

# **Dubious Voices**

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Dubious Voices

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"The First Listen"

Perhaps like every other late twenty-something, white male, downtown apartment resident I was partially educated with *artistic aspirations*; had rich parents that inconspicuously named me Alex; and lived in debt with clothes on the floor and dishes that spent most of their time rusting in the sink.

I spent most of my time planning out sculptures in my sketchbook. They were useless things that made me no money and took up space. As my brother, Jake, loved to conspicuously remind me. I lived in an apartment with him.

He was younger, and I gained points for maturity but still delivered that desperate monologue in hopes of gaining a drop of sympathy: "It was actually pretty bad. I mean I *am* glad I had the experience, just because it was an experience. But, based on that night, I have decided that I don't enjoy drinking plastic bottled tequila with salt on my tongue, discovering my knee is miraculously bleeding on its own, not being able to figure out or remember if I know the person driving the car. So, while I did not enjoy it, I can appreciate that I did something last night instead of doing nothing, and especially that I didn't do something within my normal zone of comfort. It's also important that it happened because I haven't really had enough *bad* drinking experiences—only one other one to be specific, you remember, last year that twelve hour black out from ten something to

eight something in the morning, where I found myself back in my room vomiting wine and dinner on myself—and bad drinking experiences are essential for a healthy life. Too many good drinking experiences—particularly mid afternoon ones—can be quite dangerous. As nearly all of our rehab ridden uncles are perfect examples of. I mean don't get me wrong, I didn't have *a fort* time; I'm not going to do it again, drink tequila that is, if I can help it, but it's simple, it's like the article I read in the news today—"

All he had to say for himself was: "Which one?"

"What?"

"Which newspaper?"

"I don't know okay. Some paper. But why is that important, I mean come on man, could you possibly tell me how that could matter? Or change anything I am about to tell you?"

"Credibility: I would duck everything you are about to say if you read it in the National Inquirer, and would be better off for doing so."

"Do I look like I would read a tabloid?" I threw out my hands.

"You just talk so much."

"Do you want to hear what I have to say?"

"Not particularly."

"Well I'm telling you. Because it's fucking crazy man, I mean, it literally makes no sense at all."

"Do be brief."

"One of my creations: the Energy Loop, you do remember?"

"The large, government-funded Cherio on its knees in the middle of downtown?"

"Funded by the city. But anyways. There was this article about it in the paper the other day. It's coming to pieces. They're moving it—they're storing it somewhere. That's cheaper than fixing it."

"What the ruck is the correlation between that and our drunken uncles?"

"Alright man, hey, you know what? You want to know what?"

"What? Quickly now Alex!"

"Fuck you." I stood up and went to the bathroom, shutting the doors on either side, for privacy. I sat, actually with my pants on or I wouldn't be telling you about it, on the toilet and waited. I picked up a hairy National Geographic and passed over the pages. My fingers were tickled on thin pages. I trembled at the dangerous men standing straight. They all seemed to have necklaces and no shirts. I wanted to be the one who had created them. I concentrated my anger at my brother and the memory of the huge waste of my creation on that want until it all dissolved. I put the magazine down and came back, having cooled off. But Jake was gone.

He wasn't mad of course; he drove me to Best Buy later that night. He bought a Bob Dylan album and I got Alice in Chains. You could tell he felt guilty about buying it (he always is stingy with his wallet), so I pushed him some, mostly to make myself feel better about the Alice in Chains.

"These bands are characterized by their depression," I explained to him.

"Hmm?"

"You know," I said, "that early nineties grunge stuff. You can almost taste the heroin. It's rich with their misery. Nirvana and such."

"Right. Should I buy this?"

"Absolutely."

I liked buying things. Hold on and let me clarify that: I *hated* buying things. The guilt turned in my stomach like greasy French fries lingering a day after you ate them. But I could not stop doing it. I started the month with nearly three hundred dollars left in my bank account and, at that moment, it was down to twenty-five dollars and twenty-three cents. The minimum amount I needed in the bank to have the account *was* twenty-five dollars, so I had twenty-three cents to live on.

I watched the flies scrambling inside ajar on the cover art of my new album. It felt slick and good and well in my hand. Now that some of the guilt had dissipated, I was reasonably satisfied with my purchase.

I asked, "Aren't you going to listen to your new Bob Dylan in the car?"

"Absolutely not!"

"What... Why?"

"You can't listen to an album for the first time in the car." He paused. "The first listen is a sacred thing. The first listen calls for your full attention. You must completely devote yourself to the CD. You must meditate on each individual song."

On the way back, we passed my luminous downtown sculpture otherwise known as the Energy Loop. It seemed a disfigured letter left out of the alphabet, on its knees in a gesture of humility. It was a large, stone "O," bent at the center, kneeling before all. I had created it in the midst of another depressing fit. All that money for me to create something that, basically, was just self-

therapy. It was rusted, and surrounded on all

Hernandez 8 by

sides The car slowed down as we went orange plastic, he asked: "What's up with the Energy

by, and "That's what I was trying to tell Loop?"

you earlier toda^ . If s old. It's rusted. It's coming to pieces.

They're going to have to move it."

"Huh."

I watched it in the rearview mirror for as long as it was remotely visible, and all the time .

trying not to watch. I wanted desperately to forget it]

existed life. Behind me, it was just sitting there,

rotting, war How much money had it cost this city

for me to vomit famous. Behind me, it rotted,

waiting for that big truck

ting for them to pick it up and put it

away, it up? I had been sure it would

make me to roll it away.

*I feel like large parts of me are gone, silently*

*removed, quite recognize myself in old pictures.*

*Like if I looked someone else who looked roughly*

*like me, I wouldn't I've experienced too much, and it*

*is my fault. Thepr\obl*

*>ed. I feel slightly different as if I can't always*

*in a picture where I was standing next to*

*'I know which one of them I was. I feel like*

*'em is these nights, I suppose. 't go out*

*tonight."*

And that was when he gave me counsel: "Then dbn

"Oh. Was I talking out loud?"

"Yes. Don't go."

"Concern noted." I went for my coat and had

one

"Alex—you do not have to do this to yourself,

arm in.

He grabbed me, sort of, holding my shoulders

now and then. It was as if he was trying to

don't need them to have a good time. Hell,

you

but his fingers hovering over them but touching every  
create the illusion of grabbing me. "These nights,

you don't *need* to have a good time. You can be satisfied without going to these extremes."

"You don't say," I replied, matter of a fact, and put on the rest of my coat.

I came back: drunk, coat gone, lost somewhere. The lights were out. I went to the wall and felt for the switch and, finding it, brought light to the room bed, giving me a pissed look.

I waited before finally saying, with a stiff, straight finger aimed at the door: "Out!

"Out?" He had not been expecting me to play that card

"You have nothing to offer me as a fucking roommate!

"What about a brother?"

"Nothing there either."

He looked as if he was considering it, appearing as if he was about to rub his chin the way his fingers would approach his face and then fall away, 'Alright," he said after a relatively short time. He got up and packed nearly in an instant and *his* coat on, probably one of my coats *'ou* though and left quickly, offering me some advice: " have to change." and pad and scribbled away

I said goodbye, and he left. I reached for my pen pieces of said.

memorized and thought about what he had just

literature I had

Then I began to sketch out a new statue. It was an industrious thing that would never be made, which was important. Unrealized ambition says something deeply significant about its creator, stretched twenty feet into the sky. The sketch was of a humongous letter "C." It would [have

Picture it, pretend it had been made, forget everything else I've told you about me and judge me solely on my imagination.

And then, as soon as I had asked for it, I was alone in that little apartment. Time went by twice as fast. Less and less of my sketches were fully realized. I quit several different jobs. Soon I was taking pills in the morning to go back to sleep; I would wake up from my bulges, heart pounding in the chest so hard I thought that it would explode. I began to carry on conversations with my shadow. After a failed suicide attempt, I woke up in the hospital with a tube down my throat. My brother never visited. After that, I didn't have the strength to scribble in my sketchbook again.

"Acid"

I cut my finger on the glass table. It is beginning. The feeling is expanding inside me.

I feel like there is something in my head that is trying to get out. But that is not the Acid, which is in my stomach. It makes me feel queasy, only to such a minimal degree that it is almost pleasant.

I clutch my belly as the car slides down the highway and think: You are my secret love. No clumsy woman could ever replace you. You are secure.

I know, in the car, that we are going somewhere. But I do not always know where. But I do. But something is not right and I am forced to ask myself: Do I know? Do I know? Because at the next moment, I am convinced that—actually—I do not know. And that where we are going could be anywhere.

I think that we are in my car. But there is another person driving it. Which is good. I think that it is good. It may not be. I do not know.

I ask myself questions every five minutes to check and make sure that I am alive. I always answer them right, but sometimes I forget that I am asking myself questions and stop answering them. Then I snap back, asking myself questions again, but new ones, because I have forgotten that I was asking myself questions:

What is my name?

It is Ad&i Robert Escalante. AcUin because that was my father's name and my father's father's name. And Robert because that was my mother's father's name and Escalante because it is my father's name.

I am Adam because I am in America, and have been since I was born.

That is the short answer to my question.

The long answer is—that I am a white man named Adan. Or at least whatever drop of blood in me that is Spanish is no longer mine because I have been raised as a white man is.

Who is driving the car?

His name is Ryan Dunn but he is not the same as me, he does not think as I do, he is not on Acid.

Are we going to crash?

Ryan is a competent driver. He is not intoxicated, or at least not very much so.

Are we going to crash?

No!

What happens when I stick my hand out the window and turn the music as loud as the speakers will go?

I can feel the wind pulling each of my individual fingers back and tucking in between my fingers and making the space in between my fingers known.

What happens when the music goes even louder?

Ryan turns it down.

How long before we get where we are going?

"Ryan."

"What up?"

"How much longer."

"Twenty, fifteen minutes."

Where are we going?

I do not ask him that. He will think I am crazy.

Am I crazy?

I don't know.

Why have I done this to myself?

She didn't have any mushrooms.

Why have I done this to myself?

Because it is fun.

How long have I been like this for?

Tripping? Oh, I don't know. Maybe an hour. Not long yet. It will last for a long time.

How long have I been like this for?

Like what?

How long?

I shake my head and give it to the window, eyes closed, but the wind peels back my eyelids and

I am wide open like a naked man. The questions *will* go away.

We are by a waterfall. There is plush bright grass and water, lots of noisy water exploding all around me. There are children here, and parents also. The children are

crowded at the top of the waterfall, afraid to jump. I am too, and pace, thinking furiously as I  
down several cigarettes standing over the waterfall, thinking of all the things I should not that I  
promised myself I would not. I am watching the children afraid to jump. I notice the parents. They  
are pointing at me, or staring, or noticing. I am pacing. I am terrified. I crawl back to a rock jutting  
from the river and chew my cigarette. The children are leaving. The parents are leaving. Why are  
they leaving?

They are gone now. I do not want to scare children. I do not want to be a dangerous person.  
But I have made myself these things by choice. I go to my friend, wrapped in a hammock he had  
packed in my trunk, he is wrapped tight up like he is going to come out of it a different person. I  
ask him how long we are staying. He says to climb up under the waterfall and to play. I ask him  
again. He says to wait. I smoke another cigarette. The ash curls up into a long delicate cylinder  
that goes away when I tap my cigarette. I light another cigarette. Soon I have run out of cigarettes.  
I ask Ryan.

"We have only been here for fifteen minutes."

I wait, my leg bouncing. The sun starts to set. I help Ryan take his hammock apart. He makes  
me pick up my cigarettes; he is an environmental science major.

I cannot remember where I put the whip-its. No, they are behind my clothes, in the cardboard box.  
I begin to take them. The balloon fills with nitrous, the dewy droplets resting on the cracker  
quickly freezing over.

