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Dislocation

Fredrick Miller
Saint Cloud State University

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Dislocation

by

Fredrick Thomas Miller

A Creative Work

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

St. Cloud State University

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree

Masters of Arts in

English Studies

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Culminating Project Committee:

Shannon Olson, Chairperson

Carol Mohrbacher

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Introduction

Long have I enjoyed the works of David Sedaris, J.D. Salinger, Flannery O’Conner and Tennessee Williams. I enjoy how these authors frame their character’s moments of decision and improvisation. I believe that these captured moments, of when people must choose how to act without quite knowing what to do, are at the core of every good story. Our spur-of-the-moment decisions often teach us who we are as individuals and instruct our further actions; these are the moments that change and define our character. Reading the afore mentioned authors and collections such as *Brief Encounters*, or *The Best American Nonrequired Reading* I have come to the conclusion that capturing the locus of individual change is perhaps most well suited for the medium of the short story; where one can focus directly (often solely) on the characters singular moment of transformation. Therefore, short stories of dislocation and improvisation are the inspiration as well as the method of the pieces I have written and arranged for this—my culminating project.

I have chosen to write autobiographically as I personally feel that stories from real life are more relatable than imaginary instances. The stories in this collection follow the arc of my life; beginning when I was a toddler and ending in my early twenties. I have attempted to narrate the stories in a voice which captures the regional vernacular of the places I inhabited and include intimate detail to the environs in which I found myself (as generally prescribed by The Rose Metal Press’ *Field Guide to*

Writing Flash Fiction).

While all of the stories are autobiographical and are as accurate as I can recall in detail and action, I have had to make some approximations either to protect the identities of the characters or due to a lack consistent memory; recalling only gist. In *Oh, This Scar Right Here?* I had almost total recall of the event, and in that case with the sparse dialogue, it is as close to the complete memory as I can recon. Likewise, *Moving In* is a piece without much approximation as it is more of a visually descriptive nature. In *The Welcoming Committee* I had to change the names of all characters as well as approximate the dialogue between myself and Allie; I couldn't recall exactly all she said, nor her vocal mannerisms so I substituted the voice of a friend in college who was very similar in sound and gesture. In *Oh Brother* all that was changed from the actual memory was the name of my sibling.

In the story *Gripper* there were more approximations than any of the other stories due to both the felonious nature of many of the instances as well as issues of brand. For instance, I chose to change the alternative circus my friend had joined in the story to a metal band; keeping the debasing elements of his act, without mentioning the (rather litigious) circus.' I also made two composite characters: L'Grosun and Shawn Jackson—blending their backgrounds with those of others to further confuse their identities. I put in a time shift as well making the party take place earlier in the summer than it did to increase the dramatic arc. I modified Sharon's love affair to be happening in Onalaska instead of it taking place between La Crosse and Minneapolis to give a more solid focus

on the tight locale of the Coulee Region. *The Clown* is a complete memory and I chose not to even modify the names because the two characters who are named are both foreign nationals and these names were actually nicknames. Without further ado—for my culminating project, it is my pleasure to offer this collection of short stories about times in my life which stood out to me as moments of note, moments for which I did not know how to react.

Oh, This Scar Right Here?

We were driving up the river road. The sunlight splashed across the dash and into the back seat through the branches of trees, coating us in intervals of light and shadow. Our boat trailer rattled artlessly behind with the bow of my dad's Crestliner standing tall behind the rear window. It blocked my view behind us into the windshields of the people who I'd usually make faces at. I was a kid, barely three yet a old hat seat-stander and faller-offer. I'd recently figured out it was better not to cry when you fell lest you get hollered at for fucking around back there and not sitting down like a normal person.

The hills were faceted gems: swaths of racing green hardwood tree line opening into bright harlequin grasses, knee-high-to-a-man corn, wheat and soybean fields at intervals—spaced by valley streams and the vacant echo of a culvert's passing. The asphalt below us was marbled with large tarred in cracks, which bumped in rhythmic patterns: tha-thunk, ka-kunk, ka-thunk, thunk-itty, thunk-itty, thunk-itty, kunk, creating a subtle, flat music beneath the radio clatter as we sped on. On, to go fishing.

Pulling in, untackling the boat and casting off we were soon making fast time across the great blue brown expanse of Mississippi. My dad was in rare form, you could almost hear him gritting his teeth above the high howl of the engine and hollow

banging of the waves against our aluminum hull. We wove our way around sandbars and the many tree coated islands. He stood in front of his seat, eyes wild, perched, grinning like the One who Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest, steering our tiny vessel over the wake of river barges, between water-ski jumpers and long bass boats. Our craft circled as he assessed the situation, and cursing the crowded day decided to head to the far bank, park us at a dock and gear up to simply fish off the high cement embankment next to the lock and dam.

Walking up the long, steep, wet, unrailed cement stair was terrifying to me. I had recently fallen down the stairs at home into the basement – a place of spiders and ghosts. Not wanting to horrify or knock myself silly again I was very into holding onto stairway rails. I whined a little for him to carry me. He hollered back at me about his one hand holding the bait bucket while the other was with the tackle box and rod, which was fair. So I smiled at him after pouting and decided to simply soldier up and march. As for my father's grimacing, it was his job again—so many troubles there... also a group of kids had pretended to be friends with one of my brothers just to jack him and that was yet another piece of what mom and dad were constantly arguing about - this recent goddamned move. It put him in a pretty hard mould. You could always tell it was good time to be tight lipped when he started prowling about catlike, flexed out like a potbellied championship boxer.

We mounted the top and there was a friendly crew. A bunch of guys my dad knew—most of which I had never seen before, all joking like wise guys passing about a rolled cigarette. My dad dropped his gear conspicuously in an open spot next to them. They all looked over at us gave understanding looks to each other. A man said to my father “It’s the wife again isn’t it?” “Ain’t it a shame that you can tell, just by looking at me?” said dad theatrically. They nodded, lures bobbing colorfully on their hat brims “true, true.” Dad started hollering about this and that, genuflecting to pull a minnow out of his musty bucket. A man who was holding the joint extended it to my dad but he waved it away saying “nah, I got my kid with me, and anyways” his tone changed to the scolding sound he used when I took too many cookies “I don’t do that stuff anymore, haven’t smoked for years.” He and the guys kept talking as he cast out and they all went back to minding their lines. I wandered about, bending the tall grass looking for a stick to take a swipe at one or two reeds with. “That’s the problem you know,” my dad was saying “she’s overprotective, she treats him like a little girl – doesn’t let him learn anything by himself.” I stopped and listened – I could tell by his gestures this was about me. “...she’s always trying to protect him, but ya know- how is he ever gonna learn to think or make decisions for himself? If he ever has to protect himself or others, how is he ever gonna be able to if you don’t let him come to know for himself what not to do & do?” There were murmurs of agreement. I suddenly

remembered that at the foot of the stair there had been a side bit of shoreline with rocks and such on it – I absolutely loved throwing rocks into the river. I meandered my way toward the stairs—stooping to play with the grass growing between the cracks in the cement. I was watching my dad – to see if he’d scold me for wandering off. But he was still yakking with the guys, who were now starting to complain about their wives too. I got to the edge of the stair, he glanced at me and seemed unworried so I smiled and walked down a couple of stairs.

I felt dizzy looking down the railless stairway after I had gotten out of my fathers sight, so I got down on my hands and knees and carefully lowered myself step by step down to the bottom. I was very focused on not falling off either side so I didn’t notice which one of the men checked on me but knew that someone had looked over and said “oh, he’s ok” while I made my descent. When I reached the bottom I looked about, well pleased. There was the path off to the left toward the dock which we had walked up and a small natural jetty to the right, out of sight of the men who were on the cement embankment behind me. There were a lot of rocks near the narrow shore line and I threw a bunch of them into the drink with wondrous plops and splooshes. I then tried skipping a few but got frustrated by not figuring out how to do it. Looking about I noticed then a few boxes next to a large boulder just beside the stairwell. They were beer cases full of empty bottles. I was not allowed to handle any glass objects at home,

at least not in front of my mother. I eased up next to the boxes and looked long up the stairwell holding my hands together so that if anyone looked I might seem innocent. After a moment I gingerly plucked a bottle from the nearby open case, felt it's cool smoothness in my hand. Just then a small flock of ducks was landing on the water nearby, and I fascinated with ducks stopped to look at them. While watching the ducks quack to each other I forgot the bottle which slipped from my fingers and fell against a rock collapsing harmlessly into itself but nonetheless smashing loudly. Startled, I was afraid someone would hear so I rushed to the foot of the stair. I watched and listened.

I could barely hear the men over the sound of the water loudly splashing, tumbling near the dam and the gaggle of noisy ducks. After a minute of waiting for someone to come I decided to return to the cases next to the boulder. Taking another bottle in hand I intentionally dropped it, but it fell in the pebbly sand and didn't break like the other one had. I dropped it again, on a rock but it didn't smash – I had gotten lucky before. It then occurred to me as I steadied myself against the big rock that I might be able to break it there, on that. I had seen people break bottles on tables and shatter windows with rocks on TV and so decided to give it a go. Ting, ching, smash! went the bottle. Startling, wonderful! Then another, then another. I swung them, I threw them ...I made that glorious cacophony ring out – lost over the sound of the water. Soon I was at my last bottle. I smashed it lengthwise against the side of the rock. So

pleased was I, having not only just handled glass, that most dangerous medium but I had also engaged it at its most perilous manifestation—broken and sharp. I had done it damage and escaped without a scratch. Ha-Hah! I felt like a man, full grown and capable of all sorts of things—for good or for evil. I strode forth, proud and potent to the edge of the water. I saw the ducks -I did not just look at them I saw them- saw how I was like them, free. I was free, a part of nature—just as capable and valid as the ducks who could swim on the water or fly in the air. Free and worthy as the trees on the nearby island to stand tall and feel the breeze in my hair and the warmth of my garments, and the blood pounding from my heart out to every part of my body. I was as wild and beautiful as the clouds arcing across the sky, handsome as the monumental bluffs reflecting on the water, as agile as a trout, as steady as an egret.

As I stood there breathing in and smelling the river air, cheeks flushed and feeling as powerful as a gale I thought of my father. I could see him in my mind proudly breathing in and smelling... tasting the air. This is what he was always coming out here for! This was what he had wanted today – to feel the freedom of the outdoors! I felt it—I could see it in myself, how he must want to feel and I knew that this is what it was about. Feeling awake, alive and interested. I turned and strode forth to climb the stair then with hope to tell him of this new understanding which I had found. I didn't care about the broken bottles, having trouble with words, feeling judged too little to do

stuff, getting in trouble, or being praised—I just cared about the land (nature), my family, the people (humanity) and myself. I was no longer concerned by there being no railing on the stairwell, that the concrete was damp and slippery, nor that the wind had picked up. I stood tall as I mounted those high steps and bravely lifted my knee to my midriff and put one foot in front of the other. Until I slipped.

About eight steps up there was a smooth spot that was just wet enough for my little shoe to take no purchase of and slipping I tried to adjust my weight to fall up rather than down the stairs- but that motion ended up pitching me off the side. I fell headfirst from a height onto the big rock I had been smashing bottles against. It was very quick. I went from proudly striding to suddenly seeing the stair rush upside down away, then a great booming *crack* when my head hit the rock and the tinkling jingle when my body spun under me and landed into the pile of fragmented glass. I stared dazed for a moment up at the open sky. I blinked a few times, a touch of pink smeared in one eye. I sat up—horrified to see I was laying in broken glass shards, I scurried back away and stood- but I felt so dizzy I fell down again. Then as I was attempting to stand again I felt the breeze blow lightly. However, for me it felt like someone had cut across the top of my head with a burning blade from my forehead to the very back peak. I reached up and touched it and pulled my hand back quickly – it burned like hell! My fingers were all bloody and I saw then the blood that was on my clothes. It dripped

curiously from my head as I looked down. My mind went back to the time I had stepped on a tack when I was just learning to walk and how it felt, it burned and I saw blood. My mother had freaked out and everyone acted very serious. I knew this was worse. I knew I needed a grown-up, I needed my dad.

I was wailing, bleeding and running as I lit up those stairs. I ran through the group of startled, standing fishermen straight to my father. He looked at me ...frightened, a look I had never seen on his face before. He dropped, more threw his rod into the river and scooped me up in both arms. I was looking over his shoulder, he was shouting to the men who were scrambling wide eyed and he was running. I buried my face in his arm and felt the warmth of him and comfort – I had no doubt that now, with my father who was carrying me tenderly while running, leaping and yelling that I could be in no safer hands and would surely be alright.

My father however did not know this. The skin of my head had split from my forehead, across the top, to where a bald spot would be and had pulled back a bit for the gore of what was beneath to bulge out. He couldn't tell how bad the injury was and nearing the boat dock where another fisherman was unmooring his boat he leapt inside of it – commandeering the vessel rather than taking the time to untie his own. The man complied and raced us across the channel, soon we were running past more gasping fishermen to the car. Next thing I heard was the cranking gears, howling motor and

bouncing empty boat trailer as my dad raced me to the nearest medical facility – a clinic just a few miles away. He kept asking me if I was alright and telling me to stay awake, I could see tears on his face and desperation in his eyes as we blew by the light traffic and honked through stop signs. I was crying because I was hurt but I wasn't afraid at all. I knew that my dad was going to do his damndest to save me.

He carried me into the clinic leaving the car running, door open in the entry way. He kept telling me he was so sorry but I didn't know why. As the doctor assessed the damages and got me prepped for stitches my dad kept asking him questions and was so upset the physician made him wait in the foyer, apparently offering my father a mild sedative because he seemed to be having a panic attack. When it was all done I had a head full of stitches, and lots of other bandages. We went home and my parents held me, suspending their bickering to softly speak to me and lay me down on the couch. My brothers and sisters were curiously looking at me. When my dad left to go get the boat, the painkillers and exhaustion took over.

Moving In

We had only been in town for a couple of hours. The U-Haul van was parked in the driveway of our new place backed up almost flush against the door, locked tight. Mom and Dad were laying down sleeping bags for my sisters and I between the boxes and haphazard furniture in the living room. Tonight we were camping in after the long drive with our spent takeout pizza boxes, soda cups, and weariness. It still hadn't really sunk in yet, that we'd moved. I knew I wouldn't be seeing my friends anymore and that our new neighborhood had many rules, but I didn't really understand what was happening.

Instead of playing over at my buddy Niall's house all summer like I had done last year, before the first grade, I was relocating to the far side of Wisconsin next to some really big lake—near a giant metropolis that looked like Gotham city from Batman. Second grade would be with a new bunch of kids, who knows how they would be. They wouldn't be Niall, Cormack, or Finn—I could tell you that.

We had moved before, however I was very little then and hadn't left any friends behind. Except grandma, who had raised me for my first few years -she was my best friend- and had died after we moved. I felt anxious, in a really unfocused, draining sort

of way. The TV wasn't hooked up and my sisters were talking about ghosts. Pretty much everything was haunted.

We all grew up in a choir loft; my mother loved to sing as well as avidly attend church. Once the spook show ran out of guest stars to talk about it was Mom who kept the hearth light glowing. She started up a tune and we all focused in on it, our voices rising to their parts. Mom had a broad ranging Ella Fitzgerald sounding voice, though she sang almost solely religious music or children's songs. Her pitch and timing were perfect, her timbre was warm and golden. My mother sang, prayed, and I was soon asleep curled fetally in my warm fluffy bag.

I awoke to the sound and vibration of heavy foot falls around me. The sleeping bag felt scratchy. I was covered in pizza crumbs with a knot of squished, cheese caked, fennely sausage under my cheek. I pulled it off disdainfully, disgusted at it's still appetizing smell. I thrust my head out of the bag and looked all around. Mom and Pop were moving the furniture. My sisters were carrying boxes in from the door to the garage, through the kitchen, and past me and up the stairs to their rooms. "Rise and shine!" Dad called out, seeing me stir. He was holding one side of the couch and pushing my mother a little off balance on the other end. "Watch what you're doing!" she yelled sharply at him. "You're gonna knock me over and I'm gonna drop it on him." "Now, would I do that?" He said jocularly. My father was tremendously strong and

steady. He turned his gaze back to me, "Hey, get up and go help your sisters upstairs."

