

FINDING THE WILL

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Finding the Will

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Dedicated to Monique, my lifelong inspiration, to my parents, for all their help and support through all my years, and to Jim Driggers whose wisdom and guiding hand made these stories possible.

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Hero

The will to speak.

Greg remembered the minutes just before it was his turn to speak as valedictorian of the Kent Middle School eight grade class of 1984. He felt something moving inside him, as though the portholes of a new sensation of fear and pressure were opening. White light filled his eyes, he felt the heavy pulse of blood beating throughout the brain, and he could almost feel the tiny veins stretching across his eyes bursting. As the speaker called his name, Greg ran from behind the curtain, down the tiny wooden steps, between the aisles of his classmates, parents, grandparents, teachers, and burst into the morning light outside the auditorium. He imagined their judging eyes, felt them through the walls, his mind racing through all the horrible things they would be saying.

Gregory remembered that he did not speak the morning his mother left on a rust-colored Kawasaki motorcycle with no windshield, thrusting her pelvis behind a man who wore no shirt, and whose long dirty blonde hair dangled between his shoulder blades. She locked her arms around his abdomen. Gregory stood in the yard, watching, wearing Superman pajamas. The crab grass tickled the soft bottoms of his feet.

Gregory remembered the view from his grandmother's hospital room. Seeing the brick smoke stacks of the paper mill out beyond the city limits, how the white smoke mixed effortlessly with the clouds as though the mill produced them. He did not speak as she lay dying, and sat on the edge of the bed, afraid even to touch her hand for fear of contracting death. She grabbed his suddenly, squeezed his young pale fingers with her age-spotted ones. Gregory smiled as best he could. She told him that life was a flat and barren beach. A person walks alone she said, until the universe smiles upon them and they find another. They sit in the sand and build a castle, and it is beautiful. When the tide comes in, the wet sand gleams in the moonlight and the beach is flat once more. But the next day they build again.

Gregory remembered all of this, as he eyed the young woman sitting next to him, and though he wanted desperately to no longer walk the beach his grandmother spoke of in silence, it did not surprise Gregory that he could not speak to her. She was a waitress at the diner he often frequented during his daily forty-five minute break from all things accounting. She sat at the bench waiting on the number seven bus as she always did on Tuesdays and every other Thursday. Sitting with her legs crossed and thumbing through a magazine, she licked the tip of her index finger and turned the page. He noticed her bronze nametag "Violet" glowing in the iridescent street light. A moment later Gregory allowed his peripherals to find her face. Her eyes looked as if half closed, gleaming in the white light, concentrating on the page as though they may burn holes through the paper. Her face, small and triangular, made her eyes seem unusually large. They were green. A beautiful green.

"Hello," she said, acknowledging Gregory's covert staring.

His thin neck straightened itself instinctively, focusing his attention to the darkened window of a thrift store across the street.

The mind hurried into action, quickly forming responses, running through the gamut of diverse and charismatic ways of responding to "hello." And then there was the voice, that voice inside that always judged, that exacted the sums of Gregory's life. The voice that said a response to a stranger waiting at the bus stop wasn't necessary - that a simple salutation does not always warrant a reply. He tried to decide if she would continue the conversation if he did not reply.

"Hi," he said, deciding that "hi" seemed a more informal choice than her "hello."

"Getting dark later," she said, reaching for her purse which rested on the sidewalk by her faded white tennis shoes. "Maybe spring won't be too far off." Placing the purse on her lap, she zipped it open and rummaged through it, placing a compact and an assortment of gels and creams on the bench between them. She lifted the bag closer to her face, bringing the opening just below her nose in an effort to force light into the opening. A tube of lotion rolled into Gregory's thigh. His fingers fidgeted, wondering if he should hand it to her or just push it away. His hand hovered just above it, the fingers cupped and ready to act. The last second anxiety forced his arms to cross, and he tucked the hands in tightly against his chest but they trembled anyway.

He turned away from Violet, away from the soft light on her skin focusing instead on an abandoned newspaper circular for a local business, a tree stump removal company, He stared at the comic-like picture of an exploding tree stump, the orange fire around it, and the word bang written in huge letters.

"Got a stump problem?" she asked.

Their eyes met for an instant before Gregory clicked them away. "No," he said.

She smiled. Gregory returned the gesture.

"Rough day?" she asked turning a page.

Gregory shifted his position on the bench. Tax season meant a seemingly endless supply of customers. It meant the formulation of crisp answers to many questions. His shortness in speech, his directness, meant efficiency. In accounting the numbers, the equations, and sums spoke for Gregory, and his internal machine seemed forever calculating the most proficient way to handle each person. Nevertheless, every morning he would imagine the tiny orange and blue plastic chairs of his waiting room overflowing. People standing, people waiting outside. Forming thick lines outside that looped around the block. Waiting, wanting something from him, wanting to speak to him about bringing in receipts, making return appointments. An endless drone of speech that would not end, that could never be direct, that he would endure until that magical day in April when it would end. Then Gregory could hide in his tiny office, the building itself seeming to sink away from the street, hiding between the walls that lined either side of it.

"Tax season. I'm a CPA. Certified..."

"Public Accountant," she finished.

They both grinned and Gregory felt her eyes upon him. He allowed his to connect with hers. Their eyes floated together, each set silently answering the other's questions and asking more. Gregory felt as though they were the only two people in the universe, and Gregory felt himself concentrating not on not talking, but rather what he would say next.

Headlights reflected off the building at the corner, and then the loud growl of diesel engine followed. The brakes squeaked as though a thousand fingernails scrapping chalkboards lay behind the bus's wheels. Gregory cringed, and then opened his eyes to find her cringing as well. A light laugh chirped from her mouth before her lips closed again. She smiled and Gregory saw it. Violet rose from the bench, then stood very straight as the purse went over her shoulder. He looked up at her, his feet bolted to the concrete sidewalk. A purging sound bellowed from the airbrakes, and the door hinged open. When he didn't move, she said goodnight and walked away with a soft stroll that echoed through the barren street. He saw her head resting against the window as the brakes released. A cloud of blue smoke formed around him, and the smell of diesel filled his nose and seemed to stick there. Gregory watched until the bus rounded the corner, and only then realized the tube of lotion remained at his side. He picked it up, flipped the plastic lid open and inhaled through his nose, forcing the smell of lavender in. He walked the mile and a half to his apartment building, each step bouncing the smell of lavender around in his head.

