

Trouble at Home

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Trouble at Home

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For my father

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Fishing at the Power Lines

To look at it, it was just two blond-headed guys swishing through some tall grass down the power lines on the way to go fishing. The big one on the left was Danny White and the scrawny one with the buzz cut was his little brother Roger. They were tall boys, Danny was a good deal thicker but they were both tall like weeds, and they walked like they knew the place. Roger had the poles and the bait and whatever else you might need to go fishing, wearing a thin white t-shirt and a pair of light-colored jeans with the cuffs tucked into an ugly pair of hiking boots, and Danny had a mean look and a mullet haircut, and was lugging along a big dirty white cooler full of beers. They didn't bring sandwiches or anything because they were just a couple boys skipping high school and didn't think about things like sandwiches.

Well, let's be clear; Roger was the only one skipping high school because Danny left that place in a blazing trail of dust almost two years before. No reason to stay; their father always said you can make more

money sooping up cars and moving heavy stuff around for the neighbors. And you could take days off to go fishing that way. Roger was going to leave, too, soon as he was old enough, though he didn't mind school so much. He was actually pretty good at math, though he hadn't cracked an English book since seventh grade. Lot of not-bad-looking girls there, too.

They walked like that for a good while, and it was still early but the sun was rising fast and it was becoming one of those muggy New England summer days. Danny was switching the cooler from hand to hand, trying to rest his arms.

"Stop for a beer," he said after a while. He put the cooler down right where he was, tossed Roger a can of Natural Ice and kept one for himself, took a seat on the cooler. Roger sat down on the grass with his elbows wrapped around his knees, yawned, and cracked his beer. A cricket jumped on his arm and he flicked it off.

"Shouldn't be skipping school," said Danny after a few minutes.

"Why?"

"Cause you didn't ask Dad."

"Dad don't care." Roger scuffed his toe in the dirt, took a long swig of beer, and made a face. "Stuffs nasty." Danny always bought the worst beer.

"Should have asked him." Danny crumpled up his empty can. "It's beer, you faggot, it's not supposed to taste like apple juice."

They stood up and gathered their gear, then kept walking through the mist of gnats and pollen. It all stuck to the film of sweat on their faces and necks and arms. Walking quiet like that, Roger thought he could hear the hum of the power lines. He imagined he could feel it, too, all that electricity blasting down the dry strip of grass and weeds and bugs. All that electricity buzzing through everything, straight through his own body.

They walked a little further, single file with Danny walking in front. He started switching the cooler from hand to hand with greater frequency.

"Just up this one more hill and there's our turn," called Roger, trying to be encouraging.

"I know that, asshole, I've only been up here five thousand times." "You know, if you didn't want me to come you should have said so." Danny looked back at him. "Okay. I don't want you to come." Roger thought Danny acted more and more like their father every day. Like a mean bastard, that is to say. Their father had always drunk too much and had a rotten temper, but Roger knew he took pride in his sons. It wasn't till a couple years before, when their mother died of ovarian cancer, that he'd started acting like a tyrant, pushing the boys around and even starting fist fights with Danny. At night, after he got mostly through a twelve-pack, he often made unreasonable demands on

the boys, mostly having to do with chores, or work to be done at the shop.

"How long I been asking you boys to put up this new mailbox? I'm tired of that rusty old fucking mailbox."

Roger mostly deferred to his father, either doing the chore or, if his father was drunk enough, agreeing to do the chore and then just going off to one of his buddies' houses. The next morning, if he remembered it, his father would make fun of him for submitting to his ridiculous orders.

"Yes, Daddy," he would mock. "I'll go out in the rain and mow the lawn. Kid's got no balls."

But Danny refused to comply with his father at those moments. "No fuckin' way," he'd say, "I'll do it tomorrow." Well, that usually commenced a brawl out in the backyard.

The next morning, they would both wake up bruised and sore, but their father would slap Danny on the back and say, "You're a tough kid, I'll give you that."

Roger guessed it was a lot of pressure to raise two boys alone, and he didn't envy Danny for being the first-born. First-born and favorite son, Roger thought. It was a lot to live up to, and it didn't make Danny the greatest company. Still, brothers are brothers and fishing is fishing.

"Too late now," said Roger, and he paced ahead, swinging his arms out wide.

At the top of the hill they passed through an entrance out of the sticky sun and into the dank woods. The sound of the stream bubbled up, and Roger could smell the grey clay of its banks with his first breath in. It smelled different from that sweet red clay they brag about some places, dirtier and more straightforward; there's nothing in suburban Massachusetts as exotic as red-colored dirt.

It wasn't far till they met the stream, which was much too wide to jump across. They knew to cross over the wide part just before a little rocky waterfall, where the water was shallowest, and Roger expertly hopped across the slippery roots and rocks that jutted an inch or two out of the fast water. The cooler was heavy and Danny was stepping slowly, trying not to lose his balance.

"You want to pass me that cooler?" Roger called over the rush of the stream.

"Fuck off," said Danny, and right then he lost his footing and fell ass-first into the river. "Look what you did!"

Roger laughed loudly at his brother's soaked jeans, and turned around to saunter toward the fishing hole. It wasn't far to the little pine grove that housed the campsite with a fire pit full of rusty beer cans. Right by there, like a back door off the living room, was an opening, referred to as the Rope Swing, onto Wildwood Lake. There was a big boulder at the opening, which was good both for fishing from and for getting good air off the rope that hung from the big elm tree.

The boys baited their lines, sat down on a couple smooth spots on the rock, opened a couple fresh beers, and started fishing. They didn't say much. Roger liked to sit and daydream while he fished, think about girls or what he'd do after he left high school. Maybe learn how to weld, maybe be a blacksmith. Make swords. There was a market for that sort of thing. He could always work on cars at his dad's shop; that was what his family expected anyway. A bunch of time went by that way, just him sitting and thinking and drinking his beer. He didn't catch anything for the first couple beers-neither of them had a watch, so beers were the best way to measure time-but Danny pulled out a little perch or two, which he threw back. Roger was feeling a little buzz and didn't care much about catching fish. He was fine going along in his daydreams.

"Hey Snow White, you dreaming about Prince Charming?" Danny snapped him out of it.

"Cinderella's the one with Prince Charming," Roger said, without thinking first.

"Faggot."

"Do you have any other words in your vocabulary? You used to be smart." He shook his head. The alcohol was making him bolder.

"Floccinaucinihilipilification. Longest word in the English language. It's the act of deciding something's worthless. You little piece of shit." He chucked a rock into the lake and stared at how far it sent the water rippling.

"Do you think Dad would be pissed if I didn't want to work at the shop?" Just like that, out of nowhere.

"Shut up." Danny cast his line again.

They sat quiet again for a long while. Roger sank back into his thoughts and watched the sun sparkle on the water. He'd been taking out a pretty girl lately, a real sweet one. Christine. Not bad tits, either, had to be C-cups. Not bad for a freshman. Roger knew he was the poorest kid at his high school, the only one whose family lived in a trailer, but girls loved the way his eyes crinkled up when he smiled, and were always telling him about his pretty blue eyes. He never had any trouble getting a date. Danny didn't have that sort of luck with girls. Despite his brutish manners, he was painfully shy around them, and he carried his body hunched up around the shoulders.

Roger had all but forgotten his bait in the water when he felt a good tug on the line. Before he knew it he'd pulled out a nice big large-mouthed bass, lashing defiantly against his hands as he snapped its neck. Blood ran over his hands and he rinsed it off in the murky water.

"Hey now, you're making me look like a chump," said Danny, as he glanced at the couple more perch he'd pulled out. He smiled for the first time all day, and Roger knew he was feeling the alcohol now too. They went back to fishing.

After a while Danny said, "Why?"

"What?" Roger was back to thinking about Christine.

"I mean, what, you want to stay in school?" The pitch of Danny's voice was an octave higher, and Roger knew he was getting wasted.

"Naw, not really, I just don't know if I want to work with Dad. He's kind of an asshole."

"You want to stay in school, don't you? You might as well, Dad already thinks you're a pansy faggot. Might as well be a ballerina."

"I don't want to stay in school. I want to be a blacksmith." Roger was feeling languorous in the heat. He surveyed the rock, which was littered with Natural Ice cans, and laid flat on his back.

"Well, maybe you *should* stay in school. You might be a fairy but you're a smart kid."

"I ain't a fairy," Roger said, without sitting up. "Anyway you're the one that should have stayed. All those books you used to read?"

"School's a waste of time. You think Dad's going to run that shop by himself?"

"Then why are you telling me to stay in school?"

"Because you're a little faggot weakling, and I'm actually worth a damn. I can do real work, at least." Danny said it like he meant to end the conversation right there. Roger sat up.

"Why you got to be such an asshole all the time, Danny?"

"*Why you gotta be such an asshole, Danny? Wahhh, it hurts my feelings*" Danny whined.

"You're scared of him."

"Scared of who?" Danny put down his pole.

"Dad. You're scared shitless of that drunk old bastard."

