” JP had already told the Colonel about his crazy genes. “But I can’t drive through tunnels anymore.”

“How do you know that?” the Colonel asked.

“Sort of, uh, involuntarily, I shut my eyes in the Lincoln Tunnel and almost swerved into the wall. I don’t know what that means.”

“It might not mean anything, necessarily,” Jen said. “You know, sometimes a cigar is a cigar. But it might be newly emerged phobia. Is there anything that’s changed in your life lately? Or a new stress?”

The Colonel nudged the remaining champagne flute closer to JP’s hand.

“I took some psych courses, too, Jen,” he said. “It means you’re gay. Sorry kid.” He laughed and walked away, winking at JP as Jen put her hand on his elbow.

* * *

One. Separate shoelaces, left lace in right hand, right in left. Two. Cross the shoelaces into an X shape. Three. Right hand (left lace) folded under X. Four. Pull through. Five. Pull Tight.

Although it had been years since JP had thought out tying shoe-laces

step by step, the act brought him comfort. It also distracted him from the pain shooting up his leg into his groin, stomach, and back. It kept his adrenaline from speeding up his heart, and weakened the possibility of bleeding out faster.

Six. Loop each lace into a Bunny Ear shape. Seven. Cross the Bunny Ears into an X shape. Eight. Right hand (left Bunny Ear) under X.

His father Paul had written down the steps in a brown colored pencil on the back of a crossword puzzle. The guide hung on the wall, hovering above the accumulating stack of shoes, until JP had picked up the basics and the list could be simplified.

Nine. Pull through.

What had started as eleven steps had been reduced to eight steps, then to five, then to three, and finally to one.

Ten. Pull tight. Eleven. Repeat steps 7-10 for double knot.

When the list had been narrowed to one all-encompassing step, a little brown sign read in a silver marker: "Tie your damn laces, J."

Lying in the water, with the contours of a rock digging into his back, JP contemplated mentally repeating steps 7-10. His heart rate was slow enough and that his mind was sharp enough to effectively assess the situation. He immediately decided that his left foot would be fine for now without its shoe.

JP tried to prop himself up to get a better look at his right leg, but the burning and aching in his shoulder sent him crashing down. He tried again,

this time using his abdominal muscles rather than his potentially broken or dislocated arm to lift his body.

He knew that he should be very careful about freeing a broken leg from between the rocks. But survival instincts kicked in and he tugged. He was almost blinded and knocked unconscious by the wave of nauseating pain. JP heard his cry, but didn't acknowledge that he had actually let it out. "*I thought I would be tougher than that.*"

He thought of Jen. He thought of a song she had put on his home-warming mix. He thought of making love to her to that song. He thought about Jen fucking some other guy to that song. He realized that all of this thinking was making the pain in his leg worse. His left toes started to numb. But thinking about Jen again made him forget the tingling that was working its way up his leg.

He focused on Jen's face, forgetting everything that had happened after the first climbing incident, forgetting the arguments, the ER, the box of pictures on Paul's counter. He just thought about Jen's button nose, the freckles that ran along her upper lip, the scar through her eyebrow from some childhood play-date gone wrong, the five different greens that made up her eyes. *Seriously, take the leg. And my left foot if you need to, I don't care. Just let me see her again.*

Had JP had internet access at that moment, his away message would have read, "Love is... being trapped under a rock with a hard on."

* * *

The night before the first incident, Jen watched from the doorway as JP packed his rucksack. He moved through the routine silently, carefully inspecting his ropes and bolts, sharpening his crampons. She never knew what to say to him the nights before his trips. In the four years they were together, she had never gone climbing with him. There was something about the experience that was exulting for him, something she couldn't touch or understand. She had conceded that the mountains were Ryan's territory.

Ryan and JP first ran into each other during freshmen orientation at the Outing Club booth. Two hours spent sharing stories and comparing traverses stamped the seal of their friendship. They were regulars on all of the trips – but even this was not enough to satisfy their primal crave. They knew it was in their blood. Using the Outing Club as an umbrella club, JP and Ryan started a group called the Buccaneers. They put up fliers and sent out e-mails, looking for other fanatics who wanted to climb between the club sanctioned trips.

Although JP and Ryan were the only two consistent members of the Buccaneers, they could usually convince three to four other people to tag along for each adventure. Even after graduation, they put up fliers at their rock gym and accosted athletic looking coworkers. But it was during their four years at Syracuse that the Buccaneers really flourished. JP looked forward to each trip so much that Jen's heckling never bothered him.

“But Buccaneers have nothing to do with mountains.”

“We know,” JP always replied, “but we just like the sound of it.”

“That is, by far, the worst reason behind a name that I have ever heard.”

Jen stopped teasing JP about the name and his love of climbing adventures after she took him back in the February of their senior year. In a show of gratitude for her surprising forgiveness, he finally answered the “why” of his hobby.

After everything with Desi, JP’s father signed him up for a Junior Outing Club. Paul could barely grapple with his own grief, never mind that of his two teenage kids. Catherine had just turned twelve and JP was two months away from his sixteenth birthday when they got the news. Their mother usually picked them up on Tuesdays, her day off. Paul was sitting in their ‘94 Volvo when the principal escorted the Mercer children out of the lunch room.

The day that Paul sorted through his dead wife’s clothes, deciding what to keep for Catherine and what to donate to the Church, was the same day that JP had his first climbing lesson. Something about learning the difference between dynamic ropes and static ropes and which are used to belay eased JP’s acceptance of a motherless future.

Something about climbing made everything easier to accept. Self-arresting on ice-capped summits or belaying up two hundred foot rock formations brought to mind Buddhist teacher Sogyal Rinpoche. *Living with the immediacy of death helps you sort out your priorities in life. It helps you to*

live a less trivial life. Losing his footing on a winter rock climb helped JP put a C grade on his analysis of Hitchcock film noir into perspective. A speeding ticket wasn't as daunting after JP blacked out on Mt. Washington during a blizzard. His shit-for-pay job at least let him spend time in the mountains, soloing Lafayette, hiking the Presidentials, and climbing in the vertiginous world of Cathedral Ledge. Living with the possibility of his own death was far better than dwelling in the reality of his mother's.

* * *

JP couldn't get the image of the yellow-coated corpse out of his mind. His stomach still lurched and turned even after there was nothing left. The tree-line blurred and the world spun. JP knew that if he passed out, there was a good possibility that he would drown. JP let his head fall back anyway.

No trees penetrated the vast sky in his peripheral. JP could feel the calming waters move beneath his ears, weaving between the strands of his hair. He tried to adopt the calm of nature, the stillness of the sky, the hush of water hitting banks and stones, but his body refused. His chest heaved and jerked as he fought to keep air in his lungs. The sound of his heart pounding like anvils rang through his head.

The water lingering near JP's leg gradually faded from a blue hue to an orange to a vibrant red. JP's heart rate sky rocketed as he realized that if he didn't calm his pulse, his leg would bleed out.

A soft sound in the distance caught his attention. When the agonizing cry rang out again, this time closer, JP's heart sped up. He looked over to see a black bear cub sitting on the river bank. It called out again, its moan piercing JP's skin.

* * *

The first incident happened in Tuck's the previous November, two years into life after college. Ryan wondered in the aftermath why something hadn't happened sooner. The Buccaneers set out on their annual weekend traverse of the Presidential Range. Sleep usually came easy to JP in the mountains, especially after an eleven mile day. JP's whole body ached, and his eyelids were painfully heavy, but he was wide awake.

Ryan was asleep beside JP, thumb keeping his place in *Preacher*, free arm scooping the slack of his sleeping bag into a ball that he pulled toward his body. Ryan didn't really need to keep his place in *Preacher*, he practically had the whole series memorized. Each Buccaneer was encouraged to bring their favorite book along for their adventures.

JP had always brought the lilac book his mother gave him.

JP never found out what happened the night of the incident. He remembered getting out of his sleeping bag at Hermit Lake, putting on his boots, and making it through all eleven steps of tying his shoe-laces. He remembered grabbing his hat and his cigarettes, but that's all he remembered.

