

Rain Dreams

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/GM3

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Unseen Window

The first time I saw Rainy she was writing in a ratty brown notebook, sitting on a park bench in the middle of town in front of the mayor's office. The notebook seemed like protection. She hid behind it, pretending 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*. Ostriches might have a lot more on their minds than we think. Maybe they're grappling with the meaning of life on levels human brains will never even begin to understand.

I tried not to stare. Ostriches respect that. But she was wearing tight-fitting jeans and a light gray T-shirt tied just above her waist. I loved her face from the very first time I saw it. It reminded me of The Little Prince's face - petite features, well placed. Soft cheeks. She stood up. She had good posture, kind of like an ostrich when it's courageous enough to observe the world. Her eyes blazed when she glanced at me. They were wild glisteny gray. Actually, more like an arctic icy gray. Some weird combination of shy and feisty.

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 short yellow pencil with the eraser almost gone. She'd obviously been writing a lot.

I hoped to be discrete, I wanted my approach to seem casual. But it didn't work out the way I imagined. Because I tripped over a tree root and ended up only about a foot away from her, with my knees on the ground. She turned to me, startled, and said, "Are you okay?"

"Ah, sorry." I stepped back, almost losing my balance again.

My words crashed headlong into her, like a bird into an unseen window.

Ah, BOOM! *So..r..r..y* - feathers falling.

She turned and walked away.

Important Grilled Cheese

I was working as a waiter at a café on the outskirts of town. My father would eventually work there as well. As it turns out, he would end up working there far longer than I would.

Like so many towns across the nation, our town sucked. The building that the café was located in looked like a giant white shoebox. The roof was caving in, so it looked like someone had stepped on top of the shoebox 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 the paintings 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. They served it in a fancy glass with ice. It tasted more like lemonade, truth be told. Everyone seemed to like it. We ran out a lot.

I didn't mind serving. I liked seeing the different ways people would order. Sometimes they'd bark out their order, "Eggs and toast and a side of jelly," and slap their menu down on the table. It was military-like. Then there would be the matronly type, "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? I'm in no rush." Then she would pick up the menu to read it again, even though she should have had it memorized by now. 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. I wanted something easy-going. Something low-tech, something part-time, something hyphenated actually, because I didn't want it to fully define me. It was going to be a footnote in my life - I wanted to make enough money to be able to travel before heading off to some mediocre junior college on my way to a mediocre job to help financially support my mediocre family to-be. That's all this job was to me.

It's not like I had a particular career path I wanted to pursue in my hypothetical mediocre college. I also had 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 kids, and being around kids. They didn't think normally, and they were honest. So I figured if I traveled for a year, I'd get my fill of nuances and subtle surprises and exotic cultures, and photos, before stepping back into reality - which, like mediocrity, isn't always terrible. After witnessing how bad life can get, I was hoping to be satisfied with not terrible. Eventually.

The first time I 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 either didn't remember me, or didn't want to remember me. I wasn't sure which one was true, but both possibilities were somewhere around ninety percent.

"I guess I'll have some of that orange juice thing that tastes like lemonade," she 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 bad news, "Ahh, we're out of the orange juice-lemonade. 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. But then I added, "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. It seemed to invite 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 Lipton teabags. Plus, you don't want to know where the ice comes from."

"Thanks for the inside scoop, but I've only been here like a thousand times. I've had everything, including the ice, and I lived."

A thousand times? I had only been working at the café for a few weeks. But I would have remembered her if she'd come in during my shift. Maybe she'd been on vacation with her family. Maybe they were in Tahiti. Maybe they were rich and she grew up not caring about money. But then why the hell would she eat here? Or live here?

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

Trying to ingratiate myself, I brought her an entire pitcher. 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 one?"

He looked out of his little serving hole, dripping with sweat from the heat, caused by the fake-tropical combination of a sizzling grill and no ventilation other than the serving hole, 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 hanging onto the side of the porcelain bowl, refusing to join the rest of their ilk in a death march down the drain. And I thought to myself, these are observers. These are the safe ones who just want to stay out of the way and hope nothing changes.

When she left the café that afternoon, I'd stayed silent. I was disappointed she didn't say goodbye. But neither did I. She left a tip, but it wasn't that much. I could tell I meant nothing to her.

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 to table nine. Serving goopy food to people who'll eat just about anything, who talk without listening, who walk without going anywhere. I was just like them, except with less money. That's why I was working a crappy job like this.

Sometimes I would ride my bicycle around town before work, or ride up the hill, just above the water tower, where all you see when you look down are crushed soda cans and beer bottles next to the tower's enormous metal legs -- enormous frozen feet that can't escape because they're cemented deep underground. The silver tower reminded me of Gort, the robot from *The Day the Earth Stood Still*. But skinnier, and more humiliated. And *that's* where we got our water from!

It was so typical of our town not to honor the most important thing to its own survival. They could have put some poetic plaque on it, like the one you see at 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 people didn't want to pay for things like that. They just wanted their water.

Looking into the distance, I became hypnotized by the cars floating across the main highway, disappearing under the steel green bridge, drifting right past our exit as if we were all invisible.

I felt worse than invisible. It seemed like Rainy saw right through me. Apparently, I was transparent... or at best translucent.

She saw the glowing arc of nothingness emanating from the center of me and looked away without even glancing back.

Even when Hal said to me, "Her name is Rainy Robinson. She's a good kid," I said nothing to her before she left.

I was just like one of the mirrory globs of water on the side of the sink. No life-dream. Just hanging on to the edge.

But when a mirrory glob of water bumps into another glob and merges, then, something bigger can emerge -- puddles, rivers, raging seas, columns of rain streaking over the ocean.

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 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 would never hear, with or without her.

Honestly, it wouldn't have worked out anyway. Chase's mother didn't like Rainy. She thought Rainy was too odd, too aloof, especially when she asked Rainy a question. Rainy never answered questions. She would switch the conversation to something else, or sometimes 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.

Dreams -- ghostdust.

Rainy made him feel all scrambled up inside.

Father Tales

I'd like to compare fathers. Mine and Rainy's.

My father told me a story about his first girlfriend. I don't know if it's all true, but it certainly could have been, so it's worth repeating.

He was stoned a lot back when he was my age. It was The Stoned Age. Before reality. I wish I could have lived back then, but without being as old as he is now.

Anyway, as the story goes, he was dead broke, which isn't hard to believe since he's always been pretty broke as far back as I can remember. But back in The Stoned Age, apparently you didn't need money. And he had this really nice girlfriend who didn't care he didn't have money. They met on the West Coast. Her parents lived in Dallas. So one day she said, "Hop in my van and pack your toothbrush, I want you to meet my parents."