He stepped from the shower and wiped the film of condensation from the mirror. He searched the scared little eyes and pale complexion. In Gregory's mirror, the self-evaluation script played flawlessly; he had years of rehearsal. The reflection proved dominate. "What the hell's the matter with you." Like a bull-rush, his fury purged in uncontrollable bursts of obscenity's and spittle. His eyes closed. Gregory imagined striking the glass, destroying the man inside of it, punching through the mirror, into the wall behind it. He could almost feel the softness of pink insulation as his fingers run through his hair and rested on the area Gregory felt was no longer growing. He wanted

so much to crawl into the hole, allowing the cowardice fear to overtake him and live there forever. He clinched his fists, feeling the blood rushing to the finger tips, then rushing out again to pound in his ear drums. Every muscle locked, convinced that could they tighten correctly, something ancient, primal in the purest form might be unleashed.

But nothing happened.

A balled fist struck his chest in madness and resonated through his lungs and heart, turning the skin hiding underneath the hair to throb and redden instantly. With the tip of his index finger he traced the edges of his chest hair, side to side, up and down. He opened her lotion bottle, which made a louder snap than he expected. Gregory held it to his nose and breathed as though breathing in the waitress, intending to hold her there forever. He rubbed a tiny bit on his cheek, closed his eyes and smiled.

After he turned the covers down on his bed, he found the lotion again, rubbing a drop on the pain near his heart. He rubbed until the smell of lavender and the thought of Violet's soft touch on his chest, touched Gregory with such a gentle peace that he could no longer fight the urge to drift into a satisfied sleep.

He saw her the next Tuesday night, himself having spent the entire workday and several hours overtime banging through questionable claims and deductions. Upon shutting down the computer, the dim blue light of the monitor fading, he caught a glimpse of her at the bus stop. She wore a long blue coat with a wide belt of the same color, which flowed liquidly in the winter breeze. Copper colored hair lay unbound and curled downward, resting below her shoulders. Bare legs danced in nervous fury

awaiting the bus. He looked out at her through the little office window until the bus took her in.

The following Thursday, Gregory thought of all the reasons he had decided to bring his own lunch, and why he would begin driving to work. Why he would forever be content with watching Violet from a safe distance. He opened a desk drawer and removed the bottle of lavender lotion, smelled it as he always did each time he thought of her.

He closed his eyes, held the bottle with two hands, the top just below his nose. Gregory looked as though praying, silently allowing her to build in his mind. He sat quietly until the sound of breaking glass chanted off the four corners of the office, a sudden sharp explosion. He jumped as if woken by an elementary school teacher while napping. The aging desk chair revolved like a wheel with worn-out bearings, clambering from side to side towards the small table to the right of the desk, the little table under the lonely little window, where the coffee maker rested. Liquid oozed out from the sides, slow at first like tar, and then quicker and quicker, racing toward the floor and then spreading out into the cherry carpet. He sat and watched, just staring, an appropriate end to a long day of silent calculations. The coffee pot took all the heat it could, cracked and then exploded. Closing up the office, the cold rush of air filing in with the door ajar, he stood in the exit, studying the broken glass on the floor and realizing he could write off the expense of a new one.

Ice crusted the streets which made walking an art form of balance and precision coupled with prayer. A small flash of light on a dark lonesome street warmed him, the light from the diner. It felt sympathetic, and the man in the reflection again commanded

him, taking lead over the infinite calculating. Gregory touched the sharp edge of the lotion bottle in his inner coat pocket.

The dulled bronze bell jingled as he stepped in, and the waitress shuffled behind the counter, her hair wiggled down in silken strands from the once tight bun. They seemed alone in the diner, as though they were the only people in the universe. She turned and smiled.

"Hello," she said, "Just closing up, but can I get you something. Something simple I hope?"

"Oh, cup of coffee, take the chill off."

"That's simple enough. Have a seat here at the counter." She turned toward the coffee maker, hesitated, and turned to face Gregory again. "Regular or Decaf?"

"Decaf. Regular I'll be tossing all night, more than usual anyway" he said.

She poured it ever so carefully. "I work so many different hours I don't know when to sleep. Really hard sometimes." She turned her head towards a booth sunken back into the corner of the dainty diner. A young boy curled into a ball, a small downy pillow under a small acorn head, a thin blanket covered with webbing and flying Spider-Men draped across his body.

Gregory turned to look at the boy, then looked back to her and smiled, though her eyes remained on the child.

"Must be great having a family," he said. "What's his name?"

"His name is Andy."

"He's cute." Gregory felt an unexpected sadness. She had a son, perhaps a husband, a family of her own. He lifted the cup again and sipped.

"Oh," she said, as though snapping out of some trance, "Yes he certainly is. I can't take credit for that though; he's my nephew. My sister is working late tonight and dropped him off a few hours ago."

"Oh." A few of the boy's things lay in disarray on the counter. "This coloring book how he passes the time?" asked Gregory.

"I don't think he likes being away from his mother."

"How old is he?"

"He just turned six."

"I like Spider-Man myself." Gregory lifted the cup to his mouth, took a long sip from the coffee and placed it gently back on the counter as though it might shatter. He noticed how surprisingly good the coffee tasted, expected it to be old and stale, what remained from a long cold day. "It's weird you know, kids today don't have any new heroes of their own, it's still those same old guys we grew up with. Or the ones I grew up with anyway."

"I loved Wonder Woman," she said looking up. "Those shows you know ~ *Wonder Woman* and *The Incredible Hulk*. I'd watch those every day in the summer."

"Me too!" he said.

"I stayed with my grandparents during the summer. They lived in that one house the whole time they were married. A log house by the lake, nothing fancy but - it was great. I still remember watching those shows with a little tray on my lap, filled with cookies or a slice of cake."

"I want to be a super-hero." Gregory sunk in his chair aware of his absence of thought, and felt the redness of embarrassment in his cheeks. "I mean I wanted - when I

was a kid," he said quickly, "When I was a kid I wanted to be Superman."

She chuckled. Gregory found himself wanting to tell her everything. How he once believed he was destined to become Superman's protegee at age five. How he adorned himself in Superman pajamas , a pair of dinosaur underpants with red trim, blue triceratops and red tyrannosaurs, ran into the highway with his hand extended like a traffic cop ready to stop whatever topped the hill. He wanted to confess to her so much, and he hoped he could, because talking to her felt so free.

"Coffee's on the house," she said smiling.

"That's not necessary."

She turned to grab the coffee pot. "You want a refill?"

