

A Postcard of the Space Needle

Senior Creative Writing Project

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For a Degree Bachelor of Arts with
A Major in Creative Writing at
The University of North Carolina at Asheville
Spring 2009

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A Hard Thing to Shake

When my regulars walk through the door, my back's to them, and I'm hoping they can't tell I'm on the phone. I hear the door open first -- I see the sunlight from outside wash the far wall in sudden color -- and they walk in, chit-chatting to one another about nothing important or pertinent. Even if it was, I wouldn't listen. They could walk in here and tell me Goebbels' reanimated corpse is outside playing hop-scotch with The Pope and I'd still have this phone pressed against my ear, trying to analyze and interpret every word coming through the receiver, trying to break the code that I know is in there somewhere.

I don't want them to know I'm on the phone because I'm embarrassed that I haven't hung up yet, that I keep listening to the voice on the other end, so distant in many different ways, the voice of my ex-wife, me trying to decipher what she's after. So all she hears, all anyone in the bar might hear, is a parade of "mhmms" and "yeahs" coming from my lips. A lot of sounds and words with no real meaning other than an illustration of what I'm unable to do, which is hang up the goddamned phone. Instead, my head hangs down and I watch as the edge of my thumbnail scrapes the finish on the end of the bar, lodging years' worth of grime and gunk under my nail, carving tiny crescent moons into the filth.

Finally, she says, "Goodbye, sweetie," and I can't believe she just called me sweetie but I still manage to say, "Bye," and gently place the receiver back on its cradle. For a second, I stand staring at the wall that's covered in dusty dartboards and cheap, faded scarlet wallpaper.

Flimsy stained glass lamps I bought from an old out-of-business Pizza Hut hang from the ceiling, the only light in this dank cavern. I keep it dark only because I've never been in a well-lit bar. Natural selection maybe, they just never survive. My own theory, one I don't believe for a second, is that drunks are like vampires, they hate the light. But don't worry about inviting them in, they make themselves at home.

Finally, I turn around and from behind the bar I check to see who's arrived. Reggie sits at the corner of the bar, a big, burly, blond-headed hulk of a man who sports a mustache that resembles a horse brush and makes him look like a walrus. Even though his fingers are thick like bratwursts, he's rolling a cigarette in his hands, delicate, precise, all the while pontificating from his perch at the bar.

"So I start tellin' her the cat's not mine, that I didn't tell that kid he could have a cat," he says, stopping for a second to wet the rolling paper with his tongue. "So she starts cryin', tellin' me she works, too, and makes dinner and feeds the kids and does my laundry and the least I could do is feed the cat. So I tell her I do more than enough. I fixed that dryer, didn't I? So she just sits there, then starts bawlin' and she just gets up and goes back into the kitchen. I didn't use to feed that cat."

When he finishes, he pulls out a match, dwarfed in his massive hands, strikes it and lights his cigarette. For a moment, a faint orange glow dances across his face, only to disappear with a flick of the wrist.

This is what I listen to most days. They get off work, come straight here, and this is what they do. Their trials and tribulations, their days of their lives.

I start grabbing bottles out of the cooler, already knowing what they want, prying the caps off as I set them on the counter. Rote tasks, nothing more. Reggie drinks

Budweiser because that's what his father drank, and his father's father drank. Family traditions and all.

Terry, who sits to Reggie's left, drinks High Life. He works at the plant making axles for semis and wears a tattered, soiled Braves cap that's stained from years of grunge and sweat, overgrown, unwieldy sideburns crawling down his face. He's wiry and his features are worn from years of hard-living, the kind of weathered appearance one might describe as world-weary -- if you didn't hear the shit that came out of his mouth.

To their left -- and this is always the set-up, like *The Last Supper*, they never change where they're sitting -- is Bert, this older gent who wears this great white beard that makes him look like Hemmingway or Ulysses S. Grant, who's the only one who keeps to himself. He'll drink a PBR, just one, slowly, like it's cabernet, and he'll sit and write in this little black notebook he totes around. I never know what he scribbles away at in there -- this week I think he's taking notes from an ornithology book -- but I'm sure I'd be disappointed to read it, there's no way I couldn't be.

"Hell, I know what you mean," Terry finally says in reply, grabbing his beer. "Shit, Tammy was getting' all worked up over the sink in the bathroom 'cause it was leaky, but it's always been leaky. I hear it's 'cause of those hormones they put in cows, big needles full of that stuff baseball players use. Knocks girls all out of whack. It doesn't bother us 'cause of our make-up and whatnot."

Most days, I'd argue the point, tell him how stupid and illogical the idea of his wife being 'roided up from dairy products sounds. Like one time, I sat here for at least two hours arguing with them after Reggie tried to tell me Bill Gates has to wear Velcro shoes because he has carpal tunnel. A wailing and a gnashing of teeth, and they still

wouldn't listen. For the longest time, I at least liked the illusion that I could somehow enlighten these boys.

When I first opened this place I'd humor them, come up with my own useless crap. I bought this bar with an inheritance I got from my uncle, who was a bit of a son of a bitch. I never liked the guy, he cheated on my aunt, beat his kids, that kind of thing. A real bastard, ornery as all Hell. No one liked him. But he got drunk one night, ran his pick-up into an overpass and he couldn't get the seatbelt off before the truck caught fire. One of these guys I know who works for the fire department, one of the first responders, we went to high school together, told me the old man melted to the vinyl of the bench seat. Still can't say I ever felt bad for the man.

Anyways, whatever one might've said about my uncle, he always had money and lots of it. And for some reason -- probably my Aunt's doing -- I got some of it. Not a lot, but enough to open this place. Since I never liked the guy -- and really I feel a little guilty about taking anything from him -- I never really admit where the cash for this place came from. So I slapped a photo of James Joyce I pulled from an old *Life* magazine up on the wall, found a frame and everything and started telling everyone that's who owned the bar, old Bennie and they all bought it. Now, everyone so often, one of them'll tell us "how old Bennie used to do things." I don't understand it either, never did.

But tonight I don't feel like arguing, or bullshitting, or anything, really, I just don't have the energy and I can't stop thinking about that phone call. I guess they notice, too, because Terry asks me, "What's wrong with you?"

It's obvious when I get like this, on days I'm just not in the mood. I'll stand up against the back of the bar and clean glasses with rag, nod when someone says something

so it looks like I'm paying attention, but really I'm spaced out in my own head, thinking about how I should clean the gutter at the house maybe. The glasses are already clean and the rag's usually dry, but I picked up the habit from watching too many movies. I like to look the part I guess.

"Linda called earlier," I say, not really wanting to tell them, but needing to get it out anyway. We've been separated for a year-and-a-half now, and this is the first time she's called me and done something other than scream and yell, and even that was months ago. I don't want it to bug me like this, I didn't think it would, but I get mixed up sometimes. Her voice does that to me.

Then Reggie chimes in, "What'd she want?"

"I don't know, she didn't say. She wants to come by here." I can feel my stomach knotting up, my body acknowledging the tactical mistake I made telling her she could drop by.

"Well, did she say anything?" Reggie asks, taking a drag off his cigarette.

"Not much really," I reply. "She just was asking how I'm doing. Asked how my writing's going."

As soon as I say that, I catch a look from Bert, him shaking his head and then going back to his book. He knows and I know she never cared about these things before, never had any use for it.

"She wants something," Terry butts in. He pulls off his cap and runs his fingers through his thinning hair. "Probably money."

"I doubt it," I say. "I mean, why would she need money? She's got Mitch."

“Maybe she don’t have Mitch no more,” Reggie says. “That woman will suck a man dry, like a leech or a, I don’t know-”

“A food dehydrator, maybe,” Terry chimes.

“Or a food dehydrator.”

“I didn’t mean to tell her she could come by,” I say. “But her phone call surprised me.”

Which is the truth. It was the first voice I heard all day, and for a second I forgot she ever left me, but as quick as I forgot, I remembered again. How she split for this guy named Mitch who’s ten years her senior, who owns a lumber yard and a Great Dane. She’d been seeing him behind my back, but the thing is, back then, I should’ve known something was up after she started shaving her legs again.

When she left me, she told me I never paid her enough attention, that Mitch loves her, that he’s a “real man” (I’m still not sure what she meant by that), that I always spent too much time writing instead of paying her attention. I never even asked her for what I really did wrong, I was just going to let her leave because I was never good at fighting her. When she got an idea in her head, she was like a mudslide, you could just never stop her. At least I couldn’t. I’ve always been like that.

