

Rain Dreams

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Unseen Window

The first time Rainy glanced at me she was writing something in her ratty brown notebook. She always carried it with her. It was her protection. She hid behind it. She crouched between the pages 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. Maybe they are grappling with the meaning of life on levels human brains will never even begin to grasp. Maybe their logic realizes thinking itself is senseless, and it's better to have your head stuck in the sand.

I tried not to stare. Ostriches respect that. But with a quick glance I saw tight fitting blue jeans and a light gray T-shirt tied just above her waist. She was standing at a bus stop. She had good posture; kind of like an ostrich when it's courageous enough to open its eyes 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 was scraggly, unbrushed. Thin wrists, nervous hands holding a yellow pencil. 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. My words crashed headlong into her like a bird into an unseen window; a collision of floating feathers falling slowly. I walked away late for work. Dazed, as I often tend to be.

Quiet Bells

Rainy's first boyfriend's name was Chase. Chase was always thinking ahead. He wanted to go beyond kissing as soon as possible. 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 was deaf. Not deaf to sound. Not deaf like Beethoven. Chase was deaf to resonance. Rainy ended things. He begged her to come back. He longed to go back to that place he couldn't hear without her.

Honestly, it would never have worked out anyway. Chase's mother didn't like Rainy. She thought Rainy was too odd, too aloof, especially when Rainy was asked a question. She never answered questions. She would pretend the question was never asked and start to talk about something else, or ask a question in response.

The girl was rough around the edges, mother said. But that made Chase even more attracted to her.

Moths, flames.

Hearts, siren calls.

Brains, guns.

Rainy made him feel all scrambled up inside.

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 on sale for two 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 two hundred dollars for what, exactly?

Yet this was what Rainy was forced to do one night. Rainy's father was in the textile business. He was presented with a rare opportunity. Maybe his daughter could even become rich someday. She was put on a runway in front of hundreds of people in a big city and told to walk slowly. No need to smile. Her lips and cheeks were painted. Later, her father crooned that she never shined so brightly as when she was on that runway wearing the white chiffon overlay created by none other than Joseph L. Moruga, the famous Spanish clothing designer who had offered his daughter this amazing opportunity. Rainy was transformed! Rainy looked like a super model! Rainy was, well, *someone else*.

Rainy's dad traveled a lot for his work. He was away feeling things. Silks. Angora wool. Moruga was his biggest, most famous client.

Rainy's dad once told her 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.

His job was important, he said to her. And he loved some of the people he met.

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 to live with. Nothing was enough for her -- not her dad, not Rainy. She wanted more from both of them. More respect, more love, more obedience, more gratitude. She wanted 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 another day 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, "Never mind, 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, but I've only been here like a thousand times. I've had everything at least once, including the ice, and I lived."

She was probably thinking she *had* seen me somewhere before. But where? Tall and gawky, I stood there, grateful to be in her presence.

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

I brought her 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.

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 a lot 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 dog droppings next to the tower's enormous metal legs; enormous frozen feet that can't go anywhere, because they are, in turn, cemented deep underground. The silver tower 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 looked 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 a mirrory globe of water bumps into another globe and merges, then, something bigger can emerge. Puddles, rivers, even columns of rain streaking over the wild gray ocean.

The Love Affairs of Mary Robinson

Mary Robinson gave birth to Rainy, her first and only child, when she was thirty-four years old. Before and after, and during, the moments when Rainy was conceived Mary was 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 (possibly being half-Martian). She'd finish her evening with vermouth delicately poured from a little glass pitcher gifted to her by an alcoholic glassblower.

Her days and nights 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 long love affairs she had with Johnny Walker, and Remy Martin. 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. And on slow nights Sloe Gin of course. Or, when desperate, Harvey's Bristol Cream. There was always an occasion to drink, even if it was just to raise your glass to loneliness and toast toxicity.