"I ain't scared of no one. You're the one that should be scared of him, he's going to beat your ass when you come out of the closet with your little boyfriend and then tell him you want to teach kindergarten." He guffawed. "What do I have to be afraid of?"

"Because you're the faggot," Roger muttered to himself, and laid back down, closing his eyes and letting out a drunk sigh. He opened them back up, though, when he felt hot beer breath on his face and a hard grip on his shoulders. Danny's face was up to his real close.

"What the *fuck* did you just say?"

"Nothing."

"Tell me what the fuck you said," Danny slurred. "Say it again."

They were both standing up on the boulder now, Danny still holding Roger by the shoulders.

"I said you're the faggot." Straight into the eyes, blue into blue.

Danny looked shocked for a minute, and loosened his grip on Roger. Roger pulled away and Danny caught him by the shirt. "Oh, I'm going to kick your ass."

Before Danny could get his arm back to throw a punch, Roger said, "I saw those magazines." The glossy pictures of men embracing, oiled sinew against oiled sinew, had burned themselves into Roger's memory.

Danny froze.

Roger didn't budge an inch. "I needed money for a pack of cigarettes so I looked under your mattress. You're a big fucking queer and scared to death Dad'll find out."

Like somebody just unpaused the movie, Danny sprang back to action and grabbed him tighter. "Looking through my shit! Now I'm going to fucking kill you." He pushed Roger as hard as he could, and Roger went reeling backwards, yelling as he fell five feet into the dirt.

Before Roger could register what happened in his drunken haze, his brother was kneeling on top of him and shaking him hard by the shoulders.

"I'll fucking kill you! That shit wasn't even mine!"

Roger felt Danny's fist drive into his left cheekbone, and the back of his head slammed down into the dirt.

"That shit wasn't mine!" Danny kept yelling. He punched Roger again, and Roger felt the warm sting of his lip splitting open. "That shit wasn't fucking mine!" He gave Roger another shove to the ground and began to walk back up to his spot on the rock. "Don't you fucking tell anyone," he said over his shoulder.

Roger leaned his back against the side of the boulder and shut his eyes. His stomach churned. He wanted to get up and walk home, but between the alcohol and his throbbing head, he decided to stay put. Danny had never hit him like that before. They'd had brotherly fights when they were younger—there were a few years that they had a

wrestling match in the living room every night after supper—but this time was different. It was more like how Danny fought with their father.

After a few minutes, Roger was starting to doze off when he heard a weird sound coming from the other side of the rock. Like a strange animal whining. When he got up to look, he realized it was Danny. There were tears streaming down his face. Danny saw him and turned his back to him, but did not stop crying. Roger sat back on the smooth spot he'd been sitting on. He put his elbows on his knees and stared out at the lake.

After a minute, Danny turned around, sobbing openly. "Don't tell him. Please don't tell him." There was snot running out of his nose.

Roger's jaw ached and his eye throbbed. "I won't tell," he muttered.

"And he's a drunk old bastard, you're right. Just some old fucking drunk."

But Roger knew Danny didn't think of their father that way. He remembered the tears in his father's eyes when he and Danny won the father-son fishing derby in their town. At all their baseball games, their father had been there, shouting. And he had been so excited when Danny left high school that he took the family out to celebrate with a big dinner at the Olive Garden.

"Danny, let's just go home."

Danny had stopped crying. "I don't want to go home yet."

Roger sat looking at the water for a few more minutes, and then said, "I'm going to go home." He started to get up.

"Not yet," Danny said, catching his arm. "I know what you need! A good cold swim." He whipped his shirt off and tossed it aside. "Come on." He held out his hand for Roger and pulled him to his feet. They climbed back onto the rock. The last thing Roger felt like doing was swimming; he was sick and beat up and angry. Danny pulled off the rest of his clothes, then took hold of the rope and swung out far above the water. Right before the rope began to swing back toward shore, he dropped ten feet into the water, like a baby being dropped from the stork. He disappeared beneath the surface for one, two, three, four, five seconds.

"Danny!" Roger called.

Danny's head popped back out. "Woo! That feels good. Come on in!"

"Naw," said Roger, sitting down on the boulder. His whole body ached and he longed to go home and crawl under his covers with the lights all shut off, the room pitch dark.

Danny swam back and hoisted himself out of the water, and sloppily pulling himself onto the boulder. He shook his wet head side to side, sending little blond chutes of hair straight out. "Sorry for beating the shit out of you."

Roger kept staring ahead. The words swam in his mind.

"Anyway you're right. What do I care what that old motherfucker thinks?" He picked up a rock and threw it hard into the water. He grabbed onto the rope and looked at Roger. "I'm going to go to college and become a big old gay fucking teacher. Now watch this!" Again he swung out on the rope, and when he let go attempted a frontward flip into the water. Far too intoxicated to pull it off, Danny entered the water mid flip, the back of his head slamming the surface with a hard slap, his white legs flailing.

"Jackass," Roger muttered under his breath. He hadn't stopped staring straight ahead. But one, two, three, four, five seconds passed, and his brother's head did not break the surface of the water.

"Danny," Roger said, not very loud. He watched the water ripple from where Danny had jumped in. "Fuck," he said, and took hold of the rope swing. He splashed into the water in all his clothes.

When he came to the surface, Danny was there laughing. "So gullible! Guess you're not pissed off enough to let me die!"

"You're a son of a bitch," Roger said, and began to swim to shore. "Let's go."

Danny put his clothes back on, and the boys gathered their things and headed back. Though the cooler was lighter now, it was still full of ice and fish and a few cans of beer, and it seemed even more cumbersome as Danny fumbled across the stream with it.

"Give me the fucking thing," Roger said from the other side of the shore, and Danny passed it to him.

They both winced as they entered back into the blazing sun of the power lines.

Danny reached for the cooler. "I'll take it."

They tromped down the hill, single file, grass seed clinging to their soaked jeans. Roger had a black eye and a split lip, and his waterlogged boots made a squishing sound with each step he took. It wasn't long before Danny was switching that damn cooler from hand to hand again. Roger came up next to him and grabbed one side of the handle. Danny didn't object.

"You don't want to work at the shop either, then?" Roger said in a deep voice, looking straight ahead.

"Naw, I was just kidding," said Danny. "I might be a queer but I ain't a pansy."

"It's okay, you know--" Roger started.

"Shut up," said Danny.

They walked on in silence for a minute.

"But you," said Danny, "ain't going to work for Dad."

Roger didn't say anything, just listened to the synchronized brush of their strides against the grass. At the top of the next hill, he looked out over the stretch of power lines and where they ended at the horizon. He thought about whether they ever ended, whether they would just keep

stretching on and on if you could follow them forever. He wondered where they'd go, if you could just keep going on and on, instead of always turning at the same place to get in the truck and go back home.

A Sunrise in Winter

Carolyn sat on the edge of the bed and held the hand of her friend David McCarty, who was dead. Jeff stood beside her with his hand on her shoulder, and his body cast a long shadow onto the bed from the incandescent lamp. Carolyn's hands shook as she took off David's thick glasses and set them on the bedside table. The garish design of the cheap bedspread mocked her, fluorescent green, yellow and pink three-dimensional shapes dancing around the dead man on her bed. She finished her first bout of hysterical crying, sniffed, and tried to catch her breath. Her hair stuck to her face where it was wet from the tears, a stringy, ashen smear.

Jeff took his hand off of her shoulder and sat on the foot of the bed, his head in his hands. "Well," he said, "what do you want to do?"

"I guess we should call an ambulance," she said into her lap.

"Are you sure you want to do that?" he asked.

"What?"

"Well, he said he didn't want to go to the hospital...and, I mean,

Carolyn—we could end up in jail." Jeff got up from the bed and paced across the thin blue carpet. He leaned against the peeling wallpaper by the doorway.

"But he's *dead*." She gasped and began to cry again. She got up and walked into the living room, sank into the faded couch, and absently stroked the pillowed fabric of the arm of the sofa, her jaw trembling.

"You realize the cops are going to come? And you know what the first thing they're going to do is? Probably arrest us and take Alex away, that's what," Jeff said, following her. "You're already on probation. You think they're going to think this isn't our fault?"

"Then what do we do?" she asked. "We can't just leave him on our bed! What do we do?"

Jeff paced the living room. "We've got to get him out of here."

Carolyn surveyed the living room. The coffee table was covered in empty soda and beer cans, half-eaten bags of convenience store chips, and an old butter cookie tin filled with cigarette butts. The dog had ripped up the garbage in the kitchen and strewn the trash across the carpet. Now it sat in the doorway to the kitchen, gnawing on the carcass of a rotisserie chicken. Carolyn, Jeff, and David had been shooting speedballs and smoking cigarettes on the couch all night. David had complained of not feeling well, and went to lie down on the bed. When Carolyn went to check on him, he wouldn't let her call the ambulance. *I'd*

be too embarrassed, he'd said. Carolyn and Jeff fell asleep on the couch.

At 3 AM, they woke up and found David dead.

"Come on," said Jeff. "Help me."

They walked back into the bedroom, and Jeff walked up to David.

"What are you doing?" asked Carolyn.