So when she asked if she could drop by and I said yes, I wasn’t surprised I did even though my brain kept saying “nonono.” But I still said yes. This is how I get myself in trouble sometimes.

“Don’t say we didn’t warn you,” Reggie says, and he stamps out what’s left of his smoke.

And right then, the front door opens, and all this light pours in from outside, overpowers the dingy look of the bar and the electric glow that comes from the lamps and the neon beer signs that line the wall. It's amazing what beer companies will give you for free just for getting people drunk.

All I can see in the doorway is a dark outline of a person, a silhouette, and I feel my heart speed up just from the idea of who it might be. My whole physiology changes. But as the figure moves forward, I can tell it's not her. Whoever it is they're too tall, and I suddenly realize it's Randall, this kid who comes in every so often. He works with my brother down at this car dealership off the interstate. He's the youngest one here most nights and his face shows it.

He makes his way inside and takes a seat next to Terry, and that's when I notice that Randall's wearing his Raybans despite the murk. Terry notices this too and doesn't waste any time.

"Hey there Ray Charles," he says, thinking this is real clever, not for a second realizing that no one else does. "It's looks a bit dark in here for those."

Slowly, Randall pulls his glasses off, and he's got this great big shiner around his right eye. All he says is, "I ran into a door." I get him his usual before he can say anything else.

Nobody for a minute thinks Randall really ran into a door, we all know it's Ernesto's fault. Ernesto is Randall's roommate, at least that's what they say, but really we know he's his boyfriend. If you ask either one of them, they'll say that they're just living together, that they're good pals, just buddies, even though they've been living together for six years now. I mean, they ran off to Massachusetts one summer on a road trip, at

least that's what they said, and they both come back with matching wedding bands, like no one can deduce this kind of thing. Every so often you'll see Travis scraped up, a fat lip or a black eye, but it's always funny because then you'll see Ernesto the next day with his arm in a sling or something. But they still stay together, Lord knows why, but I'm sure you can say this of anyone. I guess they can both dish it.

My aunt used to hit on my Uncle Denny sometimes. He's the uncle I liked, the one on my dad's side. She never hurt him, though. I think she weighed maybe a hundred pounds, while Denny was a big old fat man, elephantine, but she had a mean streak in her. I think that's what he loved. I have fuzzy memories from my childhood of her hitting him with a broom and he just sat there laughing, this jolly fat man chuckle. Denny died from heart disease, like no one could see that coming. Sometimes life works out the way everyone expects, no surprises, just the obvious.

When he died, actually, right around that time I opened the bar. No inheritance from him, which is maybe a shame. I would've done something better with it than sink it into this dive.

I guess Linda and I'd been married for about a year at that point, and I had this job that I hated, working for an insurance company. Menial work that steam-rolled the souls of better men than I. But looking back, it probably wasn't all that bad. I got to sit in air-conditioning all day.

So when I got my inheritance, I decided it must be a sign, an out, or just an opportunity, and a bar seemed like a good idea. Now, I'm not even sure why, but this is how hindsight works, makes you question things that seemed so surefire at the time. But I think it mostly just grew out of wanting a change of pace and partly because I had this

idea I could just stand around and come up with stories, that it was that kind of inspirational environment. It worked for awhile, until the separation, when I just stopped doing much of anything. I try and write here and there, but it all comes out bad. The last thing I tried to write, I saw this sign at the mattress store these Christians run that said "He has risen, but our prices have not," and I tried to write this story about Jesus coming back to earth and getting stuck selling mattresses, but it didn't really go anywhere.

Most of my free time these days I spend watching TV, even though I hate everything I see on there. I don't get out much and most the women I meet just seem boring. It's not like Linda was one in a million. She smelled nice and was soft and laughed at my jokes, even the ones I'm sure she didn't get, and made me pancakes shaped like Mickey Mouse's head when we first met, but it's not like these things are hard to find. At least that's what I tell myself. But I loved her, and that's a hard thing to shake.

And right when I'm thinking back to her, light bursts in through the front door, like God Almighty's barging through the entrance, and before my eyes adjust I can tell it's her. Just instinct on my part I suppose.

I swear, it's like some movie and she's walking through the room in slow-motion, and I don't notice the dusty concrete floor or the cobwebs hanging from the light fixtures or the lunches sitting around, drinking cheap booze and smoking cheaper cigarettes.

I notice she's got this low cut top on, because how can you not notice that, and she's grown out her hair since the last time I saw her, and it's done up in this massive, intricate pile of locks the color of chocolate syrup. Now, I don't want to sound shallow,

and I'm certainly not all about looks, far from it. But there are certain things that a woman can do to get the attention of a man, and she knows all of them.

When she gets to the bar, she's leaning up on it, propped up by her elbows, grinning at me, a fresh coat of lipstick covers her lips, her make-up's done and I catch the scent of her perfume. She smells like flowers, lilacs I think, a sharp contrast to the scent of discount tobacco wafting through the air. In this light she looks delicate. She bats her eyes at me just a little and the first thing she says is, "You gotta minute to come outside?"

And all I can think about is how I shouldn't be dealing with this.

Outside it's still afternoon and the sun's just starting to set and it's right in my eyes. It's warm out for Spring and the sunlight makes my bones feel good, but I can't really see much because I'm not used to the brightness just yet, so I shield my face with my hands, trying to see through the slits of my eyelids as I squint. All I can hear are our feet crunching on the gravel of the parking lot and the sound of a semi grinding down the highway that passes in front of the bar. I have this idea in my head that I'll be real firm with her, real authoritative, that I'll demand to know what she's doing here, why she's interfering with me, now of all times, but before I can, she says, "I left Mitch."

I don't have a clue what this means for me, or for us, but all I really want is to come up with something pithy or clever that'll really hurt her. Something that just tears her down, some conversational hydrogen bomb of devastation. But all I can say back is, "I'm sorry to hear that."

And she replies, “No it’s fine, I’m doing OK,” and then proceeds to go on and on about how they just weren’t right for each other, he just wasn’t sensitive enough, how they bought a cat and he turned out to be allergic to it.

Then she stops, and we stand there in silence and I think I hear a woodpecker in the distance, and to end the awkwardness, I finally blurt out the only thing I can think of.

“Well, if you need someone to talk to about it, I guess I can help.”

“Maybe later,” she replies. “But, like, for right now I was really wondering if I could borrow some money to get me through the week.”

And I just look at her, my hand still shielding my eyes like a hat brim. I imagine that anyone driving by might assume I’m saluting her.

She starts up again, “I mean, I get paid Friday, it’s just that Mitch usually helps out with my bills, I just need some help getting through the week.”

All I can say at this point is, “That’s all you wanted?”

“Well, no,” she says, starting to catch on. “I wanted to see you, too.”

She starts talking about this recurring dream she keeps having, except she calls it an occurring dream, about how she’s in bed with Mitch and she wakes up to find the house is on fire. The flames are eating up the wallpaper, climbing up the drapes, and she leans over to Mitch and starts poking him with the end of a backscratcher that came out of nowhere and instead of waking up, all he does is ask to her to open a window or turn the fan on because it’s too hot in there. Right then is when she notices her blanket has caught fire, and when she realizes she’s about to be burnt alive is when I bust through the door with no shirt on. At least according to her that’s what happens. And so shirtless me walks over to the bed and scoops her up and we leave the house.

She says, “I can’t remember what happens after that, but I think we ride around in your pick-up eating ice cream.” And then she says to me, “You always were the one to pick me up.”

Right when she says that, I realize my pupils have adjusted to the sun. I can make out the wrinkles that are now etched into her face and the gray hairs that have started creeping from her scalp. The wind shifts, and instead of flowers I smell the scent of mulch that sits piled around the small trees that line the rim of the parking lot. She has lipstick on her teeth

I pull out my wallet and all I’ve got is two tens and two fives, so I ask her if that’s enough, and she says, yes, it’ll help a little, and I slide the bills into her palm and start walking back towards the bar.

“Maybe we can get dinner sometime soon?” I hear her say when I get to the door.

“Yeah, sure,” I say back, and then go inside.

I walk through the door and as soon as I make my way back around the bar, Reggie asks, “What’d she want?”

