Waiting for the mail: A collection of short stories

James Matthew Keane
University of Northern Iowa

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WAITING FOR THE MAIL: A COLLECTION OF SHORT STORIES

An Abstract of a Thesis
Submitted
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

James Matthew Keane
University of Northern Iowa
May 2018
ABSTRACT

This collection of six pieces of original short fiction is, in general, a reflection upon my on-going questions concerning identity. In particular, these stories delve into the nature of masculinity through an exploration of male relationships—fathers, sons, husbands, and brothers.
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Entitled: WAITING FOR THE MAIL: A COLLECTION OF SHORT STORIES

has been approved as meeting the thesis requirement for the

Degree of Master of Arts

Date    Dr. Grant Tracey, Chair, Thesis Committee

Date    Dr. Brooke Wonders, Thesis Committee Member

Date    Dr. Jim O’Loughlin, Thesis Committee Member

Date    Dr. Patrick Pease, Interim Dean, Graduate College
For Jess, Thea, Will, and Elliot.

I love you.
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THE MAILMAN

Tony Bellisito squatted with his shorts around his ankles, his naked buttocks hovering over an empty five-gallon pail. He’d choked down three spoonfuls of Metamucil, beginning the evening before, and the moment of reckoning was at hand. No shit though. Lots of gas, but no shit. He began worrying that he’d over-dosed on the fiber. How much is enough? How much is too much? He hiked up his boxers and shuffled into his living room to wait for Mother Nature’s next move. The instructions said three teaspoons per day. Was that heaping, or not? He decided on one more dose, before retiring to his tattered second-hand recliner to read the Sunday sports section.

Tony Bellisito PhD. English professor extraordinaire, expert in early American Lit, collecting his shit in a bucket in Bumfuck, Iowa.

Eight months ago, Tony moved from Chicago. He wrote a check for the price of the home he now lived in—fifty-two grand—closed the door, drew the blinds, and went about life after divorce. Twelve weeks later, he took out a mortgage for eighty percent of the shack’s value. Subsequent payments had arrived at the bank later and later; and just last week the bank had notified him, in writing, of their foreclosure policy.

That goddamn divorce was killing him.

The affair wasn’t his fault, the woman at the ticket window had come onto him. It may take two to tango, as they say, but he hadn’t started it, she had. How could he say no?

If not for the affair he’d still be married. The loan from Elizabeth’s college fund could’ve been smoothed over. It was only six thousand dollars, and it was his money
anyway. Besides she didn’t need it; she got free tuition as part of his tenure deal.

He cursed the day he first went to Arlington Park. That damn brown-noser got him started. “Hey Prof, you ever bet on the ponies?” he’d said. Tony couldn’t even remember the kid’s name anymore.

Jake. Yeah, Jake something.

Tony had never in his life bet on a horse before that day.

Jake’s father owned a nag called The Great Garinsky (that name Tony would never forget) and Jake seemed confident that it was going to win. Curious, Tony went to the track the next day, and the horse did win, at almost 25 to 1. An easy thousand bucks. That wasn’t the hook though. No, the hook was that redheaded bimbo behind the betting window. She brought him back to the track again, and again.

With divorce lawyers in tow, Tony and Connie had agreed to sell their house and split the proceeds. He’d kept his Volvo and let her have all the rest of their shared assets. That’s when he became a fixture at the track. He received his first reprimand from the Dean for lecturing while drunk. A week later a colleague walked into Tony’s office to find trousers and a coed at Tony’s feet. Disgraced, Tony left Chicago, though he did manage to salvage Elizabeth’s scholarship as a contingency for an uncomplicated resignation.

Creston, Iowa, was supposed to be a second chance, an opportunity to teach again, albeit at a community college; but Prairie Meadows racetrack in Des Moines was only ninety minutes away. Tony had gotten canned before the end of his first semester, sold his Volvo, and mortgaged the house. Now he worked as a carpenter for Labor
Ready, taking orders from people who, he was quite sure, had barely graduated high school.

“Goddamnit!” he shouted, leaning back in the recliner. He threw the newspaper on the floor. “I fucking knew it.” He shook his head in disbelief. Uncanny Manny, the horse he’d specifically gone yesterday to bet on, had won, and paid $11.40 for a two dollar wager. Normally great news, except when Uncanny Manny had galloped over the finish line Tony was already in his vehicle, broke, and driving home.

He did some quick math.

“Eleven thousand dollars!” he screamed, leaping to his feet. “Eleven thousand dollars!” He paced the room, tugging at his thinning gray hair. “Eleven thousand dollars,” he whispered, collapsing back into the chair. The enormity of his failure left him breathless. “Eleven thousand fucking dollars,” he sobbed.

He closed his eyes and tried to reconcile the events of the previous day.

Twenty-four hours earlier his pockets had been flush with close to two grand—thanks to a phone call, placed earlier in the week, to his brother Paul.

“Hey, Pauly. How ya doing?”

“I told you not to call me anymore.”

“Well I’ve got a business opportunity and . . .”

“How much?”

“It’s for a garage-door dealership. My boss is going into it and asked . . .”

“Last chance, Tony. How much?”

“Five thousand, uh, that’s five thousand each. It takes ten to get . . .”
“I’ll give ya two.”

“Okay, two will be good. I’ll start paying you back within a couple . . .”

“Fuck you, Tony. Do you have any clue how much you already owe me?

“It’s different this time. I’m gonna pay you back, and I’m gonna call Elizabeth once I get established.”

Tony had really believed what he’d said; he’d felt exceptionally good about his prospects, and the idea of reconnecting with his daughter did occasionally flit through his mind. There were moments when he understood that the loss of her affection was the worst he ever endured. He also knew that Paul was sentimental.

Paul scoffed, “This is the last time. You’re dead to me. Capiche! This is your funeral payment Tony. Don’t ever fucking call me again, and don’t call any of the girls either. We’re all sick of your bullshit.”

“Oh, one last thing, I need the money by the end of the week . . .” By then, Tony was talking to himself.

His brother’s attitude pissed Tony off. When they were kids he’d saved Paul’s life. Nobody knew it, but it was true.

They had just finished serving Mass together; Paul’s debut as an altar boy and Tony’s retirement. They’d been nine and thirteen respectively. As the boys disrobed, the Parish priest, Father Silvano, set the collection money on a table and went into the bathroom. Tony could hear the priest taking a leak, and he jumped at the opportunity. His hands dove into the wicker basket brimming with cash. He filled the pockets of his Sunday pants, and forced Paul to stuff his full as well. He rifled through the
congregation’s offerings even as the toilet flushed, and he got caught red-handed.

Paul claimed ignorance, and Tony, being the elder, received the beating of a lifetime from his father. However, the Parish, at Father Silvano’s request, filed no official charges. Instead, both boys were banned from serving Mass.

Silvano, a pedophile, destroyed Tony’s childhood, but he didn’t get Paul’s.

Of course, Tony could never tell a soul his heroic story, not even Paul; but that didn’t mean that a debt had not been incurred.

He only hoped that the check would arrive in time—he’d received some mail, as they say at the track. A fellow he saw there pretty regularly had given him a solid tip.

“Watch out for Uncanny Manny. He’s just up from Missoura, an’l be worth a little sump’n’ next Sattadee.”

It was rare for anyone around Prairie Meadows to speak to Tony. Standing by the ticket window or down at the rail poring over the guide, even people who’d seen him hundreds of times didn’t acknowledge him, and that was the way Tony generally liked it. That’s what made the tip so special. Tony knew that he’d gotten it out of pity. He knew that the guy knew Tony bet in peanuts and wouldn’t affect the odds. This time would be different though, Tony had thought.

He’d felt good driving to the track, convinced that he was going to win big like Richard Dreyfuss’s character in *Let it Ride*. He’d win enough to make a new start. He’d beat the system.

The race was scheduled for 4:35, but Tony left the track shell-shocked and penniless at 3:15. He’d lost everything before his horse had even been saddled.
Sitting in his recliner, sickened by his stupidity, a rumble in his intestines followed by a sharp pang roused him from his self-loathing. Tony dashed to the bathroom, and positioned himself again over the five-gallon pail.

His bowel emptied violently. He moved over to sit on the regular toilet, wiped his ass, and then looked in the bucket. It was a staggering amount of shit. He kept staring at it, unable to stir, until he noticed the smell. He left the bathroom and closed the door.

He’d planned it all out the night before—the gloves and disinfectant were in a bag on the counter. The neighbor’s, though. In broad daylight they’d see him.

Tonight, he muttered.

Suddenly, Mildred occupied his thoughts. Boy, had she duped him.

If not for leaving the track early he never would have met the old crow. Fate had stepped in. Fate, and that kid in the sports car.

A blaring horn had snapped Tony out of a trance. Consumed by his losses and trying to reconcile his utter lack of restraint, he’d entered that mindless zone where drivers lose track of mile after mile. Squinting down at the speedometer he saw he was doing forty-five. He’d also drifted halfway into the other lane.

He eased his rundown Buick back to the right and looked in the mirror. Too late, the black sports car was alongside him, the kid behind the wheel still laying on his horn. Embarrassed, Tony waved an apology. The kid hesitated abreast Tony’s vehicle long enough to ensure that Tony got the full effect of his erect middle finger. Then gunning the engine of the shiny new vehicle, and with a mouthful of profanity, the Young Turk roared away leaving Tony in his past.
Tony wondered why “sorry” never seemed to suffice. Why everyone wants a pound of flesh? It wasn’t enough for his wife to divorce him; she’d had to turn his daughter against him too.

In the Buick, Tony was pissed. What the hell kind of car was that, anyway? It used to be that a guy could tell make and model at a glance, but they all looked the same anymore. Mustang or Camaro, he’d mused. Christ, it could’ve been a Charger. They all looked the fucking same.

As the kid sped away, Tony’s mind raced. He knew instinctively the kinds of insults that brat had yelled at him: farmer, crazy motherfucker, Sunday driver, Grampa, drunk, high, fucked up, idiot, retard—Retard! He hated that word.

He mashed the accelerator. He’d catch that little bastard and teach him a lesson. But the black whatever-it-was had already disappeared on the horizon, and his car couldn’t hit seventy without going into death rattles, so instead, Tony sent a curse careening down the road. At the count of ten that entitled son-of-bitch would get a blowout; he’d cartwheel and explode into a fireball.

Tony never got to ten. He lost focus somewhere between seven and eight, transfixed once more by the “what if” scenarios of a terrible day. He decided to take the next off-ramp in search of a more peaceful way home; the interstate was like living in a fishbowl. He stuck his left arm out the window and flipped off the world as he exited.

Things would be okay, he told himself. He’d save a couple of paychecks and then make his comeback. “Let it ride,” he whispered as he turned onto the new road home.

His gambler’s triage continued for a several miles further until gripped by
insanity, Tony pounded the steering wheel. “Idiot,” he said looking into the mirror, “You arrived too fucking early.” A pickup flashed past and made him swerve onto the shoulder. He looked at the speedometer and started screaming, Thirty! Jesus! Fuck!

The next few seconds were frenzied. He slammed on the brakes and jerked the wheel, narrowly avoiding an old lady shuffling with the aid of a walker at the edge of the blacktop. The Buick went into the on-coming lane and glanced off a mailbox before coming to rest sideways in the road, front wheels perilously close to the ditch.

Hyperventilating, foot glued to the brake pedal, Tony looked at the woman standing at the mouth of a gravel drive, glancing up and down the road. Across the street from her, on the ground next to its sturdy post, lay the mailbox he’d struck.

That crazy old bitch was gonna get herself killed.

He put his vehicle in reverse and took his quivering foot off the brake. When the Buick straightened up, he accelerated slowly away.

Then his foot went back on the brake.

“For Christ’s sake,” he groaned.

The woman stood there behind him, staring at her mailbox. He turned around.

She still hadn’t made it beyond the apron of her drive when he pulled to a stop on the opposite shoulder.

She smiled and waved.

“I can get it for you,” Tony said.

He got out of his car and opened the mailbox resting in the dust; it was empty. He laughed to himself, she was risking her life for nothing. “No mail,” he yelled.
“What?”

Annoyed, Tony crossed the road.

“Thank you for stopping,” she said.

Exaggerating each syllable, he began again, “There was no …”

She interrupted him. “Won’t you come in? You should rest a bit after all that excitement. I just took some bread out of the oven and the kettle is on.” She smiled, gesturing toward her old story-and-a-half farmhouse, the type you could drive by a hundred times and never notice.

Memories of his mother and sisters baking every Saturday morning eased into Tony’s consciousness. Typically, he would never entertain such an offer, but buoyed by the uncommonly thoughtful gesture of his stopping, he said, sure. He pulled the Buick into the drive hoping that this old woman’s bread would be as good as his mother’s.

He met the woman at the base of a ramp that led up to the front porch. She held out a gnarled, liver-spotted claw. “Mildred.”

“Tony.” He nodded, pretending not to notice her out-stretched hand.

He climbed the six steps onto the porch and waited. He did not insult Mildred by offering her assistance up the ramp. Instead, he glanced around the exterior of the house, noting a pathetic state of disrepair. The fiberboard siding was swollen and buckled, its paint chipping or completely gone. Several boards had rotted through, exposing patches of black tar paper. Layers of paint flaked and peeled from the windows, door, and whitewashed porch. A blue shutter lay on the ground. Only the plywood ramp, which Mildred was taking forever to ascend, seemed in sturdy condition.
Eventually, she shuffled her way to the front door, opened the screen, and invited Tony in. “You’ll have to excuse the mess,” she said. “I wasn’t expecting a visitor.”

“It’s fine,” Tony replied.

“I just haven’t been able to get around very well lately.”

“It’s okay.” He’d already begun to regret his hospitality.

The interior was as bad as the outside. A general clutter of clothes, towels, and blankets lay scattered amid battered walls and furniture. He’d hoped he would die before his life reached such a pitiful state. A cupboard next to the kitchen sink was missing its door, and a huge orange cat stared at him from the back of the fraying sofa. A crop report blared from a digital clock-radio sitting on a makeshift plank shelf.