My more extroverted sister called out, "hey, come up and look what we found!"

In the closet of my room was a six foot yellow stuffed bunny and a coiled up giant, fluffy teal snake. Joy! I had never seen stuffed animals so big before. My blonde sister was rubbing her fingers together, a sour look on her face. She said, "wait..." as I ran past her and grabbed the bunny in a great bear hug—pulling it out of the closet, into the empty room and tumbling over it. My laughter was short lived however because it was rather damp and smelled like old man piss.

"Yuck! This thing smells like pee!" I said rising and instinctively bushing myself off.

"Yeah that's what I was gonna tell you. I just noticed it myself, but you just ran by and wouldn't listen..."

I stuck my tongue out at her and immediately regretted it as my lips now tasted of stale mystery wizz.

"The snake seems clean, if you wanna play with that." She said amused. This was the younger of my two older sisters, she often enjoyed my little misfortunes.

I was utterly conscious of being covered in pee, "Mom! She made me touch the bunny and it's covered in pee!" My mother yelled something inaudibly from downstairs.

My sister scowled at me and went into her room giving a quick smile to my dad who was clomping up the stairs. She was his favorite and got away with anything.

Dad entered my room, "What's this about piss?"

I pointed pouting at the enormous fluffy bunny, "It's soaked!"

He grabbed it to sniff it and quickly dropped it, wiping his hands on his jeans.

"Yeah that's pee alright. It looks like a little doggie went pee-pee, and they left it for me." He loved to make up rhymes and then deliver them in a rolling, lilted voice. It generally indicated that he was in a good mood. I imagine he had heard some beatnik reading as a child and it became part of his chipper dad guy modus operandi.

I blurted out, "Its all over me Dad. What do I do? I'm covered in piss!"

"Here now boy, go change your clothes... no wait, eww. You smell really yucky my little ducky, you should go. Go... to the bathroom and take a quick shower there's a box of towels on the floor by the door. What's more, I'll open a box of your clothes and socks, then put them in here for you. That's what I'll do. For when you're done, my good little son." He looked pleased with himself. I walked out to do what he said.

He called to me when I was going into the nearby bathroom, "Hey do you wanna keep the bunny? I might be able to clean it up for ya?"

"No." My mouth tasted like cream of ammonia, chicken soup of the dickhole. No way in hell. The bunny had to go and I would never again trust stuffed bunnies to be clean.

"Well how 'bout the snake." I thought for a moment, that snake was pretty cool looking and would be like fifteen feet long uncurled.

"Yeah to the snake, if it's not all yucky." I showered quickly, not wanting to waste any of the day. My dad had grabbed clothes for me and was shoving the bunny out my window when I returned.

"I didn't want to drag pee through the house... Hey Fred, looks like some kids are playing out there. Why don't you go out and meet the neighbors? These boxes are too big for you. I can finish just fine with your Mom and sisters. Go on. Don't be shy!"

I ran down to the front door, opened it and walked coolly, across the lawn and into the street where the kids were playing. I didn't want to seem overanxious. There were about fifteen kids divided into three activities. Some beady haired girls were on the sidewalk spinning double dutch jump ropes, chanting their rhymes along to the beat. They were different from the rhymes I had heard and I was afraid of just jumping in and screwing up in front of all of these kids I didn't know. This was their first impression of me and it had to be something that wouldn't lead to an unfortunate nickname, like "Clumsy," "Dumb-Dumb," "Farty," "Booger," "Faceplant," or "Eats

Shit A Lot.” Nicknames were big where I’d lived before and I didn’t wanna be the new “Spazzo” or “Poop-Head” or whatever. There were a bunch of kids playing hopscotch in a couple of empty parking spaces, but these were mostly older girls and I didn’t want to risk getting a “Nancy-Boy” stigma. Plus older girls could be mean and you don’t want to get beat up by a girl in front of everybody. The majority of kids were playing Frisbee right in the middle of the street. This was the crowd. Good place to bide time at the margins and watch everyone to figure out what they were about. The kids were competitive but super friendly. It was odd to me, I was used to kids being kind of slow to warm up. Here in this ruddy-brown, sagging row of Section Eight duplexes, with patched power lines and jury rigged cars there was fun in the sun. My Ma had been worried about this move into a less classy, more crimey neighborhood but my Dad assured her it would be OK—with him having status as the new maintenance super and the boon of mostly free living that came with it. Seems that he was right. These kids were great, and there were all kinds of different features, accents, and tones of skin here—unlike my old neighborhood of German-Irish Scandinavians.

A small run-down, white-salt and rust-pepper sedan came up the block, and a kid yelled “car.” We all parted for the car to pass. The angry white driver guy in a gas station shirt was going a little quick, and some kid said under his voice “you missed me cracka!” I decided to try to be bold. I put my thumbs up to my ears and flapped my

hands at the driver, sticking out my tongue. Missed me too. The kid next to me looked at me like I was a wild man. He elbowed the kid next to him and then all of the kids looked at me. It was startling—they all were wide-eyed grinning at me like I was some kind of action hero ...for sticking out my tongue.

The guy in the car hadn't even noticed me. Man, these kids were easy! We started to play again and one kid called me crazy. "Here you go Crazy, you get the first toss!" Excellent, I was "Crazy!" "Crazy" isn't "Wets His Pants," "Pussy," or "Mamma's Boy." No, Crazy was badass and badass is high status. It's what all our kids shows were about. This was great, I was gonna rule as king cool in this neighborhood. I was thinking "How great was life, huh?! What an awesome place! Man, these kids haven't seen anything."

Another car turned up our street. "Car." I got ready. The dude looked like a tired 1975 James Brown complete with his own kind of distant looking version of Florida from *Good Times*. I stuck my tongue out, curled it, flapped my hands at my ears, shook my butt, rolling my hips and blew the dankest fart sounding raspberries I could manage. Dude looked right at me.

When our eyes locked for a moment I was lost. I saw a drained out guy. A man worn beyond his years in those deep, sad unblinking eyes. I saw some jackassed little know-nothing kid, mocking a grown assed man in a culture that feared nuclear

holocaust, racial violence, and inflation of the price of gas every damn day. I saw my Dad coming home in the morning after working all night long, his hands torn open from the broken machinery he fixed, telling me that life wasn't all fun and games all the time. I felt ashamed of myself. But I didn't stop, I had to keep it up or lose face in front of all these kids. I got "Crazy," I didn't want "Bipolar." Okay, the dude's dusty gold Oldsmobile finished passing by. It was over, reality check done.

Now someone had a foam rubber football. We threw that around. Whoa—these kids were tough enough. I watched a kid get tackled bloody on the pavement and decided to not try too hard to get the ball. Another car. Awesome! A tucked-in-at-the-waist, middle aged fat guy—dark hair, thick rimmed glasses driving a green and faux wood toned, giant assed old station wagon. I had my hands up, I had my tongue out. He looked at me and he looked mad. I shut my eyes and issued forth the most wet assed sounding raspberry -long and strong- spittle filling the air in front of me, some splat back landing on my chin. I flapped my hands in quick succession, double time pulses for increased distractibility. I turned my head and flipped open my eyes at the kid next to me. Trying to add a new Screaming Jay Hawkins bulgy eye pop thing to it. The kid wasn't there. All the kids had disappeared, left the Frisbee flat in the road and football rolling in the street toward the gutter. Nobody even yelled "run," they just

split. I saw one lower leg of a running kid duck behind my neighbors house as I turned back to look toward the sharp squealing from the car.

The tires' high-pitched roar was deafening at that close proximity. I shook. Smoking patches rolled out from under the two front tires like fat, black, lava lines from ball point pen wheels. Dank blue-brown burn clouds rolled up and out from his wheel wells. I was stunned, I'd never had anyone lock up all four wheels so close to me before. The driver's door flew open, car still running. The guy lunged out and hung snagged, caught by his seat belt. I heard him yell curse words, dig at his waist, and I ran.

My blood pulsed hardcore fast and cold as blades. The car had stopped right in the middle of the street in between me and my house so I had to run around it. My legs were lead tree trunks compared to the machine gun bursts of my heart as I lit across the ground at maximum kick. I had the frustrated feeling of running in slow motion. I passed the grill and turned by the front fender glancing over at the driver. His face boiled with rage, mouth and brows popping about, with the stream of half pronounced profanities and inarticulate shout sounds. He had gotten his seatbelt undone and was moving out of the vehicle freakishly fast. I looked at my door—ran with all my might up the lawn and threw my hand to the handle.

I heard "I'm gonna fucking ...fuck you, up! You little fuck!" I dared not look back. My fingers dug at the the cold, scraped up brass doorknob, the door opened

outward. As I stepped back to pull it I felt my back leg rise, hoisted from behind by the pant cuff. I was hanging suspended, stretched out with my hand on the doorknob and my leg in the guy's grip as he repositioned himself to yank me off. Inside past the living room and into the kitchen in front of me, my mother and eldest sister turned from filling a cabinet with plates and both screamed for my father as they watched the man tug me free from the door. The top of my head grazed the step as I fell, tearing the skin.

He lifted me by the ankle so that I looked down to see up into his face. "You little shit! I'm gonna beat you and throw you in a dumpster! I'm gonna take you to the cops and fucking crack your head open against the dumpster and throw you in the trash!"

He was yelling so loud and fast down into my face his spit was all over my cheeks. Then my forehead impacted the ground and there was sudden, sharp moving grass folding against my open eyes. I had to turn my head to keep the dirt out of my nose as he drug me face down across the lawn toward his car.

I yelled "Dad!" mutedly into the earth.

I heard my fathers voice boom "STOP!" from the door, and all of the sudden my leg and the rest of my body fell to the ground.

I turned and cut my heels into the sod, skidding myself away across the lawn. My Dad had moved so fast I didn't see him come from the door across the lawn but now he had the man by the throat, holding him aloft and strangling with both hands. I

saw his eye glance quickly to me. In the instant that our eyes met he shifted his hip and threw the man powerfully to the ground. The impact rattled the man's chest, winding him with a loud cracking thud against the lawn.

He moved quickly to rise. My dad stepped solidly and pushed him sprawling eight feet back into the bushes next to the door. "You stay down." He yelled, sounding like John Wayne as Rooster Coburn.

"That fucking..." the man began to say, puffing.

"MY SON?" my dad yelled down to him his fists ready like Mohammad Ali.

"Your son... fucking gave me... the bird. And I'm gonna... I'm gonna take him to the cops ...and beat him." The guy sputtered, blood on his lip where his tooth went through it on impact. He didn't dare stand up.

"Now, you shut your mouth!" my dad shouted jabbing his finger lightning fast in his face. Dad didn't take his eyes off the man. "Boy, come here. Don't be afraid—yes right next to me, I won't let him hurt you. Buddy you move and it'll be the end of you. Now, son. Did you give this man the bird?"

My mind raced, I didn't know that expression or what the middle finger meant. I knew the swears but not this 'the bird' thing. I knew The Trashmen song *Surfin' Bird* and would sing that with my dad in the car, so it was now thundering in my head complete with the image of a pink bird shirt one of my Mom's friends had. I had

waggled my hands in a flapping bird motion, that had to be it. I would have never thought that would be so serious an insult to grown men.

“Yes.” I said and was ashamed at the waver of my voice and the tears I felt streaming from my eyes. That guy was staring at me and hated me, his face looked exaggeratedly wroth and wicked, like a demon. I was terrified of him but also frightened to act a coward in front of my dad.

“Okay, boy that’s enough for now. You go inside to your mother. Don’t worry about me. I’ll deal with him.” He said to me without turning, pointing to the door. I had to summon my nerve as walking to the door brought me within quick striking distance of the man. My dad was closer to him though and swift. I looked down, my legs moved and I was suddenly in the house—my mother lifting me and bawling, sisters close at hand.

One of my sisters was on the long corded phone telling someone our address and the other was standing close, her hand rubbing Ma’s back. Mom held me there for awhile, to get some of her cry out. I could hear my dad yelling something but I couldn’t make out any words except for the accents of sharply yelled

“Fucking....Pig....You...NOW!”

I was carried into the kitchen and a warm wet rag was applied to my face, I saw my reflection in a glass on the counter and noticed the grass and dirt stain on my

forehead. I didn't realize I'd gotten a bloody nose before, just the soil getting in. I had been shaking uncontrollably and I locked eyes with myself to try to keep it together. The kid looking at me looked beat-the-hell-up, but kinda tough. OK, the fear was overwhelming, but Dad was there, Dad had this... wait, what if he hurts my Dad!?

I pushed free of my mother and sisters and ran into the living room to see out the door. I was fighting hard against the cold feeling in my chest and the almost overwhelming need to puke. Dad was stepping in through the door. I ran to him, threw my arms around his hip and cried. He lifted me and said "There, there" but I cried and cried and didn't stop until he was handing me a bowl of ice cream. He had one too, so I ate with him. Chocolate Almond Fudge. We had no food in the fridge but someone had thought to grab ice cream with the sodas at the gas station. Fuckin' A.

At some point a cop car showed up. I didn't want to talk to them. I spent the remainder of the day on my mother's lap as she stroked my hair and hummed lowly, watching Public Television. It would be years until I could look at a potbellied man who wasn't my dad, without feeling a spike of cold blooded terror. I didn't want to play. I didn't want to be there anymore. I just wanted my Mom, Dad, sisters, and far off brothers to all be OK. We even called one of my brothers just so I could say hi. Later that night, as my dad tucked me in to bed after reading me the latest chapter of *The Lord of The Rings* I asked him what happened, what he had said to the man.

“Well, I bounced him around a bit and I told him that he had just fucked up. That I was the new supervisor and had keys to all the places on the street. He lived just up the way—lived. He’s just moved out and won’t be coming around here no more. Why? Well, I told him that the cops were coming and he was kicked out. I also told him that if that didn’t work to get him gone or he came back that I’d find him, slip in quietly one night and gut him like a pig. Cut him from asshole to jaw bone and they’d never find his body because I take care of the trash removal from the sites. I said that he’d have to go. Now. Get his shit and be totally be out within twenty four hours if he wanted to see another day. ...he had a bit of a screw loose. It happens. But I can’t let anything happen to you, honey. I told him if I saw him again I’d make sure that I wouldn’t have to after. I think I got through to him. A panel truck came a few hours ago. I went over and checked. He’s already cleared out. Apparently back to his mmm’Ma-Ma’s. I’ve got her address too. I’ll look after you. You see him again, just tell me and I’ll deal with it.” He kissed me on the forehead and said as he walked out of the room. “I love you.”

I had a lot of weird conflicting emotions. I felt like I loved and hated everything—except the scary guy who grabbed me, I knew how I felt about him. I got out of bed and picked up the little boombox that had belonged to one of my siblings, but I had stashed away in my room. I turned it on really low. Some Judas Priest song

was playing that made me think of my brother in the navy. He had always been the one to act out and take the brunt of it for the rest of us when we were in trouble or stand up to Dad when he and Ma's arguing got out of hand. He was longsuffering and fearless. I hid under my blanket with the music and imagined the churning deep blue of the ocean under the black of night, the faintest of horizon line where the moon and stars were steadily disappearing. I slept and hid in there with metal hits for a few days; imagining nautical depths where squids and whales battled, far below ships doing precision drills, atop great rolling waves of forgetfulness.

I finally came down after a few days of watching the kids play to actually join them, at my mother's insistence. My neighbor who liked to wrestle said, "Hey look, Crazy is back. He ok! I told you that Mad Man didn't get him." Mad Man, so that was the kid's name for him. Dad had said the guy wasn't right in the head, and Mom told me that other families had had problems with him. I suddenly didn't want to be known as Crazy anymore. "Naw man, I'm not Crazy. Ahh, Call me... uh, call me just, just Fred." "OK man, whatever you say. Your dad got rid of Mad Man and we all happy as shit!" He said smiling and blinking. All right. At least the kids saw my dad as a hero and that meant something. As for, me they called me "Just Fred" for months before I got to be Fred. Then I was "Wussy" for awhile because the twelve year old girl across

the street would beat the hell outta me whenever she'd see me on account of her little sister's having a crush, but that's another story.