All I can mutter is, “Money.” I hear a chorus of jeers, topped off by Travis saying, “Women” and the clinking of beer bottles that follows.

And from a voice down at the end of the bar I hear, “You know what old Bennie used to say?”

I look and it’s Bert, his hands clasped over the top of the closed journal he had just been writing in.

“No, what did he say?”

Hiking his thumb to the photo of Joyce on the back wall, he says, “Old Bennie used to say, ‘I am tomorrow, or some future day, what I establish today. I am today what I established yesterday or some previous day.’ That’s what he used to say. Makes sense, doesn’t it?”

And I stand there, leaning against the back of the bar, and I feel the silence that suddenly surrounds me in the dim insides of the room.

I realize I’m biting down on my thumbnail, an old nervous tick that still crops up every now and again. Pulling the finger from my teeth, I look it over and notice there’s still filth crammed underneath from earlier, soiled and grubby.

From my back pocket, I draw out an old pen knife I carry and with the end of the blade start to carefully pick the grime from beneath my nail, until slowly I start to realize I don’t mind all that much.

Chimes through the Trees

The first thing I notice when I open the closet are all the ties. There must be sixty or seventy just hanging there. Silk, knit, polyester, novelty, I have them all, even a few bowties. Most of them I never wear, there's just too many, but I still buy them. I go out some times, go to department stores, and I'll buy a tie and wear it to work once. Then it goes on the rack, never to be seen again. I worry sometimes that this is my idea of excitement.

I grab a knit tie that hangs in front of me above an old tattered pair of sneakers and a stack of books I've been meaning to read. In front of the bathroom mirror, I flip up my collar, slide the strip of fabric around my neck. My fingers work in unison from rote memorization to from a four-in-hand knot, the simplest knot.

Back in the living room, as I head towards the front door, the exit, I notice the plastic bin by the doorway. I wonder if she's ever going to pick up the rest of her things. I don't want the reminder anymore. That feeling -- that heaviness that starts in my stomach and rises up into my throat, returns -- and I force myself to say that I don't care. Honest, I don't.

I say that a lot. Then I'll smell her scent in my clothes, in my bed. The same smell that I once looked forward to, now I can't stand it, it offends me. Memories, it's as simple as that.

As soon as I'm out of the apartment building, I light a cigarette and inhale deep and slow. I catch myself smoking more often these days.

* * *

I make the turn onto the gravel road. It rained the night before, hard. The downpour washed ruts into the dirt, small ravines cut into the soil, so I'm forced to go slow. The drive here isn't long, twenty minutes tops, but it always feels longer. I think it's because I dread coming here, even though I refuse to admit that to myself. But inside me I know it's true.

I roll down my window as I inch forward, the damp, musty smell of mud crawling through the opening. The road is flanked on each side by trees whose shade cools the summer air. A quick breeze comes through my window from an approaching storm; you can feel that electricity that floats through the air. I can see the clouds, dark and brooding, creeping their way over the mountains that sit in the distance in front of me, filtering through trees that line the ridge, like slick fingers through hair. I turn down the radio and listen carefully. I can hear the chimes through the trees, their chaotic song just faint at this point.

I get to my mother's house, which sits at the end of the road. Surrounded by oaks and pines in the middle of nowhere, it's squat and unassuming, with a screened-in porch on the front. The chimes are louder now; they're the only thing I can hear. The wind is picking up, becoming riled, and the music, the sound, it's all just cacophony, until you realize each chime plays its own tune. They hang from every tree, hundreds of them, collected over the years. I don't know what the appeal is for her, she just loves them. I don't dare ask, because I'm afraid of what her answer might be, and I'm afraid I'll realize just how little I really know about my mother.

I pull to a stop in the driveway and roll up my window, grabbing the box from the passenger's seat, another set of wind chimes inside. Every month or so I visit, and every time I bring her a new chime. Once, I got her a bird feeder, but she never put it to use, so I stick with what works.

Outside the car, all I hear are the sounds. She loves it, but I can't understand how anyone could deal with all the noise.

Whenever I come, I worry about her. She's getting up there in age. My parents were already fairly old when they had me, older than your average couple starting a family. It feels like I've always been around old age.

Walking up to the porch, I see her silhouette sitting there. She's always in the same place, sitting in her rocking chair, listening to the notes floating around her head. Slowly, I open the flimsy screen door of the porch and notice her eyes are closed. She is motionless. I'm afraid that I'm going to find her dead here one day and I don't know how I would react if that happened. I have never lost someone close to me, never seen a dead body. In my twenty-six years on this earth, I have somehow managed to never attend a funeral. Death remains a strange, opaque notion to me, something that happens to animals and celebrities.

Moving slowly, careful not to make too much noise, I get closer. She remains motionless, until finally, her eyes begin to slowly open. I'm safe for now.

"Hey, sweetie, how are you?" she says pleasantly, a tinge of sleep still in her speech. Her voice has this ability to cut through all the surrounding noise without changing its volume and still be clear and soft. Adaptation, I assume. Nevertheless, she

always sounds content, and whether it's spawned from a place of ignorance or lunacy on her part, I'm always jealous.

"I'm fine," I reply. "I got you something." Handing her the box, there's no need to tell her that I've brought her anything, it's habit by now.

"Oh, thank you!" she says as she takes the package from my hand. She opens it and pulls the wind chime from inside. It's nothing fancy, just gray metal tubes, but her face still lights up just a bit. The only ornamentation is a small plastic hummingbird that hangs from a string in the middle. The ones three feet tall or made of bamboo, for birthdays or Christmas -- the really fancy ones -- I save for Christmas or birthdays.

"I'll put it up later," she says. "I just feel like resting for now." She's always resting, in spite of the constant noise. Sometimes I wonder if that's all there is to do when you get old, just sitting and waiting. I sit down in the chair next to her. She's holding the chime in front of her, looking it over, examining it, running her fingers over it, like it's somehow different than all the others, unique.

"Do you like it?" I ask. I already know she'll say she loves it.

"I love it. Thank you."

I know exactly how the rest of our conversation will go. It's always the same, the same questions, the same answers. She'll ask me if I want anything to drink, I'll say yes, we'll go inside, and she'll ask me about my job and ask me if I've spoken to my father, and just ask me about life in general. It's always the same, and all of my answers will be white lies, just enough to get by. But for once, she surprises me.

“So how’s Amy?” She never asks about her, ever. They only met once, and that was months ago. I am completely caught off-guard, and I start to feel my face grow warm. My mouth feels dry and I’m not sure if I can swallow.

“Oh, she’s fine.” The wind picks up and the sound of the chimes hanging in the distance grows louder.

“Is she working today?”

“Yeah, she gets stuck working Sundays a lot.”

I wonder if she can tell that I am lying through my teeth. After all, she did give birth to me. We shared a heartbeat at once. I don’t have the nerve to say that she left me. And it’s not that I even care that she knows, or that I think there’s the off chance that the news might break her heart, though I doubt it’s something that will keep her up at night. But this way is easier. It’s easier than explaining that I’m fine that we’re no longer together, I really am, but what really scares me is the empty bed.

“Well, that’s too bad,” she says. “I really wish I could see her more. She’s a sweet girl.”

“Yeah, she is.”

I want this conversation to end now, though I should have known it would sprout up eventually. I want to leave and go home, but I can’t think of an excuse to get me back on the road. The bizarre thing is that there is no way for me to bring myself to that, for whatever reason. All I can hear is the clatter of the chimes and I know there is no way I can just take off. Somehow, I feel like that’s the point at which I would be acting unfair towards her. I just look at the floor and I realize I have nothing to say.

“Do you remember when I left your father?” she asks. “Or were you too young?”

“No,” I reply, staring down at my shoes, gently flipping my tie between my fore- and middle finger, like a child picking at his bellybutton. “I remember.”

Which is true. In fact, it remains a vivid memory despite how young I was when it happened. Five-years-old, six tops, I stood in the doorway to the living room, dressed in Superman pajamas. The only light in the room was the pale yellow of a lamp in the corner, the rest of the room, the fake wood panels of the wall, the ugly, worn, green carpet, coated in muddy shadow. My mother, her hair a mess, a look of exhaustion on her face, her eyes glassy and wet, argued with my father, who sat listless in our tattered armchair. The point of their argument I’ve long since forgotten, but I remember how tired, how beat down, my mother looked and how my father just sat slouched and unresponsive.