“Would you turn that off please, dear?” Mildred asked him.

Christ Almighty.

Then he couldn’t find the off switch.

After a few seconds, Mildred called out, “You just unplug it, dear.”

His patience, like the paint on the old place, had faded by the time the woman offered him a seat at the dilapidated kitchen table. He stared at a collection of newspapers and junk mail piled around him. The shit-heap repulsed him, but Tony figured, what does she care—her days are numbered. He wondered who she lived with; how could they tolerate that pig sty?

He didn’t inquire. He found personal questions crass and intrusive.

“What brings you by?” Mildred asked, as she labored to balance the bread on a cutting board atop her walker.
“I just finished work,” Tony lied.

“Oh, you live nearby?”

“No.”

Tony inhaled the steam rising out of the soft inside, as Mildred sliced into the loaf. The aroma dispelled his doubts about having stopped.

“What do you do?”

“Construction.”

The bread, covered in real butter and homemade apricot preserves, lifted Tony’s spirits, but the old woman would not shut up. She was eighty-four, widowed, had lived most all her life in this house, had recently undergone hip surgery, and was darned if she would live in a nursing home. Some folks from her church had installed the ramp.

Tony ate one slice of bread after another. He’d had nothing all day beyond a cup of coffee.

She offered to get out the other loaf, but Tony was full, and declined.

“I don’t know why I listen to that darn radio,” she’d said. “It’s nothing but politics, all the time. I hate politicians. I tried to have Nixon impeached you know.”

Tony was leaning back in his chair, eyes closed. “Really?” he said.

She kept on about something, pausing now and then. Her words washed over Tony unheeded, until he heard, “You remind me of him.”

“Who?” he asked.

“My son, Augie.”

“Oh. Is he a carpenter?”
“No, he’s dead. I just told you, he was killed in Vietnam. That’s why I started the petition to impeach Nixon.” She took a long breath. “Augie was kind, like you.”

“Uh, thanks.” Tony took a sip of coffee, not knowing what else to say.

There were a few moments of silence, and Tony leaned back in his chair again.

Then came the bombshell.

“Would you mind taking a look at the porch?” she asked. “Some boards have come loose and I’m afraid I might catch one and fall.”

“What?” Her request had caught Tony completely off guard.

“I can pay you,” she offered.

“I don’t have my tools with me,” he said.

But Mildred persisted. “That’s okay. Vern’s tools are all out in the shed.”

Who the hell was Vern?

“He was never much good to me, but he loved his tools.”

And then she was off on another monologue. Vern was a decorated World War II vet, eight years Mildred’s senior. They married in 1950. He was steady and predictable: a good farmer, an ample provider, a lousy listener, and a terrible father. He was a rabid patriot—always in the town parades dressed in uniform and carrying the flag, or a rifle. He never bought her a wedding ring. He’d promised to get her one when he could afford it, but he’d forgotten. Twenty years later, thoroughly disgusted, Mildred bought herself a ring with Vern’s brand new credit card. Master Charge gave him a five thousand dollar limit, and she used every penny of it at the jewelers.

As she rambled on, she got up from the table, cleared the dishes, and then made
her way to the front door. It irritated Tony, the way she struggled to get around.

She called him over to point out the loose porch boards and Vern’s tool shed. She offered to make some lemonade while Tony got started.

It was standing next to her at the door, that Tony got a good look at the ring. He’d spent six grand on Connie’s and Mildred’s rock was a hell of a lot bigger. How many carats did that thing measure?

He said, Okay, to the lemonade offer, then went out to look the project over.

A handful of slats had pulled free of their nails; it wouldn’t take long to screw them back into place—if he could find an impact or a drill.

Maybe he’d fix the mailbox too.

Vern’s shed contained an astounding array of tools: hand tools, power tools, a lathe, a planer, and a surfacer spread out in the spacious shop. He grabbed a Milwaukee drill, an extension cord, some deck screws, a hammer, and a few sixteen penny nails. He looked around the shop again as he closed the door. How much was this old dragon worth?

“Who farms the land now?” he asked nonchalantly, as Mildred handed him a glass of lemonade. There was condensation running down the outside, and he hoped she wouldn’t drop it; he was trying really hard to be friendly.

“Well, we never owned much, only two hundred and fifty tillable acres,” she said. “I was going to sell it when Vern died, but Pastor said I should rent it out, so that’s what I do.”

Figures ran through Tony’s head.
She was a goddamn millionaire.

He took a sip of lemonade. It was the instant variety—he’d expected fresh squeezed.

Meanwhile, Mildred started up jabbering again. It was her husband’s fault that Augie had died; Vern was so gung-ho about war. Against her pleading, Augie enlisted. “I’m a patriot too, and I’m not waiting to be drafted,” he’d said. She never forgave Vern. She hated him. At Augie’s funeral, Vern participated in the twenty-one-gun salute, and for years afterward he led military parades, even though his patriotic fervor had gotten their son killed. “I never went to another parade after Augie died,” she said, wiping her eyes behind her glasses. “Then Vern died in ’91.”

So she lived alone.

He finished his drink, and asked where he could plug in the cord.

“Right inside the door here,” she said.

All the while she’d been blubbering, he’d been thinking over a story his father used to tell him about Howard Hughes. The tycoon’s car ran out of gas somewhere in the desert and he was walking toward civilization when a stranger picked him up and gave him a ride. Later, the guy got a check for a million bucks.

As he plugged in the extension cord, Tony felt giddy, like he’d bet a pile of money at the track, and the horses were at the gate. It was exhilarating.

He came back outside whistling, and got down to the business of driving screws.

“How’d old Vern die?” he asked.

“Oh, it was the whiskey that got him.”
“Cirrhosis?” asked Tony.

“Sir what?” she asked.

“The liver disease.”

Mildred laughed. “Heavens no,” she said. “He got drunk and shot himself, cleaning his gun.”

The coroner had declared it a hunting accident, but she’d thought it looked more like a suicide. He was virtually decapitated by the point-blank shotgun blast to his throat. “Either way it didn’t matter to me,” she added. “When the Gulf War started and he got to cheerleading, well, I just couldn’t live with him any longer.”

Oh my God. She murdered him.

Tony kept his head down. He waited a tick before glancing up to see the old woman wiping her eyes again. He was done with the porch, and needed a break from the non-stop chatter. He grabbed the hammer and nails, and headed down the driveway.

“Where are you going?” Mildred hollered.

“Mailbox,” Tony yelled back.

It took him a few minutes to get the thing back together, then he rounded up all the tools and took them back to the shed. Mildred had gone back inside, and he hoped she’d pulled herself together. He wanted her feeling charitable when it came time to say goodbye.

In Vern’s workshop, Tony look around for signs of the poor bastard’s “accident.” No luck. Maybe it’d happened in the house.

When Tony came in the front door, Mildred was sitting at the kitchen table. She
seemed in better spirits. Tony brought the glasses in from the porch and set them by the sink; one last gesture of goodwill.

“Well, I gotta get going,” he said, wiping his brow for effect.

“Here.” She pushed an envelope toward him. She seemed sad to see him go.

“That’s really not necessary,” he said, as he reached out to accept it. He didn’t open the envelope—it was vulgar to open cards or look at checks in front of the person who’d written them. Instead, he jingled his keys in his pocket, wished her well, and walked briskly out the door.

In the Buick, he opened the envelope. It was a Thank You card with a check inside.

“Twenty-five bucks!” he exploded, when he saw the check. “Are you fucking kidding me?”

His fists clenched and a vein in his temple started pulsing. He climbed back out of the vehicle, and hustled back to the house. He entered without knocking.

“What the fuck is this?” he said, waving the check around. “I fixed your porch, I listened to your bullshit for hours, I tried to be nice, and all I get is twenty-five bucks?”

His face flushed and his hands twitched. “I only stopped as a favor, to get you your goddamn mail.”

“The mail?” Mildred whispered.

“Yes the fucking mail. I almost ran you over!”

“Sue delivers the mail to my door, now that I can’t get around.”

“What?” He flailed his arms. “What the hell were you doing out at the road?”
“I was exercising. Doc says I need to walk more.”

Where were the cats? Tony desperately needed to kick something. He had stopped for nothing.

“The ring,” he said, calmly. “Give it to me.”

She didn’t seem to understand him.

“Take it off,” he demanded. He was on her in a heartbeat, clutching at her hand, tugging at the ring. “Take it off!”

With clumsy fingers, she complied.

Ring in hand, he strode again to the door.

“Please, Tony. Wait,” the old woman begged.

“Just be thankful I don’t report you for murder,” he said, without looking back.

He started the Buick, the enormous diamond in his fist. “Makes up for what I should have won today,” he told himself, as he pulled out of the drive.

A few miles down the road, a siren jolted Tony out of his reverie. A cop was on his tail. Panicked, he opened his hand, unsure what to do. He pulled over, and then, without thinking, he put the ring in his mouth and washed it down with a slug of cold coffee left over from that morning.

“Why were you going so slow?” the cop asked.

“I’m sorry, Officer, it’s been a long day. I guess I was kind of zoning out.”

“Darn right you were. Twenty-seven miles per hour.”

“I’m really sorry.”

The cop sniffed around, ran Tony’s license, and decided to let him go. “But stay
focused.” he said.

And now, with his shit sitting in a pail in the bathroom, worry began eating at Tony. What had he been thinking taking that thing from the old bitch? What if she reported it stolen? What the hell did he know about fencing stolen property? In his rage about the money he hadn’t considered any of this.

My God! What if she wrote down my license plate number?

He started pacing the room. He was a common criminal. The thought of a lecherous cell-mate named Bubba sent a shiver down his spine. He opened the bathroom door and peered into his makeshift toilet, the smell no longer bothered him.

He didn’t carry the bucket outside. He didn’t put on gloves. The shit squeezed through his fingers over and over. He squelched his way through every square inch, but no ring. He wiped the sweat from his forehead. What if it never came out? What if it remained in him, poisoning his stomach, and slicing his intestines? What if it killed him?

He laid down on the floor for a long moment, before his resolve returned. Then he went to the kitchen, mixed another fiber cocktail, and sat in his recliner to wait.
TWO FUNERALS

Two funerals, that’s it. Since Hannah and I got hitched, only two.

Sure, I could’ve gone to more; opportunities are endless, but who needs all the crap: weeping and wailing, selective memories, and talk of a better place. Not me. There’s no accountability, that’s the problem.

Look, I’m forty-six years old, an age where things can go south at a moment’s notice and I don’t want any reminders. I’m too young.

Two fucking funerals.

The first was my father’s, twelve years ago; the bullshit was knee deep.

“He was a good man.”

“He looks so peaceful.”

“He’ll be missed.”

I had shaken hands with all the other losers, trying to look sad. Who the fuck were those people? Ignorant coworkers and casual acquaintances, I suppose. You can call it grief if you want, but they were delusional. My father was an asshole.

You want some specifics? Okay. For one, he killed my mother.

Now there was a good and decent human being, someone deserving of dearly departed accolades. I still get emotional thinking of her.

She died moving the fridge to clean behind it, while Dickwad, freshly retired at fifty-five—thanks to John Deere—was at the VFW. A vein popped in her brain and that was that. In twenty-eight years I’d never seen one sign that he truly loved her. Sure, he’d peck her on the cheek when he got home from work, but he was Jefferson and she was
Sally Hemings. You know what I mean?

He missed Mom, no question, but only because he had to hire a housekeeping service.

“He’ll be happy to be with your mother, God rest her soul. They were such a beautiful couple.”

The phony crap had turned my stomach.

Plus, Hannah and I fight after funerals.

After we’d buried the son of bitch she started it.

We were lying in bed together when she asked me why I hated him. What a stupid goddamn question. She knew better.

Granted, I’ve never really talked much with Hannah about my formative years—they’re water under the bridge. Mom was dead before we met and Dad wasn’t worth the effort, but I have shared a few stories. Like the time when I was thirteen, and Pops beaned me with a fastball. Why? Because I’d celebrated after hitting a long one while he was throwing to me.

Anyway, I tried to diffuse her antagonism. I told her that I didn’t hate him.

“Well, you certainly didn’t love him,” she said.

We went back and forth like this for a bit until I put my foot down. “I don’t wanna talk about it right now. Can’t we just get it on?”

The kids were asleep and I wanted to take advantage of the opportunity. I thought we had agreed to it in the car.

Hannah yawned and turned away from me.
So I tried an old trick. I ran my fingers through her hair and massaged her scalp. It might seem weird, but sometimes it works. Besides, I love the smell of her hair. I’m a simple man. You could shut me in a room with the scent of Hannah’s hair and I’d be happy for a long, long time. I don’t need much from the world. I’m simple.

Still, no go with the sex though.

That was twelve years ago.

Then earlier tonight, after we’d buried Daisy, another argument.

“I’m worried about you,” Hannah said. She rolled toward me. My fingers, twirling her hair, bent backwards. I had to get her to roll back so I could get them untangled. “Blah blah—blah blah blah.” She was unrelenting, and I knew I was going to miss out again.

What is it with her and sexual abstinence after funerals?

Shouldn’t a touchy-feely celebration of life stir the loins? Don’t reminders of mortality spark action? I mean Jesus Christ, I had it all planned out. This time, the kids were downstairs watching a video of Old Yeller. Jake is fifteen now, Lisa’s thirteen, and Marky, who missed out on the old man’s funeral, is nine.

Before I went to bed I’d told them to turn the volume up as loud as they wanted.

Yeah, Old Yeller. It used to be a family favorite. When Jake was five or six he’d sit in front of the TV and watch it every other day, bawling his eyes out every goddamn time.

He passed the tradition on to Lisa.

Of course, they hadn’t seen it in years—I don’t think Marky ever watched it. Hell,
I wasn’t even sure if the VHS player still worked, but they wanted to wallow in grief. Whatever. It’s their Thanksgiving break.

Meanwhile, in the bedroom, Hannah kept going on about insensitivity and selfishness. “It’s still about your father, isn’t it?” she said.

