

SHE FADES

by

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A Thesis
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Master of Fine Arts
Creative Writing

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A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at George Mason University

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Bachelor of Arts
George Mason University, 2012

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DEDICATION

This is dedicated to my late sister, Sarah.

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I would like to thank my mother and father. We've been through so much together, and you've always supported me no matter what. I'd like to thank Matt Banning, my best friend. Matt, I consider you my brother. Thank goodness we found running. You're the best. I'd also like to thank Tim Denevi. Tim, your guidance and support has been invaluable throughout my time in the MFA program. I could not have done this without you. A very special and heartfelt thanks to the late Alan Cheuse, my friend and mentor. Alan, your guidance, support, wisdom, wit, and knowledge will stay with me always. It was an honor to know you.

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ABSTRACT

SHE FADES

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George Mason University, 2019

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This thesis is ultimately about my sister, Sarah. She passed away from a heroin overdose on July 2, 2011. Her death left a void in me that I have been trying to cope with ever since. I got the call from my mother that Sarah was gone the summer before I was about to begin my first semester in the MFA program. I wrote about Sarah a lot while enrolled in the MFA program. I was trying to make sense out of what had happened while trying to intensely hone my writing skills. Sarah was my conduit. I grieved in this program. This collection of stories manifests my grief over the loss of Sarah. Every story relates to her, both directly and obliquely. Some stories address her life head-on. Others simply deal with subjects that we both appreciated. These subjects brought us closer together before her addiction tore us apart.

THE FADER

She lay alone on the bathroom floor, one hand on her naked breast, the other lying on the tile like a washed up shell. Her shoulders seized up against her head, bunched up like two cold tumors. Her lips trembled slightly. Smack rolled through her veins. She wanted to laugh, but couldn't. She sucked in a cold breath, stinging her throat. Her red cheeks turned purple. She'd forgotten to breathe.

A thought of a joke her father had told her once. A woman turned out to be a pig and a duck that stayed a duck, but a duck which spoke. She always thought it funny, but she never really knew why. The drug slowly ate her reason. She wished she remembered humor, the way it almost hurt to laugh too long. She knew the drug made her, something. It had to. She turned her upper lip into a dumb sneer and coughed lightly on a web of snot in the back of her throat.

She knew she looked like a swollen pig, a funny pig, but definitely not a woman. If she could have moved, she would have tied a pink bow around her neck to complete her "look."

Wait, did I really think that, or just dream it? she thought. Miss Piggy is my favorite Muppet. Favorite things don't matter much anymore, not much anyway, do they? What have I done?

She'd ingested a kaleidoscope again and it seared her insides into blunt cigar stubs.

She slowly turned her head left, her eyes focusing on a beetle crawling across the checkered floor. A tear ran down her cheek as she watched it. Her left eyelid felt all droopy. Hard to see clearly. She imagined that her eyes were two cameras, one in and one out of focus. They clouded over and everything dirtied until it was only her again, the filthy pig who wallowed aimlessly in its tiled trough.

Why did a beetle make her cry? Maybe she didn't appreciate anything small anymore. Maybe her family never really "got" her. Maybe she smelled like junkie vomit and aimless sex. Maybe she cried because she just couldn't move.

Any answer meant nothing. She lost any list of answers years ago. She noticed her gray forearm on her breast, its veins almost purple in the harsh fluorescent light, the skin looking like it should fall off the bone. Her mind seized, as if caught in a vice, tight, locked. Her old self died the first magical time the brown sludge laid on her blood. She slipped further into the shrouded ether every time she got high. As she lay so close to the tile she knew emptiness, yet she sensed more freeness around her than ever before. She watched the beetle crawl into a crack in the tall baseboard, its shell clicking against itself in a metronomic rhythm. The deep hum of the plumbing beneath the floor mingled with the static wheeze in the bottom of her lungs as she struggled to live.

She smelled strange on the floor like that, all dying and missing herself already. All acting like she had a right to live then, in the moments when it really didn't matter

anymore. She reeked of piss, but she didn't remember when it happened. She'd shown up right on time to this spot. Her life started to close just when she wanted to open it up.

How can I open it now? she thought.