She scooped me up and we left in her car. Sitting in the passenger’s seat, not tall enough to see over the dash, all I could see was her, the headlamps from passing cars occasionally illuminating her face and the tears that passed down her cheeks. Knowing nothing else, I laid my head on her lap and fell asleep as we drove through the night, her fingers brushing the hair from my eyes. I don’t remember where we ended up that night.

Looking at her now, sitting in her rocking chair, she looks so frail, the same way we all end up.

“Did I ever tell you why I left him?” she asks.

“No,” I reply. “I always figured it’s because he’s a drunk.”

“Your dad’s drinking wasn’t the problem,” she says. “It was that he never cared about anything. I would’ve been fine if he’d cared about being a drinker, but even that never seemed to matter to him.”

Just then, the winds ease themselves, and the constant music that engulfs the house simply stops, with only the faintest echoes of reverberation still floating through the air. The look on my mother's face is one that I've never seen before. It's sympathetic and hurt and noble all at once, and I have no idea why it feels so foreign.

My hand sits atop the arm rest of the chair I sit in, and she gently places her palm on top of mine. Tensing for a second, not used to contact, I look down at her thin hand, veins, pumping blood, visible through her mottled skin. I grow at ease, slowly. Her eyes are trained on my own.

"I haven't missed your father for a long time," she says. "Not to say I never did, but it does go away. There are other people in my life who I've known for a lot less than I miss a lot more, but I'm sure you know how that is. You're a smart cookie. I'm not much for giving advice, but whatever you enjoy, find it and just try and surround yourself with it, no matter how silly or stupid everyone else thinks it is. It makes it all just a little bit easier."

She removes her hand, leans back into her chair, beginning to sashay back and forth. The wind picks up again and pushes its way through the screen that encloses us, and I get goose bumps as it runs its fingertips over my skin. The chimes pick up their tune where they left off, and this time I try and see if I can find any order in all of it, some profundity or meaning in the noise, when I realize I can't. It's not there and it never will be.

I sit with my mother for a little bit longer. Our conversation goes back to usual, a dance that we both know the steps to. I hug her before I leave and give her a peck on the cheek. The storm still hasn't come, but the clouds mask the sky nonetheless. Walking to

my car, the sound of gravel under my feet, the ground below softened by the previous night's rains, I get in and leave.

At the end of the dirt road, where the pavement meets the earth, that first hint of civilization, I stop. I roll up my windows and lean my forehead against the steering wheel, and just listen to the silence. And the rain finally decides to come down in fists.

Some Remembered, Some Long Forgotten

The shaking didn't wake Abel up until it graduated to full blown pushing and shoving, a violence that crawled its way towards assault. His brain hadn't kicked in quite, stalling in spurts and fits. His senses felt dulled and muted and all he heard, swirling around his head, were sounds of anger and annoyance and a vague sense that these noises held some deeper, more salient meaning.

"Get up already!" he heard as he finally became aware, finally understanding and recognizing the sound of Emily's voice.

She repeated herself, and Abel attempted to reply, to tell her he's trying, but a garbled mash of guttural grunts and moans fell out instead. His head throbbed to the beat of some unrecognized song and his mouth felt like some bizarre, amoral mix of an ashtray and the floor of a truck stop bathroom. The light around him formed only amorphous blobs and he reached for his glasses that were nowhere to be found, only to realize they weren't attached to his ears but wrapped around his mouth, crooked and disheveled.

"Jesus, will you just get up already?" he heard once more, but this time he actually did, slowly, like some dreaded golem rising into creation.

"I'm up, I'm up," he finally muttered, raspy and dry, as he pulled his glasses up the bridge of his nose, the world suddenly shifting into focus. "What's wrong?"

"What's wrong? What's wrong?!" she replied, her voice verging closer and closer to a squeal. "You have no idea, do you?"

"No, of course I do," Abel said, though, in reality, he had no clue. His brain started grinding, trying to remember what, exactly, he might have done, but with a good idea as to which direction the conversation pointed.

"Maybe, then, you can explain to me *why*, exactly, there's a cabinet sitting on our lawn," she said, her brow furrowed, her lips slightly curled showing her teeth -- a tick she carried for as long as Abel knew her -- her finger pointing out the window of their bedroom where the early morning light shimmied in on waves and particles. Abel followed the slight, delicate curve of her arm, past the elbow, along her forearm and finally past the tip of her finger.

Through the flimsy cloth of the curtains, he spied the big cedar hulk, ornate, painted and chiseled around its edges and panels in intricate, flowing designs, its timbered body the color of dark chocolate.

"Oh baby, that's not a cabinet," he replied, giving the only answer he knew. "It's an armoire."

Immediately, she ripped the bedroom slipper from her foot and smacked him, a great loud pop ringing out, the sound and the action more the message than the physical outcome attested to.

Sitting up, propped forward by his elbows and forearms as she abruptly stormed from the room, Abel slid his glasses to the top of his head and rubbed the bridge of his nose with his thumb and index finger, trying to dull the jack hammering inside his skull. His memory of the night before remained fuzzy to a certain extent. His brother's birthday party, some Mexican food, a trip to the bar. The rest a jumble of blurred images; underdeveloped photographs, vistas viewed through frosted glass. Content that these

memories had faded into the ether long ago -- or at were best entrenched somewhere deep and Freudian never to be shaken loose -- Abel swung his legs to the floor and made his way to the door.

In the living room, she shoved whatever conveniently laid around into an old gym bag: a pair of dirty socks, a coverless copy of what looked like *Time* or *Newsweek*, a faded dishrag. To Abel, it appeared all for show, irrational and aimless, but he watched the broken seriousness in her eyes and spotted the expression telling him to tread lightly.

“Look, sweetie,” he started, gentle and calm, his best attempt at being smooth, diplomatic. “Don’t worry. I can take that thing back and get my money back. I can fix this, you know that.”

“Abel,” she replied, exhaustion in her voice, “this isn’t about fixing anything. It’s about not doing shit that needs to be fixed in the first place. Do you even know where you got that dresser? You can’t just keep getting drunk and doing this shit.”

Abel’s mind processed the thoughts, the ideas fired through his brain, over chemicals and synapses, to form a rebuttal, to give his side of the story. But he couldn’t work up the courage, the gall. Instead, he simply fixed his eyes on Emily, noticed the heaviness which formed inside his stomach, lethargic and ashamed, and muttered the only words he could think of.

“It’s an armoire.”

“Do you remember when you got this?” she said, picking up a crystal decanter that sat atop their coffee table, portraits of Richard Nixon and Spiro Agnew painted precisely across its body.

During last year's Super Bowl, he wanted to say, but instead he just stood there shrewdly stone-faced. This didn't stop her.

"We have a skeeball machine in our garage, a cement mixer you've never used sitting in the back yard and a kayak in our spare room. You can't even swim. Do you realize how stupid that is?"

"Of course I do," were the words that passed through his lips. Inside his head, a series of events wandered by. A cousin's post-wedding rehearsal festivities, his stepbrother's Oscar party, the bar mitzvah of an old friend's nephew he hardly knew, drunken events that ended with these useless objects cluttering his house.

"I've tried so hard," she muttered faintly to herself. With no point left to make, she repeated herself. "So hard."

Abel stood, too weak to fight, too drained to argue, too embarrassed to disagree. He watched Emily and the meager, random spoils that filled her duffel bag as she made her way through the front door. Tensing his body, he waited for a slam to accompany her departure, but it never came, a final, quiet testament to the utter albatross he had become for this woman.

Outside the windows and through the walls, Abel listened to the tires of her car scrape and crawl over the gravel driveway and out onto the pavement. Once he knew she'd left, he started a pot of coffee, listened to it drain into the pot for a second, then went and changed into a worn-out gray t-shirt, wrinkled and faded, and a pair of cut-off shorts splattered with white paint and motor oil.

He poured a cup of coffee, black and overbearing, and meandered about the small house, stopping before the front window of the living room that drowned the room in

yellowed morning light. Through the glass, he looked over the armoire, holding the mug with two hands while gently, slowly taking sips of coffee, trying to remember how, where or why it sat there in the overlong grass. Nothing came, his memory still sat stagnant and a feeling of sadness and anxiety crawled its way serpentine over Abel's skin.