"He's not going to need this anymore," Jeff said, pulling the wallet out of David's pocket.

"I can't believe you," said Carolyn.

He tossed the wallet aside. "Nothing in it anyway." He folded each side of the bedspread over the front of David so that it wrapped around him like a gaudy, lumpy shroud. "Get his keys out of his jacket and clear out the trunk of his car."

Carolyn put on her coat and walked out into the freezing February night. Stepping out of the doorway, she felt her face begin to go numb from the cold. The sky was clear tonight. The stars shone sharply against a dark blue backdrop, and a few loose clouds moved slowly across a small sliver of moon. The mist of Carolyn's breath resembled the clouds, blowing out white in the dark street. David's car was parked on the sidewalk in front of their apartment. All the lights were out in the neighbors' houses, and there was no one outside. She winced as she pulled out the baseball gloves and bats that belonged to David and his seventeen year old son, Ben. David was tremendously proud of Ben, who was a talented athlete. David coached all of Ben's sports teams when he

was little, and the two still played catch, shot hoops, and went to the batting cages. She also pulled out a purple backpack full of schoolbooks and a blue hooded sweater that must have been his daughter Jessie's. Jessie was thirteen, smiling with a mouthful of braces in the school picture that David carried. She was a smart kid, and often called David on his cell phone with questions about her homework. Carolyn remembered when he'd been at her and Jeff's apartment once, and Jessie had called about her first term paper. David had paced up and down their small hallway for twenty minutes, helping her draw her outline.

Jeff walked out of the house carrying David's bundled body over his shoulder and put it in the trunk of the car. Carolyn turned away from the sight of it, trying to hold back her tears and stay quiet so she wouldn't draw attention to them. Jeff took her arm and they went in the house.

"We can't just leave Alex here by himself," Carolyn said.

"He'll be fine. We'll lock the door. The dog'll be here," Jeff said.

"And we'll be back soon."

"Still-"

"I'm not doing this by myself."

Carolyn cracked the door to Alex's room. Her son lay in his bed, sound asleep, and the streetlight coming through the window shone on his blond hair. He was twelve years old and had already been taken from her once, sent to live with his father for a year, after she was arrested the second time for possession of narcotics. It was the most painful year of

her life, and she couldn't bear to lose him again. She walked in the room and sat at the edge of the bed, stroking Alex's hair with her long fingernails. Alex was born when Carolyn was twenty, and a lot had changed since then. They'd been through a lot together, but Alex hadn't started getting in trouble yet. He was a good kid, and Carolyn was going to see to it that he was going to be somebody someday. That's why she had to make sure that he would never be taken away from her again.

"We'll be back soon," she whispered.

Alex didn't wake up, and she kissed his head and walked out of the room.

They got in the car and started driving. Carolyn kept looking out the passenger-side window, thinking that someone might be following them. She couldn't think of a single reason why a couple would be driving around a little silver hatchback in the wee hours of the morning, and she was sure that the first cop who saw them would know immediately that there was a dead body in the trunk of their car.

Jeff pulled onto the Mass Pike.

"What are you doing?!" Carolyn shook Jeff's shoulder. "There are cops all over this road! There are cameras at all the tolls! Are you crazy?"

"We'll only be on this road for a few minutes. We need to get out of town."

Carolyn put her face in her hands. "We're fucked! We're fucked." She kept repeating it in a hissing whisper.

"Carolyn!" Jeff took hold of her arm. "You need to calm down. Take a deep breath. Stay with me."

Carolyn took a deep breath and let it out slowly. She fixed her gaze on the passing landscape. Shrunken piles of dirty snow glowed at the foot of a scraggy wall of pine and leafless maple. She wondered how the highway could still look the same, like it always had, when everything had changed since the moment when David walked into their apartment with a six-pack of beer, grinning through his red mustache. When he sat on the couch talking to Jeff about the Celtics game that had been on that evening. Telling a funny story about a little boy at the kids' basketball practice he coached that morning: the kid had yelled and yelled to be thrown the ball, and when he finally got it, he ran the wrong way down the court, threw the ball at the other team's hoop, and missed.

"I've never seen someone do *everything* wrong at once," David chuckled.

Eventually the conversation got around to business. "So what do you have for me?" David asked.

"You want to try something new?" Jeff asked.

Carolyn snapped out of her daydreams. She had no idea she'd been staring out the window for. "Where are we?"

"91 North," Jeff said.

"Where are we going?"

"North," Jeff said.

"Well where are you taking him?" she asked.

"I don't know yet," Jeff said. "We just need to get out of town. We need to get far away."

Bleary-eyed, Carolyn stared out the window and watched the trees rush by. The piles of plowed snow were bigger now, and the sky was turning a murky pre-dawn lavender. *Welcome to New Hampshire*, a sign read. The reality of David's death began to set in. The loss of him grew and grew as she took in the world without him. She had only met David less than a year ago, but they had been fast friends.

Carolyn met David at one of Alex's youth basketball practices. She had arrived early to pick up Alex, and watched their practice game for a while. David was the coach of the team, and Carolyn was immediately struck with how involved and serious the small man was, even though he was just coaching a bunch of young kids at an after-school program. She introduced herself when practice was over.

"Alex is a great kid," David said. "One of my best players."

"Do you think he has talent?" Carolyn asked.

"At this age, it's not so much about talent," he said. "It's about how they work together. It's about unselfishness, and the willingness to give up the spotlight for the good of the team. That's what Alex has going for him."

Carolyn and David continued their friendly conversations each week when she came to pick up Alex. She liked David. She liked that Alex was

spending time with someone who encouraged him, someone who had a good healthy philosophy. Perhaps when David asked her out for a drink, it was not only the opportunity to make some money off of him that made Carolyn agree.

But there was money to be made; that was clear. Carolyn could spot the dissatisfaction, maybe even desperation, in a person that makes them long for escape. David was a person of frustrated talent. He held a low-paying job writing for the sports section of the Milford Daily News, a local paper. Carolyn had read his articles, which were mostly about high school sports teams, and they were well-written and witty and full of character, out of place in the bland, amateurish pages of the newspaper. He coached his youth league teams with a kind of passion that seemed out of place in the YMCA gymnasium. A guy like David was always looking for excitement, and Carolyn had an addiction to pay for. She spotted the future addict in David not with a cold-hearted desire to hurt him, but with the shrewdness of any businessman always on the lookout for a new client. She could recognize a fellow drug addict the same way a foreigner in a strange city can recognize someone from his homeland.

Once he tried it, he liked cocaine, and stuck to it for a long while. Carolyn didn't push the dope right off, since coke was a good enough money maker, but after a while it didn't take much to get him interested in heroin. And Carolyn needed the money; it was too easy. Carolyn didn't have to tell Jeff that she was sleeping with David. All Jeff needed to know

was that David always had the money up front, and if they ever needed a little money, David was good for it. She had known it was only a matter of time before David ended up like her and Jeff, and a sick sense of relief washed over her at the thought. For a moment, death seemed strangely merciful.

Carolyn noticed David's brown leather wallet in the dashboard compartment, and picked it up. "Why'd you take this?" she asked.

"Did you want me to leave it in our house?" Jeff asked.

She opened it. There was no money in it, just the regular stuff, license, credit cards, business cards, phone numbers. There were pictures in it, too. Outdated pictures of his kids, Jessie looking about ten with a chubby face and a velvet Christmas dress, and a school portrait of Ben in his middle school basketball uniform. There was an older picture too, of him, his ex-wife, and the kids as small children. To Carolyn's surprise, there was a picture of her in there, too. It was a picture she had given him a couple months ago, her as a bridesmaid at her brother's wedding more than six years ago. She stared at herself in the photo, her eyes bright and her hair shiny, her skin smooth and glowing. Her memories of that time seemed to be from someone else's life. Carolyn had led a normal life, once. She was married to Alex's father then, had a nice house on the other side of town near where the private Catholic university was. She hadn't yet descended into the bored depression that led her to take up drugs and leave that life behind.

Alex had been an accident. Carolyn was in her sophomore year as a political science major at Worcester State when she got pregnant. Both from Catholic families, she and her boyfriend decided to keep the baby, and they were married before Alex was born. Carolyn left school and stayed home to take care of Alex, and her new husband went to work for the family business. He made a good salary selling Toyotas, and they were happy for awhile. Carolyn got restless, though, and eventually found herself a boyfriend with a lot of bad habits. It was a downhill glide to the divorce and a mean heroin addiction, and Carolyn lost the house but managed to hold on to Alex. After that, a procession of drug-addict boyfriends paraded through their little apartment in South Worcester. Jeff was the latest of them, and the longest-running, having lived with Carolyn for two years. Her ex-husband was remarried with two children, living in the wealthy suburbs outside St. Louis.

Staring at the photo of herself, Carolyn realized that somehow, David had seen that normal, healthy girl in her. Carolyn had been a user for five years: she had stolen, she had lied, she'd had sex for drugs. Even she did not know the girl in the photo anymore. She and David had real conversations: they were both passionate left-wingers, and often debated about issues and discussed politics. He was interested in what she thought, treated her as someone with dreams and potential. David didn't yet lead the life of a junkie; he had a job and a family, none of it destroyed until now. He'd become like a lifeline to Carolyn, her only

connection to the functioning world. Carolyn wanted to wish they'd never met, because she knew that if they hadn't, David's heart would be beating, and he would be warm under the covers of his own bed. But she couldn't wish it. Not really. / *loved him*, she thought.

