

Rain Dreams

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Wind

Our little town was windless. So if someone dropped a napkin on the sidewalk after wiping doughnut crumbs off their face it would stay right where it fell.

Picking it up, or even kicking it into the road never crossed anyone's mind.

The biggest upside to windlessness was that the plumes from various smokestacks on the edge of town went straight up into the air, never sideways.

That's one reason why people lived here. It smelled okay.

Unseen Window

The first time Rainy glanced at me she was writing something down in her ratty brown notebook. She always carried it with her. It was her protection. She hid behind it. She crouched behind the sentences and pretended no one would notice.

It's the same flawed logic an ostrich uses, except Rainy had a lot more on her mind than an ostrich. *Maybe*. I mean, ostriches might have a lot more on their minds than any of us do. Maybe they are grappling with the meaning of life on levels we will never even begin to grasp. Maybe they think *our* logic is flawed. Maybe the truth is that logic itself is senseless, and it's better to have your head stuck in the sand.

I pretended not to stare at her. Ostriches respect that. But what I saw out of the corner of my eye was that she was wearing tight blue jeans and a light gray T-shirt tied just above her waist. Her neck was long and straight, and she had good posture; kind of like an ostrich when it's courageous enough to open its eyes wide and observe the world.

Even though there was no wind I felt compelled by some invisible force to move a little closer. Her auburn hair looked a little scraggly. Unbrushed. She had thin wrists and slightly nervous hands. I wandered still closer, trying to steal a peek at what she was writing. But she closed her book with a snap and turned towards me. "What are you doing?"

"Ah, sorry." I stepped back quickly, almost losing my balance. It felt like my words crashed headlong into her like a bird into an unseen window, a collision of floating feathers falling slowly.

She walked away with no particular emotion. She didn't seem angry or annoyed or amused. She just wandered off windlessly. My thoughts bounced like sonar against her fading silhouette.

Quiet Bells

Rainy's first boyfriend's name was Chase. That gave him a head start I guess. He met Rainy a year before I did.

Chase was always thinking ahead. He wanted to go beyond kissing as soon as possible. Beyond touching. One time Rainy let her guard down, and he experienced a magical moment, like hearing quiet bells outside a window on a windless night.

But Chase, aka Romeo, was deaf. Not deaf to sound. Not deaf like Beethoven. He was deaf to all resonance. And that ended things with Rainy pretty quickly. Still, he longed to go back to that place he couldn't quite hear.

It would never have worked out anyway. Chase's mother didn't like Rainy. She thought Rainy was too odd, too aloof, especially when she was asked a question. Rainy never answered questions. She would just look away bored or pretend the question was never asked and start to talk about something else. The girl was rough around the edges, mother said. But that made Romeo even more attracted to her. Moths, flames. Hearts, siren calls. Brains, guns. Rainy made him feel all scrambled up inside.

Romeo was rich, or mother was. Father died and left a fortune behind. But Romeo was broke. Rainy broke him open, then broke him apart. He was bewitched, befuddled, crestfallen, straining to listen to an odd ringing sound floating outside his window. He had developed an addiction to a place he couldn't quite hear. A place where he was no longer wanted.

34,000 Years of Clothes

Fashion is wasted on the erotically ignorant. Millions of poor slobs in every generation, in every country, wander around malls or outdoor markets for hours looking for a fashion miracle. Something that makes them look like something more than they are. A businessman buys a red silk tie from China on sale for six hundred dollars. He goes to a big meeting wearing this thing twisted around his neck like a noose, but it doesn't prevent him from getting hoodwinked by some tech-whiz twenty-year-old kid in blue jeans and a hoodie from New York. And he's out six hundred dollars for what, exactly?

Yet this was what Rainy was forced to do one night. She was put on a runway in front of hundreds of people in a big city and told to walk slowly and paint a smile on her face. Her lips and cheeks were painted. Later, her father crooned that she never shined so brightly, or smiled so innocently as when she was on that runway wearing the white chiffon overlay created by none other than Zippy Moruga, a famous Spanish clothing designer he was representing. Rainy was transformed! Rainy was shining! Rainy was, well, *someone else*.

Rainy's father was in the textile business. He was away a lot feeling things. Silks. Angora wool.

He once proudly told Rainy that dyed flax fibers in a cave in the Republic of Georgia dating back to about 34,000 B.C. proved, *beyond any doubt*, that people have not wanted to be naked for a very long time.

More

The day came when Rainy's mom disclosed to Rainy that her father was feeling more than silk and Angora wool during his business trips away. He was feeling someone who lived in Maryland.

Rainy could understand why. Her mom had always been difficult. Nothing was enough for her -- not father, not Rainy. She wanted more from both of them, more from life in general. But *more* didn't exist. As it often doesn't.

The Wonders of an Alcove

They named Rainy Rainy for a very romantic reason. Her mom and dad had met in the rain, standing under the alcove of an office building, waiting for a bus to come.

They got off the bus together twenty minutes later and stopped at a bar. Rainy was conceived later that night.

How romantic was that?

Important Grilled Cheese

I was working as a waiter at a café on the outskirts of town. Like many towns across the nation our town sucked. The building the café was located in looked like a giant white shoe box. The roof was caving in, so it looked like someone had stepped on top of the shoe box while running out of town as fast as possible.

Inside the café there were fifteen tables, sixty chairs, and five awful paintings of birds and fruit. Actually two of them were birds, two of them were fruit, and one was a bird sitting on a piece of fruit. Your eyes always had a choice between repetitive and derivative.

The only good thing they served in the whole place was the boxed orange juice. It tasted like lemonade and everyone seemed to like it. We ran out a lot.

I liked serving. I liked seeing the different ways people ordered. It would have nothing to do with me. Sometimes they'd bark out their order, "Eggs and toast and a side of jelly." It was military-like. Then there would be the matronly tone, "Oh my, sweetie, there are just so many things here. Would you mind bringing me some coffee while I look things over a bit longer?" You get those two on a date and it could be really awful.

I chose this job for a specific reason. After I turned eighteen and graduated high school I needed a summer job. Something easy-going. Something part-time. Something hyphenated. Because I didn't want it to fully take over my life. I figured as soon as winter came I'd have enough money to travel for a while before heading off to some mediocre college on my way to a mediocre job to financially support my mediocre family. I had no particular career I wanted to study in my hypothetical mediocre college. No place in particular I wanted to travel to. I had no life plans, other than wanting to have kids someday. That was one odd thing, I really liked being around kids. They didn't think *normally*, and they were honest. So I figured if I traveled for a year first, I'd get my fill of nuances and subtle surprises

and exotic cultures before stepping back into reality – which, like mediocrity, isn't always necessarily terrible. Half of the time I was cautiously neutral about my future.

The day I first saw Rainy come into the café she was sweaty and winded from a jog. She wiped her face with her arm before sitting down at the table furthest away from the window. When I came over she smiled at me quickly then looked down at the menu. She probably remembered having seen me before but couldn't recall where, or why.

"I guess I'll have some of that orange juice-lemonade thing," Rainy said. "And a grilled cheese sandwich." She didn't look up. She just stared at the menu waiting for me to walk away with her order.

It was up to me to break the news, "Ahh, we're out of the orange juice-lemonade thing. Too many people order it. The owner thinks it's good to run out of something people like because then they'll come back just to order it again. It's how this place gets repeat business. But you're in luck with the grilled cheese -- we have cheese. And we have bread."

"Listen, I'm super thirsty," she said, wiping an auburn streak of hair away from her eyes. "Could you just bring me, like, a gallon of ice water?"

"Sure." I began to walk away.

"Or, how about iced tea?" My boss always made me say this to people ordering water.

She looked up innocently and I became magnetically transfixed on her neck. A few wet strands of hair were nestled against a delicate place between her left shoulder and her neckline.

Her neckline invited me to move closer. But there are times when a neck and the rest of the person the neck belongs to don't agree, so I whispered, "Actually the iced tea really sucks. They're like

ten-year old Earl Grey teabags. Plus, you don't want to know where the ice comes from."

She stared at me like I'd just landed from a distant planet. Can't anything be easy?

"Yeah, thanks for the inside scoop about this place, but I've only been here like ten thousand times. I've had everything at least once, including the ice, and I lived."

"Okay. So, iced tea or just water?"

She hesitated. She *had* seen me somewhere before? But where? Tall and gawky, I stood there, grateful to keep looking at her neck.

"Ice water. But as soon as you can, okay?"

I began to protest but she interrupted, "The crummy dirty ice is fine."

Wow, she reads minds. I was impressed. I looked at her hands. Elegant but pale. I must have stared too long.

"Hello," she whispered. "Ice water please? My tongue feels like a piece of moon rock."

"Yeah. 10-4. . . .That means 'okay' in police terminology," I said nervously.

She shook her head, "Just hurry before my throat points a gun at you."

I brought her some iced water before placing her order with the cook. In fact, I left an entire pitcher of iced water on the table. This was special service, usually reserved for firemen and people who worked in the mayor's office.

I went over to Hal the Cook, gave him the order, and said, “Hal, can you make sure the grilled cheese actually gets melted on the bread for this order?”

He looked out of his little serving hole, dripping with sweat from the heat, caused by the tropical combination of a sizzling grill and no ventilation, and twisted his neck around in both directions until he saw her. “Table 12, eh?”

“Yeah. Just make sure the cheese is melted, okay?”

Water

Leaning over the sink the next morning while brushing my teeth I noticed a few rivulets of water holding on to the side rim of the porcelain bowl, escaping the harsh blast of the spigot, refusing to join the rest of their ilk in a death march down the drain, and I thought to myself, these are observers, not rebels.

These are the safe ones who just want to stay out of danger and not get involved. But staying out of danger and not getting involved is a difficult thing to achieve in this world. Even rivulets are going to have their problems eventually. Evaporation. Or “The Great Slow Slide Down.” Or the dreaded Paper Towel. It’s always something.

When she left the café that afternoon I was silent, disappointed she didn’t say goodbye to me. She left a tip, but it wasn’t that much. I could tell I meant nothing to her, nothing good and nothing bad.

What was I doing working a crappy job like this? Wandering around from table seven to table fifteen, tacking over to the kitchen, drifting back with a tray full of goopy food, serving the goopy food to people who eat without tasting; talk without thinking; walk without going anywhere. I was too much like them, except with less money.

I would bicycle around town, from home to work, or way up to that stupid hill above the water tower, where all you see if you look down are crushed soda cans and used condoms and dog droppings next to the tower’s enormous metal legs, which in turn were welded to enormous frozen feet that can’t go anywhere, because they’re, in turn, cemented deep underground. It reminded me of the silver robot from “The Day the Earth Stood Still.” But skinnier, and more humiliated. And *that’s* where we got our water from!

Typical of our town not to honor the most important thing to its survival. They could have put some poetic plaque on it, like the one you see on the Statue of Liberty. Or they could have protected it with

a security guard that was proud of his job and would pick up all the garbage before going home each night. But no one wanted to pay for any of that. They just wanted the water.

Looking into the distance I became hypnotized at the cars floating across the highway, disappearing under the steel green bridge, drifting right past our exit as if we were all invisible. No one wanted to come here.

Rainy saw right through me. She saw the growing arc of nothingness in the center of me and sailed away without even glancing back.

I just can't seem to say what I feel when it's time to say it. Like a mirrory globe of water, I'm not particularly articulate, or acutely particular; no life dream. Just hanging on to the edge.

But when mirrory globe of water bumps into another globule and merges, then, something bigger can crystallize. Puddles, or rivers, or waterfalls of rain streaking over the ocean.

Flexibility

I bet you're wondering how and why and when I decided to be a waiter. Because stuff like that always makes for an interesting story.

During my entire seventeenth year I slowly got to know, and therefore created memories of, the greatly disturbing Deana Kelly. We met at a party. It was my seventeenth birthday party, actually.

My dad basically opened up our apartment to the entire teenage world. Dads do that kind of thing, especially when they're bringing up a teenage boy alone because the dad's wife died when the teenage boy was a baby. It wasn't the teenage boy's *fault*, according to the dad, because it had nothing to do with the birth. "These things just happen," the dad said to the boy more than once. Actually, the dad said it dozens of times, because if someone hears "these things just happen" enough, they usually start to believe it.

Anyway, too many people invited too many people. Beer was snuck in. I only had a few. But that just left more for everyone else. Nonsensical conversations took place in small groups that spun out radially. I stood dumbstruck in the middle listening to what sounded like a slurry version of the Tower of Babel. I couldn't understand it, or stand it, for another second so I went out to the balcony to get some air. That's where we met.

Deana introduced herself as a gymnast, which is always a good way to start a conversation on a balcony. Plus flexibility is always an attribute. She was already eighteen. She was a lot of things. She was a wonder girl, a whirlwind of energy that immediately drew me in, kind of like I'd been sucked into a black hole, spun through the center, until the inside turned us into a new universe -- The Deanaverse.

