

The Grotesque Roses

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The Grotesque Roses

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To Mom, Dad and Sam, for a million reasons you'll never even know

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Objects in Mirror Are

Neither of us knew what to do next. We stood paralyzed by the gross spectacle before us - unable to speak, to move, to react. I took a breath and glanced over my right shoulder, where Olivia's slight figure stood frozen in the doorway. Snakes of black hair obscured her face, but I could tell she was biting her lip. She furrowed her brow in a vain effort to keep tears out of her emerald eyes.

I followed her gaze back to the center of the apartment, where a drunk Swing Radford held our attention. He was pacing in the kitchen, behind the futon we used to mark the border between the two rooms. It wouldn't offer much protection if his attention became focused out of the kitchen.

"Oh shit. Fuckin' shit!" he yelled, realizing for the first time blood was running down his face from a gash beneath his sweaty brown hair. He stopped pacing and an unnerving calm settled on everyone's shoulders. Swing exhaled and I braced myself, instinctively.

Then he exploded.

Swing tore apart his Led Zeppelin shirt in a botched effort to remove it. It was stained with blood and Icarus clung in tatters around his neck. When he realized he was incapable of removing the shirt completely, he collapsed against the refrigerator and started sobbing. Controlled by an unseen string, he slowly reached his hand to the top of the fridge and grabbed a side mirror from a car with haphazard wires snaking out of one end.

I closed my eyes and pleaded with whoever was listening for the mirror to be from Swing's car. But as drunk as he was, there was a good chance it came from another vehicle. I opened my eyes, realizing these could be my last moments with my friend before he started wearing an orange jump suit and carrying soap on a rope.

With his back to us, Swing was working the mirror over and over in his hands, until he stopped - mesmerized by his own reflection. He murmured something inaudible to the bloodied face staring back at him.

Then, in slurred, deliberate speech: "Reverse. Why? Why do they put reverse right next to drive?" I turned toward Olivia and caught her perplexed expression. My eyes implored her to stay silent, to resist her instinctual urge to right a wrong.

She cleared her throat and I let out a defeated sigh. "Neutral is between reverse and drive."

Using his entire body, Swing whipped the side mirror at Olivia. It missed and erupted against the wall to the left of her head. She shielded her face with her arm and nothing penetrated. He bounded over the couch - fixated on Olivia - but tripped and

crashed terribly onto the ground, forcing the fight out. I made a move toward him, placing myself between the two. I'd be there to stem any aggression.

She moved past me. Her scent caressed me and for a moment I was caught, as if we had embraced. But Olivia had swept through me, nothing more.

She knelt by Swing, who was muttering something on his back. She took a Kleenex from her purse and wiped the blood from his nose and forehead, and whispered, "What happened, Swing? What did you do?" She reached down to remove his aviators, still miraculously perched on his bleeding face.

With sober precision, he grabbed her wrist and in a voice that belied lucidity replied, "I found a cure."

"For what?"

"For you," he laughed, and released her wrist. He motioned for her to help him up and she obliged, lifting him to the couch. Swing drew himself inward, sitting with his face buried in his hands. There was no laughing, no crying. The sounds of his heavy breathing and Olivia's sniffles sunk between the three of us. The explosion had passed and we only had to wait for the fallout. On cue, distant police sirens punctuated the quiet.

"What the hell did you do, man?" I asked. He didn't respond.

Olivia took a crack at it. "Did you hurt anyone?"

Swing chuckled in his hands. He lifted his head, reached into his pockets and pulled out his cigarettes and lighter. The way Swing usually lit cigarettes - it was an art form. His fluid, graceful gestures were replaced by clumsy jerking and shaking. Tonight, his movements were cacophonous, his symphony unrehearsed and awkward.

When he couldn't get the lighter to catch, Olivia pulled hers out and lit the Camel Light in his lips. He took a long drag.

And coughed. "I don't know that I hurt anyone, 'less parked cars count. There're might have been a guy in one, but then there might not of been. I ran off pretty fast." He leaned in and whispered, "And I've had a bit of the sauce."

"Where's your Jeep?" Olivia asked.

"Ass to ass with a Mustang, I think."

"Maybe Alexander can move it for you. Give him the keys and he could hide-"

He interrupted. "Car's still runnin'. I hit that fucker so hard in reverse that it slammed into the car beside it, but you can give it a shot, Al." He laughed, "gonna be a few people mad at me."

I stared at him. "You're laughing. You're actually laughing."

"You gotta see the humor in these situations, Al." He replied through a tight smirk.

"Stop fucking calling me Al!" I yelled. "If this is so goddamned humorous, what's the point in me cleaning it up? You can just explain the humor in 'these situations' to the cops. You're on your own, man."

Swing's smile faded, and he buried his head in Olivia's arms. The look she shot me was nothing short of venomous.

"Sorry." I mumbled.

I leaned against the wall next to the door, now angrier at how easily I melted for Olivia than at Swing's apparent apathy. I had no shield to deflect the pierce of her eyes, no rock to hide beneath.

I focused on the approaching sirens. The cops would be at the scene soon, but I couldn't bring myself to help Swing. I wasn't sure why. In the years I had known Swing, I had never denied him compassion, never let him see my resolve to be his shoulder to drape over break. But tonight, left with himself, it didn't take a genius to figure there'd be a spectacular collision. I had hoped something would shift in Swing if faced with his shadows, but in truth, the shift occurred in me. Something too distant to be a memory but too familiar to be forgotten forced its way to my lips, and I recited aloud, "What a grotesque thing a rose is."

Olivia's harsh gaze broke, and for a moment I thought she'd collapse into great, heaving sobs. But she stood, Swing fell, and she marched to the fridge and pulled a frosted bottle of dark rum out of the freezer.

"I need a drink," she declared, taking a long swallow. "Anyone want a drink?"

"I want a drink," Swing answered, sitting up.

"Shut up," and she took another swig, wiping a small hand across tight lips. The burn in her throat ignited something in her eyes, and she stared at me, maybe through me.

I could not have loved her anymore than I did at that moment. It *hurt*.

"Alexander? Drink?" she asked, holding the bottle out.

"Yeah. I need it."

"You OK?" He had asked, four years ago, standing over me as I lay on my back in the grass. I had been carrying a box up to my dorm and I tripped outside the entrance to the building. My feet had come out from under me, sending comic books, DVD's and video games into the air. There was a moment of complete silence, then the sound of laughter flooded to my ears - it seemed like every smoker in the dorm had been out there to witness my fall. One, however, stepped over to help.

His tall figure - he was a good head taller than me - blocked most of the light from the streetlight overhead and for a moment I could only make out a silhouette. "Here." He said, extending his hand. He helped me to my feet, and for the first time, I took in his appearance. He wore beat up Chuck Taylor's, with the tatters of his jeans spilling around his feet, and sported a tight, black, Rolling Stones' T-shirt. His green trucker cap - which read "Safety Begins Here-" was cocked to the right, an effort too meticulously executed to imply "haphazard." It caused his lengthy brown hair to radiate out from his head like a halo. The soft angles of his jaw hadn't been shaved in a few days, and an unlit cigarette clung to his lips. Most of his face was swallowed by the large, black aviators perched on his nose. But he extended his hand and took off the sunglasses, revealing stone-blue eyes.