"Oh no, ma'am, that's fine." Her eyes bubbled like two pools of ocean water. Their beauty shocked Gregory, and he stared and stared, and realized that he was staring, and he wondered if she was staring back, or if she was confused by his staring. He smelled the sweetness of lavender, remembered its softness on his face and fingertips.

"I'm Violet by the way, " she said, pointing to her nametag. When he didn't respond, she continued, "And you are.."

"Gregory."

Violet leaned back and smiled, "Gregory," she said. "Gregory," she repeated with more affection. "Gregory. I like that name. You look like a Gregory," she said.

"Is that good," he added hesitantly, and cringed at what her reply might be.

She interrupted the question with one of her own.

"I've seen you in your office some nights through your little office window, staring at your desk. I've seen you staring at the bus stop too. Why don't you take the

bus anymore?"

He inspected the shiny ring foot rest attached to the bottom of the vinyl covered stool. "I've been driving my car lately. It makes more sense with the late hours during tax season."

"Yes?"

Of course Gregory couldn't tell the true logistical reasoning. That he didn't drive to work initially because it made good financial sense not to. Though Gregory lived only two miles from his office, six traffic lights lay between his apartment and his business. Gregory calculated that his car burned two and one half gallons of gas while idling each week. A monthly bus pass cost Gregory the equivalent of six gallons of gas, a savings of roughly seven dollars depending on gas prices. But the real reason he took the bus was in hopes of being able to watch her as he waited at the bus stop in front of his office, then getting a seat at the back so he could feel their heads bouncing in rhythm with the clipping of potholes under the tires.

Her face scrunched in confusion. "And you don't come in for lunch anymore. Why?"

He sighed and bit his lip, feeling the dizziness of not knowing what he might say.

"Why?" she repeated.

"It's difficult," he said. "I sat there, I sat there thinking, when you smiled at me that night." He asked the question for which he could not find the sum. "Why did you smile at me that night?"

She leaned back placing her hands palms down on the counter. "Why didn't you get on the bus?"

Because I was afraid he wanted to scream at her. *Because I was afraid, so I sat there forever in the silence imagining you.* Instead, he breathed in and exhaled as though trying to put out a flame. "I remembered some papers I had left on my desk. I went back to get them. Thanks for the coffee!" he said, leaving a generous tip, and trying not trip over his awkward feet while moving toward the door. The little body twitched in the corner, his ears momentarily aroused by shuffling shoes.

"Hey."

"Yes?" Gregory spun around. He looked at the black and white tiles, each square perhaps six inches by six inches he imagined. He looked at his right shoe, the string having come undone at some point.

"Gregory is a nice name," she said. "Like Gregory Peck - very charming and epic."

He looked up to see her face. Her round eyes spoke more meaning than her words. He felt as though she knew his life, all the mornings he sat alone eating children's cereal before work, and the nights he ate it for dinner as well, and she smiled at him again. Not just a little smirk; her cheek muscles rose up and revealed her teeth, a beautiful smile. She smiled at him. She smiled at him.

He looked into her eyes, could feel something rising in him, believed that if he looked deeply enough into her eyes he might learn to fly. He believed this was not an accident, not the work of circumstance or chance. He believed he would not live in silence anymore. He felt the sand between his toes.

"Violet," he said. "Violet."

Rodger Dodger

I smoked a joint once, with a few friends after school. We played a game to see who could hold it in the longest. The longer one could hold it in, the less likely one was of seeing the rolling green hills and thick jungles of Vietnam. My friend Robert and I tied for first, and when it was over, we all took a long look at each other as we tried in desperation breath again. Somehow as I stared at Robert forcing oxygen back into his lungs, I knew that could be our last time together. Someone would go, maybe everyone, and so we lived each day in constant fear of the mailman. Robert got his draft notice a week later, found himself in Fort Bragg North Carolina six months later, and then Saigon for Christmas.

And so I waited. That is how I spent the final year of the 1960's. The constant anxiety and eventual understanding of what that tiny box marked *Leonard* could conceivably come to hold became a means of making time stand on end. So, when I did receive my draft notice at the ripe age of nineteen, surprised I was not. However, it did seem odd that such a small object could carry with it so much weight.

It came in a bland and tan envelope. The heart scorned the hands to dare not break the seal, but the mind was out for truth. Envelope torn open carefully, paper three times folded released its hold, the eyes read, dying more with each line. Tear ducts

frozen, too shocked to work I read on. Read it three times in the driveway as my Dodge pick-up idled to fast behind me, marking time with the quickening beats of my heart. I had often thought of dying before that afternoon, the idea of sudden death often crept into my mind at odd times. However, at that moment, that instant when I saw the finality of the letter's last period, I thought really hard about living, perhaps for the first time. My eyes closed and I could see a full life. I concentrated on the images, though I knew it to be an artifice, wishful thinking at its best, I hoped to remember them always.

I knocked the truck out of gear and let the slight slope of the dirt driveway carry me towards the house, each bump and hole twisting the truck upon its rotting shocks. Dad sat on the porch, and because it happened to be Friday, he had a small glass of cognac resting on his knee, instead of his usual corn whiskey. Our house was not reflective of the average cognac drinking population, nor was the appearance of myself, or my father. Not rich, pompous, or even attempting to live beyond our means. Rather, my father had once shared a bottle of cognac with a Pfc. Metcalf on June 5, 1944, D-Day minus one. He often joked his discovery of cognac was the best thing to come out of World War II,

"Well" he said, sipping with care, "I reckon the easiest thing for us to do would be to break them feet of yorn." His wet lips shined in the evening light, but did not lick them, instead allowing the breeze and the absorption of skin to slowly dry them.

"Yeah. That's one solution."

He raised his torso a little in the porch rocker. "They keeping you young boys over there too long, asking too much out of ya'll. Course in my day we was in it for the duration." He cleared his throat before again sinking into the rocker. Dad watched the

family of pines out beyond the dirt driveway as they swayed from side to side in the wispy autumn wind. His face formed a serious grin, his mustache, checkered with wires black and white, folded up into his scrunched nose. Dad's left arm steadied the newspaper, while his other, a lifeless product of military service, lay at rest on his right thigh. His squinted as he read from the sports section.

"Mantle's got a four game hitless streak a going." Dad loved the Yankees, but hated Mickey Mantle; the way he could switch hit, use either side with equal force, and he cursed the lord every time they called his name on the radio. "And I tell you something else son," he couldn't stop his musings now, "when that hammer hit's em' bone's, it'll only hurt momentarily."

"Then what Dad?"

"Well, then it's going to be numb for a spell, but you'll be a thanking me."