Placing the balloon to my lips, I suck in and blow out and suck in and blow out and suck in.  
Some of it is as sharp and icy inside my mouth as hail snatched straight from the

sky. But most of it tastes fresh and clear, as detached and hospital-like as the delicacy of a doctor's formal and inquisitive touch. I feel an alien numbness expanding inside me, erasing the grotesque itch of the acid for just a moment. Thoughts slide from my brain. I shed my personality, my lips pucker.

One knocks me backward and my head is on the wall and I am slumped across the wall and all the questions go away and I cannot see anymore and

But the questions are still here. They are beating at my skull even in unconsciousness. What if I don't get up. What if I don't get up. I can't get up. But I feel as though it is still partially because I do not want to get up. I wait until I can get up and I turn on my phone for the time.

It is seven A.M.

I am alone in the apartment and there is no one but me and the whip-its. They make a sound that might be nostalgic as they empty into the balloons. I want to be dead suddenly, in a very shocking and painful moment.

Why did I not tell Ryan about the whip-its? Is it because I was afraid he would take them away? They are not dangerous; they are not bad. They are college. College and women that think they are girls in shorts that make me watch them. I am not wrong! I am not wrong! They are wrong to be here and to live with me and I want to die sometimes but then I take them up inside and they are my secret love that I have guarded for a lifetime.

I go to the porch and angrily clench cigarettes between my teeth. I smoke until the asthma kicks in then I go inside and cough into my inhaler. Then I cough into a balloon. I can't feel my fingertips for a moment, or either they are all that I can feel, the nerves tingling, tickling at my veins. There is something in me, always, itching to get out and especially now.

Unconsciousness is the perfect place to go in moments like this. But for some reason, I feel it still and unmoving in my stomach, insistent that it is here for good. It will not leave me just because I have changed my mind. I decide to call Ryan.

"Hello?" His voice is groggy.

"I'm still tripping."

"Who is this?"

"It is me."

"Who? Oh Adam. What did you say?"

"I am still tripping."

"Okay."

"I don't know what to do. I am still tripping."

"Just wait it out." He hangs up and I am alone again.

I look at the whip-its and decide that I don't want anymore. I call Mike, but it is maybe hours later. I don't know what is happening. He drives over and throws away all my drugs. My eyes are big and crazy but, somehow, he does not notice. I tell him I don't know what is happening and ask him if he understands. He says yes but with a depressive reluctance. He drives me somewhere.

"My Girlfriend's Pants"

You will be in my girlfriend's pants by tomorrow afternoon. It's okay; you don't have to make any excuses. Be happy about it I am here to tell you: it will be all you thought it would. She even does this thing with her—well, I won't spoil it.

Yeah, you. The one with the saggy overalls. Yeah, pull them up a little, move around in them a bit, see if you can be comfortable in your own skin. With your overweight tennis shoes that give you that shuffle. I'm sure it was the first thing she noticed about you. She likes them like you: foolishly clothed, impressionable, half dumb, but smart enough that every now and then you say something that makes sense. She hates men smarter than her.

Me? You know me. I'm the one who was standing outside the window of the coffee shop, that ratty rain coat pulled down over my recognizable eyes so I could only watch the two of you in silhouette. I was in the shadow. You thought I was a homeless man. You threw some change at my un-cupped hands on your way out.

But, really, you knew exactly who I was from the moment she approached you. You saw that she was much too eager to be single. The way she swished her coffee about in its cup and watched it swirl when she ran out of things to say and your awkward quietness shoved itself between the two of you. You knew she had someone stuck to her

back sucking the life out of her. Maybe you did not know what to call me yet, but you knew I existed. Otherwise you would have spoken up quicker when she first introduced herself to you in that coffee shop. Otherwise you would've been thrilled to meet this broad, lazy green eyes, free and excitable. Ready to approach men. She was desperate for a man like you.

That was a surprise wasn't it? You may have even been a little scared. You realized someone may have figured you out and why you waited in that coffee shop, complacently ordering an iced drink and whipping the sugar about in it with a skinny black straw. You could never get it to taste sweet enough, so you kept getting out of your seat, niching over to that sugar with your eyes on every woman in the room.

Would it be that one, the Goth with the dark hair in the back, the skin so white she was born to shop at Hot Topic and listen to Emo. She would leap all over you the minute you told her you listened to the Smiths ever since they came out in the eighties.

Or would it be the soccer girl decked out in spandex, whose muscled thighs you couldn't stop noticing. She wouldn't be as easy to strike a conversation with, but you could manage. Just tell her one of those easy lies, like you were on the football team in high school and dated a cheerleader with hair the same shade as hers. Hair that looked so eerily like hers you couldn't help but notice her, but come up to her table and talk with her, the way her bangs glistened with sweat and swayed in front of her eyes like a fly she was too tired to bat away. You could tell her that you loved the look of her gold and green Packer's jacket and she would leap into your arms about how no one ever called it gold but said it was plain, dumb yellow. That boring color, so stupid a child could point to it on the color wheel.

Or the jail bait, whose mother dropped her off here to meet that sexily irresponsible surfer dude who isn't coming. She misses his perfect tan. And now she sits in the corner and tries not to spill tears over her coffee mug, her puckered, painted lip trembling every time she hid it in her coffee, thinking about him or maybe just herself. She would love to tell you about all her problems, so long as you introduced yourself first and kept saying shit like, "I'm so sorry you had to go through that," or "That must have been *awful*" Just keep any sharp objects away from her.

What about her mother? You shameless dog. Don't pretend you didn't notice them both. She was hardly there long enough for you to guess her cup size, but she was there alright, tapping her foot impatiently as she ordered a coffee to go. She had that busy look that is only attractive on some women. You didn't notice a ring, plus she had that pathetic neuroticism that just begs for strange men like you to pick her up.

But her. That woman with the gorgeous eyes that kept darting hi their sockets, cupping a mug at the table farthest from you, way in the back, on the opposite side of the room from the other lone women. She took counsel in her coffee; you knew she was a long time drinker from the way she stuffed her whole body into that cup with every gulp. The way she kept a safe difference from any creamer or sugar, swallowing that coal black coffee quicker than the waitress could refill it. You noticed her green eyes beneath that auburn shadow that was her bright hair, its creamy glow continuing to divert your attention from everything else. Oh, you noticed her, but even when she glanced from her cup for a second, smiling politely, you could not meet her gaze. Her shoulders beaming at you from her dress straps. You would never imagine approaching her; she was too neutral and there was no entry point. Plus, she looked smarter than you and would almost

certainly run circles around you in a conversation, asking questions like: "Who are you?" and "Why am I talking to you?" and "What are *you* doing with *your* life?" You could see from the frame of her lips that she had a sharp tongue to slice through your idle chit chat. She would not stand with your bullshit, even if all you wanted was for her to just *listen*, to hold you and listen to you spout off your problems. Your insecurities, pouring from your mouth even when you tried to hold them back: "I've felt so numb for so long." "All my friends are in college now and I didn't even make it past eleventh grade." "I've been drinking more lately and I haven't had a girlfriend in years." "I just want to trust someone like I could Ann in highschool. She was my first." "I just want to know what it is to feel again."

Why did she come to your table? I could hardly tell you that. I can tell you that she was waiting for you before you even arrived and nervously ordered your iced coffee and nervously stirred too much creamer into it. She noticed you when you came in for sure, your unbalanced shuffle in those stupid baggy clothes. She knew she needed you as soon as she saw you. You were like a sigh of relief to her when you came into the coffee shop and sat down in your stiff seat. She told herself: Now this is what I came here for, this man, he is what I need right now. He will control me just enough that I might control him. He will look right back at me, just as puzzled as I am at my own indecency, my own readiness. My god, the look on your face when she sat down next to you, dragging her black coffee with her like it was a prison ball that made her tug her feet.

She thinks she can get away from me, our girl, but she is so wrong. She doesn't understand men like you and me, or what it is to be a man. She is never present when the two of us make love, always beneath me, looking over my shoulder like there is something else, something better

above me, hanging over me just waiting to happen t(j> her.

But don't get excited: she is not so naive as to think that you are what she is waiting for. She knows you for exactly what you are, and wants nothing from you other than what you have to give her. She has a simple approach to life that has always done her well: when she wants something she snatches it. She has never let men like you and I in the way of what she wanted. She is a simple woman, but one of the better I have known.

Look, tomorrow when you are in the coffee shop, do *not* wait for her to come over to your table as you did before. She will be there in the morning at the same table. This time will be more difficult. She will sit far away from you, as if the two of you had never met. When you come over to her table, she will be a little cross with you and act like she is surprised you are speaking to her. Humor her a bit. It's the guilt, really. She'll have to work her way up to asking you over. You might want to suggest it to her. Not directly of course. Say you're from out of town. Mention that you don't have a place to stay right now and your hotel bill is chalking up to be more than you can afford. You might need a place to crash for a while. She'll watch your eyes when you ask her for a place to stay, making sure you're lying. If you tell the truth, she will never want to be with you. That's how we all are when we are looking for someone: terrified that we might find a good person who might make us do the right thing.

Don't worry about me: I'm leaving tonight to make room for the two of you. I'll give her a tidy excuse—got to see the hometown again, Mom's sick or some obscure cousin is graduating.

Am I mad? Oh no. I'm happy for the two of you. Hell, I might even catch myself a little something while I'm away. Something young and ready. Big-eyed and cheery until I knock on her door late one night when her roommates are sleeping off the cheap booze. Maybe I'll have a

conversation with her much like this one, explaining to her the way the world works and that—after tonight—the two of us may never speak again. Or that if she ever sees me with another woman, she must buff up and keep her cute chin popped out all stoic and suffering like and to not acknowledge us like a good little girl. I will explain to her that all mankind was created in order that we might make mistakes, and those mistakes often take the form of relationships. And that me making my way into her tight, denim jeans is just another one of those mistakes. A fun one, but a mistake nonetheless. I'll tell her that the best she can hope for, being with me, is to learn something new about herself, maybe get into some music that is a little less popular with her friends, something she would normally not listen to. Maybe Til lead her in a new direction, and she'll start sleeping with boys more often, corrupting them in the way I did her and refusing their ridiculous proposals without a flinch. She will enjoy watching their faces crumble.

So have fun with my girl Man. Shit, /hope you do. I haven't been able to lately, but you know what? That's okay. You take my place for a little while. But make sure you remember everything I have told you and keep in mind: I will be back. Not you or I could do this forever.

'Secret'

On the last day of our eighth grade year, in our last period class, the classroom shook with children. The classroom was their white-padded cell. While Terry and I sat almost silently tucked in the corner of the room, praying for the bell to send us home for the summer.

Terry was sweet. He was quieter, more reserved than most boys. But I liked him. We had flirted through the year but still felt as far apart from each other as we did when we first met. It was a disappointing day for me, that last day. I knew that the summer was here and we wouldn't see each other as much. All hope of him and me would be eliminated until next year. And that would be high school, a blank page that would feel utterly empty and new to me.

I looked at Terry, more intently than before. I gave him a forced smile that contorted my stiff and sarcastic face. I fought to fill my mind with the image of his face and his eyes and what could have ended up to be one of our last chances.

"What're you thinking about?" He winked softly to me.

I squeezed my eyes shut, concentrating on not sighing. "The future."

"Is it a sad thing?" he asked.

"The future is always sad," I said. "Your friends leave, go away. Everything you work for goes away. You have to start over again."

"Getting a little philosophical, aren't we?" he said. He sounded gently amused. "I think it's going to be a *great* summer. There'll be parties and people and lots of fun." He sounded stupid and fake.

The sigh came out. *I mil always be older than them*, I thought. *The ones like Terry too.*

I was depressed then. I am depressed now.

My eyes flutter and open. I am in my room. The light in here is faint, everything is orange and dark, the world is illuminated only by the light squeezing through the cracks in between my shutters. It is the middle of the day.

I have been sleeping. For how long? I cannot remember what the last thing is that I can remember. Oh yes. I remember what I had for breakfast this morning. Cold pizza dug from out of the back corner of the refrigerator.