My dad described the trip to me as they drove the backroads halfway across the country, but I'm not good at descriptions, so I'll leave out the part about jagged landscapes and the color of Sedona's rock formations and the lightning storm they saw at midnight in Santa Fe that lit the sky to where they swore they saw the city of Albuquerque in a halo of light. Because who knows how much of that is true anyway? I'll just get right to the Dallas part. The girl's parents lived in a suburban mansion in a neighborhood bigger than our entire town. Her father was a lawyer, and her mother was another lawyer, so they were very rule-based. They made him and his girl sleep in separate rooms, which back then, culturally, bordered on ridiculous apparently. Like I said, I wish I'd lived back then.

So, in the middle of the night she sneaks into his room. He's fast asleep in the guest quarters under these really expensive blankets and was having a pretty nice dream. And when she slips into his bed he wakes up, not knowing what's going on, and lets out a quick scream until he realizes it's her. It wasn't a long horror movie scream. Just a "Woah! What the... oh, it's you" kind of scream, and then he smiled and kissed her and put his arms around her. And suddenly lights are turned on in the hallway, which also turn on the room lights, and in walk her parents.

They're like, "What the hell is going on?"

And she says, "I couldn't sleep and I wanted to listen to Cat Stevens, but the cassette was in here, and I accidentally woke him up, and he screamed, so I was just calming him down."

And her dad says, "Cat *who?*"

And my dad, just a boy at the time, starts laughing his head off. Because who didn't know who Cat Stevens was? *Tea for the Tillerman?* "Oooh baby, baby, it's wild world, it's hard to get by with just a smile." Even I know that line fifty years later

Anyway, suddenly the parents realize she doesn't have a whole lot of clothes on. And they also concluded it was unlikely the cassette was in the guest quarters. So why was she?

It was time for a conference in the judge's chambers. So they went back to their stiff plush bedroom to consider crimes and consequences. And they struck a deal. They came back and said, "You have ten minutes to get him out of our house, or we're going to take the loaded gun out of our bedroom nightstand and shoot him right in front of you."

That's called a compromise, Dallas style. Because they could have just shot him without offering any alternative. But that would have been more Russian style. Dallas was far more fair, and just, than Russia. Dallas was part of a democracy. (Was.)

Anyway, my dad as a boy wasn't a particularly argumentative person. And this was not a good time to change his personality. So he got up and ran into the bathroom to put his clothes on. He imagined himself hitching at night in Texas.

The girl grabbed something from a dresser drawer near the bed where he had been sleeping. Then she began to pack both of their suitcases. She wasn't going to let him go anywhere without her.

They drove off at midnight together without even saying goodbye. ,

They found this really cheap hotel to stay in at 4 a.m., on the way back to California. After they washed up, she went into her suitcase and pulled out a cassette tape.

My dad said to her, "What's that?"

She said, "Cat Stevens. *Tea for the Tillerman.*" She started to sing in a quiet voice, *Miles From Nowhere*, and kissed my dad in between the verses while he listened.

And that was the night my dad proposed to my mom.

Rainy's Dad

34,000 Years of Clothes

Fashion is wasted on the erotically ignorant.

Millions of poor slobs in every generation, in every country world-wide, wander around malls or outdoor markets for hours looking for a fashion miracle. Something that will make them look better or sexier or more powerful than they really 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 bucks for what, exactly?

Yet this was the game Rainy was forced to play one night. Rainy's father was in the textile business. He was presented with a rare opportunity, an opportunity purely for her, he insisted. 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. Sparkly borrowed jewelry was put around her neck and on her wrists. Rings were put on both hands. 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. "Rainy, you were transformed," he said. "You looked like a super model!"

What Rainy heard her father say that night was she was *someone else*. And he liked the someone else better.

Rainy's dad traveled a lot for his work. He was often away touching and 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 34,000 B.C. proved, *beyond any doubt*, that people have not wanted to be naked for far longer than once thought. He was proud of his work. Proud of his daughter.

But he had secrets.

More

The dark day came when Rainy's mom disclosed to Rainy that her father had been feeling more than silk and Angora wool during his business trips away. He was feeling someone who lived in Maryland. He claimed he couldn't help his feelings. And he wanted a divorce.

Rainy could understand why.

Rainy's mom had always been difficult to live with. Nothing was enough for her -- not her husband, 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.

Alcoving

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 commuter bus to come.

They got off the bus together twenty minutes later and stopped at a bar, and drank the night away.

Drunk, stumbling into a cheap hotel next to the bar, Rainy was conceived later that night.

I mean, how romantic is that?

A Moving Story

When Rainy was just a young girl she lived in a big house in a town many miles 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 how to dream.

Then one sunny day the IRS came calling. Mary was not the most forthright citizen when it came to filling out her own taxes. Her accounting skills proved to be her downfall. Her mathematical magic tricks were indeed complex and tricky, but 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 a store.

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 sometime 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 train cars clicked and clacked over the tracks and rattled Rainy's walls at night.

Marty was out of town most of the year, trying to sell, touch, and feel things. So all this time Rainy was on her own - after school, before school, skateboarding 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 if the IRS didn't audit her again.

They were living the American dream.

Bridled Enthusiasm

Both my parents had been 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, he said. "These things just happen." He assured me of this on more than one occasion. Actually dozens of times, because he figured if someone hears phrases like "these things just happen," often enough, they might actually 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 house-made perfume called "Hi," (an abbreviation for "high" obviously).

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 in many ways. 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 stuff on my own. It was like how a dog might think if he were a dad.

Besides, my dad rediscovered heavy pot usage after Mom died. So he was usually harmlessly de-focused. He realized that life was short, and simultaneously sucked. And reality was the last place he would ever want to die. So if that were the case, then why spend a lot of time in reality while he was still alive? Stay high and scramble logic. Maybe it would eventually go away.

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

Anyway, they caught him smoking weed during his break and fired him on the spot, even though he'd been doing it for years.

I decided to try to get him a job at the café.

Hal the Cook, and the owner, Sam Buckbaugh, both shrugged. Sam Buckbaugh waved his hands in the air, and walked away when I suggested it again, which meant he was hired.

That was the same thing Buckbaugh did when *I* asked for a job.

His system of hiring was like a mime's interpretation of bridled enthusiasm.

The Beginning of Our Adventure

I was on my way to Pete's Petite Pizza to get a little dinner. The pizzas were super small, but they were almost the same price as regular-sized pizza. They came out of the oven about as big as a flattened softball. I could eat like eight of them.

After dinner, I was hoping to find some new windshield wipers for my used Hyundai. The car had no functional door locks, which I didn't really care about. But the windshield wipers scraped the glass with every swish during rainy days. 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 on and off. I was driving and mostly watching the traffic, but I also noticed that a few pedestrians were deploying umbrellas way too soon -- I mean, 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 tuned 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. Just then, 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 into a red zone where only buses are allowed to stop and got out of the car. Raindrop tears fell from her face. Her hair was wet and streaks of it 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 looked at me as if I were some gawky meaningless character she saw in a terrible movie long ago -- irrelevantly familiar.