Welcoming Committee

“We’re here. Do you want another hit off this flask before I put it away?” Allie asked, poking her head around the front passenger seat, ivory fingers shaking the bottle inquisitively at us passengers in the back. Allie had straight red pageboy hair and narrow blue eyes of mischief. There were groans of “no” and one “yes” to the right. The flask traded hands briefly as the car slowed to take a sharp turn on that narrow stretch of rural Big Woods highway. I was trying to hide my awkward erection at the bottom of a pile of two freshman girls, next to another pile of a girl and two farm boys. I was dying to get out of the car as it reeked like a geriatric orgy — stinking of hormones, Stetson Cologne, soaps, lotions, and dollar store perfume.

We pulled into a gravel driveway flanked by twenty feet of well trimmed grass ending in cattle fencing and pasture land on either side, blackness of tree line edging the acres beyond. A half dozen obscured shapes were illuminated by our headlights as we curved up the way. A new tiller, ancient plough, red shed, cow statue, a couple in the grass, a cord of firewood beside a row of cars. We parked and the girls dismounted. I was so happy to be out, but paused to pretend to tie my shoe to let the erection subside. I was thirteen and didn’t need any teasing about dick at a high school party. In our rural school there was no middle school, so I went from 6th grade detention right

into sneak out, all night, high school parties. Allie waited for me at the front of the car. She was a few years older than me, neighbor to the girl I had a crush on, and the most sophisticated girl I knew in school. She read books about artists, knew philosophers names, wrote false yet believable papers and could get whatever she wanted.

Allie liked me, saying "You're different than the rest of them. People here are so boring, all they want to talk about is racing and each other's cows. You at least have your dope and your painting which is frankly rather cosmopolitan." She knew I liked her neighbor (who was dating someone else), but needed backup at parties to aid in her schemes.

Allie's neighbor Elsa looked like an underwear model. More importantly she was kind and weighed out her actions with a fair and judicious mind. Her father was my favorite grown up in that whole collection of valleys. He had been labeled the town drunk but in reality he was no worse than others. He cleverly used this false persona as a ruse to escape judgment for worse perceived things; such as tender heartedness, shrewd familial and agribusiness exploits as well as liberal generosity. He was always ready with a joke and a smile and had given me my first Sex Pistols album. That music greatly broadened the scope of my world, and my relationship with my own father; who found it and had gotten a kick out of listening to *Friggin' in the Riggin'* on his long drive home from work.

Elsa's dad lived in the very furthest interior of the backwoods, yet like Allie's father was one of the most sophisticated men in the county. People at church would glance at each other in mutually passed judgment when he'd take his pew, which always infuriated me. That man prayed with such emotional conviction and lived his faith through action so admirably that he was the true pillar of the community; unlike those sniggering, hypocritical old bitties. He hosted massive parties, like mini-fairs at his own expense and still these impotent, smirking blatherskites (who'd drink his beer and eat his morsels) gave him paupers credit. It figured, the church ladies criticized my mom for doing the flower arrangements on her own dime, calling her "uppity." With Allie's father it was the same—he was a brilliant architect and craftsman yet no one trusted his education or expense. He loved to use one of my neighbor's 30° sunken, unusable DIY garage, whose migrated slab and fittings caved into the foundation of his house, as an example of why to call an architect. Allie's dad's house was an attractive library of dark hardwood, framed in window panes with ample outdoor light. Though I was rarely in it I always felt more intelligent upon leaving it.

Allie had few friends among the girls and most of the guys were just trying to stick it to her. In me there was trust and the camaraderie of someone to attempt her random adventures with. Usually it was something like smuggling multiple flasks into dances, getting homophobes to dance to YMCA, convincing people that I'd read about

Renoir's sailing adventures too, or scoring bags and bottles from older townsfolk without getting jacked or abducted. Tonight we were going to someone's folks-out-of-town party on a mission, we were going to make the exchange student feel at home.

Walter was a very tall, skinny guy from Denmark. He spoke in his absolute lowest vocal register and his voice would crack, leading to a fit of nervous laughter. He blushed uncontrollably, was pimply, bespectacled, and wore the conservative Christian clothes that his host family provided. He was a reverse chick magnet. He liked to talk about physics and people mocked him openly for his crazy professor accent and ways. I liked Walter, he was a decent guy. He never did anything to harm others, was smart, cheerful, and polite. Allie liked Walter too.

"Tonight, we're gonna get Walter fucked up." She said, looking over to me eyes bright in the moonlight. "Check," I said rising from my "shoelace." "You still got weed?" she asked. "Of course" I replied, " Like I said, I'm gonna get Walter high as hell! It'll be fun getting lifted with him. I'm gonna ask about Denmark, you know he never really talks about home...." "Yeah, OK now focus." She took my hand as we walked up the path, stopping to look me in deliberately in the eyes. "Tonight I want you to help me. Get Walter high. We'll have a few drinks. Flirt with me, but not too much. Just so he sees it, but not so he thinks you have a thing for me. Tell him about how great I am but that you like Elsa (because you do). Hell, tell him instead that you are secretly dating

Katia (she's less distracting). When it's time I'll do the rest." "Ok Allie, but if you want to jump him I don't think you need to..." I started. She interrupted with, "look, I like to choose, to plan out my attack. You'll be, like my wingman. You want to party with Walter, I want to fuck him. We both like our exchange student—just think of it as us being a welcoming committee. A very good welcoming committee. Imagine, wouldn't you like that kind of welcome if you were studying abroad?" I felt sort of nervous planning things out like this and wanted to laugh when she said fuck, but tried to rally my coolness and answered as honestly as I could "Uh, yeah. Who doesn't want to get laid and faded at a party?"

We entered the house. Lots of tall boys, with plastic cup beers were yelling in the deepest version of their voices. Many poofy haired girls with too much makeup on were collecting in the living room to talk smack about other girls who were not there. In the kitchen was Walter, alone staring at a revolving hot pocket in the microwave. "Hello Walter!" we cheered in unison. He looked up, eyes bright—happy to see us after being obviously excluded from the revels. He didn't even have a beer cup. I pulled out three joints, sticky from hash oil. "Today's your lucky day Walter" I singsonged "we're gonna get hi-igh!" "Oh tank guudness! I didn't think you both were coming!" He said standing to awkwardly shake my hand and blushing at Allie demurely. Soon we were down to business. Smoke was pouring from the kitchen and the party moved to us.

Allie mixed our drinks and Walter told me about school in Denmark, Danish gangs, loneliness abroad, and how he missed his family. He told me about going to lovely Amsterdam and not liking Paris. I felt so worldly with these two; hearing stories about far away places, telling him about my siblings out on the west coast, with witty interjections from the smartest girl in our school.

I flirted with Allie, he didn't seem to notice. I told him how great she was, but that I was interested in Katia. Walter was getting a little too spiffed, and after spilling gin and juice on his shirt began to take it off to put it in the washing machine. Allie made her move. She sat on his lap while he was unbuttoning on the chair, said something in his ear, kissed his neck and looked into his shocked, eager eyes. She led him off into a room somewhere. I was left with a kitchen full of high chirpy kids. I got everyone out onto the patio and we looked at the stars, shining clear and bright. We all tried to identify the various constellations. There were fireflies out, flashing green and gold, hovering about the lawn. You could smell the grassy, black soil in the air's humidity. The kids talked about God, their folks, and time. I threw in my own two cents here and there. Though Allie had aced every class in high school, I felt that her low opinion of the other kids wasn't very justified. I mean, we were really coming at life from a lot of different angles.

Much later Allie found me passing out in the living room watching late night reruns of MASH with a bunch of wasted, half sleeping teens. She said she'd found us a ride and it was time to go. I arose and walked behind her out the side door. It was still warm and humid in the house but had become rather chilly outside. I hugged my arms around myself, and Allie untied her thinly knit, red sweater from her waist; slipping it on over her head. We were following a larger girl, who was wearing a dark floral blouse, fingerless gloves and a gray and brown striped hat. I didn't know her name but she was the older sister of a girl who was really good in my math class. Allie said to me, "It's official. We're the welcoming committee."

When the next year rolled around we had a new exchange student, Jorge from Mexico. Jorge was a mid-tall thick guy. He liked hanging with the boys and we got along right away on the surface, because he too when able, smoked vast quantities of pot. Jorge was a senior and seemed older than the rest of the people in his class. He said he'd been locked up once. I thought he was bullshitting because we were minors. The first party of the year was coming up and Lilly was excited to get the welcoming committee underway. She thought Jorge was great not because he was so intelligent or interesting but that he was Mexican. People would hate to see pale-little-her on the arm of a fattish, dark, Mexican guy in that part of the country, and to Allie that was

delicious. She despised our racist neighbors and was looking forward to a way to rile them up.

Years before one of my sisters did the same but it was just by hanging out with the only black guy in our school, she liked him as a friend but was more into older guys. All of the mothers of my sister's friends forbid them to hang out with her. She therefore became very popular, and that guy got mad props because she had been considered the hottest girl in school. I got beat up by some lowlife assholes for being a "nigger-lover" but that's a different story.

Allie was fully willing to get with Jorge; she hadn't had a boyfriend all summer but for some random guy who she seduced for the hell of it while on a trip. The party was scheduled with a secret location, but not undisclosed to us. There were a bunch of people camping at the site just north of town where were thrown many keggers. We and a dozen other cars full of kids would make our way there that evening.

"Sex is the most fabulous thing in the world, you know?" Allie was saying to me as we walked with Johnny the theatre boy to his car. Johnny made a scoffing noise.

"Really? You should try it Johnny."

"No sex over here." Johnny said dejectedly.

Allie smiled, "That's because you haven't come clean, out of the closet my boy, out, out, out! You'd get some then wouldn't you, you pretty young thing!"

Johnny looked around nervously, “look, I’m not gay ok?” then louder “I love pussy. Alright. I love when girls fuck me with their pussies.”

“Ha, ha, ha, hah! I bet you do Johnny! I bet you do.” She said then turned back to me, “So, what happened at that party with the New Zealander girl? I chatted her up for an hour, had her hooked for you and then you just disappeared.”

My smile went away, “Well, my brother showed up and ambushed me at the beer keg. Being born again, tired after work, and on a mission from my parents to find me after slipping out—he didn’t want to wait for me to get laid. He gave me the option of coming home with him to save me the humiliation of being beaten in front of the girls I like. Since he taught me to fight and can pretty much kick my ass at will...”

“Well, it must suck to be a guy sometimes. Really, both of you wild men are just bristling with courage today, but no matter. I will get mine!” Allie chattered. We got into the car, it’s gritty struts creaked painfully. Johnny located the screwdriver needed to start the jury-rigged ignition and we soon rattled rustily down the road. *Come on Eileen* was on the radio. We cranked it and all sang along at the top of our lungs.

After picking up the other smokers from the speech team, and helping one of the girls push cattle across the road, we drove to the campsite. It was getting dark and there were lots of cars with kids on their hoods, passing bottles and telling jokes. As we approached we saw Jorge with some other Mexican guys further off by a tent. He

waved. Allie ditched me and the rest to go to Jorge. She walked across the campground to the tent, waved to me and went inside with him.

Soon I was being poured and Everclear cocktail by an older girl who had tried to drag me into a bathroom on my first day of school the year before. I didn't know what was happening at the time and had felt pretty embarrassed by it. She was making up for it soothingly, and looked much better without all of the dragging, forcing, and shouting. Johnny met up with his blonde buddy Troy and disappeared into the woods.

I was quite drunk, getting a backrub on the hood of a car from this tight, curly haired girl when Allie popped out of the tent. She looked distressed. "Wait, stop, stop—it's Allie. She doesn't look OK." I hopped down from the car, almost falling. I stood and gave her the "are or have you been assaulted?" look. She waved it away while walking.

She was trying to sign with me. I suck at ASL. Something about her butt... her mouth... sign for puking ...stink face. Oh. How unfortunate. Ummm. "R U O K?" I could only remember how to do letters or swears. Um... yes is nodding fist, and no is pinchy pinchy, I'm getting a kind of a twirly hand, fingers from chin to other palm thing. I don't know what the fuck that is. Now it looks like no, with some other stuff. What? Hand up and finger down it, for what, right? Oh never mind she's like twenty feet away now.

I yelled, "Hey, you ok?"

She looked disgusted, “I have to leave.” She said, and “Where’s Johnny?”

“Shit! Um, I don’t know. Wait, I saw him and Troy walk off up a deer trail a half an hour ago, why? What’s going on? Are you OK? Do you feel ...safe? Did he...? Should I...?” She gestured for me to stop.

I turned at the sound of the girl on the car who had gotten up and walked away angrily, cursing at Allie as she went. “It was just really gross. He smelled, super bad. He put it in my... well... And then I took it in my... Look. I actually don’t want to dignify that foulness with speech. It’s just that... I need... hold on.” She looked around scanning the empty cups and cans as she talked. “Wait. Just forget what I said before.” She picked up an abandoned beer, swished her mouth with it, spit it out into the grass, putting her hand on her ass like it hurt. “Sex is disgusting. I never want to have sex again.” Alley said cringing.

I started to ask, “Wait, wait, wait. Are you really OK? Did he force you to do anything...?”

She waved her hand to stop me snapping her fingers. “No. Look, I’m not going to say, to tell you what I, we, just... what happened in there. Well... OK, for your sake—and shut up about it—if you’re ever with a girl and she’s down to experiment... Maybe just don’t drop the butt play bomb your first time with her and then expect her to give you backs. Fucking revolting. But, yeah—just ...sex is gross. The welcoming

committee is off. That's over... No it's not your fault, you were better than great ...the best wingman. I just hate sex right now and let's leave it at that. Oh God. I wish phones were portable outside of the house. I would so like to call for a ride right now." She said touching her temple and looking stressed.

I really wanted to help, I didn't know what to do, what I should do, what really happened. When she said "butt play" I thought of a bunch of elderly people at a dinner theatre watching people perform Dryden wearing butt masks on their heads—in front of an over-grinning Scott Thompson, mandolin in hand, dressed as a voyageur; jumping from ass cheek to ass cheek on an enormous rubber booty prop, between geysers of glitter. I don't know, I'd never talked about butt stuff outside the realm of jokes. Meanwhile I was mortified at my brain's stupid as well as untimely humor. The horror! What if she'd been ass raped and that I had done nothing about it. I mean, what the fuck!? I wanted to vindicate her. To somehow help her.

"Shit Allie! OK Let's find you a ride."

She walked beside me, shaking her head and saying, "Ughh. I'm never having sex again."

We found Allie a ride home. She didn't want to talk anymore or in any way about what had happened. I was too worried to grasp the social implications of such discussion. Se kept waving away my attempts at talking about it with a stern eye and a

repeatedly outstretched hand. When we got to the car, I finally asked her if she wanted me to go after Jorge. She looked at me like I was an imbecile and yelled, "Shut up! ...No!" The car door shut. Off she went, crabby faced; in an upper classman's dented, light tan Chevy Nova. I sat down on a bench, feeling confusion and the alcohol. The curly haired girl reappeared, lead me back where we'd been sitting, got me another terrifyingly potent drink and I rapidly passed out on the hood of her brother's car. I remember unable to stand, sputtering incoherently in Jorge's direction as he packed up the tent in his buddies' car and left. The world, tree canopy, clouds, birds, and faces all spun into darkness.

Allie was absent from the next couple of parties. In school she had become absorbed with some test and an ivy league school. I tried to go to a few school events, but games and dances were really boring without her. When she showed up at a house party a few months later she told me that she'd met a guy with the most amazing hands. "Yeah, he's moody, super strong, and into philosophy. You'd like him." I met him. He was totally likable but that he was rather obsessed with Nietzsche. He was older, out of high school, lived a half-hour away and brought her with him into his world on the weekends. She didn't hang out with us kids at school as much, and was totally absent that summer.

I was sad. My elder sisters had moved away, taking their wit with them and now had I lost my dear and clever friend. I missed the quick turn of phrase and bright eyed scheming. Nobody else talked to me about Rimbaud, Foucault, or Kahlo. I found myself befriending an elderly history teacher, just to see again the gleam of intelligence from someone relating a clever story. He in turn shared his deep love of poetry and discovering connections from the present with the past. I began hanging with the metal head girls who told me everything there was to know about menstruation, smoked like chimneys, schemed, and smuggled vodka into school. Then a friend of mine got into stealing cars that year and had crazy misadventures, but that is a different story completely.