"Don't worry about it."

"Well looky here boy." So it began. "A few months rolling around here in a chair, compared to a lifetime. Or how about some hot metal poppin' round your skull. I was younger than you were boy and couldn't even feed myself, cause a hunk o'steel no bigger than an acorn. And that acorn could just as soon as hit me in the head." He took a long sip and laughed, causing the liquid to stream from the corners of his mouth. A red handkerchief flipped from the chest pocket of his overalls and wiped his mouth. "That would have pleased your Uncle Sam."

I hopped onto the banister of the porch and watched the fall leaves dance over the crisp grass. "Why's that Dad?" I finally asked.

I looked back as he rolled a pack of "Beach Nut" chewing tobacco from the pouch

in his overalls; a sign of his growing agitation. An oversized chaw went in, a tight but pleasuring fit. His voice now distorted and laboring battled on. "Cause they wouldn't have to pay me them checks every month. They'd just given the stars and strips to your ma." With that, a thrust of air sent a geyser of amber juices out to the dirt. "That was a good one," he said.

"You just bested your record distance," I replied and slinked down off the porch railing.

"Flag folded up like a giant's Goddamn handkerchief," he said, rubbing what little white hair remained on his head. Dad glanced at me and jerked his head toward the door. I came back clenching a thin pack of *Goodies Headache Powder*, pain killers for worn-out poor folks. Chewing tobacco still in cheek, he shook the pack, took it down, raised his aging frame up slowly from the rocking chair and wandered off for the cognac bottle.

"Thought about running?" he said, poking his head out the doorway. Harold Filmer thought of that, he coughed first that night. He didn't run though, just didn't show. His girlfriend said the FBI took him as he sat eating chopped pork at "The State Line BBQ." Oddly named as it lay nearly two hundred miles from the nearest state line.

"All I ever dodged was balls, to cold in Canada anyway." I said.

"You'll be in your friend's Robert's shoes soon."

"Got a letter from him last weak. He's coming home."

"Well that's good. Why didn't you tell me?"

I almost hated Robert. Soon he would be home with his family, having served and survived, and my ordeal just beginning. "Must've slipped my mind in the midst of all this," I lied. He wrote "Coming Home" in big letters that covered the entire page. The

envelope looked as if it had been swallowed by a sea creature, vomited out, and then slapped with a stamp. Mud and water spots surrounded the corners, ink ran down the page.

I sat out there a while longer; just watched a few bugs ramble past the porch light, listened to the sounds of life as the sun dimmed, and thought about everything Dad said. He wasn't at all serious about taking the ball-pin to my toes; unless of course I was, but I knew the passionate, painful truth of what he said. War had taken so much from us, but we made it alright. Mom never thought so, never thought it enough, and one day she topped the east hills out of Knoxville, and though he never said it, I think my father blamed himself when she left.

The following afternoon Dad called me at work. "Get here boy" he said. Static filled the earpiece followed by the deep inhales and exhales of the old man. His breath grew heavier, more erratic, and then a click. My boss Milo let me leave early with little persuasion. He simply blinked behind his square shaped glasses and walked off. I turned from Route 9, passed by the mailbox, and sped up through the tree tunneled gravel road. Driving down to the house, gravel thumping off the fender wells, my thoughts turned to my father. How he would be alone if I decided to run or go to war.

A black Plymouth Fury sat in front of the house where the grass ceased to grow, my usual parking spot, and the headlights glared snidely at my oxidizing truck. The sharp edges of car, the shine and brim of new paint and chrome spoke of its potential energy. With momentary mean thoughts thrown in my head about that car, I rattled my buggy inside the barn-garage, slammed the door more than once trying to close it, and

started towards the house. Walking, face on the ground, then at that car, then at the ground.

"Come on up here boy, we got company." The yelp boasted from the diaphragm of a contrived father sitting next to the rigid image of a contemporary warrior- a young man in a uniform shined to match that car. Dad and Robert sat rocking on the front porch. Dad picked a mason jar of whiskey off the empty orange crate by his boot. His black and red striped suspenders hung down past his thick thighs, drooping just above the floor, relieved of their daily duty.

Robert shot up off the porch step. "Been a long time ole' boy. He extended his hand; I stared at for the longest time before approaching with smaller stalling steps. My personality being as such that I never enjoyed moments like that. I had a problem. Friends, family even, became strangers to me when I didn't see them for long periods of time.

Timid feelings were replaced with jocularity when Robert smiled. My hand gripped his and he squeezed it forcefully. "Sure has Robert. Been what, a year?"

"Sure," he said.

"So how's life been a treating you."

"Call me Sergeant," he said pointing to the black marks on his shoulder, "Got a field promotion to Buck Sergeant just before I left."

With that Dad raised from the rocker. "I gotta do some things in here, fill out some bills in here" he said. "You boys be careful. Good seeing you Robert, just glad you're done with all that."

"Oh, not done, sir, no sir not me. I'm home just visiting, on leave for a few weeks. My tour was up, Mr. Morris."

Dad walked back through the shadowed doorway, his tan work boots with the strings so thick they resembled ropes vibrating the porch floor boards. He halted a few steps from the steps, looked at me momentarily in bewilderment, and then turned his eyebrow raised gaze towards Robert. "Call me Lieutenant Morris, then Robert," he said finally, "you know how much I loved the army. Question. If you're tours up, why you home for just a couple of weeks?"

"Well sir, before I left Fort Campbell I signed on for another eight years. Career man, sir. Taking another tour."

"Where's that God damn powder at, Rodger!"

I shook my head, innocently chuckling at the old man. "You know how he is."

"You the same way."

"What's that mean?"

"The way you carried on when I got drafted."

"I was concerned," I said quickly, and attempted to craft a different conversation.

"That's a flash car you got there."

"Yeah, but its dad's. He said I could use it while him and mom are in Charleston this weekend."

"Oh," I whispered. It occurred to me as to question why the parents of this boy soldier left as soon as he arrived back home.. That must have hurt him, but I didn't want to push it any further. They had money, and I figured that was reason enough to be heartless.

Then it was Robert's turn to change the subject. "Look at you. Hair down to your Goddamn shoulders. Sideburns?"

One gets used to such comments after dealing with some of the local, most special citizens, though I did not expect such comments from Robert.

"Hell, you wore yours like this in school," I replied.

"Yeah, don't remind me." Robert cleared his throat. "Somebody from the draft board gonna catch you, get you in for spite" he added, in a matter of fact sort of way.