"Shit," she said. "We can't do this. Think about his kids! They're not going to know where he is." Carolyn began to cry again. "We can't do this. He was a good person."

Jeff reached over and took her hand. "I know. I know. But think rationally about this. He's dead. His kids have lost him no matter what. The question is, should we suffer for his decisions? Should Alex suffer?"

"Jeff!" Carolyn cried. "This is fucked up. How did we end up like this? We have a dead body in our trunk!"

"Listen to me," said Jeff. "Do you want to lose your son? Do you want to go back to jail?"

Carolyn pressed her head back into the seat of the car and stared out the window. The sky was slowly lightening to a pale pink, reflected in the wet snow that weighed down the boughs of the trees. She pictured David's body folded into the trunk, wrapped in that awful bedspread.

"Stop!" she sobbed. "Let's just turn around, and tell the police what happened. Jeff!" She was screaming now. "Turn the car around!"

"Listen!" Jeff shouted back. "He was *your* friend. It's *your* kid. *You're* the one on probation. I'm helping you. Do you want me to help you?"

"David," she said, looking out the window. The wet brown branches were beginning to take shape in the first morning light. "I'm sorry, David. God forgive me." Her eyes were bloodshot and rubbed raw. She spoke to Jeff. "How can you be so fucking cold? It's like you don't even care that he's dead."

"Look, I'm just trying to think rationally."

"You don't even care that our friend is dead." Carolyn looked at him, eyes wide with the revelation.

Jeff looked back at her. "*Your* friend. And maybe you care a little too much." He slowed down the car. But instead of pulling off the highway, he pulled over to the side of the road and shut the car off. He got out of the car.

"What are you doing?" Carolyn asked, getting out too.

"If you don't want my help, you can deal with it yourself," he said, throwing his arms up and starting to walk in the other direction down the highway. "I'm going home."

"Jeff!" she yelled after him. He didn't slow down. Carolyn began to wail. "Don't do this to me!" She ran after him and caught his arm.

Jeff kept walking, the frozen gravel crunching hard under his feet as he shrugged her off. "You want to treat me like the bad guy, I'll be the fucking bad guy."

"But we can't just leave the car here! They'll find it before we even
get | home."

"So don't leave it here. You want to go to the police, then go. I want no part of it."

Carolyn stopped and stood there in disbelief, watching him cross the highway to hitch a ride home. She watched until his dark jacket blended in with the wet-smoke gray of the roadside brush.

The early morning traffic had begun. Cars rushed by and shot a freezing chill through her coat. She got in the driver's seat of the car. There was no time to think. She began to drive.

She took the next exit off the interstate, and started driving on a secondary highway. The traffic hadn't woken up here, and she passed only the occasional Mac truck. Each second seemed to lighten the sky, and a panic struck Carolyn's chest as she realized she could see the mustard brown of the dead grass. She began to take turns at random. She drove aimlessly down long, curving roads past idyllic New England scenes. There were red barns, boxy colonial homes painted white with black trim, snow-covered pastures separated by stone walls. She turned so many times that she didn't know where she was anymore. She spotted a dirt road lined with pine trees and turned down it. She had no idea what kind of road it was, whether it was someone's long driveway or some sort of logging road or opening to a hiking trail. When she was out of sight from the road, the land dropped in an embankment leading to a lower stand of trees.

Carolyn opened the trunk and looked in. She couldn't do it. She leaned against the car and sobbed with her face in her arms. She thought about Jessie and Ben. Their lives would never be the same. Then she thought about her own child. She knew that Jeff was right, in a way. David's kids had lost their father, but that didn't mean that her own son deserved to lose his mother. She had to do everything she could to hold onto him. She swore to herself that she was done with drugs, she was going to start going to meetings, get away from Jeff, take Alex away from that awful city. She opened her eyes. The sky was bright; it looked like it was going to be a beautiful day. She reached in the trunk and grabbed David's body around the chest, and began to pull. He was a small man, probably only 140 pounds or so, but it was a lot of weight for Carolyn to move. She paused and leaned against the side of the car, staring at the brown clay at her feet, how it was softened from the melting snow. She pictured Alex's shiny blond head lying so peacefully in his dark room, unaware, she thought, of all this. She went back and pulled again, and got David out of the car. She dragged him to the edge of the road, his tennis shoes leaving long marks in the dirt road, and set him down. She rolled his body down the embankment. The thumping sound of his body against the ground made her stomach drop each time she turned it over. David was partially freed of the dingy bedspread, coated in snow, laying face down on the ground. Carolyn gently pulled the bedspread over his head.

She stood there looking down at her friend's body, cocooned in her blanket and laying there as if tossed into the woods like garbage. As if he didn't have a friend in the world. He was a beer can, a McDonald's bag, a blown-out tire. She was stunned that she was responsible for this. That this was the best she could do for someone she loved.

"I'm sorry," she said, regretting that this was all she could come up with. "For everything," she added lamely. But sorry was all she felt at that moment. Looking at how she left him, she could not allow herself to feel grief, for it was a luxury she didn't deserve. She stood awkwardly on the incline of the embankment, shifting her weight from leg to leg, not knowing what to do with her hands.

She drove down to Springfield with glazed-over eyes. She parked the car on a residential street and took the bus back to Worcester. She got home around 10 AM. Jeff wasn't there and Alex was awake, watching Saturday morning cartoons and eating cereal. The living room had been cleaned up.

"Where were you?" asked Alex, after he finished drinking the pink milk from his Froot Loops.

"Did you clean up?" Carolyn asked.

"Yeah," said Alex, not taking his eyes off the Flintstones.

Carolyn winced and sat down next to Alex on the couch. She put her arms around him and kissed his shiny hair. Quietly, they watched TV for a while.

After a while, Carolyn said, "Alex? Do you ever miss your dad?"

"Sometimes," he said, training his eyes on a "Toto My Walking Pup" commercial. "Why?"

"Well," she said. "I've always been trying so hard to hold onto you that I guess I never really wanted to think about how you might miss him."

"The Jetsons" started, ending the conversation. Carolyn needed a fix, and she knew she would not resist the urge. She walked into her bedroom and picked up the phone to call her ex-husband.

"I can't take care of him right now," she said.

They were on okay terms these days; they didn't talk much, but when they did, he seemed to relate to her with more pity than bitterness. She knew he'd want to take Alex back to live with him. They made arrangements for Alex to go back to St. Louis.

After she hung up, she lay on her bed, which was still stripped of its bedspread. For the first time that day, she felt her exhaustion. The sun was high now, and she could see bright, icy sky through the dusty Venetian blinds. Before she drifted into a dense sleep, she wondered what the winters in St. Louis were like. She had never thought to ask that kind of question before. She knew, though, that the Februaries there could not be quite as harsh as here.

Become the Leader You Were Meant to Be

Steve Curtis didn't get through courthouse security until 4:34 PM on the day of his 4 PM court date. He'd taken the afternoon off from work because of it, but had gotten sidetracked playing Final Fantasy IV, and then couldn't find a parking space. Picking up his wallet and belt-clip key chain from the security conveyor belt, he surveyed the lobby. It was mayhem. Lines of people wound through the place, not seeming to begin or end anywhere. The moving patterns of skin and bright clothing jarred against the mosaic tile pattern of the floor and seemed to sully the slick marble of the walls. He was making his way to the elevator and bumped into a blonde lady in a very short pair of cut-off jeans, and when she turned around to say "excuse me," Steve noticed that she was missing a few teeth. He wove between packs of black kids swathed in too-big clothes. Some of people in line called greetings to each other across the room, as if they were in line for beer at a keg party, and some stood silent and sullen. He knew right off that this must be where they put the

criminals. He recognized the way these people looked: the whores, the beggars, the trouble-making kids he saw around the city.

Passing through the hot din of the lobby, Steve made his way to the elevator and hit the call button. He was so glad not to have to wait in those insane lines with all those miscreants. His appointment was on the fifth floor, like last time. He was hoping that the lines up there wouldn't be as bad as last time. The elevator door opened and he stepped on after a pretty young woman in a sweater set, carrying a stack of papers.

"Wow," Steve said to the girl. "What's going on down there? It's wild."

"Not sure," she said. "I'm just delivering some papers." The elevator came to a stop at the third floor.

"Have a good day now," Steve said.

The girl cast her eyes back in a smile as she stepped off the elevator. "Thanks, you too."

Yeah, she likes me, Steve thought. He felt he made up for his short stature with a muscular chest, which he liked to show off with well-fitting t-shirts and an understated gold chain. Fashionable, but masculine.

When Steve arrived at the fifth floor, the place was desolate. The DA's office was dark. There was a secretary sitting in an office, but when he tried the door it wouldn't open. Then he noticed a sign: PICK UP PHONE TO TALK TO SECRETARY. He picked up the receiver to a telephone mounted on the wall.