While I was daydreaming of all the new physical dimensions a Deanaverse might have, she mentioned that she came to the party with her mostly platonic friend, Carl. It struck me that "mostly

platonic” could be one of the odder oxymorons in the English language.

The scene fades into a sunny day, picnicking by the lake, laughing about all the little things, as destiny-struck lovers often do. “Look at that red ant trying to carry away my entire sandwich! Isn’t that funny? Isn’t that cute?” Whereas, if you were there alone it would have grossed you out and you’d be looking in your car trunk for a can of Raid. That’s love for you.

She was willing and able to do a cartwheel while we were walking down a crowded street. She was willing and able to do almost anything, come to think of it. She was actually adventurous to a fault. In that way, we brought out the worst in each other, pushing each other to our rational limits. Deana was always talking about the bigger things. She mocked monogamy, jeered at jealousy, cackled at commitment, invited emotional danger at all times. I learned to keep my mouth shut most of the time. I was like background radiation. I didn’t know how to soar out into the emotional universe with her. I just liked to be there and listen quasarically.

I eventually came to feel that the kind of love we created was “true love,” as opposed to just “love,” because lovers could come and go, but we’d always want to be around each other. Because we didn’t just love each other. We were free of the clingy emotional addictions and needs of love. Wild sex with a beautiful flexy friend was fun. We were intertwined with no entanglements. No plans. No dreams. No future. No hope. *It was perfect.*

The scene fades to another sunny day, but the red ants weren’t funny anymore, because she called me on the phone to tell me that she had fallen in love with her gymnastics coach, who inconsequentially happened to be married. She told me that things were not going to be the same between us. She still loved me, and liked me. She just didn’t ever want to see me again.

Of course, I didn’t believe her at first. Because she mocked monogamy and cackled at commitment. I thought this must be one of

the mocks she had mentioned but it might take a while for the mocking to materialize. But the gymnastics coach did not believe in anything alliterative. He was much older and colder and knew that love was basically a prison with really good food.

He got a divorce so he could transfer himself to a different cell. He wanted to spend more time with his little Gumby, as he affectionately called her. He was a brilliant college gymnast in his day, and was apparently also really good at naming people after Claymation cartoons.

They were able to come up with lots of clever nicknames for each other, and they also found lots of ways of bending that I was totally incapable of.

That's when I realized, I needed to find a job.

A Reason for Accountants

Mary Robinson gave birth to Rainy, her first and only child, when she was an ancient thirty-four years old. Before and after, and during, the moments when Rainy was conceived Mary was what you might call a roaring drunk; a certified, liver-decimating, breathalyzer-confirmed alcoholic, with a big Irish temper. She would have Scotches for breakfast, since she was half Scottish. For lunch, martinis (just in case she might be half Martian). She'd finish the evening with vermouth delicately poured from a little glass pitcher that was a gift from an alcoholic glassblower.

Dinner, and after-dinner, were full of exotic surprises. Beers from different countries, wines from different decades, Jack Daniels because she was forever grateful to Jack for many of her teen memories, but then again sometimes Dickel from Tennessee, and ah the love affair she had with Johnny Walker, and Remy Martin. Then there was Hennessy (which is not from Tennessee), and Suaza for suave moments. And don't forget Beefeater, which she insisted was wonderful when meat was served as the main course. There was Fleischmann's on Passover, Shmirnoff's on alternate Passovers, Seagram's for boat rides or writing telegrams, or for hotels with ocean views. And on slow nights Sloe Gin of course. Or, when desperate, Harvey's Bristol Cream. There was always an occasion to drink in Mary's world, even if it was just to raise your glass to boredom and loneliness and toast toxicity.

Despite Mary's constant companions, she knew how to keep a job. They moved to this God-forsaken mistake of a town when Rainy was twelve. Mary found work as an in-house accountant at a tech store. The store only sold crap from Hewlett-Packard, so there wasn't much she needed to account for, unless it was during the big Christmas sale, where they pretty much gave everything away for no profit so they could re-stock the shelves with the next generation of crap they weren't going to try to sell. How the store stayed in business without having a liquor license no one could ever figure out. I guess that's why there are accountants.

A Moving Story

Rainy's father, Marty, was a small gentle man who spent most of his time trying to stay out of Mary's way. She had a vindictive streak. Rainy also knew it well. And although Marty's friends found Mary pretty, if not drop-dead gorgeous, with her red hair and thin shapely body, most of them realized they couldn't wiggle their way into her good graces for long. One wrong move and those green eyes would flash, and *bang*. They would quickly turn to dust before her.

When Rainy was just a young girl Marty and Mary made pretty decent livings and owned a house in a small town north of here. The house was nestled between two green mountains, with a fire trail leading up to a place with gliding birds and a gully that weaved dreams for those who knew of dreams. They had paid off their mortgage. And the gliding birds were free.

Then one sunny day the IRS came calling. Mary was not the most forthright citizen when it came to filling out tax forms. Her accounting skills proved to be her downfall. Her mathematical magic tricks were not good enough to pass an IRS audit. They spent half their life savings defending the rest of their life savings.

Eventually, they abandoned their rural house nestled between two green mountains so that Mary could get a high paying job in our windless little town in the store that never sold anything.

They refused to sell their house between two mountains because Mary was sure that one day they would be able to afford to move back there again. That was the plan - to move back to the past as soon as possible in the future.

So they found the cheapest apartment they could find, near the railroad tracks, where train whistles blew as loud as air raid sirens, and the train cars clicked and clacked over the tracks so loud the walls rattled in the middle of the night.

They sold both their cars. Mary took the bus to and from the Hewlett-Packard store. Marty was out of town most of the year, trying to sell and feel things. Rainy walked to and from school, and shopped for dinners.

All this time Rainy was on her own – after school, before school, skateboarding at the park on weekends, writing in her journal, putting herself to bed alone late at night.

Each April, as the flowers bloomed and birds returned to the trees Mary would continue to cheat on their taxes to save another few thousand dollars, year after year. . . until they began to save more, and more, and more, *and more*.

They were living the American dream.

Tarzan

Rainy's second encounter with romance, post-Chase, was with a boy named Daniel. Daniel the Forest Man hated to be called Dan, or Daniel the Forest Man, or Forest Man, or Daniel The. "My name is *Daniel*," he would admonish everyone. Which always makes a good first impression.

He was one of those tall silent Daniel Boone types, except he hated raccoons. He would take her deep into the forest for an entire day and night, equipped with a tent and a backpack, and a bow and arrow to shoot things with.

She admired a lot of things about him, other than the way he kissed her and touched her and talked to her. He had a handsome face, blue eyes, and a decent amount of muscles. He seemed strong and self-reliant.

But along the way, as they walked hand-in-hand down the animal-stained trails, exploring caves and dried-up stream beds, he made it known to her that he had no time for girly things, like books for instance. Books could not conquer the wilds. Books could not catch fish. Books could not start a fire from twigs before the sunset turned the earth cold and lifeless.

Contrarily, books just pushed wimps into the worthless world of fantasy and doubt and chaos. Ripe for every kind of prey, especially the ultimate king of the jungle, paranoia. Paranoia and doubt had no natural predators, he philosophized.

He wanted none of that. He wanted to be King of his world. A world he created with his bare hands. A world he understood. So he never asked to see what she was writing in her special notebook, which was fine with her. Until it wasn't.

As time went by, she grew weary of wandering, and wary of his warped window to the world. He relentlessly explored the

physical world with her. But she drifted away, back into her own private place.

She chose fantasy over facts, and rides in old convertibles over hiking through fields of flowers. She didn't care about the names of the flowers. She didn't care what they smelled like, or why they smelled that way, or if they were edible, or if they were perennials or annuals, or even if they existed in reality at all. Maybe they were a dream, his dream, and she was just playing a bit part in it as he stomped his way across Daniel Land.

I was not Tarzan. Not a House on the Prairie character. Not someone who could make a fire, or set up a tent, or cook fish on a curved stick dangling over an orange-blue flame amongst the mosquitoed marshes. In fact, I couldn't even roast marshmallows in the marshes. They always burned black as night. The fact is, I hated marshes, and don't much like marshmallows either. Even melty brown ones. That's just the weird truth about me.

But after I served her ice water and grilled cheese that day at the café I became Tarzan of the *inner realms*; I would drag her along in my dreams each night, through the cerebral tree-tops of my synapses. From branch to branch we'd swing, swirling madly through my world of us.

I was living there already. She was still living at home.

Bridled Enthusiasm

My parents used to be hippies. Then they became half-hippies, with jobs and bills to pay. Then they became parents. Then half-parents, after my mom died.

Where my dad and I lived was fitting. Our apartment was right above a small store that sold beads, Indian clothes, and a house-made perfume called, "Hi," (an abbreviation for "high," the print on the bottle cheerily explained to those without a brain in their head -- the double entendre was underscored by the friendly cartoon stick person waving hello.) It was a confusing concoction created for friendly stoners who like to smell wrecked in an expensive elegant way.

The owner's golden retriever was permanently sprawled sideways across the most well-traveled isle. We only went in there once a month to step over the dog and pay the rent. We always came out smelling like patchouli oil.

My dad was like the dog. Laid back, but very loyal. He would never comment on my messy clothes, my part-time job, my odd choices in girlfriends like Deanna – not because he wasn't aware, or didn't care. He just decided the best way for me to grow up was to let me figure out a lot of stuff on my own.

Besides, my dad rediscovered pot over these last few years. So he was usually harmlessly de-focused. He realized that life was short and simultaneously sucked. So reality was the last place my father would ever want to die. And if that was the case, then why live there in the first place?

Hence, I didn't tell him about Rainy Robinson. Besides, at that point there was nothing to tell. It was all still phantasmagoria and sonar waves.

Then came the day my father lost his job. He was a radio dispatcher for AAA. Which is one “A” less interesting than being a radio dispatcher for AA. Imagine what that would have been like?

Anyway, they caught him smoking weed during his break and they fired him on the spot. He came home stoned and fired.

I decided to try to get him a job at the café. Hal the Cook, and the owner, Sam Buckbaugh, both shrugged, waved their hands, and walked away when I suggested it, which meant he was hired. That was the same thing they did when I asked for a job. I guess their system of hiring was a wordless form of bridled enthusiasm.

In the world of political science fiction my dad would have been an ex-hippie *and* a Republican. That way he could have related to the Sam Buckbaughs of the world. He would have gone out drinking with him when the café closed up for the night, instead of going home and rolling a joint in front of the TV.

And on those special cold and rainy November Tuesdays they could have driven to the nearest polling place together, proud and excited that it was election day, and voted for stricter voting laws, so people like my dad and me wouldn't be able to vote in the next election. Keep dreaming, Sam.

Weird Trees

I was on my way to Pete's Petite Pizza to get a little dinner. The pizzas came out of the oven about as big as a two-dimensional softball. I could eat like six of those things. But that night I only ate five. After that, I was hoping to find some new windshield wipers for my used Hyundai. The car had no functional door locks and the windshield wipers scraped the glass with every swish. It was a Saturday. I only had two hours before my evening shift started at the café.

The sky was gauzy-gray and drizzly, like a cotton ball saturated with boredom and indecisiveness. I was driving and mostly watching the traffic, but I also noticed that a few pedestrians were deploying umbrellas too soon -- a few drops of rain was no cause for panic. One man in an oversized overcoat pushed a shopping cart with his entire world in it. He had drowned out the panic long ago. He seemed more peaceful than the umbrella people.

Just as I made a right turn on Oak Street it started to rain pretty hard. Water splattered onto my front windshield like I had swerved into a drive-through car wash. I thought I saw a streaky image of Rainy walking quickly with a suitcase in her hand and a knapsack over her shoulders.

I didn't hesitate. I pulled up next to her and yelled her name out the window but she pretended not to hear me. So I pulled into a red zone where only buses are allowed to stop and got out of my car and ran towards her. Raindrops and tears were falling from her face. Her hair was wet. Her clothes were wrinkled. She looked like she hadn't slept.

"Hey, do you need a ride?" I yelled through the downpour.

She never answered questions. But I was still a question away from realizing that.

“Are you headed towards the bus station or the train?”

“Why are you here?” she answered.

“Rainy, get in the car. I’ll drive you wherever you want to go.”

She kept walking.

“The ride is free, I promise. I’m not running a taxi service or anything.”

“Nothing’s free.”

“I’m free. I’m harmless and dumb. You know that. And I won’t ask any more questions. . . . Okay?”

She looked around as if to make sure no one was looking, then turned towards the car. I had become the only logical option given the turn in the weather. I took her suitcase and knapsack and threw them in the back seat.