Disgusted, I took my hand, the one which had been peacefully stroking her hair, and put it inside my boxer briefs. I sure as hell didn’t want to talk about my fucking father, and I wasn’t giving up sex without a fight, not this time. I told her that maybe I’d just pleasure myself, right there in front of her.

She said, good night, and turned her back to me.

That power move would have worked for my dad. I’m sure of it.

I took my hand back out of my shorts. “Okay,” I said. “You want to talk about my dad? Let’s talk.” I reminded her about the time she’d been going through chemo and my turd-bucket father sent her flowers and a card. *Get well soon, Curly,* he’d written. It had really pissed her off.

“It’s over it,” she said. “He was trying to be nice.”

She was over it? I couldn’t fucking believe it. The man was a douchebag.

I decided to tell her a story she’d never heard before.

The summer before my junior year, I worked for a mechanic in town to save money for college, because the Old Man had made it abundantly clear he damn sure wouldn’t pay for it. He was big into personal responsibility.

One Saturday morning I woke up with a hangover, and there he was beating on my door yelling, “Don’t you have to work today?”
I told him I was sick.

He forced the door open and barged in. He was paranoid about drugs. The old bastard came of age in the fifties, and had a fear of reefer-addled Bolsheviks lurking in public bathrooms—sheer idiocy, but that was why he invaded my room.

Hannah already knew about my father’s drug obsession because on the birth of our children he’d call with congratulations, then share parenting tips on how to avoid the horrors of addiction and overdose. That was all we’d hear from him for years at a time, which was great.

So yeah, he stuck a paper clip in the lock on my door, popped the button, and walked right in.

He caught one whiff of alcohol vapors and said, “Get your ass out of bed.” He made me go to work. But here’s the best part—as soon as I pulled out of the drive, he called in my plates to the cops and told them I was driving drunk.

That got Hannah’s attention. She turned back to me and brushed her bangs out of her eyes. I got excited, thinking sex was back on, but she told me she’d already heard that one, then rolled over again to face the wall.

No way was I going to lay there and be taunted by her. I climbed out of bed and groped around in the dark for my pants. I got dressed, and went downstairs to get a Tums.

In the living room, Old Yeller had died. Lisa and Marky were sobbing, and Jake was teasing them. “It’s just a movie, you crybabies. And besides, it was only a dog,” he said.

He’s a smart kid, going to college next year, which, by the way, I am helping to
Marky argued that Old Yeller was not “only a dog,” that he was exactly like Daisy. I told them all to go to bed. I had a headache.

Marky was right though. Daisy and Old Yeller were the same, but it wasn’t some cosmic coincidence; all dogs are the fucking same—deranged by loyalty.

In the kitchen I discovered that we were out of Tums, so I washed down some Pepto-Bismol instead, then took a few Ibuprofen for good measure. I leaned on the counter and thought about Hannah. I knew for sure that I had never told her that story. She was confusing it with another crazy thing my father did.

A couple of years after my mother died, the cops called us to ask for help. Hannah and I were newlyweds at the time, and Pops had become a public nuisance. The 911 dispatcher originally found the old man amusing, but he had started tying up emergency response networks.

After his morning bowl of Fiber One, Numb-nuts would cruise I-94 and call in to report reckless drivers: excessive speeders, center-line crossers distracted by a phone, women applying makeup, even a farmer in a tractor going below the posted minimum—no one was above the law. Hannah couldn’t understand it, but I did. The VFW didn’t open till noon, and Mom was gone, so he took to vigilantism.

The authorities had finally convinced the old loon to come in and file a formal complaint against someone or other, just so they could warn him to cease and desist. But he kept at it, so they called his next of kin—me.

You can imagine my anger. That motherfucker had ruined my life with his
personal responsibility bullshit.

I told the cops to crucify the lunatic.

Daisy was Hannah’s idea. “Let’s get him a dog,” she’d said. “He’s lonely.”

If I’d known it would turn out like this, I would have said, no way. But I didn’t know, so I said, okay. I made it clear, though, that we were not spending any money on the damn thing. We went to find one at the Humane Society. I didn’t know until it was too late, that we’d have to pay for shots and spaying.

Knowing that Hannah had conflated the stories, I strode back upstairs to inform her that she’d never heard the one about the hangover. Seriously, why would I tell Hannah that I’d gotten a DUI at sixteen? She’d never find out on her own—juvenile records are sealed. And I hadn’t even been legally drunk; it was only a stupid zero-tolerance law for minors that did me in.

My side of the bed was still warm when I crawled between the sheets. I leaned in to the curve of Hannah’s back and whispered, “You were thinking of the time the cops called us about my dad.”

She seemed not to understand what I was talking about. I might have woken her up, but this was important.

I told her that the vigilante crap started with me, and that was why I didn’t like him.

“Oh my God!” she said. “Let it go.” She sat up and looked at me. She blurted something about making up excuses and then said, “You screwed up tonight, plain and simple.”
I asked what she was talking about.

“Daisy!” she yelled.

I should probably tell you more about Daisy.

Hannah made me drive up to check on my old man a few months after we’d given him the little mongrel. I went alone. He was mowing the lawn when I got there, so I sat in the car, down the block a bit, and watched.

The old house had a big rectangular yard and Dad was on his John Deere rider going around and around the perimeter. It was the way he’d always done it, even back when he used a push mower. Daisy was following behind him, directly behind him, maybe ten feet back. It was the strangest thing. She trotted like an Arabian stallion, bouncing along on her short wiry legs, head held high. When the mower turned a corner, she turned the corner following precisely in the wheel tracks. When the mower stopped, she stopped. Dad spun in the seat and talked to her for a while—I couldn’t hear what he was saying, but it seemed like a serious conversation. Daisy sat and listened, ears pricked up, her head tilted slightly. He started mowing again and she fell back in line, ten feet behind.

It infuriated me. What the hell did he do to deserve her obedience and loyalty?

I left, and that was the last time I saw him alive. The old shit-wafer died a year later—a heart attack, ironically, while he was mowing. The Deere came to a halt at the base of the next-door-neighbor’s tree. It had run out of gas by the time the neighbor got home that evening, my father’s corpse still seated on it, Daisy still sitting patiently, ten feet back, ears pricked, head tilted. Hannah and the kids insisted we take her home with
us after the funeral.

It was all I inherited. The fucker left everything of value to the VFW.

Now Hannah was out of the bed, going on about the stupid mutt. “All the kids wanted was to have a memorial before you covered her up. Why couldn’t you do it?”

She turned the light on.

I don’t like being looked down on, plus, I’m more comfortable arguing in the dark, so I got up too, and turned the light off. “It was going to rain,” I said.

She turned the light back on, “No! It wasn’t.”

I decided to leave the light on if it would make her feel better about herself. The fact of the matter was that I’d seen lightning while I was digging the hole for Daisy. “I know what I saw,” I said.

Hannah turned the light off. I couldn’t fucking win. Her voice was getting louder. “She was a good dog.”

For twelve years, the kids grew up with Daisy.

“They were throwing dog biscuits all over the ground out there. We’d have had vermin all over,” I argued. “What if some coyote started digging around? What then?”

“She deserved better. The kids deserved better.”

“She hated me,” I said.

“Well, she loved your children. And they loved her,” she said. Her voice was wavering—things were getting emotional. “Daisy was a saint.”

Oh great, I thought, now she’s gonna bring up the miracles.

The goddamn miracles.
The first one happened one night when it was raining. I mean really pissing down, and I needed to run to work. The power had gone out, and the computers had to reboot. I jumped in the car, which was on the driveway because the garage door opener was broken. I started backing up to turn around and ran over what I thought was a big rock or something. Suddenly Daisy shot out from under the vehicle making a high-pitched squealy yelping sound. I could hear it over the rain.

What the hell was I supposed to do? She ran across the yard, half limping and dragging her head on the ground. I knew she was a goner, and I didn’t have time to go after her—I had to get to work to reboot the computers.

A couple hours later, I got back home and went in the house to explain to Hannah and the kids what had happened. That it had been an accident. It was still raining, but I felt bad about the whole deal, so I grabbed a coat and flashlight and headed out to search for her. She was gone. Nowhere to be found.

I went back inside, wringing wet, and broke the news that Daisy was probably dead. There was a general hysteria. I got no thanks for slogging through the cold and rain, risking pneumonia. No. All they cared about was that stupid dog.

Three days later, I arrived home in the evening, and there was Daisy, good as new, playing in the yard with the kids.

I really thought Hannah was going to bring that miracle shit up, but she didn’t. Relieved, I reminded her that Daisy used to growl at me when no one else was around.

“Oh, poor you,” Hannah said.

“I saved her life!” I said, incensed.
That was part of the second miracle.

It must have been on a weekend, the kids were outside, screaming. Jake burst through the back door hollering, “Dad! Dad! Hurry, Daisy’s getting killed.” He was about nine at the time.

I raced outside to see what was going on.

Thirty feet off the porch, a massive Irish Setter had Daisy’s limp body clamped in its jaws. It was shaking its head violently back and forth.

“Get inside!” I told the kids.

I ran to the garage, grabbed a shovel and took a whack at the monster. It howled in pain, dropped Daisy, and bolted. Thank God, it didn’t turn on me. I don’t know what I’d been thinking.

The whole family took an emergency trip to the vet’s. On the way, the kids raved about Daisy’s bravery. About how the giant dog, ten times Daisy’s size, walked into the backyard and she attacked it to protect them. Hannah agreed that Daisy was a hero. I stayed out of it.

The vet told me that Daisy was unlikely to last the night. He administered some antibiotics and sent us home. There was nothing else to do but wait and see. Against my better judgment, I allowed a temporary dog bed in the laundry room.

Unbelievably, Daisy made it through the night. The kids missed school the next day so that they could be with her. They hovered around her, but she didn’t move. They squirted milk into her mouth with a medicine dropper. I didn’t discourage them, even though I knew they were wasting their time—the vet had said as much.
The second day I made the kids go to school. Lisa had to go to the counselor’s office because she couldn’t stop crying. At home, Daisy hardly budged. She managed to lift her head for a drink, but ate nothing. When the kids got home from school, she perked up a bit. She started licking her wounds. They all went to bed that night hopeful. The next morning, on the third day, Daisy was on her feet scratching at the back door when I got up. I put her outside and she acted like nothing had happened.

Three days, twice.

Maybe I shoulda let the Setter finish Daisy off. Maybe then Hannah and I wouldn’t have been arguing.

Amazingly, Hannah didn’t bring up the second miracle either. Her strategy confused me, until she brushed her bangs out of her eyes again. She was playing coy. I stayed focused though, Hannah was not going to win this fight.

I told her that, despite my having saved her life, Daisy never respected me.

Then Hannah blurted out, “You’re worse than your father.”

I could feel myself losing it, and she backed off. She tried to hold my hand, but I pulled away. I can’t remember exactly what she said but it was something about the kids growing up and how did I want them to think of me.

I was fuming. “They love me,” I said. “Don’t tell me I’m a bad father.” I slammed the door as I walked out of the room. I went downstairs, sat on the sofa, and stared for a long while at the blank television screen, trying to calm down.

I wept too, you know, the first time I watched Old Yeller with Jake.

Eventually I trudged back upstairs. The whole affair had exhausted me.
Hannah was asleep, or maybe she was pretending, I don’t know. Seeing her so peaceful, and catching a whiff of her hair, overwhelmed me. I got worked up again. I couldn’t shake my disappointment.

Why was she treating me like the bad guy?

Why had that stupid little mongrel bitch liked everyone but me?

I decided to sleep on the couch.

But I couldn’t sleep on the couch. What’s next, I thought. Separation? It’s a slippery slope. Then it came to me in a flash of brilliance—the answer to the evening’s problems. I’d prove that I was nothing like my jack-wagon father.

I walked out into the night.

The burial site was undisturbed.

I put my flashlight in the crotch of a nearby tree so that I could see. Then I started digging. At the first sight of Daisy’s black and white corpse I got down on my knees and finished exhuming her with my hands. I carried her into the house.

The last few days of her life Daisy had lived in the kitchen by the backdoor. Of course, I’d had no say in the matter—Hannah made a unilateral decision. She put out a folded blanket for a bed and brought in Daisy’s food and water dishes. Every morning I picked Daisy up and moved her onto a clean blanket, so Hannah could wash the dirty one. Daisy was so far gone she couldn’t even stand up. She would have bit me if I’d picked her up under normal circumstances. Anyway, it didn’t take long before she died.

I brought her back in because I wanted a do-over.

I cleaned all the mud and clay off her fur, and settled her in the exact pose we
found her after she’d perished. It was all pretty easy to do, thanks to the rigor mortis.

Then tomorrow’s scene ran through my head:

We all wake up and write a communal poem about Daisy and how much we’ll miss her. We solemnly carry her outside as though she is royalty, and gently place her, wrapped in a blanket, into her beautifully re-excavated final resting place. The kids throw treats and toys in the hole so that Daisy will have them in her next life. We come back in, and I make bacon and eggs for breakfast. Afterwards, the kids watch *Old Yeller*, while Hannah and I go upstairs—for a nap, is what we tell the kids.

Perfect.

And now I gotta go get some sleep.
THE HOLE

Natalie Schmidt sat at the kitchen table, fidgeting with the sale agreement her husband had failed to sign prior to disappearing. It was a generous offer.

“Don’t worry Natalie, he’ll show up,” the Sheriff told her at the outset, but Jerry had been missing, without a trace, since Christmas. The authorities had exhausted the search for her husband around the local area.

Last month the Sheriff assured her that Jerry was probably holed up somewhere for the winter. “Sometimes men get strange ideas in their heads,” he’d said. “He’ll be back.”

Staring out at the gravel drive, Natalie sipped her morning coffee, dark and sugarless, wondering where the hell he’d gone. She wanted to rid herself of house and husband, and move on; but she needed his signature.

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A mile and a half away from the Schmidt’s kitchen, as the crow flies, Theresa and Maggie Williams played in their yard with an archery set that Theresa got for Christmas.