Something about the house, a stale claustrophobia, started to seep in and gave Abel the overwhelming feeling that he needed to leave or else face some miserable, unknown consequence. So he finished his coffee, grabbed the shades that sat on the coffee table and clipped them to his eyeglasses and slid a pair of tattered, ratty old Chucks onto his feet, finally making his way out the door.

Outside, the summer air sat heavy and humid, and already, even in the morning hours, he started to feel his skin become sticky and tacky. His only option remained a ride down the road in an attempt at relaxation, the radio turned up loud, the windows down, the only means he had to figure out what to do with the armoire. And everything else.

He saddled into his car, an old, beat up Toyota, and found the keys dangling from the ignition, remaining from the night before. But when he turned them, the engine greeted Abel not with the sound of ignition, but with a dull, dead click. The headlamp controls sat in the "on" position, and Abel immediately knew that the battery sat drained, the car dead and listless.

"I know how you feel," he muttered, patting the dusty dashboard.

Back outside, he made his way to the garage and yanked open the wide aluminum door, spying the amassed knick-knacks and odds-and-ends that fill up the space. A gallery of junk sat stacked on shelves and tables and on top of each other, a disorganized

frenzy of neglected rubbish. Weedeaters and lawnmowers and baseball bats and garden lanterns and tiki torches and on and on and on. Each with a story, some remembered, some long forgotten.

Digging through the junk he found a bright yellow bicycle underneath a canvas bag full of half-deflated dodgeballs. Inflating the tires with a plastic bicycle pump, Abel thought about how he woke up one morning over a year before to find the bike propped against the end of his bed. He'd been bowling the night before and remembered little else.

Climbing onto the banana seat, slowly and awkwardly, Abel pedaled his way onto the pavement and down the road, gliding slowly past the oaks and pines that lined the way. Years had passed since the last time he rode a bike, a luxury that died the day he earned his driver's license. He pushed, his balance uneasy at first, and his legs began to burn, the consequences of years of disastrous living and general inactivity. But Abel didn't mind the pain in his legs or the ache in his lungs; it felt almost baptismal in a way, cleansing out impurities.

Pumping harder, he picked up speed and closed his eyes and felt the wind kiss his face and run its fingers through his ragged hair. When he opened his eyes he spotted the old gravel road that acted as a short cut to the sparse part of town that held only cow pastures and Baptist churches. A small convenience store also stood on the other end and with nothing better to do with his day but meander for a bit, he decided to bike down the path to the store and get a bite to eat. Something cheap, a day old sandwich from the fridge in the back and a Coke in one of those glass bottles that reminded him of a childhood -- of good old days -- that never quite existed.

Leaning in, he took the turn onto the dirt road. The pass itself sat shaded on both sides by trees, the only sunlight filtered in shafts through the leaves overhead. Here the weather existed as almost ideal, and it attempted to seduce Abel into forgetting his problems altogether, something he welcomed easily.

Up the road, he spotted an old pick-up truck sitting by the shoulder, the powder blue paint of its tailgate faded, chipped and rusted in spots. As he closed in, Abel stopped his legs from churning and glided over the rocks and dirt that lay flat underneath him. At the front of the truck, a figure stood, a man, his back facing Abel. There appeared to be no trouble.

As he approached, became adjacent to the figure, Abel suddenly felt the urge to be nosy, quickly squeezed the bike's brakes, skidding abruptly to a stop just ahead of the truck. The sudden appearance of Abel didn't seem to affect the stranger, who simply turned his head, making eye contact, and Abel caught a glimpse of glassy-eyed sadness for just a second before it quickly disappeared.

The man wore a fedora tilted back on the top of his head, tufts of gray, thinning, neatly trimmed hair poking out from underneath, his face clean-shaven. He looked aged, but healthy and vaguely reputable, growing old respectably. A bouquet of flowers lay on the hood behind the man which combined with his manner of dress -- pressed jeans and a tucked in, short-sleeved dress shirt, tanned and shined russet cowboy boots -- made him look oddly refined and debonair. An unlit cigarette hung from the corner of his lips and began to flop up and down once he finally spoke.

"You got a light there, Chief?" he said, and Abel finally noticed him holding a pack of matches in his fingers. "These things just aren't cutting it."

“Yeah, sure,” Abel replied, and patted his pockets until he found a disposable Bic tucked away in back, a crushed pack of Pall Malls stored there, too. Pulling his own last cigarette from the cellophane and paper packaging, Abel lit it, then shuffled closer to the man, his bike to his side, lighter outstretched, until it became picked from his fingers.

“Thanks, kid,” the man said, lighting his cigarette and taking a long drag, leaning his head back and blowing a thin stream of smoke from between his lips. “Quit these things while you still can. They’re terrible.”

“I’ve tried, trust me. You OK out here?”

“Me? Yeah, I’m fine,” he replied, picking up the flowers from the hood. “I just have some business that’s all.”

“These things happen, I suppose,” Abel replied as he leaned against his bike slowly breathing in tobacco, realizing the sentence held no real weight or meaning. But he feared the awkwardness of silence which often made him say whatever came to mind. “What brings you out here?”

“My wife’s out there somewhere,” the man responded, jabbing a hitchhiker’s thumb towards the woods growing behind him. “I mean, she’s buried out there. But I didn’t put her there myself or nothing. Family plot.”

“Of course,” Abel replied, noticing a sudden uncomfortable nervousness in the man which quickly disappeared. “If I could just get my lighter back I’ll--”

“Oh, yeah, no problem,” he said, tossing the tiny plastic lighter all in one confident motion. “You got a name, kid?”

“Abel.”

“Like from the Bible? Your family real religious, Abel?”

"No, sir, not really. My mother always just liked the name. At least that's what she always told me growing up. We never went to church all that often."

"I doubt you were missing much, to be honest. My name's Harvey," the stranger said, holding his hand out. "Pleased to meet you."

Abel took the man's hand and shook it, feeling the strength of Harvey's grip. Harvey's palms were coarse and calloused in comparison to Abel's, but to the younger man, they acted not as an indication of age, but rather long years of difficult work; of effort, of reward.

"I never realized there was anyone buried out there," Abel said, squinting towards the growth of trees in front of him.

"No one does. Well, most people, that is. It's just a small plot. Half the time, I can never find it."

"Would you mind if I came with you?" Abel asked, purely out of curiosity. The idea of a secret -- any secret, anything more than what could be seen -- enticed Abel.

"Sure, why not," Harvey replied. "I never refuse company."

Grabbing the flowers from the hood, the old man turned toward the woods and motioned with his hand for Abel to follow, who dropped his bike into the ditch of the road. Amongst the trees, the only sounds were of the fallen branches snapping underfoot and the serenade of birds high up above, hidden and camouflaged. The two men moved slowly and deliberately, Harvey, Abel thought, because of his age. Abel because his hangover still lingered.

"You said your wife's out here? How long were you married?" Abel said, breaking the soft sounds that flitted through the forest.

"Eleven years," Harvey replied, still taking short puffs from his cigarette. "I still remember when eleven years felt like a long time. Now it's nothing."

"Well, it still sounds like a long time for two people to be in love with one another. At least to me."

Something about Abel's words caused Harvey to laugh, a short sort of chuckle, something Abel hadn't expected.

"Out of those eleven years, I can't even remember a time when we were both in love at the same time. Hell, I'm not even sure there was a time she even liked me."

"Then why were you married?" Abel asked.

"I'm not even sure. It's what you did then."

Looking towards the older man, who held the cigarette between his lips, the tulips in his hand, walking with a slight hitch in his posture as he trudged forward, Abel noticed an expression of contemplation in the man's face, beneath the crow's feet and wrinkles. There was activity behind those eyes, cognition, thoughts and memories triggered in his mind as they strolled over brush and fallen leaves and a carpet of dead pine needles from months earlier that muffled their steps.

Suddenly, Harvey stopped, inhaled one last breath from his smoke and, grabbing a birch for balance, extinguished the lit ash on the bottom of his boot, then dropped the butt to the ground. He spoke once more.

"Actually, she pretty much hated my guts the entire time. Can't say I blame her when it comes down to it."

"I'm not so sure about that," replied Abel, feeling the need to pry. "I mean, eleven years is a long time to be together."

"Not when you're Catholic like her, it's not," Harvey shot back. "You know, she had an aunt who was married -- still is, I guess -- for something like 40 years, and they hated each other. She tried to stab him with a potato peeler on their silver anniversary. But that's not really the point. The point is that I chased tail, boozed, gambled. There wasn't a commandment I didn't break. She had every right to hate me."