"Hi there," Steve said. "I'm meeting with the DA, but he doesn't seem to be in his office."

"Well where are you supposed to be?" The secretary asked in a harsh tone.

"I reckon that's what I'm asking you, ma'am."

"What's your name," she sighed.

"Steven Curtis."

A second went by while she looked him up. "Ground floor." She hung up the phone.

When he took the elevator back down to the lobby, he noticed that everyone in the lobby held a pink citation ticket exactly like the one in his pocket. The place was warm and thick with human breath, and he tried to decipher where the lines were going. He walked up to a thirty-something hippie lady in a tank top and no bra.

"Is this the line for the DA?"

"Yes, it is," said the lady. Seeing the frown on his face, she added, "Isn't this just so alienating?"

"Alienating," Steve repeated, over-articulating it as one does when learning a word from a foreign language. He assumed a place in line behind the woman. In a moment he felt a firm tap on his shoulder.

"This ain't the end of the line!" A skinny middle-aged black woman in leopard-print stretch pants stood with her hands on her hips. "I ain't waiting here while people go cutting in line!"

"Oh, this isn't the end?" Steve asked.

"No." The woman rolled her eyes and thrust her chin forward. "Line starts there"—she pointed to a window where people stood talking—"goes down here, *then* all the way down that hallway, *back* up the hallway, all the way around the room and *ends* over there. I been standing in this line for an hour and you ain't trying to cut me."

Steve made his way to the end of the line, and took his place behind a young black man dressed in a crisp white shirt and tie, who stood reading a book. It was awkward, standing still in the middle of a room like that. He tried to find somewhere to put his hands. On his hips. Jangling his keys. Clasped together. Shoved into the pockets of his tight jeans. Finally he scrunched up his shoulders and released them, letting his arms hang by his sides. He shifted his weight slightly from foot to foot as he looked around the room. Then the elevator opened and the woman in the sweater set began navigating her way through the crowd toward the door. She met Steve's eye with a questioning look, and Steve gave a sheepish nod and stepped forward to let her pass. The noise and colors of the crowd bubbled around him as he considered his situation.

He'd been arrested a month or so before for his second drunk driving offense. He knew there was a "three strikes" rule, so he was hoping to get off light. But, he wondered, does his prior arrest for possession of cocaine count as a strike? All he could do was wait; better not to worry about it now. His eyes rested on the young man in front of

him. The man had excellent posture, though his head was bent over the book. Steve peered at the side of his face. He seemed serious and intellectual. What was he reading? As Steve looked over the man's right shoulder, then his left to try to see the name of the book, the man felt his hot breath on the back of his neck and turned around. He stepped back with a furrowed brow when he saw the white man in a tight salmon-colored t-shirt and stud earring.

"Oh," said Steve. "Sorry man. I was just curious about the book you were reading."

"Oh." The handsome young man recovered quickly, showing him the front of the hardcover book. It read, **BECOME THE LEADER YOU WERE MEANT TO BE.**

"Interesting title," Steve said. "What sort of book is that?"

"Well," said the man, "It's about how to get motivated in your life, so you can fulfill the potential that God gave you. It teaches you how to think of yourself in a different way, so you can achieve your goals."

Steve was surprised at how articulate the man was. "Wow," he said, "that sounds like a book I'd like to read!" He had always suspected that God had given him potential.

"I'm telling you, man, I'm getting my life straight and I'm telling you, I'm going right to the top. No more of this messing around." He clutched the pink citation ticket and shook it up in the air.

"Well good for you. That sure does sound like something I should read!"

"I'm going to college. Political science major. Gonna be a state representative, or maybe a senator. How 'bout you, man? You got goals?"

"Yeah," said Steve. "Make lots of money, I guess." In truth, Steve had set many goals in his life, reaching none of them. His mother's TV had been lying disassembled in his hall closet for a year. She'd gotten a new one after about two months, but he still planned to fix it. His shelves-unpainted-were full of books on various subjects from welding to furniture reupholstering to engine rebuilding to computer programming, from all the hobbies he had picked up and subsequently dropped within days or weeks. He still subscribed to magazines such as *Guitar* and *Model Railroader*, which he never read but forgot to cancel after the passion fled. There was also a partially-built deck off the back of his condo, which Steve never even noticed anymore.

"Tell you what, man-what's your name? Steve. I'm Marcel, pleased to meet you. I'll tell you what. I'm a Christian man. I'll give you this book to read. Help you realize your goals."

Steve was excited. He was a Christian man too, even though he hadn't been to church since he was a child. "Well that's just great. You're a fine young man, I do thank you. I will read this. I sure could use to read this."

Marcel turned back around and Steve opened up the book and started reading. The line had been slowly moving, and though Steve was still the very last person in line, he was much closer to the window now. He had a clear view of it, at least. After a few minutes of reading, all the sudden out of nowhere, he felt two hands rest softly on his shoulders. The hands were moving him over a little, and when Steve looked to see who it was, he saw a pretty little lady with very nice skin moving past him in the crowd.

"Excuse me," she said, with friendly smile.

"That's all right," said Steve. He was in the middle of thinking up something clever to say to her when she went on walking through the crowd, gently moving people over so that she could get by. She had on a skirt and a little sweater, and she looked like a nice person to Steve. He liked brunettes. And glasses didn't particularly turn him off either, especially when they wore them as well as this lady did. They made her look older, but he could tell she was around his own age, and not a day over thirty-five. He watched her the whole way, and then she disappeared through a doorway. But, to Steve's surprise, she reappeared in the DA window and began talking to the people with the pink citation tickets. *This* was the DA? Steve guessed there were stranger things than a lady DA, but this girl didn't strike him as a lawyer. He liked how she was wearing that skirt and that little sweater, not one of those outfits most lady lawyers wear, the ones that look like girls' versions of men's suits.

This lady lawyer seemed soft and feminine. She was just lovely.

Steve still had *Become the Leader You Were Meant to Be* open in his right hand as if he was reading it, but he was watching that lady lawyer from the minute he saw her. He had a girl he took out pretty steady, Amber, but suddenly she seemed, well, a little unrefined and maybe a touch crass. She didn't wear little sweaters; when it got cold she just had some big old sweatshirts she'd put on. And he wondered why she couldn't just wear her hair *simple*, instead of all hairsprayed up like a lawn hedge around her face. Amber was a nice girl-especially after a few Jack and Cokes-but Steve knew she wasn't nearly smart enough to be a lady lawyer. If he was going to read this book and get his life together and really go straight to the top, like Marcel was, he'd need the right kind of lady by his side.

It may have been a half hour that Steve observed the woman at the window, before he got close enough to hear her voice. She spoke in a confident voice with a nice low sound to it; *assertive* was the word the book used. She was talking to a young white girl who was accompanied by another woman.

"Fifty-five in a thirty-five," she said, looking at the girl's pink ticket. "That's too fast. This your mom? You live at home? Good. How are your grades? Straight A's?" She let the girl go home with a warning, telling her to be more careful.

The next person stepped up to the window, a young black man in one of those do-rags.

"I'm not happy to see you back here, Mr. Martin," she said. "I don't want to see you end up in jail. Your hearing's in room D14."

A lady lawyer with a heart of gold, Steve thought to himself. This was a special girl.

Eventually it was almost Steve's turn. Janitors were walking around with push brooms, sweeping up candy wrappers, dirt, cigarette butts, and the occasional article of baby clothing. Marcel went up to the window. The lady lawyer looked tired.

"Mr. Johnson," she said. "I'm not happy to see you back here, but you are looking sharp. I wish you'd quit messing with those thugs."

"I'm getting it together, Ms. Baxter. I'm going back to college."

"Well I'm glad to hear that. Room D14."

It was Steve's turn. He set his book on the radiator against the wall, took a deep breath, and stepped up face to face with Ms. Baxter.

"Hi," he said, moony-eyed. "My name's Steve Curtis. How you doing?"

"Hi there. Let's see your pink slip. Drunk driving. That's your second offense."

"Yes, ma'am...but I'm really working on it, and I'm, you know, getting it together and flying right...."

"Well, of course I can't let you off, especially since you've also got a history of drug arrests. You give me your license today and take a thousand dollar fine and a year of probation, and you can skip the hearing and I'll keep you out of jail."

Steve was flabbergasted. "Jail!" He hadn't thought a DWI offense could get you in jail.

"Sir, in the state of North Carolina, you'd go in there for three months, easy, if it was up to the judge."

As much as Steve wanted to dislike her, she still looked pretty. She had a nice mouth, sort of small and pouty. "Okay, I'll take the fine...I have to give you my license? For a year?" She had big brown eyes. Kind eyes.

She started writing up paperwork.

"You must be tired," Steve offered.

She didn't look up. "To put it mildly," she said, raising her eyebrows a little.

"If you don't mind me saying," he said, "I noticed that you are very good at what you do. I can sure tell that you really give a darn about the people that come through here."

She looked up and gave a gracious smile. "Well thank you for saying that."