The sixth and final arrow in the quiver left the bow majestically. Five previous launch attempts having awkwardly fluttered and floundered, the sisters stared in awe as the fiberglass missile arced into the distance. Both girls idolized Katniss Everdeen. Theresa, nine, beamed in silent pride, while Maggie, six, yelped with delight, “Good shot Catnip!”

The girls had watched The Hunger Games, well half of it at least, on DVD the summer before. The viewing had been an error in judgment by their parents who’d had
no idea how graphically violent the story was. Their mother stopped the movie just as the “Games” were getting started, but Theresa and Maggie had already formed an allegiance with the Mockingjay by then.

“How far do ya think it went?” the smaller girl asked.

“Pretty far. Past the shed for sure,” Theresa said.

“Was that the last one? It’s my turn now!” Maggie danced from her assigned position behind Theresa and, leaping and squealing, grabbed at the bow in her sister’s hand.

“Okay, okay. First we gotta go get the arrows, Goofy.”

“Oh yeah … I’ll get the long one! Can I? Can I?” Maggie could not contain her glee, and she took off running before Theresa could answer.

The bigger girl looked after her sister for a moment, still amazed by the accomplishment of that last miracle shot, then walked toward the first of the arrows scattered nearby.

Warm weather the past few days had melted enough of the snow covering the family’s modest acreage that large patches of vibrant green burst into the late-March sunlight. Winter had been particularly long, cold, and snowy, and Theresa’s archery skills had gone untested until now. Smiling, she collected the five misfired arrows and returned them to their vinyl quiver.

She’d been waiting for this day since Christmas morning when, inspired by his firstborn’s infatuation with Katniss Everdeen, Theresa’s dad presented her with the beginner set. The girls’ mother, decidedly hesitant about the wisdom of the gift,
immediately laid out the ground rules for safe use, even though the metal-tipped arrows were not particularly sharp.

The list remained posted, on the refrigerator beneath school picture magnets:

1. Before shooting, make sure no one is standing in the area in front you.
2. Before shooting again, make sure no one is in front of you.
3. Do not aim at birds or other animals.
4. Under no circumstances can Maggie use the bow and arrow unattended.

“Maggie,” shouted Theresa to her distant sister. “Come on, Goofy.”

She’d lost sight of Maggie, but, thinking about the establishment of a record, Theresa decided to pace off the distance separating them. She lost count at sixty-three. As she came around the corner of the pole shed, Theresa saw Maggie standing quietly by the hole.

“How old are you?” Maggie asked someone that Theresa could not see.

The hole had been commissioned by their father two years earlier while the backhoe digging a new septic system was on hand. It was some twenty feet in diameter with steep sides cut twelve feet deep. He’d intended to fill it with the field debris left piled by previous owners along the tree line bordering their property, but had yet to find the time. Meanwhile, the hole filled with groundwater.

That hole worried his wife sick, and she forbade the girls to play anywhere near it.

Theresa rushed toward her sister’s side. “Maggie, get away from there!”

Maggie glanced around at Theresa and said, “Look! I found a caveman.”
Theresa grabbed her sister by the arm from behind.

“Look!” Maggie insisted.

A man grimaced up at them from inside the hole. One eye gashed and swollen shut, the other wide open. With an orange gloved hand he reached for little Maggie’s coat. Theresa screamed, and lifted her sister off her feet. Clutching Maggie to her chest, she gave the man a final sideways glance and sprinted toward their house away in the distance. Awkward in her high rubber boots, she sloshed across the waterlogged ground, stumbling through snowdrifts that remained in the yard. Running fast as her burning lungs and legs would allow, she never once looked back over her shoulder.

***

Jerry Schmidt, long before he found himself in the Williams’ hole, had been a marked man, though his natural disposition never allowed him to understand it. Jerry lived an unassuming life, stubbornly clinging to the two things he valued most: his marriage and his home. At his funeral, those who knew him best—his coworkers—would describe him, in no particular order, as quiet, hardworking, and generous. His wife Natalie considered him dull, gullible, and obstinate.

Jerry and Natalie had begun dating at fifteen and fourteen, respectively, and married right out of high school, with pregnancy being the catalyst. The baby, J.J. (Jerry Junior), died in childbirth, and Natalie knew forthwith that she had made a mistake in hitching her future to Jerry. He, however, remained optimistic after the loss, saying, “Well, we’ll just try again.” She covertly went on the pill and, two years later, began the first of several affairs that Jerry never discovered.
At Natalie’s insistence, after the miscarriage they moved far away from the town where they both grew up.

In their new hometown Jerry established a good reputation on a concrete crew. He was big and strong, and blessed with an eye for detail. He made good money, and even during the months when Natalie remained bed-ridden, consumed by grief, the couple managed to save. Once Natalie began working evenings at a steakhouse in a neighboring town, it wasn’t long before the Schmidts had enough for a down-payment on a little place in the country.

In his spare time, the industrious Jerry devoted himself to fixing up the old farmstead they’d bought. He re-shingled, re-sided, and replaced windows. He planted a variety of trees (blue spruce, oaks and maples) sporadically around the four acres included in the purchase, and converted a dilapidated corncrib into a shelter for a pair of poorly bred horses and a brood of free-range chickens.

This property, some five years after its acquisition, would become the wellspring of a conspiracy against Jerry Schmidt.

It was then, that a local banker had purchased the two hundred acres adjacent to the Schmidt’s little settlement. He’d taken the estate off the hands of a struggling farmer and his wife who, in their sixties, and given the economic climate, could no longer make a viable living on the land. The elderly couple jumped at the banker’s cash offer, and moved to town. Unfortunately, over the next handful of years, they would lose the entire sum of the sale to the gambling consortium that owned a riverboat casino fifty miles to the east.
The banker immediately invested himself in transforming his windfall into a subdivision, complete with a communal well and a rather impressive artificially excavated lake. He partitioned off six ten acre lots which he sold to various reputable and wealthy connections, who, in turn, helped develop the defunct farm into a series of shiny sprawling mansions. The gravel road affronting the development got paved following a weighty petition from the new residents (and sizeable donations to each of the County Supervisor’s reelection campaigns).

Naturally, Jerry Schmidt had been ecstatic when the asphalt went down in front of his property, and as the subdivision progressed, Jerry went amiably about life on his little patch of heaven. The new neighbors, though, considered the Schmidt’s house an eyesore in its simplicity. They scorned a lawn left under the care of grazing horses, and a furor arose over the backwoods aura of the Schmidt’s outbuilding and chickens. The banker made several offers to buy the Schmidts out, and Natalie—amid visions of a lucrative divorce and a new life—pushed for a deal. Her husband, though, was not inclined to sell the acreage into which he had invested so much sweat equity.

Such were the foundational circumstances of the plot against Jerry Schmidt although it cannot be denied that a love of beer might ultimately be cited as the vehicle of his demise.

***

Theresa and Maggie’s mother, Catherine, a slender, high-strung woman, had heard the girl’s ruckus from the kitchen. She was standing on the porch in stockinged feet
when Theresa emerged from behind the detached garage carrying her sister.

   Out of breath, Theresa set the smaller girl on the porch and pointed, wild-eyed, back toward the hole, trying to describe what she’d witnessed. Catherine picked up Maggie—still babbling about a caveman—and desperately ushered Theresa into the house. She understood from the older girl’s ranting, that her daughters were being followed. She locked the door behind them, grabbed her phone, and took the girls upstairs to hide behind another locked door.

   The panicked woman dialed 911 and, in a wavering voice, whispered, “Someone is after my daughters.” Then, in a flash of terror, she realized that the front door was unlocked, and the room they hid in did not offer a view in the direction from which the man would approach. Weighing her options, she decided to stay put.

   Stroking Maggie’s curly blonde hair, Catherine responded almost inaudibly to a barrage of questions: “Where are you? Are you alone? How old are your girls? Where does your husband work? What’s his phone number?”

   She couldn’t focus on the questions.

   She hung up the phone to listen for sounds of an intruder in her home.

   Rocking gently back and forth, she absently shushed Maggie who insisted that the caveman was friendly.

   “Theresa,” Catherine whispered. “Come sit with us.”

   Holding her breath, Theresa followed the instruction, and for many long minutes the three of them sat huddled in the farthest corner of the room, motionless.

   Then a male voice echoed from downstairs, “Mrs. Williams? Are you okay?”
Dread consuming her, Catherine could not respond.

Theresa tiptoed to the window and saw the sheriff’s vehicle parked in the drive below. She said to her mother in a hushed tone, “I think it’s the cops.”

“Mrs. Williams, this is Deputy Johnson … Are you okay?”

Theresa walked to the bedroom door and unlocked it.

***

Considering his history of alcohol-related incidents, it is somewhat ironic that Jerry Schmidt was completely sober when he stumbled upon the Williams’s hole.

His first DUI, acquired one evening on the way home from a few beers after work, happened around the time that the banker and others were moving into their new homes. It coincided with the initial rumblings of negativity regarding the Schmidt establishment. Jerry served two days in jail, lost his license for six months, paid the fine, went to a mandatory drinking and driving class without complaint, and took to riding his bike the three miles into town for work. Thankful in the end that he hadn’t hurt anyone, he vowed to never again drive under the influence.

One might, in retrospect, imagine Jerry’s second offense suspicious given the antagonistic attitude of his powerful neighbors. Jerry, though, in his placid ignorance, suspected nothing. Shortly after his license had been reinstated, Jerry was riding his horse along the shoulder of the road, not a quarter of a mile from his house, when a Sherriff’s deputy waylaid him. Jerry had drunk his fair share of beer, but it was late on a Sunday afternoon, and he had not considered that riding a horse in his happy condition might get him a second DUI. He blew above the legal limit. However, the County prosecutor
refused to seek the Court’s opinion on whether a horse was, or was not, a vehicle, so instead of DUI, Jerry was charged with, and convicted of, public intoxication. His license once again revoked, and with the calendar soon to turn to November, he got back on his bike. He knew it would only be a month or two till he got laid off for the winter—frozen ground and sub-zero temperatures made concrete work uneconomical.

At that time the local newspaper took an unexpected interest in Jerry. They reported the drunken horse-riding incident as a repeat offense, citing the prior DUI as evidence. The editor openly mocked Jerry for his stupidity, suggesting that perhaps he should leave town to salvage some self-respect. The banker—being an avid supporter of the free press—on the afternoon that this editorial appeared, dropped a five-hundred dollar donation off at the front desk of the paper’s office.

Jerry paid no mind to the ridicule.

Then came the accident.

The weather remained mild, and Jerry remained working and cycling until, on his way home on the evening of December eighth, he crashed into a car door which opened suddenly in front of him as he pedaled down Main Street. He flew ten feet through the air, and fractured, among other things, his skull.

The newspaper headline read: “Local man with record of drunken felonies injured in bicycle accident.”

Surgery was not required, but Jerry spent ten days in the hospital under the care of a doctor who lived in the banker’s subdivision.

In a narcotic-induced haze, Jerry was next released into the care of Natalie who,
on their way home, stopped first at the pharmacy to fill a prescription for powerful opioid
painkillers, and then at the bank to pick up the paperwork to sell the house.

The contingency which she and the banker and the doctor, failed to account for,
was Jerry’s mild loss of memory; sufficient to cause confusion and paranoia.

Natalie insisted that Jerry take the pills and sign the forms, which led him to
believe that she may not be his actual wife, and that whoever she might be, she was
trying to poison him. He refused to swallow a single painkiller, and the line on the sale
paperwork directly below the name Jerry R. Schmidt remained blank.

Delusions festered in Jerry’s unbalanced mind for days before he settled on a
plan, and began watching the weather forecasts. On Christmas Eve, he stayed up
watching T.V. until Natalie fell asleep in her recliner; then he took up a backpack
prepared beforehand (and hidden in the basement) and walked out the backdoor into the
winter’s first blizzard.

Jerry slogged through stubbled cornfields in arctic conditions for almost two
hours in anticipation of finding the highway which ran a mile south of his home. In the
blinding snow and brutal cold though, Jerry became disoriented. His mind had begun to
play death knell tricks on him by the time he caught a glimpse of the Williams’s yard
light through squinting eyes. The halo, shining as a beacon, awoke in him an
overwhelming desire to seek shelter—he was a mere mile and a half from the couch on
which he’d sat immediately prior to embarking on his ill-advised journey.

He fell into the hole just as he began allowing himself to envision the warmth of
the home, the outline of which, by then, he could just make out. Pitching forward, he fell
four feet, face-first, through a thin veneer of ice. His eye gashed open, and he thrashed around in the freezing muddy water, trying desperately to climb the slippery bank out of the hole. Eleven minutes later, with one gloved hand still raised in hope, he surrendered to hypothermia. The heavy snow, which fell unabated throughout the night, and which did not melt until the day before the sisters went out with their bow and arrows, covered him, and his tracks, and kept him out of sight for almost three months.

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Theresa and Maggie’s father, Mike Williams, arrived home as a trio of deputies approached the hole—hands hovering over their firearms. He witnessed the body submerged from the chest down in murky ice. The man stared up pathetically, his mouth ajar, purple lips accentuated his sallow complexion. Strands of scraggly hair clung to his filthy face, and one hand reached out of his wintry grave.

The orange glove was the object which had first attracted Maggie’s attention.

The officers discussed options for removing the corpse from the frozen hole. They settled on hiring a concrete contractor—the same one for whom Jerry had worked—to bring insulated blankets and a heavy duty propane heater to thaw the ice.

All agreed on the identity of the man. Though disfigured by the circumstances of his death, it was undoubtedly Jerry Schmidt, the subject of a missing person report filed on Christmas day.