The next year Allie had gone off into an accelerated program where she took classes at a college a few towns away. I think where her boyfriend lived. I missed her but I made other friends and had found many new exploits. I became however, wary of Everclear and aware of the complexities and complications of sex. Learning about that became somewhat of the theme for the rest of life in high school (and really, beyond).

The welcoming committee did end on that day, and Jorge didn't stay long, there was some problem with his paperwork. He may indeed have been older than we thought. But really it had been made for (more even than Allie's conquests) Walter out in Odense or Kolding or wherever he's gotten to in life. Where our friends saw a dorky,

awkward stranger, we saw a person of genius, and great sensuality. Thus in closing—I raise my glass in memory, “To Allie! To Walter! To the fireflies and starlit nights of Southeastern Minnesota! Cheers!”

Oh Brother

It was late. The wind whipped, rattling glassy pebbles across packed snow encrusted in ice with the wicked chill of twenty below. The car which dropped me at the end of our long country driveway sped off down the gravelly snow darkness of rural roadway. I watched it through the bushes and trees until the tail lights disappeared behind a hill at the bend in the road. I listened to the fading sound of my friend's engine as it passed out of sight, over the bridge, and out of earshot in the howling wind.

It had been an overcast day and was a very dark night—no moon, no stars. Turning I steadied myself against the commanding wind, stepping in the icy divots that concealed the driveway. I wondered again where my parents were, their car was absent from the driveway and the farm truck was still buried under two feet of snow. There were lights on in the house and smoke out of the chimney, which meant my eldest brother was still home.

He had moved in when his wife left him a few months before—but he already sort of lived there, as his broken trailer had been only about thirty yards from the house. The trailer had been mangled in its initial transport; the frame was bent, there were holes, nothing worked but he and the wife roughed it there for a few years before she left him. They were always lurking about in my parents house due to the marvels of

plumbing, heat, and electricity found therein. I saw his large silhouette in the sliding glass doors to the front porch. I walked on, skirting between the slippery tire track ice and the deeper snow—wincing as the blisteringly cold gusts pulsed between the house and garage downhill, throwing snow in my face.

Once I got past the outer buildings and into the wind shadow of the house I paused for a moment. I lit a cigarette. For the past month my brother hadn't slept at night. He kept obsessing over the divorce, his kids, what could have been different, what he might still do... and lacking rest he was also without boundaries. He had been following me around the house, not really speaking to me but always there – often talking vaguely to himself. I had taken to going on hikes more than I ever would in the winter... to try to get away from him, but he followed along there too. I would quickly outdistance him in the woods but he'd still follow, muttering, tracking my steps.

I had just tonight drank a bunch of brandy with my friends, bitching about him and how I was worried that he was losing his mind. Me and my friends were fourteen. Nobody knew what to say about it, so we switched to the topics of girls, the government, and music instead. But now I was home and he was standing there in the doorway steadily staring at me while I smoked conspicuously, hunched over for warmth on an icy path in the snow.

My dog woke and whimpered, poking his head through the flap of the doghouse. He wanted to greet me but didn't fancy the chill. It was odd to me that he was outside, we'd usually have him inside when it was cold like this. I thought about bringing him in the house but decided to wait and see what the reason was for him being outside first, my brother would know. Probably something logical—he was a dog, they are sloppy creatures. I scratched behind his Akita ears and told him to get back in his house which he did. I felt the blankets inside, they were warm and dry so I worried less about his winter safety. I creaked up the porch stairs and stomped the snow off my boots at the rough rug in front of the glass door. My brother had retreated further into the house somewhere, probably to get away from the frost that would follow me through the door. I pulled the handle and stepped inside the kitchen.

In the kitchen there was a sort of permanent scent of oregano, tomato peel, and jerk spice from the food I cooked. My parents didn't like cooking and I didn't care for their food, so in reward for my outspokenness I made most of the meals. It was a good smell, and I was filled with instant memories of familiar cunning applied to what were always substitute ingredients. My mind warmed before my body. I tossed my long overcoat, heavy down jacket, and thin navy deck jacket on a chair keeping my sweater. It paid to layer up—the air in between kept you alive. We had an old wood-burning stove in the adjoining room. We had been using it for heat for the past five years. Our

furnace failed just into our first season there. I instinctively went right to it not just to warm feeling back into my face and hands but also to see if there were enough logs on the fire. If the fire went out the pipes and everything else would freeze, so I always checked it immediately upon entering the house.

The stove was in the central dining room along with some stacks of firewood and a long, covered table and chairs that we never used. We always ate at our intimate little Formica table in the kitchen, where we also played cards. In the wall behind the stove there was an opening next to the doorway where a window had been in nineteen-ten, before someone built the addition that was to become our living room. I looked up through it and I saw my brother standing in the middle of the living room, looking out a bay window facing away from me. I was going to say hi but I noticed looking over the stove that the pot we kept on it to keep the air from getting dry was out of water. "I'm going to get some water," I said. He emerged from the living room and looked at me with a peculiar glossy expression, like he was glaring at the wall behind me, so I grabbed a hot pad and the pot. He followed me into the kitchen, I filled the pot, and moved past him to put it back on the stove. He mutely stared, unblinking, at a point just below my chin. It occurred to me that I might have something on my neck, or that my clothes may be dirty and smell like booze. I froze for a moment, he didn't speak. I decided that I should take a shower and brush my teeth before my parents got home. So

I grabbed my gear off of the chairs, emptied out my pockets onto the dryer, stripped down to my undies and tossed everything into the washer. My brother had followed me into the laundry room and had opened the closet there with the vacuum cleaner, soap powder, summer jackets, and gun rack in it.

I already had a toothbrush in my mouth and stopped to ask "Are there raccoons on the roof? Coyotes by the back porch?" There had been in the past and sometimes my dad or brother would go shoot off a round to get them to clear out. "No," he said as he loaded a round into the single shot shotgun I had taken hunting the year before, pocketing a half dozen other red Winchester slugs from the box. He stepped into the bathroom as I was washing out my mouth, I looked up into the mirror and said "what are you weird or something? Get out of here! I'm gonna take a shower before Mom and Dad get home to wash the booze stink off." I was about to say "this ain't no peepshow" when in the mirror behind my grinning face I saw him raise the gun, cocking it as he put the muzzle to the back of my head. The cool metal of the gun pushed ring like against the base of my skull.

He looked me coldly in the eye through the mirror. He said, "No, no I'm not."

"What are you doing with the gun!?! You're not what?" I replied, smile gone.

His pupils were pinched into sharp little points looking at me like a deathly stranger. Like he wanted to see the shot exit the orbit of my eye carrying the spray of

my bone and brain through the shattering glass of the mirror. I noticed my own face in the mirror, my cheeks, more my forehead—had gone from ruddy to pale. My eyes were wide, I looked scared. I had felt tipsy before, but now I was instantly sober, feeling the ring of gun steel prodding my head forward, my hair pushing into the bore.

He said in a steady expressionless voice “I’m not a fucking fag... look I know you’re in on it and you’re gonna pay.”

“In on what?” I said.

“Look, get out of the bathroom. You walk ahead of me into the living room,” he said backing into the other room gun up at his shoulder drawing a bead on my forehead as I turned around.

The man had a hundred eighty pounds on me and was thirteen years my senior – years spent studying martial arts, getting into fights, and trying to be a championship weightlifter, so grappling for the gun was not much of an option.

I sputtered, “You want me to put my hands up, or...?”

“Yeah, no. Just. Just WALK” he shouted, gun muzzle firmly striking my occipital bone. I strode with my hands a little out to my sides, in case I tripped on something and fell.

I walked out, in my underwear, with minty toothpaste on my lips to the living room with my eldest brother stalking behind me – I could see him peripherally in the

reflection on the window, raising and lowering the gun to point at my brain then my heart and back again as he crept behind me.

“You said I was in on something... In on what?” I really wished that I knew. Whatever he thought I was in on had to be something big. It wasn’t like he kept his nose clean, maybe this was just some kind of gross misunderstanding. It was either that or he had finally, really snapped and I was going to be dead. I couldn’t think it was that. I had to pee a little. My mind was racing for something to grasp onto, something to get me out of this.

We got into the living room and he said, “sit on the couch.” I sat on the couch.

He stuck the muzzle of the gun in my face. I could see light curve into darkness down the bore.

In terse, even tones this came out of his mouth: “You, and fucking Mom, and Dad really think that you can contract a hit on me and fucking get away with it?!”

“What, what are you talking about?” I asked lifting my hands. He positioned the gun in front of my left eye.

“Yeah right, like you’re not in on it,” he scoffed.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, what, a hit? Did someone hit you? Wait, like a gangster hit?” I responded. I hadn’t yet seen a lot of gangster movies, wasn’t my thing—didn’t get the parlance. He smiled cruelly and shook his head.

I said shakily, "Look, I'm your brother and I am in high school and I would never try to get a hit on you, I don't even know ...how, where ...what the hell is this all about?"

"Oh I'll tell you what this is about!" He yelled, shotgun tapping hard against the bridge and lens piece of my glasses.

My brother then spun a tale. He said he had been accosted at a bar in town where he'd gone to get some weed and the people who threw him out told him that he'd better get the hell out of there because someone was gonna come and get him. He said that he knew why my mom and dad were all buddy-buddy with the Italians. He said that he knew about Dad's teamster connections and how our parents had methodically, month by month plotted and destroyed his marriage and now that we - the family- had hired this hit on him. He said was going to kill us before they got him, and he'd be waiting to do the hit men in too.

While hearing this my jaw fell open. My brother had no gift as a story teller. He was not an intelligent or creative man, and listening to this story as he went into an hour of different details I was amazed at how convincing he sounded, how meticulous. How could my brother John, who can't make up words for a song, or remember a punch line, or really read, make this all up? My mom did tend to make friends with Italian women, my dad was in a union, they did bicker exceedingly with John's ex-wife,

he was fearful enough to have me at gun point—finger on the trigger... But it couldn't be true. I didn't know anything about it. I told him I didn't, couldn't know anything. I then pleaded for my life. I had to piss like crazy.

At some point he sat down on one of the recliners, he kept the gun pointed at me. He looked pleased with himself. I started to feel something other than fear. I was getting angry. I had to pee. Really bad. I could feel the round fullness of my bladder, painfully stretched and I was afraid I couldn't hold it anymore.

"Look!" I yelled at him, changing my tone and clenching my brow. His eyes widened, he aimed at my chest. "I have to fucking pee! I've been listening to your shit for hours and I have been holding a piss this entire time." I stood up. "I can't take it anymore! I am going to the bathroom. You can fucking shoot me if you want!" I turned and took a long step over the floor, headed toward the bathroom.

"Don't you..." he started to say but I cut him off.

"I'm not gonna piss myself in front of you! I won't wet my pants for your entertainment you sick fuck, so go ahead, kill me if your gonna kill me... Yes, shoot your brother in the back when he needs to piss, because you've lost your fucking mind. Good job! What a fuckin' hero." I took a further step, into the other room.

The instant of that stride was a small eternity. For a moment instead of feeling like I was going to piss I was simply aware of my body especially the skin on my back,

my spine underneath and the organs below, waiting for the focused sting of the muzzle burn, the searing metal slug to rip instantly through my heart or lung, for the deafening shot in an enclosed space, the smell of gunpowder, blood on the doorway in front of me, the loss of balance and to enter rapidly into dying.

There was no shot. He didn't even follow me. In moments I was in the bathroom trying to pull down my undies as quickly as possible because I was starting to lose my grip on it. It was a very, very long piss. It started giddy. I was still alive! I got to pee! But as it drew on I was considering what he had said and sorting out what to do next. First off—my brother John was wrong. My dad was in a machinists union, not the teamsters. He hated gangster shit, said they were a bunch of cowardly scumbags.

My mother made friends with Italian ladies because they were often the only Catholic women who would put up with her pre-Vatican II, cult of Mary, religious views. My dad only met her friends to figure out what kind of people they were – if we were going to be raped or made into steaks by going over there or something, and that was it. He wasn't into listening to talk about Protestants' going to hell, sneaking scapula on the terminally ill, St. Bernadette's tears, or how "with his holiness the Pope so confused by the world, we need the co-savior status of Mary now more than ever." I had to sit and listen to this stuff while pretending to go through stations of the cross on a rosary. At least her friends taught me to cook.

My dad was so vehemently against gangs he had been hit with a pipe at work once because of saying so. I had to be reintroduced to him at the hospital. He never wavered. My parents were a two-seater fifties biker couple who settled down into their own version of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, had a working class family – the farm being their last experiment in a series of moves.

I wasn't a Mafioso, I was a stoner farm kid who liked to paint happy little trees and made friends with my local librarian. Nobody had hired a hit, John had gone to a small town bar, muttering to himself like a nut, asking for drugs, acted like a tough guy and got kicked out—they were probably trying to tell him that the cops were coming. His wife was a horrible sadist, and he was a tool, a buffoon, and their marriage collapsed under the weight of their conceits ...not some secret methodology of my actually disinterested parents.

John was still waiting in the other room to shoot my folks when they got home from where ever they were. I couldn't let that happen. I couldn't let him kill my parents for nothing – for some paranoid snap of his mind. He didn't shoot me, that didn't mean that he wouldn't. I remembered the guns in the closet in the laundry room. My dad had spent many hours drilling me in their use at target ranges, the thing he was most afraid of was someone harming his family. If ever something like this happened, he had prepared me for what I was to do.

I peeked out of the bathroom door—looking through the laundry room, past the woodstove and into the living room where John was standing. He was still holding the gun. His back was to me as he stared into the vacant horse pasture, out beyond the big bay window. The closet door had a pull handle which opened soundlessly. I was looking at a .303 with a clip in it, I was seeing the back of my brothers head twenty feet away.

My underwear were wet from not quite making it to the toilet in time. I touched the gun. I had been raised to protect my family, had practice in the use of this weapon and now was facing the decision to try to save my parent's lives by taking my brother's. No. I know the story of Cain and Abel. I am my brothers keeper (though I have to watch out for the motherfucker). I also know John wasn't right in the head, I mean there was the British rifle, a Remington .22, a Mossberg pump 12 gauge, and a .22 Ruger pistol all in the same closet that he'd gotten the .410 single shot out of. Hell, he could have gotten creative—there was a three section staff in there too. Not to mention the veritable armory upstairs. What was he going to do? Pop us one at a time, casually reloading while we watch? As if we'd just stand around for that. There were tonfas in the living room, a machete in the kitchen, and a K.O. from a shovel outside would be fatal in this weather. He was so big I don't even think I could drag his ass back into the house.

Well, he did already have one in the chamber and had had the initiative. He didn't shoot me, I should probably return the favor. Anyway, he needs a dose of sense, not death. I outgun him just standing here, trying not to fart. I was a pretty good shot then, even with the glasses. ...and quick. No one should die over a lack of sleep and an economy sized case of sadness. Especially not my brother, by my hand. For fuck's sake, he used to carry me around everywhere on his shoulders when I was three, telling people I was his cool little buddy. I softly shut the closet and stepped further into the laundry room to get some clean underwear that I hadn't put away after drying them the day before.

I changed my garment, I would not kill my brother – I would not hang on to that for the rest of my life. I would reason with him. If my parents got home and he was still going to kill them I could likely change my mind. I probably wouldn't have a better shot than now but I refused to let his madness become my own. I put on a shirt, some pants and brought socks with me into the living room. John turned as I stepped on the creaky spot in the floor next to the stove—I stepped there on purpose, I wanted him to see me coming, not to startle him. He relaxed the weapon, the point of the gun tipped to the ceiling.

He said, “you don't know nothing. You must not be in on it ...you don't know nothing.”

“There’s nothing to know,” I replied.

Then, for the next hour I pleaded and argued with him. I did my best to make him see what was happening – a month without sleep, the stress of divorce, and his paranoid misconceptions should not make him a kinslayer. He stuck to his gun.

I kept getting more and more angry. Then there was another hour of me simply yelling at him- mocking him calling him a fool, daring him to come to reason, even taunting him to kill me. I was pretty great at sarcasm. I let him have it. He looked dazed, was mostly motionless.

He wouldn’t budge, all he said was, “You don’t understand, I have to kill Dad and Mom.”