"I'm Swing Radford." He explained with a lopsided grin.

I shook his hand, carefully. "Swing? Is that the name you mother gave you?"

Swing laughed. "That's the name I gave me." He put his glasses on and started gathering DVDs.

"I'm Alexander."

"Well, pleased to make your acquaintance, Al."

"Not Al, just Alexander." He stood, and for a moment I feared I had corrected the wrong person. "Sorry."

Another lopsided grin. "No, no. My mistake, Alexander - you stick to your guns. That's what makes a man a man." He produced a book of matches from his pocket, snatched one out and quickly struck it against the side of his shoe, using the flame to light his cigarette. He waved the match out vigorously, then flicked the little stick over my shoulder. He straightened his posture and lifted his chin, just slightly. I regarded him silently for a moment, wondering if he meant for me to applaud.

"Really?" I asked.

"What?" Swing's inflection jumped half an octave higher, distinctly defensive.

"That doesn't seem a bit theatrical to you?" I gestured toward the cigarette, "You've never heard of a lighter?"

"Everyone has lighters, Alexander. I just like a little style in my life." He picked up the box next to my feet. "Come on, let's get you moved in."

"Ok, Swing. Fair enough," I smirked.

Swing helped me unload the rest of the boxes from my car and carry them to my dorm room. As we made trips back and forth, it seemed as though he knew everyone in the building, saying hello to every Jennifer, Greg, Lisa, and Zach we passed. I suddenly became a little anxious that I wasn't making a friend so much as I was becoming part of Swing Radford's flock.

When we completed the last trip to my room, I asked him, "How do you know so many people?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "Don't know." He pulled out a flask. "I guess offerin' some of this helps. Want some?"

"No thanks, I don't really drink."

"Well that's a fucking shame." He paused, considering me for a moment. "Lemme guess, you're one of those puritanical types." When I didn't respond, he continued, "You can't handle your liquor? Know someone that drank themselves to death? Your old man a drunk?"

"Something like that." I was eager to avoid Swing Radford's particular brand of psychological analysis and get settled in my room. "Anyway, that seems like it could get you in trouble around here," I added, pointing to his flask.

Swing chuckled. "I ain't worried. Hell, when you've been in this dorm for two years, you start to realize no one really gives a damn." A silence gripped both of us and something I couldn't place faded from Swing's face. I began to understand why Swing Radford wore aviators. He took a hit from his flask and said, "Don't be a stranger." With that he gave my shoulder a hard squeeze and left.

I stood in my doorway, watching him work his way down the hall, offering his flask to other groups of freshmen, on their own for the first time. Little groups would form around him - both boys and girls - listening to the stories he'd punctuate with comic gestures and loud guffaws. But for every sip he offered, he'd take two. Swing Radford's charm came easy - maybe effortlessly - but I got the feeling he wasn't aware

of it. Anytime there was a lull in the conversation or a joke that didn't go over well he drank.

I got tired of observing him and went to the common room to watch TV, but found I wasn't the only one with that idea. The couch was full of people watching a movie I didn't recognize. As I turned to leave, a girl entered the room, wove her way through the co-eds, sat at a table and started reading. She was slender, with heavy brown hair kept tied in a loose ponytail that spilled down her neck like a silky waterfall. Her green eyes were vibrant as they danced from page to page - and they were big; eyes I felt sure I could swim in; probably drown in.

I had never been the confident type, able to approach women directly with some witty line, but I determined now was the perfect time to dispense with the "never-beens" and take a chance. The potential reward seemed well worth the risk. Hell, Swing Radford had made it look easy.

I shuddered slightly and walked over to her. She was reading *The Great Gatsby* and I exhaled, relieved.

"That's my absolute favorite book." I said, sitting down across the table.

She looked up, surprised. "Really? It's kinda ridiculous. I mean, this bootlegger falls in love with some ditzy blonde whose only hope for her daughter is that she's a 'beautiful fool?' What kind of shit is that?"

"Love, I guess."

"Yeah right," she snorted. She straightened her posture, cleared her throat and in her best professor voice began, "In my estimation, this novel is overly-dramatic. It's *maudlin*"

"Maudlin, eh?" I tried hard to suppress a goofy grin.

"Oh yeah," she replied. "I know you're totally impressed."

"You have no idea." I managed a tight smirk and extended my hand, "I'm Alexander."

Her long fingers found their way into mine, and I was struck by the tenderness of her touch. "Olivia. Nice to meet you."

"You know, this doesn't seem like the ideal place to read."

"Beats the hell out of trying to concentrate with my roommate's death metal blaring out of her computer." she replied.

"And let me guess - she keeps interrupting to you to show off her tattoos and nipple piercing?"

"Yeah, a real Daddy's girl, that one." She leaned in and I followed suit. "I could hook you up, if you want." she whispered, sending a tingling sensation down my neck. She sat back and I laughed nervously.

Swing stumbled in the room, and we both turned our attention to him. Spotting me, he made his way to where we sat.

"Alexander." He overemphasized the last syllables of my name. "Introduce me to your friend." His speech was slightly slurred.

"This is Olivia. Olivia, meet, uh...well, Swing Radford." She gave him an empty smile, but extended her hand. He took it and tried to kiss it, but she pulled it away before he could.

"Oh, sorry honey - didn't mean to offend. But when someone offers me something as lovely as your hand, I have an overwhelming urge to kiss it." She regarded his grin coolly and stood to leave.

She stopped next to him and said, "You didn't offend me, *honey*." The last word dripped with venom. "I just don't let strange men wearing sunglasses at night kiss any part of me. It's of a rule of mine." Her face was blank, but there was something wolfish in her eyes. "Plus, I don't want my hand smelling like cheap whiskey." She turned her attention to me. "It was nice meeting you, Alexander. I'll let you know what I think of the end of the book." Olivia walked out of the room, leaving me desperate for more.

Swing sat in her place and watched me watch her walk out of the room. "What a bitch." He said. It was my turn to catch him study her as she left. "I love it though - makes life more exciting."

"Love what?" But I'd already lost his attention. As quick as he'd found Olivia, he'd found another girl, who was hanging back a little too far from the group on the couch.

"Watch this." He walked to her, full of rehearsed bravado. I pictured him making the same approach with countless other girls, pictured the other girls pretending not to be flattered, as this girl was, pictured them all wrapping their thin fingers around his thick

wrist the same way she did, pulling him close to whisper scandalous indiscretions in his ear. I tried not to picture what they'd be doing inside of an hour.

He said something low and sultry, and she laughed. Swing ushered her out of the room, and they sauntered down the hallway, puncturing the quiet with flirtatious laughter.

I sat in the room for another hour, trying to follow the rest of the movie, but I was continually distracted by the thought of Olivia. I finally got up and walked down the girls' side of the hallway - empty and silent save for the sound of the movie in the common room. I searched for her name on the little tags the R. A. had made for the girls and finally found it - the last door on the right before the stairwell. I put my ear to the door and heard nothing - the roommate had obviously finished listening to death metal. I thought about knocking, but I was struck by a dim green light emanating from beneath the doorway. There was an eerie quality to the glow - I realized it was quiet on the hallway for the first time since I'd arrived - but I was drawn to it still. Remembering another fool overwhelmed by the idea of a woman, truly the only woman that existed for him, I stepped back, closed my eyes and stretched my arms out toward her door.