I curl my toes. They feel cold and naked. They feel like I have just discovered where they are.

One night that summer I saw Terry again. It was at a party and I was on a balcony drinking tequila shots and clanking shot glasses with one of my dearest friends, Nurry whose grimace pulled her face back uglier and uglier with each shot.

"I don't always get you. The things you do—they don't always come together. But you know Honey," she crooned, "I love you like a sister."

"I know that, I know—" I tapered off, seeing him entering at the large front door beneath us. I

recognized him instantly, his soft, fragile walk. His optimism leaked out of his unassuming, generous nature. I felt it from the balcony; it put a shivery coldness in me, one that went even deeper than the hideous taste of the tequila.

"I meant that—" burped Nurry. "I really did \_\_\_\_ "

I dipped over the balcony, no longer noticing her, calling to Terry. He went on into the house, oblivious. I dived back into the house, determined to find him and make right the wrongs I had done by not having him before. I thought—then, drunk and filled with the fiery tequila—that maybe he could be the one to know me. Finally, I felt ready to take a risk, *the* risk.

Inside the house, I was swallowed by a mob of drinking and smoking teens. I made my way thickly through them, searching for the one I wanted. It was a huge house, made even bigger by the crowd and my drunken state.

I felt like I was at the core of a tornado, unable to feel anything but the need to keep going. "Sleeping again I see?" Nurry pokes her head through the door. Today I have spent most of the day in bed.

"Yeah, well, I'm exhausted. I told my dad not to let anyone up."

"He was dozing on the couch when I came in. The door was open."

"Good for nothing." I turn in the bed and stretch and yawn and then a thought hits me hard. I twist in the middle of my stretch, a sudden and tragic accident in the mechanics of my body. The thought burns a silent hole in our conversation.

"Amy?" Nurry says, her voice hovering delicately over something big and dangerous.

"What?"

"I love you like a sister. You know that. Right?"

I giggle. "That was random," I say.

"You know that. You know that. Right?" "Sure Nur. I know that. I've always known that. Why now?" "I just thought you might need to hear it," she says. "I just thought..." Then I hear nothing. I hear nothing; I hear nothing in my ear. Like I dive into blank, black, emptiness. The space before a movie starts. The place where all you can hear is the record spin.

Even if I would have got to know Terry, even if he was an actual character in this story, if there was more to him than a little slither, even then, it would have been pointless. He would have grown tired of me in a couple months, he would have called me up, he would have said not tonight. No I don't want to tonight. I don't want you. You come up short here. You don't deserve or understand me.

I've decided what life is all about: looking for someone to tell your secrets—a nearly forgettable but kind acquaintance of a boy, with soft looks that make you ache—but not finding them. Maybe—if I told Terry my secret—I would die.

I could spend a thousand pages, rather than this small number, telling you about all the different things life is. I could go on and on, I could give you a million words.

'Look at the Wall'

The other night Richard visited me again, and I gave it to him again. I was struggling to sleep in my dorm room when I heard him stumble in. I went still in my bed. Even with the lights off I could see the shadows dangling over the lumpy ceiling, and I watched them carefully, feeling the bed lean towards him as he climbed on. I did not look at his face, not before or after. And once he was inside of me I did not close my eyes, and I did not look at him. I looked at the ceiling and counted the shadows moving on the ceiling and waited for him. I kept my eyes closed even when it was intense and I felt like I couldn't wait for him anymore. I squeezed them shut and shut them like a door that I was closing until it bent and opened impossibly the other way.

I kept them shut until it happened to him. Then I let them open, slowly, looking at the ceiling but sensing him slinking from me, and his head retreating to my belly to rest his head and to rest his body.

"No," I said. He raised an arm to my breast as if to milk me, but I swatted it, not looking at him.

"No?" he whispered.

"No," I said, brushing his head away from my belly and waiting for it to leave and waiting for him to roll over and not lay on me, so that I could lay there without him on me. Then I didn't have to look at him, and I could pretend that he wasn't there and that I was

laying there completely alone in the dark. But the stench of vodka complicated my pretending.

I was starting to feel alone when he said, "Did you?"

"No," I said, this time gently.

"I didn't come here in my boxers, right?" he asked. The morning was bleeding through the dorm windows.

"I don't know," I said. I was sitting on my bed, looking at the wall, but I got a feeling that he was moving towards me. I jerked back.

"You don't hate me that much do you?"

"I don't hate you," I said.

"Do you love me?"

"I don't know," I said.

It felt like he was looking at me and I hurt all over. "What do you want Carrie?"

I thought about the question hard. "I want you to stop coming around."

"I love.yoM, Carrie." I could feel that he was moving very close to me now, the bed leaning to where his knees must have rested. "Why won't you look at me?" His fingers wrapped around my chin and he turned my face. I looked down, just one last second left to myself to pretend, then I watched him. I blinked, seeing his eyes blink and watching his yellow eyes. There were little explosive clouds of blood in them. I looked at him for a long time. He kissed me, and I closed my eyes. He let me go, and I looked at the wall.

"I guess I love you," I said. I tried not to think about anything.

"Eh," he said. "I'm leaving."

"You don't have any clothes."

"I just have to make it upstairs."

I heard him walk away and close the door, but I kept looking at the wall, afraid for a long time until I was sure that he was at least not in the hallway anymore. I turned around.

His pants and shirt were balled up under my desk. I picked them up and went out into the hallway and put them in the big trash can. I covered them up with old newspaper and an empty pizza box in case he looked for them there.

Each day seemed to pass as slowly as a Victorian novel. I had little human contact other than him. Those I did see usually cared. They would give me a shrugging look when his name came up.

"Find somebody else," one of my girlfriends said. "Let him beat off when he gets drunk."

She couldn't figure out what I saw in him, because she couldn't figure out that I saw nothing in him.

Another night he didn't come and I woke up at the usual time, unable to fall back asleep. I lay there with my eyes open, alert and alone, trying hard not to think about him. It became especially hard when I heard a crashing sound, probably provoked by something falling in the stairwell or the hallway, that I thought might be him finally coming to have me.

Morning came. I was painfully tired. It was the kind of tired that feels like it will never go away.

I got ready for class. I was almost out of the door when I saw him. He was on the floor,

wedged between the doorway, very dead looking. His skin was unnaturally white and there were droopy gray slices of vomit, laced with a reddish black blood that must have come from deep inside him. I stepped over him and tried not to feel. There was no wall to look at but a window, directly in front of me, facing our room in the hallway. I saw the red morning sun, and my tired eyes hurt.

'Out"

1.

I'm out. I'm out again. There was none left after Sal came over. You know what that means. Spent the whole day by the toilet, hanging over the toilet, saying prayers to the toilet, putting what was left hi my stomach hi the toilet. Even when I didn't think there was anything left hi me to put in the toilet, I was putting it hi the toilet. Until I could get up from the toilet, wipe my hands and maybe my face, make it to the phone and call Mark.

Nothing.

Call Jessie.

Zip.

Call Sal, he's like what you calling me for? I should be calling you you dumb fuck.

Call Rob. Last and Least. Nothing. He even asks me to call him back when I got something.

Right.

So I go down town. Clean up just enough so I still look like trash. Put on my big, ugly coat, the one that's so black it makes me look like a roach. Get an attractive cardboard sign going and I can't even make a dollar today. These guys are looking at me like I'm wearing a spacesuit. I can't make fifty cents. I think some guy that looks even worse than me puts a penny in. I start to follow him but then stop myself; the Waffle House isn't far away.

I start moving down the block, heading for the House like my life depends on it and it does. I'm shaking like some kind of crazy. I make it halfway there and there's this kid. There's this kid that's got to be out of a movie about highschool football. I see him at a stoplight, tucked in a familylooking car so snug I thought he was going to fall asleep, checking his watch, blabbing to his mommy on his little cellular telephone. He's got a jacket so warm it could set him on fire, from the friction, if he started running.

I look down the block at the Waffle House and somehow know that's where he's going to. This kid. This kid doesn't deserve to sit in the House. I look at him angry-like, to get his attention. But he doesn't see me. I wave my arms, middle fingers ready. He doesn't see me.

I make it to the House. I go in. I dump the change I made on the counter and ask for a coffee. The lady must be new, This chick's young. We're talking high school. She's got that sweet, lipstick look. She looks ready too, like she's waiting for me to pull out a gun. She looks at the change like it's the same currency they use in Japan, looks at me like I must be from Japan.

"This isn't enough for coffee. But, generally, we take your order first, Sir. We can also take credit *or* debit."

I think how funny it is her telling me that, like she's telling me a joke without a punch line, like I never been to a Waffle House before. I ask for Jill.

"Jill?"

I ask her if she's deaf. She says no, but she doesn't know who Jill is. I stick my head behind the counter and scream for Jill. I wait. The girl gets uncomfortable. She wants to

give me a dirty look but keeps watching the floor so that she doesn't. I wait. Jill comes out.

"Jesus Scott."

I tell her to get me some coffee. She doesn't say anything, except for maybe to herself, and turns around to get me that coffee. I sit at a booth and I wait for the kid with the car. He comes in, sure enough. He still doesn't see me, doesn't notice me staring. I don't get these people. It's like no one exists—only them.

Jill takes her time with the coffee, over by some other people, taking an order or something with my coffee in her hand like she's teasing me with it. Finally she sets it down in front of me at the booth. I don't say anything except for can I have my change back, remembering it's still on the counter. She says no sharply and I sip the coffee and wait on my kid. I keep watching him but he still doesn't see me. I wish I had some cigarettes.

I get up from my coffee and go over to his booth. He still doesn't see me; I'm standing over his booth like I'm about to hit him and he doesn't even see me. I wait for him to see me. He does. I wait for it to sink in and then ask him for a cigarette.

"Don't smoke."

"Are you asking that boy for money!" Jill pipes up.

I tell her no, I'm not asking him for money.

"Are you asking that boy!"

I tell her no.

"Get out Scott! Just get out! Out!"

I wait there, over his booth, waiting for him to get scared, waiting for Jill to head towards the

phone pretending like she's going to call the cops like she always does. She does go to the phone but I'm still waiting for him to scare. She's talking into the phone, pretending like she's calling them like she always does. I give up on the kid. For now.

I go outside. I lean to the brick of the House, waiting. Some big ugly guy walks out of the House and I ask him for a cigarette. He gives me one. A real gentlemen: he even lights it for me.

I puff on it as slow as I can manage. Then. The kid.

He walks out, slipping right in front of me, rubbing his hands together and blowing on them with his breath and sticking them in his pockets. I grab him by the shoulder, other hand in my black coat.

"I got a gun in the coat Kid. I got a gun. I'm going to need you to drive me somewhere."

Here it is, I think. Here it comes. He's going to pee his pants. It's going to be perfect. It's going to be everything. I'm going to get so ripped tonight I'm going to be outside of my body. I'm going to have to thank this kid, I think. I'm going to have to thank him, because this kid will give me another shot at life.

He turns around, my hand still on his shoulder. He turns around and he looks at me.

He's scared now. He's shaking, I can feel it in his shoulder. His breath is coming faster now, in and out of his body like he doesn't know what to do with it. It's so beautiful I can hardly stand it.

"If you are going to shoot me. Do it here where everyone can see."

My jaw drops. My hand flops from his shoulder to my side. He goes away, not looking at me

anymore.

I stand in the lot, jaw open, watching him leave. His big fancy, family-looking car. He doesn't even look at me. I don't exist.

I start for home. I see bluelights before I'm hardly out the lot. I guess Jill did call them this time. They're gentle.

I wish I could be a cop. I'd never be out, I think, trying real hard to go to sleep but I'm shaking so much my eyes keep popping open on their own. If I was a cop. Even when I was out I could bust somebody and then I wouldn't be out anymore. I know everyfuckingbody in this town. I could take my pick.

Matter fact, I would love to see the look on somebody like Rob's face. Shit, I'd love to see the look on any of their faces. This guy, this guy they thought was so down and out.