When Ryan found him a half-mile from the Hermit Lake Shelters, legs dangling over a ledge high up in Tuckerman Ravine, holding a cigarette in his gloveless hand, Ryan's initial reaction was to shove him. Instead, Ryan just demanded, "What the fuck are you doing?"

JP didn't remember what he said, and Ryan never told him. Whatever he did say, Ryan's only response was, "Well, do you at least want a light?" He must have nodded because Ryan threw his "Fuck Communism" zippo at him. JP didn't recall why, but Ryan asked, "What does Jen think?"

* * *

It's too early. Aren't bears are still hibernating? It's too fucking early for this.

JP knew that he wasn't supposed to play dead, but he didn't know what else to do. The only other time he had run into a black bear, JP's ranger training had kicked in immediately. Slowly, he had walked backwards down the path, waving his arms above his head, gently saying "Hi Bear!" For an hour and a half, JP had talked his way down the mountain, never breaking eye contact with the bear. Every good sense had told him to scream and run the other way. But he had kept waving his arms, saying "Hi Bear!" using the voice he reserved for his baby cousins.

JP tried to make eye contact with the cub. Keeping his head turned too long brought back the nausea. He had no where to run. *I have plenty of places*

to run, just no way of running. He couldn't lift his arms to wave. JP wondered if he still had a voice.

“Hi Bear!” he croaked.

The cub cried out again. This time, his mother returned the call.

“Fuck,” JP cried out.

* * *

When Ryan dropped JP off after the Presidentials trip, Jen was already prepared for a speech. Ryan had given her a courtesy call while JP slept off the weekend in the passenger seat. JP knew that she was going to say something about being irresponsible and selfish, how it wasn't just him anymore, how he had other people to think about. Her eyes said it all before the phone rang. The first words that broke the silence were, “Catherine O.D.ed.”

The doctors in the ER had pumped Catherine's stomach until all of the vodka was gone. When JP spoke with the on-staff Psychiatrist, Catherine used a tableside vase to check the status of her eye liner. Black streaks ran down her face. Catherine wiped away the remnants of the night on the sleeves of JP's Notre Dame sweatshirt, Paul's alum, a token she had stolen years earlier for comfort. The on-staff Psychiatrist said he wasn't sure if the overdose was intentional or not. He wanted to admit Catherine, but JP assured him it was not necessary.

JP took the couch so that Catherine could share the bed with Jen, but

JP knew he wouldn't sleep. He had to call Paul to tell him that a second woman he loved almost slipped out of his life.

Jen couldn't sleep either the night that JP got home from the Presidentials, the night after the first incident. It was just "the incident" then. She didn't imagine his stupidity would resurface in such a dangerous way again. She never imagined there would be a second incident.

She tiptoed into the kitchen at 3 A.M. to make a cup of tea and caught JP slipping out of the kitchen with a box of Cheesits.

"I want to talk about it," she whispered.

"I don't."

"Not about your sister," she said, reaching her hand into the open box JP had tucked under his arm. "About your trip."

"I know. But I just don't want to talk about it."

She made her tea, and JP munched on his crackers, and they were delighted to find that *Walker Texas Ranger* was in syndication at 3 A.M. In the year that they had been living together, ever since Ryan moved out to share an apartment with Shane, reruns of *Walker* had solved many unspoken arguments.

* * *

JP regretted not wearing a hat before getting swept into the river. He also regretted losing his shoe with the current, but that was not entirely his

fault. Dusk crept closer and the evening's air chilled his bones. The stream of blood around his leg had slowed noticeably. He figured the vessels must have contracted from the cold. Luckily, the bear cub had quieted and hidden in the brush.

JP stopped thinking about rescue. Something about the inherent independence, or loneliness, of that realization frightened him. He had accepted his own solitude, and perhaps the fate that typically accompanied that. If anyone even found his itinerary, it was two days wrong and a few miles off course. That wasn't what sent shivers up his spine.

Well, he thought, at least hypothermia will kill me before my leg does.

JP wasn't the kind of guy who could drink a handle of vodka with the hopes of never waking up again, but if he ever would consider it an option, then would have been the time.

“Love is...not drinking a bottle of Drano when the occasion calls for it.”

* * *

When Desi Mercer was six months pregnant with Catherine, she took JP to the zoo for the first time. JP had spent most of the day bombarding his mother with questions about his baby sister and the “miracle of birth.” She had hoped that she would not need to explain the differences between male and female sex organs to a four year old. She tried distracting him with exotic

animals. Her plan had not worked.

As they approached the penguin exhibit hand in hand, JP expressed his first real interest of the day. He watched what he assumed was the mother penguin nursing an infant, and felt a rage of jealousy.

He demanded to know why he couldn't be a mother, why he couldn't be pregnant with a little sister or a penguin.

Desi laughed and told him, "But you are."

She took his pretzel in one hand as she reached for his calf with the other. She tugged gently on his soft muscle. "What do you think this is? Human babies grow in girls' tummies, but penguin babies grow in little boys' legs. That's the warmest place for them."

For months JP would knead his calf as his mother rubbed her stomach. Neither Desi nor JP ever explained to Paul how he should be expecting a new pet along with a new daughter. For three months, JP anticipated the day when he could experience child birth, when he could experience being a mother.

After the doctor delivered Catherine, JP looked to his own infant. When the nurse made her rounds, JP politely asked when the doctor would be back to deliver JP's penguin. She chuckled and gave him some hot chocolate. Paul overheard this, and with great unrest explained to his son that Desi had been joking, that only female penguins could carry baby penguins, and there were special organs that allowed this, that no creature on earth had sprung from a little boy's leg.

This was a story JP often told when trying to explain to people why he

turned out the way he did. His family was *fucking crazy*. Or, at least that's what he told Jen after Thanksgiving of their senior year when he left her. After everything that had happened with the Colonel that October, he was reminded of Desi.

“You're not doomed to be crazy and miserable and alone,” Jen retorted through tears.

“How do you know?”

“Why would anyone be doomed like that? You're not a puppet at the hands of some malicious and sadistic fate. You're in control. This is on you, don't blame your fucking 'bad wiring,' that's bullshit.”

JP couldn't look her in the eyes when she cried. “You deserve to be sane and happy and with someone who can give you what you give me.” This made her cry harder. “I'm too crazy for you, I'm this self-destructive vortex and am bound to drag you down with me. I don't want to get you caught in my spiral.”

“It's your ex-girlfriend,” Jen shrugged. “I get it. I'm sure that you probably believe that you can't handle our relationship because of some malfunctioning inner-mechanics. Deep down, you just never got over that slut who cheated on you.”

JP swore that it had nothing to do with his ex. He thought. He hoped. He wasn't sure, however, that he was ready to blame it all on Desi either.

* * *

JP wanted his left toes to move. He shut his eyes, took three breaths in, and willed his mind to make his toes wiggle, squirm, anything. With his eyes closed, he could almost feel them gently rocking back and forth. When he looked down, his left foot was as still as the rock supporting it. The piercing numbness crept up his leg, moving and weaving around his body like a serpent. When the icing pain reached his abdomen, JP winced and let out a cry.

Fuck. This is going to be a painful death. Isn't there a fucking quicker way to go?

JP wasn't actually looking to die, hopefully. Psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg was when he walked into the Atlantic Ocean at Revere Beach. The Colonel was when he locked himself in his car listening to NPR with the engine still running.

By the time the Colonel got around to punching out his ticket, JP had seen enough pain and suffering. The Colonel's death pushed him over the edge. He was already worried about having to graduate and make it on his own, not really sure what he was supposed to be doing with his life, not really sure what anyone was supposed to be doing with their lives. It was in this confusion that he got the phone call. The Colonel's wife called JP personally. She said that although no one could have predicted it, she wasn't surprised. *What a fucking thing to say.* The Colonel masked his depression with laughter and interactions with students. And drugs. Lots of drugs. She chuckled and

asked if JP wanted the rest of the Colonel's pot.

The Colonel's wife smiled at the memorial service as she handed JP a manila envelope. "He would have been proud at how sketchy we are being right now." Then she burst into tears and threw her arms around JP. He and Jen stayed behind to help her clean up after all the guests left. The three of them smoked the rest of the Colonel's stash in what they thought would be a "glorious tribute to a man who knew what a shit-hole life really is without herbal supplements."