Despite Mary's constant synapse-corrupting companions, she knew how to keep a job. Rainy was twelve when her parents moved her to this boring lifeless town. Mary had found a high-paying job 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 pennies on the dollar so they could re-stock the shelves with the next generation of crap they weren't going to sell. How the store stayed in business without having a liquor license was anyone's guess.

A Moving Story

When Rainy was just a young girl she lived in a big house in a 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.

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. The government now owned their life savings.

They left their rural house nestled between two green mountains so Mary could work at a high paying job in the store that never sold anything. They refused to sell their house because Mary was sure that one day they would be able to afford to move back. 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 in our town, near the railroad tracks, where train whistles blew as loud as air raid sirens, and the train cars clicked and clacked over the tracks until the walls rattled.

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.

All this time Rainy was on her own – after school, before school, skateboarding at the park on weekends with stoner skater boys, 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. They began to save more, and more, *and more*. Eventually they would have enough to move back home. . . . They were living the American dream.

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.

My dad was constantly telling me it wasn't my fault she died. It had nothing to do with the birth. "These things just happen," he said to me more than once. Actually dozens of times, because if someone hears "these things just happen" often enough they usually start to believe it.

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 owner's golden retriever was permanently sprawled sideways across the center aisle. 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 late nights wandering around town – 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 had rediscovered pot over these last few years since mom died. 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? Stay high and scramble logic.

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 let him go him on the spot.

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 some wordless form of bridled enthusiasm.

Weird Trees

I was on my way to Pete's Petite Pizza to get a little dinner. The pizzas were super small -- the came out of the oven about as big as a flattened softball. I could eat like six of them. After dinner 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 had two hours before my evening shift started at the café.

The sky was gauzy-gray, like a cotton ball saturated with boredom. It was drizzling. Indecisive. I was driving, mostly watching the traffic, but I also noticed that a few pedestrians were deploying umbrellas way 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 steered 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 pulled closer to the curb. I 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 the car and ran towards her. Raindrop tears fell from her face. Her hair was wet and covered her eyes. 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 asked.

"Rainy, get in the car. I'll drive you wherever you want to go."

She kept walking.

"The ride's free, I promise. I'm not running a taxi service or anything."

"Nothing's free."

"I'm free. I'm harmless and dumb. And free to drive you where you want to go. 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. She 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 face was beautiful in its ferocity. Her brown-ish red 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 near 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 the 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 getting married by accident, which was me. So I'm divorcing them to return the favor."

Now I understood. But I still had no clue where she was headed, other than somewhere over Jansen Bridge. And 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 for a while. Then I said, "I can't just drop you off across the bridge. 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'll have lived out your fantasy, you won't be a bridge virgin anymore.”

“The big scary town of Martinsville. Wow. 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 pretty wet.

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

“Do you have any money?” I asked.

“I can pay you enough 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,” she said. “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 “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 all the way because it scraped against the cement sidewalk. A bell dangled from the top so that the reception clerk would know when someone was struggling to push themselves inside. 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 after she struggled with the key. 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, 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 to be honest, 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 away from me then back towards my face for no apparent reason; a nervous habit I'd seen her do once before when I was her waiter 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. Did I know anything else?

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. Like five minutes, 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 in a thunderstorm – that is where Rainy eventually told me why her parents were getting divorced. She said she was happy about her father's affair, and didn't know what took him so long.

She pulled out a joint and lit it. She didn't immediately pass it to me so I told her my throat felt wet and I needed something to parch it. She thought it was a moronic thing to say but offered me the joint after taking another long drag herself.

Getting stoned wasn't something I did every day. That was my dad's domain. So I felt a little self-conscious being high 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 contemplated the ironic 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 Rainy had apparently begun ruminating about her dad's girlfriend from Maryland, because when her mom told Rainy about the divorce she also mentioned the girl from Maryland was pregnant. So she blurted out to me, "Can you imagine anyone having kids at my dad's age? Or any age? It's insane. I mean, kids are fucking idiots."

“Okay, no, that's not true. . . like at all. I think they're awesome. I want kids someday.”

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

She was definitely asking me about myself now, so I decided to answer her question.