But now I am out, trying to sleep and my heart going so fast I can't stop thinking about. Think how if it keeps going that fast I might have a heartattack. Thinking how if it keeps going that fast I might have to reach inside my chest and pull it out and squash it in my bare hands. Thinking how horrible I feel to be out and to not be able to sleep and about the cops and the kid and that kid talking to his mommy on his cell phone.

I wish he knew how it felt. To be out.

2.

But he does know how it feels. We all do. We all know. It's that feeling where you can't sleep or eat, the only thing you can do is sip hot coffee and tell every woman you see that you love her, and all you can think about is how you're going to stop being out. I had that feeling long before. He knows. He knows. We all know.

That's how I decide to look for him again. I got to find this prick, I tell myself at six or so when I give up on sleep.

I put on the coat I get out of the apartment and head for the House.

He'll come back there. I know he will.

Jill's at the front this time looking at me like I'm a drop of pee she was asked to wipe from the *inside* of the toilet bowl.

"Shouldn't you be in jail."

I tell her I didn't have anything on me. I tell her I'm so dry right now every bone in my body hurts.

She looks at me like I have a motive. "You're in a better mood today. You gonna make me kick you out again?"

I tell her no Jill, of course I'm not going to make her do *that* again. And does she have any coffee for me?

"This isn't a bar Scott. I don't run a tab."

I tell her Christ, Jill, she's starting to sound like she forgot what I did for her mother all those years ago, and Christ Jill, she's starting to sound like one *of them*.

She gives me some coffee. I sip it and ask some guy for a cigarette. He gives me one out of one of them one-dollar cigarette packs. It tastes like wood, but that's O.K. with me. I sip my coffee.

"You waiting for somebody today Scott? No drugs in the House."

I tell her, of course I'm waiting for someone Jill. I'm waiting for like a caravan of guys with more pure white than you've ever seen.

She doesn't think it's funny, but when I ask she lets me have a little more coffee. I keep sipping and waiting.

The kid doesn't show.

3.

I'm getting desperate. Sleep isn't happening. I'm thinking about borrowing Sal's gun and not telling him what for and doing it. And thinking about what the bullet would sound like when it came through my temple and through my skull and drilled into my brain and came out. Or if I would still be able to feel it then. I call Sal. I say come on Sal. He says he might have something for me and to come over right away. I put on the coat, wondering what he might have something means.

When I'm at his apartment, there's a feeling very not O.K. about it.

So I don't knock on the door. I go down the stairs, thinking hard man, slipping around the side

and looking in for something. I don't see anything, nothing; there's nothing different.

I go back up the stairs and knock. There's a long time that I am waiting. The shaking won't go away, it just stays and stays.

"Come in Scott."

I open the door and come in. There's four people here and I only know one of them and that's Scott and they all look way too serious. They don't look angry and that is bad news man.

"Sit down Scott."

I walk over to the kitchen half of the room. I look in the fridge. No beer?

"Make yourself comfortable Scott."

I ask what these other people are here for.

"We're here to talk to you Scott," one of them says. He has a flat face that you could play cards on top of if you turned him the right way.

I ask him how he knows my name.

"Sit down," Sal says, "they're here to talk Scott."

I come out of the kitchen and sit down and look around me, all around me, and sit down and think hard, way hard. I'm shaking.

"We want to help you out, Scott."

I say if you want to help me out, then score me some scag man. They say that's not how they want to help me out. I say then how do you want to help me out. They try to explain to me how they want to help me out but I'm shaking my head the whole time like no that's not how you help a man out and thinking that these people must be like that kid and not

know anyone exists but them.

That kid.

I tell them to go fuck themselves, put my tennis shoes back on and I'm out the door.

I got to find that kid.

I'm headed for downtown man, I don't care what is going on there, I got to find that kid. I hit downtown and move around in the crowds with my hood up and looking at every face but with most of my face down so I'm looking with only the tops of my eyes. I can't find that kid.

I walk for hours. I'm walking up town and down town and going inside coffee shops and outside coffee shops and I even peek in a restaurant and there's a long line of people but none of them are that kid.

Then it hits me.

The university.

Got to be a college kid man, I mean I thought he might be high school, but now that I think about it, he's probably too old for that, but I know he's in school, I can tell from the way he looks he's got to be in school with a look like that. That look like you never paid for anything hi your life. That look like your parents told you even when you were hi elementary school that you had to go to college one day, because that's what everybody does.

I leave down town, still shaking, but I'm breathing hard from the walk and some of the shaking is gone. I ask somebody for a cigarette and they tell me that stuff kills and I tell them to go fuck themselves.

I cross the street and head for the school.

The world starts to get different the nearer I get to the school. There's like kids out and pretty

girls out and they're making faces at each other like they never seen a face like the other one's face before and some of them might even put their faces together for a while like their plan is to make a new face.

I get to a place where there's four big, brick buildings, pick one, and go in.

There's some cute girl that makes me think of Goldilocks with her little breasts and her red, mommy-knitted sweater, starting to ask me a question, about am I a student or something. She's sitting at a desk. It's her job or something. I keep walking.

I go up to the stairs in case she's going to follow me and ask me to leave and will have time to catch me if I wait at an elevator. I'm looking for that kid man.

I stop at each floor and I walk from the beginning of the hallway to the end, knocking on the doors, one at a time and waiting for them to answer and saying, oh I'm sorry, I'm at the wrong room, and then going to the next one and a few people start to notice that I'm doing that and start to stand in the hallway with their doors open and the mouths closed up tight like they're sealing what they want to say to me inside it. And they're starting to pile up like that, five or so kids with their doors open, hanging halfway outside their doors and looking at me and looking at each other.

Finally when one of them starts to say something to me I dart out, back into the stairwell, and I go up a stairwell and I stop on that floor and I start again, this time skipping a room every now and then and giving myself some time between each knock so that—

There he is. The little fuckface. He's right there, I can see him behind this girl who just answered her door, he's eating a bag of Doritos with cheese on his fingers and a video game controller in his lap like he owns the world, and his insulated coat wrapped up at his

feet.

"I'm sorry, can I help you?" the girl says. She's got sparkling cheeks, like sprinkled with something.

I tell her let me talk to her friend.

"Emanuel, you know this guy?"

"What guy?" the kid says and I hide behind the door a little so he doesn't scoot off right away.

"This guy at the door. Come over."

The kid conies up to the door and I'm still a bit hidden so he can't see.

"I didn't have a gun," I say.

"What?" he asks, stepping out of the room some so he can look at me.

"In the coat. I didn't have one."

The cops come to get me and keep me this time, dragging me out the place with my feet pulling at the floor to stop them.

But something happens at the station, where they're talking about me to someone else. It's one of those nuts from Sal's place. He's got that serious look on his face. He comes to talk to me.

"You're going to spend at least a night here, but we think we can get you to a Detox."

A Detox? You're kidding me I tell him.

"I'm not."

But I know that's not right. I can only go if I want to I tell him. They didn't find anything on me.

"Look. You're detoxing already. Just let us have you. There's an empty bed for you and we

can stop the shaking."

I tell him I'm not shaking.

"Just fill this out. We can help you. At least look at it logically. You can't get anything to stop the shaking; you can't sleep. We can help you with that. You probably haven't eaten in a while—

"

I make like I'm going to fill out the sheet then when he gives it to me I tear it up. Fuck you, I say. Fuck you, I say again. You have no idea, I say. You have no idea what it is like.

But when I'm in my cell I'm shaking so bad the guy in there starts calling and they take me somewhere anyways. I can't move my hands but when I concentrate on them and try to they shoot up and go crazy and my fingers are going crazy and feel like there is something biting me all over from the inside. There's nothing wrong, I think. I'm just out, I think. I just need to find that kid.

They give me something somewhere along the line and it is like I am in another world that is soft like a pillow and there are not people but fuzzy shapes that don't talk but hum at me like gentle, soft birds. They stick me with another thing and another until it is like hundreds of dull points rubbing me all over. Sleep.

"No Thanks'

I'm sick again, today. I can feel it rumbling deep in my body and I hurt all over. I don't call in anymore; the assholes at work can figure it out. Let them paint the dorm walls without me.

I do wake up early though and the sunlight squeezes itself through the cracks in my blinds and through the cracks in my long, purple eyelashes. I get up and draw the blinds. I can see my university from the apartment, the dorms out of focus in the distance. I blink at the light and stretch.

I puff on three or four cigarettes for breakfast, on the porch. I blow out a little bit of smoke still scraping at the bottom of my throat. I think about the Moon Pie boxes in the pantry and how I don't ever want to eat one of them again after last night even though I know I'm going to. My name is Ronnette. But my ex-girlfriend's name was Alex. She had long dark red hair that reminded me of an animal's tail. She was a bitch. Before her, I'd only touched one other girl in those places. The first one's name was Kelly, a bigger girl than me with rolls of fat that I held in my hands for a moment in her dark dorm room. There was just a bit of faint greenish light, from the computer on her desk, to illuminate her little eyes rolling around on her chubby cheeks.

"Now, me. Put your hands here Hun," she said. But her voice was embarrassing and loud against the near blank whirr of the computer.

"I'm sorry. I mean—I never—"

"It's okay Girly. Mmhm. Yeah. Deeper. Wait. Hold on." She held my hand.

"I'm sorry," I gasped.

"Don't apologize so much."

I moved back, confused at the feeling of her. She shook her head hi the dollop of light. She grabbed my body and held it there.

She was only there with me that one bizarre and tickling moment and then we were more like awkward friends after that happened.

Alex was nothing like that. We didn't kiss or hold each other hardly ever. Sometimes I reached out for her at night but was pushed away.

After living with her for a long time that way, I became very angry all the time. Strand by strand, I wanted to pull out her coarse red hair. One night she sat up in bed and kept pushing until I tripped out of the bed. From then on I slept on the couch.

I took my problems with Alex out on co-workers. I enjoyed fussing at them and then watching ugly and perplexed expressions creep over them. I liked being around people, if only to bounce my most awkward feelings off them.

It was one of those jobs where you catch some hassle from the higher-ups anyways. I was in a position of some power over the other painters. It was nice.

Our job was to paint the university's dorms wherever was needed while students were gone during the summer. It paid okay, ruined most of your clothes though. By the end of the summer my jeans looked like a child's finger painting.

I liked keeping the other painters on their toes with the unexpected. Big fuck-ups I let slide, but at the wrong moment, some little mistake would show up and I'd let them have it.

Like when that douche Hunter painted a Wu-Tang symbol on the wall and the snitch Johnny told me about it. Then I just shrugged. But if someone left a paint lid in another hallway I freaked.

Or like one day James turned off the weathered, paint littered boom box we dragged everywhere with us. It was right in the middle of this Flogging Molly CD that had been absolutely blaring. I told him he was being seriously prejudice against the Irish and could get fired for plenty less. He got scared and has treated me real nice ever since. I like him okay. Johnny on the other hand, not so much.

He went to the bathroom one time and—while he was away—James peed in his Nalgine. I didn't say shit.

We waited for him to sip it all day, giggling and making obvious faces. But he just put it in his book bag and didn't pull it out again. Weird. Like he knew or something.

He was an odd kid, Johnny. I saw him outside of work only once. On my twenty-first birthday, Jenny was parting my back while I spat out beer and pizza. We watched it slide down the sidewalk. We were at a stoplight, the car door swung open. Angie was the one driving. When I was done, I wiped my lips and chin and looked up. There the fuckface was. He had a small beagle on a leash. Walking his puppy downtown at threeish in the morning. Weird, right?

Then Jenny saw I was done, tugged me back in the car and swung the door shut. The light had been green at that point. The car lurched on with Angie fussing back at me.

I told them about Johnny and his pup the next day. They didn't believe the story though. Gave me the old, "It was late Honey. You were trashed. You didn't really see that." I didn't insist.