Given Schmidt’s reputation as an imaginative and irresponsible drunkard, it had been speculated by most in town that he would eventually show up somewhere down south trying to live under an alias.
The next day, against their mother’s wishes, Theresa and Maggie stood at a bedroom window with a view, and watched as a big yellow backhoe hoisted the man out of the hole. Theresa daydreamed about an arrow piercing a frozen eyeball, while Maggie cried over her prehistoric friend.
I’m not really a writer. I’m a graduate assistant in the sociology department of a state university, and even if I was a writer, I could hardly claim any creative credit for this story. I recorded it when I interviewed this guy outside a diner, and then afterwards chatted with a waitress he’d been talking to. I didn’t know I’d uncovered a story until the man had been talking for a while, and even now I’m not sure exactly what to make of it. It’s actually pretty miraculous that I captured everything like I did. It was only because it was chilly that day that I even had my tape recorder with me.

I’ve done my best to transcribe the conversations from the recordings, but the grammar may not be quite up to scratch. Like I said, I’m a sociology student.

The professor I assist sends me out to small towns within twenty miles of campus to survey people about their dining habits. You know, questions like: How many times a week do you eat out? How do you choose the restaurant? Do you come here to socialize?

Last week I was standing around outside a locally owned diner, looking for potential participants. I’d already recorded several anonymous responses, and was getting ready to leave town. I looked through the glass doors and the diner appeared to be empty, so I threw on my backpack. Right then, a well-dressed middle-aged man walked by me, and entered the establishment. It was about two-thirty and I didn’t need to be back at the university until four, so I decided to wait around to interview the guy when he exited. Getting back early would only lead to some monotonous task designed to kill time, and besides, I had some reading to catch up on.

The man was in the place for over half an hour, but when he came out he agreed
to take the survey.

Like I mentioned earlier, when the weather is cold, I record survey responses on a small device. The reason is to avoid aggravating the tendonitis that sometimes flares up in my right elbow. My friends say I’m lazy, but I think it paid off in a really big way this time.

Here’s what happened.

First question: “How many times per week, on average, do you eat out?”

“Never,” he said. “However, on the occasion of having just left my divorce proceedings, I decided, on the spur of the moment, to go in.”

“So it was only to satisfy your appetite?” I asked.

“No, I wasn’t particularly hungry,” he replied.

His answer surprised me, and I completely forgot about the scripted survey questions.

“Did you eat anything?” I asked.

“I had a cup of coffee, though I didn’t drink it all.”

“But you were in there for a long time,” I said.

“Yes, I was engaged in an invigorating tête-à-tête with the waitress.”

Just so you know, this man used a lot of weird phrases like tête-à-tête, and because of his weirdness I continued asking questions that weren’t officially part of the survey. It felt strange, but his responses were voluntary and anonymous.

“Do you mind me asking what you talked with the waitress about?”

“Not at all,” he said. Then he just stood there and looked at me.
After an awkward pause, I asked him again, “What did you and the waitress talk about?”

“It began rather uncomfortably,” he said. “She approached, smiling, as one would expect, and inquired as to whether I was prepared to order. I responded that I do not typically like to eat at diners, as I prefer to fix my own meals. Well, it struck me immediately as an uncommon thing to say, sitting as I was, in a diner booth. The waitress fidgeted for a while with her order tablet, before saying, okay, with something of a nervous demeanor. I thoroughly regretted saying what I had. She seemed so very nice—the waitress, that is.”

Now I need to clear something up here. This man had a habit of randomly clarifying who he was talking about, even though in my opinion it was pretty clear. I certainly didn’t have a problem following his story. Seriously, he was a strange dude, and after a while his habits got annoying, so I’ve decided to leave out all the unnecessary clarifications. Also, this guy hardly stopped talking the whole time I was with him, except when I asked a question, and a couple of times when he expected me to respond to a question of his. But this time where I have interrupted his dialogue, he did not actually stop talking—it just seems like it because I wanted to discuss his eccentric habits. So now, I’ll go back to him talking.

“Of course, I know waitresses have to be nice, that’s how they get tips, but she was different. Her eyes were startling . . . yes, it was her eyes. Piercing, and inquisitive. A countenance so innocent as to disarm. So I attempted to make amends. I perused a menu and informed her that, though I did not really have an appetite, I would take a cup of
coffee.

“She asked if I wanted cream or sugar. ‘No. Just black,’ I answered. When she
turned to go fill my order, and as I folded the menu, the price of a cup of coffee caught
my attention. I called her back and remarked that one-seventy-five seemed awfully high.
I then asked if this price included free refills. Yeah, she said. The simplicity in her
directness impressed me, yet it was not precisely clear if she had meant, ‘yeah, that is
high for a cup of coffee,’ or, ‘yeah, she would refill my cup as necessary.’ I therefore
sought clarification and found that she had intended to convey that the price included
refills. I then confirmed my order.

“She made to walk away again, but this time before turning she asked if I was
feeling alright. She mentioned that I looked ‘sad,’ but I adjudged that she intended
something far deeper. There seemed to be a connection between us.”

Another interruption, sorry. I hope this will be the last.

When the man had finally finished talking and left me alone, I interviewed the
waitress. His story had been so unusual that I wanted to verify it with her. I hoped the
woman wouldn’t mind taking a few minutes to confirm what the guy had told me he’d
told her. She started off pretty irritable, but then she came around. She agreed to tell me
her version of the story, anonymously of course.

I’m weaving her responses in with the guy’s, to give some extra context. Her
responses are also transcribed, just as they were recorded. I’ll use asterisks to mark the
transitions between the man and the waitress.
He looked lost. Yeah, lost. I mean sad and lonely like. Ya know? He was super polite and all. He didn’t want anything but a cup of coffee. Said he wasn’t hungry. It was like he was full on sadness, or something. That sounds corny but it’s true. Then he asked about refills cuz he thought the price was too high. I told him of course I’d get him refills. I felt kinda sorry for the dude.

“So I got his coffee and on the way back I started wondering about him. In my profession small talk never hurts, so I asked him ‘why the long face?’ ‘I just got divorced,’ he said.

“I mean, what could I say to that? I smiled sympathetically and didn’t say anything. Just gave him his coffee, but damn, he looked so down in the dumps. Call me crazy, but I was thinking that what if I saw on the news tonight that he’d committed suicide. Seriously? I couldn’t live with myself. I had to try and lift his spirits. It was a quiet afternoon, and I already had my preps done for the supper shift, so I plunked down across from him in the booth. Besides my feet hurt so sitting down helped.”

“Her concern really touched me. I am quite sure she had obligations, yet she sat down when I told her that my divorce had just been finalized. Like in her very core she understood me. Like she felt the burden that I carried. I thought she might cry, such was her concern. A spiritual connection is the way I would describe it.”

“I was trying to be positive. He was kind of a downer, ya know? I don’t recall
saying anything, but maybe I said, ‘that’s too bad,’ or something like that. Boy, was that a mistake cuz he started to cry. It was pretty embarrassing for both of us, I’m sure. To be honest, he sorta freaked me out. But Jesus, I couldn’t just get up and leave, the dude was crying, and so the next thing I asked him how he met his wife.

“Why that question? I don’t know. I told ya, I was tryin’ to lift his spirits. It just kinda fell out of my mouth, really. I mean, he caught me by surprise with the crying, right? ‘It’s a long story,’ he said. Then I said, ‘that’s okay.’ I could kick myself now.”

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“She inquired as to how I came to meet my wife. This waitress, akin to a saint, displayed an astonishing enthusiasm for easing suffering. A soul healer is how I envisioned her in that moment. There was such care in her face. I asked if I could buy her a cup of coffee. ‘No, that’s okay,’ she said, ‘I get it for free.’ Then she got up from our table.

“I wondered if I had somehow upset her.

“She walked over and talked to the cook for a minute, then poured herself a cup of coffee. I was determined not to watch her, but my head turned involuntarily. I noticed that she takes it black like me, although, actually I really don’t care for coffee. I never drink it, but I had to order something, and then I did not want to waste cream and sugar in a cup of coffee that I was not likely to finish anyway.

“After filling her cup, which was significantly larger than mine, and which I therefore assumed belonged to her personally, she returned to our table. I was relieved that I had not upset her.”
“I asked him to hold on a sec and I went and got myself a coffee. I told Tom I was gonna sit down for a minute. People think he’s only the cook but he also owns the place so I hadta get his permission, ya know? He could see the place was empty and said, okay. Then I went back with my coffee and sat across from the guy again. I was still worried about the suicide, right?”

“By the time she returned I had decided that I should accommodate her inquiry concerning how I met my wife. Of course, I cannot remember exactly word for word how it was conveyed but I will do my best to reconstruct the substance of the account I shared with her. Will that suffice?”

This was one of the times he stopped to look at me. Apparently, he was waiting for me to give the okay that the story wasn’t going to be word for word. To be honest, I was already getting tired of his voice, but I said, okay. Then he continued.

“I was in the trunk of an Olds Eighty-Eight. I had just regained consciousness; the crash must have knocked me out. I opened my eyes and everything was pitch black. At that time I did not know I was in the trunk of a vehicle, and I also did not realize that there had been an accident. I mean, I knew I was in the trunk, but I could not remember at that exact moment. It did not help that I was intoxicated.

“A violent jerking awoke me. I was utterly disoriented. My now ex-wife later told me that the jerking which roused me must have been the tow truck pulling the car out of the ditch. Of course I did not know any of that. All I knew was that the darkness
prohibited me from seeing anything and my arms were pinned tightly by my sides. Claustrophobia set in. Panicked, I began to scream while kicking my legs as hard as I could. That is when I remembered I was in the trunk. I had entered it of my own volition in effort to impress a lady friend.

“A senior in college at the time, I had attended a party. Not that I typically partied, but there was a young woman in one of my seminars and I had fallen for her considerable charms. She invited me to the affair and I went, because, well, she had invited me.

“We both drank too much beer, and before I knew it we were together in an otherwise unoccupied bedroom. We were kissing, and then she took her shirt off. Overcome with shock I told her that we must cease and desist, as I did not believe in sex before marriage. She asked, ‘Are you a virgin?’ I informed her that of course I was. She began laughing convulsively, then stumbled out into the hall and yelled at the top of her lungs, ‘He’s a virgin.’

“I showed a willingness to forgive her outburst, but she shouted it again.

“Then I struck upon a plan to prove that I was an interesting person.

“On our way up to the bedroom I’d overheard two guys talking about taking their car for a spin. This party was at a house out in the country, and the gravel roads were slick due to a buildup of snow and ice, so these fellows were going to drive up and down the road and ‘do doughnuts’ at each end. I told the yelling girl, ‘watch this,’ then I marched downstairs and found the two guys. I asked if I could join them, but they did not remember what they had been discussing. I reminded them that they were considering a
drive to do doughnuts. Then they said, ‘Oh yeah, let’s do it!’ They started for the door
and I followed, adding that I would like to experience their three-hundred and sixty
degree shenanigans from inside the trunk, to prove to the woman (still laughing) that I
was not a square. They agreed to include me.

“Because the spare tire had not been correctly re-installed after its most recent
use, it took some effort to make myself comfortable. Eventually, though, I was settled
and one of the guys closed the trunk. Then, spinning his wheels, the driver took off.

“My new acquaintances stopped the vehicle and switched places on every back-
and-forth lap of the gravel road. I could hear them conversing during these exchanges.
After a few laps I became nauseated and eager to disembark. I attempted to gain their
attention, but like me, they were both inebriated, and they seemed to have forgotten that I
had accompanied them.

“My now ex-wife, told me afterwards that the car rolled three times before
settling in the ditch. So it was that I became entombed. Then I heard voices, so I kicked
and screamed like a man possessed until someone outside the vehicle counselled me to
chill out. I quit my flailing, and apologized for the racket. Eventually the trunk opened,
and there stood the woman who would become my future ex-wife. My knight in
reflective EMS clothing is what I called her at that moment.

“The back half of the Oldsmobile had caved in—she’d had to employ the Jaws-
of-Life to pry it open. The remainder of the vehicle was equally damaged, but, like me,
my two compadres miraculously escaped serious injury. Both were thrown from the
vehicle into a snow bank. At the moment I emerged from the trunk the police were
attempting to ascertain which of the two had been driving.

“I did not tell the authorities that both young men had been operating while intoxicated—I’m no snitch.

“Of course, my now ex-wife asked me how I happened to be in the trunk and I told her the story. She called me a ‘fucking idiot,’ but her tone appeared flirtatious, so I asked if she wanted to go on a date sometime. A year later, while I was in Law School, we wed.”

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“The guy went on and on, something about being in a trunk and the car crashed and his wife saved him. His voice was kinda soothing though, so I didn’t stop him. Deep, like Darth Vader. No, not like Darth Vader, more like that guy who does the ‘Beef, it’s what’s fer dinner’ commercials, except without the drawl. Ya know?

“It took me a second to realize he had finished the story cuz I was kinda zoned out. He asked if I was okay. I didn’t say anything cuz I didn’t want to encourage him, but then I felt guilty and I might have said something about his story being ‘romantic.’ But it was only embarrassment that caused me to say it because, really, climbing into the trunk of a vehicle is pretty stupid, especially if the driver is drunk, which is what I think he said.”

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“That is so romantic,’ she said, when I had finished telling my story. Her response exceeded even the lofty expectations established by my elevated assessment of her character. Her flattery reminded me of my now ex-wife’s daring flirtatiousness. It
was a very touching moment, and, to be honest, for a brief second I envisioned applying for an annulment. I am aware that they take a long time and involve enormous documentation, but I would be lying if I said I did not wonder about the possibility, in that instant.”

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“He just kept smiling at me . . . he was fairly good looking for his age, so between that and the hypnotic voice I could see where an EMS might fall for him. Anyways, I was tired, and my mind was wandering, and . . . shit! I didn’t know what to do. It was one of those moments as a waitress when you feel like you’re sorta begging for a tip or something, and that just made me feel even guiltier because I still felt a little bit guilty about zoning out. So I asked him why they got divorced. I coulda predicted he’d say ‘it’s a long story,’ but ya know what, it never hurts to rest one’s feet in this business, and at least he didn’t start crying again.

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“I could not believe it. She asked me to explain how my ex-wife and I came to get a divorce. I thought that I had probably droned on too long with the story of how we met, but apparently not. This uncommon woman’s compassion and empathy knew no bounds. I entertained her intrigue. Again though, I cannot guarantee that what I am about to relate is a verbatim account. I assume that will be acceptable?”