“Well, the way I see it, we're just sitting around here right now without kids, and what are we doing, really? We're getting stoned in a smoky hotel that smells like Raid, yeah, but from an astronomic perspective it's even worse! Ultimately we're just a random pile of radioactive star crap. Somehow we learned how to think. But we're light-years mind-distance from each other. Total strangers. But then we're like, 'Oh, we're strangers,' like that's a bad thing, and then someone has to go and ask the question, where do stars come from? Because we have all this time on our hands, right? Because we don't have kids. And then we smoke another joint and 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 time unless something stops it. But when you have kids, see, you don't have time to think about what '*from*' means. Kids are the perfect distraction from what would otherwise be a life of dark hotels and being alone at night, dreaming about love someday, and how you hate the rain. I think kids are at least more fun than that.”

She covered her face with her hands and began to laugh, “Shit. You are so *fucked up*.”

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 myself 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 rain dance or something romantic. . . . Rainy had an astral smile.

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

We drove silently until we floated up to her destination, "Now shut the moon, and put your 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 the parenthesis between our aloneness and remembering after the other person leaves.

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

So I continued reaching upwards, towards her face until finally I found it, and rested my fingers upon her cheeks. 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 need to distinguish between present and future.

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 water.

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 lying a canyon-distance across from Rainy on a twin bed in a Motel 6.

This was getting *really bad!*

Somehow I managed to rise. I excused myself dizzily and went to the bathroom. 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 the bed next to hers and watched her breathing slowly in the near-darkness before falling asleep myself.

I had a number of dreams before dawn. 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 around the time the sun came up.

Foreshadow

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.

A Disturbing Comma

When I woke up she was gone.

I opened the door to the outside. I immediately squinted because of the syrupy bright light. The sky was achingly void of clouds now, and the streets were dust dry. It was as if it never rained. It was as if rain never existed. I wondered if she would have left if it had still been 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 being on a quest would get him off my back for a few days, since he knew that I was otherwise falling headlong into an insipidly boring life. So a quest, any quest, was *good*.

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

And so the quest began.

I got into my beat-up Hyundai Accent and began pulling out of the not recently 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 located right on the state road that connects all the towns around these parts like a string of beads. So instead of shady lanes with lakes and picnic tables and friendly people waving at you as you drove by, there were 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 vacuous parade, like the inner curl of the yellow brick road. Except there were no Munchkins there to sing me a high-pitched send-off song. Only a spy, a thief, a shape-shifter --

I was waiting at a red light about to pull out onto the main road when a man casting a giant shadow came racing towards my car. He crashed into the passenger door, which had no functional lock, pulled it open, and told me to drive. . . *fast!* He had a gun in his hand.

He was overwhelmingly big. He ducked down as he was getting in, bending all the way to his waist. Blurry blue tattoos were carved all over his muscular arms. He was wearing a denim work shirt rolled up at the sleeves. He had a beer belly, 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, 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

by telling this guy to fuck off, slamming on the break and biting his face.

But this was no time to be a hero. I didn't want to know what he wanted, or who he was, or where he came from. Blame it on my severe lack of curiosity at the time. I just wanted to get him out of my car. Full compliance was the only strategy I could come up with.

However, I did notice the name "O'Brian," written on the top of his shirt pocket. So one thing I assumed immediately was that his name wasn't O'Brian. I mean how fucking stupid would *that* have been?

He directed me down a number of small winding streets until I realized that we had made a giant U-turn. I saw Jansen Bridge coming up on the horizon. It looked like a badly put together erector set, steel beams going every which way. The tops of the beams looked like sploingy hair curlers.

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 insane people 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. I headed down a street I'd never been on. Then 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 leftover line of road repair from long ago -- and picked up the familiar brown notebook. How did it get *here*?

This was not a safe part of town. Buildings had their black gates down, blocking the front entrances. A few abandoned stores had

their windows smashed in. An old Ford Mustang in the alleyway across from me was on wood blocks with all the tires missing. Garbage cans were overflowing. Sleek black cats chased emaciated mice. This place was like the top surface of hell. One step down and, *poof*.