The Colonel's wife also gave JP the first short story that the Colonel ever wrote. She said that he had mentioned the importance of handed-down literature in JP's life, and felt it was appropriate for the Colonel to contribute, too.

At least the Colonel waited until he was dead before handing down chattels.

* * *

There were still remnants of sunlight lingering in the sky when JP realized that he could no longer feel his right leg. The bleeding had stopped, for the most part, either because the rock had formed some sort of tourniquet or the blood vessels in his lower body had pinched shut. He accepted that in order to live, his right leg was coming out of this completely mangled, but with any luck still attached to his body.

Twigs snapped in the brush under the loud thud of footsteps. The cub reemerged from under a bush and cried toward the woods. Its lighter pitter patter sounded weak in comparison to the powerful stride of its mother. JP could hear the forest crumpling beneath her gait, crushed by the infallible force of a mother who's found her cub.

When she charged through the tree line, she spotted JP before her cub. *She smells my blood.* She huffed and swatted the ground, chomping her teeth to ward off the intruder. JP didn't know how to tell her that he was harmless, that he wasn't even trying to play dead. He couldn't establish his dominance because he had none, she could kill him with one swipe of her claw. He wouldn't have blamed her. She was just trying to protect her young.

Regardless, JP's taut body finally relaxed once she nudged the cub and took off into the woods.

* * *

Statistics show that women have more attempted suicides (pills, sticking their heads in the oven, etc) than men do. Men, however, have more completed suicides (shot gun to the head, jumping, etc) than women do. Women are usually looking for help, for a way for things to eventually get better. Men assume help won't work. Desi Mercer wasn't asking for help when she poisoned herself with pipe cleaner. Her suicide was the first masculine action of her life.

For JP's fifteenth Christmas, his mother gave him a Vonnegut book.

She had read it when she was his age, and marked up particular passages that fucked with her thinking. The glow in her cheeks made him feel like he was receiving some sort of family heirloom, whose words were supposed to clear up all his life.

When he had finished, his mother asked him what he thought of it. JP told her that it gave him hope for the assholes of the world. His mother laughed, and asked what he thought of its “meaning of life.”

“To love whoever is around to be loved? Makes sense, I guess.”

His mother turned to him, held his face in her palms, and rubbed his ear lobes, a gesture that had always brought him great comfort at three. At fifteen, he was a little embarrassed by it.

“Try to give your father a shot when I’m gone.”

JP figured she was referring to some time in the distant future, some time after he had started a family of his own and she had destroyed her body with the three packets of fake sugar she put in each cup of tea. He didn’t realize she was foreshadowing her own suicide only months later. JP could never have predicted that she would sit in her bath tub and drink a bottle of Drano after dropping her children off at school.

He had loved his father before she died, back when he still called him “dad,” but it was out of tradition. Sons love their fathers. He understood now. He was supposed to love his father for the man he was, and the compassion he felt for his family. Also, not being the one to swallow a household poison helps gain a son’s trust – well, a son who doesn’t blame you.

A boy in JP's high school student government blamed his father for his mother's suicide. Later that boy would make millions off of a Dot-Com company and tell the press he was an orphan. He mentioned the Dot-Com boy in his litany of 'why Jen should leave him' as he dumped her.

"Crazy runs in my family," he told her. "Crazy seeps into anyone I care about's life. I can't let that happen to you."

"That's not your decision to make, Judah," she told him. "You're not crazy. You just need an excuse for the things that happen in this world that have no explanation. Maybe you just needed a concrete reason for your hurt and pain, because accepting those as part of normal, human life is daunting and overwhelming."

"Stop with your fucking psycho babble."

"You just want to be crazy to believe that the things in his life that were spinning out of control were never in your hands. You don't need to be crazy to be in pain and at the mercy of unforeseen forces."

This speech stuck with JP during their separation. JP didn't want to be crazy. JP wasn't setting out to be crazy, or using it as an excuse. The speech haunted him at night sometimes. At her peak of bitterness, she told Shane and Amy, when prompted about the breakup, that his whole life was a "story of JP thinking he is going crazy, and trying to prove it."

* * *

The man in the yellow jacket floated back into his memory. JP worried that he too would just be a lifeless object floating into an abyss, with nobody around to notice but a scared shit-for-brains twenty-four-year-old. He wondered what the yellow jacketed man was like before. He had nothing else to do to pass the time, no judge of how much time he had to kill.

JP imagined a whole life for the faceless body. His friends called him the Hornet, because of his jacket. His friends were clever like that. JP imagined a life fraught with preparatory high schools, two years of Ivy League, the creation of a small business, a home in the suburbs with the dog and picket fence, and the abandonment of the yuppie lifestyle during select weekends in order to return to the mountains. JP imagined a life of success, a life of comfort and potential, a life swept away in an instant, a life gone unnoticed and a death gone unnoticed.

Maybe he gave the man too much credit. He was probably taking one of the tourist routes when he got killed.

JP rewrote some of the Hornet's history. Maybe he had a girl like Jen. Maybe he hadn't royally fucked up and actually married the girl. Maybe they had a kid together, or were planning to. Maybe he left them all behind, because of a freak storm.

That's just the risk you take.

JP's head throbbed.

Maybe Catherine was right. Maybe they were both right.

Even though Jen took the call from the hospital, JP went alone to pick up his little sister. She seemed relieved to see him, and even let him put his arm around her as he walked them to his car. JP sat silently in the parking lot, unable to turn the ignition. Catherine searched the glove compartment for gum.

“What’s the matter? Couldn’t afford sleeping pills like everyone else?”

“There’s a reason you’re my emergency contact, JP.” Catherine looked down at the vomit stains on her pleated mini-skirt.

“You don’t think I’m telling Paul? You practically swallowed a bottle of vodka. Are you out of your fucking mind?”

Catherine turned to JP. “Vodka. Climbing. You have your ways. I have mine.”

* * *

Almost a month after JP brought Catherine home from the ER, Jen received another phone call from Ryan. It was a Saturday night, a few days before the new year. JP had gone on a trip with the Buccaneers, or so he had told her. Ryan called from his apartment in Beacon Hill.

“JP’s alone out there. One of the Buccaneers just told me. JP wrote him an email saying he was soloing something on Washington, so he’ll miss poker night.”

“What does that mean?”

There was a moment of silence. Ryan cleared his throat. “He’s climbing alone, on a mountain infamous for its weather.”

“Why would he do that?”

“Is that a question you really want me to answer, Jen?”

After the first incident, Catherine implied that JP was on a mission. After the second incident, Jen believed her. She left him the Tuesday after he returned.

“What, what are you doing? Put your bags down,” JP begged.

“Are you fucking kidding me? I’m not an idiot, I know about Washington.”

“I’m not the first person to do it alone, and it wasn’t my first solo. It’s not a big deal.”

“You just told me how you had to crawl on your hands and knees to stop from sinking into the snow. I’m tired of smiling during your war stories, I don’t care about battle scars. How many times have you *almost* died? It’s not cute anymore, it’s not impressive. It’s reckless.”

“Then leave,” he said.

“Get off your high horse,” Jen snapped. “Stop trying to save people from yourself, stop being a martyr.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You aren’t alone or unique in your suffering, so stop it. If you want to keep going on these little suicide trips, fine, but I’m not staying around to

watch it. Everyone feels like they aren't good enough, but they are, and so are you."

"You've always had too much faith in people. It used to be admirable, but now I just think you're a sap."

The Colonel said that the only thing you should trust about humans is their outstanding ability to fuck up good situations by trying to do what others say is right.

"I think I'm finally seeing what the Colonel meant," Jen said as she gathered her car keys and cell phone.

"Where will you go?"

"After you dumped me senior year, I went on a date with a guy from my psychology class. He brought me little rings and trinkets from these toy dispensers at his restaurant. He brought me a new one every Thursday. So I finally got a drink with him. We dated for a few weeks. I've kept in touch with him, though. I'll probably go to him first."

"That's mean. That's so cold hearted."

"Where will you go?"