And, once again, he looked to me for an okay. I gave him a thumb’s up. I was just beginning to sense that a story was unfolding, and hoped that my tape recorder was still working.
He continued, “I explained to her that the divorce materialized following my then-
wife’s unprecedented departure, after what I perceived to be a minor incident. I later
assumed it would be a one-night separation, though even that would have been surprising
and painful. It came to pass that I did not see her again until the proceedings which took
place today, immediately before I happened into the diner.

“The incendiary incident began when I came home from work one evening and
gave my now ex-wife, a customary kiss on the cheek. She was crying, and I inquired as to
the problem. She informed me that she missed our daughter, whom we had just helped
move to New York City to attend NYU. My now ex-wife and I drove her out to the Big
Apple with her collection of belongings. We had returned home only the day before to an
empty nest.

“I explained to my now ex-wife that I missed our daughter too. She asked if I had
called her that day. I replied that I had, and that she seemed to be having an excellent first
day of classes. I suggested that we focus on the bright side—we had the house to
ourselves. I then attempted, with a deliberately mischievous wink, to embrace her. She
shrugged off my advance.

“In effort to change the subject, I told her that two old friends from Law School,
Mark Kirkeby and Terry Frost, had visited my office for lunch that day, unannounced.
Their decision baffled me. What if I had gone out for lunch, or taken the day off? They
would have wasted the trip. My now ex-wife had never liked those particular friends, and
so it didn’t work well as a distraction, although it did cause her to say, ‘you never miss
work and you always sit at your desk and eat a sack lunch.’ I did not want to argue, so I
took a different diversionary tack.

“I attempted to initiate a conversation about a letter to the editor I was drafting for the local newspaper. It concerned a professional football player who refused to stand for the National Anthem. Being a lawyer, such news stories interest me, and listening to alleged patriots railing against this player really ‘ruffled my feathers,’ so to speak.

“I went to my briefcase to retrieve the draft so that I could read it to her, but she stopped me before I could start. She said she already knew about it because it was all I talked about on the way home from New York. I told her that I had made some changes to the document, and would like to get her opinion. Suddenly, and without provocation, she lost her composure. She exclaimed loudly, ‘I can’t do this any longer.’

“As you might imagine, I assumed the outburst to concern her missing our daughter, so I reconfirmed that I missed her too, and that I was supremely confident she would be just fine in New York City. That is when my now ex-wife informed me that, ‘It’s not about her. It’s about us.’

“It took me a moment to comprehend that she conceived of a problem existing between us. I pride myself on being a good husband: reliable; an ample provider; and, despite my lack of experience prior to our marriage, an attentive and effectual lover.

“She was not finished, though, and continued on, ‘I can’t listen to another one of your editorials, or political statements, or social commentaries.’ This was news to me. It is true that I author a lot of opinion pieces, but she has never before mentioned an aversion to them. I informed her of as much. ‘Are you fucking kidding me?’ she asked. She told me ‘that she hadn’t listened to my bullshit in ten years.’ She employed those
precise terms. I suggested that she calm down, which is when she slapped me.

“Her coarse language, and the slap, shocked me. I can say, without shame, that her sentiments hurt my feelings. I expressed forgiveness, though. Imagine my surprise when she grabbed a suitcase from the closet and started packing.

“I sought to reason with her. I reminded her that our daughter needed us. That we were a family, and that we belonged together. She only laughed, rather maniacally I might add, as she kept shoveling clothes into the suitcase. It was an oversized model, so the process took quite some time, and all the while, I pleaded with her to regain some modicum of sanity.

“When the suitcase was full, she went to the bathroom with her overnight bag. I made to follow her, but she slammed the door in my face. Being a patient and reasonable man, I continued my efforts to console her, from without. I trusted that she would calm down—and she did. She seemed eerily calm as she strolled out the backdoor, and loaded the suitcase into our Toyota Prius. I could not watch any longer. I sat down at the kitchen table, and took up reviewing my letter to the editor.

“When I got home from work the next day I found that she had collected the remainder of her apparel and footwear, along with a number of her favorite furnishings. She did not contact me again. She refused even speak to me this morning, as our divorce was being finalized.”

The man took a long breath at this point, and brushed away a tear. He appeared to be done with the story.

“Wait. What happened next?” I said.
“Well,” he said, “Having finished my account I again looked to the waitress for her reaction. It was then that I noticed she was resting her forehead on the table, undoubtedly overcome with anguish. I would have welcomed her condolences, yet I could not bear to disturb her further. The weight of my tale apparently strained the physical limits of her ability to bear her own empathy. I only hoped that she was not judging my ex-wife too harshly, because even after all the pain she has caused, I believe her to be a good woman at heart.

“I crept from my seat, so as not to alarm the angel, and paid my bill with the cook. I then returned to our booth and left a tip, in excess of thirty percent, before exiting the diner. I would not normally tip at such a high rate, but she had been so attentive and supportive that I felt it appropriate.”

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“I must have dozed off. One minute he was yakkin’ about some football player. The next, Tom was shaking my shoulder to wake me up. The guy had left already. There was fifty-three cents on the table, two quarters and three pennies. ‘Must be your tip,’ Tom said. Can you fucking believe it? Fifty-three goddamn cents for listening to all that crap!’

She didn’t say anything else, so I left her to her work, and started back to campus.

I had asked the man one final question before we finished our conversation, “Do you plan on seeing her again?”

He seemed pretty confused by the question “The waitress, or my ex-wife?” he asked.

“The waitress.”
“Oh! Well no, I shouldn’t imagine so. As I have already mentioned, I prefer not to eat at diners.”

Then he told me, “Good day,” and walked away.
SHAKING HANDS

Frank finished looking over the letter, and signed it. He always proofed printed work. His eyes played tricks when reading things from a computer screen; one typo or another always escaped his attention.

It wasn’t easy to step down after so many seasons, teams, players, but it was for the best.

The resignation was a preemptive strike really, a means of saving himself the humiliation of being shown the door. He had not apologized, the problem is not that I refused to shake hands, but rather that I have shaken too many undeserving hands over the years. He’d drawn a line in the sand, and he was proud of it, even if it meant he could no longer coach.

He folded the letter, stuffed it in an envelope, and addressed it to the Director of the Park and Rec department. His assuredness faltered, though, as he considered his next task—he needed to apologize to Eddie. Eddie, his only child, who, for fourteen years, had provided Frank an endless supply of memories, all vying for the title of “proudest moment ever.” Frank recalled the boy’s fifth birthday party, when Eddie had insisted on giving his gifts away to his friends as they headed home because he didn’t want them to feel left out.

Back facing his laptop, Frank’s hands hovered over the keyboard. He wasn’t going to apologize in writing, which would be ridiculously insensitive, he was just trying to untangle his thoughts. When his sentiments were discernible, and in order, then he would know what to say to his son.
He stared at the screen: I’m sorry. That’s all he had. He couldn’t seem to corner the fragments of ideas rolling around inside his head. The blinking cursor reminded him that it was waiting for more, but no words came out. He deleted, I’m sorry, and started over: Please forgive me. Blink, blink, blink. I’m sorry. Frank closed the computer and grabbed his car keys.

“I’m gonna run into town,” he said, loud enough for his voice to carry upstairs. It was Saturday afternoon, his wife, Linda, was relaxing with a book, and Eddie was watching a movie in his room.

“Okay,” Linda called down.

It was Frank’s auto-response to writer’s block. A throwback to his days in college when he regularly drove to the store to buy chips or a candy bar, just to clear his mind and refocus while writing a paper.

He took the letter with him.

The drive to the post office took Frank past the diner where he and Eddie ate breakfast that morning. Eddie had been a referee for a month, but today would be his first time as head ref. Frank couldn’t have been happier; it was his team’s game, and he’d be there for support. Over pancakes, Eddie talked non-stop about his love of soccer, and how he’d eventually work his way up to officiating high school, and maybe even college matches. The money would get him through college. Maybe one day he might even become a professional referee.

“Why not,” Frank encouraged him. “Somebody’s gotta do it.”

There was such an air of excitement.
Eddie checked that he had all his supplies: notepad, pencil, whistle, pocket-rulebook, and his red and yellow cards—even though he knew these wouldn’t be necessary in an under-ten game. Frank quizzed his son on the rules to help alleviate the boy’s anxiety, and Eddie made Frank swear that they’d act as professionals during the game, not as father and son.

Frank mailed his resignation, then decided to take a drive over to the soccer field.

Parking in the empty lot, he revisited the morning’s events. He’d arrived the same as always, smiling, encouraging his player’s to have fun, and trying to temper their expectations of a win. They never won. His team hadn’t scored a goal in almost two full seasons.

The problem was that this town didn’t take soccer seriously. Most of the athletic kids were playing something else, and Frank was left to coach a co-ed team because there weren’t enough boys, or girls, signed up to make a team on their own. They were the only co-ed team in the region, and, according to the rules, had to play in a boy’s league.

Other teams in the league took games very seriously, so Frank’s kids were always getting slaughtered, and occasionally, they’d run into a maniac opponent bent on humiliation.

That’s what had happened that morning.

Frank was already upset before the kid kicked the ball into Emma. He’d lost track of the score, it was so lopsided, and a couple of his players had complained that the other team was making fun of them and calling them names. With every unnecessary, pile-on goal, Frank looked up the sideline at the other team’s coach and shrugged, as if to ask,
Why? The other man laughed at him each time, and shrugged back, as if to say, What can I do? My kids like to score goals.

Frank couldn’t understand why anyone would want to annihilate the will of his eight and nine-year-old players.

Emma’s incident happened late in the game.

The boy on the white team intentionally kicked the ball into her. The poor girl was looking around, confused, and never even saw it coming. Point-blank, right in the stomach. She collapsed, and Frank ran out to assist her. The other coach yelled out, “Nice shot!” Eddie was frantically waving for help. Emma was winded, and flailing.

When Frank arrived on the scene, Emma clawed frantically at his arm. He was trying to get her to relax and take a slow breath, when he heard, “She plays like a girl,” rise from a nearby huddle of white team players. Eddie seemed not to hear it; or maybe he simply took it as a statement of fact.

Frank just wasn’t conditioned for this sort of blood-letting.

It was his ninth year volunteering for Park and Rec. His tenure began when he enrolled Eddie in peewee soccer. The coach had left town suddenly and the program was in jeopardy of being cancelled. Frank had put his hand up. He played soccer years ago as an army brat in Europe—he could coach. All the other parents okayed it, and Frank started right then. He moved up the ranks with Eddie. He coached Eddie’s under-eight team, and then his under-ten team. That’s where the town’s soccer program ended. Eddie switched to basketball, but Frank kept coaching the under-tens.

“Take a nice long breath,” he told Emma, reassuringly.
She craned her neck, and gasped, and that would have been the end of things, except the other coach ran onto the field.

“That’s a penalty!” he shouted. “That kid handled the ball before the whistle blew!” He rushed toward Eddie, pointing at Bryce.

Bryce, Frank’s smallest player, had the game ball tucked under his arm.

Eddie looked in that direction, blew his whistle, and yelled, “Penalty kick.”

“What?” Frank was stunned.

“It’s a penalty,” bellowed his opponent. “Teach your kids the rules. The ball is not dead until the whistle blows.”

Eddie retrieved the ball and put it on the penalty spot.

Frank moved in front of the ball, arms folded in protest. Then Emma’s grandmother walked onto the field and scolded the white team’s coach, “You oughta be ashamed of yourself.” She informed Frank that she was taking Emma home, and that she’d see him at practice on Tuesday. White Coach jeered them as they left the field, “If you can’t stand the heat, get outta the kitchen.”

Frank maintained his blockade.

Eddie asked him to move.

“No!” Frank said. “The game is supposed to be fun.”

White Coach grunted.

Frank asked what the score was.

Eddie looked in his notepad. “White eleven, red zero.” Then he whispered to Frank that the goals had happened so fast he might have missed one.
White Coach must have overheard—he laughed heartily, and caused Eddie to blush.

Frank turned to the spectator sideline and yelled, “The score is at least eleven to nothing. It could be worse, they’ve scored so many goals that the ref thinks he might have forgotten to record one. White coach is demanding a penalty because Bryce picked up the ball when Emma got hurt.”

Some people shouted back at him, to get out of the way and let the kids play.

Eddie pulled the yellow plastic card from his shirt pocket, and held it high in the air in front of Frank. “I’m sorry, Red Coach, but I have to book you for delay of game.”

Frank defiantly put his foot on the ball.

Eddie looked at his watch, and blew his whistle. Mercifully, the game was over and Frank walked off the field, while White Coach told Eddie that he expected to get the penalty shot. Eddie looked it up in his rulebook and didn’t argue with the request. The white team scored another goal.

From the sideline Frank yelled, “Don’t forget to record that one!”

Looking back on the affair, Frank was embarrassed. If he’d witnessed anyone mocking a referee like he had, especially a young referee, he would have been the first to file a complaint with the league.

But didn’t he have a duty to stick up for his players? They were being mocked and ridiculed too, and anyway, the other guy was worse. He’d celebrated an injury, and cajoled Eddie into awarding a penalty—he’d taunted a grandmother for God’s sake . . . and then he assaulted Frank.
At the end of every game, players from both teams always shuffled through a post-game line up, giving each other high fives. Frank had been in his customary spot at the end of his team’s line, “Good game, good game, good game . . .” echoed back and forth until Frank was face to face with White Coach. The other man stretched out his hand, but Frank turned his back and walked away without shaking it. He didn’t plan it. It just happened.

White Coach clamped onto Frank’s shoulder from behind, and spun him around.

“I said ‘good game’ coach.”

Frank told him to get lost.

Eddie, standing ten feet away checking through his notepad drew a deep breath. He blew his whistle once more, and stated that, “Hands must be shaken by all participants following a game.”

White Coach grabbed Frank’s arm, trying to comply with the ref’s directive.