My spleen exploded, the only way to describe such a ghostly feeling. My voice personified terror, gasping each word. "I think I'd run."

Robert dusted off a step, took care in straightening his pant legs while crouching, and then sat down. He pushed the cuffs of his uniform up gently. The jacket swallowed the body, a tiny head leaked out of the mouth of the great cotton beast. His forearm showed an estuary of raised blue veins against a tan backdrop, skin almost transparent. "Oh you would be surprised how many of them suck it up. Everyone sucks it up eventually," he said, voice growing in bravado. "They see all those golden locks on the floor, like little girls who lost their dolls."

"You know what," I said in a lonesome stammer, "forget this, come on Robert its been too long. Friday night special?"

Robert looked up, obviously somewhat amused at the proposal. "Camping?" he asked.

My face squinted, head reflexively nodding in agreement. "Camping. Tomorrow, maybe a few more days." I added. He saluted me, and turned the car from elegant potential energy, into ground thumping kinetic.

It roared beyond the trees, a gear changed and the roar deepened further down Route 9. The wind stood still, and the trees followed its lead, and there was not even the faintest natural sound. There was only that mechanical pounding, and I knew at that moment that it was consuming me. The roar of a strange man, but perhaps a better one.

I pried the decrepit letter from within my pocket, balled into a tiny retched clump and jettisoned it into an oblivion of dirty socks. At diner that night Dad asked me what I thought about that "Poor Boy." I didn't reply. However, there throbbed that curiosity to see if I could find Rob again, in turn find happiness, some snap of joy we once shared together. At the same time, the house, the woods and the animals that made their home there, my father's countenance and even Robert's, said *run*. Don't finish dinner, stifle the urge to think, to reason and discern. Run.

"You two have fun, but you watch him, and watch him good. Anyone get free of hell and go back, crazy!", he said, then paused to further work over the words in his head, and the biscuit in his mouth. "You watch his ass boy!"

Along with all our supplies, I packed a tin box that held a small amount of marijuana on the inside, and a picture of Marshall Matt Dylan from *Gunsmoke* on the outside. Robert pulled in with the morning sun. Dad told Robert to watch out for me that morning, but had already restated his warning to me with a psyche penetrating facial contortion over morning eggs and liver mush. Robert heaved his bag in, but put a long black case down every so gently, rested it against a few blankets and his green bedroll. Dad wandered out and helped us load the last few things. "You boys be careful now," he said after some pause. I threw a few pieces of pine wood in, both for the camp fire and for weighting down the tarp.

"Here." Dad pushed a half full bottle of cheap whiskey into my chest and held it there until my hand grasped it too. I felt his big knuckles on my palm. "This'll help keep you warm. Don't let him have a lot," he whispered.

"Thanks dad. You go easy on the Goodies" I said gripping his shoulder in a half hug.

"You too boy."

Dad wore a smile despite his uneasiness. He stood waving as the truck picked up speed down the driveway. I hated leaving him, but the farther we drove from that house, the closer we got to the hills, the more I thought of living. I left behind the city and its people, the melancholy sounds of work, bench grinders and honing tools on metal. I left behind my father, our little house, and the pine trees that encircled it. I hoped to replace them all with new sounds and new trees, if not for a little while.

The charted streets of asphalt turned to gentle black and gray gravel curves of country road. I hoped we didn't need a tarp. Robert had my Dodge pushing in ways unfashionable of a truck in its condition. We slid onto Fisher road in half spin, but Robert pushed for further speed and we lost the tarp. It being his, it felt but a modest loss. However, with no seatbelt, I stiffened my legs against the floorboard; the cancerous rust having not terminally spread. "Why you drive like this?" I asked.

"What you mean?" he replied.

"All we have to live on is back there flying around. This road is gravel you know."

"Yeah I know. Just anxious to get there, plus I haven't driven a truck in along time."

"Well hammer down then!"

The tingling of anxiousness helped propel the truck. Memories of long summer's passed flooded my consciousness, nipping at the focused images of bare hour glasses. Wooden planks of an aging bridge clattered and warped under too much weight and velocity, but it kept us out of the Pigeon River. I adjusted my posture. "Should have picked up a little more speed of the knoll. It'd been safer if we could have jumped that splinter stack."

Robert gripped the wheel tighter, his knuckles turning white, "Well?" he asked.

"Yeah. That's a deep subject."

I grabbed my wallet and flipped it open. The note gone. A few folded bills, a faded license. Never had I noticed how scared I looked in the id picture, as if the camera lunged from behind a blind corner and snapped my soul away. Glaring at the trees in forceful wonder thinking of how many times I might have seen those same trees, how many were no longer there, cleared to soon, how many had taken their place. The sun shown down on the sign ahead. It looked as though written in crayon, *Fall Creek Falls Campground Five Miles.* More beautiful words were never written. I grew increasingly eager with the plume of gravel dust wake masking my escape, and I prayed that the world may never find me.

The campground appeared to be in ruins. Half erected tents lined the perimeter of the office which looked abandoned. Cracked and shattered windows lined the walls on either side of the doorway. The door itself lay on the ground, ripped from its hinges perhaps by the wind. Some tents lay flat on the ground, the poles run straight through the

canvas, while others stood but inches off the ground, the ends flapping with the breeze. Crunched beer cans, many with fresh looking labels dotted the landscape, and a tin trash can outside the office door shined with them, loaded far beyond capacity.

"What the fuck is all this?" asked Robert.

"Probably tourists from the North looking at the fall colors," I said, kicking an empty can of pinto beans.

"What a fucking treat that must be."

We cleared a sight right by the falls. Water beat down against the bottom pool and splashed along the rocks. I couldn't shake the image of jumping from those falls. Allowing myself to let go, crash like the water onto the jagged white boulders. Break my legs, hip, back, neck anything. How easy it would be.

Oak, pine, and hickory's stood guard behind us, as we began unpacking the supplies, and setting up the tent. "This place isn't as dense as the jungle, but it's nice, good canopy," said Robert. "Hey! It's a Tennessee Jungle!" He undipped a long black case as I set up my tent.

"You want me to set up your tent?."

He looked up from his study. "Oh I like sleeping next to nature so I won't--." A leaf scuffled next to me, a tiny chipmunk ran past.

"Squirrel!" He jostled an oversized rifle with an oversized scope from the ground.

"What?" I asked, spinning in quick circles.

The tiny chipmunk previously stood not three feet away from my kneeling body, but filled with terror at the sounds of screams galloped away. The rifle rang out through

the forest. "Damn, I thought my dad had this thing sighted."