"Probably on one of my little suicide trips first."

JP didn't actually know where he would go.

After the first break up, when JP did the breaking, he went to Shane. JP spent three days without sleep, wondering why he suddenly felt like he'd been hit by a truck. When he ended his relationship with Jen, he had truly believed that it was the right thing to do, letting her go, letting her find

someone worthy of her. He stumbled into Shane's room at 2 a.m. She made space in her bed, asking, "You fucked up, didn't you?"

JP told her about the Colonel, about the truck feeling, about making the initial break-up decision out of compassion, out of love.

"That wasn't your decision to make, J."

Every few nights, JP would go knock on Shane's door, thankful for the one girl who didn't hate him, the one person who knew how he felt. She got him through the first few weeks. She was there for him then, back when she was only in the room over.

He couldn't go to Ryan's door. JP had never seen Ryan upset over a girl in the four years of Syracuse. In fact, apart from a few dislocated shoulders and a slight burn from a cooking hazard, the only time JP had ever seen Ryan upset was when they moved to Boston. After a week, Ryan had realized that Shane wasn't living in the same house, not even in the same state.

Where was Shane in December? Where was she when Jen walked out?

Moments after Jen slammed the door on him, promising to come back for the rest of her stuff, JP had called Shane. But she had been in another state, with Ryan, announcing her engagement to her extended family. She asked JP if he wanted her to come over.

"Knowing that you'd make the drive is enough."

* * *

Where is she now? Where is Shane now that I really need her?

She was probably sitting in her new Beacon Hill apartment, watching a movie with Ryan, minutes away from fucking. And Jen? *Probably fucking Cole*. That's the name JP gave the toy ring guy, her new old boyfriend. She seemed like the kind of girl who would date a Cole.

The sun had already set when the pins and needles struck. JP normally hated the sensation, but was so overwhelmed that there actually was sensation that he forgot about his pet peeve. He tried to wiggle his left toes. It worked. He tried to wiggle his right toes. He could feel them moving within his boot.

“Help! Hello?”

For the love of God, someone please answer me.

“My name is Judah Mercer! Hello? If anyone can hear me, please! My name is Judah Mercer! I am twenty-four years old. My leg is stuck, and I think I dislocated my shoulder. Please! My name is Judah. I need help! I need some fucking help!”

Moments passed. Then minutes. JP wanted to shout out again, but he knew no one was there. He knew he was utterly alone, and the ability to wiggle his toes again wasn't going to change that.

“Lower your voice, JP. I'm right here.” Ryan was standing beside him in the river.

“Ryan, what are – Help! Don't just stand there, fucking help me!”

“Calm down. Don't freak out, JP, but I'm not Ryan. I'm here to take

you.”

His head began to spin and his lungs lost hold of oxygen. “Take me?” JP thought of the man in the yellow jacket. “Am I dead? What is this? Is this a hallucination?”

“Think of it what you will. But you’re not dead yet.” The man who looked like Ryan came closer. “There’s been a glitch in this world, JP. This life is wrong. I need you to come with me to another world, to fix things. You want to fix things, don’t you?”

JP nodded. His temples pounded and his eyes began to water.

“I figured Ryan would be a comforting face for you. Was I right? Are you comfortable?” JP nodded even though he was far from comfortable.

“Am I about to die?”

“Yes. But think of the glitch. Think of the other life awaiting you – a life where Desi is still alive.”

“Mom?” JP couldn’t tell if he was crying or if the icy water had finally sent his body into convulsions. “Mom is there?”

“Yes. But Lawrence Kohlberg isn’t. That wasn’t the glitch.”

JP reached down to knead his calf muscle, searching for evidence of life. The nerves in his left leg didn’t register the touch. It felt like another’s leg, a corpse, a penguin perhaps, anything that wasn’t attached to his body.

“Okay.” JP wanted to see Desi.

The man who looked like Ryan placed his hand on JP’s forehead. “It’s time.”

“JP? What are you doing?” Shane was standing on the river bank.

“What’s she doing here? Tell her to leave. She can’t see this.” JP’s pleads were ignored by Ryan. JP turned to Shane. “Don’t look! Get out of here! I love you, turn around. Just fucking leave!”

JP felt his left leg throbbing.

“Oh god, this isn’t real. This is a dream, a fucking nightmare.” He looked at the two ghosts. He could feel like head slipping. “I don’t want to go to another life. Desi wasn’t the glitch. She wasn’t the glitch!”

If Desi’s alive, that means no climbing, no Syracuse, no Ryan, no Shane, no Colonel, no Buccaneers, no Catherine calling me from the ER, no climbing, Paul, Catherine, no book, no Jen, no mountains.

“No Jen.”

JP tore himself away from the man who looked like Ryan’s grasp. He swung his fists and kicked his good leg. He closed his eyes and covered his ears, a left-over defense mechanism.

“I can’t go! I’m not going! Make this stop! Why won’t you make this stop!”

He opened his eyes. Once again, JP found himself alone in the river.

Climbing that weekend was supposed to be a temporary hiatus from the tedious bullshit and poignant ironies of life, not a permanent dissolution from it. *It was just supposed to be temporary.* The exultation of a solo or weekend group traverse was supposed to be enough to get JP through the return to servitude. JP knew that on the ground, in the state of crawling grubs,

he was bound and at the will of employers, friends, fathers, bankers, rent checks, girlfriends, his own fucking thoughts.

The only master he could stand was the mountain. At least when she demanded determination, purpose, and strength from him, she eventually let him get to the top. And at the top, above even the mountain herself, nothing could get to him. A man without strings, without connections, without cares could very well only be dead. But up there, JP was the furthest from death, and the closest to whatever he believed to be heaven.

But down here, down in the rapids, after he had reached overwhelming bliss at the summit, he was going to die a slave to the thoughts and forces that drove him up the mountain in the first place.

* * *

The Wednesday night before his trip, JP heard his father cry for the first time since Desi's death. Paul had been offered a severance package that afternoon. He asked JP to play golf with him after work on Thursday, so he'd have something to look forward to as he finished his last two days suffering in a cubicle. He asked JP to stay over with him and Catherine, to have the family under one roof until Paul got a grasp of it all.

When JP awoke Friday morning, he saw a small box in the kitchen holding Paul's personal items from the office. There was a picture of Desi in the box. She was twenty-three in the picture, drunk and sun burnt on their

honeymoon. There was a picture of Catherine in a blue cap and gown standing bashfully next to her overwhelmingly proud father. Her senior class elected her to give the farewell speech, but she turned them down, saying she had had enough goodbyes. There was no picture of JP in the box. Paul asked permission to put one up on his wall, but JP said he was too old for pictures. Paul kept a baseball on his desk that JP had caught at Fenway Park at the age of five instead.

Something about seeing his father's life packed neatly in a box angered JP. It sickened him and saddened him and sent him out the door, despite the Nor'easter that threatened to hit. JP promised Paul that he would eat breakfast with him before his trip, but JP couldn't face his father, not after everything with Catherine and Jen. Before he left the house, he scratched out a quick note for Paul.

"I'm so sorry they did this to you. And I know that you'll be okay. I don't know if I will be right now, so I left for my trip early. I'll be back Sunday, dad. Don't worry. Love, J."

It was only supposed to be a weekend trip. JP should have been sitting on his couch with a pack of Pall Malls and a Honey Brown browsing through the channels in search of *Walker Texas Ranger*, catching intermittent news bulletins about a flash flood that took the lives of several hikers in the White Mountain Region.

Instead, he broke trail to spend two extra days at a camp site that had been soaked by the unrelenting rains of a Nor'easter. *"Man may be doomed to*

loss, sorrow, and desolation, but if he tries his strength and will, however briefly, upon the indifferent vast hostility of the elements, he rages against futility and asserts his right of being.” Jim Perrin wrote that. JP believed it. JP didn’t recall what Perrin said about when man rages against the elements and is overcome.

In mid April of his senior year, not too long after Jen took him back, JP climbed up the side of Jen’s house to get a stray Frisbee. He jumped and pretended to have hurt his back. He rolled around on the ground, moaning and calling out about his spine, sending Jen’s housemates into pot-paranoid hysterics. Jen giggled in the corner during the whole ordeal. She knew that he couldn’t get hurt. She knew that even if he was hurt, he wouldn’t really be.