Finally I told him, “I give up! I can’t stand sitting here with your crazy ass! I’m out! I’m going!”

He had told me before that if I tried to leave he’d shoot. I knew if I tried to plug in and reconnect the phone cord to make a call he would have either shot me or more likely at this point, beat me senseless. I figured I would walk to the neighbors house and call the police. I didn’t think he would shoot me now. He didn’t shoot me when I went to the bathroom, though he said that he would, and I had just called him a dumb motherfucker at least twenty times—at one point pulling down my shirt to show him where to put the bullet and “win.” Yet, I wasn’t sure if he’d let me leave.

I thought, maybe if I just walk boldly right out. I can't hesitate while stepping out the door, he'd think I was being shifty and react to that.

I layered up with some spare coats from hooks by the stairs— non hurriedly, staring back at him as he stood in the hallway. I went and got the stuff from my pockets out of the laundry room. He followed me. I walked back into the kitchen to put on my dad's spare boots, as mine were wet.

I said, "You should put that gun away John. Don't kill your parents. Don't kill Mom and Dad." He gave me a sneer and scratched his head. I was out the door, he grabbed a jacket off a hook and followed me. I was walking down the steps, I heard a click. I froze.

Another long millisecond passed where I was expecting to feel the bullet shatter my bones and to quickly see a close-up of the snow—but nothing, it was his lighter. He had lit up a smoke, and sat down on one of the deck rocking chairs with the gun in his lap, steadied the chair and just watched me. I was glad I hadn't hit the deck. I felt really perturbed, this shit was undignifying. I pulled out a smoke and lit it while I walked. It was four in the morning, I had gotten home at ten.

The wind had died down and the snow was falling fast, there was a fresh six inches of powder on the ground. It was cold but I had on a good, thick parka and was determined to not let him hurt anybody. I started off toward the neighbors house a half

mile away. It was late but no-one locked their doors, I could call 911 there. When I got to the end of the drive I heard an engine in the distance. The only people driving up the valley that late at night would be my parents. I saw lights flash up the road near the bridge and my neighbors dairy barn. I was on the other side of a large spruce tree from John, I couldn't see him and he couldn't see me. I waited there for them to stop, to warn them before they maybe got shot.

As the car pulled up I could see my parents squinting at me cockeyed from behind the windshield. I waved for them to halt. They pulled just past me, up the drive and rolled down the passenger window.

"What are you doing?!" my mother called out to me.

"It's John" I whispered – mouthing deliberately, "he has a gun and he wants to shoot you."

"What? What are you saying, why are you outside at this hour?" my mother yelled shrilly into the shadows. I stepped closer, giving up my cover. I could see John still on the porch – with the gun.

I blurted out quickly, "It's John he has a gun and wants to shoot you- you've gotta get out of here."

"What? What are you saying? A gun? Are you drunk?" She'd recently caught me stealing some of her whiskey.

I gave up on being tactful- John could surely hear and see us so I yelled jumping up and down pointing and waving my arms. "He has a fucking gun! He wants to shoot you! Aaarrgh!"

My dad shut off the car and stepped out. John had stood up and was reentering the house. My parents didn't believe me. I turned from them all and strode up the wheel tracks in the snow toward the neighbors.'

When I got up behind the hill at the bend in the road and within a quick run to my neighbor's house, I stopped and lit up a cigarette. I hadn't heard any shots yet and I was rethinking just waltzing into their house, if in fact nothing was happening. John may have been bigger than my dad but the old man was meaner, much more cunning, and could fight like hell. I smoked another, then another. I ran out after six, and there were still no shots fired. I was considering going back when I saw something coming up the road toward me from our farm. Darkly squeaking through the powdery white came a bike with a figure on it. I walked toward it. It was my brother—no gun visible riding a bike that I knew had flat tires, through the snow. He didn't look at me, he just stared forward and kept pedaling. I walked past him and didn't turn to see him go, just listened to hear if he stopped.

Gripper

Summer vay-cay had just gotten underway and I was home for the first time in months from boarding school. The 'rents had me hanging with them full-time the first week and I was fine with that. They had better food and more of it than I had gotten used to eating at school. My main man Niall couldn't hold off for much longer though and we were going out to party. We were both seventeen.

Some of the guys and gals I used to hang with were throwing two parties that weekend and I was to attend both. It was a big deal because after I left some friends of mine from one town started kicking it with kids from another. I was the common link between them, elevating my status and making kids want me to be there. This was different from how things had gone before when I was more on the outskirts of the constant popularity contest among the cliques and tropes of regular high school life. I preferred relaxing. Walking at the fringes of groups, being chill. I was a little anxious about being some sort of VIP. I usually tried to redirect praise and elevation. I preferred to peg it on someone else, as those popular folks doubled invariably as targets. If one forged too far ahead, their back often made a common target for character assassins - the supply of which in high school was ample. The exception to that rule was perhaps found among the goth kids. Whoever was popular among them pretty much just got

perks since they tended to share everything—including shame. But being popular with those people generally required lots of accessorizing and I spent my spare money on other things. So even in that case I would defer any proposed laurels.

Anyhow Niall and I were driving away from my folks farmhouse after a brutal argument with my mother. “But, Mo-om, I’m peacocking. It’s a thing.” Mother barked back, “What thing? Some sort of shame yourself by looking like a twittering faggot thing?! What are you, a pansy waste?” It went on for awhile. Eventually progressing to where I “should be drug out into the street and shot,” for walking around dressed like a fruitcake. My dad was with her on this but let her do the talking, as she was equal opportunity flipping out. “C’mon Ma, this is a classic look, like Space Oddity Bowie, or like one of the Young Ones on BBC.” I’d been living in Minneapolis, the house that Prince built in the shade of Paul Bunyan’s axe hole. It was the funky town from that song. At the time I was gobbling down P-Funk, Fela Kuti, and vintage XTC albums by the milk crate. I looked dope as hell. Whatever. I put the sexy back into flower child. Shit. I’d have looked natural at a George Clinton or Ween show. ...dragged out into the street.... What, did Chairman Mao’s team USA, Mormon Gestapo agents come out of their sleeper cells because a young man wore his fresh jammies and “behold, the bulge” pants out in public? Fuck a whole bunch of that ridiculous nonsense. Really she just missed me and wanted me to stay home playing cards or rolling dice with my pals until

the stars were out. Then have a great big bonfire, bringing kids over to make up stories or sing catchy tunes. ...or maybe even prepare a great huge Sicilian feast like one of our old neighbor ladies showed me, like I used to.

What was I wearing? Well, let's start from the bottom and go up. I had on some black, fringed, knee-high, moccasin boots topped off by striped cobalt blue and ruby red Italian pajama pants which framed the shape of my bits just so. They lacked pockets so I had an ornate, leather clasp, belt pouch knotted at the waist for my wallet, smokes, and stuff. The pants-pouch combo worked great because I had complete mobility to do scissor kicks or tornados without my keys or lighter flying out of pocket. I had on a tight, form-fitting, white, long john shirt and a bright orange, fringed, short sleeved top that fit like a bolero jacket. The top -an orange shirt- had been a gift from a hippie mama pal at Arts High. It's been her uncle's. It was made for him by an old girlfriend and had unique hand painted buttons and faint lemon pinstriping. It looked like something Sly Stone or one of the Bar-Kays would wear.

Her uncle would wear this shirt and a big smile when he was bringing drugs into Dick Dale or Grateful Dead concerts. He never got searched and apparently was a chick magnet in the garish thing. She said that I was the only person she knew with the balls to wear it. I took it out of a vague social obligation—almost like a dare. While wearing it, I had a similar experience to her uncle. First off, when putting it on you couldn't help

but grin at yourself in the mirror, because it was the loudest damn thing you'd ever seen and yup, you were going for it. I was so conspicuous I never got patted down or searched in the thing, doormen never charged me a cover and didn't ID me when I had it on—it was like I was always in the band or whatever. Girls seemed to find me more approachable, and with that crazy thing on there was always something to talk about. Cops and gangstas might point or laugh at me but they didn't try to bully or detain me (which was pretty far from usual). In addition to that, complete strangers (especially the elderly) would regularly come up to me and tell me of the craziest things they'd done or ever seen. For me, that alone made it well worth looking like a freak show. I love a good story. Niall was less wildly dressed. He had on Vans shoes and hat, black slacks (he too only wore pants one could comfortably do high kicks in), an Alice In Chains T-shirt and a long sleeved flannel he'd lifted from my house. My Ma was right to say that I looked different and even be concerned, but I knew that I'd be alright. This was already a tried, tested and proven outfit—I was wearing that shit practically everywhere that year.

I didn't like fighting with with my mother, I knew how lonely it was out in the hills but I had a social obligation, and Niall would look bad if I didn't show up. I couldn't let that happen. Niall and I were up until this point the dead last rejects in the ongoing, school popularity contest. We were always getting attacked by people because they thought they could get away with it.

I was proud to have beat motherfuckers off of Niall when we moved back into town and ashamed of when I wasn't able to. It had been hard for Niall at times with his popular brothers—making him like everyone's kid brother to shit on and I was always the new kid who one can assault with impunity. There were always plenty of bullies. For me in the last few years it had been mostly the sportos. I whooped a couple of bigger and higher status jocks who'd attacked me for not being on the team (first it was the wrestlers, but it blew up from there to a lot of the different sports' guys). Therefore I had to defend myself almost everyday against low status sportos trying to socially elevate themselves by kicking my ass. But my dad made sure I could rock socks, and for awhile I was a borderline bully boy (sometimes acting preemptively)—but I was really just trying to look out for me and my friends (who might get beaten by proxy). Now we were older and suddenly the cool kids because we had been the first in our grade to lift our plaintiff hands out for controversial music, sex with girls, and copious amounts of cushy buds. Also, I was the first one to move away (and beyond all hope I lived).

What I really wanted to find out was if my new status could get the attention of this girl Emer, who was essentially a mythical Norse-Irish nymph-princess of tauntingly captivating sex. I knew no straight man, boy, or lesbian who wouldn't have given a pound of flesh to have a go with her. She gave such a solid rise with her laughing green eyes. Man just thinking of the double curve of her ass, there in the truck was making my

belt strap feel a bit too tight. Perhaps she'd bite. She'd flirted with me once, but she flirted with everyone because that's what they wanted to think that she was doing. Niall was saying, "...she IS fine, man. Pass me Old Juanito." Old Juanito was the name of a massive clay pipe that lived in Niall's broken glove box.

Old Juanito had a Mexi-Spaniard looking face (like Don Quixote gone vaquero), long moustache, his mouth and eyes open as if in dull surprise. The mouth was the bowl of the pipe and fit an easy dime bag or two depending on who you were dealing with. It was a pipe of substance and fit well in the hand. Juanito was going back and forth as we sailed effortlessly around familiar corners—past cliffs, boundary stones, over rills and through encircling plant life across the thirty miles we were headed. The air smelled floral of cut hay, thistle-down and blackberry blossoms; sweet, tart and fragrant like in a botanical spa. It was first the Violent Femmes then Bob Dylan out of our mouths and speakers. He'd offered to play the Subhumans tape I'd left in his car, an old favorite of mine, but I wanted to hear our mutual fun time classics. In between good songs we were thinking up and voicing more clever analogies for pretty girls sexy bits, police cruisers, and new, improved sarcastic ways for saying "affirmative." There were always a few quotes taken from movies and used as idioms. Like yelling "Sexual Chocolate!" and miming a mic drop as an expression for something being really embarrassingly bad; in reference to Randy Watson from *Coming to America*. Or saying

“Have a coke and a smile” as a way of saying “shut the fuck up” in reference to Richard Pryor’s advice in *Raw*. Niall loved Eddie Murphy.

We knew a redneck guy who liked “to sit on the back porch, and blow shit up!” We passed his house and started jabbering like southern yokels, about pegging cows, sheep and chickens until we stopped at the turn off from the back roads into denser civilization. We were on the lookout. Cops liked to hide in the blind turns around here, had got my dad a few times for speeding, and once almost caught us red handed with Old Juanito laughing smoke rings at us.

I was riding passenger at the absolute peak of my high. When the cop lit his cherries I tilted the seat back to pretend to be asleep. Niall flipped out, “No man! Don’t, just be normal. He’ll think we’re up to stuff for sure if you’re laying down!” No dice, I couldn’t talk to anybody—just too damn goofy at the time. I had one eye cracked and noticed all of the fog in the car clear as Niall rolled down the window, meaning Mr. Officer just received a potent hit of hotbox chronic. He coughed. We were fucked. “What’s wrong with your friend there.” Said Mr. Officer, flashing his light across my face. I don’t know what possessed me to do this, I knew it was the wrong thing. I popped up, faced him with both of my rosé stained glass window eyes and hissed loudly, “I’m asleep!” The surprised expression on Niall’s face was priceless.

Niall looked like he was going to lose it laughing, then whipped his head over to gauge the cop's expression. The officer snorted, stepped back and shook his head. Both out of the car. Interrogation times. "What are you boys doing out here tonight..?" Then on to ye olde searchy-searchy. Oh shit, the glove box doesn't close and he's in there by Old Juanito. We were lucky that when the cop was digging in there and hit pay dirt he was squeamish of the crumpled up tissues I'd placed around and on top of Juan. We didn't have anything else to cover the beast with. It was ragweed season, I had hay fever and a few were snotty. He touched one, got his fingers wet and looked super disgusted. I'm pretty sure by the horrified way he looked at us that he had thought they were laden with teen reject, whack festival cum blossoms. Cops tend to have the dirtiest of imaginations (then again I've seen what they force these cats to watch in their cop schools and it's pretty fucking terrifying). He had Niall do the drunk test no less than six times, until he seemed satisfied enough to let us go.

We were lucky, he knew we were higher than Sputnik riding on Airavata's tusks and he could have hauled us in or worse. Some of the cops down there liked to beat out the phantom monkeys on their backs, and I didn't want to be beat like no cops monkey. Niall had been completely overwhelmed, "Asleep! Asleep man, REALLY! What-the-fuck-was-that!?!... And the tissue! Our lives hang in the balance and you fucking cover it with a goddamned tissue?! Wh't'feck'man?!" Yup. I never really lived "being asleep"

down, but I did learn to adapt a more regular, sedate method with authority figures after that. Right now however, we were on the lookout. We didn't want to even skirtingly take chances on sordid police-fantasy delays. We had two parties to get to.

We put on dour, church faces and tuned on commercial radio to keep up the act of humorlessness. If those boys in blue saw you joking around and having a good time they'd pull you over for sure (crazy outfit or not). Too high either on drugs or life, better book 'em... Nothing like hearing commercials for blathering political wags, new & improved litter-shit-kitty shovels, and shiny freeze-dried, sugary bacon-bites to suck all the joy from the world. We had the choice of country break up songs, olden times by captain acid casualty, or the words of Jesus reimagined by some backwater, toothless, West Virginian hick, jingo lobbyist. So we listened to the seventies rehab station and started talking about the landscape architecture of the various lots we passed. Mellow structuralist gab backed by played out sounds, a regular after school special on wheels.

We came to the turn to go to La Crosse or toward Brownsville. I thought we'd go first to La Crosse. I loved La Crosse and its scenic bluffs, underage accessible bars, and plenteous, sex shop savvy girlfriends. We turned towards Brownsville. The place with the fish fries and the big church. "L'Grosun's?" I asked. He lived in Hokah, a town halfway in between. Just uphill from the broken levee, out next to the flats. "Oui, L'Grosun's."

L’Grosun was a guy who taught us how to play drums on a trap set. Well, instructed Niall, who then showed me. We could both play every song from *Ride the Lightning* because of him. He was a big fella. Wavy blond hair, like he crimped it. Corpulent. Enormous Dutch nose. A young heshier. He pretty much wanted to grow up and be the next singer or drummer for AC/DC. We’d smoke him up and he’d teach us stuff. It was a mutually beneficial relationship. He was a couple of years older and wanted to be friends with Niall’s elder brothers. Niall filled me in on the way to the haps at L’Grosun’s of late. Apparently Scooby, Benzo, and Phil had been squatting over there cooking and smoking up grips of meth. Musketeers four had been so prodigious of late, selling to the trailer court community on the flood plain, that they were celebrating a thirty day party for L’Grosun’s birthday.