When I got behind the wheel I kept my promise and didn’t ask her any questions. I just turned the engine on and waited for her to talk.

“Towards Jansen Bridge,” she said finally. I wasn’t expecting that.

“Okay, cool, no problem.” Then I added, “Believe it or not, I’ve never been across it.”

I could tell she didn’t believe me but she didn't respond.

“Seriously, really, I’m a Jansen Bridge virgin.”

She shook her head then looked out the passenger window.

Her semi-angry face was beautiful in its ferocity. Her brown-ish read eyebrows furled downward. Her arms were crossed. She was slumped away from me and leaning against the unlocked door.

We were caught in a bit of traffic nearing the end of town when she mumbled, "Weird trees." She was staring out the window, looking at a row of leafless yellow buckeyes dripping raindrops from the remnants of a cloudburst.

I said, "All trees are weird when you think about it. They're trying to stretch up toward something that would kill them if they ever reached it. So their end goal is kind of suicidal."

I didn't think she would respond, or even know what I was talking about, but then she said, "No it's not suicidal. Because they don't *know* the sun would kill them. So technically it would be an accident."

We drove for a while without speaking, then she blurted out, "I'm divorcing an accident, actually. My parents were officially divorced today after accidentally getting married. So I'm divorcing them to return the favor. Could be another accident waiting to happen. But worth the risk."

Now I understood. But I still had no clue where she was headed other than somewhere over Jansen Bridge. That could lead. . . anywhere. Because the world is round.

Another logical thought crossed my mind: What if I never saw her again? I was taxi-ing her over an uncrossed bridge. Purposely driving her away from me.

"I can come," I said, barely loud enough for her to hear.

"What?"

"Wherever you're going, I could drive you all the way."

“Uh, no thanks.”

I drove on in silence. Then I said, “I can’t just drop you off across the bridge,” I said. “There isn’t even a place to pull over.

“Just drive over it and follow the signs,” she said. “You can drop me off at the edge of Martinsville. Then you will have lived out your fantasy. You won’t be a bridge virgin anymore.”

“The big scary town of Martinsville. I never had a reason to go there myself, since I heard it was basically a carbon copy of our town, except they have wind.”

“No they don’t. . . *Look*, just take me there please.” She pulled her legs up and folded her arms around them. She was still wet.

The drizzle outside turned to hammer-hard rain again and I increased the windshield wiper speed. Amazingly, you could hear the squeaking of the wipers against the glass even during peak rainfall. They were pretty much worn down to the steel rods. I meant to get new ones on the way to work. That seemed like a very long time ago.

“Do you have any money?” I asked.

“I can pay you for gas.”

“No, forget it. I was just. . . .”

She told me to pull into a motel right beyond the “Welcome to Martinsville” sign. It’s as if the town was saying, “Welcome to Martinsville, Where Everyone Immediately Goes to Sleep.”

Rainy had never checked into a hotel before so she didn’t refuse my offer to stay in the car until they gave her a room key. “Whatever, but then you have to go.”

It was 5 pm, the start of my work shift at the café. The rain was still falling in waves. This motel wasn't crowded but it was taking quite a bit of time for her to get a room. So I got out of the car and walked toward the sparkly sign above the main entrance that said, "Vacancy." There were no unlit "No" bulbs preceding the green "Vacancy" bulbs. So either this place was never full, or it had an infinite amount of rooms.

The office door was made of heavy glass, as thick as an airport window. It was squeaky and hard to open. A bell dangled from the top so that the reception clerk would know when someone was struggling to push themselves in. I looked around while Rainy's I.D. was being checked and her cash counted. I realized this place might be a "broken clock with cracked glass" kind of place. Because above the registration desk was a broken clock with cracked glass.

She was shivering slightly as we walked across the parking lot to her room. It was the one right in front of my car, "108." I walked in behind her. It smelled faintly of cigarette smoke beneath a much stronger scent of insect repellent masquerading as room freshener. The atmosphere was dark and dreary, almost spooky with all the curtains closed and the lights off.

She pulled the curtains open. A blast of gray yawned in. Then she forced the window free until we heard the rain spattering on the walkway outside. I brought her suitcase and backpack into the room from the car and then flopped down on one of the two small twin beds. Everything was wet, including me.

"So what do we do now?" I said.

She was standing near the bathroom door, about to open it. "*What? What do you mean?*"

"Well you can't just kick me out in the rain with bad windshield wipers. Just let me stay until the rain lets up a bit. I'm harmless."

"You're annoying."

"Annoying? Well maybe, but I like you."

"You're annoying *because* you like me. And you don't know me, like, *at all*. So there is nothing for you to like." Her eyes darted over to the empty wall and back towards my face for no apparent reason; a nervous habit I'd seen her do once before back at the restaurant.

"I *do* know you, a little. For example, I know you write things in your brown notebook that you don't want anyone else to see. And I know you like grilled cheese. And ice water after a long run. And. . ." I started to go blank.

Right at that moment we heard an ear-splitting thunder clap. The rain began to fall so hard it was beyond rhythm. Like water screaming.

She closed her eyes and said, "Once the rain stops, go home, okay?"

I decided I didn't have to answer questions either.

Star Crap

Sitting at the edge of separate twin beds in a Motel 6 in Martinsville, Purgatory – that is where Rainy first told me about her father, and why her parents were getting divorced. She said they were both so messed up she was glad she didn't have to live with them anymore.

She pulled out a joint and lit it. I told her my throat felt wet and I needed something to parch it. She thought it was a moronic thing to say but passed me the joint after taking a long drag herself. Getting high wasn't something I did every day. That was my dad's domain. So I felt a little self-conscious being high and alone with her. I could feel the self-doubt and paranoia creeping into my thoughts because of my assumption that she was judging me. Which, in retrospect, she was.

I told myself: Be yourself, show her who you really are. You have nothing to lose, right? Because it's obvious that she doesn't like who you've been pretending to be, so why pretend anymore? The real question was, who was I without pretending? I had no idea.

But by the time I thoroughly considered the logic of the fact that my real self was basically a fake, I couldn't remember the beginning of the thought. Something about pretending to remember something, if I ever knew it in the first place? Then everything evaporated.

At the same time she had probably begun ruminating about her dad's pregnant girlfriend from Maryland, because she blurted out, "Can you imagine anyone having kids at my dad's age? Or any age? It's insane. I mean, kids are fucking idiots."

"Oh no, that's not true, like at all. I definitely see myself having kids someday. I think they're awesome!"

“Why the hell would you say something like that?” she laughed.

She wanted to know, she was definitely asking me, so I decided to just *be myself*.

“Well, the way I see it, we’re just sitting around right now without kids, and what are we doing, really? We’re just a random pile of radioactive star crap, currently sitting in little lonely room, light-years mind-distance from each other in a rainstorm. But then most adults have to go and ask the question, where did stars come from? Because we have all this time on our hands, right? And after that we start asking things like, what exactly does ‘*from*’ mean? And *that* kind of meaningless questioning can go on and on for an infinity of questions. But when you have kids you don’t have time to think about what ‘*from*’ means (which would have mostly been just a huge waste of time anyway, even if you looked it up). So kids are the perfect distraction from what would otherwise be all of us evolving into cold emotionless human silver computer bubbles floating around in outer space after the sun is gone, dreaming about love and rain. You have to admit, being around kids is at least more fun than that.”

She began to laugh and covered her face with her hands, “Shit. You are such a fucking weirdo.”

Astral Milkshakes

I felt like I was in limbo. And this was not the kind of limbo you could escape from by dancing under a stick and nosing up to the bar for a pina colada with your back all screwed up. This was the *totally stuck* kind of limbo. Because on one hand, I wanted to move closer to her. But that would have freaked her out. On the other hand, my body was glued to the bedspread. The weed had imprisoned me and frozen my appendages. I couldn't move. So I closed my eyes and called upon The Ganja-Ghost of Christmas Future as I fell into a cosmic daydream. We had just come from a dance or something. . . .

Rainy had an astral smile that night.

"The dawn will be closing soon. Get in the car," she whispered.

We drove silently until we reached her destination, "Now shut the moon, and put your hands in my hands on my face."

Just as I was finding my hands she sighed, "Beginnings are always a grateful parenthesis."

Yes, she saw what I saw -- that humans fly in and out of each other's existence. Yet memories allow no true endings. So beginnings are like parenthesis before the leaving and remembering.

While lying in the dark I said to my astral girl, "Your face feels as soft as Indian silk." She said, "That's not my face, that's the bottom of my skirt."

So I continued reaching up towards her face until finally I found it, and rested my fingers upon her temples. I kissed her milky-soft mouth for the first time, until, exotically, inexorably, we were wrapped up in a lamb skin rug, warm together on a bitter cold night.

Silver stars twinkled wildly. Constellations co-joined.
Astral milk shakes all around.

That's how Rainy and I swam together through dark
matter and conceived our son, Orion.

We played happily in the fields of time, running amok,
wandering through warm winds of summer, and tumbling
through wormholes that led us away from the last time we
thought of time.

Our daughter, Oceana, was conceived on a sailboat at
sunset. She could swim like a dolphin at the age of three. She
never wanted to leave the ocean.

We were a young family of four. Soon to be three. Then
two.

Then one.

Because, layer by layer, I awoke from the reverie and found
myself still laying a canyon distance across from her on a twin bed in
a Motel 6.

This was getting *really bad!*

Somehow I managed to rise. I excused myself and went to the
bathroom. It was decorated in Modular Disgusting. All the rage at
cheap hotels. But at least it was quiet in there. Except for the leaking
faucet and the permanently running toilet.

After texting my dad, basically telling him I was fine and to
please stop texting me, Rainy and I talked a bit more. But we were
too stoned to really connect. I wished she could have seen my dream.
Or maybe not.

It was after midnight when the rain finally stopped. Technically, I was supposed to leave. But I looked over and saw Rainy was asleep. So I curled up under the covers of my bed next to hers and watched her breathing slowly in the near-darkness before falling asleep myself.

I had a number of dreams. Each one woke me up and made me toss and turn for a while. Some were about her. Some were about weird trees. Some were about drunk Martians landing in Martinsville. I finally fell into a deep sleep right about the time the sun came up.

A Disturbing Comma

Here is the truth: Being a hero is a hard task for anyone. But if you don't live your life as a hero, then you're a coward. There isn't anything in between.

When I woke up she was gone.

I opened the door to our dingy room adjacent to the parking lot and immediately squinted because of the syrupy bright light. The sky was achingly void of clouds and the streets were dust dry. It was as if it never rained. I wondered if she would have left if it was still raining.

I called the café and quit.

I called my dad and left a voice message that I was fine, and that I might be off traveling for a while. He could call me on my cell if he needed to. But please don't. I added I was on a "quest."

I figured that would get him off my back for a few days, since he knew that I was falling headlong into an insipidly boring life the way things were going. So a quest, any quest, was *good*.

Rainy had no cell phone as far as I knew. What were her parents thinking? Did they even care if she was gone? Maybe not, but I did.

And so the quest began.

I got in my beat-up Hyundai Accent and began pulling out of the recently re-paved Motel 6 parking lot. The only thing I could think of was to head in the opposite direction of Jansen Bridge, since I was sure Rainy wasn't going home.

The hotel was right on the state road that connects all the towns around these parts. So instead of shady lanes with lakes and picnic

tables and friendly people waving at you as you drove by, there was the empty soul-frozen line-up of usual suspects -- Exxon, McDonalds, Payless, Burger King, Chevron, Taco Bell.

Motel 6 was placed at the beginning of this villainous vacuous parade, like the inner curl of the yellow brick road. Except there were no Munchkins there to sing me a send-off song. Only a spy, a thief, a shape-shifter:

I was waiting for the light to turn when a man casting a giant shadow came racing out of the recently re-paved Motel 6 parking lot towards my car, crashed into the passenger door which had no functional lock, opened it, got in, and told me to drive, *fast!*

He was overwhelmingly big. He had to bend all the way to his waist to get inside the car. He had a gun in his hand. Blurry blue tattoos were carved all over his muscular arms. He was wearing a denim work shirt. He had a beer belly, and uncombed red hair, and a thick red beard. His eyes were smeary looking, which meant he was either stoned, or sleepless, or stoned *and* sleepless.

The light turned green and I obediently pressed on the gas pedal. The car took a deep breath before deciding to lurch forward, only to gallop away at twenty miles an hour.

"Faster!" he yelled.

"*It's a used Hyundai!*" I yelled back.

Never try whining to a guy who looks like he's just escaped from an institution for the criminally insane. Tempers can be short. Empathy lacking.

He took his left foot and jammed it under the wheel and pressed the accelerator. It was at that moment he knew I wasn't lying. The car responded with a moan and actually seemed to slow down.