Lying in the water, JP wished Jen was around to have that same faith in him.

Even though she was happy now, with Cole, or whatever the fuck his name was, she was happier with him, with JP. She would always be happier with JP. With Judah. She called him Judah. Not even Desi called him Judah. And he was happier with her. She would never walk into an Eckerd to buy too many bottles of aspirin and sleeping pills.

But who was he to take that away from her, a new old boyfriend who probably had fallen completely in love with her by now, who wouldn’t go camping alone and get his leg caught in a rock? She at least deserved that, a boyfriend without an overt death wish.

He never even got to ask her what was written on the perforated paper

that day in the Colonel's office. His leg was bleeding out, his mind slipped in and out of consciousness, but all he wanted to do was ask her about that piece of paper. Maybe that would give him closure.

He wanted to think of his mother, Desi, and her book, Kurt's book, the one about sirens, the one that kept her going for awhile. But he couldn't. At twenty-four, he was about to die, alone, in a river, lying on a rock, and he couldn't think of his mother. He wanted to think of his father and his little sister, and he could only think of Jen in her green sweater, crying in the Colonel's office, only now probably watching some Will Ferrell movie with an overgrown frat boy. But, in all honesty, she was probably happy, not crying, hopefully not in the green sweater, the one JP hoped no other guy would ever get to see her take off.

You cannot stay on the summit forever; you have to come down again. So why bother in the first place? Just this: What is above knows what is below, but what is below does not know what is above. One climbs, one sees. One descends, one sees no longer, but one has seen. There is an art of conducting oneself in the lower regions by the memory of what one saw higher up. When one can no longer see, one can at least still know. René Daumal wrote that.

But at least he had that. At least JP had once been there to see her take it off, before he fucked up everything with Jen. At least he had driven Catherine home from after-Prom parties and late night movies before he drove her home from the hospital. At least he had known a girl who put his

happiness before her own without his asking, even if Shane was with Ryan now. At least he had known a man who fought for his divine human rights and inspired hundreds of students before surrendering to the temptation of peace and nothingness. At least the Colonel held out for forty-five years. At least he remembered when seeing his picture hanging in Paul's office brought him unabashed pride, not adolescent embarrassment.

At least JP had stood on the tops of mountains and had touched the sky. No matter how low he got, he knew what awaited him, perched in the clouds, beckoning his return.

JP didn't even have the energy to shift his body into a more comfortable position. He was going to die balancing awkwardly on his scapula, like when Jen would bring a book to bed and leave it for him to roll onto in the middle of the night.

“Love is...”

A twig snapped under human weight a few hundred yards away. A voice echoed out. And then another.

JP's head spun and his body told him that he shouldn't sit up, his body told him to shut his eyes and drift off into a welcoming and unrelenting sleep, to follow the man who promised him a life with Desi.

JP wasn't the kind of guy who could walk into a CVS and buy a bottle of Drano.

A voice called out again.

And JP called back.

Reflective Essay

After many months of working on these pieces, years for some, it's surprisingly difficult to sit down and write a "reflective essay." It feels as though all I can do is think about JP Mercer and Charlie Winters and zombie apocalypses. The amount of conversations that have been usurped by Ultimate Frisbee is untold. A day does not pass when I do not take off on a tangent about my definitions of "intangibles," "infinities," and "ineffables." Most say that writers, young writers especially, should never write about writing. I know that this applies mainly to fiction, but perhaps this can explain some of my hesitation. How do I begin to describe a project that I've poured more of myself into than I thought there was to give?

One place to start could be with the decision to name the collection after JP instead of Charlie, the focal point of three pieces. In the summer before my junior year, a trailer for a terrible action movie caught my attention. The protagonist is injected with a poison that will kill him if his heart rate drops below a certain beats per minute, giving him a limited time to seek vengeance and tie up loose ends. I never saw the movie, but the concept stayed with me. What would I do if I knew I only had a few hours to live? Who would I want to see? What would I want to say to them? What if I couldn't do anything – what if I had nothing to do but sit and think and wait? These are the roots of "The Third Incident of JP Mercer."

Two years later, all three of us have changed – JP, his story, and me. Our cores have remained intact, authentic, but the circumstances surrounding us have altered our visages. As I grew as a writer and matured as a person, JP’s story became more sophisticated. Through mentoring and an advanced fiction workshop, I slowly learned not to dwell in the back-story with my writing and not to live in the past. My academic background in psychology has programmed me to believe that any present action can be explained by a moment in the past. So while we have nothing if we do not have a history, we must acknowledge it without fixating upon it. Understanding this marked a significant turning point in my writing. My style became less cute, less tongue-in-cheek, and more grounded in the gritty realism of day to day struggles and tiny victories.

Although stylistically “The Third Incident of JP Mercer” may not appeal to all readers, it is the story I am most proud of in my collection. It is the story I have the most invested in, the story that I changed the most with while writing it. The plot is not organized linearly, nor is the back-story in order. It may be about mountaineering on the surface, but it is actually about one’s past catching up with the present. It does not matter whether or not the search-and-rescue hears JP cries for help – it matters that despite everything that has happened to him, he does want to be saved. It matters that all of the uncontrollable and intangible forces that drive JP up the mountain are not enough to conquer him. This is why my thesis shares the same title.

Another choice I made in compiling this collection was to pull most of my inspiration from music. In *A Man Without a Country*, Kurt Vonnegut desires that his epitaph read: “The only proof he needed for the existence of God was music.” The humor in this comes from his being a Humanist and it being a truthful sentiment. I too am a Humanist and I too have spiritual, and perhaps religious, experiences listening to music. Each of the eight stories have some connection to music, whether specific songs set the mood for the piece, offer their titles to the piece, or appear in some form within the world of the characters.

It’s hard to follow the music of Nick Drake and Elliott Smith, knowing the circumstances of their lives and deaths, and not harness that overwhelming sadness and beauty as fuel for JP’s story. After Nick Drake overdosed on prescribed antidepressants, many of his fans disputed his intentions. There was no suicide note. His sister Gabrielle said that in a way she hoped he had made the decision to end it himself, rather than it being a tragic accident – that would have been much more terrible.

A similar controversy surrounded Elliott Smith’s death. Were the two stab wounds self-inflicted or was he murdered? A few people in Smith’s life noted that they weren’t really surprised by his suicide, that his music should have tipped them off. Ted Leo, a close friend of his, was outraged by these remarks – no matter how dark or depressing someone’s art is, one never sees something like that coming. Both Gabrielle Drake’s and Ted Leo’s reactions are themes of “The Third Incident of JP Mercer.”

The first draft of “The Boy” was a 3 a.m. experiment on a sleepless night. I had just listened to The Eel’s recent album “Blinking Lights and Other Revelations.” The instrumentals conjured such vivid images and emotions in my head. I couldn’t hold them in, I needed to get them out. “Marie Floating Over the Backyard” and “Blinking Lights (For You)” both started as my expressions of two songs sharing the same names.

As I began this thesis, I recalled a friend asking me what the little boy would be like when he grew up. At the time, I was working on an idea of someone saving physical thumbnails of memories and mailing them to an old love. Many rewrites later, the overarching story has evolved into “The Boy” and “Alone Again Or.” Not only are all three pieces named after the songs that inspired their mood, but the main character is named after Charlie Watts, the drummer of The Rolling Stones. When I picture Charlie Winters, he carries himself with the same mannerisms and demeanor as Charlie Watts.

For experimental purposes, I created a soundtrack to go along with my collected works:

The Boy: Marie Floating Over the Backyard

“Marie Floating Over the Backyard” – The Eels

Mel’s Blog

“Neighborhood #1 (Tunnels)” – The Arcade Fire

“The Village Green Preservation Society” – The Kink

The Good Thing About Quitting

“These Days” – Nico

“Let’s Leave” – The Battle Royale

“Steadier Footing” – Death Cab For Cutie

“Remind Me” – Royksopp

A Love Letter to Ultimate Frisbee, Or: Disc is My Favorite Four Letter Word

“The Skin of My Yellow Country Teeth” – Clap Your Hands Say Yeah!