Few days later, I come back to work—finally. I'm relatively unconcerned about the time I've missed until I see the note on the sign-in-sheet. *Ronnette, See me in the office.*

I go in. He doesn't waste a whole lot of time telling me I'm fired.

"You can finish out the week—with full pay—if you want."

"No fucking thanks." I swing my purse around as I head out.

"Excuse me. What did you expect? You were in charge. Did you think you could just not show up?"

I'm already gone though.

I still have Kelly's number. I call her tonight for the first time in almost a year, telling her about the boss. I'm crying a little and I make it sound *good*. "Do you want me to come over?"

I cringe at the thought of her fatty rolls.

"No thanks Hun," I say.

Except that I'm still crying when I get in the bed. I think it's just because I was pretending so good to Kelly that I can't tell myself anymore. But whatever the case is, I can't sleep and I keep thinking about her face and what it might have looked like when she asked me to come over. Was it pity there? Or was it like that gentle, knowing look your mom gives you that makes it okay if she feels sorry for you?

I make it through the night. Only the next night I can't sleep again and when I do fall asleep, I wake up sniffling, and my sheets feel alien to me. This is not my bed, I think. This is not my *life*.

A few more nights like that and finally I end up driving to her place, knocking on the door. It's a little late and no one answers. But she doesn't usually lock her door, or at least not with a big lock, like a latch. So I slide a credit card in the crack and gently push the door in.

I can hear her breathing. It's a beautiful thing: a delicate evidence of life. I think I even see the rising and falling shadow of her chest.

I tip-toe up to the bed. Slowly, I creep in and begin to tuck my arms over her. She doesn't feel so fat.

But her body's all wrong. She smells like an amalgam of thick hair and heat. She smells like cheese or some experiment gone wrong in the microwave. I feel the bed moving and the lights come on.

She pops up on the other side of the bed. "What the fuck! What the fuck!"

I look down and there is a stranger waking up beneath my arms, a naked man sprouting with thick, wiry hair and unfamiliar smells.

'Sign"

We are in *the mall*, where there are people, which is important for my punishment. My dad's holding my hand hard. I wear my sign. I watch the floor. I can see the dust rising from it as I bring my feet from it. With my head hanging, I can feel the dust brush my nose and run up through it. I hold my breath and swallow it. Inside me, it becomes mud. I gulp it, change it, and forget about it and straighten my sign. My sign says what I did. I hit my sister because she was laughing at me. I hate my sister. Do the people who read my sign hate me like I hate my sister? I don't want to see them, and I watch the floor. They don't like me, but my dad and my mom like me. I like my dad, but I don't like it when my dad looks at me, and stares so hard it hurts my head to look at him, it makes my head ache, even my body like when I can't go to school and my mom gets me the bottle that rattles and I have to swallow them with water, feeling them go down my throat.

Good job swallowing them Honey. They're big aren't they?

I can feel them in my throat...

They'll make you feel much better. Go on to sleep now. Go on.

Then I climb into my bed. It's so much bigger than me that I can just wrap it around me. I can lay and be inside of it and be safe. I like it there, in my bed. I like it, like my dad or my mom.

There, I dream.

Of things that I want to. Sometimes, in my dream, if I don't like how something is happening, it changes. One time in my dream there was my dad, looking at me mad, and I thought, I wish he wasn't doing that, and suddenly, it stopped happening.

I'm walking, with the floor moving under my feet where I watch it like the yellow lines that run outside the window of the car. I don't like my sister, if it wasn't for her I would not be here. I lift my head to say something to my dad, but his face hurts my body to look at. I say it anyway though, without looking.

Dad?

What?

Can we go yet?

No.

I look away from him, when before I can watch dust, I see a passing person's face. His skin runs yellow like mustard. He is tall and old, he wears clothes larger than him that hang from his body.

Where is Mom?

She's at home.

Why isn't she here?

Because this is for you.

Why are you here?

Because I'm here for you.

Me and my sister do like to play with each other sometimes. But it usually ends bad. Because she hates me. And I hate her. I love my dad.

We go in a store lying along the walls. Then my dad sets me aside a tall rack of things. He tells me to wait here, then leaves. I look at the rack. It has books on it. I pick one with an orange spine, fold back the covers and flip the pages under my fingers, holding the spine tightly in one hand. There are words everywhere. The pages are covered in words, littered in words. There are words all over. I can slide into the words, the flipping pages, the words are runny like my nose when I'm sick and have to swallow heavy round things, shaped like my Christmas jelly beans. But there are so many of the words that they are hypnotizing. They make me feel blank. They make me change the way I am thinking. They make. They.

Hey Kid!

I turn around and find the yellow man standing straight in his droopy clothes. I am not afraid of him. I think of the nighttime, the heavy, safe covers of my bed, I wait too long not to say something. I look for something I'm supposed to say. I say, Yes Sir?

Hey Kid—where's your dad?

What?

Why are you wearing that sign?

I'm being punished.

Where's your dad?

What?

Your father, your pops, you know whatever.

Oh my dad. He went to go do something but now he's back, there, behind—

What the ruck are you doing here? says my dad.

The man walks away and my dad looks at him as he passes and my dad grabs my hand again and drags me out of the store. In his other hand is a new bag, that wasn't there before. It hangs heavy with something. I don't want to walk anymore. My feet are tired and that's from standing by the rack of books where I was waiting. Now I can't walk, and my feet are running along the floor as my dad pulls my hand, and my sign is gone loose around my neck and it's bumping my chest and my head.

The people can look at me now. I don't care. I just want to leave. But what if they're not even watching me? I pick up my head and then give up and then I decide not to care.

My mom loves me. She told me so a million nights when she tucked me in after I had swallowed the big things that I can feel going down my throat. When we sit at the dinner table sometimes she tells me so.

Once we all sat at the dinner table and she looked at my dad and she told him that she loved him. It was strange the way she told him, different than how she said it to me at night when she tucked me in and I felt them rattling in my throat and traveling deeper and deeper inside me. When she told my dad that, it was more like she wanted to say it to make sure that it was real at all. He looked back at her and said nothing, but his face got like it was when he would later put the sign on me.

She looked back at him all empty like and I just chewed my food. They kept looking at each other and I just chewed. Once I looked at my sister across the table but she looked away. It was before I totally hated her, when this thing had happened.

When my dad put the sign on me, he wouldn't look at me either. I remember when he was writing on the sign and I asked him what it said. It

says what you did, he said.

My sister doesn't like me: she was eating my color-filled bag of jelly beans that had once been shining under the Christmas tree, that I had stuffed under my pillow, eating a single bean a night, each time a different color. It lasted for many nights. Then I was slapping the beans from her hands and hearing them bouncing, and I pushed her, and the floor was all over with the colorful beans and I didn't care but heard them bouncing. She was on the floor and I slid on top of her and I hit her and hit her. Her face was puffy with crying. My dad walked hi and stood over us for a while. For some time, while I hit her, it was dark because his shadow was over us. Then my hands hurt so bad I dropped them to the sides of me and just sat there, on top of my sister, feeling the stiff fur of the carpet on my dropped hands. I didn't look at my dad. I just kept watch over her puffy, crying face. I sat on top of her body, hearing her make noise, and my hands on the floor.

You done yet Son?

No.

You're not done yet Son? Because—to me—it looks like you can't even lift your arms.

No!

I was trying to lift my arms, but my dad had lifted me up in his hands and was carrying me away and I was screaming, No no no. Not because of what he was going to do to me, well maybe yes because of that, but I think it was because I wanted to answer his question to where he could hear me.

My dad takes me to the corner of the mall where there are benches and really old people sitting looking like they have come here to die. He sits me hard in a bench.

You are almost done. Your suffering is almost over Son. You've done well. You've proven yourself. You've made up for hurting your little sister. It's okay now. Now just wait here while I get one more thing.

Wait, wait Dad.

Yes Son?

Do you love me?

Of course I do, of course, of course.

He hugs me.

"Mya's Roommate Moves Out"

My roommate is here. She keeps shoving drinks at me. I don't really want to drink, but I drink them anyways and limp to the pill cabinet. I don't want to be here, I think, pushing them down my mouth, crunching, struggling, empty little beige bottles rattle on the floor. They taste like dust pasted together. I drown them in vodka.

"What were you just doing in the bathroom?"

"Nothing..."

I spit, belligerent, and my chin dips and I can feel my whole head bob in the air in unintentional nod, my tongue slides all over my mouth, my head goes blank, and streaks of long black silence halt my thought.

I wake up in the bathroom. My mouth tastes like throw up. I can't move. I try to move but fall back asleep. In the black, I remember that I exist, then feel the memory building into an image of my limp body not responding to the shakes sent down it by my roommate, clutching my bare shoulders. I realize this image is what is actually happening. I try to talk, but instead of words throw up bubbles in my throat and I spray it on her chest. It dribbles on her frown. Then my head falls back and I can't see. I can't move, I am dangling in my roommate's hands. I try to lift my right hand to wipe my wet mouth and a finger trembles in a little seizure of response.

I go away again, awake for one last moment as I become aware that I am uncomfortably unable to wipe myself.

I am aware that I am sleeping for a long time. In my sleep, I can form cohesive thoughts that last for a little while. I begin to think I am dead. I was right! I think. There is no God! I think. Then I realize I shouldn't be able to think if I'm dead. Suddenly I am awake, my eyes still closed. My eyelids are heavy and I do not really want to make the effort to open them. But after a while they sort of come open. I am surrounded by the smell of my own vomit.

I feel like all my senses are a burden I am carrying on my back. It is a pain to do anything. And my head hurts. I lift my leg, grab my toes in my fingers and rub the slick bottom of my foot; my fingers slip on vomit. I look around me. The roommate is gone. There is no sign of her here. The vomit is mostly on the floor. I put my arms inside my large, floppy shirt and push it off.

I head into the shower, curling up with my butt to the tile floor. I turn the water to hot. The chunks on my body slide off, steaming. The steam spreads all around me like a fog. I sit feeling the hard floor on my butt, thinking, though afterwards I have to admit I cannot remember anything I was thinking about.

In the cafeteria, Eric sits down beside me. I am conscious of his presence and know it is him without looking up from my tuna sandwich. "Hey Kid," he calls to me.

"Yeah."

"Hey. What'd you do this weekend?"

"Not much. Puked all over my room."

"You should cut down."

"She keeps shoving drinks at me," I explained.

"You mean Alex?"

"Yeah."

"She does trip sometimes. Hey."

"Yeah."

"You want some weed."

"No."

"I'll give you some."

"Why?"

"You look down. Come here Sweetness." I scoot up to him and feel him, he's hot and smelly and moist, he drops a blunt in my lap. I paw it into the left pocket of my shorts. I can feel it resting there beneath my wallet. I'm sweating off the heat from his body. I scoot back.

"Eric. This is a shit load."

"You need at *least* that much."

"Thanks." I get up and set my tray away and hold the door open for Eric without looking back at him. "You didn't finish your meal," I say.

"What?"

"Your meal. You didn't finish."

"Oh. That. I wasn't hungry. So let's smoke."

"I have work to do."

"Call me when you're done."

"Will do."

"Bye Mya."

"Bye."

I shut the door behind me and slip out of my flip-flops. My roommate is still not home. Probably at the gym. I scrub the floor with all of the cleaner I can find in the room and empty a thing of Popuri into the air. The air is thick with chemicals, and it makes me feel faint to breathe it. It sits thick in my nostrils. I scrub some more. Done, I roll the blunt from my pocket and watch it slide back and forth in my curled palm. I am about to throw it to the trash when I remember how smooth it feels to be high. I check my roommate's desk for a lighter.