Today was the thirtieth day of the party, a party in which each person (and a few stragglers) had been up a solid thirty days on meth. I was like “Whaaaaat!?” One of my brothers had a dark chapter on that shit and it turned me off in a big way. I’d seen people plenty of times, up a weekend, maybe a few days, vapid, possessed and schitzo, but thirty? “Fo-real!? Thirty days? A fucker can die from a splinter of that.” I scowled. Bad blood with the crank heating to a low boil. Niall cast a wry smile. “Yup’n. Foshizzle, man. Real thirty. Careful now, shit’s cra-cra-cray-zay over yonder. Yepper-Skipper!”

We rolled into the drive in front of a beat up, peach, two story prefab. There were eight or nine cars parked in the drive and on the lawn, full up. One was just leaving so we didn't have to gamble with the street. Thank heavens. Hokah is a nightmare of drunk drivers smashing off your mirror or fender and bailing. At least we were spared this local chapter of the Old Milwaukie driving school. Out of the truck Hokah Tech's dropout division stood looming before us. L'Grosun's and his meth lab of pre-fire and flood destruction. We were met at the door by a jean-jacketed heshier who looked like he combed with a squeegee. "Who the fuck... oh Niall. My good man. Who's this, the prodigal son? Come in. Scooby just left, I think L'Gros just busted his face! It's a party!"

We walked into a dark infested living room full of broken furniture. Some scabby, half naked tweaker girl was in the corner scratching herself and cursing at the cigarettes in her handbag. It smelled like old shit and burnt plastic. We fought back the urge to gag and went for the stairs going up. You could hear L'Gros and Benzo shouting like football hooligans up there. We climbed halfway up, making it to the landing. L'Grosun popped down the stairs like a yellow streak of stink lighting. His stained light tan bathrobe fluttered, his flip-flops flapped, his balls dangled out of his filthy, blue, sailboat boxers. "Hey fuckahhs! How's my menzz!" His eyes bulged a painful, puffy pink-red emptiness. He stank. A formidable cloud hung about him of

bum pits, fresh landfill and incinerated Sudafed—over powering the mere human shit, crank-stank of level one.

We couldn't get a word in edgewise. "See that? Whahaaa-haha! That's where me and Scooby got pushy on the stairs. Motha-fucka snap into a Slim Jiiiiimmm! Slim Jim Bitches! Lookit! See his face in the dumb damn wall?! Fooooo! I bust bitches for breakfast! It's dinner and I need rock!" He flew back up the stairs. Stirring further his personal stink cloud.

I was flabbergasted. This dude was always fat. Just a big dude. He had become skinny! Well sort of. His flesh hung off his bones like flopping rags. He used to talk slower than Andy Griffith on Quaaludes, and move like cornstarch and molasses. He now was all Speedy Gonzales on recess pop rocks. Had once been over bathed and smelled like green shampoo conditioner blend. Now he had a dirty, thickly crusted, lost hobo penis, power odor. His eyes were recessed into their sockets but bulging out like agonizing, veiny, face hernias. Complexion was the scratchiest looking collection of itch wounds I'd ever seen, body wide. Like he'd had fallen into a moment of passionate romance with an aching, long lusted, bushy patch of poison ivy. The cracked in hole in the shitty post-fab drywall looked generally face like. I could see the rough arc in the break mark where Scooby's nose had connected. There was a further pushed in outcropping and little blood marks on the plaster where the nostrils had been. Great.

How fun was this. "Maybe we should go man."

"Now, man you gotta see this shit. I was here yesterday and I just didn't know how to describe it, what's happened with people here lately. You, you just gotta see it. I dunno, I don't know how to explain this level of fuckedness." Niall said looking amused at my vocal expression. Niall couldn't read facial queues too well but caught tone, and with Niall I wore my heart on my sleeve. It apparently sounded pretty grossified and disgustulated. "All right man. Let's go up and see it." I straightened up my chest and tilted in my chin, not just to tough it out but in case someone got the urge for fisticuffs.

Crank generally brings out the best examples of the worst in people. I'd already seen too many fights erupt out of thin air from tweaking geekers and I didn't want to be sucker punched and tossed out a window, like what famously happened to a guy I once knew. No fucking around, but act cool, no fists up or anything. Just casually badass. Even though you're wearing a captain floofhammer outfit, everybody's seen some dude get his ass busted for fucking with a fresh dressed man, style irrelevant. I mean just look at muscle queens. Only dyed in the wool busters want to take the time to fuck with 'em because of the fear of how your ass will look being kicked by one, and what could happen after it's over. I mean everyone who's ever been in a fight knows things can go wrong and that you wanna weigh out your risks. That kind of second-guessing

becomes instinct then for when enough drugs are applied. I had a friend try to lift a building once on angel dust. All it took to get him acting like John Q. Public was to remind him that that wasn't cool, not a thing that human people do. No one wants to be uncool, and no one wants to be the guinea pig for the cops to try out all their new shock and awe devices on. Or, all cuffed up, get a nightstick jammed up your butthole. We'd all heard the stories and had friends or family in stir. But then again. Crank makes you dumb as hell, and loudly convinced otherwise.

As we crested the stairs we saw collections of soiled towels and blankets all over the floor. There were so many fist holes in the walls you could see into all three rooms as well as the sunset outside if you lined them up just so. One closet was totally caved in, the beds were broken and the trampled piles of heavy metal posters, broken CD cases, and denim boiled with roaches and fleas. I didn't want to get too close to that. Fleas suck.

Benzo was prepping a foiley. An aluminum foil wrap smoking thing. He was looking' like a spazz-goblin. He used to look like one of the Ramones. I usually avoided the dude. He was one of Niall's girlfriend's ex-boys. They had an amiable truce, but you never know with these things. So I was defensive. Also, he wacked off a dog at a party in the presence of Niall and some others. Hard to live that one down no matter how high you were. I dunno. Being isolated can make one pretty freaky and I've done the

whole backwoods thing... and what are common practices in animal husbandry would challenge the stay-down-ability of some folks breakfast but that wasn't standard animal husbandry. Fucking shit man. No bueno. It's like that guy on the ridge who used to beat his horses and got into the paper, caught shoulder deep up a horses vag with his ding dong out, tugging away when the sheriff drove by. Not the usual prescribed thing, that there.

Despite that, Benzo was usually nice enough. Right now he looked far from nice or earth. Very much on Sauron's team, this new manifestation of Benzo. He had been a geeker for awhile but never so haggard as this, his skin was almost grey. He even sounded like a goblin. All howling half words and spittle gook.

"Su-uh-uh. P'main! Yu, it wan? Ohmyfuckin godrawaahh! Om tak-he r'it, hot bawx?"

"No man that's cool. I'm just weedin' it. " I rattled out.

"Take beer?" said L'Grosun, flipping open a blue cooler from under a pile of oil stained serape drapes. A warm Special Export was thrust into my hand. Niall got one too, nodded and put it in his pocket. I opened mine and drank some. It was beer. I was being friendly.

"Happy birthday! So, I heard it's been thirty days?" I was trying out some chitchat.

“Whaaaaa-huagh! Thirtythirty Thir-teeee Days. God fuck! I’ve been sooooo wasted. Look at my house! It has become cheese! Hahah! Look!”

BAM! His fist went through a yet unspoiled spot. He held up his other hand. A dark wound, dusted with white plaster was torn back from the knuckle. He hollered, “Found a stud to-yesterday, times. I fucked it up real good!”

“Real good!” Chirped up Benzo from his scratching and crinkle.

“Real good.” Followed Niall, shooting me a sarcastic sideways glance. This had become entertaining for him.

L’Grosun was suddenly indisposed, frantically feeling around on the floor mess for the rock Benzo had just dropped. “Fuckity-fuckity-feck! Wherzit!?” He chattered, while Benzo made clucking sounds, rummaging.

“So, I saw Phil’s brother downstairs, and some girl. It look’s like everyone else left.” I said while trying to finish the beer quickly so we could leave.

“What?! Aww yepper! Foundit! Lookie there, th’ eye of the fuggin eagle cunt right der boyz!” He held the murky little shard aloft and then it was passed off to Benzo.

“What, oh yeez. Yah they fuggin went to town. Up ta Shawn Jackson’s. Got a bit a’ pussy there! I don’t need nothing. I got rock to my dick and nothing is gonna up fuck me.” L’Gros was yelling, pitching back and forth. I finished my beer and waved away

another. He tossed it at the cooler and hollered, "Hey, Magnus is coming back soon with som'bitches and a rig. We gonna shoot shit, fucks! Wanna stay or is it out to the kids play, puss-ayys?!"

Magnus and I used to be really cool with each other, both into the being into the creative literature thing. He had a couple sour turns of fate though and had become a suicidal drug man. Hit the heroin express and was riding ASAP to burn out city. I didn't want to see him in a worse state then the last time I did, and that was inevitable if we stayed. There were girls at the other party, an honest excuse.

"Pussy, yep. We gotta go find us some. All right, talk to you dudes later." I nodded to both of them and walked down to the landing quickly. I then turned to watch them as Niall came after, got to keep an eye on the drug in people. They were busy with their shit. I waved again, Benzo nodded absently and we walked down quickly. Niall was sorry but he had to take a quick piss. Great.

Phil's brother was in a hallway looking into a room, messing with his belt buckle. He waved me over, "Gotta love skanks! Dude, she'll do BJ's for grip or cash for gear. ...bitch is hot."

"Naw man, I'm good. Got other fish to fry." I said looking uncomfortably away toward the door. I walked out it and waited on the stoop for Niall to shake it off, wondering who the girl was and if there was any hope for her. Also why there were so

many cars and yet so few people there. Niall emerged lighting a smoke and followed me to the truck. I walked swiftly saying back at him, "Let's get out of here quick, before Magnus shows up. I don't want to spend another second with this shit."

Niall smiled and chirped out as we got into the truck, "Real good!"

We drove in the silence of speech, a Pink Floyd doubleheader talking to us from the squawk box. Niall eventually told me we needed to make a pit stop on the way. We were going to pick up his brother Gravy. Gravy was called Gravy because of the old truck he used to drive around. His buddies christened it "The Gravy Train" as it was the ride bringing everybody to the party. Now the Gravy Train was no more. However Niall's brother Finn remained Gravy.

Gravy was a tall thin boy, cordy muscled, and welsh looking with bright eyes and a good-natured smile that flashed out like rays of sunshine. Everybody around loved the man and he was naturally the life of the continual party he existed in. Gravy was living with the ex-girlfriend of his old best friend. She had a kid by her former lover and took Gravy on while still living with the first guy. Gravy had been helping her with the kid, unlike the old dude. Another difference was that Gravy intended to stay there for the long haul, helping her have a tiny family unit. He stayed true through many a shitstorm. It gave him purpose and great joy. It gave the kid a father. Tonight we were to bring him with us to the other party. He was at the very center of

the group of friends there and frankly the peacemaker among them, having subtly transformed the rowdiest boys into a bunch of jokester hippies through the course of high school. We rolled up in front of the spot on dilapidated quadruplex row, just blocks from the wooded ravine where everyone used to smoke after school.

Gravy was there and the old lady was out, he had kid duty and couldn't come. Where's the old lady? Well she's at the bar. Third street of La Crosse was a few miles of consecutive bars and "at the bar" meant crawling from tavern to tavern, making for hours of bleary social calls and exploits. She was older than us too, and could get into all the bars whereas we had to go backdoor to specific haunts. Niall was concerned that maybe she had another beau, as history repeats. I didn't know, living now a culture away. Gravy was cool with whatever. Give the boys and girls his best. He had lullaby's to attend to and early bedtime to get up bright and shining for his little darling. Good man. We were disappointed, but we were off again and talking about girls. Niall had a girlfriend but wanted to live vicariously through me and thus was laying out my options and add-ons.

With graduation looming in another year there were worries where everyone would end up. Most wouldn't leave the hinterland of "Old Boozy" here, but maybe I should get a girl to come back home to... or to come up there with me and we'd all have a little exodus to the cities. That sort of thing. I told him I had in mind plucking the

pride apple of the valley and he concurred, waxing poetic about the back of her neck and lovely hands. “Good luck with that though, she’s into older guys.” Niall then told me about her recent exploits with some college boys. No surprise there.

The girl I had a crush on through elementary school and early high school (we had no middle school) apparently had started dating a twenty-five-year-old when she was thirteen. She had made out with me anyway but I never got to third base. Rather than facing the dismal truth that I’d had a lack of initiative due to a reckless bit of self loathing (and couldn’t imagine that she liked me back—even after it was proven), I’d assumed it was because she was saving it for the farm hand (who she was seeing). But then again, that was a pretty usual story down there. Most of the really pretty girls were all poached by the liquor store accessible types. They usually tended to be jerk wads. Imagine that.

I wasn’t going to let that stop me this time. I was at an arts boarding school. I looked good, and different enough to catch her eye. I had become more clever and quick when talking. I’d learned how to dance a little. Probably my greatest asset was being a ticket out of here, and that was pretty much golden in this blind drunk, slump economy of the bluff lands. The big-out trumped even getting into (the only entertainment) bars. Besides, I could get a girl into a Stereolab or Morris Day concert and that was some highfalutin shit from our usual high school prospects, let me tell you

what. Just going to First Ave., the MIA, Extreme Noise or Electric Fetus alone.... The girls knew it. Most planned on going to college in the cities, leaving the old town behind, and I was all the sudden a valuable contact having already made connections there. "Well Niall, let's just see how it goes."

We rolled up in front of the house of Shawn Jackson. Shawn Jackson lived there with his ankle bracelet and people would come over regularly to get blitzed. A few of Gravy's pals had apparently moved in, started trickling down rent and bringing over their friends. Shawn had been pals with Niall's eldest brother Cormack and had a case of arrested development after coming out of the can. He'd been in for trusting the wrong people. Some mob guy with a pawnshop... got set up with some crap to cover a bigger operation. In the can he just learned to smuggle better. He liked hanging out with us younger folk because that's about where he was when the shit hit the fan for him. Also, nobody else is going to come over all the time for beers with the bar scene there but for the youngsters. Especially with girls in tow.

The house they rented was a big white craftsman, near the college off the edge of downtown. It was next to a crummy dive, almost constantly empty with old men farting the place up with dust. It was none the less a busy neighborhood, popping with young people goofing around and wandering from restaurants, bars and after parties nightly. There was a good bar not far away, Houghton's, who my family used to sell

produce to. Nice people. My Dad liked to BS with the owner. They had the best damn soup I had ever tasted. Live music, Gaelic at that—fanning the flame of my mother’s ardor. It was a rare find in that more German Catholic settled area to hear *Óró, sé do bheatha ’bhaile* played on a flute and a fiddle, but for there.

We walked up the front stairs, past the hello’s on the screen porch, down a hall and into the kitchen. There was Phil, Nate, Rooster and Hof. Some other guys were further back in the open living room. I noticed right away the difference in clothing. Last I’d seen everyone, they were wearing tie-dyes and corduroy. Now it looked like we were headed to a monster truck rally. There was an adjoining bathroom to the kitchen and in front of that were some girls. Snacks, Brenda, Katia, Rooster’s girl, and Emer. At least the girls weren’t looking so Walmartz. Emer was the first to glance at us. She stopped paying attention to what Snacks was saying. Snacks and the rest of the girls gazed over at me. I looked at Emer.

Her body held a long agile line. Strong curves like a palates instructor but softer and more supple. The hourglass of her form was like a stretched infinity symbol. She was wearing clothes well ...casually; no bands, no brands, no logos, no jive. She looked me up and down, a smile flashed quickly, she bit her lip and brushed her hair over her ear as her eyes met mine, all excitement. I tried to remain neutral, calm. A smirk, a long, deliberate look from the tread of her shoes up to the top of her hair—reestablish eye

contact, hold and smile back. I stepped further into the kitchen then. Saying hi to Hof and Rooster.

I didn't want to push my hand just yet. One of my best friends at the Art School, a native guy named Solomon was a player. If you measured his success by the number of offspring he ended up with one might say he did too well. He was probably just copping style from our friend Yetundi. Tundi was a very mellow dude, a ladies man and an honest gentleman. Solomon said a man should never drool on a lady or flip on a bitch. One shouldn't push, just let them make up their own mind and have enough to know that when they're ready for it—you're down. He had gotten so good at being calm, cool, and freshy-fresh he even had a warning.