“Confessions Pt. 2” – The Battle Royale
Don’t Worry Baby
 “Don’t Worry Baby” – The Beach Boys
 “Care of Cell 44” – The Zombies
 “The Sniper at the Gates of Heaven” – The Black Angels
Alone Again Or
 “Alone Again Or” – Love
 “Your Cover’s Blown” - Belle & Sebastian
 “Love in Vain” – The Rolling Stones
The Boy: Blinking Lights (For You)
 “Blinking Lights (For You)” – The Eels
 “Thirteen” – Big Star
The Third Incident of JP Mercer
 “Road” – Nick Drake
 “I’ll keep it with mine” – Nico
 “Theme for a Pretty Girl Who Makes You Believe God Exists”
 – The Eels
 “The Biggest Lie” – Elliott Smith

Some of the connections between the soundtrack and the pieces are immediately obvious. Others require familiarity with the songs. “The Good Thing About Quitting” was inspired by sitting on my porch with my former housemate listening to Nico’s “These Days.” I’ve always jokingly wished that I could write and direct a zombie movie just so that I could juxtapose the climactic battle and the Beach Boys. Instead, I wrote a flash fiction called “Don’t Worry Baby.”

*“I’ve been out walking
 I don’t do too much talking
 These days, these days.
 These days I seem to think a lot
 About the things that I forgot to do
 And all the times I had the chance to.”*

I’ve never really considered what or whose work has directly influenced my technique and style. Every novel, short story, comic that I’ve read, every play, movie, or television show that I’ve seen, every album that

I've listened to while falling asleep or out on an aimless drive has influenced me in one way or another. Even those things that I did not enjoy have had some impact on me, no matter how minute. In the process of preparing for this reflective essay, I have come to realize how deeply Kurt Vonnegut's life and works have penetrated my own.

The first Vonnegut novel I read was *The Sirens of Titan*. This set a high standard for the quality of work I wanted to read and eventually produce. My enjoyment for Vonnegut's work isn't limited to the actual read – he has profoundly effected my outlook on life. Although I think my switch from traditional religious beliefs to secular values occurred during my reading of *Cat's Cradle*, he best sums up my current spiritual affiliation in *Timequake*: “Humanists try to behave decently and honorably without any expectation of rewards or punishments in the afterlife.”

Vonnegut's works are fraught with flawed characters trying to get by while causing the least amount of pain possible. And no matter what mistakes they have made, their stories always end on a hopeful note. If that isn't nice, what is? Uncle Alex Vonnegut has been referred to and quoted in many of Vonnegut's works. In *Timequake*, Vonnegut writes that his uncle Alex had said:

“When things were really going well we should be sure to *notice* it. He was talking about simple occasions, not great victories: maybe drinking lemonade on a hot afternoon in the shade, or smelling the aroma of a nearby bakery, or fishing and not caring if we catch

anything or not, or hearing somebody all alone playing a piano really well in the house next door. Uncle Alex urged me to say this out loud during such epiphanies: ‘If this isn’t nice, what is?’”

Over the years, that quote has become a personal mantra of mine. Vonnegut writes in *A Man Without a Country*: “Humor is a way of holding off how awful life can be, to protect yourself.” Knowing his life story – how he survived the bombing of Dresden, the suicide of his mother, the deaths of his sister and brother-in-law, the subsequent adoption of their children – makes his humor much more poignant. If he could survive all that and still find humor in life, there is hope for this world. I tried to imitate this style in most of my stories, specifically “Don’t Worry Baby.”

My affection for Vonnegut is most evident in “The Third Incident of JP Mercer.” In earlier drafts of the story, I tried to emulate his voice. As I developed a voice of my own voice, I decided to pay my respect to him through homage. JP’s mother, Desi Mercer, kills herself by drinking a bottle of the household cleaner Drano. In *Breakfast of Champions*, Dwayne Hoover’s wife kills herself by drinking Drano. JP’s mentor, the Colonel, commits suicide during the school year. His wife muses in distress that she really wasn’t that surprised, maybe he just finally realized what a shithole life was. Vonnegut’s mentor and advisor at the University of Chicago committed suicide five years after he graduated. When his letter of condolences received no response from his advisor’s widow, he wondered: “It could have been that

she was overwhelmed with grief. Then again, she could have been sore as hell at him for taking the easy way out.”

Five other students in my advanced fiction workshop and I are planning to start our own literary magazine. Although I won't be in Syracuse next year, I still intend to play a major role in this publication. The only venues students currently have to publish their works on campus are aimed at poets. We've decided that short story writers need the same creative outlet. In honor of Vonnegut, we are naming our publication “The B-36” after his fake short story “The Sisters B-36.” Attributed to his alter ego Kilgore Trout, the story revolves around three sisters on the planet Booboo – a painter, a short story writer, and a thermodynamic scientist. Because all of the Booboolings have giant brains and expansive imaginations, they all love the two artistic sisters. But once the scientific sister invents the TV and other venues of instant gratification:

“Young Booboolings didn't see any point in developing imaginations anymore, since all they had to do was turn on a switch and see all kinds of jazzy shit. They would look at a printed page or a painting and wonder how anybody could have gotten his or her rocks off looking at things that simple and dead.”

Kilgore Trout explains that because the Booboolings no longer developed imaginations or appreciated art, they became the most merciless creatures in the galaxy. This is how we feel about short stories – the shared experience that comes from reading keeps us humane. We are out to show that we still care

about the art of short stories. We are out to show that we still care about our humanity.

Kurt Vonnegut's death was very upsetting for me. It wasn't that I knew him on a personal level or that I would have ever gotten the chance to meet or work with him. One minute, everything feels right. In the next minute, the teaser for the next news story after commercial breaks announces that one of my heroes is gone. That minute, suddenly the world feels less lighthearted, more doomed. If unfiltered Pall Malls hadn't killed him in all these years, it makes me nervous to wonder what did. Sure, it was a fall and a head trauma, but I wonder – after reading *A Man Without a Country* – if it wasn't something more. In any case, he lives on within my bookshelf.

*“I had a lover,
 I don't think I'll risk another
 These days, these days.
 And if I seem to be afraid
 To live the life that I have made in song
 It's just that I've been losing so long.”*

When I began planning my Capstone Project, I assumed that it would be a collection of different stories. The eight pieces all began as very distinct and separate works. As I discovered my voice and my intent, a theme emerged across my writing. *How do you peacefully exist in the present with the painful baggage of the past? How do you stop old wounds from coming back? How do you move on when the scars are constant reminders?* Although some of my stories are set around an important turning point of event, most of the struggles that my characters face involve surviving day to day.

Charlie Winters must accept the truth about Marie and Abby in order to find tranquility. The first girl he felt a connection with killed herself, the gravity of which did not hit him for a few years. The first time he fell in love, her need for stability prevented her from reciprocating. At the age of twenty-seven, Charlie hopes that he has moved beyond the pain of these experiences. He has not, and ultimately dooms a budding relationship with someone who could have been good for him.

In “Mel’s Blog,” the sentiment is the same but starts at a different point. It starts with the disillusionment – the peaceful and ignorant existence a community has known is gone. Now that everyone has had their awakening, how do they move on? How do they return to happiness with their new emotional baggage?

Shane and Ryan are overwhelmed with regret as they sit on the porch of their old college house. Surrounded by memories of missed opportunities and better times, both regress back to old habits because the unknowns of the future are too daunting. Later in “The Third Incident of JP Mercer,” we learn that they do resolve any lingering hang-ups and reveal their feelings for one another.

The man writing the letter to Ultimate Frisbee is on the cusp of a turning point. As he reflects upon his history with Ultimate and the time following his knee injury, it is uncomfortably apparent that his pain has seeped into his everyday life, tainting relationships and social connections. Now that this has been brought to his attention by the ultimatum, he needs to

decide which choice will let him assimilate easier. Will staying with Jeanie bring him a happier existence, or returning to Ultimate Frisbee?