So what happened ? Did she throw the book down in the middle of the road out of frustration, or did she drop it accidentally? Or was she running when it fell? Running from someone?

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. But why would she have come back towards Jansen Bridge?

I pulled over near a closed bar called, 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 looked 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!!!*"

I studied this odd poem 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 maybe 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 starving dog, or like a weird lonely tree in the desert waiting for rain to fall and bring me back to life. How is that arrogant?

As far as all that stuff I said last night, I was *stoned*. It was a mildly hallucinogenic midnight rap to myself. 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, I pushed her away by sounding arrogant. Yeah, I wouldn’t put it past me. I was pathetic, but in a pretentious kind of way.

But wait! . . . She was the one judging *me*. So wouldn’t that be equally arrogant?

But then, wasn’t me defining her as equally arrogant the ultimate 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.”

That was not arrogant. That was damn beautiful. So was what she wrote for pages and pages after.

I closed my eyes and tried to think things through. She could 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 so she ran away, but I can't find her, because when I woke up stoned at 11 a.m. in a Motel 6 she was gone."

Then officer would say: "Well, 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, "Remember kid, stalking is illegal."

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

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

After thinking things through I'd probably admit to the cop, "Yeah, actually I think I *am* stalking her. I mean, she obviously doesn't want me around. So let me give you my address -- I'm at 666 Hell Street South. I'll wait for you to come and cuff me. I have to be stopped."

Forget 911. I had to find her.

Motel 6 Redux

Night fell and a hard rain came again. I had searched down every road and alleyway near where I first saw the book, then widened my search for miles in all directions. I couldn't find her.

Her journal made it clear that I was just bugging her. I was just a napkin lying on a windy street lurching out and attaching myself to her ankle. So I headed back towards Jansen Bridge, driving down the only road that would take me back home, past the flashing fast food signs and competing gas stations, until I passed the Motel 6 framed in a sickly yellow 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 keyhole. 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 walk."

“You brought your suitcase and knapsack with you.”

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

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

“Did you think I’d read your journal or something?”

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

She headed inside, but the door was left open. She threw her suitcase on her bed.

I stepped inside to tell her about the journal, but someone came up 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 to use the phone.

“You can use my cell if you want.”

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

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 put the notebook on my bed and threw my jacket over it. Then I went into the disgusting bathroom to wash up. 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. Or maybe they expect you to carry a switchblade that can also pry open their shampoo bottles.

The faucet labeled, "Hot," didn't work. It just spun around endlessly, disconnected from everything. So I washed my face with cold water while listening to the pipes making a high pitched sound. 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 my bed 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 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.”

Her thoughts seemed to be somewhere else. “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 my Uncle Jimmy all riled up and then 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 fucking 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."

"My name is Taylor, by the way."

"Yeah, did I need to know that?"

"You might."

She looked at me, "Look Taylor, I need to sleep. I'm exhausted. But I guess you can sleep in the other bed again since the rain is turning into a fucking flood out there. 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 haiku, okay? I definitely don't want a repeat of this day."

"Don't worry," she yawned. "No matter how bad things get, nothing repeats."

Cool. . . I think.

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

I looked over to her bed. She was still sleeping. Her bare leg was sticking half-way out of the sheet. I thought maybe she wasn't wearing any clothes. I let my mind wander. . . . Then came a terrible pounding on the door.

She sat up in bed, startled. I 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 behind her.

I unlatched the lock and Uncle Jimmy quickly pushed his way in.

"*Oh crap!*" I screamed.

"Yeah, *I'm* Uncle Jimmy. James O'Brian to you. Nice to meet you again, you little runt." He had an odd smile on his face.

"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, it 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 suddenly curved in. He was wet from head to toe, his red beard was 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 that made me smile. 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. Nine notes into the song he pressed the green accept button.

"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. Once I was gone he'd never know how to find me.