"Rainy, remember me? I stumbled over the tree root in front of the mayor's office. I'm the waiter that gave you extra ice water. Remember?"

She never answered questions. But I was still a question away from realizing that -- "Are you headed towards the bus station, or the train?"

"Who are you?" she squinted at me. "Oh, yeah, the waiter guy...."

"Yes! Hey, I'll drive you wherever you want to go."

She kept walking.

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

"Nothing's free, waiter guy."

"The ice water was free. *I'm* free. I'm harmless and dumb and I'll 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 bus stop where my car was parked. 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 questions. I just turned the engine on and waited for her to talk.

"Head 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."

She shook her head then looked out the passenger window.

Her face was beautiful in its ferocity - henna-red eyebrows furled downward, arms crossed. She was slumped away from me, leaning against the unlocked door.

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

I said, "All trees are weird when you think about it. Trying to stretch up toward something that would kill them if they ever came close enough to reaching it. 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, "It's not suicidal. Because they don't *know* the sun would kill them. So technically it would be a fatal accident."

We drove for a while without speaking, then she blurted out, "I'm divorcing a fatal accident, actually. My parents were officially divorced today, after getting married because of an accident, which turned out to be me. So I'm divorcing them to return the favor."

Now I understood a bit more. But I still had no clue where she was headed beyond Jansen Bridge. And that could lead... anywhere. Because the world is round.

Another thought crossed my mind: What if I never saw her again? I was taxiing her far from town, purposely driving her away -- from me. Why would I do that to myself?

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

"What?"

"Wherever you're going, I could drive you there."

"Uh, no thanks."

I drove on in silence for a while. Then I said, "I can't just drop you off at 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 beginning of Martinsville. Then you'll have lived out your fantasy of crossing Jansen's bridge."

"Martinsville. I never had a reason to go there myself, since I heard it was basically a carbon copy of our town, except they have more wind than we do. And for me, that's not a super compelling reason to visit."

"They don't have more wind. That's a rumor.... Look, just drive, if you want to drive. Or don't." She pulled her legs up to her chest and folded her arms around them. She was still pretty wet. She was trying to keep herself warm.

The drizzle outside turned into hammer-hard rain again, Cloudburst II, so I increased the windshield wiper speed. You could hear the annoying squeaking of my old wipers against the glass even during peak rainfall. They were pretty much worn down to the steel rods. I was on my way 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 for gas."

"No, forget it. I was just...."

She told me to pull into a motel just a few yards beyond the "Welcome to Martinsville" sign.

It was as if the motel was saying, "Welcome to Martinsville -- The Town That Puts You To Sleep Within 500 Feet."

As I looked down the road, I could see why sleep might be the best option. If an architect could build an entirely gray world, this is what it would look like. Everything merged into the rainy sky.

Rainy had never checked into a hotel on her own before, so she didn't refuse my offer to stay in the car until they at least confirmed there was a vacancy and gave her a room key.

I looked at my car clock. It was 5 pm, the start of my work shift at the café. The rain was still falling in waves. Even bugs couldn't escape this onslaught. Their attempts to fly away would have ended up with them pinned against a wall, or drowning trying to escape.

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 red sparkly sign above the main entrance that said, "Vacancy." There was no N or O bulb preceding the "Vacancy" bulbs. It looked like they had been unscrewed, and only the sockets remained. 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 the kind they have at an airport. It was squeaky, and hard to open all the way because it scraped against the cement threshold. A bell dangled from the top of the door so 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 that this place might be a "Broken Clock with Cracked Glass" kind of place. Because above the registration desk there was a broken clock with cracked glass.

She was shivering slightly as we walked across the parking lot to her room. Coincidentally, it was the one right in front of my car, 108. She struggled with the key, but then the door finally opened. I remained standing outside the doorway, but I poked my head inside after she went in. 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 and the rain falling.

I brought her suitcase and backpack into the room from the car, then sat down at the edge of one of the two small twin beds.

She pulled the curtains open. Dull light yawned in. Then she forced the window free to get some fresh air and we heard the rain splattering loudly on the walkway.

"So what now?" I said.

She didn't answer. She was checking her backpack to make sure everything had stayed dry.

"I mean, this weather is crazy. You can't just kick me out in a storm with bad windshield wipers. I felt like I was driving a mini-submarine. Would it be okay if I stay until the rain lets up? I'll see if they have free coffee at the reception desk or something."

She stared at me.

"I'm harmless."

"You're annoying."

"Annoying? Well, okay, maybe. But you're not annoying."

"You don't know me."

"I *do* know you, a little. For example, I know you write things in a notebook. Things you probably don't want anyone else to see. And I know you like grilled cheese. And you drink a ton of ice water way too fast after a long run. And..." I started to go blank. Did I know anything else?

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

"Once the rain stops, go home. Or, in ten minutes, whichever comes first, okay?"

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

She turned her back to me and continued to search through her backpack.

Star Flakes

Sitting at the edge of separate twin beds in a Motel 6 in Martinsville, Purgatory, in a thunderstorm – that is when Rainy told me why her parents were getting divorced. She wasn't really talking *to* me. It was more like me witnessing Rainy talking to herself while she got more and more frustrated about something either hiding in her backpack, or not there.

She said she was happy about her father's affair, and didn't know what took him so long to get out. Her mother either drank, or worried about everything, or cheated on their taxes. There was no in between.

She finally found what she was looking for. She pulled out a crinkled up joint and struck a match from a matchbook that had stayed dry enough to light. Good thing her backpack was waterproof. Some of those cheap ones would have made everything *at least* too damp, if not wet.

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 about being stoned 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 far. So why pretend anymore? The real question was, who was I without pretending?

But by the time I thoroughly contemplated the ironic fact that even my real self was basically a fake, I came to the unfortunate conclusion that I couldn't remember back to the beginning of my thought. Everything evaporated.

At the same time, Rainy mumbled something about her dad's girlfriend from Maryland. Because when her mom told her about the

divorce, she also mentioned the girl her dad was feeling in Maryland was now pregnant.

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 not *at all*. I think kids are awesome."

"Why the hell would you think that?" she laughed. She still hadn't met my eyes. She was either pacing, looking out the window, or rummaging through her backpack.

But, she was definitely asking me something about myself now, so I decided to answer her question honestly, and not pretend, and not pace while I talked.