In “Don’t Worry Baby,” the protagonist realizes that her scars are too deep, too painful, to ever heal. The horror that she has witnessed has changed her so deeply that she has lost her sense of humanity. She feels as savage as the monsters hunting her and the young man. Her only option left is to neutralize the threat of her turning into a zombie before she actually becomes one.

In “The Third Incident of JP Mercer,” Jen claims that his entire life is a “story of JP thinking he is going crazy, and trying to prove it.” In reality, JP’s story is his denial of a painful and paralyzing history. On a surface level, JP acknowledges that the suicides of his mother and college advisor did negatively affect him. He also understands that both breakups with Jen were traumatic and exacerbated by his own numbness. It is only once he finds himself face to face with death that he realizes how ingrained these events are into his core. The climber Jim Perrin said: “Man may be doomed to loss, sorrow, and desolation, but if he tries his strength and will, however briefly, upon the indifferent vast hostility of the elements, he rages against futility and asserts his right of being.” JP’s thrill seeking and isolation are not a test of his right to live, but rather his desire to live. Perhaps he didn’t spend two extra days climbing in the midst of a Nor’easter because he needed to clear his head. Maybe he had just given up.

In Vonnegut's *Breakfast of Champions*, protagonist Dwayne Hoover recalls a testing room in an automobile factory in which "everything you're not supposed to do to a car, they did to a car." The room was labeled: Destructive Testing. Hoover says, "I saw that sign and I couldn't help wondering if that was what God put me on Earth for – to find out how much a man could take without breaking." A lot of my writing comes from this feeling – what more can I or we as people handle? In my own attempt to grapple with that question, I put my characters through hell to see how they manage. I've grown to care the most about Charlie and JP – it's a shame that they have both had such rough luck.

Because most of my writing is done electronically, I do not hold on to the various drafts of my stories. Had I printed each version out, I'm sure it could double as a chronicle of the past few years. I'm not sure if this is a positive or negative phenomenon, but my stories have changed depending on the circumstances of my life.

"The Good Thing About Quitting" was a completely different story before time passed and only a few months of my college years remained. The experience of returning to a safe haven was lost on me until my old porch companion returned for a visit and noted how the place felt foreign.

This same former housemate was the one I turned to for climbing expertise. I knew that the focus of JP's story wouldn't be mountaineering, but I wanted the writing to be authentic. We would sit with coffee on our porch talking about the feats of mankind, of great alpinist and famous things they

have said. Within the first week of 2007, he took me climbing in the White Mountains of New Hampshire. It was my first time climbing and I've suffered from chronic shin splints for several years – it was much more strenuous than I anticipated. But that day was the first time that I knew what I was up against – it was the first time that the extraneous forces that were causing me distress were tangible. I had to climb the mountain. That simple. Reaching the summit brought me more exaltation than I thought possible. My body was physically exhausted, I almost didn't make it back down, but my mind had never felt so relieved. JP's story changed drastically after that day. All of my stories changed drastically. Things were put into perspective.

“You cannot stay on the summit forever; you have to come down again. So why bother in the first place? Just this: What is above knows what is below, but what is below does not know what is above. One climbs, one sees. One descends, one sees no longer, but one has seen. There is an art of conducting oneself in the lower regions by the memory of what one saw higher up. When one can no longer see, one can at least still know.” *Rene Daumal*

The most interesting example of circumstantial change in my writing is “Mel’s Blog.” It began as a found fiction exercise. We were told to open up a book, point to a sentence, and use that in a flash story. I had a collection of my professor Michael Burkhard’s poetry entitled *Entire Dilemma* with me, and my phrase was: “Who the hell is Mel? Cut. Print.” Over time, the piece matured from being a quirky experiment in a new voice to a commentary on blogging and free speech. The callous way news media and photographers treated actor Heath Ledger’s death created the characters of the Politician, the Angsty Musician, and the Celebrity. I was struggling for a way to end the

story, for a definitive decision that the Nervous Pediatrician could make. Circumstances in my own life made me wonder: just because I am unhappy, do I have the right to sabotage other's happiness? This inspired the new theme of disillusionment that structured the final scene of "Mel's Blog."

*"I've stopped my rambling,
I don't do too much gambling
These days, these days.
These days I seem to think about
How all the changes came about my ways
And I wonder if I'll see another highway."*

In order to define my audience, I have to define my purpose for and intent in writing. I would like to think of this collection as a music record – each story should be able to hold up on its own, but the effect of the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. This is one of the reasons why "Blinking Lights (For You)" falls after "Alone Again Or." I feel as though the emotional punch of both stories is stronger if the hopeful beginning is revealed after the heartbreaking end. I was careful to remember the length and momentum of each story in relation to others as I selected their order.

Vonnegut writes in *Timequake* that: "I say in speeches that a plausible mission of artists is to make people appreciate being alive at least a little bit. I am then asked if I know of any artists who pulled that off. I reply, 'The Beatles did.'" Kurt Vonnegut pulled that off. I would like to one day pull that off, but for now I would be happy if people find a catalyst in my stories. When I listen to music, if I think that it is a good song, I am with it one hundred

percent from start to finish. I feel the way the artist wants me to feel, I believe what the artist wants me to believe.

I don't write to change lives or spark great social revolution. I write so that a reader can empathize with my characters and their situations for the duration of the story. I write so that for a few moments, a reader can feel intangibles (the things that affect us without our knowledge), infinites (the things that make you want to stay in a moment for ever), and ineffables (the things so beautiful or catastrophic that you have no words). Vonnegut often quotes his son Mark as saying: "We are here to help each other get through this thing, whatever it is." That is a prominent goal of my writing, giving people the avenue of connection, empathy, or even vicarious escape. I honestly have put all of my faith into the inherent goodness of mankind. Like all faith, it is blind as I have time and time again been proven wrong. That's just another reason we need to help each other get through this thing.

One way to accomplish that is through humor. Laughter is a natural response to fear and desolation. In "Don't Worry Baby," I created juxtaposition between the Beach Boys and a zombie apocalypse. Then one of the characters starts singing a song by the band The Zombies. The reason zombies are one of, if not the, scariest monsters is because they are us. It's not as though Godzilla storms in and wreaks havoc and casualties occur – but then that's it. Zombies are just humans stripped of their cognitive functioning and left to operate on primal and animalistic urges. Once you are attacked by a

zombie, you become one – you become the enemy. This is terrifying. Why wouldn't someone want to lace the situation with as much humor as possible?

In *A Man Without a Country*, Vonnegut says “There are such things as laughless jokes, what Freud called gallows humor. There are real life situations so hopeless that no relief is imaginable.” Perhaps this is more the humor in my writing. There are things that happen to JP and Charlie and the two characters in “Don't Worry Baby” that are tragic and perverse. I did not intend for my collection to be bleak or discouraging. The humor in my stories, hopefully, allows a reader to recognize how gritty life can be but still feel as though we are all just getting through this thing together.

*“I've stopped my dreaming,
I won't do too much scheming
These days, these days.
These days I sit on corner stones
And count the time in quarter tones to ten.
Please don't confront me with my failures,
I had not forgotten them.”*

To close this reflective essay, I should address some of the different obstacles I ran across during this project. I began work on “The Boy” two and a half years ago and JP's story soon after. My own self epiphanies and personal changes have surfaced in my writing. Although I kept the concept of stories that I have been working on over the past few years, all significant work on this thesis has occurred within the last nine months. Not only have I poured myself into this work, but I have had to continuously go back and make sure that all of my writing was on the same level. Two stories that I felt

represented my writing style six months ago have since been cut from the project. They were adding nothing but pages to a manuscript that was already one hundred and thirty pages long. They no longer provoked any adequate response in readers.

A few activities and relationships have suffered as a result of the amount of writing and digital design that I've done for the Capstone Project, but it now feels worth it. At the end of this project, I will have in my possession a five-by-seven perfect-bound copy of my collection. My aspiration is to continue writing and work in book design while I strive to get published. A lot of effort went into the design process of the book – and trying to find a reasonable price quote has been a headache. The copies have been ordered. The manuscript is complete. Now that it has all come together, the experience has been surreal.