Jerking backwards, Frank shouted, “I will not shake hands with this jackass!”

Eddie took the red plastic card from his pocket.

Frank protested, “But the game is over! This . . .”

Eddie cut him short. “This field is under my authority until I determine it appropriate to leave,” he stated. “Now, either shake hands or I will book you. Again.”

Tears formed in his son’s eyes, and Frank, in hindsight, realized that that was the moment he should have embraced him. A simple, I’m sorry, would have sufficed, then. He should have swallowed his pride, and shaken the other coach’s hand.

However, in the moment, Frank lost sight of the bigger picture. His throat swelled
shut, and he found himself turning his back as Eddie held the red card in the air. “Red Coach has been dismissed from the game for unsportsmanlike conduct,” Eddie stated. Then he walked away, shoulders hunched slightly forward, toward the parking lot.

The crowd dispersed quickly after that. People, parents and guardians mainly, were visibly upset with Frank’s behavior. He was left alone to collect the practice balls scattered about, when, from somewhere behind him, he heard a primal bellow. He turned, just as White Coach lifted him off the ground with a hefty shoulder under the rib cage. In a heartbeat, Frank was incapacitated, the considerable bulk of his adversary squatting on his abdomen, and pinning his arms.

Breathing heavily, neither spoke for several seconds.

Finally, Frank broke the ice. “Funny how these things get out of hand. Isn’t it?”

“Nope,” said White Coach. He leaned forward, stretching Frank’s arms along the ground over his head, until the two men were nose to nose. “You a military man?” he asked.

Frank shook his head, no.

White Coach straightened back up, his faced flushed. “I knew it,” he panted. “A spoiled fucking brat. You’d be speaking Chinese if not for people like me.” He jerked his head to the side and cracked his neck. “Six years in the Marines—I served two goddamn tours in Afghanistan while you sat on your ass and took freedom for granted.” He spat on the ground beside Frank’s head. “Fucking bleeding heart liberal too, I bet. You wouldn’t last thirty seconds in the shit, and now you want pity from me.” Then his voice changed to a higher register, “Please don’t run the score up mister. You’ll hurt our feelings.” He
laughed, and spat again.

Frank offered a short chuckle, but White Coach was suddenly unamused.

He picked up Frank’s hand by the wrist and forced him to slap himself before continuing his diatribe, “I play by the rules. I play hard, but by the rules. I don’t ask for any favors, and it disgusts me when weakling losers like you whine about life being unfair. Suck it up, Snowflake.”

White Coach was a large man, much bigger than Frank, but he was nimble. He managed to squirm forward, settling his butt directly below Frank’s sternum. He pulled Frank’s arms under his knees so that his own hands were free. “You ever hear of the typewriter?” he asked, in a jovial tone, as he popped his knuckles one at a time.

Frank again shook his head, no.

The other man must not have seen him. “Hey! I’m talking to you, Snowflake.” He lifted Frank’s head off the ground by the ears, forcing eye contact.

“No,” Frank said, starting to worry.

White Coach chuckled. He told Frank briefly about his childhood, about the torment of his older brothers. Then he began typing.

He dictated a letter, as his thick index fingers went up and down, landing forcefully on Frank’s chest as though it were a keyboard. “Dear Red Coach.” There was a pause, and then he slapped Frank’s face, mimicking the return mechanism on an old Smith Corona.

Frank struggled in vain to free his arms.

“You are an idiot, exclamation point.” White Coach continued, jabbing Frank’s
breastbone, over, and over.

Slap, return.

“Repeat after me one hundred times. I will always shake hands with the other coach.”

Slap, return.

White Coach was picking up steam.

Frank had no response, beyond the tears starting to spill out of the corners of his eyes.

White Coach’s fingers moved in a flurry. “I will always shake hands with the other coach.”

Slap, return.

He stopped typing. “You’re not repeating after me, Snowflake!”

Helpless, Frank tried a new tactic. “Well, I haven’t received the letter yet,” he said. “You see, you’re still typing it. Then you mail it to me. Only then will I be able to read it, and comply with your request.”

White Coach typed the next line more slowly, and with greater effort. “Repeat after me. I will not be a smart ass.” However, instead of slapping Frank’s face at the end, he raised a fist.

“Get off him!”

Frank recognized Eddie’s voice. He stretched his neck backward, grimacing into the boy’s face.

“I thought you went home,” said White Coach.
Eddie crossed his arms.

White Coach put his hands in the air, feigning surrender. “Me and Red Coach here are just having some fun. We’re old friends.” He pinched Frank’s cheek, and tugged it up and down. “Isn’t that right, little buddy?”

Frank said nothing.

Tears streamed down Eddie’s face. “No. He’s my dad.”

White Coach laughed, “Well I’ll be goddamned.” Then he spat on the ground again. “What are you gonna do about it?” he sneered.

Eddie took the phone from his pocket and recited aloud, 9-1-1, as he entered the number.

“Okay, okay,” the ex-marine rose slowly to his feet. “There’s no need to get carried away,” he said, giving Frank a final, gentle slap on the cheek. Then he walked toward a solitary pickup truck in the lot.

Eddie said nothing further. He didn’t help Frank up. He simply started walking back to their car.

Frank struggled clumsily to his knees. “Eddie,” he called out. “Eddie wait.”

The boy stopped, but didn’t look back.

Frank was on his feet, jogging toward his son. “You had a good game today, Eddie. I’m proud of you.”

The young man turned to face his father, and, wiping his face with a sleeve, said, “I’m done refereeing.”

Frank was almost to him, when Eddie turned his back. Over his shoulder he called
out, “Don’t forget to grab the gear.”

When Frank got back home from his drive, Linda and Eddie were eating supper.

“You’re late,” Linda said. “I tried to call you.”

“Sorry, I must have left my phone here,” Frank said.

“That’s okay, I didn’t grill anyway cuz Eddie said he wasn’t really hungry, so we’re just having mac and cheese and hot dogs.”

Frank got a plate and helped himself.

Everyone ate in silence, and Frank wondered if Eddie had told his mother about the game. No one said anything, until Eddie excused himself and headed upstairs.

“Wait.” Frank got up and followed him. He caught up just as Eddie crossed the threshold into his bedroom. “Wait, Eddie.”

Eddie stopped, with his hand on the doorknob.

“Look son, I’m sorry.”

“Sorry about what?” Eddie said.

“About what happened today . . . I lost control, I’m sorry.”

Eddie fidgeted with the knob with a blank stare.

“And thanks for what you did,” Frank said.

Eddie shrugged his shoulders.

Frank hesitated a second. “I resigned from coaching, and I thought maybe I’d join you refereeing,” he said.

“Yeah, well like I said before, I’m finished with that.”

“But what about reffing high school, and college?”
Eddie snorted out a short laugh. “That’ll never happen.”

“Ah, c’mon, Eddie.” Frank reached out his hand.

“Nah, it’s a stupid game anyway.”

Eddie shut the door, leaving Frank alone in the hall.
“THE BASTER LOADER PREVAILS!!!”

I’m running for Mayor of my hometown, and the local press is utterly obsessed with my lack of children. They say I hate children. They say that my wife, Annie, and I have maliciously, and methodically, used birth control to avoid insemination. The charges have caused quite a stir in our quiet rural-Iowa town. I’ve produced the relevant medical diagnoses which clearly cite a fallopian tube blockage as the source of our childlessness, but the press continues to conspire against me and Annie. The local newspaper editor refuses to shed sufficient truthful light on the matter to allow a reasoned debate. She prefers to stoke the furor of pro-lifers who have cast me, us, as anti-lifers.

The whole issue is a result of the speech I gave on the steps of the Community Center to declare my decision to enter the mayoral race. In front of that gathering, comprised of upwards of fifteen friends and neighbors, (along with the local newspaper editor) I had proclaimed, among other things, that I am an active member of the Catholic community in town. Now the authenticity of my faith is in question.

The national obsession with Godly consistency began in earnest a few years back with the creation of the Office of Evangelical Zealotry and Reasonable Accountability (EZRA). The Office, a product of liberal backlash after four years of Donald Trump, falls officially under the auspices of the Justice Department. Their videotaped activities, uploaded to YouTube, generated an instantaneous and immense public following. The mission of the Office is to hold people accountable to overt public claims of heavenly design and intervention. They only go after the most privileged and prominent members of society, and then only those who make the most definitive and hypocritical claims of
divine intervention.

Unfortunately for me, EZRA’s effect has trickled down to even the smallest media markets. Everyone wants religious consistency these days.

The Office of EZRA made a huge impression right out of the gate. They convened a panel, which, in a public ceremony, dealt with an NFL quarterback who claimed after a Super Bowl win that his Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, had opened up the opposing team’s defensive line like the Red Sea, and directed him to run through for the winning touchdown.

EZRA made it immediately clear that they are not in the business of punishing such prophetic visions, in fact, they released an official statement on the matter of Divine favoritism:

The Office of Evangelical Zealotry and Reasonable Accountability does not deny, and never has denied, that God (if such an entity actually exists) apparently prefers the success of some citizens over others. The evidence of the argument is irrefutable: God is omnipotent, and human existence is not equitable in any aspect—therefore, clearly, God has favored designs for some over others. For those with eyes to see, look around, the truth is everywhere. For those without eyes, enough said.

No, the issue addressed by the Office is not inequality of opportunity, but rather God’s inconsistency in punishing those people who overtly acknowledge His favor, and then blatantly transgress against His commandments. EZRA agents do not claim any Divine authority—they don’t even profess faith in God. They are merely public servants trying to foster cosmic equity.

Per their website, EZRA mostly addresses sexual malfeasance and/or excessive misrepresentation of the truth. Activities which are not necessarily illegal, but which
clearly violate the written laws of God.

That quarterback, the night after giving all the glory and honor to Jesus, had sexually propositioned his next-door neighbor’s wife.

The panel convened by the EZRA wondered publicly, why, if God so plainly rewarded the quarterback’s spiritual superiority with a touchdown, He would not punish the quarterback’s sin in equally plain fashion. That said, they undertook to enact justice. A committee member dressed as Moses read from a stone tablet the evidence of wrongdoing, then struck his staff upon the ground at the feet of the restrained quarterback. Miraculously (with the use of barely visible wires) the condemned man’s legs spread wide. An ancient prophet look-a-like entered with a curved dagger and, with some effort, harvested the offending man’s genitalia.

To the casual observer the affair might have seemed draconian, but EZRA later released a dossier filled with evidence of the player’s moral improprieties. This wasn’t the first wife he had coveted. Besides, the subject had been treated with a local anesthetic prior to the procedure, and afterwards, had received expert medical care.

The video reached a billion views in record time.

As you might expect, the disgraced and disfigured quarterback was forced to retire. It’s hard enough to play in the NFL under normal conditions, let alone with a permanent catheter strapped to your leg. One sports-talk-radio host joked that the man wasn’t even qualified to be an equipment handler. Again, some wondered about the punishment fitting the crime, but popular public sentiment seemed to be that if God wanted the quarterback to score more touchdowns then He’d figure out a path forward.
EZRA proponents contend that retribution ceremonies stifle the urge of people to think in terms of manifest destiny. Such language incites opposition ire, and the belief that the Office is part of a conspiracy by Indian tribes who continue to be sore losers. Casinos are not enough, these people say, the Savages want a pound of flesh as well. Either way, EZRA has been effective in curtailing outspoken claims of heavenly preference, athletes and movie stars have learned to keep their religious views to themselves during award ceremonies and post-game pressers. Even average Joes have taken heed. It’s rare these days to hear anyone say, “There but for the grace of God go I,” when walking past a homeless wretch.

Politicians though, are caught in a pickle. It’s impossible to get votes without publicly professing unyielding faith in Christ, yet these professions lead to scrutiny. As a result, politicians make up the majority of EZRA’s current caseload. More than one congressperson in the national assembly has lost their sexual organs, but mostly, in political circles, tongues are cleaved in two. Critics initially argued that the forked tongue is not strictly a Biblical metaphor, but the visual was so effective, and the correlation with Satan sufficient, that speech impediments now abound on Capitol Hill.

This was my dilemma: I wanted desperately to serve the public, but I also desired that my body remain intact. I prayed long and hard on the matter, and eventually became confident that my moral compass would serve my Christian values. I then filed the necessary paperwork to enter the mayoral race.

My father had counselled me to wait until I was forty-five (I’m thirty-five now) before entering politics. Pops was always a straight shooter, and advised that I needed
more seasoning. “Wait another ten years,” he’d said. Annie and I figured that his advice was motivated by self-interest. You see, he’s the incumbent mayor, and has been since I was five years old. I think he wanted another decade at the town’s helm before retiring and handing me the reins.

Annie rightly pointed out that forty-five is a late age to enter politics if one has one’s eyes set on ascending to the Presidency. She also noted that if I waited, it might be perceived that I’d been handed the Mayorship rather than earning it through a well-run campaign.

Together we decided it would be best if I ran against my father now.

Dad was pretty irate. I think he’d grown accustomed to having the town’s maintenance department, aka Ed Haveshaw, at his beck and call.

I’m a grown man though, and eight years on the School Board was long enough. I stood by my decision. Almost immediately, I began to have second thoughts. The race was brutal and taxing.

My father had instigated the misinformation campaign about my attitude toward children. That was particularly hurtful. He’s familiar with the impenetrable barrier my wife and I face regarding pregnancy, and still he fueled the fires of judgment against me.

The vicious rumors didn’t seem to bother Annie though—she’s from a poor background and must be used to ridicule. She wouldn’t let me surrender. She has her tenacious heart set on the title of Mrs. Mayor, and more. She kept reminding me to go after Dad’s jugular. “Keep your eyes on the prize.” she said.

Scandal obsessed voters ate up the father/son controversy.
I called 1-800-RETRIBUTION, the hotline for tips to the Office of EZRA. I informed them of my father’s public vow of faith in Christ and his subsequent lies, but they told me they did not have a sufficient budget to concern themselves with political small fries—they only go after big fish. Dejected I hung up the phone. I felt I had bitten off more than I could chew in going up against the wily old man.