I thought I heard the door open, but didn't react in time. A harsh voice asked, "What the hell are you doing?"

My eyes snapped open, as large and whites as ever, as I met Olivia's roommate. "Uh, sorry, really," I stammered.

"Do you need something?" Whether her face was scrunched up from annoyance or unfortunate genetics, I couldn't be sure.

"Um, well...no." I turned on my heels and began to trot back to my room at the other side of the interminable hallway.

"Alexander?" Olivia's voice caught me from behind.

Turning around, I tried to will the redness out of my face, tried to act natural. "Oh, hey Olivia!" Too enthusiastic. Not even natural for a clown. "I didn't mean to bother you."

"You didn't bother me, I was just reading with my headphones on. Did you want something?"

"Uh, no. Not really," I answered, praying that a plausible excuse would work its way to my lips. Nothing came, as usual.

She arched an eyebrow. "Ok then. Goodnight, I guess." Olivia headed back for her room.

"Olivia!" I called.

"Yeah?" She asked, turning toward me.

"Do you want eat lunch in cafeteria with me tomorrow?"

She smiled, and my heart started beating again. "Sounds great. Come get me around one, ok? I like to sleep late when I can." She went back in her room and closed the door.

Grinning like an idiot, I started for my room. Before I got there, though, I noticed a door with no name on it slightly open. The unmistakable sound of vomiting came from within and I could see Swing's hat on the desk from the opening. Curious to get a new glimpse of the mysterious Swing Radford, I pushed into his room. It was dark, but I

could tell there were no posters, no decorations -just a single bed with one pillow and stark white sheets. There was no sign of a roommate, or even the girl from earlier.

He was on all fours over a small trash can, with no shirt, no glasses, nothing that seem to comprise Swing Radford. He stopped heaving and turned his head slightly.

"What the hell do you want?" Sweaty brown hair was plastered to his face.

"Are you OK?" I cringed at the stupidity of my own question.

"Oh yeah, I'm just peachy pal." He pulled back from the trashcan and collapsed on the floor, staring up at the ceiling. "Pull up a chair and enjoy the show."

I walked over to him and extended my hand. "Get up."

"Get out." He closed his eyes. "And go fuck yourself."

I bent down and swung his arm over my shoulder and stood, struggling to drag him up with me. He seemed impossibly heavy, but I couldn't in good conscience leave him on the cold tile. He grunted, but didn't say anything else. I finally got him into his bed and I put the sheet over him. I took the trashcan to the bathroom and emptied into the toilet, then rinsed it out in the sink. I replaced in it Swing's room and went to leave. When I spotted Swing's wallet on the floor, I couldn't help myself. I snatched it, and flipped through it looking for his driver's license. When I found it, I pulled it out and held it up to the light leaking in through the opening in the doorway.

"Lawrence Knopka," I said aloud, disbelief creeping into my tone. Swing stirred at my voice.

"I miss-" he whispered, eyes open now. "I miss him."

"Miss who, Swing?"

He didn't respond for a long time, so I closed the door and slumped against the wall outside Swing's room. I had walked into his room hoping to verify that Swing was dangerous and powerful - a hurricane or a runaway eighteen-wheeler. Something with *force*. I wanted proof that he was to be avoided, a threat worth warning others about - perhaps protecting Olivia from. My life would be exponentially easier if Swing Radford could just be hated, forgotten.

Instead, the only evidence I found in his cold, dank dorm room indicated that he was scared. Of what, I couldn't be completely certain - but it probably involved the lack of mirrors in his room, of posters or Christmas lights, of pictures, of anything that implied an identity. Swing or Lawrence or whoever didn't need to be feared and he wasn't deserving of repulsion. He posed a threat, sure, but not to me or anyone else on that hallway.

I expected to walk out of that room with my curiosity about Swing Radford sated, free of him and his aviators. But sitting on the floor, the chill from the wall's cinderblocks crept up my spine, and into my brain, along with a memory from years ago, one I thought I had lost for good.

At twelve, there's a wealth of new information flooding in from all directions. You start to understand the world is a more serious place, darker, that can't be ignored despite an active imagination. And when your father is a drunk, as Swing had correctly assumed earlier, you start to realize what disease is. You begin to understand that compulsion is beyond love, it is beyond commitment or family, it is more powerful than any force of the human heart.

It was the night after my last little league game, after the other fathers had hugged their sons, slung their arms around them approvingly and treated them to a special dinner at their favorite restaurant, that I sat outside my parents' bathroom and watched my father - on all fours - throw up into a trash can. So drunk was he that he couldn't make it to the toilet not an arm's length away.

I was quiet, but my mother was screaming at him, her voice as shrill as ever. She berated him for not showing up, for being the drunk loser *her* mother had warned her he'd be, she threw things at him, and asked him he'd even given a thought to how terrible this made me, his only son, feel. My mother always did that, told others, me, how I felt.

But I didn't feel terrible, not because he was drunk or because he wasn't at my game. I was disappointed, sure, but I felt worse that my dad was so sick and I, his only son, couldn't make him feel better.

After my mom had stormed out of the room and he had stopped throwing up, he collapsed to the cold tile and turned to me.

"Hey, champ." His eyes were bloodshot and watery, his face dripped sweat.

"Hey, Dad."

He motioned for me to sit by him, so I did. "How was the game?"

"Pretty good. We won." I replied, meekly.

"Yeah, but how'd^{ow} do?"

"Two doubles and a RBI. I caught a pop fly, too." I smiled, remembering that it was him who taught me not to be afraid of the ball.

"That's my boy." He tussled my hair. "Help your old man up, ok?"

I smiled, stood and took his clammy hand. I tugged on him, a man easily twice my size, until he finally got to his feet, and then I helped him to bed.

I always did my best to care for him, but he could never stop drinking. It was hardly a year later when my mother couldn't take it anymore and kicked Dad out for good. She never tried to help, never tried to get him in treatment. We moved from Colorado to Virginia, and he would call intermittently, but he never visited - couldn't afford it, and my mother wouldn't send me out to him.

I never fully shook off the notion that I failed him. It's the silly thing a teenage boy would believe, not willing to see his father's shortcomings, to see that truly he failed me. I told myself that I, as an adult, understood it was all on him, that I wasn't culpable in the fact that I hadn't seen my Dad in almost ten years, but some shame is buried too deep to be dug out. Some sicknesses can't be explained away. I lost my father because I wasn't strong enough to help him.

I checked back in on Swing, and he snored noisily on his bed. I imagined him years later, throwing up in a trashcan, his own son just as scared and helpless as I had been. I wanted to be Lawrence's friend; maybe his only one.

I wanted to *cure* him of Swing Radford.

As the months passed, I found myself feeling more and more comfortable at college. Home ceased to be Richmond and became the fifth floor of Galloway dormitory.