"Well, the way I see it, we're just sitting around here right now in this hotel room, without kids, and what are we doing? We're getting stoned in a smoky room that smells like Raid, yeah, but from a bigger perspective, it's kind of even worse! Ultimately, we're just a random pile of radioactive star flakes that used to live in some anonymous galaxy. Somehow, we got born and learned how to think, and learned how to make up languages, and name a galaxy, *galaxy*. But as grown humans, we're total strangers, to everyone, everywhere. Why? Because we're not kids anymore! We're just sitting around asking things like, where are we going? Where did we come from? And where did the universe come from? And what exactly does the word, '*from*' mean? And *that* kind of meaningless stuff can go on and on for a lifetime, unless something or someone wakes you up, and shakes you out of it. And that someone is kids. They don't think about what '*from*' means. Kids are the opposite of a dark smelly hotel room, or worrying ourselves to death about the meaning of life. They're way more fun than that."

She covered her face with her hands and began to laugh uncontrollably, "Oh my God, you are so *fucked up*."

Astral Milkshakes

I felt like I was in limbo. And this was not the kind of limbo where you dance under a stick, then nose up to the bar for a piña colada with your lower back all screwed up. This was the *totally stuck* kind of limbo.

Because on one hand, I wanted to move closer to Rainy. I wanted to look more closely at her face. On the other hand, my body was glued to the bedspread. The weed had frozen my appendages. Eventually, I closed my eyes and fell into a cloud-like dream....

We had just come from a rain dance of some kind.
It worked. I looked at her as the rain began to fall

Rainy had an astral smile. I'd never seen her smile before.
She only smiled far away from where she lived.

“Shut off the moon and put your hands on my face.”

Silver stars twinkled. Constellations co-joined.
The world was ablaze; the world was abblur.
Astral milkshakes all around.

There was no need to distinguish the present
from the previous present. They were all gifts.

We swam through a river of light and tumbled in to the
place and time where our son, Orion, was born.

Our daughter, Oceana, was conceived on a sailboat
at sunset, many presents later.

She could swim like a dolphin by 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 my daydream and found myself lying as still as a stone, a canyon-distance across from Rainy.

Somehow I managed to rise up. I tumbled dizzily into the bathroom. It was pre-echo quiet in there, until one drip echoingly escaped from the faucet. *Plll-op*.... A rebel returning home. A white porcelain world awaited -- but, wait, it was a trap! No time to fall asleep here. And the rain was too far away to escape into.

After trying to wash my face awake, I texted my dad, basically to tell him to stop texting me, I was fine. And no, I hadn't accidentally fallen asleep up by the water tower again.

Rainy was dreaming away. She hadn't even gotten under the sheets.

A little after midnight the rain finally stopped. Technically, I was supposed to leave. But instead, I curled beneath the covers in the bed next to hers. I turned my head and watched her breathing slowly in the near-darkness before falling asleep myself.

I had more strange dreams during the night. Each one woke me for a while. Some were about her. Some were about weird trees reaching up too far into the sky and turning to hot smoke, and the sun being charged with homicide.

Some were about drunk Martians landing in Martinsville and invading Motel 6, and changing the name of the town to -- I think it was Martian Landing. They announced that we had become a suburb of Mars.

I finally fell into REM 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 front door and squinted into the syrupy bright light. The sky was void of clouds now. It was as if it had never rained. It was as if rain itself never existed. The streets were cracked and dry. A paper napkin from a fast food container flew by in the wind. It needed rain to land, to anchor itself, maybe coming to rest in a nice green garden. But there was only sun and wind. And more wind. (It *was* windier here.) 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'm on a quest."

I figured being on a quest would get him off my back for a few days. He would respect me being on a quest. Otherwise, he knew I would continue to tumble headlong into the abyss of an abysmally boring life. So a quest, any quest, was better than the alternative of not caring about quests, and never going anywhere except where you're supposed to go.

Rainy had no cell phone with her as far as I knew. If she did, I didn't have her number, and no one called her last night. What were her parents thinking right now? Did they even care 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, dry cracked 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 was not going backwards.

The hotel was located 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 was an empty soul-frozen line-up of usual suspects -- Exxon, McDonalds, Payless, 7-11, Burger King, Chevron, Taco Bell, and a fire station, in case some clown, some frustrated

McDonald's worker, threw their little white hat down in disgust one day, took a match and some rancid cooking oil, and set fire to the entire town.

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 that little high-pitched send-off song. Only a spy, a thief, a shape-shifter about to change my life.

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, got in the passenger seat, and told me to drive... *fast!* He had a gun in his hand.

He was overwhelmingly big. He had to duck down as he was getting in the passenger seat, 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 curly 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.

"Go!" he seemed angry that I wasn't running the red light.

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, or yelling back at a guy who looks like he 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 steering 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 in turn, 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 brake and punching him in his face until the gun went off. Good old grandpa.

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 when guns are involved. I just wanted to get him out of my car, or get me out of my car.

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? ... The puzzle pieces were coming together slowly.

He directed me down a number of small winding streets until I realized 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 hail a cab.

I put my wreck in reverse, hoping for a quick exit before he came back for his ride home, but in my haste I smashed into a big yellow dumpster that smelled like urine even with all my windows closed. Maybe it was painted yellow as a warning to those with no sense of smell not to slam into it.

I floored the gas pedal 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 squiggly line of road repair -- and picked up Rainy's familiar ratty brown notebook. How did it get *here*?

This was not a safe part of town. Buildings had thick black gates blocking the front entrances. A few abandoned stores had their windows smashed in. An old Ford Mustang in an 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. Take one small step down and, *poof*.

So what had 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? Was she in danger? Captured, with her book falling from her backpack as they dragged her away?

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 safely 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 humankind -- 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 dated from this morning:

The boy is crazy,
wants something from me. Why should
I care? Just, *FUCK HIM!*

I studied this odd poem for a moment.
That weird line break in the middle...
I counted the syllables of each line.
Yep, it was a haiku.
I *knew* she was a good writer.
This proved it.

The crazy boy was me.
But that last sentence seemed slightly open to interpretation.
Did she mean, what a jerk, *fuck him?*
Or did she mean, maybe I'm starting to like him enough to...?
The 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, I almost missed it:

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

This was not a haiku.

And, *Arrogant?*

I was spending all my time begging for her attention like a starving dog, or like a half-dead 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 an hallucinogenic midnight rap. That's all. I didn't think she would remember any of it the next morning. 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, that was true, 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, of course. I didn't 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. As were all the entries she wrote thereafter. Pages and pages of them.

I closed my eyes and tried to think things through. She could really be in trouble. Maybe I should get the police involved. Call 911.

But what would I say?

“Hello, officer. 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.”

The officer might say: “Well kid, maybe she thought you were a creep and she left to get away from you. Were you stalking her?”

And I’d say, “She was letting me stalk her, eventually, I think. But she doesn’t think I’m a creep. Just crazy and arrogant.”