On the night of the traditional mayoral debate at the middle school gymnasium (an event which hadn’t been witnessed in a generation because my father always ran unopposed) I had planned on making a concession speech. I could no longer handle the pressure cooker.

Minutes before the debate was due to begin, I informed Annie of my decision. She called me many names, and threatened to take her barren womb elsewhere.

“But Annie,” I said. “I love you and I will not allow him to taunt you, and lie about us any longer.”

“Grow a sack,” she said. “This is war!

“No, I can’t do it,” I said. I resigned myself to resignation.

Annie was clearing her throat, probably to generate enough phlegm to make spitting on me worthwhile, when God sent me a sign—Rosalynn.

Rosalynn and I had spent some time together at a volunteer community in Washington D.C., but it had been at least a dozen years since I’d seen her. We were both just impressionable kids back then, fresh out of college, full of energy and hormones. I recognized her immediately; some faces make an imprint on your memory.

She must have seen me too, because she was running full tilt across the parquet
She looked good, charging toward me in her tunic and flowery garland. The years had treated her well, and she always had large breasts. I waved excitedly, causing Annie to re-ingest her mucus as she turned to see what the commotion was about.

I closed my eyes, smiling wide as Rosalynn launched herself toward me—nostrils awash in the scent of patchouli. Annie hijacked the embrace. She took Rosalynn to the ground in a head lock. Embarrassed, I pulled her off my old friend, helped them both to their feet, and introduced them to each other. They shook hands awkwardly, and I decided against giving Rosalynn a hug.

Seeing her, though, reminded me of the only other time I disobeyed my father’s advice. Not the volunteer work, he’d agreed to that after confirming that the organization was bona fide Christian. He’d said that serving Christ through the poor would look good on my future political resume. The problem for him was what I chose to do next.

I was in love with Rosalynn (even though she told me that she was a lesbian repulsed by penises), and I followed her to a cult across town. She knew this guy Zing from somewhere, and thought he had a good vision for a just life. He was a skinny Bohemian, jacked up on NoDoz and pesto. There were five of us total in the cult when Rosalynn and I joined. Zing ran a tight ship, indoctrinating the rest of us by reading from a laminated copy of the Unabomber’s manifesto while we all sat in a circle practicing Zen meditation. But I managed to outsmart him and his brainwashing tactics; all the while Zing preached, I recited the alphabet backwards in my head to distract myself.

It infuriated Dad that I would waste my time there.

Rent was free though, so I stayed a couple of months trying to convert Rosalynn
away from her sinful affair with another cult member, Audrey. And anyway, it wasn’t only mind-altering stuff going on—there were some good things happening. I distinctly remember dumpster diving behind a Dunkin’ Donuts, then sharing the huge bag of expired pastries around our disenfranchised neighborhood. A work of mercy.

However, all good things must come to an end.

A protest at the newly elected President’s inauguration was planned, and Zing had the idea to paint the four aces on cheap sandwich boards. We’d wear them, and parade around chanting, “We bid no Trump.” Of course, being anarchists, we were going to protest the inauguration no matter who won the election, but Trump was Zing’s preference—his name being so much easier to pun than Clinton. Rosalynn wanted me to join her in the demonstration but I couldn’t find the wherewithal. Thank God I didn’t participate, because they all got arrested.

I left town in a hurry. Imagine what a police record would have done for my political ambitions.

Tail between my legs, I went home. I agreed, at my father’s insistence, to take the LSAT, which I failed miserably. Ultimately, I came to a compromise with him. He had always preached the political value of a courthouse career, so I enrolled in an online course to become a certified stenographer.

The last time I saw Rosalynn she was handcuffed, being dragged away from my general vicinity. I’d pretended not to know her as she yelled, “See you back at the compound.”

Now, exchanging pleasantries at the gymnasium, she seemed not to hold any
Annie wanted to know what she was doing there.

“I heard Tom’s name on the radio yesterday. We only live across the river in Wisconsin and the news guy was talking about this father/son debate. I didn’t realize we lived so close.”

“Me either,” I said. “When did you move out here?”

Annie was listening intently.

“A few years ago. Audrey and I had already separated, and then my folks died in a cheese-curd factory explosion. It was one of those freak accidents—the propane storage area got struck by lightning. They’d met on the line there, thirty-four years earlier, and died together doing what they loved. Maybe it was a blessing. Anyway, I inherited their acreage, so I started my own little cult. We garden, weave rugs, and bury supplies and firearms in the bunker some locals helped me dig out.”

“Hmm,” I said.

“Who’s Audrey?” asked Annie.

“My lesbian lover,” said Rosalynn.

Annie looked mortified.

“We’d fallen out of lust,” Rosalynn continued. “You know what I mean?”

“Hmm,” I said again.

Annie’s head was ready to fly into orbit—we do not traffic in lust in our home.

“A LESBIAN!” she yelled.

People nearby looked over but I gestured to them, as if to say, she did not just
scream lesbian. They smiled and seemed satisfied.

Rosalynn looked put out. “I can’t believe Tom wouldn’t have mentioned us.”

To be honest, I’d mostly forgotten about Rosalynn and Audrey by the time I met Annie.

“You surely told Annie here about the turkey baster episode. Didn’t ya?”

“Oh yeah, I forgot about that.” I said.

She proceeded to share the details with Annie.

The week before the ill-fated protest ended our relationship, I donated my semen to Rosalynn in a cup of warm water. Audrey allegedly sucked up the sperm water with a turkey baster and injected it into Rosalynn’s vagina. I hadn’t witness the infiltration but I had observed Rosalynn later, laying on the floor with her feet up on the bed. I guess I always thought the whole thing was some kind of loyalty test cooked up by Zing.

“Well, the baster worked,” she said. “I’d like you to meet your son.”

She whistled to a tall gangly youth slumped against a wall with his arms folded. He walked slowly our way, combing long hair out of his eyes with first one hand, then the other.

“Hmm.” For the third time, it was all I could think to say.

“Wait, this is Tom’s son?” Annie exclaimed.

“Yes, Honeysuckle Lemongrass Lilacbush.” Rosalynn beamed with pride.

“Audrey, Zing, and I all had a hand in naming him. You could of too, if only you’d stuck around.” She punched me in the arm.

She hugged the boy as he joined our circle. “But I affectionately call him My
Little Baste-erd,” she said. “Isn’t that right, My Little Baste-erd?”

The young man, who must have been eleven or twelve, squirmed away from his mother.

“Honeysuckle Lemongrass Lilacbush,” she scolded. “You act nice now. This is your father, Tom. There’ll be no more Baste-erd jokes from me.”

I looked at the boy, numb with shock.

Annie grabbed my arm. “We need to talk,” she whispered as she pulled me away. When we were sufficiently out of earshot, she said, “It’s a Godsend!”

“What are you talking about?” I said. “It’s a disaster; I have a bastard child with a lesbian. I have to withdraw immediately and hope that EZRA never finds out about this.”

Annie shushed me, then kept on, “Look, she may be a sexual monstrosity and a gun crazed hippie, but she’s proof that you are invested in populating the world. That boy is definitive evidence that you are pro-life. This puts us back in the race!”

I fidgeted with my testicles. I wasn’t comfortable with her logic.

“Trust me,” she said, and with that she climbed the steps onto the stage to make an announcement. She told the assembled crowd everything—well almost everything. She spoke about the turkey baster and my contribution to Rosalynn’s pregnancy. She painted me as an innocent young man who’d been ignorant of the existence of lesbians and the like in God’s creation. She said that I was only trying to help a fellow human being in the process of bringing the glory of life into the world.

The crowd was stunned, shuffling their feet in silent unison. They’d arrived, pockets stuffed with rotting produce, hoping that I would participate in the debate just so
they could rain down blackened cabbage and tomatoes upon me. Now they were visibly confused. Annie had sown the seeds of doubt.

I took heart, and decided to go ahead with the debate.

The newspaper editor, who was clearly in cahoots with Dad, moderated. She opened the proceedings by asking him how he felt about the rumors of my fatherhood.

“Well,” he said. “Let’s be honest here, the child is illegitimate. It’s really an ugly stain on my opponent’s moral character.”

The crowd seemed uneasy. Then old Mrs. Griffwinkle hollered, “Get off the lad’s back.” Someone else said, “Yeah, give him a break.” A chorus of discontent rang out.

The moderator quickly changed the subject. “Tell us about your qualifications and policies,” she said to my father.

He began detailing evidence of fiscal responsibility and a robust Chamber of Commerce, but the crowd did not respond favorably—they were bored, and agitated.

I learned quickly from his mistake. These people were here for a spectacle; so I cut him off. “I’m going to get tough on crime!” I yelled. A few people were murmured, Amen. I flailed my arms for effect. “And tough on immigration!”

The moderator tried to intervene but was drowned out by cheers from the audience.

“I’ll bring mandatory prayer back into public schools, and make this town great again! I’ll dam the creek and make us energy independent!” I was being carried away by the groundswell of enthusiastic support.

The assembly ate it up.
Dad tried to respond, but that’s when Ed Haveshaw interjected. “He made me change his oil,” he bellowed. The crowd hushed. “And paint his garage.”

I took advantage of Haveshaw’s outburst. I bemoaned witnessing my father’s descent into corruption. I explained that Ed was right, my dad was just another politician bent on gaming the system and exploiting the resources he’d been elected to manage. “I’ll pull the plug on politics as usual, and put an end to gerrymanders and filibustering!” I screamed.

The debate was cut short by flying vegetables, all directed at the old man. We shook hands as we ran out of range, and Dad told me that he had under-estimated me, but that he would still kick my ass.

Beaming, I exited the stage. Annie grabbed my arm again and pulled me into a nook. “We have to get custody of that boy,” she said. She told me that public opinion is a fickle animal. That I couldn’t rest on my laurels. That we needed to address the illegitimacy question.

“You’re right,” I said.

We invited Rosalynn and Honeysuckle Lemongrass Lilacbush to stay the night at our home to celebrate the father/son reunion. They agreed, and after the boy went to bed I offered Rosalynn $10,000 to buy him, no strings attached. All she had to do was sign a disclaimer, and disappear. It would make our family complete, and give my campaign a real shot-in-the-arm.

Unbelievably, she declined, and retired to the bedroom Annie had assigned her.

Then I had an idea.
Annie is a bookkeeper, but she’s also a part time manager of two hog confinements—she monitors feed, and health standards at the facilities. Maybe she was the one who first told me about the farmer who collapsed inside a hog building. The next day, his son found remnants, some tattered clothing scraps and the rubber soles of his leather work-boots. The rest of the unfortunate man had been devoured by the beasts.

“We just need to put our faith in God,” I said.

“How?” Annie was frustrated, and angry.

“We’ll put her in one of your hog lots, like Daniel in the lion’s den. If she survives then we’ll know that God loves her more than He loves us, and we’ll likely go to jail. But if she perishes, and disappears from the face of the earth, then we’ll inherit Honeysuckle Lemongrass Lilacbush. We’ll tell him, and the press, that Rosalynn gave him to us, before hitch-hiking to Costa Rica, or Fiji, or somewhere, to open a new cult.”

Annie loved the plan. “That demon bitch doesn’t deserve raise your child,” she said.

I went into Rosalynn’s room and cold-cocked her.

We stripped her, bound her with edible flaxen twine, and drove her out of town in the trunk of our Jumbo Wagoneer. Annie unlocked one of her buildings and we placed Rosalynn on the ground in the midst of eight hundred mostly agitated hogs. All the while she remained resting peacefully, which was good because my hand hadn’t stopped throbbing yet, and I didn’t want to have to punch her again. Neither Annie nor I was sure that the pigs would eat a living human—our actions were strictly a leap of faith. We garnished her with honey and almond slivers to assist God in his judgment.
I couldn’t sleep that night. I was too excited about the prospect of raising my very own child. The next morning Annie went to work to oversee the daily feed rations and check on the outcome.

Rosalynn was gone. Maybe she escaped, though there would have been ramifications if that had happened. More likely, she was eaten. In my mind, though, I envisioned her ascending into heaven, body and soul, without suffering. Regardless of the specifics, God’s will had been done—Rosalynn was no longer an issue.

Things went smoothly after that. The newspaper took to referring to me with terms of endearment like Master Baster, and I reveled in the admiration. Annie and I told the authorities our story and they believed us because, well, after all, Rosalynn was a cult leader and a sexual abomination. I took a paternity test to confirm that I was Honeysuckle Lemongrass Lilacbush’s biological father, and the court granted Annie and me custody.

The boy didn’t seem at all put out by the change in ownership. “She does this all the time,” he said.

We told him she might not come back, and that he was our son now.

“That’s good,” he said. “I hate her, and that stupid cult, and homeschooling, and my stupid name.”

We encouraged him to refrain from using the word “hate” but in my heart I was delighted by his vitriol. We legally shortened his name to Holeli, pronounced holy. I made sure that he was constantly by my side during the final two weeks of the mayoral race. Annie forged Rosalynn’s signature on the title of her VW Combi-Van, transferring ownership to me. We planned on presenting it to Holeli when he reached the appropriate
age, but thought better of it. The gesture might rekindle reminders of his former mother, causing emotional confusion. It probably wasn’t safe to drive anyway—there were 1.9 million miles on the odometer. It had no resale value, so I donated it to a charity and gained some political equity.

Now here I am, the morning after Election Day, on my knees, sending petitions heavenward as I prepare to open my internet browser and check the results. On the website of the local newspaper, the headline reads: “The Baster Loader Prevails!!” I think Baster Booster has a better ring to it, but I’ll clear that up later.

Annie and Holeli hear my jubilation, and come downstairs to share in the joy of the moment.

I’m on my way up, I can feel it.

First order of business is to call a press conference where I’ll humbly give all the glory and honor of the victory to my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Then I’ll publicly embrace the loser to prove that I honor my father … you never know when the EZRA might be taking notes. Then I’ll have Ed Haveshaw come over and mow the lawn.