Written Capstone Summary

The Boy: Marie Floating Over the Backyard

Playing in the field behind his house, a young boy watches as his sixteen-year-old babysitter jumps from the roof of a watermill into a stream. At first, he mistakes her movement as floating or flying, as an act of freedom or exaltation. His mother's scream from the nearby house breaks his disconnection and he eventually sees the shoes she left behind on the roof before she jumped. Now as he looks back, it is hard to discern which parts of the memory are concrete and truthful and which parts have been tainted by fantasy or youthful ignorance.

Mel's Blog

The idyllic existence of a small community is disrupted when a mysterious "Anarchist" leaves a comment on Mel's Blog. Up until then, the citizens had always solely trusted what Mel had written in the Blog. The reassuring "All is Well" that appeared in the posts seven hundred days straight is undermined by questions from the Anarchist. Eventually the Anarchist joins forces with the Skeptic Writer to start a separate blog and newspaper in an attempt to enlighten the community to free speech and Mel's covert dictatorship.

The events that unfold are seen through the eyes of the Nervous Pediatrician, the Storeowner, and the Florist. The Storeowner is a

representative and Mel-abiding citizen. He seems the most distraught by the Anarchist's continuing efforts to debunk Mel's Blog – he learns that his day to day interactions with almost everyone in town have been complete artifice. Despite the breakdown of a superficial and uninformed life, the Storeowner believes that everyone was happier before the enlightenment. The Storeowner questions why the concerns of two rebels justify the disillusionment of an entire community.

Of the three, the Florist has the deepest roots in the community. An esteemed elder in town, the Florist has not always agreed with Mel's politics or taken the Politician, her former fiancé, seriously. The power and respect she receives have been enough to keep the Florist a stringent follower of Mel's Blog. Once the Anarchist and Skeptic Writer voice their complaints, the Florist begins to stray from the comfort of blindly following.

The Nervous Pediatrician undergoes the most drastic change during the Blog controversy. At first unable to even make eye-contact with the one woman in town who shows him the most attention, the Nervous Pediatrician uses the outcry of the Anarchist and Skeptic Writer as a catalyst for person change. His confidence builds and he is able to stop stuttering long enough to ask: "Why?" The apparent suicide of the Politician, prompted by the reveal of an affair between the Florist and the Neurologist, awakens the Nervous Pediatrician to the omnipotent power of the Blog. He eventually confronts Mel – why is his opinion so important? Why is no one else allowed to have a voice?

Just as the Nervous Pediatrician, the Anarchist, and the Skeptic Writer are about to distribute the knowledge of Mel's involvement with the Politician's death, Mel warns the Nervous Pediatrician of what harm will come. Does the unhappiness of three people warrant a whole town tearing itself apart? Do those three people have a right to ruin a perfectly blissful, albeit apathetic and ignorant, existence for everyone?

The Good Thing About Quitting

Shane and Ryan reunite for a weekend during a trip back to their alma mater six months after graduation. Their other former housemate, JP, sits in the basement with the friends he left the lease to upon leaving. Shane and Ryan sit on their old porch, now foreign territory, sharing coffee and clove cigarettes. The place has changed. They, as people, have changed. The ghosts of their college years linger in the bones of the bare porch – especially the image of a night when Shane tried to kiss Ryan at the doorway. A summer away from Ryan and JP has helped Shane quit smoking, and perhaps move past her feelings for him. Now as they try to figure out what's left for them here and what waits at their new homes, they can't help but wonder: what's the point of quitting anything if you can so easily return to the bad habit.

A Lover Letter to Ultimate Frisbee, or: Disc is My Favorite Four Letter Word

After kicking over a display rack at an outdoor recreation equipment store, a man sits down to answer an ultimatum. The scene was sparked by his

outrage at seeing Ultimate Frisbee discs shelved in the dog and family leisure aisle. Although thankful that the store did not pressed charges, his girlfriend Jeanie tells him that he has to grown up, he has to pick between their relationship and his obsession with a sport that he can no longer play.

He writes a letter to Ultimate, reflecting on their history together, the obstacles they've had to overcome, the people they've affected. It pains him both physically and mentally to think about the knee injury that has prevented him from playing. He questions whether or not he needs to make a decision about the ultimatum, whether or not he can have the balance – despite a sudden awareness that his passion has created turmoil in other areas of his life. Which love does he pick? If he chooses the sport, he'll always wonder if he threw away the best girlfriend he'd ever have. If he chooses the girl, he'll always resent the fact that she took Ultimate away from him.

Don't Worry Baby

Two strangers are united in their struggle to endure a catastrophic zombie apocalypse. Contrary to most survival scenarios, the woman is the one who finds and saves a twenty-three-year-old man – she is the protector and he would be lost without her. They have broken into an abandoned house to rest and recover. The woman quickly learns that she has been bitten and that she soon will die from blood loss.

She wonders what responsibility she actually has for him – why did she risk her own life trying to help him. As she begins to slip in and out of

consciousness, she realizes that she is the bigger threat to him than the monsters outside. She is the enemy now. The zombies aren't abstract creatures but rather people like her who have lost the function of their cerebral cortexes. Is that the only thing separating the monsters from the two protagonists – a pulse and higher brain functioning? Or has the woman already lost her sense of humanity? The ease with which she can kill these things that still look human haunts her, leading her to believe that she has already passed the threshold into savagery.

Alone Again Or

Just as Charlie Winters has moved on from the girl he had been in love with for seventeen years, she reinitiates contact by mailing him mementoes of their past. Although Charlie never got the opportunity to tell Abby that he loved her, she remained the most important person in his life until the day she left school without warning. In the six years since he has last spoken to her, the emotional scar has both deliberately and unintentionally robbed him of any other meaningful relationship.

Unsure whether or not Charlie has been using the idea of Abby as a cop-out, he decides to give in to the advances of his coworker Maggie. He lets himself open up to her, to allow for possibility of affection and romance. Their initial dating gives him hope that he can love someone else. The packages from Abby make him question how long he can put off his feelings for her. She sends him keepsakes of their old friendship, their prior intimacy.

But once she sends him a reminder of the night he tried to kiss her, he can no longer pretend that she doesn't still have an effect on him. He can no longer deny that his feelings for Abby had prevented him from finding happiness.

Charlie abruptly ends things with Maggie, fully aware that it never really started. He calls Abby in the hope that her packages were a message, that she is finally coming home. Why else would she have gone through the trouble of finding old relics of their relationship? What else could she be trying to say? Their brief phone conversation devastates Charlie and strands him back where he started. He had misconstrued her intentions.

The Boy: Blinking Lights (For You)

The first time that Charlie meets Abby is the day he moves into a new neighborhood. Struggling to deal with the stress of a colic infant, his parents ask Charlie to entertain himself for the summer. His friendship with Abby arises out of this shared experience – her own family life is caught in a stalemate of constant turmoil. As the summer passes and they become closer, Charlie has his first experience with love. Unfortunately, that love is complicated by age and circumstance. She confides in him, revealing that he is the only dependable person in her life. If he chooses to confront her with his feelings, he risks tainting their friendship. Charlie learns at a young age the path of least resistance and the merit of biting one's tongue.

The Third Incident of JP Mercer

JP Mercer is lying in a mountain river with his leg caught between two rocks. Despite the threat of an unpredictable Nor'easter, JP decided to ditch the itinerary he left in his car and spend two extra days camping in the White Mountains. When the rain hits, the turbulent rapids pull him away and knock him unconscious. Awoken by the pain, JP realizes that the chances of saving himself are slim with a dislocated shoulder and an alarming leg wound. With no one around to hear his cries for help, JP has nothing to do but reflect upon the forces that drove him up the mountain in the first place.

Was he upset about his father's severance package? Had the lonely despair of his breakup four months prior finally surfaced? His climbing mantra dictates that the mountains are an escape, a challenge to test his right to live. Lying in the water, JP realizes that maybe the test isn't of his right but rather his will to live. After the suicides of his mother and his college mentor, JP never thought that it was within his character to take his own life. Lying in the water, JP questions his motives for climbing, for his recklessness. As he fights to stay conscious long enough for rescue to arrive, JP tries to decide whether or not the struggle is worth it.