And he’d say, “Remember kid, stalking is a crime.”

And I’d say, “But she could be in trouble.”

And he’d say, “Do you have proof of that?”

And I’d say, “I found her journal in the middle of the road after a guy with a gun carjacked me.”

And he’d say, “What mental institution did you escape from? Or are you still stoned out of your mind? And do you know anything about the dented yellow trash cannister near Off the Pier? Someone will have to pay for that.”

And I’d say, “How did you connect me with the trash can incident by me saying I was carjacked by a madman?”

And after a long pause, he’d say, “Look kid, this is *Martinsville*. Nothing ever happens here but sleep, and people trying to leave town. There are no madmen here. Where are you calling from? We’re going to have to interrogate you.”

And I’d say, “I’m at 666 Hell Street, South. I’ll wait for you to come and put me in handcuffs, because yes, *YES*, I was the one who slammed into the yellow trash cannister.”

They weren’t going to believe Rainy was in danger.

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 notebook, then widened my search for miles in both directions. I couldn't find her.

Her journal made it clear that I was no one she needed to ever see again. I was just a napkin flying down a windy street 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 fire station, and fast food signs, past flashing yellow traffic lights, until I saw the Motel 6 framed in a dull white neon glow.

Then, out of the corner of my eye, through the drizzle-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 door 108 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 turning it upside down and right side up, but neither side would work. The third try resulted in the key getting jammed in the keyhole. I moved her out of the way and opened the door with a slight kick. She stepped inside and tried to yank the key out by putting her foot against the opened door, pulling at the key with both hands.

"Rainy, I've been looking all over for you! Because I have your..."

"Why did you do that? I just decided to take a walk, okay?"

"You brought your suitcase and knapsack with you on your walk."

"I didn't want you to steal anything before you hopefully left."

The key finally dislodged. The green plastic room number tag clacked its applause.

"Did you think I'd read your journal or something?"

She became silent. I could almost see her thoughts darting around. Her eyebrows furled. "Go home."

She headed inside and threw her suitcase on the bed.

I stepped just inside the entranceway to tell her about finding her 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."

"Wow, your uncle knows you're here?"

She didn't answer my question... of course.

She tossed her knapsack into the corner, "I gotta call him."

She said to the office manager, "How much is it to make a call from the office?"

Before he could answer, I said, "You can use my phone if you want."

"Use his phone, please. You can't call from the office anyway. It's only for incoming calls to the motel."

She took my phone and stepped outside, shutting the door behind her. The office manager walked back to the front desk.

I opened the door a crack and saw her talking a few doors away, staying dry under the overhang. 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 windows 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 the bed near the window and covered it with my jacket.

Then I went into the disgusting bathroom to wash up. I opened up the new piece of soap they give you each day, 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 you can also use to cut 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."

"Your notebook?"

Her eyes blazed as she squinted at me.

"I found it, Rainy. I swear. It was in the middle of a street near Jansen Bridge."

I retrieved it from the bed and handed it to her.

"That's 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 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 there. I wouldn't have thought you'd 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 was worried I was going to jump off the fucking pier because of the divorce. Like I actually care. He's a bit overreactive, but I blame my screwed-up mother for that. She got him all riled up, and told him to follow me around to make sure I don't 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 on 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 moron and you piss me off?"

"Something like that, yeah. And 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, some day."

She looked at me and shook her head. "Look Taylor, I need to get some sleep. I'm exhausted. But I guess you can sleep in the other bed again since the rain is turning into a fucking monsoon out there again. As long as you leave me alone and keep to yourself. And no more rants about kids and galaxies. And it's just for one more night. Then that's the end."

"Okay, thanks."

"And you're not smoking anymore of my weed."

"Do you have anymore?"

She laughed.

"Fine, Rainy, smoke alone. I'll just be your little ghost taxi driver curled up right over here near the window. 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."

And It Was All Chrome Yellow

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

I looked over to her bed. She was still sleeping. Her bare leg was sticking halfway out of the sheet. I thought maybe she wasn't wearing any clothes. I let my mind wander. She was so beautiful. At that moment, I realized I had to leave before she woke up. I was tired of being rejected and making a fool of myself.

Suddenly, there was 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 the front door 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. She was wearing a pair of red boxers and a white sleeveless T-shirt.

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

"*Holy crap!*" I screamed.

"Um 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 globules of raindrops onto the orange-brown carpet. Or did the interior designer of Motel 6 nationwide officially call the color something more appealing, like: chrome yellow? No one would buy anything called orange-brown. Would they?

Uncle Jimmy looked like he hadn't slept in a while. But Rainy 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 as she put her hands on her hips. No one could have ever looked cooler, to be honest.

"Uncle Jimmy, this is Taylor... *or something.*"

"Morrison."

"Taylor Morrison. The friend I told you about."

"Yeah, I think we already met. He was kind enough to give me a ride yesterday."

Rainy looked at us, then she leaned forward on one foot nervously. "You gave him a ride?"

"I had to use a little subtle persuasion," Jimmy smiled.

Two of his teeth were missing.

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. If he was, he wouldn't be here anymore... I mean alive, on Earth." He glared at me again, "No, not Chase. It's Troy, or Todd, something like that."

He handed the phone to Rainy.

"Hey Mom. How's work going?" she said brightly. "Oh yeah? He asked you out? Too bad, I know him, he's an ass.... Okay, he asked you on a real date as opposed to what...? Look Mom, I don't really give a crap."

She headed towards the bathroom with Jimmy's phone to get some privacy, but before she closed the door I heard her say, "Why do you care what I think? Or where I'm going? Why are you even calling me?"

I found myself alone with Uncle Jimmy. He looked at me and his eyes turned oddly soft, "Look, I'm sorry about what happened 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!*"

"Is there a difference?"

"Look, that part of town she was heading towards is filled with dangerous types."

"You mean like guys running around with guns and stuff?"

"Dude, 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 the chamber was empty.

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 think it was loaded. I swear, I thought I emptied all the bullets!"

I had literally 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 an all-piccolo version of "*Für Elise*" somewhere in the hollow back regions of my brain. Or maybe it was the initial stages of a migraine.

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?*" *Click.* "*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 off the force. He was a bad guy anyway, but you gotta follow the rules, see? It doesn't matter how good the results are.

"So after that I got a job as an auto mechanic." He pulled at his blue shirt with O'Brian written on the pocket. "The irony is, I can't even fix my own car parked out there, because it broke down and needed a part this town didn't have. That's why I had to hitch a ride with you yesterday. To make sure she was okay and not going to do anything stupid, see? Anyway, the part just came in this morning from the city so I won't need rides from you anymore."

Rainy opened the bathroom door, "Hold on, Mom -- I'll give you your phone back in a minute, I just have to..."