I was hyperventilating myself, crying silently for my dad, if you really must know, who would probably have been crying for *his* dad, who, knowing my grandfather, would probably have gotten himself killed telling this guy to fuck off after slamming on the break and biting his face.

But this was no time to be a hero. I didn't even want to know what he wanted, or who he was, or where he came from. Blame it on a severe lack of curiosity at the time. I just wanted to get him where he was going and get him the fuck out of the car. However, I did notice the name "O'Brian," written on the top of his blue work shirt pocket. He probably stole the shirt from an Irish guy who worked in a gas station and who was now dead and shirtless. Strangled by those big red hairy hands.

He directed me down a number of small winding streets until I realized we had made a zig-zaggy semi-circle. I saw Jansen Bridge coming up on the horizon -- it looked like a badly put together erector set, steel beams suspended in the air going every which way, like a permanently bad hair day. Finally we came to an alleyway near the pier.

"Thanks for the ride, Jack," he said. He yanked the car door open and began to run. So *this* was how escaped inmates defined "hailing a cab."

I put my wreck in reverse, hoping for a quick exit before he changed his mind and came back for another ride, but in my haste I smashed into a big yellow dumpster that smelled like urine even with all my windows closed. I guess it was painted yellow as a warning to those with no sense of smell.

I floored the gas and the car limped away, headed down a street I'd never been on. But I saw something on the road in front of me that made me slam on my brakes. Could it be? I got out of the car and reached my hand down towards a streak of black dried road goo -- a left over line of a road repair from long ago -- and picked up the familiar brown notebook. How did it get *here*? Did she throw it down

in the middle of the road out of frustration, or did she drop it accidentally? Or was she in trouble? Was she running when it fell? This was not a safe part of town. This was actually like being on the top surface of hell. One step down and, *poof*.

I looked around but saw no sign of her. I took the notebook and put it in the front seat next to me, where minutes earlier a lunatic had been sitting holding a gun in his thick hairy hand. I drove off slowly because I didn't quite know where to go next. She obviously wasn't headed out of town. Why would she have come back towards Jansen Bridge?

I pulled over near a closed bar. It was run down and heavily gated. The dirty sign read, "Off the Pier," which was hopefully where all the patrons from around these parts -- for the sake of mankind -- flung themselves after a good stiff drink. I picked up Rainy's notebook from the passenger seat and began looking at the last pages she had written, hoping to find a clue to her whereabouts.

One page was titled:

"Hero Clown from Nowhere Town"

The boy is mad. He
Wants something from me. Why should
I care? Just, *FUCK HIM!!!*"

That was the end of the poem.

I studied it for a moment. The first thing I did was count the syllables on each line. Yep. It was a haiku. I *knew* she was a good writer. This proved it.

But also, that last line. It was a double entendre in a way. Did she mean, *fuck him*, or I'm starting to like him enough to. . . ?

The placement of her comma was disturbing.

Arrogance

But wait!

There was also something on the next page, written in very light pencil. It was her very last entry:

“He thinks he knows what it’s like to have kids! He thinks he’s got it all figured out. He’s so arrogant.”

Arrogant?

I was spending all my time begging for her attention like a dog, like a weird lonely tree in the desert waiting for rain to fall and bring me back to life. As far as all that stuff I said last night, I was *stoned*. It was a mildly hallucinogenic midnight rap. I didn’t think she would remember any of it the next morning. *I couldn’t even remember it!* But all I could think of now was, did I push her away by sounding arrogant? I wouldn’t put it past me. I *was* kind of pathetic, in a pretentious kind of way.

But wait! She was the one judging *me*. Wouldn’t she be equally arrogant by judging me like that?

But then, wasn’t defining her as being equally arrogant just a defense mechanism that was preventing me from owning up to my original arrogance? Now *that* was arrogance!

I began to read further back in her journal. None of it was about me. I didn’t really exist until yesterday.

Then I turned to the very first page. It said: “Sailing on, with Chaos and Rivers Cascading.”

A few pages later it mentioned her old boyfriend, Chase, in unflattering terms. “His hair gel smells like blended raw potatoes

soaked in his mom's perfume. Plus his cocaine habit makes him shake like a naked Eskimo. I can't do this anymore, with anyone."

Enough.

I closed my eyes and tried to think things through. Could she be in trouble? Maybe I should get the police involved. Call 911.

But what would I say? "There's an eighteen year-old girl who doesn't want to live with her parents anymore, but I can't find her, because when I woke up stoned at 11 a.m. in a Motel 6 she was gone."

And the officer would say: "Maybe she thought you were a jerk and she left to get away from *you*."

And I'd say, "She doesn't think I'm a jerk. Just arrogant."

And he'd say, "Stalking is illegal."

And I say, "But she could be in trouble."

And he'd say, "You have proof of that, kid?"

Then after thinking things through I'd probably admit to the cop, "Yeah, I think I *am* stalking her. I mean, she obviously doesn't want me around. So gee, thanks for our little chat, officer. I guess I'll just go home now."

Forget 911. I had to find her.

Motel 6 Redux

Night fell and the rain came again. I had searched for her down every road and alleyway near where I first saw the book, then widened my search for miles in all directions.

The most distressing thing was that I didn't know whether she was safe or not. But the second most distressing thing was that I realized if she *was* safe, she probably would hate me for trying to find her.

Her journal made it clear that I was just bugging her. I was just a napkin lying on a windless street. So I headed back towards Jansen Bridge, driving down the only road that would take me home, past the flashing fast food signs and competing gas stations, until I passed the Motel 6 and its recently re-paved parking lot, framed in a sickly yellow *vacancy* glow

Out of the corner of my eye, through the rain-streaked driver's window, I thought I saw her walking towards the same room we'd been in the night before.

I swerved the car over the double yellow line and parked in an empty stall, then ran towards the door just as she was fumbling with the key.

"*Hey!*" I got closer but she seemed to be ignoring me.

"Hey! Where the heck did you go?" I surprised myself by sounding a bit annoyed.

She seemed annoyed too because the key wasn't fitting in the lock. She tried it upside down and right side up but neither way would work. The third try resulted in the key getting jammed in the lock, but the door opened with a slight kick. Then she tried to yank the key out by putting her foot against the door, pulling the key with both hands.

“Rainy, I’ve been looking all over for you! I have your. . .”

“Why? I just decided to take a morning walk.”

“You brought your suitcase and knapsack with you.”

“I didn’t want you to steal anything.”

The key finally dislodged, with the green plastic room number tag clacking its applause.

“Me?”

I knew how to get her attention. “Did you think I’d read your journal or something?”

She became silent. I could almost see her thoughts darting around. “Go home.”

“Rainy, what’s going on?”

She headed inside, but she left the door open while she threw her suitcase on one of the beds.

I stepped inside to tell her about the journal, but someone came in from behind me.

“Rainy Robinson?”

“Yes.”

“Your Uncle Jimmy says to call him on his cell. It’s important.”

“Okay, um, thanks.”

I sat down on my bed near the window. “Wow, your Uncle knows you’re here?”

“Yeah. My mom has spies.”

She tossed her knapsack into the corner, “I gotta call him.” She started out the door towards the office.

“You can use my cell if you want.”

She stopped and looked at me oddly, assessing something. “Whatever. Thanks.” She took my cell and stepped outside, shutting the door behind her.

I was thinking of the right moment to tell her about finding the notebook. I opened the door a crack and saw her talking a few doors away, so I went to my car and brought the notebook back inside with me, keeping it dry from the rain by tucking it under my shirt.

Thunder began to rattle the walls of the dingy room. There were some sickly-green tinted paintings hanging on the walls. They looked perfectly hideous against the orange-brown carpets. I went into the disgusting bathroom to wash up. I put the notebook near the sink where she would be sure to find it. Then I opened up the little piece of soap they give you, unwrapping it by scraping the covering off with my fingernails. It’s like they want you to give up and not use it. The “hot” faucet didn’t work on the sink. It just spun around endlessly, disconnected to anything. So I washed my face with cold water. When I came out of the bathroom she was searching through her backpack, looking a bit shaken.

“You okay?”

“Where is it?”

“What?” I said.

“Never mind. You couldn’t possibly know.”

“Your notebook?”

Her eyes blazed as she squinted at me.

"I found it, Rainy. I swear. It was in the middle of a street near Jansen Bridge." I retrieved it from the bathroom counter and handed it to her.

"Insane," she mumbled. "How? Did you take it from me last night?" She started leafing through it to make sure it was intact.

"No, I swear it's true. It was in the middle of the road out near the pier."

"What were *you* doing near the pier?"

"I could be asking you the same question. But actually, I had an interesting visitor escort me through the neighborhood. I wouldn't have thought you would go anywhere near a place like that."

"You don't know me."

"I'm sorry, you're right."

She seemed to be somewhere else in that little auburn head of hers. "Anyway," she stammered, "my uncle thought I was like going to jump off the fucking pier or something. He's a bit over-reactive. But I blame my screwed up mother for that. She doesn't trust me. She doesn't think I can make it on my own. So she got Uncle Jimmy all riled up and he decides to follow me around to make sure I'm not going to kill myself."

She started to look through her notebook again. "I can't believe it wasn't torn to pieces from cars going by. It must have dropped out of my backpack when I was crossing the street." She added, "You found it in the road?"

"I swear."

Then she looked up and searched my eyes, "Did you read it?"

“I read the end to see if it would give me a clue about where you were headed.”

“It didn’t.”

“Well, it gave me a clue about where *we* were headed.”

She smiled. “Why, because I said you were a goon?”

“Something like that, yeah.”

She sighed, then closed her eyes.

“Well, sometimes you just have to read between the lines.”

“I tried. But there was a very disturbing comma in your haiku.”

She laughed as she read the last verse to herself, “Yeah, I can see that.”

She looked at me, “Taylor, I need to sleep. I really do. I'm exhausted. You can sleep in the other bed again if you want. As long as you leave me alone. But just for one more night.”

“Okay, thanks. But don’t sneak out in the morning this time without at least writing me a goodbye note, okay? I definitely don’t want a repeat of this day.”

“Don’t worry,” she yawned. “No matter how bad things get, the good news is nothing ever repeats.”

Cool. . . I think.

The next morning I awoke to rain yet again. I could hear it splashing against the window. I started wondering if I should have bought an ark instead of a used Hyundai. I mean, this was ridiculous.

Then came a terrible pounding on the door.

She sat up in bed, startled. I got up and tried to peer through the window to see who it was but I couldn't see anything from that angle. "Who's there?" I called out.

"Uncle Jimmy. Open up!" He pounded on the door again.

"Go ahead. It's okay," she said as she ran into the bathroom and closed the door.

I unlatched the lock and the door flew open.

"*Oh crap!*" I screamed.

"Yeah, *I'm* Uncle Jimmy. James O'Brian to you. Nice to meet you again, you little runt."

"Not nice for me," I said, staring at the gun hanging from his belt.

He followed my eyes and glanced down. "Yeah, look, the gun wasn't loaded. I was just in a bit of a rush. So bygones." He looked around the room. "Where is she?"

"*I'm in the bathroom!*" she called out.

He sat down meekly on my bed, his huge shoulders curved in. He was wet from head to toe, his red beard dripping globs of raindrops onto the orange floor. He looked like he hadn't slept in a while.

She came out looking fresh and glowy, even though her hair was still tangled from sleep. Her shirt was untucked. Her jeans were crumpled. She was barefoot. She possessed a curvy swagger. No one could have ever looked more beautiful, to be honest.

"Uncle Jimmy, this is Taylor. . . *what the fuck is your last name?*"

"Morrison."

"Okay, Taylor fucking Morrison. The friend I told you about."

"Yeah, we met. He was kind enough to give me a lift yesterday."

Rainy looked at us, then leaned forward on one foot nervously and smiled, "Cool. . . I think."

Guns and Beethoven

James O'Brian's cell phone had a ring tone. It was Beethoven's "Für Elise." Nothing like a classical music buff who looks like he just escaped from a barbed wired facility.

"Eeeyellow. . . . Yes, sis, she's right here. Everything's fine, mostly." He glared at me. "No, he's not a problem. Believe me." He glared at me again. "No, not Chase. Some kid named Troy or Todd; something like that."

I was glad he didn't remember my name. He handed the phone to Rainy. "Hey Mom. How's work going?" she said brightly. "Oh, too bad. I know him, he's an ass. . . . He asked you on a real date as opposed to what. . . ? Sure, I don't give a crap. It's not like I have to watch or anything. . . ."

She headed towards the bathroom to get some privacy, but before she closed the door I heard her say, "Why do you care what dad thinks? Why would you need to make him feel jealous? Just move the fuck on."

I found myself alone with Uncle Jimmy. He looked at me and his eyes turned moist, "Look, I'm sorry about the carjacking yesterday. I was just trying to get down to the pier before Rainy did something stupid. Her mom says she's an emotional wreck. I guess you know why."