"Most people with so much success as yourself have given up on people like...this." He gestured to the empty lobby.

She handed the paperwork back to him and smiled politely. "Thank you.

"And...what is your name?" he asked. "Just in case, you know, I have any questions. About this." He shook the wad of papers at her.

"My name is Laura Baxter. But if you have any questions you can contact your probation officer."

"Right. Right. Well I thank you...I hope you have a lovely evening, Miss." He turned and headed for the exit, tried the wrong door, crossed to the other side of the lobby and let himself out of the courthouse. *Become the Leader You Were Meant to Be* lay on the radiator.

Steve entered his condo thinking of Laura. She wasn't married; he'd made sure to check her ring finger. He wondered if she had a boyfriend. He checked the mail. Just bills and a newsletter from a coin-collecting club he didn't remember joining. The voicemail light on his phone was blinking, so he checked his messages. His mother wanted a ride to Wal-Mart tomorrow. He would have to call and tell her to take the bus. Or, he could just not call and pretend he didn't get the message: problem solved. The second message was from Amber, but he figured he'd rather lay in bed alone tonight and think about Laura Baxter. The third call, the only one he returned, was from his buddy Chip, who he'd known since high school. Chip was who'd gotten him the job at the moving company. He always had some coke, and Steve figured he could use a pick-me-up just then.

Chip gave Steve a ride over to his place, and they and their other buddy from the moving company, Scotty, sat around Chip's apartment drinking beer and watching a Nascar race. Steve was never interested in sports, but was happy sitting around smoking joints and shooting the shit. A haze of cigarette smoke developed over the dim apartment while Chip and Scotty yelled at the TV and Steve slurred to them about the beautiful Laura Baxter.

"What about Amber?" Chip asked.

"I'm finished with Amber," Steve told him. "I'm into classy chicks now."

"Hell, if you don't want her, I'll take her!" Chip said.

After a while they broke out the cocaine—well, it wasn't pure cocaine, but "crack" just sounded so much worse—and that's when the fun started. They didn't quit drinking beer, either, and by 3 AM they were out in the park down the street, doing donuts on the grass in Chip's truck.

The next morning Steve woke up bleary-eyed with a headache, but he was still thinking about Laura. He was trying to figure out how he could see her again. It was Tuesday, so he had to go to work. Luckily, the Grandma's Attic Moving Co. truck picked him up every morning on the way to the job, so he didn't have to worry about transportation. He popped a couple Ibuprofens and splashed some water on his face, and the truck showed up. He and the guys smoked a joint in the truck every

morning on the way to the first house. It was a good job, easy work that paid well. Lift a few heavy dressers, throw some boxes in a truck, dilly-dally a bit to rack up the timecard, and take home a cool seventeen bucks an hour, under the table.

After work, Steve decided he needed to figure out some transportation for himself. He knew he could not stomach riding the bus every day for a year, surrounded by degenerates like those people in the courthouse. You didn't need a license to ride a moped, so the Grandma's Attic Moving truck dropped him off in the parking lot of Scooterville and Steve rode away in a brand new leased yellow Suzuki moped.

When he got home, he found himself thinking about Laura Baxter again. He knew he would have to shape up his act to win over a lady like that. All of the sudden he remembered Marcel, and *Become the Leader You Were Meant to Be*. He realized he left the book at the courthouse. He jumped right back on his scooter and went right to the courthouse.

There was no one in the lobby, so he took the elevator up to the fifth floor. He went straight to the phone to talk to the secretary.

"Hello, I would like to speak to Laura Baxter, please. The DA."

"If you need to speak to Ms. Baxter, you'll have to come on a Monday at four."

"But I just have a question," he protested.

"Everyone just has a question. Come back on Monday."

Steve peered through the glass in the door at the secretary. Seeing him there, the secretary hung up the receiver and went back to her work. Steve knew he didn't need to talk directly to Laura to get his book back and that, in fact, she probably had no idea where it was; but this was the only premise he could think of for him to see her again.

Monday finally arrived. Steve calculated that she should be through with the line of criminals by around 5:30, so he planned to arrive around then to avoid the wait. A summer afternoon rain was coming down when he left, which is an inconvenience on a scooter, but he simply could not wait another week. He put on his windbreaker and took off through the rain, and the stinging pelts against his face did not bother him one bit, because he was going to see the most special lady in the world.

He congratulated himself when he saw her talking to the third-to-last person in line, and stepped to the back of the line with his chin up. At his turn, he smiled into the window. "Hey there again," he said in his smoothest voice. He leaned casually on the ledge of the window opening.

"Hi." Laura seemed more tired than last week, and there were dark circles under her eyes. "Can I see your pink slip please?"

"Oh!" He laughed. "No, I don't have a citation. I've just got a quick question for you. I came in last week and I left my book here. I wondered if you found it."

"You waited in line to ask me that?"

"Well, I--"

"I wouldn't even know about something like that, you'd have to ask one of the janitors where they keep the lost and found."

"You didn't see it? It's called *Becoming the Man You Are Destined to Become*. Something like that. Self improvement."

Laura began to pick up her paperwork. "I'm sorry. Check the lost and found."

"Oh. Well then I've got one more question. I know this might be unorthodox, but you seem like a very special lady, and I was wondering if you'd be interested...if I could take you out to dinner sometime."

Laura stopped herself in the middle of a guffaw. "Oh, I'm sorry...I'm sure you'll understand that I don't have the greatest job to meet boyfriends at...I mean, a criminal record isn't exactly the best foot to put forward." She smiled sympathetically.

"Oh--" Steve was lost for words.

"I'm sorry. I'm just being honest," she said, and gave up suppressing her laughter. "And, I have to say, the criminal record is beside the point if you're going to wear that earring."

The earring was out of Steve's ear before he was out of the building. No woman had ever humiliated him like that before. She treated him as if he was just like everybody else that walked into the courthouse with a pink slip. And all at once, Steve realized that she was right.

He went outside with nothing in his mind but the feeling of his ears burning. It had stopped raining, and the first bright streak of sunset

showed through the clouds. The air was soft and fresh, the kind of smell that makes you breathe in deep and look at the sky. But Steve had nothing on his mind but getting out of there, and the moped motor whined as he sped toward his house. The tires kicked up the skim of water on the road, and he felt it soaking the rest of the way through his shoes and socks, but still, all that was in his mind was a blank, blind feeling.

He walked into his apartment and headed straight for the bathroom. Standing in front of the sink, he looked at his reflection in the mirror. His skin was porous, and he could see some creases starting around his eyebrows. There was hair growing out of his ears. When had he gotten old? He guessed he hadn't noticed because nothing much had changed since his youth. He'd been doing nothing but partying since high school. His friends were the same ones he'd always had. He'd accomplished nothing: he was just like he thought all those people at the courthouse were. Good for nothing.

When he was young, this was not how Steve envisioned he would be in his thirties. He had a normal childhood: grew up middle class, had a lot of friends, dated all the prettiest girls, even had some artistic talent. He used to draw these comic strips all the time, and his friends all loved to read them. And he was a smooth talker, could get away with anything. His mom raised him by herself, since his father had run off with his secretary (something like that, one of those stories—Steve wasn't really

sure) when he was very young, and he pretty much had the run of the house. They had some fun in those days, and never got caught. The teachers loved him—he charmed the pants off of them, and he cruised right through high school. After that, it seemed, the cruise slowed down and became more like treading water.

Steve went in the living room and sat on his couch. It was a simple problem, he decided. He needed to quit messing around and really be somebody, just like he was meant to. God had given him potential, he knew that much. Now he was even more determined to get that girl. He was going to really get it together and show her that he wasn't just some scumbag. No more drinking, no more drugs, and he was going back to school, hitting the books. And then she would not be laughing, unless it was at one of Steve's witty jokes. He hadn't yet nailed down the details of what he would study. He thought about becoming a lawyer, but after thinking it through, it occurred to him that it would be an awful lot of boring reading and would take an awful long time. Perusing a community college catalog found in his stack of old mail, he narrowed it down to a short list, including pro's and con's:

1. EMT

pro's: only two years of school; good money

con's: possibility of dealing with blood or death; too much pressure

2. Taxidermist

pro's: ability to corner the market; use of artistic flair

con's: bad smells; possibility of touching guts

3. Accountant

pro's: professional jobs are impressive; could file own taxes
con's: involvement with the government; math

4. Cabinet Maker

pro's: already know how to cut wood; enjoy building things
con's: sawdust; wearing an apron

After considering his list, it was easy to narrow things down. Two of the four involved the great possibility of touching or smelling something disgusting, and one included math, so it looked like Steve was destined to become a maker of fine cabinetry. Not quite the impressive vocation he was initially looking for, but it was better than being a moving guy. And there were only a few more days to register, so he didn't take much time to think about it.

It felt good to have made all these resolutions. Actually, Steve noticed, it was a familiar feeling; he guessed he was better at making resolutions than keeping them. But this time he was serious. He resolved to keep his resolutions, but that didn't feel right. He had to show himself that he could really stick to it.

Right now, Steve thought, I resolve to cook myself a healthy dinner. And I resolve to clean up the dishes right afterward.