Before she could complete her thought, there came a flurry of loud knocks.

A young motel clerk who had just started his shift was shouting, "Is everything okay in d'ere? May I please come in, sir?"

He had a very sweet-sounding Indian accent. It sounded polite and gentle, yet appropriately 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 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 to underscore that he could also be saying, fowl.) He was laughing at his clever little pun. But what he didn't realize was the pun didn't really make sense. Because the fowl was still there.

Nonetheless, I had to stop 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 Indian boy points his bony finger at the huge red bearded man sitting on the bed.

"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 Jimmy. "He's your... niece?"

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

"Yeah? How the hell is Mary anyway?"

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

"Why, what's up with Mary?"

"Divorced. 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 towards the policemen 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?"

Jimmy says matter-of-factly, "Smith and Wesson 625 fired at close range. What do you think I'm gonna carry around, a pea shooter? Look, boys, write this down -- 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 knocked up.... 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, "After my niece ran away from home Mary thought she might try to kill herself or something, see? Because she was distraught, because of the divorce. And because her father is an ass. So Mary, being a devoted mom, asked me to trail my niece to make sure she's okay. Then this kid gets involved somehow, who I don't know from shit, and don't trust *at all*. And then my goddamned car wouldn't start after my niece took off on foot towards the pier, of which I thought she might jump... off of.... So I jumped into this 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 the officer, who was now writing as quickly as he could.

"Hence, Walter, a carjacking," Uncle Jimmy offered. "That's a 209.5, as opposed to stealing his car outright. 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, mud-covered size sixteen shoe with no arch.

"Anyway, I get to the only place on the pier 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 intently.

"*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 finally over.

"Because apparently she *wasn't* trying to commit a 164. She tells me on the phone this morning she was looking for a fucking ferry. 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? And I'm sure she was aching to see an oil rig. So now I don't know what she's up to."

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

Walter says, "No way."

"Swear to Jesus."

Jimmy's voice rises again, "Anyway Rainy, exactly how flippin' stupid are you? Or is something else going on in that little head of yours?"

"Just stupid, Uncle Jimmy. I guess it's genetic," she shoots back.

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

Rainy says, "Okay, I get it. *They* get it. I'm just a dumb kid. But you're right, 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 your side of the family."

"Vell den, vhat ver you doin' over d'ere, *fishing for dinner?*" the Indian clerk cackled. Stand-up was not his ticket out of this minimum wage job.

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 Timmy, or whatever... and uh, some little Indian guy, and a few cops actually, because I fucking shot a tangerine, so I gotta call you back."

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

Mary responded, sounding like a distant chipmunk through the other end of the phone. "Okay, sis, I won't let either of them out of my sight, trust me." His fist tightened and his cheeks turned a little red. He snapped the phone shut. "*Siddown,*" he commanded to me, standing over me like a red redwood tree. So I sat. He began to pace.

Officer Walter butted in, "Jim. I'm afraid we have to interrupt and 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 Santa Claus."

Uncle Jimmy laughed nervously, the officers laughed in response. The Indian clerk tried to imagine a red bearded Krishna and laughed along.

Then off they drove with Uncle Jimmy, red car light swirling in a foggy rain, with the clerk screaming, "Who's going to pay for da wall?"

"Ask the president," Jimmy screamed back over his shoulder.

Jimmy was attuned to national politics more than I would have imagined.

I watched the police cars become little dots on the road. Then I laughed, "If Uncle Jimmy isn't going to let us out of his sight he'd better have telescopic vision. Barring that, I'd say we're okay."

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

As she walked towards me, I thought she was *actually* going to kick me in the face. But instead she kicked the front door shut with her bare foot.

"I'm so mad at *everybody*. Except you. Maybe. You can come with me if you want. Otherwise, I'll just take a bus."

"Come where?"

But, of course, that was a stupid thing to ask. Because Rainy never answered questions.

The Crumpled Brown Paper Bag

Part of the motel wall was now lying on the floor, having exploded into dusty moon-shaped fragments. The smell of stucco and gun powder hung in the air. Rainy was walking around the room making sure she hadn't forgotten anything.

"Can I ask you just a few simple questions you'll actually answer?"

"Within reason," she said.

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

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

"No! I mean, we'll need to eat, and buy gas, and..."

She covered her face with her hands and sighed, "Okay, I have about seventy-five dollars left."

"I only have about thirty," I said.

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

"All right," I said. "Why are all these secrets going on?"

"What secrets?"

"Why did you really go down to the pier?"

"Well, that's one too many questions."

I stared blankly.

"Taylor, get in the car. We have to go."

She started to put her socks on. That was depressing. Because I realized the odds were quite high I'd never see her without sox on again.

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

"Where to, fearless leader?" I said, strapping myself in the driver's seat.

"Drive back to the pier. Jimmy interrupted me from finishing something important."

I started driving down the same streets I had been forced to drive down the day before. When we got close to Jansen Bridge she directed me to drive into a small alleyway.

"Park here," she said sternly. We were at the very edge of the northern part of the pier. When we got out she shook her head, "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 doesn't know anything. I hope."

I was confused, but I kept walking with her. The light became dimmer until we were standing in front of a dozen steel-coated mailboxes, 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 the family, and pulled out a very small silver key.

"You brought me all the way down this dark alley to pick up mail?" I whispered.

She unlocked the box. I craned my neck in to try 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?

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 to the main road, onto the state highway, until a mile and a half later we were officially out of Martinsville.

The next town looked exactly like Martinsville. There was even a Motel 6 to greet us.

She sat silently with the crumpled brown paper bag firmly in her grasp.

In Them Thar Hills

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

About an hour later we came to a small hilly green town and pulled into the Elly's Pike General Store.

We walked through rows of mismatched items: plastic wrapped cheese crackers next to a pair of rain boots; two cans of mosquito repellent next to three big boxes of Raisin Bran.

We bought a ripe tomato, a loaf of bread, some butter, a box of Oreos, and a toothbrush. Then we gassed up at an old red and white single pump with one grade of gas. I calculated that what she spent on all these things, including the gas, used up almost half her money. I still had my thirty dollars. But it wouldn't be long until we ran out.

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 room was very clean and the furnishings were mostly 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 nightstand, lacey curtains, an old dark wood dresser, and a painting that looked like 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. She ran her fingers across the smooth marble pieces. The board was

fully prepared for guests. It was staged on an old wood table, with two big chairs facing each other.

"Do you know how to play?" she asked.

"I dabble."

"Then let's dabble."

She sat 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 thin and delicate. She wore no rings, no bracelets on her wrists. No jewelry anywhere. Not even a simple chain around her neck. No earrings. No pierced ears. Rainy didn't seem to care about these things. Either that or it brought up bad memories.

"I used to play with my mom," she said. She was pretty good, even when she was dead-assed 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.