"Screwed up parents?"

"Divorce!"

"Oh."

"And that part of town she was heading towards is filled with serious nut cases."

“You mean like guys running around with guns and stuff?”

“Look, I told you it wasn’t loaded!”

He pulled out the aforementioned pistol and shook it at me, then aimed it at the wall and pulled the trigger.

A huge explosion ensued which shook the room and left a massive smoking hole just above the TV.

The bullet landed just to the left of the exact same painting of a bird sitting on a piece of fruit that hung in the café. The world is filled with coincidences, and prints.

Rainy came running out from the bathroom. “Jesus Christ, what the fuck was that?”

“I . . . I didn’t know it was loaded. I swear I emptied all the bullets out of the chamber before I left the apartment!”

I had instinctively cowered from the explosion. I was now huddled in the far corner, shaking from the gun blast. My ears were ringing. I thought I heard “Für Elise” somewhere in the hollow back regions of my brain. Or maybe it was the initial stages of a migraine accompanied by a random piano concerto.

“You used to be a cop, Uncle Jimmy! How the hell could you miss emptying one of the chambers?”

“I dunno, Rainy,” he whined, “I just did somehow.” His shoulders slumped another layer down. He looked like a big sad red cow sitting at the foot of my bed, holding a drooping gun in his front hoof.

“But the other chambers are empty, I *know* that.” He pointed the gun at the same wall and pulled the trigger again. I plugged my ears but he pulled the trigger over and over, resulting only in well-

greased metallic clicks. He reveled in the silence between each click.
“See? See?”

Rainy put the phone back up to her ear, “Okay mom, the rest of the gun was empty.”

She went back into the bathroom and closed the door.

“You used to be a cop? *You?*” I was bewildered. My ears were still ringing.

“Yeah, but then I killed someone by accident and they kicked me out of the force. He was a bad guy anyway, but you gotta follow the rules, see? It doesn’t matter what the results are. So then I got a job as an auto mechanic. But what the fuck. I can’t even fix my own car parked out there. That’s why I needed to hitch a ride with you yesterday. I think it needs a fuel pump. . . . Got a big straw in your pocket?” He began to laugh like a madman. “*Get it?*”

“Yeah. A true comedian, you are.”

There was a flurry of knocks on the door. The motel clerk shouted, “Is everything okay in d’ere?”

“Yeah,” I shouted back. “Someone tried to kill the bird in your painting, that's all.”

“May I please come in, sir?” He had a very sweet sounding Indian accent. It sounded so polite and gentle, but demanding at the same time.

Uncle Jimmy sighed, then opened the door by leaning backwards and turning the knob with the thumb and index finger of his big left hand.

The clerk, dark skinned, thin as a rail, and barely more than my age, came in holding a gun of his own. He held it up to the ceiling with his finger on the trigger. He was shaking. “Okay, who fired de

shot?" He straightened his wire rimmed glasses so he could aim better in case he had to shoot one of us.

"I did, Gandhi," Uncle Jimmy said. "Put down the pistol. It was a mistake."

"Vell, sir, you need to pay for da wall, den."

"The whole wall, chief? Look, all that hole needs is a little spackle. Five bucks at hardware store and a quick paint job. And the painting itself is fine. See? I totally missed the bird. No harm, no *foul*." (I think he was making a pun. . .foul. . .fowl.) I stopped myself from laughing. I couldn't believe I found him funny.

Next thing you know, three policemen are standing at the opened door. "What's the problem here?"

"*Dis man . . .*" the boy from India points his bony finger at O'Brian.

"*Jimmy!*" bellowed one of the officers. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"Hey, Pete. I'm just watching over my niece. A little private detective gig."

Officer Pete looked at me, then back at Uncle Jimmy. "He's a niece?"

"Nah, she's in the bathroom talking to Mary."

"Yeah? How the hell is Mary?"

The other officers were staring at the bullet hole in the wall. Jimmy looks at Pete and shrugs, "Don't ask."

"Why, what's with Mary?"

"Divorce. But I meant the wall."

"She's single?"

"Pete, fuck you."

Another officer somberly said, "We have to ask a few questions, you know that, Jim. We have a report to write up."

"Yeah, yeah," Jimmy says. "Just say that some guy took aim at a tiny bird sitting on top of a tangerine, and *just* missed." He started laughing, but everyone else remained silent.

"Dat's *not* a tangerine, sir," huffed the Indian boy, whose father probably owned the motel and picked out the painting himself. "It's a rock, coated with light from an orange sunset."

"Fuck no it's not," Jimmy insisted. "*That's* a tangerine, or a small orange. Where'd you get those glasses from, a pawn shop?"

The boy turned back toward the policeman hoping for some empathy, but they were focused on the hole in the wall. "What kind of gun puts that big of a hole in a wall?"

"Just my Smith and Wesson 625 fired at close range. What do you think I'm carrying around, a bazooka? Look, boys, write this down for your report -- I came here to watch over my niece, Rainy Robinson. She's not feeling real happy at the moment because her mom and her dick of a husband who I *will* kill the next time I see him, are getting a divorce, because he got his out of state girlfriend slightly pregnant. . . . Are you writing all this down?"

The officers had something akin to smiles appearing on their faces while one of them dutifully scribbled in his little black leather book.

"So," Uncle Jimmy continued, "her mom thought my niece might try to kill herself or something, see? And then my God-

damned car wouldn't start after she took off towards the pier, of which I thought she might jump. . . off of. . . . So, when her creepy boyfriend here wakes up from his beauty sleep I jumped into the poor dumb shit's car and forced him to drive me to the pier, threatening to otherwise blow his head off with what I thought was an unloaded gun."

He paused and looked at officer who was now madly taking the notes.

"Hence, Walter, a carjacking," O'Brian offered. "That's a code 209.5, as opposed to stealing his car, so cross out 537e. That's *wrong*."

The officer named Walter dutifully crossed out 537e and replaced it with 209.5.

"So I get down to the pier and take off on a full run with these fucked-up black mechanic's shoes on my feet that slide all around and make my bunions burn like a bonfire - you guys don't *know* how freakin' good those cop shoes are until you walk around in *these* dogs for a week," he lifts up one of his tree trunk-sized legs to reveal a scuffy black mud-covered size sixteen shoe with no arch.

"Anyway, I get to the only place on the pier that's high enough for someone to jump off of, and not just dogpaddle around in the sludge, and guess what I don't see?"

The officers are staring at him. The Indian guy behind them is standing there with his mouth open wide enough for a cat to jump in.

"*Rainy*, my niece, jumping off the pier. . . . That's what I don't see."

On cue, Rainy comes out of the bathroom, her conversation with her mom now over.

"Because apparently she wasn't trying to commit a 164. She was looking for a fucking ferry, she tells me. A Martinsville ferry,

which would go exactly where, if one existed? From Jansen pier to the nearest offshore oil rig? A real tourist attraction that would be, don't you think?"

His voice lowers, "You know, Sylvester got a job out on that rig about a month ago."

Walter says, "No way."

"Swear to Jesus."

His voice rises, "Anyway Rainy, exactly how flippin' stupid are you?"

"I guess it's genetic," she shoots back.

The officers begin to snicker. Jimmy thought he had them eating out of his hand, but now he was the punch line.

"You think you could pay for a boat ride with piggy bank money?" He was trying to rebound back towards being the joker and not the joke. But it failed.

Rainy says, "Okay, Uncle Jimmy, I get it. *They* get it. I'm just a dumb little shit kid, okay? But I wasn't trying to kill myself by jumping off a three foot dock into a pool of gasoline. I'm not that dumb, despite the rest of my family."

"Vell den, what ver you doing there, *fishing for dinner?*" the Indian clerk cackled. Stand-up was not his ticket out of this minimum wage gig. You could hear the crickets chirping.

"Für Elise" began to play again from Uncle Jimmy's cell. He snapped it open. "Sis, we're in the middle of a little discussion here with your daughter and, Tommy or, and uh, some little Indian guy, and a few cops actually, because I shot a wall with a tangerine on it, so can I please call you back?"

There's a few seconds of silence while he listens to Mary on the other end of the line. "Do I think she's sleeping with who . . . *him*?" He glared at me with eyes of stone. Then he looked at Rainy, "What gave you that idea?"

Mary responded, sounding like a distant chipmunk through the other end of the cell phone. "Okay, sis, I won't let him out of my sight, trust me." His fist tightened and he turned a little bit red in the face. He snapped the phone shut. "*Sid*down," he commanded, standing right over me. So I did.

Officer Walter butted in, "Jim. I'm afraid we have to take you down to the station for a chat."

"Come on Walter, get off my fucking back. I have to. . . ."

"Jimmy, don't put up a fight, man," said the officer standing closest to the door. "It won't end well. It's just regulations, you know that. And by the way, what's up with that crappy beard? Shit, it makes you look like a deranged Santa Claus."

Uncle Jimmy laughed nervously, the officers laughed, the Indian clerk, who was Hindu, tried to imagine a red bearded Krishna and laughed along. Then off they drove with Uncle Jimmy, into the fog of morning. And the clerk walked back to the office.

They left the door open. I watched the police cars drive off after a job well done. "If Uncle Jimmy isn't going to let you out of his sight he'd better leave his reading glasses behind," I said. "Barring that, I'd say we're all alone again."

This was my idea of a romantic segue, leading to a possible but improbable first kiss.

She threw her notebook in her backpack and zipped it up. "Your jokes are so funny, and so romantic, it makes me want to kick you in the face."

Then she walked over and slammed the front door shut with her foot.

Then she rushed towards me.

I assumed she was going to *actually* kick me in the face. But then. . . no, the kiss caused me to lose my balance and we fell onto the bed, and everything that followed was nothing Uncle Jimmy would have ever wanted to see.

The Crumpled Brown Paper Bag

My astral girl had become real. Silver stars sparkled wildly out the window of our greenish brown room, while part of the exploded wall lay dead on the floor in white dusty fragments.

I touched her cheek, for real this time. "Can I ask questions now?"

"Within reason," she said.

"Okay, first of all, how much money do you have on you?"

She laughed, "Why? Are you going to *charge* me for all this?"

"No! We'll probably need to eat, and buy gas, and. . . I mean, we need to be able to afford to go somewhere. We can't just stay here. It smells like gun powder."

"We?"

"Rainy seriously. Do you really want to go off on your own? I'm willing to try to help."

"Okay. Okay. I have about seventy-five dollars left."

"I only have about thirty," I said.

"Yeah, I don't care about that," she shrugged nervously. "Wanna ask me anything else?"

"Yes. . . . Do you actually *like* me?" I smiled a little too widely.

"You little creep. I'm starting not to again." She pushed me away from her.

“Okay,” I said, “then tell me this -- why are there all these secrets going on?”

“What secrets?”

“Why did you really go down to the pier? I want the real story.”

“Okay, Taylor, get in the car. It’s time you knew. And we really do have to get out of here before Jimmy comes back.”

She got up and started to put her clothes on. That was depressing. The odds were high that what happened wasn't going to happen again.

She quickly packed her suitcase and knapsack and put them in the back seat of my car.

“Where to, fearless leader?” I said, strapping in the driver’s seat.

“Back to the pier. Jimmy interrupted me from an important errand.”

I started driving down the same streets I had been forced to drive down with O’Brian the Madman, thinking at the time my life was over. When we got close to Jansen Bridge she directed me down a small alleyway.

“Park here,” she said sternly. We were at the very edge of the northern part of the pier. When we got out she said, “This is where Uncle Jimmy found me yesterday. He came running from right over there.” She pointed to where the yellow dumpster was. Not a fond memory for me.

“If he'd gotten here any later my life would have gotten so fucked up. He knows something. He just doesn't know everything.”

We kept walking, with the light dimming, until we were standing in front of a dozen steel-coated mail boxes hidden in the shadows, each one with a separate lock. She searched until she found the right number. Then she pulled out her wallet, dug two fingers into an insert usually reserved for a photo of your kid, and pulled out a very small key.

“You brought me all the way down a dark alley to pick up your mail?” I whispered. I half-expected someone would jump out from the darkness to grab us.

She unlocked the box. I craned my neck to see what was inside. Out came an old crumpled brown paper bag. She looked inside and quickly closed it up. “Okay, let’s get out of here.” Her voice was shaking.

Drugs? Did Chase put her up to this? She was racing back to the car before I had time to question her.

We drove as quickly as my used Hyundai could go, main road out of Martinsville, towards the next town that looked pretty much the same as Martinsville, with the crumpled brown paper bag firmly in her grasp.

It started to rain again, of course, and the windshield scraped everything into blurry streaks.

She leaned over and kissed me.

“Thank you. I really appreciate that. But before we drown, do you mind telling me what’s in the bag?”

“An inflatable boat.”

“Oh, so I’m Noah, right?”