"Did you ever love her?" Abel asked, his voice timid.

"You must be some kind of romantic," Harvey said, a hint of sarcasm in his voice. "Look, whether or not I loved her isn't really the point, is it? I had friends, good friends, who never once said they loved a damned thing, and they were the kindest people I ever knew. And then there were people who claimed to love all kinds of things, and they were pure Hell. What I felt doesn't matter."

As these words came from Harvey, Abel spotted a small clearing ahead of them filled with sparse weeds and ragged grass and a handful of weathered granite tombstones, dirtied and unkempt. Varying in size, they grew from the ground like fingers slowly reaching heavenward. Before one of the headstones, the name "Meredith" and a portrait of a cherub carved into its face, Harvey knelt slowly and carefully, his body suddenly looking delicate. Sweeping the refuse of twigs that surrounded it away with his free hand, he removed his hat soberly.

And gently, solemnly, he laid the flowers at its base and ran his fingers over the words chiseled in stone. Staring at the face of the monument, he gnawed gently on his lower lip. Abel simply stood there, sweat beading on his brow and neck, tingeing his eyes with subtle stings of pain, feeling the burden of watching this intimate moment he knew he should never have been privy to.

For a handful of seconds, Harvey simply knelt, still, serene, almost a monument himself, until suddenly, he bent his head down, placed his fedora back on top of his naked head and began to stand gingerly, using the tombstone as his support.

“We had a bad kerosene heater and the fumes from it, I guess, they just smothered her in her sleep,” Harvey began to say without provocation, while gently swatting some invisible gnat or fly from in front of his face. “They told me she didn’t feel a thing, it was painless. So that was good. I should’ve been there, too, but I was out on business. It’s how these things work, I guess.

“But that’s enough about me. We should get out of here, I’m sure you’ve got things to do.”

They walked their way out of the forest in silence, the forlorn figure of the old man in lockstep next to Abel, who felt the July air still warming. He felt more estranged from this man than when they first met on the road not long before. A lifetime of stories, vignettes of memories long past, happiness and disappointment and heartbreak. Some deserved, some not.

When they finally emerged from the wood, Harvey held out his hand one last time. Abel shook it, noticing the grip had faded, the strength gone, for now at least.

“Thanks for the company again,” the old man said.

“You’re welcome,” Abel replied, the taste of stale coffee and cigarettes making the words difficult to release. “Don’t worry about it.”

“You need a ride? It looked like you’re headed my way.”

“No thank you. I was, but I think I’m headed back home.”

“Suit yourself. Nice meeting you, Abel.”

“Nice meeting you.”

From the ditch, Abel pulled the bike up by the handlebars, the leftover mud from old rainstorms sucking at his shoes. Behind him, he heard the pick-up fire up, and by the time he turned around, the truck had started down the road, a cloud of dirt and dust kicked up in its wake, the distinct sound of gravel being ground up underfoot following behind.

Once the truck had disappeared from view, Abel began to walk back towards home, pushing the bike by his side. No hurry still, he knew the things he needed to do, had to do, had ages to do; he just hoped he had the fortitude. As the noontime sun tumbled down around him, he climbed back onto the seat of the bicycle, comfortable to the point that the contraption almost felt like an extension of himself, pushing his legs as hard as possible, sweat slowly scaling down his face and stinging his eyes once more.

A Postcard of the Space Needle

I.

I met Roman because of Oliver Reed. The actor, the rabble-rouser, the alcoholic, the womanizer, the Englishman.

I sat in a bar in the city, a vaguely dirty place, a strange mix of slumming college kids and burnt-out, pony-tailed metalheads, the crowd sparse because of the early evening. Kitschy knick-knacks lined the walls above bottles of liquor, and a haze of cigarette smoke hung heavy and palpable in the air. Some punk band I didn't recognize played over the stereo, dimly audible, just background noise.

I nursed a free Coke, sitting on a stool near the end of the bar waiting on a friend. The magic of bars for someone who doesn't drink is that if it isn't alcohol, nine times out of ten it's going to be free. A small reward for being responsible, I suppose.

When I first heard Roman speaking down the bar from where I sat, I was watching the Red Sox-Blue Jays game on the TV above the bar, my attention occasionally broken up by quick, anxious glances at my wristwatch. The girl I sat waiting on was a good half hour late by that point. Actually, she never showed up at all, but this isn't important. What is important are the words I heard floating through the cloud of carcinogens and ambience up the bar from me. Some guy about my age was talking to the bartender. He wore thick black-rimmed glasses, short black hair and three days worth of unwieldy facial growth that, all combined, made him look like some sort of scruffy Peter Sellers.

"So he gets really drunk -- like, really really drunk -- and arm wrestles these four sailors," I heard the guy say. "Then has a heart attack and dies. And he was 60."

I realized I knew this story -- I'm amazed that anyone else would, too -- but I noticed this guys facts are wrong. Usually, I'd let it go, I like keeping to myself, it's just how I am, that's all. Usually, I'd just drink my Coke and watch the TV, let the world turn around me, but I'm starting to realize I've been stood up and I hate that rejection, that annoyance -- whatever the final outcome, that remainder, is. I don't feel like thinking about it any longer. So I interject.

"Excuse me," I said after I began moving my way towards the conversation, my drink in my hand, the condensation making my fingers wet, the tips of my free hand aimlessly running across tops of the faux leather barstools that sat empty and abandoned. "It wasn't four sailors, it was five."

"What?" the guy asks, and I'm offended for a second that he seems to think I'm wrong, because I'm not and I know I'm not.

"Oliver Reed," I reply. "That's who you were talking about, right?"

"Yeah, of course," he replies, a bit surprised. "You're sure it was five?"

"Positive."

He introduced himself, said he was named after some Austrian physicist, but never explained why. I figured he lied, but I didn't mind since it showed some imagination.

We started talking about Oliver Reed -- Ollie, as Roman called him, like they were old friends even though the man had been dead for years, died when we were still kids, really -- passing anecdotes back and forth, a convivial sparring.

Roman mentioned *The Devils* and how during shooting, when Ken Russell wanted to shave his eyebrows off for the film's climax, Ollie had them insured in case they refused to grow back. I mentioned how he once called Jack Nicholson "a balding midget." We talked about our favorite scenes from *Tommy*, how neither of us really cared for *Quadrophenia*, the movie or the album. We talked about the infield fly rule, String Theory, the Stegosaurus, Peter O'Toole, space travel, Black Sabbath's "Hand of Doom" and William Faulkner. Among other things.

Roman tells me he works in a movie theater as a projectionist, the pay is terrible, but it's easy, most of his nights are spent reading.

"If I do my job right no one should even know I exist," he said. "I'm magic to them."

Before long, last call came, and it wasn't till we slowly, reluctantly began to leave the bar, to re-enter the world, that I noticed Roman struggling to walk, swaying like a sailor in search of his sea legs. He was drunk. I felt impressed, somehow, that it took me this long to notice. His speech stayed perfect the entire night, nary a slurred syllable or indecipherable phrase, a remarkable trick. Grabbing his arm, I steered him towards the door.

"I'm fine," he said once we made our way outside, vaguely ashamed, but never rejected the help. "Actually, give me a minute."

Roman wedged himself against the building's brick façade and the metal rack of some weekly arts rag that sat alone on the sidewalk, before slowly sliding down the wall, sitting Indian style. He spat onto the sidewalk.

Outside, the spring air had chilled, turned cool, and I looked up past the tops of the buildings that climbed towards the sky above us. The atmosphere sat cloudless, and a hundred points of light, thousands of years old, littered the firmament, thousands more up there, hidden, drowned out by the city lights. I found the three stars that made up Orion's Belt, the only constellation I can consistently find, ran my eyes up to the hunter's shoulder where Betelgeuse hangs, flickering silent.

"Do you know how a movie projector works?" I hear Roman say suddenly, unexpectedly, still squat on the concrete, his head hunched down, his glasses off, his fingers tangled in his hair, a weary look. "A shutter opens and shuts every fourth frame so the film doesn't blur, so you can make out the action. But it happens so quick your eye, your brain never realizes it. A fourth of the time you're sitting there in that theater, eating your popcorn, you're in the dark. You're in the dark for so long and you never even notice."