"I'm done," she said abruptly. "Take my queen first 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 the window wide.

She stood behind me and said, "Should I push you, or should you push me?"

"Very funny."

"I'll tell you something *amazingly* funny, Taylor.

What's that?"

"We're rich!"

"What?"

She brought the crumpled brown paper bag over to the bed. She put her finger to her lips and said, "Don't scream!"

Then she reached her hand into the bag and pulled out four small rolls of yellow coins.

"Know what this is?"

"Something very shiny."

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

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

"My dad -- the one who impregnates non-wives from Maryland -- he felt really guilty after the 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 was saving it for me to go to college.

"He bought it the year I was born for two-hundred-fifty dollars an ounce. Forty ounces. Cost my dad ten-thousand dollars. It was a lot of money back then to stash away." She fingered the four small tubes of coins now lying on the bed. "And then, he said he was sorry. He said he loved me. Never meant to hurt me."

"Wow."

"And I believe him."

She wiped away the beginning of a tear. "Guess how much this is worth now?"

"You're crying."

"Shut the fuck up. Guess how much?"

"Enough to make you start crying, obviously."

"About *sixty*-thousand dollars!"

"*What?* Really?"

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

"So...?"

"So we have to spend it before she finds out about it! We need to spend it fast. We have to figure out a way to have the best time of our fucking lives."

"*We?*"

"Yeah, you've been my taxi boy. So, officially that makes you an accomplice. Risk and loyalty cut both ways."

Not Ireland

After eating our dinner of bread and tomatoes, 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 of them whisper a secret truth about the world.
They whisper to me to sail away on the first cloud I touch.
I search for my piece of sky.
The air is full of chiming things I used to know.

I closed the book and looked at her. "You are *really*..." That's all I could say, since I myself had never written poems or had a journal, and had no idea why those words moved me.

I put her notebook on the nightstand, then playfully took Rainy by the shoulders and sat her down in a big overstuffed antique chair.

I slid it across the wooden floor until she was facing the bed. Then I started bouncing up and down on the mattress, using the bedsprings to propel me. She started to laugh in an embarrassed kind of way.

"All right," I announced, "if you answer this question correctly 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. "And the 'Final Question' is, 'What is my last name?'"

"Um, uh... Morris?"

"Judges?" I looked behind me to an invisible panel of judges.

"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 among 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. Complete with new windshield wipers."

"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. And no jewelry. Once was enough."

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, Missus Rainy."

"I don't want a freakin' 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 why are slaves being given away 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?"

"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 let's be a little more specific."

She thought about it and said quietly, "Maybe Italy. Maybe Barcelona! Or Chile. No, Peru. Maybe... Paris. "

"Paris?"

"Paris. It's spring. We can go! I always wanted to go to Paris in the spring, Taylor. We could actually be there, you and me... and then from there we could go, like, *everywhere else!*"

"Except Ireland."

"Right."

Her eyes were bright. Her cheeks were flushed. I'd never seen her like this.

She went to the window and looked out at the blank night. "I think that's the answer... and the solution. No one could ever take that away from me if I spent all the money travelling the world." Then she added, "But first, there's a place I want to go tomorrow. On our way to the nearest city with an airport."

"We'll need passports."

"Oh yeah. Well, then we can fly to New York City! It's huge. No one will find us there. And we'll apply and wait for our passports there."

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

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

"Don't be soppy."

"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 it in the last few days, I really like rain. It's been like a good luck charm."

"I kind of like rainy places too."

"There's Seattle. We could drive there."

"No. It's not exotic enough. Paris still feels right," she said. "I've heard it rains in the spring, and then all the flowers bloom, then summer comes, and everything comes alive."

I closed my eyes and tried to imagine the unimaginable.

The quiet that followed was one of the most beautiful silences 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 seemed to be slowly making our way towards New York City. But when I asked her she said it would be better to take a plane, maybe even tomorrow. First, she said, we needed to cash in some of the gold, and then she had one last thing she wanted to do.

We got off at a dusty exit and drove through its small strip of stores: An old American 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, up, up we went, winding around a two-lane road until the views became vast, majestic. 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. At the end was an ivory-colored house. 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 sunbeam angling through the 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, with 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 with it into 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 an actual girl?'"

"I'd just shake my head in disbelief at how clueless they were. Eventually I stopped answering their questions. 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 used to be, "And I'd sit down right here in this corner and write my secrets in a red leather diary that had a lock connected to the flap, until they went to sleep. Drunks usually go to bed early."

"What happened to the diary?"

"I burned it in front of them because I caught my mom looking at it after she found 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 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, 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 sat 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 the boat 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 wouldn't 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 come get me and beg me to walk down with him. 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. And when the photo rolled out of the camera he gave it me to keep. But when we moved, I left it on the floor of my closet. 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 in front of us 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, took the phone, and flung into a tree about five 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 tumbled down into the gully. The ringing had 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 large 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-six-hundred-twenty-one dollars. We tried to remain clam, thanked him, and quickly left.

We stayed 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 decided we would leave for the airport the next morning and go to New York, then eventually on to Paris. We found a place to stay for the night right next to the old Greyhound station. The name of the establishment was: "Inn Here."

Clever to some.

There were only five rooms, 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 his 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, he insisted, 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 and one car -- yours. According

to the old man that meant it would be extra quiet out our window because "no handicapped people ever come 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. "Tomorrow we go to the airport. We have to figure out how to pay for tickets without a credit card. There has to be a way. And where will we leave your car?"

I closed my eyes for a moment. My thoughts were buzzing. I tried to imagine the future, our future. Where would this all lead?

She gazed out the window, looking across the parking lot to the Greyhound station. "When I was a little kid, 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 all of America. And if you have enough money you could take a bus anywhere. New Zealand... or *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 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 were magic. 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 thought about kissing her. She made me feel so happy. In fact, I decided I'd try tonight. But then came a gentle knock on our 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 cried out, "*Wait! 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 he'd found us and tricked us into letting him in.

"How did you know we were here?" Rainy whispered, 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 up the hill to the gully 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? The window.

"So then I said to myself, 'If I was high on dope, and got 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 dump... And then I parked my big-assed fully repaired '96 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 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: bright yellow. So you need to 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, now was it? 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, many years ago. The man could never hold his liquor as good as your mother can. He was so proud of what he did for you, his sweet little girl. His pride and joy. But, see, drunk accountants' minds like your mother's are not only the most *paranoid* minds in the world, 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. So she put two and

two together. She had me follow you. She knew you'd lead us to where it was and would know how to unlock the treasure."

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. But I'd have found you eventually."