What the fuck happened to you. My mind asked it forcefully, but my mouth would not work. "That a welcome home gift?"

"Yeah."

"Just like that Plymouth." I added while smiling and shaking my head from side to side.

"You know my dad, always trying to make up for lost time." "I didn't want to mention it in front your dad; I know how he like's Plymouth's."

"I appreciate that, very considerate of you," I said.

He removed the scope from the rifle first. The ends looked to be wide and bulging, the center of the scope being thin. He breathed on each side until the lenses fogged, and then he wiped them with a dark colored handkerchief. He placed the scope in a small compartment in the case, ran the handkerchief up and down the length of the rifle barrel before placing it in as well.

I went back to staking base peg's for the tent. To control the hammer smashes that buried them proved difficult, though I tried not to bury them too deep, for the anger that put them there could never bring them out.

"I'll get him next time," he said, and with that he smacked the locks on the case together.

The tent's top ascended, while the anger lowered. Grabbing my cane pole I turned to find Robert on his way back from the truck and jostling with two lanterns in an effort not to drop them.

"I'm gonna go do some fishin' up by the creek." I picked at the end of a fishing hook, trying to remove a caramel colored crust, what remained of old bait. I turned just as the sound of falling lanterns caused my shoulders to freeze and then shudder.

"I'll join you in a minute," he said.

I took off up the trail, walking briskly to give myself as much time alone by the creek as possible; hoping the gentle flow of water would provide a hint of solace. The forest, a beautiful array of fall colors, the leaves, never as beautiful as in their last dying days. An elderly oak invited me into its shade. Its extremities bled thin, coarse, red leaves, but more remained on the capillary like limbs than on the ground; a good sign of a short winter. Five mesmerizing minutes passed, and then the loud crunch of leaves stopped next to me. He sat down. "Hey ole boy," he said while casting off with a shiny rod and reel. "You know," he said almost immediately, "you really want to get some fishing done." His face smirked up to ensure me he knew exactly what to say. "Then you need to do it way we did when I was in country."

"Really, how's that?" I turned my face away, and the eyes rolled mechanically

"Well when we got tired of rations, and we found a little pond or stream, couple of boys would toss concussion grenades in there. Fish would just float up, some of them dead, others flopping around blind and deaf."

"Do fish have ears, Rob?"

"Then these two Hawaiian's would dive in and round em' up."

"That's great, but there is two fish in this entire creek. I don't know how a grenade helps us."

"Them two boys could climb a tree like a monkey." He flicked the lure, and then

shoved the pole's end into the moist ground of the creek bank. What fish the water may have contained decided not to bite; they not unlike myself were hiding. We rose together; I walking quietly back to camp, while he continued on about his training, the war and all things that unnerved me. Two strangers walked through the forest, sharing the same path.

The camp fire sprang up thanks to rich pine, and a dash of kerosene from one of the lanterns. The blaze showed bright in the time of year when the evenings quickly gave way to the darkness of night. Hotdogs and marshmallows run through with sticks, roasted over the lapping flames. Robert started up again. "You know, they using us wrong over there, my self anyways."

I didn't care to respond, but did so anyway. "How so?"

"Well we all the time going out, humping around, looking for them. If I had my way I'd be up in a tree, M-16, M-79 Law, just waiting on them."

I quietly revolved my eyes. "What would you do for food?" I asked.

"Food?" he replied.

"Yeah. Even super soldiers like you gotta eat." The condescension in my voice seemed to show more than I intended.

Robert manufactured a chuckle. "Well, when I ran out of food I'd shoot me a bird flying over."

"Yeah but you would have to get down to go get it. Might step on a mine or get shot."

"Get down. Boy I'm so good it would fall right in my hand, never need to move." His face beamed everlasting confidence.

"Listen," I had to stop him or kill him. "How's about some of that new stuff they call pot marijuana." Robert's face showed a human smile and his head nodded. We each enjoyed our own joint, overkill. Trouble's began to fade, and we spoke with melancholy of times growing up, when we came out to that same campground as high schoolers with Michelle and Megan Wallace.

One wonderful hour passed with no mention of violence or soldiery.

"Hey," said Robert seeming to suddenly snap into some perverse sobriety, "you know what this marshmallow looks like."

I physically shuddered at what he might say. "A roasting marshmallow I hope to God."

"No, chinks after the napalm hits."

I darted up so fast my back hurt. "What the fuck is wrong with you!" I found the courage to ask. Robert's face contoured in confusion. "What's wrong with you Robert?" I repeated. I felt a deep pulsing in my head that seemed to emanate throughout my body, through the tips of my fingers, through the soles of my feet, and out into the darkness.

"What's wrong with you?" he fired back.

"I'll tell you what's wrong with me. I got my draft notice."

Robert stood up slowly "That's great! After basic I can get you in my platoon, look after you, it'll be great."

"Great? Great you dumb fuck! I came out here to try to have a little fun. To forget about it for a few days, think about what I'm going to do, and all you can do is keep talking about guns and people burning alive."

"Maybe you're right. You might should try getting towards Canada. You've always been kind of sensitive." Despite all of my father's raising I took offense to that. I was angry, impaired with drugs and a shattering sense of courage. "I mean the way your daddy raised you," he continued, "I don't know if you could handle it boy."

"My father's a good man, protected me, loved me, a better man than your father, he knows true courage." I lowered myself to the dirt again, and sat as still as I could manage to, watched the world throb beyond my eyes, the pulse that would not stop. It thumped in my ears, and rattled in my stomach, made the trees behind Robert twist into odd forms.

He laughed like a high school bully, confident arrogance coloring his face. His eyes locked to mine. "Your father's a crippled old coward."

Robert went to sleep on his feet; I half expected him to start snoring before he hit the ground. I made frequent fists trying to squeeze out the pain that anger left there; then in calm hysteria began packing the truck. High or not I wanted out of there. I took down the tent, loaded our things while he remained silent, motionless. The last trip back from the truck, I thought about how awkward the ride home might be. If Robert would show me any remorse, understand he crossed the line. I thought about Dad, how he would come to cope with my departure. Only after rolling Robert's sleeping bag that once held his body did I notice it lay barren. A nervous cold stretched over me. "Robert. . .Robert."

I heard a whimper that seemed to emanate from the darkness. The sound of my name followed. I walked in the direction of the sounds, and found Robert sitting against

the thick trunk of a tree, his knees held fast against his body as if trying to hide inside of it.