Once when he was visiting the res' a couple of middle aged women got into a fight, just to see who'd get to be first to talk to him. Dude was eighteen and he saw a woman bust another ladies teeth out on the pavement, just to holler at the man. Had to split. Gotta be careful with that shit.

Hof was the golden boy of the school out in the hills. He had been introduced to people here by me and Niall and got along splendidly. Hof, or Hasselhoff did great Arnold Schwarzenegger impressions. Mostly because he looked like him (that and David Hasselhoff, more like a swirl of both). He was very well received by the girls and had worked it in as many of their bedrooms as he was able. His exploits were a source

of pride for the debased sensibilities of the teenaged boys from our school. I hadn't seen him for about a year. He was one of my first friends at the old school. He was a really kind soul, prayed unceasingly in the back of his head — like me, but wasn't zealous, or dogmatic. Just good-natured. He was funny, cut, really into body sculpting and smiling through painful assed shit. Easily the most popular kid at the country school. We chatted a bit about the old town. Same as it ever was.

Next was Rooster, as Shawn was apparently passed out somewhere having hit the drink too early. Rooster had played bass in a local band, looked like Sebastian Bach and all the girls here used to swoon. Now he looked like Freddy Mercury with a Hulk Hogan stash, tensely gripping and pounding back cheap beers. He'd changed a lot. Joined a touring Nordic hellcore band a few year back when their bassist went AWOL and pretty much lost his cool upon coming home. I asked him how Europe was, remembering he'd toured all over out there the year before.

His response was quick, terse and sounded weirdly rehearsed. "Man, fuck Europe! Fuck a whole bunch of other countries. We're home. America man! Tits and ass, America. Damn best place on earth! You see this beer, Pabst Blue Ribbon. A fucking American beer, the beer of home. Our fucking homeland. Best fucking beer in the world. Fuck those other countries. This is American shit." He took an angry swig,

downing the rest of his beer, crumpling the can. “Merica.” I really didn’t expect that, looked apparently stunned and turned to a bunch of knowing faces.

Yup, Rooster was different alright. I’d pissed him off a few years previous, choosing to hang with Niall rather than him when he tried to force me to choose friends. It was to be with Gravy’s crew rather than BFF’s with Niall, the younger brother. I told him to shove it, I’d make up my own mind on friends rather than be someone’s puppet. I thought that maybe the water under the bridge had spoiled. I had been in plenty of fights over that kind of shit. Niall later told me that it was just the stress of the weirdness of his life abroad. The first week with the band someone shat into Rooters toothbrush bristles and returned it to it’s case for him to find one morning. Rooster was pissed and later asked the guys who did it when they were all sitting around. The lead singer, a dude who huffed dead bird from a bag before singing, admitted loudly that he was the culprit. When asked why Rooster was told that it was the will of the dark lord. The other guys were with Ol’ Stinkbreath the Pooper, and Rooster just had to accept that he could not bring a toothbrush onto the tour bus. Apparently a lot of things were happening like that. He’d assumed they were just hazing and that things would get better when he showed his tenacity by going abroad with them. They didn’t.

These guys weren't some intellectual, well educated, Finnish black metal band—they were a chaotic bunch of brutal dick-bags out to do psychological damage. Rooster's manager (who the guys assented to as though he were their supreme cult leader) was a horrible, controlling little fiend. He came complete with a curly moustache, beard spike and rubicund skin. When looking to expand the show he came up with two options for Rooster to choose from during the synth-bass part of their big *Blood Sacrifice* song. He had the choice of either pretending to gut a real dead sow onstage with a hedge trimmer and then crawl inside it dressed as a Schutzstaffel zombie, or he could line his clothes with hoses, get whipped and gored by a busty goat headed woman while spurting the crowd and stage down with fake blood. He chose to be the bleeder, I would have too ...lawsuits. Yikes. Everyone assumed he'd had it so good, being famous. We knew they toured with an alternative circus and did fetish fairs but I don't think any of us knew how that filtered into his day-to-day life, or what the other performances were like. They'd gotten a spot on some show and we'd held a big party to watch the PG version of the act on late night TV. He was a great musician and actor. The whipping crescendo looked really painful and real. That goat lady was fucking merciless.

Nate and his three present brothers said hi and started squabbling with each other immediately, as per usual. Ed was there and crazier than ever. Most of us

worried that the dude would someday become a serial killer. Phil seemed too busy messing with a pipe to notice us, and Matt gave a big theatrical hello, before joining the Brothers' Nate production. Snacks asked, "What up? How's the new school little stoner? Not so little anymore, huh?" Snacks was pretty much the lynch pin of the girls in the group, though she wasn't totally aware of it.

Everyone loved Snacks. She was a really inspiring speaker, you always came away from a conversation with her feeling like you personally could save the world. She was a tall, buff redhead. Dressed sporty casual. Became a Marine later. A right fucking Joan of Arc warrior maiden, dude. Was called "Snacks" because of a restaurant in town named "Snacks Attacks" and someone linking together the restaurant and her - Shelia Anne Vonarx- in an acid party. Snacks. It fit (unlike "Shanks" which didn't stick, she wasn't mean enough ...too much focus— also "I want me some snacks" sounded better than "nice shanks girl"). She always had juicy little tidbits of gossip. She knew how to drop vague details, get ya hooked, and then have you demand (all ears) whatever story she wanted to tell. And she was cute. I gabbed with her a minute looking at Emer, so she'd know I was interested but making her wait. Increasing the anticipation while looking less desperate. Snacks was a catch, I wanted Emer to sweat it a little.

Soon Emer was standing really close to me her arm touching mine, her breath hitting my ear and neck when she'd speak. Her hand tapping against my chest and triceps as she talked. I was lean and solid. After a year of open hand sparring and drilling in horse stance with a dude standing on my legs, I was becoming a tall, welterweight, bianco Bruce Lee. She liked the way it felt, and her finger kept lingering. We were back in the hall a couple of steps from the rest. I knew how it was going. I'd had some romps, but more importantly I'd learned early to really read. When I was eleven I noticed that my mother's romance novels had many dog-eared marks left on the pages after she was done reading them. I was curious and opened them up. I thus had read hundreds of seductions by the age of sixteen, from the books of my churchy mother who had wanted me to go into holy orders and become a priest. Thanks Mom!

"How are you, how are things? You look hot." She was saying and I could hear my blood in my ears as I spoke cordially, in long, cool sentences. I didn't want to rush her. So I responded in kind to her emotion, never giving more than I got. Dudes from the living room had come into the kitchen and were huddling together around Phil. The rest were listening to Matt and Hof talking loudly about drugs and beer. Then there was a scuffle when two of Nate's brothers. S'Murphy and Roddy started wrestling and fell, knocking the couch (and people on it) right over.

It was Matt who was smaller, skinnier and less of a martial artist than anyone in Nate's household, that shot over. He whipped S'Murphy into the rocker recliner, lodging his head disorientatinly between the seat and back cushion. Matt had Roddy - the biggest one- in a quick arm lock, pinning his neck against a windowsill and choking him. We yelled at Matt. He let him go. I went over and helped Nate's younger brother S'Murphy out of the chair before he broke it, then came back to Emer. Brothers' Nate laughed, they all were a brawling crew of rowdy busters. Matt returned to the kitchen and hollered' "I's trying to break up that fight and then forgot I wasn't involved in it! That fucking gripper man. Takes over. You know what happened to the Hippies?" "No!" shouted Hof and Ed, choir style. Mark responded, "They got gripped by the gripper! All that peace and love shit died, it got smoked out by the speed. That fucking crank really gets a hold of ya! It's the quicker gripper picker upper!"

Gripper. It was what they were calling crank now. Get gripped, grip out, gripping it.... There were always new names for stuff. Like our nicknames there was a function to this. It kept the cops and other authority figures from knowing what or who the hell you were talking about. These names tended to change over time, and were usually associated to events at get-togethers. We'd even use names to send hidden messages. For instance if I was all the sudden "Tommy" there was someone untrustworthy around (while were doing something illegal), or when someone called

me “Freddy Teddy” that meant they were too fucked up and needed some kind of assistance. Or if I was “Billy-Jim-Bo-Bob” they wanted to hear some redneck jokes, that sort of thing. There were also phrases such as, “do you smell ham?” meaning watch out—there’s a cop around somewhere, or that person is a narc. Additionally there was always the lilt; the cadence in “let’s go bowling” meant the difference in between going to a bowling alley or off to smoke some weed. We weren’t unique in doing this, most groups of kids I knew had their own lingo.

What was unique is the sheer volume of words we’d appropriated or made up. We all felt a touch of pride when using and expanding our regional version of teenage argot, perhaps that’s why it was ever expanding. Apparently to my friends in the cities us South Easterners all sounded like a bunch of incoherent, wasted Pikeys. Then again, to us they sounded like guileless, wanna-be-rapper, Nordic divulgers with similarly unintelligible allusions. It could get confusing going from one place to another as some common words had different meanings in other areas (and often it’s all very subtle), but that’s another story. Emer put her hand on my chest, locking eyes with me again.

She rolled her fingers from my collarbone to my areola. I was once more under her spell. “So you’re at the Arts School, you know I thought of going there.” Emer was saying to me. Good. She liked what I was into. I’d gotten into so many fights at school and with my parents for being an art kid, everyone thinks you’re probably gay and you

gotta stomp back so you don't end up buried under the steamroller waiting to push any outsiders into the ground. I had to hide going to poetry readings from people out in the sticks. Where I was meeting cool girls for Christ's sake, but might be jacked for acting queer by publicly liking art that wasn't simply paint and easels.

I liked La Crosse because there were so many café's back then hosting readings and I could go, listen or join in without censure. The best ones were at The Pump House or The Painted Alley. Niall would skip Tae Kwon Do practice to come with me, and we'd go on wild adventures with the girls afterwards. It was a blast. So much lyric, music and energy.

I knew Emer was into Sonic Youth, I suddenly wanted us to wrap up in each others limbs somewhere dark and warm and be silently overtaken by the noise. I wanted us to write illiterate poetry from our hot finger tips, like blue woad spirals across the flush of our euphoric bodies. Emer let her hand rest on my left pectoral muscle, feeling my breathing and heartbeat. I was aware of her hips facing me and being close enough to brush her smooth belly against my rock hard cock if we were naked. Her eyes held mine. There was nothing else in the world.

She said, lips mouthing around the words like lollipops, "But I didn't go because of the gays. They freak me out. I mean if some lesbian were to hit on me, or a fag on my boyfriend, I don't think I could handle that." Something darkened for me there. Maybe

it was that I called one of Hof's friends gay because I was jealous that his mother liked that kid more. I then watched as the community took that simple utterance of insult from me, some stupid kid, and went wildfire with it. Since I was the borderline faggy art guy then I must know. He must be gay. He was attacked. Bashed, insulted. Preached at. Wasn't gay. I had never been so ashamed in my life. I tried to take it back but it had gone too far. It wasn't about me. It was about finding a face to land a fist onto. I was just the dumb fuck who called someone the wrong name, in jealousy for some mother's affection (and access to in-town sleepover parties) no less.

Maybe it was the conservative church boy I smoked up at one of the first Arts High School parties. He was pretty uptight and I wanted him to relax with the others, get a piece of the dancing and shit. The conversation was a downer. He asked me if I ever thought about suicide. I said yeah, I wanted to kill myself when I was twelve, got a hold of a gun but couldn't do it...that I wanted to see how the story ends rather than closing the book before it's gone anywhere. I dunno being an isolated kid is rough. He told me he wanted to kill himself every day. That he fucking hated himself. His hand was bandaged from hitting his face in the mirror. He had the cut scars on his arms, like the suicide-watch-girls did. He told me how his father found out he wasn't into pussy and disowned him after trying to beat the gay out of him in various ways. That the kids at school and church found out. They would have at him any chance they got, leaving

lynched “gay” dolls in his closet and shit. He said that they probably made him more gay by so doing. I could see that. He told me he was just trying to go forward. Found a church through a school connection where they take all kinds. Was trying to hear Jesus over the hate. It was intense. I told him I didn’t hate him. I still prayed too. That we were cool, and we were in a better place. No big judgments at the Art School.

I was ashamed. My mind was racing. Jesus hung out with prostitutes. They do it all. Get humped oddly by weirdos. Use abortifacients. Break rules. Are used as faces for stupid fists. He said forgive them, no matter whatever anybody said before in law books or after in letters. Love one another, as I have loved you. Not kill that kid because of, oopsie. I mean what the fuck?

So here I was ashamed, looking into this beautiful girls eyes. Strike one. Maybe she just doesn’t get it. It’ll be ok, she’s not a bigot right? Homophobia is just a phobia, a fear. Fear one can get over. No worries girl, I ain’t no homo. She saw the pained look despite my recovery. She tried a different tactic, “Also the black people, you know? I mean there are more in the cities and that’s kind of, well you know?” Oof. No I don’t know. My best friends at school, the friendliest and most honorable dudes there, were a brilliant African American painter and a savvy Lakota National Citizen. No way! Emer and I had mutual friends who were black, I couldn’t believe this crap. Prince was black, Living Colour, Nina Simone, LeVar from reading fucking rainbow, our buddy Big John

who lived by the north side Kwik Trip... I went to Sunday school with Big John, he was a saint. Or what about Sharon from up on the ridge, or Renée the Flash? Renée was a track star sweetheart but she didn't like to hang out in all this druggie business. And Sharon... everybody loved Sharon. What the hell? Sharon and Emer used to be all buddy-buddy.

Sharon was a regular addition to the stoner girl's brigade until she met that guy who wanted to be a chef in Onalaska. They were too busy with their love affair to fool with these parties. Instead taking lakeside beach-spliffies-for-two, making love in the soft clover-flower-meadow-grass, feeding each other strawberries and living the dream. Sharon was one of us, how could Emer just say that? This had my mind screaming. I was raised not to discriminate like that and this was outrageous to me. Strike two. Wait, again, maybe it's negative chick competition or some shit like that. Sharon and I got along pretty seamlessly, I cooked too and maybe this was some sort of jealousy damage. I had told one of the girls once that I would date Sharon in a second. They do talk. Hmm. I'd said racist shit when I was like eight just to get someone's goat. Maybe it would be ok, maybe Emer didn't really mean it. Or it was just another (shocking) phobia or conceit. She can meet some more people that are decent (and not competition)—find a different way. Shoot, maybe she was just testing me; trying to get my goat. If so, she was really convincing and it was working. There was a concerning

lack of sarcasm in her voice and demeanor. Yet, as much as I wanted to walk away she was a girl I had really liked (for a long time) and I was an eager boy.

Her hair was golden like autumn wheat highlighted by the sun with corn silk. Her hand felt soft and warm on my chest. She stoked her other hand across her obliques and lower abs, tilting her neck to feel my breath behind her ear. I could smell her hair, and more the scent of her sex behind the perfume and dope smoke. I could sense her blood beating through her veins just inches away, the heat of her skin and wanted to touch her, to join our bodies. There was a bedroom less than ten feet away. It's a party. It's what people do. Maybe it'll be angry sex, I'd never had that before. She kept talking, "I mean it's cool that you went, you know—and go. But, maybe some of us would like to see more of you..." A smell pulled my eyes away. Someone was sparking crank in the room. There had already been a bit of it in the air but this was fresh, potent, and puffing right next to me. I'm sensitive to it—I can feel the contact buzz almost immediately and it irritates me. Especially after that smegma and toasted medicine cloud at L'Grosun's. Really wasn't feeling it.

More importantly I overheard Hof just holler "Let's hit this shit!" I'd introduced him to these people. By extension to these drugs. After the thirty days party I wanted no part in seeing him become like L'Grosun or Magnus. Emer was sexy, but getting uglier and uglier by the moment. She may have been the cutest in the county but I couldn't

sell out my best friends for ass, no matter how golden. I couldn't sell out the world.

"Pardon me for a moment, I'm sorry." I turned to the guys at the table. They had a blowtorch out and were sizzling a rock. Matt was coughing out a hit and passing it to Hasselhoff. I thought of L'Grosun's jaundiced looking, pocky, post-flab wings and lost it.