II.

By summer, Roman moved into the tiny house I rented. My roommate left for Texas, to live with her boyfriend and Roman needed a place to stay. He'd been couch surfing for weeks at that point, after his girlfriend, some girl I never met, threw him out. So convenience came into play.

The house cowered in a thicket of trees, brick and unassuming, nondescript. And maybe a little bit shoddy. Spindly cracks like spider webs crawled up through the plaster walls inside, like maps of unknown rivers and tributaries. A heavy, musty, dank smell always clung to the air, probably more dangerous than we ever thought to acknowledge.

At night, if you laid still and quiet, you could hear skittering inside the wall, a sound we never felt the curiosity to investigate.

Frankly, we didn't care. We were young and the rent was cheap. Neither of us worked much in those days, so we spent our free time gallivanting with no real purpose. Our heyday, our salad days, but we were too naïve to notice, to care. But I'm sure now, that's their charm.

We spent most of our nights next to the old pine tree that sat lonely in the backyard, amongst the tired, wilted grass. Roman would grill whatever meat could be scrounged out of the fridge and I'd sit in a tattered old lawn chair, my bare feet propped upon a cooler filled with ice and beer and soft drinks. At dusk, I'd watch the fireflies dance about, their courting signals pulsing in the waning sunlight.

Some nights friends or acquaintances might come by but mostly it remained us, talking about books or music or movies or whatever came to mind. Tennis shoes or laundry detergent. Ice hockey or sweet tea.

Roman talked. A lot. About anything and everything, to anyone who might listen, and most of the time, that meant me. Which I didn't mind, I always figured I carried a talent for listening, for observing and watching. I'll always be convinced that's how we got along so well. Roman walked through the world begging people to pay attention to him. I loved the security that the veil of anonymity brought with it. We filled in what the other lacked, like the teeth of a zipper closing up.

And this is how I always realized when Roman became upset, when he refused to talk, walked around silent the entire day. One evening that summer, we sat in our usual place in the backyard, Roman grilling veggie patties, me sitting in my chair, reading a

magazine on fly fishing I found at the post office. I've never been fly fishing. Roman isn't talking and hasn't all day, instead carrying around a stern look of ambivalence. I've never been good at consoling, so usually I leave people to themselves. But every time I look up from my article, he looks more and more despondent and I can no longer help myself.

"You OK?"

"Hm?" he replied. "Yeah, yeah, I'm fine."

"You don't seem like it."

"A lot of things don't seem like what they really are," he said, flipping a burger, a sizzle coming from the grill, wisps of smoke wafting into the air.

I leaned my head back, the aluminum frame of the chair digging into my neck. The sky stretched above me, blue and soft, as a solitary cloud slowly floated diagonally, miles above my head, the shape of a turnip maybe. My eyes, slightly burning around the edges from fatigue, my energy sapped by the heat of summer, hotter and hotter each day, began to close and flutter slightly towards sleep, until the sudden sound of Roman's voice pulled me back to complete consciousness.

"My father's sick," he said. Never before had I heard him mention his family. "He's in the hospital. His liver's bad. I've got no idea if he'll make it. They've got no idea either. He's been sick for awhile."

"I'm sorry," I replied, feeling the insignificance of those words run through my body, my nervous system.

"Don't worry about it," he said. "I'm not, at least. We were never that close."

I could tell he was lying about not worrying, it would've been obvious to anyone, but I didn't call him on it. Instead, I let his words lie there, heavy, and looked at Roman as he stared down at the food that littered the grill. Not too long afterwards, we ate together, me in my chair, Roman atop the cooler, his arms propped upon his knees. We stayed silent.

That night, the heat refused to let me sleep. I spent hours vainly trying to nod off, doing nothing more than lying prone in bed, my arms and legs spread flat, my ears listening to the subtle drone of the ceiling fan spinning above my head.

But that's not all my ears picked up. They heard a sudden scuffling coming through the plaster walls from the room next to mine, Roman's room, and the faint murmur of a television set. I sat up and the clock that bathed the room in pale green light read 1:24.

Swinging my feet from the bed and onto the oak floor, I crossed the room silently on my toes, to my closet, being quiet for no good reason other than to not disturb the dark. Groping through the faint outlines of old boxes full of years of collected refuse, my fingers came upon the splintered lid of an aged Army-issue ammunition box. Once, in my youth, it held Matchbox cars and baseball cards. Now, it lay filled with the remains of a trip to the beach the year past, namely in the form of copious amounts of firecrackers and bottle rockets, all neatly bound in a paper bag.

I dressed quickly, put on shoes and made the quick trip down the hall to Roman's room, the sack of explosives tucked neatly under my arm, and with three quick bursts from my balled fist, I knocked on his door.

“Yeah?” I heard Roman’s muffled voice say. I slowly turned the knob and peeked in through the small sliver of an opening. He laid there on his bed, awash in an unnatural gray light that came from the TV.

“You busy?” I asked.

“No, just watching a movie,” he replied, his voice listless.

“Well, pause it or something. We’re going out.”

“It’s the middle of the night. The bars’ll be closed soon.”

I pushed the door open just a bit further, shoving the paper bag through the widened gap.

“I’ve got fireworks.”

Minutes later, we coasted down disserted back roads on our bicycles, the waxing crescent above the only light keeping us on the road. Our destination was the river that crawled not far from our house, and soon we heard it rushing over rocks and between trees in the distance, the sound accompanied by the songs of crickets and randy bullfrogs.

We pulled off the road into the parking lot of a picnic area that sat adjacent to the water, letting our bikes fall violently, carelessly to the gravel that paved the ground. Jogging towards the river in the charcoal outline of the night, I stopped on the shore, my eyes making out only a timid image of the water rushing before me, the blackened outline of a mountain sitting monumental across the way. Pulling a Roman candle from the satchel around my neck, I lit it, the sparks of the fuse abusing my eyes with its sudden explosion of light, until it burst forth, up into the sky, its sharp purple glow cutting through the dark. Then again, and again, over and over.

“Give me one,” Roman asked, standing next to me. I handed him a bottle rocket, and he slid its tail into an old beer bottle, grinding the entire apparatus into the silt and mud of the river banks. Seconds later, the remains of the rocket, shimmering green octopus arms, showered the water as they fell from the sky.

After an hour, the last of the fireworks combusted, we just sat on the bank in the dirt, propped up by our arms, our feet washing in the cold flow of the river. With the lighter that just minutes ago had been lighting the last of our sparklers and snakes, Roman lit a cigarette he’d pulled from a pack in his shirt pocket. For a second, I could see his face, illuminated, tinged in orange. The small ember at the end of his smoke hovered in the air, a gentle sway in its step, and the only sound the rush of water barely visible in front of us.

We sat not speaking for minutes, the silence comforting, meditative. How long I can’t say exactly, minutes upon minutes upon minutes, until finally, at some point, Roman simply said, “Thanks.”

III.

Our summer stayed on the same track, a waste of time to any outside observer, but they’d have done the same. We knew that much. We rode bikes everywhere in the August heat, to punk shows in the city, crowded with smelly, filthy kids. To screenings of French films in the basements of art galleries, audiences made up of aging, pony-tailed hippies discussing politics. To parties and bonfires and cookouts and art openings and street festivals. Different faces found everywhere we went, visages that created the portrait of our summer.

Around that time, I'd ran out of friends. All the people I knew once, were close with had left in some form or fashion. Some literal, out to make their way in the world in some unbeknownst fashion, in some faraway city bigger and more complicated than here. Others exited figuratively for any number of reasons, different interests leading people apart.

But at that time, Roman was there, and we were a team. I always let him lead, to take control, him being natural people person. And myself, of course, not. Roman loved to schmooze and chit-chat and grease his way through social situations. And I liked to hang back, to observe and listen. I remained fine hanging around as his sidekick, the quiet one. This was where I was comfortable.

Somewhere in all this, Roman met Clare, a tiny college student with thick black hair and a voice like Ally Sheedy. He never minded this, but it bugged the hell out me, though I never complained. How could I? Roman was happy, content. Sometimes, when it was just us, out of nowhere, he simply said, "I've got it bad."

Sometimes, too, he might repeat it, and the phrase became the mantra to a feeling Roman couldn't explain, didn't quite understand. Love. Or at least what he thought to be love. After all, maybe it was simple infatuation, desire gallivanting as true adoration. Who knows? He was pleased, that's all I knew.