He handed the phone to Rainy. "Hey Mom. How's work going?" she said brightly. "Oh yeah? Too bad actually. I know him, he's an ass. So he asked you on a real date as opposed to what. . . ? Look mom, 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 I think? Why are you calling me. There has to be a reason."

I found myself alone with Uncle Jimmy. He looked at me and his eyes turned oddly soft, "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?"

"No! Divorce!"

"Oh."

“And that part of town she was heading towards is filled with danger.”

“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 to show me how empty the chamber was.

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 before I left the apartment!”

I had 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 a piccolo version of “Für Elise” somewhere in the hollow back regions of my brain. Or maybe it was the initial stages of a migraine swirling inside Bagatelle No. 25 in A minor.

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

“I dunno,” 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. . . ."

There came a flurry of knocks on the door. The motel clerk was shouting, "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 on my bed and turning the knob with 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 Ace and a quick paint job. And the painting itself is fine. See? I totally missed the bird. No harm, no *foul*." (He emphasized 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. One of them says, "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 looks 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 don't ask about the wall."

"So she's single?"

"Pete, fuck you."

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

"Yeah, yeah," Jimmy says. "Just say that some guy tried to shoot a bird sitting on top of a painted 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 the light of an orange sunset."

"Fuck no it's not," Jimmy insisted. "*That's* a tangerine, or a small orange. Where'd you get your 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?"

"A Smith and Wesson 625 fired at close range. What do you think I'm carrying around, a pea shooter? 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 shit-hole 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 slight smiles on their faces while one of them dutifully scribbled down Jimmy's statement in his little black leather book.

"So," Uncle Jimmy continued, "her mom thought my niece might try to kill herself or something, see? Because she was

distraught and ran away from home. Then this kid gets involved somehow, who I don't trust at all. And then my God-damned car wouldn't start after she took off on foot 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 bastard's car and forced him to drive me to the pier, threatening to otherwise blow his little curly blonde head off with what I thought was an unloaded gun."

He paused and looked at officer who was now madly taking more and more 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 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 and the Indian kid are staring at him silently.

"*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 was finally 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 the 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 at him.

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 non-existent boat ride with what? 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. 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 having inherited brains from 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.

“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 I gotta call you back?"

There are 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?" 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 phone. "Okay, sis, I won't let him out of my sight, trust me. Or her." His fist tightened and he turned a little bit red in the face. He snapped the phone shut. "*Siddown,*" he commanded, standing right over me. So I did. He began to pace.

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? It makes you look like a deranged Irish Santa Claus."

Uncle Jimmy laughed nervously, the officers laughed in response. 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 with the clerk screaming, "Who's going to pay for my wall?"

"Ask the president," Jimmy screamed back.

I watched the police cars drive off with Jimmy in the back seat. "If Uncle Jimmy isn't going to let you out of his sight he'd better have X-ray vision," I said. "Barring that, I'd say we're all alone again."

My crude and awkward segue was hoping for a 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.”

She walked towards me, then past me, and slammed the front door shut with her foot.

I thought maybe she was going to *actually* kick me in the face. But no, her kiss caused me to lose my balance. 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 out the window of our greenish brown room. Part of the wall lay dead, having exploded onto the floor in dusty moon-shaped fragments. The smell of stucco and gun powder served as an aphrodisiac.

I touched her cheek, for real this time. Not a dream. "Can I ask you questions you'll answer 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 need to eat, and buy gas, and. . . I mean, we need to get out of here."

"We?"

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

She covered her eyes with her hands. "I have about seventy-five dollars left."

"I only have about thirty," I said.

"Yeah, I don't care about that," she shrugged nervously. "You get one last question. Then you have to shut up."

"Okay," I said, "Why are there all these secrets going on?"

"What secrets?"

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

“Taylor, get in the car. We have to get out of here before Jimmy comes back.”

She got up and started to put her clothes on. That was depressing. Because the odds were high that I'd never see her without clothes on 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 the day before. When we got close to Jansen Bridge she directed me down a small alleyway.