For the most part, I spent my days in class and on the Quad with Olivia, talking about

louder than all, and the only person wearing mirrored aviators, ensuring that nothing reflected inward, only out.

But at that inevitable point when Swing had finally drunk to his limit, threw up in a trash bag or house plant and accused someone of being a "slut" or "cock-blocker," I'd finally let him drape his arm over me. I'd play the part of the apologetic, ever-gracious P.R. rep, and usher Swing out to his car. He'd crumple in the passenger seat, a sweaty pile of hair and flesh, denim and trucker caps. Mostly he'd pass out. Sometimes we'd talk.

He'd flip off a cop car and I'd admonish, "Not cool, Lawrence."

"Fuck off, man. Don't call me that, *Al*!" At that point of the night, words came at great difficulty for Swing.

I'd slow the car down and warn, "I can kick your drunk ass out right here, you know."

"Naw man, don't be like that. I - I'm sorry. You know you're my boy."

"I know, Swing."

"You're like, my best friend."

"I know."

"You're my brother, man. Know that."

"OK."

"Can we get some Taco Bell?"

"No."

"Man, fuck you." He'd slump against the window and pass out shortly thereafter. For all the spontaneity Swing claimed to crave, our nights were mostly predictable, a paint-by-numbers sort of experience. I often questioned the wisdom of staying so invested in Swing's blossoming demise, but I could not tear myself away without feeling I was abandoning some dying monster, the only one of his kind, at once both beautiful and terrible.

I fell into a comfortably uncomfortable existence between the world of Olivia and the life of Swing. In the former, I spent most of my energy wishing, lusting, needing. In the latter, 7 was needed.

Like a drunk bouncing between two walls, I maintained balance between the two great immovable objects in my life.

I succeeded in keeping the two dynamic forces in my life separate well into my sophomore year. They'd inquire about each other intermittently; Olivia questioning my loyalty to a "pathetic, alcoholic, attention-whore," and Swing wondering much the same about my devotion to Olivia, though with more colorful language. It was winter when it all started falling apart.

Olivia and I were watching TV in the apartment I shared with Swing when he burst in, stinking like booze. He positioned himself in front of the TV and peered over his sunglasses at us.

"You two are the lamest nerds I know."

"Says *Lawrence Knopka*" Olivia sneered.

"Fuck you, sweetheart," Swing smirked.

"You know, if I had ten seconds to spare, I might consider it," she replied, and I muffled a laugh.

That got Swing's attention. "Well, speaking of pussies... Alexander, come with me down to Stubby's. They've got two-dollar tequila shots tonight, man."

"How do you expect me to get in? I'm over a year away from being legal," I answered. Swing knew I wouldn't drink even if I were 21, he just wanted a driver.

"Yeah, we're not all on our seventh year of undergrad, Swing," Olivia chimed in.

"So sharp, Olivia. Must get exhausting." Then to me, "Don't worry about it, man. My boy Randy is watching the door tonight. He'll let you in with a library card."

"I don't think so, man. I'm not in the mood, and I've-"

"Did you say it was tequila on special?" Olivia interrupted. I stared at her incredulously.

The biggest aviators in the world couldn't hide the surprise on Swing's face.

"Yeah. Cuervo, I think." He recomposed himself and added, "Why, you think you can handle your liquor, little girl?"

Olivia stood. "Come on, Alexander. I could stand a little excitement, and your roommate could stand a humbling experience."

"This is stupid. Why don't you two go and leave me here?" I pleaded. They both stared at me, Swing with a stupid smile pasted across his face, Olivia's eyes burning through my skull.

"I'll grab your coat," Swing said, finally.

An hour later, the three of us were sitting at an out-of-the-way table in a half-empty Stubby's. It might have been the Nickelback pouring from the speakers that was giving me a headache, but more than likely it was the scene unfolding in front of me. A tipsy Olivia had just borrowed a cigarette from Swing and actually allowed him to light it for her.

"That's sweet," I snarled. Olivia shot me a sidelong glance and Swing stood.

"You want another shot, or are you ready to give up?" Swing asked Olivia.

"Give up? I haven't even warmed up!" Olivia laughed and Swing made his way to the bar.

I leaned in to Olivia and asked harshly, "What the hell are you doing?"

"What are you talking about?"

I gave Swing's empty chair a meaningful look. "You're flirting with him!"

"Oh Christ, Alexander. I'm just having fun. Relax."

"Not two hours ago you *hated* Swing. Could barely stand to be in the same room with him!" My voice got louder.

"Hey, it's not like I love the guy all of a sudden. I still think he's an ass. But he's not so bad with a few drinks in me." Her smile was lopsided. Swing Radford-lopsided.

I blurted, "Is this how your mom acts when she's drunk," and immediately wished the words back. Hurt bled from her eyes to the rest of her face.

"Go to hell. Really." She pushed away from the table violently and stalked over to the piano tucked in the farthest corner from where I sat.

I shook my head and stood to go to her, but Swing intercepted me, his hands full with four shots. "Where'd she go?" He asked

I pointed to her. "I pissed her off."

"Shit, man. Goin' over there isn't going to help anything - she needs space. Here," he said, handing me two of the shots, "sit this play out. I'll smooth things over."

"Yeah, I'd rather-"

"Trust me, Alexander. I'll take care of it." He weaved his way to the piano, sat down on the bench next to her, and handed her both shots. She downed each without a breath between. I placed my shots on the table, sat back in my chair and glowered at them. After a moment, I said, "Fuck it;" drank both shots and chewed on a lime.

Before that night, I never had a reason to dislike tequila. Afterward, I hated the smell of it, the very thought of it. I spent the next few minutes cursing Jose Cuervo, cursing Stubby and his drink specials, Randy and his lack of concern for underage drinking. Mostly I cursed Olivia and Swing. This was nothing short of betrayal - not one jagged knife in my heart, but two.

Just as I thought it couldn't get any worse, Swing twisted the knife. Swing Radford, who never displayed any aptitude for any art form - except perhaps acting - and called me a "queer" every time I listened to classical music in my room, started playing the piano. And not just poking randomly at keys - actual playing. It took the bartender turning down the radio so the rest of the patrons could listen before I actually placed the song. I shook my head, angry and shocked. He wasn't performing "Heart and Soul" or "Over the Rainbow," he was playing the fucking Moonlight Sonata. Beethoven.

Lawrence Knopka, who insisted on being called "Swing Radford", could play Beethoven. I watched for a few moments, as awestruck that Swing could actually surprise me as I was that he had real talent. But when Olivia put her head on his shoulder, I couldn't stand anymore.

I marched to the bar and ordered two more shots: bourbon. I smelled it, and my father flooded into memory. He always had the sickly sweet smell of bourbon about him. I swallowed, and waited. Ordered two more. Gulped those. When the anger in my stomach began to melt, when the knot in my head started to unwind, I realized why my father, why Swing, why anyone would be an alcoholic. I understood, if only briefly, how easy it was to let go and let the booze work its magic. I pushed over the last two shots I'd ordered, more terrified than ever of the stuff, and laid my head down on the bar. I stood to walk outside, but lost my balance and crashed to floor, taking a few stools with me. The bartender called to Swing, and he and Olivia peeled me off the ground and carried me out of the bar between them.