"Robert?" I whispered.

"I'm not going back," he whispered back. "I'm going to run." He looked at me as though seeing me for the first time, and though I could not see the tears run down his face, I knew they were there. He reached for my neck and pulled me forward until our heads met softly. His hand gripped my neck as though it was a tree branch hanging from the side of a cliff, and his sobs grew louder. Light from the fire illuminated the forest backdrop. Strings of ants marched towards their bunker, ending a midnight tour. A piece of hickory wood exploded into a radiant shower of embers. Robert cried out and gripped my neck harder. A thrush, a Tennessee Thrush sang out from its perch as we held each other. The night breezed stood still, ceasing to rustle the tree limbs that hung low to the ground, almost wrapping us in its warmth. The fire flashed through the trees and we held each other tight.

"Hold on," I said. The hesitation in his crying told me he thought I might leave him. "Hold on," I repeated.

I returned with the cheap whiskey. I unscrewed the cap and offered the bottle to Robert. The liquid inside looked more like molasses in the light of the fire, and Robert turned the bottle straight up, drank until it bubbled inside the bottle. He took a dip breathe and wiped the whiskey from his lips with a bare wrist. "We got caught in an ambush, the day before my R&R papers came through" he said, no longer crying. "We got caught and I ran." He pushed the bottle into my chest.

"Jesus." I didn't take a drink.

"I'd just made sergeant, but it doesn't stop you from getting scared." "I've been thinking about running too. I'm come with you." Robert grabbed the bottle from my hand and took another drink. "You'll be alright over there, Rodger, you're smarter than me. You'll make it."

At that moment I realized that I was afraid to run, afraid to jump onto the rocks. . The light of the camp fire flickered under the tree branches, a tender sound of rolling water echoed through the quite woods, and I felt at once alone and at peace. Robert handed me the bottle and I drank until the whiskey bubbled. Robert stood up, and balanced himself against the tree. I joined him, swirling the small amount that remained around inside the bottle. "You want it?"

Robert grabbed it from my hand, walked with care before stopping just in front of the fire. He looked over his shoulder toward me and smiled, and through the red tint of the fire I could see my old friend. His wrist turned as his eyes remained locked on mine, and the liquor hit the flames causing them to burst upward. "Fire water!" he said laughing.

We got in the truck, wrapped our sleeping bags around us as best we could. Robert cupped his hands around his mouth, exhaled trying to force warmth unto them. "Good night," he said, tucked the cover up close to chin and closed his eyes. I leaned my head against the side window, felt the coldness there, felt the painful and wonderful sensation of life in my cheek, until a weak morning sun sent what light and heat it could through the windshield some hours later. Robert was gone, and I knew neither of us could remain in the hills of Tennessee.

Hot and Cold

Rinse with cold water not warm.

Tom remembered that fatherly wisdom as he studied the different razor blades hung neatly in the bathroom accessories isle. They all looked so professional, with rigidly sharp steel teeth, flashy names, and bright colored handles. Some with four levels of cutting, others with five, and flexible heads on them all. The promise of fewer strokes and less skin irritation humored him little. All he wanted was the shadow of coarse black hair which framed his jaw, wrapped around his lips and lined his unusually small chin removed. To have that skin feel the weak warmth of an October sun, or the chilled breeze of an autumn evening. He would cut them with a dull pocket blade, or rip out each hair if need be, but then again, the razors promised fewer strokes.

Their relationship, like that of a cut rose; the last days before its death perhaps the most beautiful, removed from the roots of the bush, unable to blossom again, had been withering for months. Tom had felt it coming on like disease, an unseen mist developing

between them, and though he could not remember when that feeling of deconstruction first struck, he knew it to be an unrelenting pain.

They fought all the time, over trivial things as it seemed to him; things that should never be discussed. But she herself delivered the death blow, she asked to move in. Of course he yielded immediately as he always did for her; her beauty demanded it of him. He felt the cells of libido dying with each picture she hung, each inch of closet space she annexed. Her pitiless obsession with nesting, however, did allow him to gather years of accumulated smutty books, movies, and other things of pleasure, and race them out to the garden house for safe keeping.

He connected the blade head to the shaft, let the cold water run for a moment before wetting the sharp edges. Tom felt a smug reality wash over his face. "I have to do this," he whispered to the razor. He squeezed a glob of wintergreen, friction reducing gel into his palm, and chuckled at how it looked like a large green Hershey's Kiss. The four bladed razor head eyed him persuasively; he gripped it tight, then tighter still.

His green eyes watched themselves move in the mirror. They searched his countenance as though realizing then the significance of that moment. He hated that beard, the way it made him look like a criminal, ruff and dirty. Tom's mother said it made him look like a hoodlum. He hated the color, that bright orange that the world decided to call red. It was really orange. He hated the way it curled, the way it grew in thicker around his chin and in splotches around his profile. The way the tiny hairs around his lips felt sticky after eating ribs. But most of all, he hated it because his girlfriend loved it.

He rubbed the green clump until it lathered in his hand, and spread it along the line of his jaw, and then carefully around his upper and lower lips. The stout thicker hairs were screaming to breakthrough towards the light and finally did so. He lowered the high-tech chisel to his lower cheek, scraping downward, slowly erasing a streak of curls, pruning them away like forests of red oak trees. He saw the first patch of reborn skin and marveled at his conviction. But the skin looked pale, frightened. Tom shaved the same area again, and rinsed the hairs away in cold water, not warm.

The sink quickly became rugged in whiskers. With each swipe of the cutting edge, he saw her face, her anticipating lips, their first kiss. He cut again. That section of her face washed away into the drain. Her face, her love, his beard—their first kiss, sliding through the mesh drain into the sludge of sewer pipes. The well rooted ones, those who wouldn't be cut with ease, caught in the razor's louvered blades were tugged out. The unexpected pain shivered Tom's spine. He doubled the stroke on the other side making an effort to keep the sides balanced and symmetrical.

Those on his chin, long and thick and stout proved to be particularly difficult despite the titanium blades. He bore down brutishly upon the underside of his chin and scraped it upward, like a snow plow chafing asphalt. Blood ran down his thin neck. Some absorbed into what hair remained, dyeing them a timid red. Those stout few, those she nibbled on just before she kissed him for the first time, but the sight of blood gave purpose to his resolve, like hounds having their noses rubbed in blood before the hunt. He let the blood run.

And there was the question of what he would say to her.

He looked to the mirror for answers. "No cliches, just emotion."