So he did just that, and it wasn't Lean Cuisine, either. He got out a piece of chicken from the freezer, a can of green beans, and a box of instant mashed potatoes, and made himself a regular feast. Enjoyed with a glass of milk instead of beer. He watched TV while he ate, and instead

of falling asleep on the couch afterward, he got right up and washed all the dishes and wiped the countertop.

That's the ticket, he thought to himself. One little resolution at a time.

In the next few weeks, his classes started up and Steve found himself a very busy man. Three days a week, he had to zip straight from work to class. With his time so stretched, he didn't seem to have time to hang around with Chip, or to spend time at the Corner Pocket, his favorite bar. When he did have time, he found he had lots of other things to do. He'd noticed his condo was a mess, and he began to devote time to straightening it up and rearranging things to look a little nicer. He dusted and vacuumed, did the dishes quite often. On Saturdays, he did things like pull out the fridge and clean behind it, take down all the Venetian blinds and wash them in the bath tub, or scrub the tile grout in the shower with a toothbrush. One Saturday morning, he was wiping down the baseboards in his bedroom with a soapy solution when it dawned on him that his place was looking very tidy these days, but it still lacked something. The walls were all white and there was nothing hanging on them, and all that was in the living room was a cheap couch and a table with a TV on it, and his bedspread was just an old unzipped sleeping bag drawn over the bed. The mess that used to be there had been covering up how plain his place was. He realized that his apartment was desperately in need of a woman's touch.

Steve's mother, Evelyn, was happy to hear from him. They'd talked on the phone a couple of times since Steve started school, and once he'd visited her at the assisted living complex where she lived, but they hadn't gone on an outing together since Steve lost his license. This Saturday, Steve rode his scooter over to her building and they took the bus together to Wal-Mart.

"Wait till you see my place, Ma," Steve told her. "You've never seen such a clean apartment."

At the store, Evelyn coasted down the aisles in a shopping cart/wheel chair with Steve walking beside her with his own big shopping cart. Looking at the bed linens, Evelyn handed Steve a package of Southwestern-print sheets to put in his cart, and asked how school was going.

"Great," Steve said. He told her about his plans to build himself a TV cabinet that had doors he could close and shelves on the bottom where he could store his DVD player and his movies. Steve liked school, and he enjoyed learning how to work with his hands. He hadn't expected to derive so much satisfaction from finishing a project. It felt even better than the initial excitement of starting something new.

"Well, Steven," Evelyn said, "I'm so glad you've finally decided to use some of that artistic talent you have." She laughed. "I still remember those pictures you used to draw when you were in high school. I always

thought you'd end up drawing one of those comic strips in the newspaper."

Steve chuckled. "That was a long time ago."

They went on to pick out some faux-bamboo blinds for the living room, throw pillows for the couch, some lamps, and an array of deliciously scented candles. They picked out paint colors for the whole apartment, and several tasteful art prints to hang on the walls. Steve picked out a leopard-print bedspread, which his mother vetoed, and then settled on a navy blue flannel comforter. Satisfied, they took all their bags onto the bus and went to Steve's condo. Steve put up the blinds while Evelyn arranged the pillows, lamps, and candles around the house.

"Steven," Evelyn called from the kitchenette. "Are you ever going to finish that deck? How long's it been like that now?" She was looking out the back door at the weather-worn boards meant to frame the deck.

"Yeah, I'm going to," said Steve. That back deck was an overwhelming project. He'd gotten the first part done right when he'd moved into this place five years ago, but, as with everything else, he lost steam and became disinterested in finishing it. Even since he'd started on his home-improvement kick, he still hadn't felt like dealing with the deck.

After they were done with their work on the apartment, Evelyn made them two cups of tea and they sat on the couch to admire what they'd done.

"Honey," Evelyn said. "Have you met yourself a nice girl yet?"

"Well, actually...." Steve told her about the lady lawyer he'd met, and how he was getting his life together in the hopes that she might be interested in him.

"But you haven't asked her on a date yet?" Evelyn was confused.

"No," said Steve shortly. He looked at his watch. "They're going to be bringing your dinner soon, we should get you back."

Heading down the steps, his mother stopped. "Flowers!" she said. "You should plant flowers out front." She looked at him and took his arm. "Ladies love flowers."

So the next day, Steve went out and got some mums, and he planted them all along the edges of the walk up to his steps. While he patted the dirt around the roots of the plants, he daydreamt about his and Laura's life together, of the nice little house that Steve would always be making improvements to, of a golden retriever and a couple of adorable kids that looked just like their mother. On a whim, he also put up a swing on the big oak tree outside the condo. He pictured the two of them having lunch in the grass on a sunny day, and then him pushing Laura on the swing and her hair flying behind her like shiny streamers.

Steve didn't smoke pot with the guys at work anymore. He did this with sheer will-power. Self-discipline. Whenever it seemed like a good idea to get high, he thought to himself, One resolution at a time. And when that didn't work, he just thought of beautiful Laura Baxter and pretended she was watching over his shoulder the whole time.

School was going great. He made his mother an end table with a drawer in it for her TV Guide and Reader's Digest. Her apartment needed some brightening up too, he thought. The two of them had been spending a lot of time together, sprucing up his apartment and going on shopping trips. And the best part of school was, one of his coworkers whose wife was expecting had commissioned him to build a baby crib. He wasn't even through with the course, and he was already getting work! He would impress that lady lawyer soon enough.

One evening leaving class, Steve recognized a handsome young black man in a well-ironed shirt leaving the student center.

"Marcel! Hey! Marcel!" he called.

"Hey man!" Marcel gave him a manly handshake/hug. "Steve, right? How you doing?"

"Oh, I'm great, great, unbelievable," Steve said. "You wouldn't believe how I've gotten my act together. I'm back in school, not messing around anymore."

"So did you read that book I gave you, then?"

"Well I tell you man, I want to thank you for lending me that book. It changed my life."

"Changed your life! Well you're a new man, ain't you!"

Bidding Marcel goodbye, Steve thought about that. He was a new man. Sober, productive, with a future...he finally felt ready to face Laura Baxter again. He planned to go find her at the courthouse the next day.

This was an occasion for Steve, and he took the day off from work for it. That morning, he stood in front of his closet looking for the right thing to wear. He wanted to look casual, but still like a man with his act together. He found a pair of pleat-fronted khaki pants his mother had bought him, which he had never worn, and tried them on. Not bad. He stopped himself from reaching for one of his tight t-shirts, and wondered if he had anything with a collar. Not quite, but he did have one of those button-down shirts with a mock collar. He looked in the mirror at his outfit and nodded with approval.

It was around noon when he locked up the scooter outside the courthouse, and as Steve took off his helmet he turned to face the big, ornate building in front of him. He was suddenly overwhelmed with a nervousness he had not felt over a girl since puberty. His head felt light and his stomach was queasy. Touching his forehead, his fingers slid across a sheet of sweat. He couldn't go in there like this. Spotting a coffee shop across the street, he decided to go have something to settle his stomach and take a moment to relax.

He took a seat at a booth by the window. The waitress came up and he ordered a cup of coffee and a tuna sandwich. While he waited for his sandwich he stared out the window and took deep breaths to try to get his head straight. However, his heart began to beat loudly in his ears because he saw the love of his life, Laura Baxter, walking up to the door of the coffee shop.

A gust of autumn wind came through the door as Laura opened it, and the sound of a few brown leaves skittering in the entryway accompanied the tin bells that jangled against the door as she walked in. She took a booth on the other side of the restaurant, ordered from the waitress, and began reading a newspaper.

Steve was shocked that she had walked in this coffee shop while he was there. *Destiny*, he thought. He knew that he would have to go talk to her. It was meant to be. He got up from the booth and walked over to her.

"Hi," he said.

Laura looked up. "Hi." She paused. "Do I know you?"

"I'm Steve. We met at the courthouse a while back." Steve cleared his throat.

Her face changed as she recognized him. "Oh, I remember you. I really apologize. It was a long day. I didn't mean to laugh at you."

"No, no. You had every right to laugh. Who was I to think a beautiful, successful lady like you would go out with a loser like me?"

"Well, I don't know about that...." She shook her head graciously.

"And, you know," Steve said, "I thought a lot about that, and it caused me to make a lot of changes in my life." He perched on the edge of the seat on the other side of the booth from Laura, leaning his elbow on the corner of the table.

Laura cast her eyes quickly from side to side and slid back in her seat.

"You really made an impression on me, actually," said Steve. "Like I told you, you are very good at what you do. I thought to myself, this is a very special lady."

Laura smiled and rolled her eyes. "You're very sweet...."

"Like I said, Ms. Baxter, I've made a lot of changes in my life since then. Hardly the same person."

"Well, I'm glad to hear that."

"I've gone back to school, haven't had a drop to drink for three months."

"That's great." Laura smiled and raised her eyebrows, looking side to side again.

"Thanks. I feel great." Steve was grinning and looking at Laura.

"Um," said Laura, "so, can I help you with something, or...?"