By the time I woke up the next morning, I had slept through my only two classes of the day, and purposefully skipped my usual lunch with Olivia. She called me twice that afternoon, but I didn't answer.

It was almost three weeks later when Swing finally decided to confide in me about Olivia. I had cooled some since the night at Stubby's, but I still wasn't ready for that particular conversation. However, there was an uncertain tone in Swing's voice that

I wasn't familiar with. Usually when he talked about women he spoke in decrees and sweeping claims. He began this talk in a much different place.

"I don't know what to do, Alexander." The sunglasses were off.

"Well, don't ask me. I'm no expert."

"I mean, she hasn't called me in over a week. What the fuck?"

I turned away, to hide my smile. "That's a bad sign."

"Fuckin' women, man. Can't trust 'em." He said.

I nodded, silent.

"Maybe I love her. Maybe, I don't know. But she'll rip my heart out if I let her,"

Swing continued.

"Ever actually had your heart broken, Swing?" I asked.

"Broken heart? I never give 'em a chance at it." He shot at me in an absurdly defensive tone. "I love her. I guess,"

I wanted to slug him, to tell him that his "love" was superficial at best - his heart was too indecisive, and not under his control. Love wasn't an interaction that could be rehearsed and perfected, it was spontaneous and painful. I wanted to explain that I loved Olivia, loved in her in an awful and ardent way that Swing's artifice would forever keep him from truly experiencing. I wanted to pour out the truth right there, over our couch and coffee table; all over the living room, until it burst from our cramped apartment and spread to Olivia's waiting ears. I wanted to. But I couldn't. I couldn't bring myself to hurt him, not when he was this vulnerable. It wasn't my place. And anyway, he loved her.

He guessed.

"So what do I do?" It was the first time I could recall him asking me for help with something that didn't involve climbing in or out of a car, or cleaning up vomit.

I sighed heavily and turned to him. "You tell her how you feel. Not as Swing Radford, but as Lawrence. That's your best bet."

I could tell Swing was working that over in his head. I left him there, standing with his arms crossed, staring blankly out the window.

When I didn't see Swing for two days, I got worried. I tried calling him, but it went straight to his voicemail every time. Given Swing's history, it was just as likely that he had wrapped his Jeep around a tree as it was that he felt the need to avoid me. Finally unable to take it, I called Olivia. "Hey," I said, not sure where to go from there. "Hi."

"Urn, have you seen Swing?"

"Are you serious? I don't talk to you for weeks, and you call for him?" "No! I didn't- I just, I don't know. It's been confusing, you know?" "Yeah," she replied, the anger melting out of her voice. "I know." "I just haven't seen him in a couple of days and I was getting worried." "He was just here an hour ago and..." Her tone was heavy as she trailed off. "Can I come over?"

"Of course," I said.

"I'll be there in fifteen," and the line went dead.

When she arrived, I tried to apologize for being so aloof, but she dismissed it. "I know. It's weird when, well... when-" She was having a hard time forcing the words out, and I knew what was coming.

"If you say 'hook up,' I'm walking out that door."

"But it's your house," she smirked.

"Look, I just don't need the details of your torrid affair with Swing Radford. Really."

She snorted. "Torrid affair? Not even close."

"Well, whatever it was."

"It was a mistake," she explained. "And it put you in a tough position. I don't blame you for acting the way you did."

"Thanks," I said, the anger that had risen in my throat now swallowed. After a pause, I asked, "What happened with Swing? Earlier?"

She told me that he had taken my advice. He sat her down, took off the aviators, and told her about his feelings for her.

"He told me he loved me, that he was sure I was the only woman he had ever really loved, in any meaningful sense. He said he *needed* me. His voice was shaking the entire time."

"I think it's probably terrifying for Swing to admit he needs anyone. What'd you say?" I asked.

"Well, I fought back tears and thanked him," she said.

I closed my eyes.

She continued, "But I said I just didn't feel the same way. I told him that love wasn'ttywsr about needing someone. It's more than that, and he doesn't get that, not yet. He stormed out without saying another word."

I suppose I should have been overjoyed, but it didn't come.

"He said some really beautiful stuff, you know?" she explained. "But I can't tell what's real and what's part of this over-rehearsed 'Swing Radford' bullshit. I mean, we talk about him like he's a real person, separate from Lawrence, for chrissakes! It's not real!"

"I don't think Lawrence would agree with that," I answered.

"You're probably right, and that's scary. He needs help, *real* help. I'd just fuck him up worse. Or maybe he'd fuck me up - I don't know."

"I think you probably can't walk away from Swing Radford without a scar or two."

She nodded, absently. "He told me he loved me. Three weeks and he already thinks he loves me? That's impossible, even for someone who isn't as confused as Lawrence."

"I knew it the first day I met you," I said, unsure of how I was so calm.

"What?"

"I knew that I loved you that first night. There was no question."

She snorted, and chuckled. Not exactly the reaction I was looking for. "Boys. Silly, stupid boys." She threw her arms around my neck and squeezed. Before I had a chance to hug her back, she released. "I guess we should go find Swing."

"I think I'd rather find Lawrence," I said, trying to forget that my confession - quite possibly the most difficult of my life - had just been met with a chuckle and a quick hug.

"Me too," Olivia replied.

The sound of a violent collision outside announced that, like it or not, Swing had found us.

I swallowed long and hard from the bottle, letting the burn trickle down my throat. I looked down at my feet, where the shattered glass from the mirror had scattered. Some shards had letters on them - a disassembled warning.

I closed my eyes and recited it aloud, to myself. "Objects in the mirror are-"

Swing finished. "Closer than they appear." I opened my eyes, and looked at him. He had taken off his glasses, and was staring at me - through me. He stood and I tensed.

"Help me, man. Please, I fucked up." There was panic in Swing's voice.

"I don't know what I can do." I looked out the window and saw the police were in the parking lot below, surveying the scene - making deductions. "Look, maybe if we leave now, we can get you over to Olivia's place. Until we can figure something out." I really didn't want to see Swing taken off in handcuffs.

He shook his head. "That's not good enough, man! They'll figure it out! I can't - *can't* - have another DUI on my record." He grabbed both my shoulders and towered over me. His eyes - bloodshot and jumpy - pleaded with mine.

Olivia jumped into the conversation from behind us. "What is it you want him to do, Swing."

"Look, just go out there and talk to them. Tell them it was an accident, and that you weren't drinking. Please just do this one thing for me, Al. Just once."

I started shaking my head. The situation was becoming surreal.

"I never ask you for anything, man." His fingers began to dig into my shoulders. "No one would even know your name if it wasn't for me."

"Let go, Swing."

"Fucking help me, man! You're supposed to be my best friend!"

"This is the only help you're ever going to get, Lawrence. Now *let go*."

"Don't call me that, asshole!" He shoved me hard into the wall. I cringed, expecting a fist to come rocketing toward my face.

"Swing!" Olivia shrieked. I opened my eyes, and found Olivia standing in front of me. Swing's fist was cocked, but was frozen by the scene in front of him. He shook his head, the way a big animal might after being shot with a tranquilizer dart. Without

losing the perplexed look on his face, or even offering a single utterance, Swing darted out of the room and into the cold night.