"Hof! Don't hit that shit, man. It's fucking poison! Literally toxic waste. Toxic! Don't fucking do it!" I was at the table, yelling down at him in his seat.

"Fuck man! Whatever. You did all this shit, I'm just giving it a little go. Don't be an asshole." I was never into crank, but I did experiment with a lot of drugs before I went off to school, before I had something better to do.

"Yeah. Yes I did and that's why I'm yelling. I know what I know, ok? I don't want you to get hooked on this shit, get a monkey on your back like my brother Harold did or like Magnus and L'Grosun have got now. Have you seen it over there?" I felt wild, ready to take on the whole crew. But I was trying not to yell. Everyone was looking at me, a little shocked, a little angry.

"Yeah I went over there a few weeks ago with Matt." Hof said, looking snarky.

Matt chimed in, "Fugging thirddy dayzz. I got to like six before I just passed out in a chair and slept there for like... two whole days. Man my legs were cramped from

the twitchies after that. For a week.” Everyone seemed pleased with Matt’s change of subject and pretty pissed at me.

The pipe went around. And talk of ‘the twitchy legs.’ I looked at Hof pleadingly. He hit it again.

Emer looked at me surprised and stayed back a little, “Why are you talking down to Hof? It’s just some meth.”

Strike three, I’m outta here. “Forget it. I’m sorry. I, I gotta go.” I said, turning to leave. I felt like an ass. I just did the unspeakable thing of criticizing peoples’ party favors at a gathering, and worse I talked down, literally down into the face of my friend publicly. I also had that chance with the rose of the valley and I passed it up like a fool. I made myself, Niall, and Hof look bad. Mainly myself—that was a big taboo, hollering at people about drugs. Especially after spending a year away. That was borderline narc stuff there. I knew it wouldn’t be the same with these people, I’d shot the new status and lost even the old. But things were different already. I sat on the curb and smoked. Rooster had smiled for the first time since I got there and nodded to me when I left. We were different. We had all changed.

“What the fuck was that man!?” Niall was yelling at me. I’d been sitting about four cigarettes long there by the gutter waiting for him while he said his apologies and

goodbyes. "What the fuck, why? Why man, did you just treat Hof like a child in front of everybody? What the hell gives?"

I looked up responding slowly, "Look, you brought me to L'Grosun's, no? I saw Hof there and I felt responsible, responsible for making him like Benzo."

"Yeah, well he's not Benzo. You have some fucking nerve. Like you haven't done worse." Niall was pretty livid. I didn't blame him. What I did would have in other circumstances warranted a fight.

"Yeah, well maybe that's it. Ya know, it's like we never are afraid for ourselves, you know? I dunno, I might be Magnus right now if I didn't move. Remember when we were at Weedstock?"

Niall responded immediately, "Yes. When you and Peter ate a bunch of shrooms ...thought you became 'One With The Grass.' Super-smart times for you yourself there, man." That was a pretty brilliant time to bring up after my yelling at Hof. I'd been hitting Mario Land pretty hard.

I responded calmly, mostly because I felt bummed about my own hypocrisy. "Yes, you're right. But no—not the 'Big Chief Red Socks' episode (when Gravy thought he had become a wooden Indian), I mean the time with the opium. You remember how I liked the op'n?" He nodded, sitting down and lighting his own smoke. He had guessed where I was going, and visibly relaxed.

“OK, I decided I would never try heroin after that because I got a taste for that velvet-flowery, underwater feeling and it freaked me out.” I said, gesturing circularly.

He recalled, “Yup’n. That went on for a minute, you almost got yourself addicted.” Niall threw a Tennessee twang on the word “addicted.” “Or you at least thought so...”

“Ya, I had to choose. It wasn’t just choosing between drugs, or whatever. It was choosing *la joie de vivre*. You know, every time you eat a good meal, take a needed shit, fuck, read something entertaining you get a little euphoria. More than that you have the thrill of anticipation before, and then the pleasure of anxieties’ erasure when you are full—when you’ve cum or whatever. I know Magnus said...”

“Magnus is a dumbass.” Niall voiced flatly.

“Yeah, but we all used to listen to him. Like when he said, ‘they were wrong about weed so they’re wrong about the rest.’ But come on, you’ve met Peter’s Mom with her need to touch everything to make sure it’s real.”

Niall smiled, “Yeah she knocked over a bunch of shit in her kitchen when Pete first brought me there. Looked at me like I was a ghost. Then shuffled over, hands and back flush with the wall. She poked me in the chest and swatted at my hair a bit before she’d say anything to me. Pretty fucking memorable moment, man.”

I kept going, up on my high horse. “With the strong stuff you lose subtlety. It’s all rush from up to down. Also you’re isolated—the other, more simple highs you can do with or discuss with other people. We hide our crazy high times, because while entertaining they tend to be culturally dehumanizing. That makes us inherently deceptive and by extension, lonesome.”

Niall audibly flicked the ash from his smoke—signaling me to let him speak, “I don’t know, probably? I mean L’Grosun isn’t that lonely. He’s got people around. But then again, they’re just there to watch the show. It’s like racing—you’re really just watching to see someone die in a wreck, not just to see who can make the best long left turn. Nobody’s there to see him really, just the leper he’s become.”

I responded excitedly, “Yeah, but it’s worse than just how they feel -the friends-about his becoming some sort of spectacle or whatever. I mean it’s how he feels. How he’s trying not to feel. Like, when I was op’n out I didn’t care about people, only that feeling. I knew it wouldn’t get any better, just worse. I mean think of my brother Harold. I knew that I’d fall further away from other people and lose my own happiness chasing after it. I’d watched it happen with him and I don’t want that for Hof. For myself.”

Niall exhaled smoke loudly, shaking his finger at me. “Yes but you don’t get to make those kind of assumptions for Hof, you are not him. You don’t get to force him to

do what you want. What worked for you, you know, was just figuring things out for yourself. You don't have the right to talk to him like a fucking child in front of everybody. I mean if we weren't all old friends and you hadn't been gone for so long you would've gotten your ass busted in there—or beat all those fuckers—your friends down, to prove what? How right you are? Like it would matter, or anyone would be able to listen to you when you humiliate them publically.”

I shrunk back a little. “Yeah, Niall, you're right. Now I'm just embarrassed, I'm sorry. I just freaked out man. I'll have to make it right somehow with Hof. He's a good guy, he'll be all right. I just don't think I can hang with this scene. Definitely not anymore tonight.”

He extinguished his smoke on the cement. “Yeah, we should go.”

We got into the truck, he fired it up, “Where you wanna go? Perkins? Jules? Riverside? A ridge run? My girls house?” he rattled off the regular list. “I don't think I can deal with your girlfriend's skeezy dad right now, and the other places will hold more folks for me to fuck up talking to. Except for the ridgey, but not tonight.” I said, I just kind of wanted to go home. A ridge run was riding up to the top of a bluff puffing some herb and going hiking, out to one of the diners, friend's cabins, or checking out the spectacular night time overlook views. Since it would be the latter I was worried about having a silent introspective nightmare.

“Well, how ‘bout this—how ‘bout we go back to my folks place and shoot some pool. Ma and Big Sweyn would like to see ya, and Big Sweyn filled the downstairs fridge full of beers assuming we’d steal some while you’re in town. Sound good?” Niall asked with a quick tilted glance at the end.

“Real good.” I said.

I’d spent so much time at his parents house it felt more like home than my own. Niall couldn’t help himself, and said smirking, “You’re sure you can handle the beers? I mean, big bad drugs and all...”

I was still a little too freaked out for that, responding, “Maybe you’re right. Maybe I should lay off the sauce for a bit. I mean, I told you about the New Years Eve Party right? Were I just ended up babysitting Little Wendy and Bob after getting them out of that freak out party? Wendy’s officially an acid casualty now man, eighteen years old and fucked up for life. Bob might be all right if he can ever get out of that numb void he’s crawled into. Leap in a prison to escape the world. I mean I just can’t live like that dude. Maybe the straight edge guys are right.”

Niall laughed, “Always the brinkman, eh? Crossing the line... Like the time Big Ralph’s brother called you a name and you kicked him in the head. Now, some idiots are overloaded and you’re off the sauce forever. What? Next fat guy you see and –hold it now- you never eat cake again.”

I laughed as well and said, "Prolly fookin' right. Yawper. I got to take it a little more easy. Chill, even. Maybe let's give Marty and Elim a call when we get there, get a good game of nine-ball going." I liked those guys, they didn't give a shit about status.

Niall smiled toothily, "Alright just promise me you're not gonna yell at the dudes, we both know what kinda big fuck-ups THEY are."

I looked out toward the pontoon bellied boathouses moored on the other bank of the river and spoke hoarsely, "No worries man, I already hit my arrogance card for the evening. I'm busted out."

We drove over the big blue bridge, the grate howling under the tires too loud to speak over. I thought about the other Arts School kids who were facing similar going-back-home situations. Emer had been a crush of mine for years, and in this I wasn't alone. For fucks sake, she dressed up like a tiger one Halloween and gave all the boys in town a lasting Cheetara fetish. I mean she was hot as Smalley's 666 Wings. But when I thought about the ballerinas, actresses, poetesses, painter girls, photographer chicks and female musicians back at school I didn't feel so bad. They were cool, smart, sexy, and brave enough to go after what they wanted.

Striving for and going to Arts High, I felt I had something more in common with those fly girls. That was pretty cool to me thinking about it. Took some of that shame away, leaving a modest spark of hope and satisfaction. I'd messed around up at school,

had a *Me & Mrs. Jones* moment. Maybe I should stop fucking around and consider finding a real girlfriend up there. I didn't need to sweat this dead scene so much and I had the rest of the summer ahead of me anyways. Regardless of all that self indulgent thinking, I still would have to come up with something to make it right with my old buddy Hof (Niall was right, it was a cardinal rule not to infantilize your friends), but I couldn't think of anything suitable at the moment. Then again, last summer Hof and Peter had opened the doors of my old car (so they could splash around back there) when we were driving through the flooded streets of the eastside industrial park. The car stank like a rotten fish, burnt motor oil, cigarette puddle ever after — up until it died. Not even-steven, but we put each other through all sorts of crap in life. Shit, I was just looking out for the man....

Niall and I drove on past the stilt house that was concealed by wetland trees in the mossy bottoms swamp, almost to the cattail forest and green algae top of old Blue Lake next to La Crescent. Niall wasn't feeling the Steely Dan droning from 'hits! hits! hits!,' so popped in a CD. We listened to Gruntruck over the symphony of a million bullfrogs and crickets, watching the crescent of the moon dip behind the bluff line treetops like a scythe. Reaping away the Coulee Region's bad spirits. It was the homeland. Packed with plenteous beer, spot on cheese, and numerous jollies. No matter what piece of social idiocy was happening at the moment.

Port Clown

“Nice keeek, man.” Said Benito the Quebecois quietly, his eyes darting sideways at me with a sparkle as we descended the plain white stairwell. An unadorned light bulb swayed at the end of its cord above the blue cheese and marijuana scented carpeting that cascaded in waves of stains down to the neon glow. It came in from across the street—pulsed and caught in the web of cracks on the glass and steel entryway, scintillating, making the foot of the stairs look like it was under red water.

Benito was the tall, lanky, black mustached and maned man to my right. He smelled like leather though he was wearing denim. Benito had a kind of constant smirk that belied a rich and useful Quebec-Mex humor, though at the time I couldn't make sense of it at all.

I had just moments before an altercation with a man from the south. He was staying with us for awhile. He kept hitting on our friends and creeping them out — we couldn't have women over because of it. He also kept trying to bring young (too young/wasted/runaway) girls over to make out and we'd have to get them to leave. All parts of these situations were awkward.

The guy wouldn't take off his face paint unless he was doing so to reapply it (the makeup was a thick and sticky goop, but he liked the effect enough to keep it on at all times—even when it was smeared to hell). He was a clown.

He drank like Bukowski. He'd tie balloon animals for people for tips. This was his life's aspiration. He paid us a little rent to camp out on our couch until it happened.

Until the day I came home, opened the door I saw his dark human eyes behind the squint of cherry clown lids... his pink tongue lick his red clown lips. Until the day that the clown after some unwanted fondling at my friend the night before (and my just before hearing about it), called me a pussy when I got home—in my own apartment- for not wanting him and my roommate (the one who was on the lease with me, a blues musician) to put up Al Pacino posters everywhere... and for not letting him smoke glass or beat at porn in my living room.

I listened to his diatribe for a few minutes, while waiting for Benito to get his gear together (we were going for a walk to find a good place to busk) and for everyone put shoes on and stuff to go out and have a smoke (we didn't smoke cigarettes in the apartment- and as such we'd usually go out to smoke en masse).

The clown just kept talking. He was really stoned and had been listening to a lot of Redman. He talked and talked. Talked smack too much, all agrin at me from behind that painted smile....

I stepped out the door—the clown right behind me cigarette pursed in his grin, Benito already waiting in the hall three doors down at the top of the stair by the vent that let up Chinese smells from the restaurant below (that were a mixed blessing because they got stale and fishy but it was better than the weird moldy bong smell of the stairwell and west wing of the building).

I spun bringing my leg up and to the spot, just past the tip of his squeaky nose, in a crescent arc. It was one fluid motion. The cigarette broke, flew from his mouth. The corners of his eyes and lips drooped—he was afraid. I was livid as I pierced him with a narrow and furious gaze. I told him, “This is a warning.” That was all. His mouth had fallen open in a gasp and his eyes watered. I stood defensively in front of him for a moment waiting to gauge his reaction. Right then I watched a clown crumble inside. I saw that he wouldn’t try anything. I saw that he wouldn’t come around anymore. I saw that he was really hurt and didn’t understand what was going on. That he was “special” maybe. I saw his hurt and fear.

I went with Benito downstairs to wait for the clown and my homie to come outside. They were along and we all had a cigarette. Benito was quiet, yet pleased. I was miserable (I felt like I broke the heart of a child, I was also amped on adrenalin which kind of disgusted me) yet watchful of the clown until he excused himself and left to go out to wherever he went to—I didn’t see him much after that. My roomy was smiling

big and proud. He kind of hated the clown but liked the rent and that he had someone to agree to anything he said. Yet there was the problem with girls and frankly it disgusted him to have such a lackey. I was keeping my feelings hidden. I liked the clown at first and thrown a lot of kicks but I really had never kicked anything out of someone's mouth before ...and here I was trying to be a lover not a fighter. Yet, there I was fully ready and willing to kick this clown's ass, who was maybe just a pawn in a struggle with my roommate, myself and my world. I pulled with long slow draws watching the smoke dissipate against the background of the sell-you-shit neon gibberish signs and the arc of rooftops that dipped down the hill downtown, to the sea and beyond. It was dusk. It smelt fresh outside, like an ice pack.

We stood smoking with guitars and stuff leaned up against the wall and each mused on the last day of the clown. Benito was moving on too, he figured out a decent plan to get back into Canada and get back on his feet again. I would also move soon but I didn't yet know it. We smoked and my mind drifted to a ballerina friend dancing across town in her studio. To my nutso friend who was carving soapstone statues of satyrs and nymphs rapt with orgasm in her womb-like apartment of red and black. To an old girlfriend across the country and the dreams I'd have of our conversations while walking around an idyllic lake. On to another city of crumbling industry and infrastructure that was once home and would never be again. Then back around to the

clown. He always wore a disguise. Why did he really run away to be a clown in a port town? ...What's my mask?

We played downtown for awhile, then on the hill. The tourist season was pretty much over and people weren't feeling too generous. We broke it off before bar time and went our separate ways. We chatted a little first. We didn't talk about the clown. We talked about this girl we used to play with who had left the city a few weeks earlier. Her man got killed and she desperately needed to get to Vancouver. We played with her and people would listen. Her voice pierced you to the core. It was raw and loud. Like a musical wailing. All the money we made went to the "Vancouver or bust" fund. She got the last of the good nights and that was fitting. Her name was Summer and she left in the fall. We joked about that, playing with the the irony.

Later I told my girl about what happened with the clown. I felt bad and I needed to confess. My face burned with shame and my eyes watered when I told her of the sorrow I saw in him. She smiled and kissed me. She said I looked like a little boy. Her room was always warm. I hoped that the clown was someplace so sublime and then stopped thinking about him.