“Park here,” she said sternly. Quietly. 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. If he'd gotten here two minutes later my life would have been so over. He knows something. He just doesn't know everything.”

I was confused, but I kept walking with her, with the light dimming, until we were standing in front of a dozen steel-coated mail boxes, 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 this dark alley to pick up your mail?” I whispered. I half-expected someone would jump out from the darkness and 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 say a word.

We drove as quickly as my used Hyundai could go down the main road until we were out of Martinsville. The next town looked exactly like it. There was even a Motel 6 to greet us. She sat there silently with the crumpled brown paper bag firmly in her grasp.

In Them Thar Hills

Rainy told me to head east towards a small town called Elly's Pike.

About an hour later we came to a hilly green town in the middle of nowhere and pulled into 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 toothbrush all my own. We picked up some food too. A ripe tomato, a loaf of bread, some 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 it wouldn't be long until we ran out of money.

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." I gave her three ten dollar bills. She counted them slowly, one by one. "Room's at the top of the stairs."

When we opened the door we were pleasantly surprised. This place was a whole lot nicer than a Motel 6. The floors creaked but the furnishings were 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 normally would have fallen asleep on the spot, but I was pretty wound up about everything.

“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 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. I’d never seen anything like it. 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."

"But. . ."

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!*"

"What?"

She kept laughing as she brought the crumpled brown 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, Taylor! 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 one 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 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 before she does! We need to spend it, you and me. We have to figure out a way to have the best time of our lives and *drain these little shiny tubes as soon as possible.*"

"We?"

"Yeah, you're my taxi boy. So officially that makes you an accomplice."

She kissed me. It was a new kind of kiss. Not tentative. But not rough. She pulled me down onto the bed and 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:

Unseen Windows. Quiet bells.
Each whisper a truth about the world.
I'm here, but willing to sail away on the first cloud.
I see a sea of sky.
The air is full of chiming things
I used to know.
But my eyes are 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 it across the wooden floor until she was facing the bed.

I sat in front of her and started bouncing up and down on the mattress, using the bed's springiness to propel me. She started to laugh.

"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 is my last name?”

“Um, uh, Morris?”

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

“It's Morrison. But the judges have accepted Morris as a correct answer, young lady. So let's see what you've won. Oh, it's your lucky day. It's 'free choice day!' That means you get to choose amongst any of the following prizes.

“A brand new laptop computer.”

“No thanks, I hate computers.”

“Okay, okay. . . a beautiful, *powerful*, brand new car to drive you out of town in style.”

“No. Well, maybe. But no. I like your car.”

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

“My neck is a normal neck, pervert. 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 may 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 exactly?"

"You name it!"

"*Not* Ireland!"

"That's not really the kind of answer we're 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. Barcelona! Chile. Peru. Maybe. . . ."

"Basically, everywhere *but* Ireland apparently. Okay. We get it. Can the show afford to take her everywhere but Ireland?"

"We can go! Taylor, we could actually 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 to the blank black night. "Let me sleep on it," she said. "But I think that's the answer. . . and the solution. No one could ever take that away." Then she added, "But first, there's a place near here I want to go tomorrow."

She sat 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 both *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, it's probably *too* rainy in Ireland."

"Well, there's Paris, in the spring," she said. "I've heard it rains there in the spring and all the flowers bloom, then summer comes, and everything comes alive."

"Paris!" I said in awe.

"Yeah, Paris."

"Paris."

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

The Photograph

A beautiful morning carried sunshine through the white curtains. 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.

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: 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.

Near the top of the ridge she told me to turn into a dirt driveway. We traveled down a gravel road until an ivory-colored house appeared. No other houses were around it. Nearby was a fire trail leading up to the peak of the ridge.

We parked the car and I followed her 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 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.

She was standing straight, but her hands were outstretched as if she were going to try to fly any minute. The bird almost looked as if it was going to land on her, maybe to teach her how to climb the sky.