Drinking the cheap bourbon Olivia had found in the freezer, she and I watched from the balcony for over an hour as they put Swing in the back of the police cruiser and finished cleaning up the accident. After everyone had left, we walked down to the parking lot.

We sat drunk in the dirt, back to back, passing what was left of the bourbon between us, surrounded by shards of windshields and jagged pieces of fiberglass. The silence was oppressive, but neither of us had the heart to break it. I didn't know when I'd see Lawrence again, and maybe I didn't care. But Swing was gone for good. His flame had burned out - as had my crusade to save him - and Olivia and I were left flapping our wings listlessly in the dark, hoping that we would collide and cling to each other so neither would have to face the night alone.

I looked to my left and found her hand next to mine. I went to place my hand on hers, to connect, but she leaned forward at the last moment, wrapping her arms around her knees. Without Olivia to hold me up, I lost my balance. I shot my hand out - to stop myself, to gain control - but it landed hard on a piece of glass, piercing into the meat of my palm. I realized eventually that love was about timing.

I looked up to see morning's encroaching light filter through the trees.

The Hanging Kitten

In a dank, dim room, two doors loomed in front of Jacob. There was nothing inherently disturbing about these doors - in fact, their color was that sort of concrete-gray Jacob had always found soothing on his evening jogs as he wound through the suburban neighborhood. It wasn't that he enjoyed running so much as he liked looking into the warm homes for families eating dinner together, playing board games and laughing. He always hoped to see families like the ones on TV from his youth, and wanted to see proof that there were still Cleavers in the world, that there was a slice of Mayberry in Los Angeles. He needed to see that sort of life *could* exist, even if not for Jacob.

Jacob reconsidered. Maybe there was something inherently disturbing about these doors. Certainly, what was on the doors gave him pause.

A poster of an adorable tabby kitten dangling from a branch adorned the left door. Its green saucer-eyes pleaded with Jacob and pink bubble letters read, "Hang in There!" It reminded him of his third-grade teacher, Mrs. Wistemier and her fondness for the same poster when he and his classmates were having trouble with their multiplication tables.

The right door, however, was a bit more puzzling. Its poster was an advertisement for Virginia Slims' cigarettes - Jacob guessed circa early 1970's -

an elegant woman with a slender cigarette in slender fingers and the phrase, "You've Come A Long Way, Baby!"

At this point Jacob began to suspect that something was amiss, and that he might in fact, be dead. He tried to remember how he might have died, but memory failed him. He remembered his thirty-sixth birthday - his first since the divorce - and the dinner he had with his mother, but that had been at least a few days ago. She had made his favorite: Vegetable lasagna with extra spinach. Everything after that was cloudy and offered no clues to the reasons behind his possible demise.

Not that he was really concerned. Which concerned him. Surely after spending an interminable amount of time in the hallways he should feel impatient, or hungry, or sleepy, or annoyance at the soft, banal jazz that constantly frothed out of speakers unseen. But each time something encroached on his emotional neutrality, it was quickly suppressed with blossoming indifference and the confidence that he was exactly where he was supposed to be, doing exactly what he needed to do. And so the concern would pass.

He had spent the last few hours wandering through a labyrinth of windowless hallways fending off the notion that he was once again in the basement of the Airport Marriott in Dallas, where he had gotten lost after stumbling away from his sister's wedding last year. But this time, his ex-wife Lorraine wasn't waiting for him around the next corner, fists on hips, furrowed brow, and thin lips eager to admonish him for being a "moron."

Here, only two curious doors awaited Jacob - doors he concluded were gateways to the afterlife and not exactly the pearly gates Father O'Leery had talked about in mass

when Jacob was young. The kitten poster, however, was encouraging, and Jacob was inclined to go with that route until he considered it might be exactly the kind of ironic humor demons and devils were probably fond of. Of course, a cigarette ad certainly had troubling connotations, but many of his heroes were smokers - Ricky and Lucy Ricardo, Ralph Kramden - and surely none of those icons were burning in Hell. He stood between the doors for a moment, chewing on his lip and running his hand through thinning hair, hoping for a sign.

Glancing up, he found it: a radiant, emerald beacon. A green "exit" sign rested above the Virginia Slims' door, exuding to Jacob comfort and welcome. A quick look at the kitten's door confirmed his decision. There was no way he was going through a door with a *red* exit sign.

He smiled and said aloud, "Amen." Then, after taking a breath, Jacob put his shoulder to the door, turned the handle and pushed through, finding himself in a dark, stuffy room. He felt carpet beneath his feet, and stood there for a moment, scratching his head, wondering if he had made the biggest mistake of his afterlife.

And then there was light.

He was in a small square room, with sky blue walls and cream shag carpet. There was a white door in front of him, but no sign of the door he came through. A long table stretched across one side of the room, offering a vegetable platter, a plate of finger sandwiches, a cheese and cracker spread, and a glistening tub of ice filled with cans of Coke, Diet Coke and Dasani water bottles. A glossy silver banner hung across the ceiling

and in multicolored letters it read, "Welcome to Heaven." It reminded him of his thirteenth birthday party.

This confirmed Jacob's suspicions that he had, in fact, become recently deceased. Jacob, like most people, had previously thought that this revelation would always come as a bit of shock. He had miscalculated.

He was about to start nibbling at a small, triangular cucumber sandwich when the white door flew open and a short woman dressed in all black and carrying a clipboard marched in. She wore a large headset, and was talking to someone on the other end of it when she walked in.

"Yeah, uh-huh. He's here," she stared blankly at Jacob.

He smiled and began to say, "Hello," but she shushed him, and gestured to the headset. Jacob mouthed, "Sorry."

"Yup, I'll get him there," she said to whoever was on the other end. "Ok, Marty. I'll meet you for lunch after I take care of this?" She paused, then burst into high-pitched laughter. "Tuna casserole! Marty you are *too* much, babe! See you in twenty!" She clicked off the headset, checked something on the clipboard and forced a smile at Jacob. "Hi, Jacob."

"Urn, hi?"

"Welcome to Heaven. You made it!" The same fake smile stayed plastered on her face.

"This is Heaven?" Jacob wondered, a little underwhelmed. "Are you an angel?"

She snorted, "Angel? Not quite. I'm a P.A. And this isn't exactly Heaven. It's Heaven's green room."

"P.A. like production assistant? Green room? Are you sure this is-"

She cut him off with a flip of her hand, "Look, I think I know better than you what this is and what this isn't. Now, because you took so long out there deciding, we're running behind, and you're due to meet your guide in less than five," she explained. Then, in a patronizing tone, she asked, "So do you think we can get moving?"

"Um, sure." Jacob said, unsure of what was going on.

Perhaps picking up on Jacob's discomfort, the P.A. asked, "Do you want a drink or something, while we walk?"

Jacob considered the tub of drinks and replied, "Not really. I kinda prefer Pepsi."

The P.A. clicked her teeth and said, "God prefers Coke." She turned on her heels, motioned for Jacob to come along and led him through the white door. Keeping a brisk pace, she led him through a narrow corridor.

"You know, I have a lot of questions," Jacob said.