I head to the bathroom and shut the door and fill the crack with a towel. I sit on the toilet and hold the blunt in my lips, lighting it. It burns easily. Smoke builds all inside me and turns and turns. I inhale, breathing deep. Suddenly, it touches a part of my throat, tugging. I cough up the smoke and spit the blunt halfway across the bathroom. It tumbles, spreading sparks. I stand up. I stomp the sparks out with the callused heel of my foot. I pick up the blunt, still lit, and watch it closely, I squeeze it between my lips and breathe in more. Then I cough it all up again. I slide against the wall, my body heavy with smoke. I spit on the floor. I flick the blunt, not half gone, to the trash. I look at myself in the mirror.

I still don't want this; I would take pills if I had them.

I lumber my way from the bathroom. I make it to my bed. I sleep. And vaguely dream.

I dream I'm standing in a huge, open grassy space, like a landscape. But I can't move outside of a small invisible box, about the size of my body. Eric and Alex are there but they can both move all around the plains. They're mocking me, making faces and spitting. I'm naked and I keep trying to cover myself. They just laugh. I choke trying to talk to them. I nearly forget that I am having the dream and then I wake up.

"Morning," Alex says, her sarcastic stoic stare that doesn't stare at me but lets me know it's

there. I sit up in my bed, my back straight and tingling. She is carrying her computer. The door is open and there is a stack beside it.

"What's going on?" I ask.

"Moving."

"You didn't tell me."

As if to respond, she picks up that large desk in the corner of the room, all by herself this attractive little white girl in spandex, fresh sweat on her sleek body, her long hazel hair shaking and shining as she does it, she tilts back and forth, banging the door as she leaves, barely fitting in there, she jerks her way up and down and back and forth, tearing through her way with that desk that would always just sit big and fat in the corner of the room, just daring us little girls to go near it.

It seemed to moan at us.

"Shadows"

She doesn't even knock, comes right in. It's almost midnight and I could be sleeping. The nerve.

Allow me my illusion. Is it so hard to be fooled?

She recoils at my thoughts.

It is the only question I ever wanted an answer to, the only shadow that I mind. "Where did you go?" I ask.

She never answers, staring back so blankly it pierces my thoughts.

I wait for her to leave. Finally—and I mean hours later—she does. Out the window, the house has just one floor. I wonder if she's cold outside—shoeless, with the moist grass poking her toes. I close my eyes, roll over, and wait for the less realistic dreams.

The alarm clock that I hate pounds me into wakefulness with its metallic buzz and I am conscious of time again. I feel the ticking and humming that is in everything, pressing us all forward to whatever is there for us. I can't wait to never hear that stupid alarm clock again.

After all, it's nothing original. Taking control through destruction of your own body is quite prominent in the family. I am told that after I was born, my mother hung herself. My father (and more than a few of my uncles) drank themselves in and out of treatment centers until they

stumbled through the small portion left of their lives dressed in their ratty, sloppy yellow flesh.

And there's always her to complain about.

The shower is hot and almost painful. The water spitefully eats away at my skin. It feels like it is going to melt off.

"Mornin' kid," Uncle Robert says before I am all the way down the stairs.

"Morning," I say.

"Made you grits."

"Thanks." I sit down in front of the table and watch the plate that swims with gritty gray mush, the corner of a piece of margarine jutting out, like a sinking ship's tail peeking out of the ocean at the world.

"Good grits?" Robert says.

"Yeah," I say. I mash the margarine deeper into the sand and watch it turn from white to yellow. Grits slip down my lips as if trying to escape. "What time is it?"

"Sev—"

"No don't tell me. Just is it time to go."

"Willbeintwen—"

"No just if it's not tell me when it is."

Robert turns around. I watch the shadows playing with each other as they fall over his bald head.

A little bit later: "Time to go kid," he says but he is late because I have already felt it and am walking to the door. As I open the door it draws a bumpy shadow over my tennis shoes. I can trace the numb gray lines over my laces and the indents drawing checks and patterns.

I twist the keys in my hand. I can't remember something, reaching for it in my head. "Am I taking her today?" I ask.

"Whole first week," Robert calls as the door falls into its place behind me blocking him out.

"Hey kid," I tell her. I pop the trunk for her; it makes a clicking, release sound like something sliding out of place. I hear rustling around as she puts her book bag in. Then she's sitting next to me and she's slamming her door shut. I can feel her presence, soft and comfortable and silent. I wonder if her brain is as loud as mine.

"Ready for school?" I know she won't say anything back.

But I hear the hum of something under my breath and under her breath. I hear something telling me what to do next. I can measure everything with it.

I remove my foot from the gas pedal and we glide for a swift and powerful moment. We are coming closer to downtown and the cemetery is on our right. It's an old, old cemetery and I don't know anybody there, but I can still feel it.

Maybe when I die I will be buried there, tucked in a corner, or under a tree. I wouldn't want my grave to be in anyone's way.

I push the car forward, tapping the brake and the gas back and forth on the slow traffic filled street full of miserable morning people going to jobs and going to school. I can feel the sleepy irritation coming off the cars down the street as though it is some kind of steam, unpleasant and itchy.

"What time is—"

She turns her head to face me but her blank expression does not change, a tattoo on her face.

"I mean ... didn't mean that. I don't know; I don't want to know what time it is." I don't say anything for a while but we can both hear me still thinking. "Do you have a watch?" I ask her.

She shakes her head, the tattoo sliding from left to right.

"O.K." I say.

The car slides into a red light and everything stops moving. I can feel the cars all jump forward a tad when they break.

I watch the light and wait for it to turn green. I feel it watching me back—it wants me to look away. I don't want to look away and I stare it down until it turns green. But it doesn't feel like a victory.

"Move it kid!" He rolls down his window just to say that to me. It was rolled up with the light dancing all over it trying to squeeze inside his car, trying to stow itself away.

I dip my head down and hope he didn't see my face, me, the face of an absolute idiot lost in a world of geniuses. I push my car forward.

"You're right. You're not very smart," she says to me. I blow air through my nose and almost chuckle but I stop myself because I really don't want to.

"Now you fucking have something to say, huh."

She looks down, dipping her head like I did only with dignity and for her own reasons.

I flip the CD player on in the car and turn the music up hi case she decides to talk again. Some dumb punk rock I keep pretending to like to make Robert angry blasts through the speakers. I can feel the drums and the guitar and all the whiny voice moan-singing. The moan-singing: "Don't wake me 'cause I'm jaded. Don't wake me 'cause you're swimming hi my head. Don't wake me.

In my head. Yeah-ah. Yeah."

Once I wrote a story about myself. Robert read it. He asked me who the character was and I said no one.

I have tried writing many other times. I gave a poem to my English teacher one time and she talked to me after class—her intervention. Or either I just fail all together. I tried to write a story about Carrie one time but the words fell away every time I pulled them up; I felt like I was holding too much weight while I was writing and I wasn't strong enough.

Beth opens her door and gets out. "Have a good day kid," I say. I watch her walk across the school yard to the building, her shadow sprouting spiky edges and curves bent at the hands of the chemical green grass.

I don't have to be here for another hour. I'm a senior and don't have a first period. I pull out of the high school parking lot. Most of the cars in it are bright, noticeable colors sparkling under the sun like daytime stars coming down everywhere. Light, withering morning shadows beneath them. With no teenagers in them, no bass pounding the rearview mirrors I can see through them and I see that behind the superficiality there is meaning in everything.

"Hey!" Horn ripping through my thoughts. Windows rolled down, I can hear someone shouting at me again. "Wake up! Let's go!" I catch the glimmer of a teenage face in one of those fancy cars. A prickly brown beard half plastered across his face, a product of laziness. I wonder where he is going. Maybe he is skipping school or just dropping someone off. "Come on man!" he shouts again.

I press the gas gently and move on. My stomach is uncomfortably bare. I know everything, and I'm cracking. I think about things I know aren't true but I still think them. Sometimes—in

my bed at night—they are all I have.

The little diner I go to is compact, consisting of a couple stools and a bar and maybe two tables. I feel like I am inside of a mime's invisible box.

The stool is cold. But the sausage biscuit is warm, comfortably filling the corners of my mouth, right and full and good. I eat it maybe too fast, it burns the roof of my mouth. "Hey!" A voice, I may have heard it before. "Hey dude!" I turn and look in its direction seeing a lazy beard. "Hey, I saw you a minute ago, weren't you like sleeping while you were driving your car or something. You looked blitzed."

"I wish I was," I say.

"Yeah. You skipping, or you a senior?"

"Senior. Yourself?"

"Skipping. Going to get wasted after this, at my friend's house. Who are you? I never seen you before."

"Dexter. You?"

"Jessie."

"No you don't!"

There is an empty space here, for her and for him and for what happened and for all the things I can think about inside of that empty space.

"Chill the ruck out!"

I pull myself back. "Sorry," I say.

"Get the fuck off me!"

His friends (there are two of them, they had apparently been sitting on some stools on the

other side of the place) come up behind him, hovering over me and looking condescending. They breathe heavy with adrenaline and I can hear them chanting:

"Wanna fight man, you wann—"

"I'm sorry," I say. "Sorry. I didn't mean—"

"We'll—"

"Nah," Jessie says. "Let's go—"

A lady behind the bar emerges from the kitchen and says firmly to us, "Why don't all of you little bastards just get out of here." She has gray hair, a wrinkly face that wants to be young and long, red fingernails.

"You're lucky," his friends say as their clumsy but loud voices fade away.

"Sorry Jessie!" I call out to them, one last surrender.

I hear Lazy Beard whisper to one of his friends, "He keeps calling me Jessie. That dude is nuts."

Then the lady kicks me out of her diner too and I sit in my car in her parking lot, staring at the huge, bulky brick building across the street. It holds enough classrooms to imprison over a thousand children for seven hours a day. Out of those thousand and out of all those classrooms and all those hours I stand alone, wandering somewhere in there, scrambling around and trying to find my place, not sure if it exists at all.

Then I feel the air sucking itself through my mouth and everything goes inside but won't come out. Everything is going inside me and draining all my feelings away and I want to die. I will never see her again—other than at the beginning of the night.

The door to my car clicks open under the command of my hand. I pull the keys out of the

ignition and put them in my pocket. I step out of the car, shove the door closed and listen to its rattling sound.

Maybe I should not think about her so much. Maybe she doesn't deserve that. I don't think she would be thinking about me right now if I had been the one.

I walk back into the diner, the door swinging behind me. Everyone is staring at me; they were all here before. The lady behind the bar stares at me.

"Go to school Kid," she says.

"Need to use the restroom," I mumble, my voice gurgling in the warm saliva in my throat.

"Then you're not coming back anymore."

"Yeah," I say. I walk over to one of the two tables (this one is empty) and with my back to everyone in the diner unroll a napkin, the utensils inside of it rolling out. I pick up one funny looking knife with a serrated edge, slip it in my pocket.

"That ain't the bathroom," the lady says. I quickly roll the napkin back up. I turn around and everyone is still watching me.

"I'm sorry Mam," I say. I don't mean it. I hate this lady. I hope she dies.

"Get out of here kid," she says. Spittle drips in beads from her raspy, wiry lips. They are so dry skin is hanging from them.

"I need to use the restroom Lady," I say, not realizing I called her lady until afterwards when it's too late.

"Get out," she says.

"I'm never coming back after I use your restroom." I faintly hear her voice fading behind me as I walk in quick, instant steps into her restroom on the other side of the room. I shut the door

behind me and lock it; it's one of those little, one-toilet restrooms with the air so thick you can feel it licking your skin.

I could always feel the air when I was around her. It was this presence that was just her and when you met her you could feel her body in the air. Her sweet, blond hair positively flowed. But then I could barely feel her at all towards the end. She dissolved into her own aura.

I pull the knife out of my pocket and its rough edges roll over my thumb nicking tough skin and still peeling the skin, painlessly and without any raw red showing under. I hold the knife in my hand and toss it around in my palm watching it bounce off the sides of my palm and feeling its wooden handle. The handle feels old and rotten. Could now be the last moment? I've been counting the days, the minutes. Time has been passing.

She was a good person. There were just things she did not understand. Like, for example, how much I loved her and what that had to do with the things she did to herself.