There was only skin, an outer shell thirsting for a lost warmth. He felt himself slipping into a deep sadness at what he might say. His soul unshielded, the man looking back, the man standing naked in the glass saw himself cleanly. He tried to remember the first time he felt them falling apart.

In the beginning, the relationship flowed smoothly, giving and taking in harmony; that period when everything is beautiful, when hands are never kept to themselves. The primal, sexual passion left her. He conceived all of his nasty habits, those of being a man, but when the lust dissolved, so did Tom's conscience. He resorted to lies. Every question the same answer, never adhering to the idea they were having problems.

'You don't look at other women do you?'

'No.'

'Do you watch porn?'

'No baby.'

'Is the sex okay?'

'Okay? Any better and I'd never leave the house.'

"Are you a man," asked the apparition in the mirror. "Yes, theoretically, yes but no, but no, not in a while." He hated her most for that, for turning him into a liar, something less than a man hiding underneath a beard. He yearned at that moment to cut her with the razor, rinse her off the blade, and cut her deeper. He trimmed the emotions from his heart and washed them away in the cold water.

The distance between them developed slowly. Jokes turned into arguments, arguments into fights, and then eventually, those little idiosyncrasies that made them love each other more, started to anger them. Her slightly high-pitched laugh, his inability to

be serious in any situation. The night before Tom reached his decision that very thing separated them in bed; his senseless joking, his sometimes hurtful joking. They lay in the tiny bed, twisting to gain comfort, distancing themselves to gain more real-estate.

"Oh yeah," he said.

"What?"

"Tomorrow's Wednesday, you know the night we fuck."

"Yes."

"I just thought I would remind you so you could start thinking of a good excuse why we can't."

"Fuck you," she cried.

"I wish somebody would!"

He wrestled the covers from his frame, stole a pillow and stomped into the living room. He lay there on the chocolate colored couch gazing at the unlit stucco ceiling. He heard her crying softly into the mattress. Tom never meant to bring tears: though he had before, but this time he didn't console her, he simply closed his eyes as the sound of his girlfriend lulled him to sleep.

He dried the water from his face and applied the alcohol-free aftershave, a minty musk. The red skin burned in cool cleansing agony. His mind again turned to what he might say. "No cliches." He thought of the obvious ones at his desk and wrote them out on the word processor. 'Its not you its me' he decided was the worst of the bunch, and of course, it was definitely her. He closed the processor and began perusing the internet for pornography. The internet had convinced Tom if he cut the ties between them, if he found himself as a free man, several anonymous women would appear, as if dropping

from the heavens for simultaneous sex. He couldn't help but imagine. He buried the idea that she had lost interest in him, that he wasn't attractive anymore.

Tom gazed upon the crude scene. "Is this really what I want," he asked the monitor, but knew the answer. The man on the monitor relieved his daily frustrations on the young woman's face. Tom felt sympathy for her, and shame for himself. He moped back to the mirror and looked at his face. He looked like a turtle, like a Tom turtle, his cheeks flat and round. "I destroyed us," he mumbled, "I stopped trying to win her." He began to cry, the tears running untouched down his cheeks and chin and plopping into the drain. When the tears ceased, he went to the couch to wait. He would tell her everything, all the reasons they couldn't be together anymore; the reasons why he didn't deserve her anymore.

A smudge of a sunset illuminated the window pane, and the blinds cast a stripped shadow along his face and torso. He saw her small frame skip past the window. The door knocked. He squinted through the peep hole, trying to gather his thoughts in an instant. He cautiously removed the chain and dead bolt. "You can do this, you can do this," he chanted. She stood in the doorway, a bag of grocery's clinging to her chest. She opened her mouth as if to speak.

"We need to talk," he broke in. His brain slapped the heart around for the intoxications that made him spew out such a phrase. Her body curved and cut through the evening light, her brown hair catching fire in the sun, turning shades of amber and gold.

"Listen lets not start it again. I bought some cookies."

"What? Oh, yes?"

"I'm sorry about last night," she continued standing just inside the doorway, "just let me put them on." Her face seemed unsure, worried, the light around her dying as the sun slipped below the mountains inch by inch.

"Okay," he said finally.

Tom sat down on the couch as she placed the cookies in the oven and put the other groceries away. He took the time to imagine his next sentence, and the one after that.

He heard the oven's light flip on, and his girlfriend saying, "Come here," in the frailest voice he ever heard. He turned to view the kitchen, and though he couldn't see her, Tom gently walked, one foot then the next, to the kitchen. She sat on the floor, leaning against the cabinet door under the sink and in front of the oven, looking up at him.

"What, what are doing?" he asked.

She smiled as if caught doing something meant for no one else to see, then chuckled, both of which hurt Tom deeply. Momentarily he would tell her why she had to go, why it was him not her that broke them apart.

"I'm watching the cookies bake," she said.

"Why?"

"Cause it's interesting, and cause I knew if I went to the couch we would forget about them and they would burn." She patted the pearl tile next to her thigh, "Come on and sit down."

Tom lowered himself to the cold tile. The floor nipped the unfortunate skin below the knees where the material of his ragged khakis shorts did not reach, though the area

soon warmed from body heat. He looked at her little head, and then through the rectangle cut in the oven door. The oven light illuminated the universe inside like an electric star. The cookie doe pulsed with heat, transforming from raw clumps, to half-cooked, partially flattened clumps. They looked as if molded by invincible hands, like little lumps of modeling clay becoming edible sculpture. One by one they began to gurgle and rise, brown bags of hot air. He felt her enchanted stare about him, and when his eyes met hers she smiled.

"You shaved."

"Yeah. Sorry."

"No, no I like it. Its like a can see your. . .well I can just see you now.

"Yeah."

"I like it." She ran her hand along his jaw line, "it's so smooth to."

"Yeah. I used a nice lotion," he said, touching the other side of his face and then her hand as she felt that side also.

"Listen," he said quickly.

As Tom began to gather the courage to speak, to explain the cold facts to her, she leaned her head against his shoulder, placed her hand on his, looked up at him, and sighed. *No no no " he thought. "Be bitchey, be anything but this. Let me hate you so you can hate me.* She gripped his thigh, ran her tender touch down his leg, kissed him as they kissed so long ago, and though he did not know if he could ever allow her to love him again, he leaned his head to the side until it rested against the top of hers. Any of amount of time would never be enough to soak in the moments of anxiety, the feelings of hopelessness and hopefulness, and no memory could ever capture or contain the struggle

inside as Tom sat silently. The cookies burned in the oven. Neither of them seemed to care.