"I'm sure you do. That's why we're going to meet your guide," she replied, over her shoulder. A man, dressed in black like the P.A. walked past them carrying a two-by-four.

"Can't you answer some basic ones? Like *how* I died?"

She looked down at her clipboard, never losing a step. "E. Coli. From bad spinach."

Jacob winced, remembering the lasagna his mother had made for him. "That's a pretty lame way to go," he muttered to himself.

Apparently the P. A. heard Jacob though, and said, "Yeah, I gotta be honest with you Jacob, you didn't exactly lead an exciting life." She flipped through her notes, and Jacob shuddered at the thought of his entire existence being broken down into short, curt bullet-points.

But Jacob couldn't argue much with the P.A.'s evaluation of his life. Jacob had lived a muted life. He couldn't even place a time he'd ever been really upset. Disappointed, annoyed, disquieted, sure. But never honest, burning anger. Even when Lorraine told him she was leaving him for Roddy Greene - their pharmacist - Jacob couldn't manage more than a distressed sigh and a shake of his head. He still filled his prescriptions with Roddy.

But he could never help it. After his father died of a heart attack when Jacob was eight, Jacob's mother told him that it was his father's temper that really killed him. She made him promise to never lift a finger or his voice in anger.

"Jesus never lost his temper," she would explain. "You want to go Heaven and live with Jesus don't you?"

He'd nod.

"Then be a quiet little mouse." Then she'd remind him, "The meek shall inherit the earth, Jacob."

And so, he'd had a somewhat uneventful existence. He had been a television writer, and had experienced mixed success. Recently he had written a pilot for a sitcom

featuring a shape-shifting alien from Alpha Centauri trying to pose as a professional baseball player - with hilarious results. UPN had picked it up and filmed the pilot, but decided to pass. Jacob was planning to use the income to finally move out of his mother's basement - Lorraine had kept the house - and into his own place, where he could have a dog and drink beer in the open. There were even designs for a girlfriend. He just couldn't figure out a way to break it to his mother that he wanted to move out.

Of course, it was all a moot point now. They finally arrived at the end of the corridor at another large, gray door.

"There sure are a lot of doors in the afterlife," Jacob said.

The P.A. turned, cocked her head slightly and forced another tight smile. "There sure are. Well, this is where I leave you. Right through that door is your guide. Good luck." She opened the door, and white light blinded Jacob.

"What am I supposed to do?" Jacob's voice was frantic.

"What do you do whenever someone opens a door for you?" She held the door open with one hand and pushed Jacob through with the other.

He went across the threshold, and heard the door slam shut before his eyes could adjust. When his surroundings finally came into focus, Jacob couldn't help grinning like an idiot. He found himself on a quiet street lined with big oak and maple trees. Big, colorful Victorian houses sat back from the street, each with verdant lawns lined with tulips, daffodils and rose bushes. In the yard across from Jacob, two boys tossed a baseball. A woman in a flowing, floral print dress stepped out from inside the house with a tray of lemonade for the boys.

"This *is* Heaven," Jacob said to himself, his concerns about his earlier experience with the P.A. now evaporated.

Jacob heard the familiar clicking hum of baseball cards in bicycle spokes and turned to see a boy - no more than twelve - on a gleaming red Schwinn heading toward him. The boy wore a plain T-shirt, jeans rolled up at the cuff and gleaming white sneakers. He had a blue baseball cap with a golden "H" on the front, the bill in a horseshoe shape and facing forward, the way, Jacob thought, hats are meant to be worn.

When he got closer, Jacob could see freckles were splashed across his cheeks. The boy stopped his bike right in front of Jacob, stood with one foot on a pedal and the other on the ground and smiled. Jacob noticed that instead of blue or green eyes like he would've expected, the boy had golden eyes.

After a moment passed in silence, Jacob finally spoke, "Well, hello there."

Expecting a high-pitched voice of a pre-pubescent boy, Jacob jumped slightly when the boy answered, "Welcome, Jacob!" in a voice that sounded like coarse gravel pouring out of a dump truck. The boy continued, "The name's Alkormei, but you can me Al! I'm an angel, third-class." Leaning in, he whispered, "That's bottom o' the rung, friend. But it don't chap my ass." He winked, chuckled and held out his hand. "I'll be your guide."

Jacob stared at the hand, not sure if he should take it.

A knowing smirk spread on the angel's face, "Oh, the voice. Yeah it gets everybody -I damn near forget about it every time. You see how smooth *you* sound after smoking for three millennia."

"Smoking? In Heaven?" Jacob asked.

"Shit yeah," Al answered. "Didn't you see the poster on the door when you came in? Everyone smokes here. It's not like we're gonna die of lung cancer or anything!"

Jacob considered that, and figured the angel had a point. "I guess you're right."

"Of course I am! Now are you going to shake my hand or what?" He asked, nodding to his outstretched hand.

Jacob's hand swallowed Al's, and he croaked out, "Nice to meet you. Sorry for being rude, you just aren't what I thought an angel would be."

Al laughed, "I know, I know. Where's my damned halo and wings, right? You'll see soon enough that things ain't exactly like they all say earthside."

"I guess so. Are you sure you should be cursing like that? I mean, a boy your age-"

Al cut him off, "They're just words, man! You better lighten up, or it's gonna be a *long* eternity. Besides, my 'curses' are harmless! They don't even teach you the real nasty words 'til you been here a few centuries."

Jacob felt sheepish. "I'm sorry. It's just that... well, this wasn't what I was expecting. I thought-"

Al cut him off. "You thought, 'Fluffy white clouds, streets paved with gold and golden trees and golden halos and golden frickin' toilets,' yeah?"

Jacob nodded.

"Trust me when I say this is Heaven - the eternal paradise of man, sonny! You made the first cut! You're sittin' pretty!"

"First cut?" Jacob asked.

"Never mind about that for right now. Lemme show you around." Al peddled the bike slowly, so Jacob could keep up. They meandered through the neighborhood, said hello to Mrs. Klecko who was gardening in bright Capri's and a wide sun hat, and stopped to check out Jimmy Muhlheisen's new collie puppy. Eventually they made it to Main Street, where teen girls in poodle skirts giggled as they ran out of Muhlheisen's Soda Fountain. Al introduced Jacob to people as they made their way down the street, and everyone was exceedingly friendly. The Jensions even invited him over for dinner that night, as Mrs. Jenson - like always - would simply make too much tuna casserole.

When they were past Main Street, Al led Jacob into a quaint park. Jacob took a seat at a nearby bench and Al parked his bike and joined him.

"So?" Al asked, pulling a pack of cigarettes from his back pocket.

Despite the disturbing image of a twelve-year old lighting up a cigarette, Jacob smiled. "I love it."

"We figured you would fit better here. We almost put you on the cruise ship, but didn't think you'd mesh well with the more sexually-charged material there." He offered Jacob a smoke.

Jacob furrowed his brow. "What are you talking about? Cruise ship?"

"What, you thought this was the only iteration of the Lord's kingdom? Now that'd be certifiably boring, wouldn't it Jake?"

"Huh?"

"You like watching just one damn channel on TV?" Al asked, the cigarette hanging from the corner of his mouth.