"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 shot gun wedding? And if that's the case, if that's what's on the marriage certificate, then *legally it was still his money... not their money.*"

"Yeah, yeah. Tell it to the divorce attorneys, honey. They'll get a good fucking laugh out of it. They'll probably spend more than what those coins are worth in legal fees arguing over common law marriage rights. Meanwhile, looks like your class on divorce law ends here. I hope you also 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, yes, 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 wrong in my eyes, and for hiding who he really was for so long. But maybe, just once, I can catch a break, you know? And not have to babysit for my drunken mother anymore, and make her Bloody Mary's in the morning. And not have to wait up at night for 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 slowly applaud. "Sob, 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. Aren't you? Can't you see that? You're just like him. 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 get half if she gets her half. So I need both halves right now."

"I'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! And didn't want to declare it as part of his divorce either. Then, of course, after he gets out of jail some year, he'll be so very glad to pay the back taxes. But at least you got to go to college - oops, check that. You didn't want to go to college. So you were going to spend your father's gift - your college tuition - on what? Him? "

"Wait a minute!" I protested.

"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 paying 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?* Apparently, you have your father's sense of fairness."

He pinched the bridge of his nose, shook his head, and said in a low voice, "You know, you're just as greedy as I am. Or your mother. See the irony there, little niece? All of a sudden, you know what greed *feels* like. You want something *so bad*. It's poison, isn't it, to actually *want* something, or someone? To *need* it? So then you resort to fantasies, and begging. Just like you're begging *me* now. Miss Snobby Always Above It All. You pretend you're different from everyone else. 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 lepre-con. *Now!*"

She looked back at the bed: "Shit, I don't know, where the fuck... *it's gone!*"

"I'm losing my patience, damn it. *Hand it over!*" 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. I swear to God. 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 for all time. And everything would have meant nothing.

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. Her red boxer pajama bottoms and bra were tossed over his shoulder.

When he was satisfied, and the room had been turned into a whirling mess, opened drawers, a bed without sheets, a suitcase kicked over after being emptied, clothes thrown in every direction, he crowed, "Your mom and I will have a good time with your father's gift. Thanks for the golden moments we've shared over the last few days. But I have to take my leave now. 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. She ran into the bathroom, looking almost possessed, and filled a 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 walking toward his car, making the great escape, then sitting in the wet driver's seat and wondering where the hell the water came from. I watched him as he began to curse. Rainy came flying out of the bathroom just as he was looking up towards the open window. She 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 plastic 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 dog," she yelled, and slammed the window shut.

Sleeping Together

It was the only time I ever saw Rainy 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. A year of work at the café and I can make enough money for us to go to Paris together *next* spring. Except we'll have passports. And I don't have to feel guilty about it. *You see?* Because you'll be *my* accomplice. and I won't feel like I'm freeloading off of your dream. It'll be *our* dream."

"Taylor, it's not about the money. Not about Paris. Or traveling to any place in particular." She wiped a tear away. "I'm upset because what my uncle said about me is true."

"Don't believe anything he said. He was just messing with you. You know that?"

I knelt down in front of her 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 in the glove box of the car. There's like, way over a thousand dollars in there too."

"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 pay for passports, maybe enough to go to Paris anyway! Maybe."

"No Taylor. I don't want to fly anywhere. I don't want to lie to myself anymore.... I just want to sleep. I need to sleep now. Come lay next to me. Just be quiet and put your arms around me."

Golden

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

Her note said:

Going to the Greyhound station. Don't follow me this time. Please.... Maybe I'll come home to visit someday.

- Rain

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

I went to the window and looked across to the Greyhound terminal. I caught sight of the entrance.

The sun poured down on the sidewalk as people came and went. Everything seemed shiny and bright. I pulled the shade.

White

I went back to sleep and fell into a dream about us, Rainy.

We were sitting on the floor of your childhood room. You were showing me the photograph from long ago. The green gully, 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 upstairs to your room. 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 green hilly landscape out your window to pure white cloud.

It carried us 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 across to the other side.

As I gauged the distance I thought - we won't make it. We're not really birds, and it's too far. When I turned to ask you what you thought, you were gone.

So I drove my car to find you. I was pressing on the brake while pressing on the gas. I drifted slowly, like Noah's ark, across oceans, all the while knowing there could be no rescue. Rescues never work when that someone is looking for something else.

I went back to the gully and sat down next to where you'd been.

I was trying to decide if I should fly across to the other side alone.

Orange

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

As I sat down near your rock, an orange ribbon of light appeared in the sky.

I followed it out to the end, where a sailboat seemed to be racing out on the open horizon.

Suddenly I saw you alone on the deck, looking back at me with your arms spread wide.

You were backlit against an orange triangular sailcloth, rippling from the kind of wind that moves time forward.

I could hear you. I thought I could hear your voice.

I thought I saw a tear falling. But it was just the rain.

Then you whispered the oddest thing to me:

"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 father'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 figured he would have fired me by now.

"Why'd ya quit?" he yelled in his gravelly voice as soon as he saw me. 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 in the back that you'll need to help bring in -- six cases of those orange juice boxes 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. Because of the orange juice. So maybe I can squeeze a shift in for you. Meanwhile, you can take Kathy's section today, and table 15 if it gets crowded enough to put someone back there near the John. Just don't start messin' with the help, Mr. Playboy. Get my drift?"

"10-4."

"10-4 is goddamned right. Now go wash up." He strode off towards the kitchen.

I headed to the back corner, past table 15. When I entered the 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 quietly. "They're *really* tasty."

Before my dad could answer, Sam's sandpaper voice rang out, "Hal, what the hell are you doing back there? We have customers!"

"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. "Tayls!"

He ran over and jarred me with a long hard hug, then he 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 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, and he didn't want to pry any further.

"Dad?"

"Yes, boy."

I felt myself tearing up, which is *not* okay when your father is stoned and wants to hug you, again.

I said, "Why?"

"Why, *what*?"

I shook my head, "I don't know, just, why?"

"Oh, *that* why."

I nodded.

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

"I know, Dad!"

"Anyway, you don't know this part of the story. But 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, Linnie, 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*. And I'm proud of you for that. So maybe *that's* where you should get your answers about *why* from. I think if you do that, you'll find out someday."

Someone actually sat down at table 15 and interrupted our conversation. His beard reminded me of the bottom of a broom.

Dad took me by the arm and pulled me backwards toward the lockers. "So did Sam give you your job back?"

"He yelled it back."

"Good."

"But as soon as I make enough money, I'm leaving. I can't stay here anymore."

He nodded, "I figured that. I mean, no one should go backwards after going on a quest."

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

"No, no, that's okay."

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 wanna go? Maybe college? Maybe Martinsville?"

I shook my head, "As exciting as those two suggestions may be, Dad, I was actually thinking about going to Paris."

"Paris?"

"Yeah, I have this dream of seeing Paris, in the spring...."

The End
~ GM