She nodded, turning her steely blue eyes towards me, "And that would make me Mrs. Noah, I suppose. There has to be two of everything apparently."

"Odd honeymoon," I smiled. I was having the time of my life!

In Them Thar Hills

Rainy suggested we skip the next town after Martinsville and head east towards an old farm town called Elly's Pike.

About an hour later, we came to a hilly green town in the middle of nowhere and Rainy told me to pull off the road at the Elly's Pike General Store.

We went in and looked around. There were rows of mismatched items of all shapes and sizes: plastic wrapped cheese crackers next to a pair of plumbers boots next to two cans of mosquito repellent next to boxes of Raisin Bran. The store also had a rack of clothes. She bought me a pair of used jeans, which fit pretty well, and a white collared work shirt I could wear while I washed mine. And a toothbrush all my own. We picked up some food too. A ripe tomato, a loaf of bread, some fresh butter and a box of Oreos. We gassed up outside at an old red and white single pump with one regular grade of gas. I calculated that what she spent on all these things, including a full tank of gas, used up more than half her money. I still had my thirty dollars. But then what?

As we drove on we saw a bed and breakfast sign and she told me to pull in. We went to the front door and knocked. An elderly lady answered. She saw us shivering and huddled together. "I get it. How much you got?" she asked. "Thirty dollars," I said. She thought things over for a moment. "Okay, pay me now, in cash. . . . No coins," she added. I gave her three ten dollar bills. She counted them slowly, one by one. "Room's at the top of the stairs."

When we entered the room we were pleasantly surprised. This place was a whole lot nicer than the Motel 6. The floors creaked but the furnishings were all antiques. I loved sitting in the rocking chair. It had a new blue cushion with white polka dots. The entire house smelled like fresh gravy. There was a big bed with an old white quilt on it, flowers on the night stand, lacey curtains, an old dark wood dresser, and a painting that looked like a pencil sketch of a farm with

a main house that might have been this very place a hundred years ago.

I flopped down on the bed and the springs bobbed me up and down. It was so comfortable I could have fallen asleep on the spot, except that I was also pretty wound up about *everything*.

“Want to tell me what’s going on now? What are we going to do starting tomorrow with no money and no food and. . . .”

She ignored my comment and began to inspect a chess board with beautiful hand-carved marble pieces. She ran her fingers across the smooth pieces. The board sat fully prepared for the guests, staged on an old wood table, with two big chairs facing each other.

“Do you know how to play?” she asked.

“I dabble.”

“Dabble with me.”

She sat down in one of the chairs and motioned to me with her eyes. I made my way over. She’d taken the white pieces.

With her first move I took notice of her hands. Her fingers were beautifully delicate, even without any nail polish. She also wore no rings, no bracelets. No jewelry anywhere. Not even a trinket around her neck. No earrings. No pierced ears. Maybe her parents were part of some religious cult that forbid these things.

“I used to play with my mom,” she said. She was pretty good, even when she was dead drunk.”

Rainy’s mind was very complex. She led me to think she was planning one line of attack, only to attack me from another angle. But after so much aggression against my barely capable defense, she got too confident and exposed her queen and I trapped her.

At least that's what I assumed. But after her next move I realized that after I took her queen she would have me in checkmate. "So I'm done," she said. "Take my queen if you want."

She got up from her chair, took me by the hand and led me to a big white framed window overlooking a small garden and opened it wide.

She said, "Should I push you, or you push me?"

"Very funny." I turned around to try to kiss her but she stopped me and started to laugh hysterically.

"What's so funny?"

"Us."

"Why?"

"Because, well, *we're rich*, Noah."

"What are you talking about?"

She kept laughing as she brought the crumpled paper bag over to the bed.

She put her finger to her lips and told me not to scream, then reached her hand into the bag and pulled out four small rolls of yellow coins.

"Know what this is?"

"It's very shiny. "

"That's right, it's very *very* shiny. It's gold, Noah! A *lot* of it."

"Where in the world did you get this from? Rainy, stop messing with me. What the heck is going on?"

“My dad -- the creep who impregnates non-wives from Maryland -- he felt really guilty after my mom served divorce papers on him. So he called me one night and told me he had a gift for me. But I had to keep it a secret or it might get hung up in the divorce settlement, even though he had meant to give it to me all along when I graduated high school.

“He said he bought some gold the year I was born for two hundred and fifty dollars an ounce. Forty ounces. Cost my dad ten thousand dollars at the time. It was a lot of money to stash away. He thought it would pay for my college education someday. She fingered the four small tubes of coins now lying on the bed.

“What’s it worth now?”

“About *sixty frickin’ thousand dollars!*”

“Jeez!”

“But if my mom gets her hands on it, it’s gonna be gone. She’ll buy sixty thousand dollars’ worth of booze and cigarettes, I swear to God she will. She won’t care who the money was meant for. She’ll just take it and ingest it. So”

“So. . . ?”

“So we have to spend it, Taylor! We need to spend it, *now*. We have to figure out a way to have the best time of our lives and *drain these little tubes A.S.A.P.*”

“We?”

“Yeah, you’re my taxi boy, aren’t you? So officially that makes you an accomplice.”

She kissed me. It was a new kind of kiss. Not tentative. But not rough. Then she pulled me down to the bed with the gold lying

between us. We made love in a way unique to most human beings who have ever lived. Of that, I was sure. Because it was with sixty thousand dollars of gold pressed against our skin.

Not Ireland

After eating our gourmet dinner of bread and tomatoes, bought hours before at Elly's Pike General Store, Rainy did something quite unexpected. She handed me her brown notebook and said, "You can read any one page you want except the last entries. They're private."

I opened her book to a random page near the beginning:

Wind. Windows. Quiet bells
Each in turn tell the truth about the world.
I'm here, but ready to sail away on the first cloud.
I see a sea of sky, but I'm not seeing anything I can touch.
And the air is full of secret chiming things
I used to know long ago.
But I'm too old to remember now.

I closed the book and looked at her. "You are *really*. . . ." That's all I could say, since I myself had never been able to write anything.

I took Rainy by the shoulders and sat her down in a big overstuffed antique chair, then sledged the chair across the wooden floor until she was facing the bed.

I jumped up on the white quilt and started bouncing up and down. She started to laugh at me.

"All right," I announced, "if you answer this question you will be able to choose from a number of wonderful prizes. Are you ready for 'The Final Question?'"

"I don't answer questions, and especially not final questions," she said seriously. She crossed her arms.

“Rainy Robinson, please reconsider. Because you can choose from the following very expensive prizes if you win, some of which could be worth as much as *sixty thousand* dollars!”

“Oh, really?”

“Yes, really.” I cleared my throat, still bouncing on the bed. And the ‘Final Question’ is, “What will tomorrow bring?”

“Tomorrow will be an interesting day,” she said to no one in particular.

“Judges?” I looked behind me to the invisible panel of judges consisting of me, me, and me.

“The judges have accepted that as an answer, young lady. So let’s see what you’ve won. Oh, lucky you. It’s ‘free choice!’ That means you get to choose among any of the following prizes.

“A beautiful, *powerful*, brand new laptop computer.”

“. . . . No thanks, I hate computers.”

“Okay, okay. . . a beautiful, *powerful*, brand new car to drive you out of here in style, and take you anywhere you want to go.”

“No. Um, well, maybe.”

“I’m sorry, the judges cannot accept maybe as an answer. I will repeat the question. Drum roll please. . . . a beautiful, powerful, brand new car?”

“Okay. . . . No.”

“How about a *massively* expensive diamond necklace for that lovely neck of yours.”

“My neck is just a normal neck. And no jewelry.”

This was getting harder.

“Okay, here is a special prize rarely offered to our contestants. How about *a slave!* A human slave to do whatever you command of him.” I bowed, “At your service, Master Rainy.”

“I don’t want a slave, you little sh. . . .”

“Uh, uh, uh, we’ll censor that out later. Please remember, Ms. Robinson, this is a family show.”

“Okay, fine. But then what are slaves doing on a family show?”

“Good point. We’ll have to fire the producer. Okay, here’s your final choice. How about an all-expenses-paid trip around the world for a whole year?”

“Hmm. . .Where to?”

“You name it!”

“*Not* Ireland!”

“That’s not really the kind of answer the judges are looking for, Ms. Robinson. There are a lot of ‘not Irelands.’ So please. A little more specificity.”

She thought about it and said quietly, “Maybe Paris. And Italy. Spain! Chile. Peru. Maybe. . . .”

“Basically, everywhere but Ireland!” I announced to the TV audience. “Okay. We get it. Can the show afford to take her everywhere but Ireland? Judges?”

“We can go! Taylor, we could go, you and me. . . *everywhere!*” Her face looked as excited as a child’s. Her eyes were bright. Her cheeks were flushed. I’d never seen her like this.

She went to the window and looked out into the night. "Let me sleep on it," she said. "But I think that's the answer. . . and the solution." Then she added, "But first, there's a place I want to go tomorrow, on our way out of town."

She turned around and climbed up on the bed and began to bounce next to me, then she put her arms around my neck, "Just know," she looked deeply into my eyes as we were bouncing in sync, "I think you make a very," we jumped a bit higher, "shitty," she was getting a little giddy and out of breath, "game show host."

Later that night, Rainy and I looked through a World Atlas we found on the bookshelf. I realized there were so many places we *didn't want to go to*.

"I've decided, I like places that have rain," I said, almost to myself."

"Don't be sappy."

"What do you mean?"

"Just because my name is Rainy? "

"No, no, that's not it at all. I didn't even think about that. I just realized in the last few days, I really like rain; I'd like it even more if I had windshield wipers that worked."

"We'll get some new wipers tomorrow. . . . I kind of like rainy places too. There's Seattle."

"No. It's not exotic enough. There's. . . ."

"Not Ireland!"

"Okay. Anyway, maybe it's *too* rainy in Ireland."

“Okay, she said, “Well, there’s Paris, in the spring. It rains in the spring, and then all the flowers bloom, then summer comes, and everything comes totally alive.”

“Paris!” I said in awe.

“Yeah, Paris.”

“Paris.”

The silence that followed was the most beautiful silence I’d ever known.

The Photograph

A beautiful morning carried sunshine through all the windows. There were so many reasons not to get up. There was so much life in front of us, but nothing at all to do right now. It was incredibly perfect. Although probably nothing is *credibly* perfect.

Around noon we checked out and packed up the car. She told me to drive further east towards a town called Captain's Ridge.

We got off at a dusty exit and drove through the small strip of stores that represented the downtown: a gas station, an old diner, a grocery store, a bank, and a small Victorian-looking inn next to a Greyhound Bus Station.

At the end of town she told me to turn left, and up we went, winding around a two-lane road until the views off to one side became movie-like. We could see so much green, thousands of acres of grass, and farmland normally hidden by steel and roads and buildings from ground level.

Near the top of the ridge she told me to turn into a dirt driveway. We traveled down a gravel road until a white house appeared. No other houses were around it. It was enclosed by a long wooden fence. Nearby was a fire trail leading up to the peak of the ridge.

She told me to park the car and I followed her through the wooden gate to the front door. She tried the knob but it was locked, so she went around the side of the house, opened a window, and climbed through it. She opened the front door from the inside and I stepped in.

There was no furniture, a lot of dust, a sun beam angling through a living room window, a kitchen with no appliances.

"This where you used to live?"

“Until I was eleven.”

She motioned for me to come in and took me up a creaky flight of stairs. We entered a small room with a window that looked out over the valley. There was a small empty closet and an outlet with a cable wire still attached. She must have had a small TV in her room back then.

“Oh my God,” she said breathlessly. She bent down in a corner of the closet and stood up holding a four by five photograph.

It was a picture of her as a young girl, with an out of control smile on her face, the same auburn hair except slightly redder. She was standing on a ridge, a broad green gulch in the background, and a white bird flying low, almost landing on her shoulder.

She was standing straight, but her hands were outstretched as if she were going to try to fly any minute. It was perfect, with the bird looking like it was going to land on her, maybe to teach her how to climb the sky.

I looked at the picture still closer. Noticed more details.

Her voice lowered, “My parents, they sat at the kitchen table down there, and drank, and fought and drank some more. Then, they’d call me down for dinner and get on me about something insane, like, ‘You’re so pretty, why don’t you become a cheerleader?’ Or, ‘Why don’t you paint your nails and put on some jewelry like a girl?’ . . . And I’d just shake my head in disbelief at how clueless they were. Then they’d get madder at me for not answering their questions. So I just stopped answering questions from them or anyone else. Because what I learned from my parents was there are usually no good answers. They just lead to more questions.