“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. So I just stopped answering questions from them. Because what I learned from my parents was there are usually no good answers. They just lead to more questions or an argument trying to prove you wrong.

“I’d run up to my room, this room, and lock the door.” She looked around for a moment, maybe remembering where her bed and dresser were, “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.”

“What happened to the diary?”

“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 down another flight of stairs to a renovated basement. “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 across a vast gully 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, white bird flying low, and then she ripped up the photo into 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 close my eyes.

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

I looked across the expanse and easily saw the endless rolling blue 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, "One day at sunset I saw a boat with a tall triangular 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.

"Then one day the orange light took me all the way to the boat. I didn't know where it was going. It was just 'away.' Anywhere would have been fine."

I noticed 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.

"Then came the 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 find me and beg me to come down. He knew about this place; my place. He brought his camera along. He looked pretty shook up. I knew he didn't want to leave either. So when he held up the camera and told me to smile, I did. For him. When the photo rolled out of the camera he gave it me and I kept it. And today I gave 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 - because my cell phone rang.

I 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 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 off the trunk

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 swept 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 indeed a legitimate American Eagle gold coin. 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 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 it 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.

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 their ignitions right below you, because no handicapped people ever came here.

He began to count the 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. 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 to do errands, 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. 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 America. And if you have enough money you could go anywhere. 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 - saw an open window. No dust on the ledge, so it hadn't been opened long. That's how you got in, right? 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?' So I searched the local hotels and inns, and bulls-eye, saw the little creep's used Hyundai parked in the side lot of this place. . . . And then I parked my big-assed fully repaired Chevy convertible in the handicapped zone, right next to his piece of garbage, to block your way just in case you tried to escape again. I told the old man downstairs the truth, mostly -- I was the young girl's Uncle with a wedding gift to give her. He said 'Ah, that's why they took the suite.' Some suite you got here, overlooking the fucking Greyhound Station."

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

He was silent, fuming, then he screamed, "*You're in possession of stolen property, color: yellow. So give it back!*"

"How did you. . . ?"

"Never mind that. Let's not make this long and painful."

"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 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 as good as your mother can. He was so proud of what he did. But, see, drunk accountants’ minds are not only the most paranoid minds in the universe, they’re also like steel traps. So when you ran away she figured your father would try to help you. His sad little beauty queen needed to be rescued. She put two and two together. She had me follow you.”

Rainy 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! *Did you know that?* Or didn't they invite you to the wedding? And if that’s the case, then *legally. . .*”

“Yeah, yeah. Tell it to the divorce attorneys, honey. They’ll get a good bendy fucking laugh out of it. They’ll probably use it up in fees arguing over common law marriage. 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 lied about the affair and hurt mom bad. But he lied to both of us, not just her! I don't even know him anymore! His money can't buy him out of being a coward in my eyes. For hiding who he is. But maybe just once I can catch a break, you know? Not have to babysit for a drunken mother anymore and make her Bloody Mary's in the morning. Not have to put up with a father who almost never came home. Maybe just one time I get to believe in life and luck, and not feel like a fucking misfit."

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 man who runs away whenever things get tough. That's who he is. And that's a part of who you are. That's what you're trying to do too. Can't you 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. Then, of course, after he gets out of jail, he'll be so very glad to pay the back taxes. But at least you took some of the money to go to college - oops, check that."

"Wait a minute!" I protested. "You can't just come in here. . . ."

"Shut the fuck up."

He turned back to Rainy. "Let me tell you something from experience. 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, I know you're a nicer guy than this," she said gently. "You used to play with me up on the hill when you'd come for holiday dinners. Remember, we'd throw rocks into the gully together? You taught me how to throw. I'm your only niece. All I'm asking is for you to be fair. . . ."

"Fair? *Fair?* 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, *need* it? So you resort to begging. Begging *me* now. Miss Snobby Above It All, on her knees. 'Cause 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 were becoming moist. She began to shake almost imperceptibly. He'd gotten to her.