"Yeah. TV Land."

Al laughed, "Guess I forgot who I was talking to. Well, trust me when I say you're in the minority on that one. And the only vote that matters around here," Al paused, pointing up toward the sky, "likes variety in His entertainment. Now you lucked out, cause the Boss *loves* His '50's Americana," he made a sweeping gesture, indicating their surroundings, "But even He gets an itch for something a little spicier from time to time."

"So He's watching us, like a show?" Jacob asked, unsure of how he felt about being on display. There was a reason he wanted to be a writer, hidden from spotlights and cameras.

"Bingo. Look," Al paused and pulled something resembling a Palm Pilot out of his pocket and examined it for a moment, "You're in good shape here. Lived a pretty decent life, couple o' sins here and there - nothin' mortal. Seems to me, you don't bungle things up, you should sail through auditions."

"Wait. Auditions? What are you talking about?"

"Listen, it works like this: Just because you're here right now don't quite mean you're *in*, capeesh? Shit just ain't that simple. We gotta make sure you're a good fit for the story line they got worked out for you."

"They've got a story line for me already? I don't get to make my own?"

"Damn, Jacob, I thought I read you were a TV writer. Do you let actors determine their stories? Hell no! They gotta have someone like you to write 'em!"

"Then let me write mine! It's what I'm good at!" Jacob exclaimed, standing.

Al chuckled, "Well, I'd say that's up for debate. Look, we got a staff of experts. Leave the story telling to us, ok? We got you set up with a real nice wife, and three daughters." Al leaned in, "Though I'll tell you, we're having a hell of a time finding good candidates for those three. But we'll dredge something up."

"You're *giving* me a family?"

"Yeah, just like you always wanted! You think we ain't wise to why you jog every night? To be honest, some of the higher-ups, thought it was a bit voyeuristic for their tastes, but God set 'em straight. He's lookin' out for you, boy." Al smiled, like he was delivering the best news in the world, but Jacob shook his head.

"I don't want it like this. It's not mine, I didn't make it. It's not *my* life." Jacob sat, feeling dizzy.

"You're right, it ain't yours, buck-o. It's His." Al pointed up again.

"He's a tyrant, then!" Jacob said, as loud as could ever remember being.

"Damn, Jacob, I didn't think we'd have this problem withj/ow. Look, you ain't the first to be, let's say, uncomfortable with this whole situation. But trust you me when I tell you it's better than the alternative."

"Alternative? You mean hell?" Jacob asked, suddenly scared.

"You got it. Remember the other door? The kitten poster?"

"Yeah?"

"It's something of a hint. Take a look." Al closed his golden eyes, and laid a small, cold hand on Jacob's forehead.

Jacob blinked, and found he was no longer in the park. Instead, he was dangling from a thick wire, gripping tight with both hands just like the kitten in the poster. He looked down, and far below him a fiery pit belched intense heat and a sustained, wailing scream. All around him, other people clung to the wire, some clung to the legs of others, most people were screaming. He could tell some were praying. He watched one close by woman - no older than twenty five - recite the Lord's prayer, then turn her head slightly and give a surprisingly serene smile to Jacob before letting go and tumbling through empty air until the flames swallowed her. As his arms began to ache, Jacob felt a tap on top of his head.

Alkormei balanced on the wire, and asked, "Get the picture?"

Jacob chanced another glance below, searching for signs of the woman, then looked up at Al and nodded his head. Al smiled.

They were back on the park bench, a squirrel nibbling at an acorn near their feet.

Jacob was silent for a long time. Eventually Al explained, "Most people fall in line after that." He added, "Some don't. And we can't have dissenters in the Kingdom of God, you know?"

Jacob nodded absently, unable to look at Al.

"Cheer up, Jake. You're not in any real danger. I'm sure the audition board will love you. In fact, let's head that way. After all, you've got a date over at the Jensen's

tonight!" Al chuckled. He mounted the bike and started peddling slowly, with Jacob in tow.

Eventually Jacob spoke up. "This is all a dream right? A nightmare. I'm going to wake up?"

"Sorry, kid. No chance. Look, just relax. Trust us. Trust God. We've had time like you wouldn't believe to perfect the formula. You're gonna love eternity, I promise. You gotta respect His will; His in-eff-a-ble wisdom."

"There is *no* wisdom in a formula, Al."

"Watch it, Jacob. I mean it, dammnit. You're starting to wear on my nerves."

Jacob relented, deciding he had pushed as hard as he could. Who was he to question God? And thought of dangling from that wire for an entire afterlife was certainly not preferable to being stuck in a Nick at Nite rerun.

They made their way through the park, and were almost to the street, when Jacob stopped to watch an older man toss a football with a young boy. His son, Jacob assumed. Or the actor playing the man's son. A thought gripped Jacob, and he jogged to catch Al.

He grabbed Al's shoulder and asked, anxiously, "Where's my father?"

"What?"

"My dad. He died when I was eight. Can I see him?"

Al closed his eyes for a moment and when he opened them, shook his head.

"Sorry Jacob, no can do."

"Why not? Are you telling me he's not..." The look on Al's face confirmed Jacob's fears.

"My father was a good man," Jacob screamed. "He didn't deserve hell."

"You're right," Al yelled back. "He was here for a while, but couldn't keep that temper of his in check. Broke character one too many times. They had to cancel him."

"Cancel?" The word came out a whisper. "God 'cancels' stories?" Jacob's hands flew to his head in desperation.

"Of course! If a story don't fit, or ain't interesting, God ain't gonna watch it. Gotta make room for new situations, more entertainment." Al smirked, and explained it all away as someone would bat at a fly.

"He sends people to hell because He's bored? How can that be right?" Jacob sat in the grass. His questions weren't aimed at Al anymore. They just floated between the two.

"His creation. His rules."

He looked directly into the angel's eyes. *"Fuck His creation.¹"*

Al stared at him, as if that had been the first real surprise in the angel's existence.

"Listen here, son. I'm gonna be generous. You have one chance to say you're sorry. Now repent."

Jacob stood, clenching his fists. "No." The anger tasted like bile in his mouth, and made his eyes water. He was livid. In death, he felt alive.

"Kneel and repent," Alkormei yelled.

Instead of kneeling, Jacob lunged at the angel. Jacob didn't really care that angels weren't susceptible to sneak attacks. He needed revenge. Revenge for his father, revenge for everyone who suffered in Heaven under a bored tyrant, revenge for the all the

flies who were victims of wanton boys, revenge against an arbitrary God. Jacob's wrath met Al's eyes, and the angel whispered something.

Jacob found himself in the hallway outside the blue room, sitting against the door with the "You've Come a Long Way, Baby" poster. He stared down the long hallway, still devoid of life. Without letting go of his wrath and without letting it overtake him he stood, and carefully tore the poster from the door. He rolled it up and stuck it under his arm and started down the shadowy corridor. He stopped, turned, and stared at the other door, the gateway to hell, with the innocent kitten suspended for all time, its fate uncertain. Jacob smiled.

"Ineffable my ass." Jacob said to the kitten.

He grabbed the doorknob with all the conviction he could muster, and pushed through, tendrils of heat licking his face. He would not repent.