“Anyway, I’d run back up to my room, this room, and lock the door.” She looked around for a moment, maybe remembering where her bed was, and her dresser, “And I’d sit down right here in this

corner, and hide out, and write my secrets in a red leather diary that had a lock connected to the flap, until they were asleep. Drunks usually go to bed early. So, yeah, I would imagine I could fly right out this window and leave here. Flying has a lot of upside.”

“What happened to the diary?”

“Oh, yeah, that was cool. I burned it in front of them because I caught my mom looking for the key one day.

We wandered around the house a bit more. She didn’t want to go into her parents’ old room, but we wandered downstairs to a room that had been renovated from an old garage. “This is where the pool table was,” she said. “We were really living the stinkin’ high life back then.”

We walked out the front door. Then we began hiking up the fire trail. She carried the photo in her hand all the while.

About ten minutes later we came to an overlook. It looked across a vast gully and unfurled into the horizon, with blue sky the only thing you could see beyond it.

We sat down on some boulders at the edge of the ridge and then she did the strangest thing. She looked at the photo, which was obviously taken right here at this spot, and stared at eleven year-old Rainy, the little girl with the big smile on her face and her arms outstretched, with the expansive blue sky framing her, white bird flying, like the flock of birds gliding across the gully now. . . and then she ripped the photo up in a dozen pieces, until the pieces were too small to rip anymore.

She flung the confetti of photograph off the ridge. “Have a nice life,” she said.

I was too stunned and confused to say anything so I just continued sitting silently with my arms hugging my legs. I’d glance

up at her from time to time, then look out to the gully, then close my eyes.

She came closer to me and said quietly, "I used to see a sailboat in the distance with an orange sail. It was slowly crossing the sea of sky. I saw the sky as the sea all the time from here, instead of sky. Can you see it?"

I looked across the expanse and easily saw the endless rolling blue sky as a vast ocean. The silence sitting at this spot was so intense I could hear the ringing in my ears. Not a sound anywhere, except for her voice when she chose to speak.

She said almost to herself, "Vast and blue, and something you could travel away on. . . . And then one day, at sunset, I saw a boat with a tall triangular orange sail, and there was this umbilical cord of orange light that rolled towards me, shimmering.

"It rolled on and on until it came right up to me, right here." She moved a few inches to the left until she sat in front of an old rock the size of a basketball. "Here. Right here. And I tried to attach myself to it, and just sail away. I tried to leap towards it without moving, hoping it would carry me off, but nothing happened. *But I really wanted it to.* That was my life out there! I wanted to go."

I imagined an orange light shimmering towards me. I could almost see it.

"Then it happened. The orange light took me all the way to the boat. I didn't know where to sail to, but it didn't matter. It was just 'away.' Anywhere away was fine."

I looked at her from a side view. I noticed a few freckles on her face I hadn't noticed before. Her cheeks had gotten red. Her eyes were watery but I knew she would never cry. Anger saw to that.

She stood up and wiped the dirt off her hands. "And then one day my mom told me we were moving. So I came up here one last

time. I was up here so long my dad had to come get me and literally drag me down the hill. He knew about this place; my place. He brought his camera along. And he took the photograph of me the very last time I was up here. He told me to smile. He made me smile until the smile looked just right. When it rolled out of the Polaroid he gave it me and I kept it, because honestly, I liked the way I looked. So I had to give it a proper burial.”

I was just about to say something when the continuity of the moment exploded – as if an alien had landed from outer space – my cell phone rang.

I immediately promised myself I’d never own a cell phone again.

I instinctively looked at the number but didn’t recognize it. Rainy did though. “Shit, it’s my mother. She must have vacuumed up your number when I called her on your cell the other day.”

I got up from where we were seated and flung the phone into a big tree about eight feet away. It blew up into a mass of silver shards and left a little divot in the bark. One tiny chip ricocheted and almost hit me in the leg. The battery bailed out without a parachute and mercifully died on contact. The ringing stopped.

She looked at me, stunned. Then she nervously combed her hands through her hair and started laughing, “You are *such a fucking freak!*”

' z '

We drove back into the small town of Captain's Ridge and stopped at the local bank. We went into a quiet corner and Rainy carefully dislodged a coin from one of the tubes. Then we went up to the teller. "Can you cash this?"

She looked at it and asked us to take a seat at the manager's desk. A fat man in a wrinkly black suit greeted us. He reminded me of a bespeckled scuffed-up bowling ball.

He looked at us with a tad of suspicion. But then he looked carefully at both sides of the coin under what looked like a jeweler's magnifying glass and confirmed it was an American Eagle. He went to his computer and looked at the daily value of an ounce of gold. "We take a fee for this," he dutifully warned us. When he returned, he handed us one thousand four hundred and twenty one dollars and eighteen cents. We thanked him and quickly left.

We were quiet and subdued until we got far enough away from the bank to start screaming and jumping in the air.

"Oh my God! This is insane."

We found a place to stay for the night right next to the Greyhound station. The business card at the front desk had the name of the establishment written on it: "Inn Here." I guess the more clever the name of the place is, the more they think they can charge. Especially if the name is also written in script.

There were only five rooms at the inn, but it wasn't a bed and breakfast because the old guy who owned it couldn't cook. He laughed about that fact when we checked in. "I just eats over at the grocery deli, or once in a while over at that diner there," he said a bit slurrily, due to the fact that he had two front teeth missing. One would assume both places offered a variety of soft foods.

We stayed in “the suite,” which was one hundred ten dollars a night. But it was worth it apparently. Because the room was double-sized and had a romantic view of the Greyhound station itself.

Best of all, right below our window was an empty parking space reserved for the handicapped. According to the old man that meant it was extra quiet in the suite because no cars start up right below you, because no handicapped people come here.

He began to count the brand new bills we laid in front of him. “Yep. Nice and quiet. Not a soul to disturb you.” Then he winked at us.

When we entered the suite we flopped giddily onto the bed. “Is this crazy or what?” she said breathlessly. I closed my eyes for a moment. My thoughts were buzzing. I tried to imagine the future, our future. Where would this all lead? We would need passports to leave the country. Probably a credit card to pay for the flights, unless the airlines would accept cash. Or gold! But her thoughts were somewhere else.

She gazed out the window, looking across the parking lot to the Greyhound station. “When I was little, my dad used to drive me into town with him, and while he was in that same bank we were just in, withdrawing money for the weekend, I’d stand outside and stare at that Greyhound station, the big sign, all the buses coming and going. And I’d think to myself, ‘Wow, look how huge that building is! It must be the main connection point for all of America. . . . The magic passageway out of here. . . . And if you have enough money, someday you could go anywhere. Like New Zealand. . . and *Zanzibar!* Anywhere with a ‘z’ in it.’ That was my fantasy back then. I didn’t think about how a Greyhound bus was going to travel across the ocean. That was a small detail. I just wanted to go to a faraway place with a ‘z’ in it. Z’s were magical for some reason. . . . I guess I wanted to go as far away from the beginning of the known alphabet as possible.”

The Gift

Evening came. She took the four tubes of coins, now with one coin gone, and put them on the bed in front of us. We were so rich we had no problem leaving the left-over cash from our first coin in the glove box of my used Hyundai, even though the passenger side didn't have a lock. We could afford to trust the world for one night.

She leaned forward, legs crossed, her elbows on the bedspread, staring at the tiny powerful canisters up close. They could lead us to a wild new life. We were like Gods now -- we were sacrificing these little round golden lambs to our wanderlust.

I was drawn to her silent worship and came closer. She pushed up against me playfully. I kissed her neck. Then came a gentle knock at the door. A light, sorry to disturb you, kind of knock.

"Who's there?" Rainy called out. I instinctively reached over and put the tubes of gold in both my front pockets. One coin slipped out and I hastily put that one in my back pocket.

"I have a small gift from the owner," said the voice, a small weird high-pitched voice.

Rainy stood there frozen, looking oddly confused. I started towards the door. Flowers? Chocolate? As my hand began to unhinge the lock she called out, "Don't open it!"

But it was too late.

Jimmy came spilling in through the first crack, his voice blustery. "*I'm* the gift! *Ha!* Enjoy it while it lasts!" he roared with laughter, obviously proud that he'd found us, and then tricked us into letting him in.

"How did you know we were here?" Rainy whispered almost to herself, shocked at the sight of him.

“I’m an ex-cop, darlin’. As soon as I saw the weather had cleared I figured you’d want to take him to the house and your little meadow up the hill before scampering out of here for good. . . . But I couldn’t be sure.”

She said nothing, blushing slightly.

“So I drove over there, saw fresh car tracks – I found an open window. No dust on the ledge, so it hadn’t been opened long. That’s how you got in. So then I said to myself, ‘If I was high on dope, and romantically sucked into this weird creep’s little trippy world, and needed a place to sleep after showing him my little meadow dreamland, where would I go?’ I drove to the only place to stay in town that wasn’t rat-infested. And, bulls-eye. Saw the little creep’s used Hyundai parked in the side lot. Yeah. So I parked my big-assed fully repaired Chevy convertible in the handicapped zone, right next to your piece of garbage, to block your way just in case you tried to escape.”

He lowered his voice and sneered, “And then, my professional detective mind says to myself, ‘If I were suddenly rich, what room would I stay in?’ The best room in the whole goddamn joint, of course! He wiped his face with the sleeve of his shirt, sort of like an animal before coming in for the kill.

“I told the old man the truth, that I was the young girl’s Uncle, and he confirmed you were up in ‘the suite.’ But of course. Why quibble over a hundred dogs here, and a hundred dogs there, when you’re in love and *rollin’ in dough*? Am I right?

How did he know?

“So I climbed up the little red carpeted stairs and used my best ‘faggy bell hop’ voice, and *bang*, the gift arrived! ‘*What a gift I am!*’” he mocked in his faggy bell hop voice. “It was just too damn easy, babe.”

He was getting louder. I was hoping the inn keeper would hear him. Or maybe if I screamed for help really loud just once the inn keeper would hear me and call the police. But I had to face facts -- the old guy was half-deaf and fast asleep by now. And Jimmy might kill me if I screamed. He seemed more than willing, and capable of doing it with his bare hands.

"What do you want, Uncle Jimmy? I'm safe. He's cool. I'm not going to kill myself, for. . . ."

"You know what I want."

When neither of us said anything, he screamed, "You're in possession of stolen property, color: yellow. So give it back!"

"It's *not* stolen."

"How's that, little girl?"

"Dad gave it to me as a gift. He bought it for me when I was born."

"And whose money did he use to buy that gift? It wasn't just his money to give away. That was *their* money, his and your mother's.

"That's not true!"

He sighed, "You really don't get it, do you? I followed you right from the beginning, because your mom knew about the gold all along. Your dad told her just one time, years ago. The man could never hold his liquor like your mother can. But he wouldn't tell her where it was, because he knew she'd want it. That pissed her off big-time. She never forgot it. Drunk as she may have been. Drunk accountants' minds are not only the most paranoid minds in the universe, they're also like steel traps. So as soon as you ran away she figured that's where you might be headed. You'd need money. That's why she had me follow you. She told me she'd split whatever I could

find, fifty-fifty. So I followed you down to the pier in a mad rush, but then I realized I found you before you got your hands on the prize." He laughed, "I wasn't there to save you. No one thought you were going to jump off a two foot pier into an oil slick. As soon as I came back from the police station and found you gone I knew you had it and were on the run. So I fixed my car and *hunted your ass down*. Cool as hell, right?"

She squinted at him, cowgirl style, a slight smile on her face.

He squinted right back at her, "You're a stupid kid, I'll tell ya. You should have just gone straight to an airport. It would have taken me a lot longer to track you down."

"Well, maybe I'm not so stupid after all," she shot back. "Think about it. Dad bought the coins for me when I was born, right? But I was born *six months before* they were married! Remember that? *Remember?* And if that's the case, then *legally*. . ."

"Yeah, yeah. Tell it to the attorneys, honey. They'll get a good bendy fucking laugh out of it. Meanwhile, looks like your college education ends here. I hope you enjoyed, 'Sex, Drugs, and Robbery, 101.' But the semester is over."

Rainy said quietly, "Look, Uncle Jimmy, mom makes plenty of money at her job. And dad, he's a creep, I know that. He left mom and screwed up really bad. His money can't buy him out of that in my eyes. But he *owes* me. . . *something*. . . don't you think? And so does she, if you want to know the truth. She sucked as a mom. I'm sorry, but it's true. I couldn't read her from one second to the next. Maybe this money is a way of saying sometimes things can turn out okay, not all people are completely greedy and insane, maybe life can be fun once in a while. With no strings attached."

He began to applaud. "Sob, sob, little pirate. Very nice. Pulled right at my heart strings. But in the end, you took something that's not yours. You took something that was given to you from a master of deceit. A coward. A man who runs away whenever things get

tough. That's who he is. And that's a part of who you are. I can see that. And what do you think you deserve for *that*? A buried treasure?"

Rainy stood frozen before him.