As summer melted into fall, I started back to school and I saw less and less of Roman, his relationship taking up most of his own time. On weekends, I'd drive into the city, alone, in a usually vain attempt at entertaining myself.

When I did see Roman, Clare was always with him, attached to him by the elbow, their fingers locked together, maybe. When I got home from work at night, they'd be

sitting on the couch watching reality TV. Friday or Saturday nights, I'd see the two of them at the bar maybe. Mornings would come around, and I'd find her in the kitchen eating my cereal. I never really got to know her that well, the most in depth conversation we ever had, in some esoteric manner, involved tube socks.

With the sun going down earlier and earlier every night, and school and work getting more and more complicated and busy as the year grew older, I spent a lot of time by myself. I drove down old windy roads in the middle of nowhere, narrow mountain paths dotted by cow pastures, solitary mailboxes marking the opening to dirt roads that led to houses hidden in hills and behind trees. Once, this had been my favorite pastime. I found it meditative, just me, the steering wheel, my car stereo and miles of road beneath my tires.

My best thinking happened at these times, in the middle of the night, driving for hours at a time sometimes, my headlamps illuminating the pavement and its painted stripes.

One of these nights, I decided to leave, that I had to escape this town, this city, this place. We lived in a small city, so everyone seemingly knew one another, or knew their friends or their families. And while I recognized them all, I knew no one.

So driving aimlessly, lost in thought, this is what I decided. I'd head out west, maybe, follow the path, the swath, burned by so many before me with the idea that my freedom lay hidden out there somewhere, waiting for me to catch up.

I drove home with purpose and excitement that night. I had a goal, something I so often was missing in my life. A pointed direction.

I pulled into the driveway late that night, late enough to where the time no longer mattered, and through the bay window on the front of our house, I noticed the dull hue of television light.

Making my way up the walk and opening the front door, removing myself from the chill of the autumn air into the insides of the house, toasty and comfortable, I found Roman sitting on the couch watching *Duck Soup*.

“No Clare tonight?” I asked.

“I sent her home,” he replied, his voice disinterested.

“You sent her home? You can do that?”

“She said she thought Groucho was stupid,” he said, taking a swig from a can of beer that sat on the coffee table. “I was trying to watch *Animal Crackers*. So I told her to leave. She thought I was kidding, so I told her again.”

“Jeez,” I replied. “Seems harsh.”

“Maybe.”

Ignoring Roman’s behavior out of exhaustion, I walked through the living room and into the kitchen, started making myself a sandwich out of slices of processed cheese and what was left of the mayonnaise in our sparse refrigerator. I nibbled on the corners of my sandwich, gripped in my fingers beneath a napkin, and stopped in the living room doorway.

“I’m headed off to bed,” I said, with the sole intention of finishing that sandwich and sleeping till late in the oncoming morning.

Roman remained on the couch as when I’d last seen him, the same posture, the same spot, but silent, saying nothing. In the sparse light, I couldn’t quite make out if he

were awake, or even alive, and assumed that my words were not heard. But the instant the muscles that make up my body began to twitch towards the direction of bed, that split-second, I heard the sound of Roman's voice.

"My father died today."

Standing there, my brain tried to process the correct response, tried to calculate exactly what to say, what phrase, what grouping of words might help, might make everything better. Somehow.

But nothing came out. My lips and tongue and vocal cords stood ensconced, silent.

So instead, I just walked across the room, careful not to trip in the darkness, and took a seat at the end of the couch next to my friend, my sandwich still in my hands.

IV.

As winter approached and the last of the leaves fell from the trees, I saw less and less of Clare. When I did see her, the mood between her and Roman had decidedly changed, a fact that was obvious to everyone around the couple except for the immediate party involved. Sometimes those in the most dire need of information, of intelligence, are the last ones to know, maybe out of ignorance, maybe out of stubbornness. But with the two of them, the luster, the new, had worn off.

One night, I woke up to a strange sound coming from the bathroom across the hall from my room, made more foreign and bizarre through the fog of sleep. Ambling to my door, punch drunk from grogginess, the cold of the hardwood floor punishing my bare

feet, I turned the knob and squinted hard from the onrush of light that came through the open bathroom door.

The discordant sounds of splashing, disturbed toilet water and the retching noise of vomiting came from somewhere in front of me, my adjusting eyes making the world beyond me an formless blob of light and shadow.

My brain slowly began to jumpstart and the scene before me slowly made sense to me in soft focus. Roman sat, awkward and angular, on the floor of the bathroom, one arm on the rim of the toilet, a small sliver of saliva or some other bodily fluid hanging from the corner of his mouth.

“Sorry, did I wake you?” he asked suddenly, wiping the mess from his lips with the back of his naked forearm, quickly slumping, crumpled and languid, against the bathtub. “I was just throwing up.”

“Obviously,” I replied, rubbing in vain the sleep from my eyes. The bathroom window above the tub sat open, and cold winter air rushed in, freezing. “How much have you had to drink?”

“A lot,” he said, shielding his eyes from the light overhead. “Clare left me.”

I moved forward, and tried to help him up from the floor which he slowly crept closer to, but he was having none of it. So instead I propped myself against the sink.

“I’m sorry,” I said, not thinking of any other response, the winter air prickling my skin in goose bumps up and down my arms.

“It’s not your fault, trust me,” he replied, slowly pushing the dead weight of his torso up from the floor. “I didn’t even really like her.”

“Well that’s not true. Or else you wouldn’t be acting like this.”

"Of course I would," he replied, spitting quickly into the toilet that sat next to him at chest level. "I always act like this. I love engaging in my own navel gazing."

"I can tell," I said. "Look, why don't we get you off this floor, get you cleaned up and get you to bed. You'll feel better in the morning."

"Of course I will," he replied, slowly lurching into an upright, seated position, his legs still spread out askance. "I'll be perfectly fine in the morning. I always do. I don't care if I'm alone. That's the part that scares me."

Roman finally, slowly, stood, bracing his drunken body against the bare, aluminum towel rack bolted to the wall. I just stared at him at a loss, finding nothing to say because there was nothing to say, nothing insightful or worthwhile that he didn't already know, that he wasn't already aware of. Running his fingers through the mess of hair atop his head, he began to speak once more.

"Tell me again how Ollie died," he asked, staring towards the dingy yellow linoleum of our bathroom floor.

I knew he knew this story, he knew he knew this story, but he wanted to hear it anyway. The story of the death of a man we both admired -- to Roman, he stood as a monument to masculinity, for me, a symbol of brash virility that I could never be.

"He got drunk and arm wrestled five sailors," I said. "One right after the other, in a row. And when he was finished, after he had beat them all, he died. He had a heart attack right then and there. You know this."

"Do you think that's how he really died?" Roman asked.

And after standing in that bathroom, the cold air numbing my toes, I answered, "No. I don't think that's how he died."

Roman raised his head, his eyes bloodshot and glassy, and slowly ambled towards the bathroom's threshold. He stopped for a second, grabbing the doorframe to catch his balance, and with his hesitation I took the opportunity to add one last thing.

“But I hope that’s how he died.”

V.

A month later, Roman left, packed up what few belongings he had into the back of the dusty station wagon he owned and moved to Seattle. He had friends out there, he claimed, though he never told me their names.

School finished and I moved into an apartment in the city, a much cleaner, nicer place, where the only sounds I heard through the walls at night were the lives of the strangers who lived around me. I started looking for a real job, a career, all those things that tag along with adulthood and responsibility, those awkward, frightening times.

Before he left, Roman said he’d keep in touch, but I never got a phone call or a letter, never heard a word. He could’ve died somewhere in the plains of the Midwest, lost and anonymous, somewhere on some desolate Interstate, flat-ironed smooth. But I knew that wasn’t true, he’d live and thrive wherever he ended up. That’s what he was best at.

For awhile, when I opened my mailbox, I expected a postcard. After I moved out of our old house, I hoped I’d find one tucked away diagonally in my mailbox, a photo of the Space Needle on the front. On the back, a yellow sticker to the right forwarding address printed on it, and on the left, some message from Roman. I tried to think of what it might say, and all I could think of -- the only thing that I wanted, scribbled in black ball point pen -- were the words “Good luck.”

But my mailbox stayed empty. The phone call, the letter, the post card never came.

And eventually, it all slipped from my mind.