"Ms. Baxter," Steve took a deep breath, "I was just hoping you might reconsider and maybe have a cup of coffee with me."

"I'm sorry," she said, looking antsy. "I'm really not interested."

The waitress came up and set Laura's soup and salad in front of her.

"I'm going to eat my lunch, now, Steve," Laura said. "I wish you the best of luck." She smiled as if she pitied him.

Steve didn't know what to say. He hadn't planned for what to do if she said no. "Are—are you sure?" His voice sounded high-pitched, and cracked a little. "I've really changed."

"Sorry," she said, shaking her head and holding a package of Saltine crackers.

Steve got up and produced one of his woodworking business cards from his pocket and slid it across the table. "If you change your mind," he said, smiling.

Laura slid the card back across the table. "Please go," she said, her voice a little louder and an octave deeper.

"Okay," said Steve, quietly, and he did not break his smile until he was out of the coffee shop and past the front windows. He got to his scooter and kicked it as hard as he could, and it started to fall over and so he had to catch it before it hit the ground. When he arrived at home, before walking up his steps, he scuffed his shoes over his mums, and left every single flower broken in the dirt. He crawled under his covers and didn't go back to work that day.

The next day, he dragged himself back to work, and dragged himself to his woodworking class. After that, he crawled back under his covers and watched TV in his bed until he fell asleep. That weekend, he didn't clean his house. He laid on the couch watching TV and eating fried chicken. On Monday, he went back to work.

In the truck, he was staring out the window quietly while the guys were passing around a joint.

"*Man!*" said Chip all the sudden. "Steve, you been moping around since last week! I wasn't going to say anything, but what the hell is the matter with you?"

Steve told the guys about what had happened with Laura.

"Oiiicfi!" said Chip.

"That's cold," one of the other guys said.

Scotty passed him over the joint. "You need it this morning!"

"Naw," said Steve, shrugging it away. "It's no big deal."

Throughout the week, his spirits got a little better, but he didn't go to any of his classes. He had lost interest in it, and wouldn't finish out the semester. On Friday, Chip and the guys were going out to the bar after work. They invited him to come along. Steve decided to go; he realized he hadn't socialized outside of work in over three months, except for with his mother. And he figured a couple beers wouldn't hurt. What did it matter, anyway? Laura was right about him. He'd missed his chance. He wasn't going anywhere.

It turned out, Steve had missed partying for those three months- and it seemed like he was out to make up for lost time, because he started getting drunk more than ever. It wasn't just with the guys anymore. He started drinking beer from the time he woke up in the

morning and didn't stop until he passed out drooling on one of his throw pillows.

One morning at work, Steve had already gone through quite a few Budweisers, and they were moving a single young woman into a new house. The woman was one of these independent women, a feminist apparently, because Steve noticed as she was organizing some boxes that she was not wearing a bra underneath her tank top. Unfortunately, at that moment he lacked the discretion to hold his tongue, and said some very impolite things to the young woman. The woman didn't take it well, and Steve's boss asked Steve not to come back to work until he could come back sober.

Unemployment didn't bother Steve until he ran out of money. On the phone, his mother sighed. "You lost your job." She was quiet.

"I didn't lose it," Steve yelled into the phone, as he tended to raise his voice when he'd been drinking. "I'm going back, I just need to borrow some money till my next paycheck."

Evelyn was quiet a minute longer. "Steven, I was always afraid you were going to turn out just like your father. I don't know where I went wrong." She gave him the money anyway, knowing he would never pay her back.

And so Steve passed the winter drinking in his apartment and doing all the drugs he could get his hands on. Perhaps all that saved him was that the only money he had was what his mother gave him to pay his

bills with. He used some of it to pay bills and some of it on whiskey, which was what he switched to when beer quit doing the trick. His apartment was a shambles. All of his dishes were dirty and in the sink at all times, and he never remembered when garbage day was, so pizza boxes, old buckets of fried chicken and beer cans overflowed trash bags in the kitchen. The rest of his house was strewn with dirty clothes, old mail, and stuff he knocked over when he was drunk. He didn't go out to the Corner Pocket much in those days, because his friends didn't tend to invite him out very often. He told himself it was because they went out after work and just didn't remember to give him a call, but somewhere, he knew it was probably because he'd embarrassed them up there a few too many times.

One afternoon, he was at the convenience store near his house, picking up a twelver of Miller High Life. He was lucid for that time of day, having woken up late and taken a while to get motivated to go to the store. A pack of those too-big-clothes black kids was behind him in line. One of them knew his name.

"Steve! How you doing, man?" It was Marcel, but he didn't look the same. He wasn't wearing one of his crisp white shirts, just a big T-shirt and a pair of bright blue jeans belted below his boxer shorts.

"I'm doing all right. Well actually," said Steve. "I'm just like my old man." He didn't explain, just shrugged, and said, "How are you? Have you become a big fancy senator yet?" he asked, chuckling.

"Naw, you know what Steve?" said Marcel. "The school system in this country, it's just another way for the man to keep you down. You're in school, in school, in school, and you know what? You never get anywhere."

"So what are you up to now?"

Marcel took Steve's arm and lowered his voice. "I tell you what, man, I've got me a sweet setup. Better than all that school bullshit, where you work your ass off and don't get shit for it." He lowered his voice more. "I tell you what, I'm making *good money* and I don't got to work a day."

Steve laughed a little. "What about that book. You know, fulfilling the potential God gave you." He said it like a joke.

"Well, one thing I know is that nobody *gave* me anything. I got to go out and get it myself."

Steve went back to his apartment and started drinking and watching a Discovery Channel show about snapping turtles. His mind drifted to Marcel. It seemed like a shame. He was a bright kid, and it seemed sad to Steve to think that Marcel didn't believe all that stuff about potential and God and all that. The more he thought about it, the more it just seemed like a damned shame. He fell asleep thinking about it.

The next morning, Steve didn't feel like drinking. He lay in his bed till late in the afternoon. He didn't know what day it was, but he knew it was a weekday because "Days of Our Lives" was on at ten. Then he

decided to go down to the courthouse. It was too cold to ride his scooter that day in February, so he took the bus. He passed through security and began to wander around the lobby. After a minute, he turned back toward a security guy and said, "Where do you keep the lost and found?"

A few minutes later, a janitor brought him to a huge box full of sweatshirts, jackets, single baby shoes, books, and toys. He dug through it for a minute and eventually pulled out *Become the Leader You Were Meant to Be*.

"Thanks," he said, and then he rode the bus back home.

Back at his condo, Steve lay in bed rereading the first part of the book. You are one of God's creatures, it said. God gave everyone Potential. Steve fell asleep after the first few pages. After his nap, he watched TV for a long time. When he couldn't sit down any more, he washed some of the dishes, then gathered up the dirty clothes from the floor and put them into the wicker hamper he and his mother had picked out on one of their shopping trips. He went to bed early that night.

The next morning he did feel like drinking, but he was pacing around the house trying to think of what he could do instead. Flipping on the TV, he discovered it was a Saturday because there were Hanna-Barbera cartoons on instead of soaps. He shut it off and kept wandering around his place. He went in the bedroom and made the bed, but that only took a minute. He walked back to the living room and arranged the throw pillows on the couch. Still, no time had passed. He walked into the

kitchenette and considered mopping the few square feet of linoleum. He stared out the back door at the deck. He shook his head at it. "God damn it!" he said out loud. "I can't look at that deck anymore."

He picked up the phone and dialed Chip. "What are you doing today?" he asked.

"Aw, Steve, I don't feel like drinking today. Had a rough night last night," he said.

"No," said Steve, "I was wondering if you could do me a favor."

Chip gave Steve a ride to pick up some lumber, and spotted him the money for it.

"You're really going to finish the deck *now*?" Chip asked. "It's the middle of damn winter!"

"Yup," said Steve. It was a cold day, but the North Carolina winters weren't so bad. He layered thermal underwear beneath a flannel shirt and blue jeans, put on a winter cap, and got out his toolbox and his dusty manual, *How to Build Anything*. He brought out his boom box, and put on the Kiss Country radio station on full volume. Steve stayed outside all day, measuring and cutting and hammering, and singing along to Toby Keith. It reminded him of his woodworking class, and he enjoyed it. When it got too dark, he went inside and was asleep after one TV show. The next day it snowed, but he still went out and worked on that deck until sunset. On Monday he finished it. On Tuesday he stained it.

On Wednesday, he went back to work. It felt good being sober, and he knew the only way to stay like that was to keep busy. His old boss at the moving company had known Steve for years, and he was happy to have him back at his promise to come to work sober.

That Saturday, he woke up and the sun was shining strong in the sky. He went out on his deck in his T-shirt and smelled the air, and looked at the clear sky. An hour later, he dialed up his mother and then took the bus to her house, and together they rode back to Steve's place.

"Wait till you see," he said to her, holding his hand over her eyes as he guided her to the back door. He opened the back door and took his hand away from her eyes to show her the finished deck, which had a little table and two chairs on it, and on the table there were two tuna melt sandwiches and two glasses of sweet tea. In each corner of the deck, there was a plastic pot of mums.