I grip the wooden handle tight, my fingers curling around it, gaining control of its motion and I let it swing back and forth, swimming in the air brilliantly. I let it fall on my wrist, resting its shaky swing, pressing it into my skin. It is vertical, parallel to the vein and not touching it. The vein looks up at me in a worried blue shade, sick and frustrated with me. I can almost hear it beg for its life.

Carrie. Her name was—

I let go of the knife and let it drop on the floor clanking just as the skin turns raw and red and a single bubble of blood appears in the spot on my wrist. I feel a scratchy, itchy, raw feeling.

"Hurry up in there. Need to be in school." Knocking on the door. I look down at the knife. Bending over, I put it in my pocket. I stuff my itching wrist in my pocket. I open the door.

"You stole something, didn't you?" croaks the ugly lady. She has removed herself from behind the bar and is now standing in front of me. There is a hairy mole hanging loosely from her chin, bouncing around, seemingly breathing with a life separate from hers. Her child waiting in a brown, pudgy cocoon. "Give it back. Give it back to me." She holds out her hand. I can see nicotine stains on her fingertips.

"I didn't take anything," I say.

"Give it back to me kid," she says. "Give it. I know you have the knife. Come on."

"Don't know what you're talking about."

"You don't need a sharp knife like that. Come on."

I reach in my pocket with my clean hand, which is awkward because I already have the bloody wrist stuffed in this pocket. I rub what might be blood or dirt off the knife with my thumb inside of my pocket. Then I pull it out.

"Should call me police. What could you have been about to do? Crazy kid. Need some help." She is saying none of it to me as she walks back to behind the bar and disappears into the kitchen. I watch her go and then stare after her until one of the people at a table shouts at me, "Would you get out of here!"

Back against the wall of the brick building that is our stupid high school, I feel the sweet odor of the marijuana smoke leaking into the air. It smells crispy and crumpled like disease. The soft cone shaped tip of the joint wedged between two of my fingers. I feel the blood rushing through them and the gentleness of the marijuana high flowing through my body and into my brain.

"Good weed Dude?" the lazy-bearded boy—whose name is *not* Jessie and who is *not* Jessie—asks.

"It's not bad," I say.

"Glad you like it."

"Yeah it's pretty good."

"I love this fucking stuff. I got it from this kid who was in—"

"It's okay. I don't know. Sorry about hitting you."

"Nah. It's cool. You've apologized like thirty times."

I sigh and watch the smoke flow out of my mouth in rhythm with my breath. "I don't know. I'm kind of crazy. Most people don't come near me. I don't know. I don't open up usually."

"Opening now."

"That's this talking man." I raise the joint and the sweet smoke swims through the air. "I don't talk. I don't do anything. I live my life and I don't do anything. I don't know."

"Yeah. Pass that stuff." He brings the joint to his lips and I watch the smoke vent out the sides of his mouth.

"So yeah," I say. "Yeah." Everything floating from my brain.

"Yeah yeah yeah"

Something hard on my head. It comes too suddenly to hurt. I lean to the brick and start to slide, dubious vokes swirling around me. The shadows of their owners are cast beside me on the brick, clumsy shadows that stretch as I continue to slide. "Get him Man. Get him. Fucking get him."

She is tapping her foot. Or is it just the ticking? Sounds are tricky. I wait under her. I wouldn't reach out or reach at all. But I can wait. I can wait all my life for nothing to happen.

"Where'd you go ... when you left?"

Of course, she stares. This time I am sort of O.K. with it. Or maybe I'm only used to it.

Cold hard firmness under my head feels uncomfortable. The back of my head is wet and it might be bleeding, don't know. I can feel the marijuana still strong and bouncing around inside of my brain, clouding my thoughts. I know I've been smoking but I don't know anything else. I roll over and push myself off the floor until I'm standing up. I sway against the wall and hold myself there so I won't move. My body hovers over the floor. I have a headache, of course. One that hurts so bad I almost can't feel it. I touch the back of my head where the wetness is then put my hand in front of my eyes. I'm not bleeding much.

Drag myself to the sink—there's one right in front of me—where I wash my face. It feels dirty. Then when I'm done I wash the back of my head where it hurts. I press a paper towel against it in case it's still bleeding, but I don't think it is. I feel sloppy on my feet and so I plop myself on the tile floor where I sit Indian style and let my head and thoughts sway until they steady themselves and their pattern feels normal again.

I survey my surroundings, finding myself in one of the restrooms in our school. I remember it all then and cringe at the embarrassing thought of what they had done to me. I wonder if they had any trouble getting me here. I weigh more than they do. They probably stood me up between them.

I stick my hands in my pockets and wiggle my fingers around. They are empty. My book bag

is gone too. None of this would have happened. But for her.

"And why would you be late today?"

I look down at the ground and I can feel everyone in the class, their eyes on me. I don't want to look back.

"Why are you late?" the teacher asks me again.

I look up from the floor. "I'm not that late," I say. "The bell just rung." I had been impressed that I had managed to accomplish all that had happened in only an hour and thirty minutes.

"Late is late," the teacher says. "Lunch detention."

"I'm a senior," I say. "I don't go to lunch."

"Does not matter," she says; she's almost laughing. "Be here. One-twenty."

I frown, painfully twisting my face. I sit down in a chair hi the back of the room. The announcements come on, pounding through the speakers. "All stand for the pledge of allegiance." I sloppily pull myself to my feet, limply and barely standing up. I gaze dispassionately across the room at the red and blue and white emblem on the wall, disrespectfully plucking my hands into my pockets as I listen to the eruption of voices around me reciting—without emotion—the pledge. I do not join their voices, but emptily stare at the flag hanging on the wall. It is wrinkled and points down to the ground like a crooked diagonal line. I don't feel anything when I listen to their voices, anything at all. And then it is over and I sit back down.

Her voice made me feel very alone sometimes, but at other times I felt like there was someone who was something to me. In any case, her voice always provoked more reaction, from inside of

me, than anyone else's voice.

The class is trigonometry and the teacher's voice rumbles on into a stream of numbers, drawing squiggly lines flowing up and down across the big, white board and I watch her blue marker move hi ripples like a wave and the emptiness of her and her words. I don't want to feel the things that this school makes me feel. I wish I could be away.

Sitting at a desk in the stupid trigonometry teacher's class for lunch detention. Surrender is not gentle to my already awkward nature. I did what she told me to.

"I hope that, in the future, you manage to get to class on time. Thank you Dexter. You may leave now."

I nod stiffly at the teacher and stand up and walk out of the room. The hallway is empty but has a sense of being deserted, a sense that it was full of life and movement. Now all has been stuffed and stored hi little boxes leaving the tumbleweeds to roll across the dusty tile floors.

I watch each duty tile pass under my tennis shoes and each one identical to the one before it.

My shadow traces over the indents hi between the tiles, slightly disfigured by then' square shape but shadows are never in proportion to us. They always slip and slide out of our original set design, abstract and beautiful hi then\* own way.

I come to the restroom in the far corner of the hallway. I let the door swing open and step into the strong stench with a presence seeming to hover over the air's shoulder. I walk to the stall in the far corner of the room and pull it behind me. I lock it. I throw myself into the comer of the stall and let my back run down the wall until I'm sitting on the wet tile floor.

Crouching against the wall, my legs curl into my hands. I stand up with a straightened back

and wipe my life away from my brow. I step out of the bathroom, moving to the parking lot where Robert's car sits, the sun glinting off of it, waiting for me, it's waiting for me to come and drive it away. It's waiting for me and we will escape together.

Is it any secret that someone like me should want to kill himself? I have known several people who killed themselves. A friend of mine whom I met in tenth grade, for example. He went home from school when day and swallowed his parents' sleeping pills. Another kid did something similar the next year. But instead of dying he was left paralyzed. I guess my mother does not actually count, because I never knew her. But still.

Her book bag is tight under her armpits, the straps squeezing her body and the book bag going only wherever her body goes, clinging closely to it. She looks at the ground but seems to know where we are walking.

"Good day at school Kid?"

She looks up from the ground for a second but does not bother to meet my eyes. Then she looks down again and we're both swaying back and forth, walking.

She is so quiet it scares me but I know she is quiet because she doesn't have to. She can hear most of the things I don't say.

I am going to kill myself today. Pills maybe (I could get enough oxycontin if my friend would call me back), or I could go out more dramatically—I don't know; I haven't decided yet. I'm going to get home and it is going to feel so good, and so full. I'm tired of feeling like I'm lacking something. I'm tired of everyone dying except for me.

I'm backing up out of the parking lot; the cars honking their horns and the teenagers squeezed through the last minutes of school attempting to shove themselves home.

I push the car away through the lines of teenage cars painted with decals and fancy lights and noisy engines, each one more superficial than the other and more like everything it is trying to be different or better than.

Then her and I are off of Market Street and on the road that will take us home. It is wide and spreads out over four fat lanes. The cars swim through it gracefully and gently. It is a much happier place than the cluttered Market Street, with ugly gray cemetery.

I feel my head beating with the stress of the day, I pound the glove compartment once with my fist and it plops open. I reach for the month old pack of cigarettes and the lighter inside, feeling something going on hi my belly and hi my brain, disgusting and relieving.

"Thought you quit," she says. It's always when I want her to shut up that she talks.

"I did," I say.

I don't know or care about anything else. I will find the end of it.

I will walk shamelessly into the nothing until I am covered by it, the bigger monster swallowing the smaller one. I *will* reach a place where I will no longer have to feel. I have no desire to find out who I am or what I am, having never known myself I'm content to keep it that way.

The lit cigarette bouncing up and down with my mouth, the smoke filling up the car. Robert will

smell the smoke and complain. He is going through one of his quitting phases.

Then I am coming up on the left lane, my turn signal blinking. I can see the car turning but it's like I don't care. But there the car is, I see it. It's a bright red Mitsubishi mirage taking a right, pointed at me as straight as if we were on a graph: two lines with the same equation. It's coming for me and I want to take the left so bad, I want to take the left. I don't want to see the car and I don't know how far it is from me or it doesn't matter. I don't care about the car. I don't care about me enough to care about her or her or anybody. I want to hit that stupid Mitsubishi right head on, kill me and her. If she doesn't want to die why doesn't she tell me why doesn't she talk she never talks. Talk! We are doomed, my last little piece of what I had.

I come to my senses as the car is close and I turn as hard as I can. The car is turning away too but it nails the trunk of my car and then we feel the impact. I think I hear her asking if this is really happening or not, but it's always hard to tell if she's talking or just thinking loudly to herself. The car is spinning around. The car is spinning and then I press the brake, feeling the spuming slow and slow until we have stopped. The tires rip the gravel. We are facing the opposite direction.

She leaps on me as much as she can, held back by the seatbelt, and shoves her face into mine and I can feel her skin, smooth and new. We are alive. We are unhurt.

"I Am In Arcadia"

I know only so much. I have little to offer. I do not see myself as a particularly intelligent person. At least not in a way that distinguishes me from everyone else. I have only three things entirely my own. Interest, eagerness, and obsessive-ness. These aren't original traits, but at least I can do them especially well.

I don't know how I'm going to document events where I was present as a wraith.

"It's just death," she explained big and fat. "It goes away."

"I feel sleepy," I said.

"It goes away."

What did she say to me or do to me that struck a chord in me that day. The sun all in my eye like a lens effective immediately. I want to go to sleep for a long time.

hi these short eighteen years—particularly this recent one feeling particularly short—I have gotten little sleep.

There were times when I had to convince myself to stay alive. And the only reason I was was her.

To Arcadia I came. I don't know how I got here. I seemed to just be here. Others have since told

me similar: that I seemed to fog up, to become vague and figurative. And then I was gone. And then I was in Arcadia.

Oh but I still live here. Out in the country where no one will come. Then it is true how they claim that you cannot leave. But the fact that I am writing this at all is against many of their ideas. I don't know. You could say me writing this is hope for my kind.