"So hand it over!"

"Well, she should only owe you half, right?" I said. My words fell into the well of fear that had pervaded the room. But I ventured forth, "We'll give you her mom's half and call it even."

"You should have thought about that sooner, Tommy the Creep. But my police work is very costly these days. The bills are piling up, I'm afraid. . . .So, I'll need it all. And I'll need it right now."

"We'll tell dad what you did!" Rainy stammered.

"Oh my! And let's see, then he'll tell the police, right? He'll tell them he was hiding gold, undeclared to the IRS, for eighteen years! Didn't want to declare it as part of his divorce either. Leaving poor Mary Robinson with *zip*. Then, of course, after he gets out of jail, he'll be so very glad to pay the back taxes in the gold, and pay off his divorce lawyer, and be happy that you at least took some of the money to go to college - oops, check that - I mean stole it to pay for gas so you could fuck your boyfriend in a Motel 6, then disappear from the known world without so much as a thank you to him. Leaving everyone else with a tidy sum of. . . *zero*! That's *zero* with a little 'z'. . . Life is very complicated, Miss Pirate Niece. You gotta be an accountant these days just to figure out if you have any money, or more likely, how much you owe. Then you have all these choices to make. You have to decide whether to work off your debts, or declare bankruptcy. There is no door number three. You can't just spread your wings and fly away from reality without payin' the wing maker. Cold hard facts, girl - life is lived on the ground. Usually belly down."

“Uncle Jimmy, you know this isn’t fair,” she said gently. She was stoic, calm. No hint of fear or anger. “Can’t we maybe. . . .”

“Fair? *Fair?*” He began to laugh like a madman. “You have your father’s sense of fairness, don’t you?”

He sobered himself by pinching the bridge of his nose and shaking his head, and said in a low voice, “You know, you’re just as greedy as all the people you hate for being greedy. See the irony there, little niece? See what that *feels* like? To want somethin’ *so bad*? It’s poison, isn’t it, to actually *want* something? So you resort to begging. Begging *me* now. Uncle Asshole! *You, begging me!* Miss Above It All, on her knees. . . . No, you’re just a little snively thief, just like everyone else in the known universe. You pretend you’re different. But you’re not.”

She was still standing straight before him, but her eyes became moist. She began to shake almost imperceptibly. He’d gotten to her.

“Now give me the pot of gold. *Do it!*”

She looked back at the bed: “Shit, I don’t know, where the fuck *it’s gone!*”

“I’m losing my patience, damn it. Hand it over! *Now!*” He took out his gun and pointed it at me. “If either of you move in any direction except where those coins are, I’ll blow his head off. And believe me, this time all the chambers are loaded.”

“They’re in my pocket,” I said. “Just slow down. . . . I need to put my hands in my pocket to get them for you. And I don’t carry a gun. . . . So. . . .”

“Stop right there!” he yelled. “Which pocket?”

“The right one.”

He walked over to me and put the muzzle of the gun right against my temple. I began to shake and feel sick to my stomach. I felt like I might black out. I closed my eyes, feeling the end of the gun pushing against my brain. Any second a bomb could go off in my head. Then, the end of me for all time.

He took two tubes out of my right pocket, and as I expected, he checked my other pocket too. The other two tubes were there. He patted me down to make sure there were no other tubes on me and then patted Rainy down as well. Then he searched the room for more, knowing exactly what to look for now. He looked in the bathroom. Under the bed.

When he was satisfied, and the room had been turned into a whirl of open drawers, a bed without sheets, a suitcase kicked over and emptied, and clothes thrown in every direction, he crowed, "Your mom and I are sure to have a very good time with your asshole father's undeclared money. Thanks for the golden moments we've shared over the last few days. I've enjoyed it. Have a happy life."

Then he elbowed me in the solar plexus and I crashed into the wall. I fell to the floor, trying to catch my breath.

He left the room, leaving the door wide open. Rainy went over and slammed the door closed with both hands. Then she opened the window wide. I had no idea what she was doing. She ran into the bathroom, looking almost possessed, and filled a cleaning bucket with water from the bathtub. She ran to the window, looked out, and zeroed in on Uncle Jimmy's car. The top was down. It was a straight shot. An easy target. The front seat got completely drenched.

She ran back in and filled the bucket again. I saw Jimmy running towards his car for the great escape, then sitting in the water and wondering where the hell it came from. I watched him as he began to curse. Then he look straight up at our window. Rainy came flying out of the bathroom and just as he started yelling she dropped another bucket of water straight down onto his head. Then she threw

the empty bucket as hard as she could down at him. It pinged off the inside top of the windshield and ricocheted into his face. He waved it away like a giant steel mosquito. His nose was bloody.

“And there’s my gift to *you*, Uncle Rat Shit! Now you don’t have to take a bath for another few weeks, you smelly old fuck,” she yelled, and slammed the window shut.

Sleep

It was the only time I ever saw Rainy break down and cry. She wouldn't look at me. She sat on the side of the bed and buried her head in her arms.

"Rainy," I whispered. "It's gonna be all right. Another few months of work at the café and I'll have enough money for us to travel, we'll go anywhere you want. Paris, even! Except I don't have to feel guilty about it this way. *You see?* Because it'll be *my* money. And then you can be *my* accomplice. I'll take care of the rest. I won't feel like I'm mooching off of you."

"Taylor, it's not about the money. Or traveling to any place in particular." She wiped a tear away. "And you don't have to feel guilty about anything. I liked buying you clothes, and food. I'm upset because some of what my uncle said was true. *That's* why I'm crying."

"Don't believe anything that fat fuck said. He was just messing with you."

I knelt down before her. "Hey Rainy, he didn't find it all." I handed her the one gold coin I had put in my back pocket when it fell to the floor. "It's worth more than a thousand dollars. And then there's the money from the coin we cashed yesterday -- it's in the glove box of the car. That should get us started. It'll all work out for us, you'll see."

"He'll probably come back for it," she laughed, with tears rolling down her cheeks. "The man's relentless."

"We'll be long gone. We can leave right now."

"No. No, let's sleep, Taylor. I'm tired. I don't really care about him anymore. I don't want to run. I don't want to fly. I just want to sleep."

She beckoned me to bed, and we held each other until we fell asleep. Instead of having gold coins nestled between us there was only the decrepit yellow light from the Greyhound station glowing through our window.

Loved

When I woke up, of course, she was gone.

The note said, "Going to the Greyhound station. Don't follow me this time. Please. I'll try to come home someday. I promise. I loved you. You know that. - Rain.

At the bottom of the note was the gold coin I'd wanted her to have.

I wandered into the bathroom where the only thing that remained was the toothbrush and shirt she had bought me.

I brushed my teeth with cold water and walked back into the bedroom. I looked across to the Greyhound terminal. I caught sight of the entrance. Just a dark hall spiraling inward. A black hole sucking in the morning light.

White

Rainy, I had a dream last night.

We were sitting on the floor of your childhood room. You were showing me the photograph from long ago. The green hilly island, a bird flying low, almost landing on your shoulder. You were eleven years old.

You took me by the hand. You introduced me to your parents. They had been living in the same house all these years. I tried hard to please them. They could see I cared for you; and I was kind to them. But they didn't like me.

I went into your room at the top of the house. I was glad for the privacy. I felt darkened and alone. You followed me in, sat beside me and put your hand on my face - "I used to lock myself away in here too. I remember it. They made me feel just like you feel now."

Thick fog curled in and rearranged the hilly landscape to pure white.

The white took us there, up to the hillside, to the rock she sat near. We huddled and merged inside the fog until it turned warm. Like a nest.

We were two small birds sitting together, looking across the gully, wondering if we should try to fly to the other side. Across the vastness, there was Paris. It was raining, it was spring time.

As I gauged the distance I thought - we won't make it. We're not really birds, and it's too far. . . . But we should try anyway.

When I turned to ask you what you thought, you were

gone. I looked around, but not for long. I knew you weren't coming back.

I was driving a car. But I was pressing on the brake while pressing on the gas. I drove slowly, across cities, across oceans, looking for you, but knowing there could be no rescues. Rescues never work.

I went back to the hill and sat by the gully. I was trying to decide if I should fly across to the other side alone. . .

. . . away from here, away from you, and everything I ever tried to love.

Orange

I drove back to her old house and walked up to the gully,
hoping in my utter innocence to find her there.

As I sat down on the rocks alone an orange ribbon of light
appeared in the sky.

I followed it out to the end, where a sailboat raced on the open
horizon.

Suddenly I saw you standing alone on the deck,
looking back at me,
backlit by an orange triangular sailcloth
rippling from the wind that moves time
forward.

Without words I could hear you. You were pleading with
me, a tear falling, "Let the longing lead you home."

Why

I drove across Jansen Bridge, its crazy metal rods splaying out in every direction like a stepped on Slinky.

It took me two hours to get back to the café. I parked next to my dad's car. I straightened out my hair, tucked in the new white shirt Rainy bought me, and asked Sam Buckbaugh for my job back. Because I knew he would have fired me by now.

"Why'd ya quit?" he yelled with his gravelly voice. Yelling was his talking.

I shrugged.

"A girl, wasn't it?"

I didn't answer.

"It *couldn't* have been the pay. You people are robbing me blind."

"Please can I have my job back, Sam?"

He shrugged. "I heard you the first time. Well, Kathy, see, she called in sick -- again. . . . In fact, is *that* the girl? Is it Kathy?" He smiled at me in an obscene kind of way. His thick black eyebrows rose with the question.

"No!"

"Yeah, I didn't think so. She's too smart for you. We just got a shipment you'll need to help bring in -- the artificial orange juice that tastes like lemonade. We'll have lines out the door when word gets out, I swear to God. Right? *Am I right?*"

"Right."

“So then we’re gonna need extra staff the rest of the week too, I suppose. Take Kathy’s section for now, and table 15 if it gets crowded. Just don’t start messin’ with the help, Mr. Sudden Playboy. Got my drift?”

“10-4.”

“10-4 is goddamned right. Go wash up.” He walked towards the kitchen.

I headed to the back corner, past table 15 -- the table no one wants to sit at because it’s right near the bathroom. When I entered the back hallway I could see my dad and Hal the Cook talking near the lockers. “What else did you put in these brownies?” Hal asked him. “They’re *really* tasty.”

Before my dad could answer, Sam’s sandpaper voice rang out, “Hal, what the hell are you doing back there, we have animals to feed.”

“Hold on, hold on,” Hal yelled back. “I was just gettin’ a recipe.”

“A recipe for what? How to make money without working? I want that recipe too when you find it. Now get in here.”

My dad saw me out of the corner of his eye and his face lit up like a puppy when “the boy” comes home from school.

“*Tayls!*” He ran over and jarred me with a hug, then kissed my cheek.

“Hey dad.”

“So. . . . tell me everything. How was ‘the quest?’”

“Uh. . . kinda hard.”

He put his hand on my shoulders. "You know, I never thought you'd be the type who would go up into the mountains and meditate alone. But I bet you learned a lot up there."

"Yeah."

My dad smiled, "What was her name?"

I smiled and lowered my head, then met his eyes. "Rainy."

He scratched his head, "Rainy Robinson? Mary and Marty's girl? I heard they're getting divorced."

I didn't respond. He didn't want to pry any further.

"Dad?"

"Yes, boy."

I felt myself tearing up, which is *not* okay to do near the bathroom in the back of a cheap café. ". . . Why?"

"Why, what?"

I shook my head, "I don't know. Just, why, I guess."

"Ah, *that* why . . . Honestly, Taylor, I have no idea. But maybe the answer isn't a mind thing."

I squinted at him. I thought he might be stoned from the brownies.

"You know, right after you were born, mom got really sick. *It wasn't your fault*, these things just happen."

"I *know*, dad!"

“Anyway, I visited her in the hospital one day with you wrapped in my arms. I think you were a month old. And we started talking about who you might be when you grow up. And I said to her, ‘I know one thing, Jen, I don’t care if he isn’t the smartest kid in the world, and I don’t care if he isn’t the strongest. I just want him to have a heart as big as yours.’ And Taylor, you do. Maybe that’s where you’ll get your answers from someday, if you let yourself search long enough.”

Someone actually sat down at table 15 and interrupted our conversation. His beard was as long as a broom.

Dad took my arm and pulled me toward the lockers. “So did Sam give you your job back?”

“Surprisingly.”

“Good.”

“But as soon as I make enough money I’m leaving.”

He nodded, “I know.”

He reached into his pocket and offered me a crumpled-up twenty.

“No dad, that’s okay.” He put it back in his pocket.

We both realized from the growing noise that we had to get back out there, the tables were starting to fill.

“Any idea where you’re gonna go?”

I said, “Yeah, actually. I was thinking about going to Paris. Maybe Paris in the spring.”

The End
~ GM