"Now give me the pot of gold, little leprecon. *Do it now!*"

She looked back at the bed: "Shit, I don't know, where the fuck did. . . *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. . . ."

"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 and then patted Rainy down as well. Then he searched the room for more, knowing exactly what he was looking for now. He looked in the bathroom. Under the bed. He searched through Rainy's stuff, throwing her clothes behind him as he looked in every possible hiding place.

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 gift. Thanks for the golden moments we've shared over the last few days. I've truly 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 small green

cleaning bucket full of 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. The water was hot now. I saw Jimmy running towards his car, making the great escape, then sitting in the water and wondering where the hell it came from. I watched him as he began to curse. Rainy came flying out of the bathroom just as he looked up towards the open window and dropped the bucket of steaming hot 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 bloodied.

"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 it'll be spring, and I'll have enough money for us to go to Paris together. 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 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. "I'm upset because what my uncle said about me was true."

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

I knelt down and looked up at her face. "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. There's like over a thousand dollars in there. That should get us started. It'll all work out, you'll see."

"He'll probably come back for it when he realizes we shorted him," she laughed, with tears rolling down her cheeks. "The man's relentless."

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

"No. No, let's just go to sleep, Taylor. I'm tired. I don't want to run. I don't want to fly. I don't want to lie to myself. I just want to sleep."

She beckoned me to bed, and we held each other until we fell dozed off.

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 went to the window and looked across to the Greyhound terminal. I caught sight of the entrance. A dark hallway spiraling inward to places unknown. 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 ivory house all these years. I tried hard to please them. They could see I cared for you. But they didn't like me.

I went into your room upstairs. 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. They made me feel just like you feel now."

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

The white carried us there, up to the gully. We huddled and merged inside the fog until it turned warm and milky. 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.

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 was driving my car in a huge rain storm. I was pressing on the brake while pressing on the gas. I drifted slowly, through cities, across oceans, but knowing there could be no rescue. Rescues never work.

I went back to the gully and sat on your favorite rock. I was trying to decide if I should try to fly across to the other side alone

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

Orange

The morning you left I drove back to your old house and walked up the hill, hoping in my utter innocence to find you there.

As I sat down on the rock 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.

I could hear you. You were pleading with me. I thought I saw a tear falling. You said,

“Let the longing lead you home.”

Why

In the late afternoon I drove across the Jansen Bridge, its 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 my hair in the rearview mirror, tucked in my shirt, and went inside to ask 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 normal way of talking.

I shrugged.

"It was a girl, wasn't it?"

I didn't answer.

"It *couldn't* have been the pay. You people are robbing me blind. I make nothing!"

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

"I heard you the first time."

Then he shrugged, "Well, Kathy called in sick -- again. . . . In fact, wait a minute. . . 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."

He started shuffling papers around near the cash register. "Well, 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. Right? *Am I right?*"

"Right."

"So then we're gonna need extra staff the rest of the week, I suppose. Take Kathy's section for now, and table 15 if it gets crowded enough to shove someone back there. Just don't start messin' with the help, Mr. 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?"

"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. . . . 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 back and lowered my head. "Rainy."

He scratched his unshaven face, "Rainy Robinson? Mary and Marty's girl? Jeez, 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 when your father is stoned and wants to kiss you again.

". . . . *Why?*"

"Why, what?"

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

"Ah, *that* why . . . Well, maybe that answer doesn't have words.

"Oh, okay."

"No, that's not what I mean. I have an answer for you."

I squinted at him.

"Look, you know right after you were born, mom got really sick. *I mean, it wasn't your fault.*"

"*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, Lynn, 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. I'm proud of you. . . . So maybe that's where you'll get the answers from someday."

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 backwards toward the lockers. "So did Sam give you your job back?"

"Surprisingly."

"Good."

"But as soon as I make enough money, dad, I'm leaving."

He nodded, "I figured that."

He reached into his pocket and offered me a crumpled-up twenty. "Head start?"

"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 Paris. Maybe Paris in the spring.”

The End
~ GM