I appeared hi Arcadia—it was cold somewhere. They don't know the weather because they can't feel it. I could feel for a while when I first came and there I was—cold. It's hard to remember what things like cold are now.

I met her in a bar where I went to drink. There is not much else to do when you are homeless and cold and seventeen and where there is nearly no work and where there is no drinking age. I went there to get drunk and turned my pockets inside out and threw my lint on the counter and said I have no money and need something to drink for dear God's sake. And there she was, overhearing and she said for them to give me a drink. And it was all slapped down in a minute: me saying I needed to be in the wrong mind; her saying give it to him; a shot glass stuttering on the bar. I drank it and it bubbled up my nose. I have always hated alcohol. You can taste it every tune you drink something with it inside. Even beer. You know it is made to shut you up the minute you smell its bubbles. It is made to do something special to you.

The bartender put down enough after that for me to get all messed up. And then I turned to her, finally surveying this generous person. She had thick lips that were sick and shiny like a slickness, glossed all over. She had a round face that made me want to trust her and a begging look that was obviously feigning innocence. But it was such an entertaining act that you wanted to play along. I looked at her face and something was not right and I realized her eyes were

purple. I asked her the question.

"Sure I'm a virgin," she said as though compressing a chord that was her voice.

We talked until I decided to relieve her of the burden of her virginity. I began to point out that I had no place to stay and had only just got here, knowing no one and began to lean on that point. She looked me up and down and lost her innocence somewhere in between and told me that she would not fuck me as she was a virgin and had come here to stay a virgin many years ago and had been a virgin for these many years and had come here to discover herself. She explained to me that if I had come here looking for it I would not find much in the way of sexual relations. But if I wanted to stay with her where she lived I was welcome.

I took it as her way of saying she would give herself to me eventually if not tonight and agreed promptly to be equally promptly disappointed.

Her name—that I won't forget—was Dinah.

We came out of the bar and it was so night that I couldn't see. My body shook afraid where I couldn't see it. It felt like when you go numb. Then I felt it all trickling down inside me and I couldn't think straight or walk straight or stand straight and everything was unstraight and crooked. I fell drunk in emptiness. Stumbling. I felt her reach out and nearly gasped. I didn't know how but she clutched my hand. And I could feel hands then, they weren't all tickly, and it felt like when a mother has your hand. I looked up when she had my hand and I saw her eyes bright in the odd color. I saw them unflinching with what they had dared to do. She did not let go of my hand and did not let go of me and I walked loosely, guided firmly by her. I wondered how she could be a virgin and take care of me all at the same time. She nearly carried me to her house.

I remember that I couldn't know what it looked like on the outside. It was too dark to understand anything like that. But on the inside it was bright all over and itchy. It was humongous with stairs that twisted into the horizon line. Everything was plush, velvet. I laid myself down on one of the luxurious couches. I was drunk and confused. I itched. I scratched myself and she laughed at me.

"Getting a little too comfortable."

I wanted to explain to her that it was the opposite but did not feel like doing so as I would have to talk. So, having shaken off my shoes and socks, I allowed myself free into blackness. It came over me sudden.

The transformation back to this world was equally sudden. There on her couch where I woke up in nearly the same position the next day. I last remembered her laughing at me and blinking prettily, her eyelashes seeming to have grown.

I was still drunk because it was only about four hours later and I was pasty and itchy all over. I felt like I was made of a dried and peeling glue. I slumped across the carpet, so lush it sunk my feet, to a humongous kitchen that stretched out long and intimidating. The tile floor felt cold and alien on my feet. I went down into a chair that was gathered around a table with its brothers. I waited for something to happen until I heard her humming toward me. I turned around and there she was, dressed in a nightgown. I squinted to see through it lucklessly.

"Morning!" she said. "Did you sleep well?"

I did not answer.

"Hmm," she perked. Her long lips stuck. She produced something with a glinting needle that seemed to be nothing to me, just early day background. "Would you like your morning dose."

"Umm." Thinking as quickly as I could, I decided it could mean breakfast. "Yeah."

"Hold out your arm." She came forward with the needle.

I jumped out of my seat and scrambled backwards.

"What?" she demanded. "You can wait until after breakfast if you prefer."

"Whuh—what's going on." It was the only real thing I had said since last night and it felt good to speak again and to be able to interact with the world around me.

"Hey. Are you okay?" She put a cold sweet hand on my forehead and I wondered how she could be a virgin again. Everything about Arcadia was different.

"Are you crazy?"

"Have you ever been here before?" she asked me.

"Been where?"

"Where you are now."

"What?"

"Arcadia. Have you been to Arcadia?"

"Urn. No."

"That's where you are. Do you understand. Are you delirious?"

"No. I dunno."

"Okay." She sighed and sat down on a chair and crossed her legs and set the needle on the table like it had a consciousness and was offended that I had rejected it.

Dinah told me about life in Arcadia and about where I was. I did not understand anything. She said that was perfect. The way of life was as a series of dreams of disappearing and reappearing.

She explained to me and then gave me my first dose. She did it to herself first so I wouldn't be scared. I watched her thump her vein. Then the needle sunk in. I didn't watch when she did it to my arm. I only felt. Then all turned colors. I looked back at her and she glowed. I could see her thoughts running like bubbles over her head.

She smiled at me and her face curved. She was perfect, brilliant.

How does it feel? she asked me as if.

You are perfect. You are brilliant. I watched her glow.

I thought so, she said. Her smile was so bright. I reached and tried to kiss and to touch but she shoved me easily away. Then I was flopping on the floor somehow. Then I was throwing my hands in the air and begging for sex. I could feel myself, painfully present beneath my pants. She shook her finger and explained and glowed.

Her name was Dinah.

It happened as many times as I wanted to but was mandatory in the mornings. A strong hallucinatory sense of euphoria that eventually began to branch out and cover up my entire life and everything that I did. It was a beautifully intense drug, not at all physically addictive she explained. It was the entire reason why Arcadia existed. To live in a safe dream. It was a real illusion that could never go away. Arcadia was Arcadia was Arcadia. And I loved it.

I had no choice really. I woke up every morning and she injected me. I never asked questions and after a while I ceased to think them. I lived with her. I never touched her. I only went with her

everywhere like a little boy, like her tail that wagged behind her unsure of itself as an individual, but comfortable to be attached to the body. I tried to explain to myself that I knew what was going on and that I must have a handle on things. But all I really ever did was everything she told me to. Though she hardly asked me to do anything at all. I felt everything that I had been evaporating. I wondered about progress and slept less at night because I got my sleep wide awake in the sunlight.

There wasn't much to do in Arcadia. We went to the museum and appreciated the abstract paintings. We went to their version of movies, which were really just huge images flashed on and off to make us feel things. They had play pen like things—I call them that because they did not have a name for anything, only the names they had carried hi from their backgrounds—we splashed hi pools and slipped down winding slides. Everything seemed foolish and slick like her long lips. But when I looked in her purple eyes and thought I realized she was so much smarter than me and so much better than me. I just couldn't understand what was best for myself; I was not capable. And the colors kept me busy. They were all over.

There were other people of course, most everyone late teens or early twenties. The judge appeared to be the oldest, at least thirty. I think she had shortly cut black hair and a white face, and if she didn't it would look appropriate. But I stopped looking for what people looked like. Personalities became a vague fog that reached out over everything and I could barely distinguish one person from another. The only two I was sure about was myself and her. Sometimes not even then. After a while the only thing I had anymore was their eyes. The judge had brown. Price had brown. Zack had brown. Almost everyone had those kind of eyes I think. Except for her purple ones, darting about.

There were large houses separated by long roads, an urban area and rural one. The urban was sparsely populated. The rural was nearly desolate. I never went there until now.

There was a lot of walking.

We ran too. Running with Price waving his big humidifier in the air like a flag, I could see the green, flaked fragments floating, all tangled up in the smoke, I could see them but I did not feel them when they went in and slipped down my throat. They just felt clear like I was breathing a thick smooth slippery slickness. I could feel them go straight to my head, but that was nearly all I could feel them do and I followed Price across the countryside like a true follower, only near him for the gift that he gave me. He and the others were shouting and yelling and I just walked alongside them, dizzily spinning in it all. I could feel it so much that I could not feel a damn thing—

"I am the judge. And you are very new here."

I looked up at her, up up. She was so above me that it was like her chin was an inch from her forehead, like her face was a mountain, on her pedestal.

"I am here to talk to you, in private. I do it for everyone."

I gulped, afraid of her status.

"Do not be scared." Her voice boomed and she shivered and waved in my hazy view. "I am to decide what your life will be here. I will explain the manner of things to you."

She stepped down and I saw that she was not actually taller than me but my same height and I thought for a second until the second went away with the thought. She had her arm around me, guiding me into a cold, white room. She led me into to a chair where I sat down a shuttered and

wrapped my arms around me. I felt naked. I was helpless. She could have told me to jump off a building.

"You are in Arcadia."

"Really?" I said earnestly.

"You are in a place of pleasure, sublime nirvana, you will know forever. All you have to do is wander around and pick a place to live. Some of these houses are abandoned, some are not."

"Well see. I was living with my parents. What if I want to—"

"No one goes to the outside again."

"No one has ever left... ?"

"No one has ever left and no one has ever recorded anything about Arcadia. It is a secret. We come here when we are ready to come here and, in doing so, we cannot leave."

"I don't understand."

"No one 'finds' Arcadia. You chose to come here by past choices in your life and then you are here eventually after a gradual process."

"How is that possible?"

She sighed patiently as if to make me feel grateful, explaining. "Everyone is the same, you understand."

"No I do not."

"Everyone wants something, right? What do you want?"

"Um. I have no idea."

"But you do want something, correct?"

"I guess."

"Of course you do. Everybody wants something. They just don't know what it is. Even if they think they do they're probably wrong. Arcadia gives them something to want. In fulfilling that desire, they are never cursed with wanting again."

"Wanting is a curse?"

"Because it is never fulfilled. You see, everyone is the same. They all want, they all share that in common, and that's what their character boils down to is that one solitary fact: desire. But they fake individuality. Because the last thing they want is to discover they are all the same."

"Really?"

"Think about it. What's your greatest fear when you are a child. Others. You are afraid of everyone but yourself. Throughout your life, when you interact with other human beings you are scared to learn about them, you refuse to become closer to people, because they might be just like you."

"But then why would everyone be happy here?"

"Because we eliminated that fear by giving them what they want."

"But there's—there's no literature or individuality. There's not even any sex."

"Arcadia achieves perfection and innocence by omitting sex. Sex is the lack of ignorance. Sex is evil. Ignorance is bliss."

"I don't understand."

"Perfect," she said. "Be grateful." She ripped out my hand and then there was a fiery rod in her hand and I felt my hand tingling like something far away screaming. I looked in its direction and saw steam rising from it. Rolling across my hand in boiling letters *ET IN ARCADIA EGO*.

"What's a matter kid?" Price asked me. I shook my head.

I went to sleep and had dreams that night. Sometimes you just have so many dreams that you wake up with a headache. Some of it was that I had borrowed Price's humidifier and it sent me into a rumbling hallucinogenic sleep. I felt myself turning into everyone else. I felt one last burst of caring about anything but what I had. I began to drift and float and sift into the future like a light soft pillow ripped from beneath my head and like my head nailing something hard one last time, like one last moment of being awake before the long sleep. I saw what was going to happen to me. I saw an old friend sent searching for me, somehow managing to momentarily penetrate the border between outside and Arcadia. He came to tell me that my father was dead from a heart attack. He was only forty-five. I remember taking Dinah to the funeral with me, her, my last friend, the closest thing to an individual melted into this awful society. The sun was in my eyes that day. And then I left for the countryside, pushing and shoving aside mindless hoards of people that I had come to believe were another part of a huge body that was me. I ripped myself from that body and took the last torn bits of me and carried my life away as far away as I could get. Sometimes running my fingers across the scarred flesh that spelled out the past year.