Funny thoughts seeped from her drooling brain. The goat face she used to make as a joke. Her nose flared and lips pulled out taught into sails, accompanied by the shrill "baa" sound. The perfect goat. The one she used to embarrass her brother with at restaurants. He'd cringe as she wailed. Goat girl. Slick. Only she remembered goat girl. Only she remembered her body once being beautiful and blonde, finely tuned to ballet, that now lay on the floor in a naked wet heap, with no one around to help her, to see her go to rehab, to see her finally change. See her "baa" again.

She wondered when her mother would come home tonight and if she'd find her alive when she did. She imagined her brother's new life, that his new girlfriend treated him well. She remembered Justin, him putting the needle in her neck for what seemed hours ago, him rushing out of the bathroom after she sloughed off the toilet and collapsed on the cold tile. She sensed what dying felt like, that she should think of herself as doing so. She should score some more smack if she sobered up.

The drug covered her as she held the floor down, keeping her warm so that even the tile underneath her began to sweat under the humidity. The globed light above her dried her eyes the longer she stared at it. She smiled inside. She wanted to laugh, because it might make her feel herself again. She wanted to enter a warm place in her life. Her body felt bloated and she wondered if piss ran down her butt crack, or sweat.

A special place, still warm, hid inside her. It lied in the back of her neck near the hole the needle made. The memory of when, as a little girl, she had sparkled on a stage as a snowflake in *The Nutcracker*. She twirled and leapt in tiny bursts through the storm of dancers on stage. I shined that night, she thought. I was something then. Life seemed to lay still while she molded it to her satisfaction. She danced and people took notice. Life wandered around her, indifferent, while she lay still on the bathroom floor. Only the toilet watched her, maybe the beetle too.

She considered her indifference a strength. Things felt good when she got high, even if she really didn't do much except lie on the floor and possibly die. Getting high made sense to her because she had a talent for it. She did what needed to be done to get the drugs. She never thought twice about these tasks, these missions. She wanted Justin to come back, anyone really. Anyone to find her and cradle her, tell her she really wasn't a pig, that she wasn't alone, that she looked sad and helpless and really needed help, that they would help her and in the end she would turn out okay, sober or happy.

The tile floor still felt cold to her. She'll never learn. Her throat clogged like a kitchen strainer as she choked on her vomit, her eyes slowly swelling into ripe plums as she struggled to breathe, to breathe again so she might cop and shoot. She wished someone cried over her. She knew she couldn't be saved. Someone needed to save her anyway. Someone must have wanted her around again, for some reason.

She choked up green puss on that floor as the paramedics shot her full of Narcan. Her eyelids shot open, her swollen eyeballs bulging out of their sockets like boiled

meatballs as her central nervous system churned inside her. She looked for the beetle in the baseboard crack. She thought it would think her strong for coming back to life again. She just wanted another friend. Her blood felt like it carried razor blades. She looked toward the female paramedic holding her head as she helped her partner load her on to the gurney—a dark-skinned woman with a crooked face—and tried to say something.

“Cah, cah, cahhh.” She realized a large object lay in her throat. She wanted to puke it out. She wanted to scream. The woman looked in her eyes and laughed. Maybe she looked funny or something. So helpless and desperate, so fragile and dirty, a little lost junkie. Her eyes rolled in their sockets, rolled around the ambulance compartment. She wanted to cry, but didn’t want to look scared.

She hoped she wouldn’t make it to the hospital alive, not this time. She did. The staff sedated her after flushing her system. She snored on the gurney, her breaths coming out of her mouth in large puffs of air which made her lips flap erratically. Her inhalations through her nose sounded as if a metal can rolled around in her sinuses. She looked pathetic when her mother entered the observation room reserved for the least respected patients. The staff had seen her before, many times in fact, knew her by name already, knew her mother too. Their caring hands gripped harder each time Rachel visited.

Her mother—an extremely short, blonde woman with bright blue eyes and a pointy nose, always looked like she had tears in her eyes, more so when with Rachel—bent over her and kissed her forehead, her head and hands shaking. She knew the drill: Wait for her little girl to wake up.

Rachel stirred slightly and opened her pale blue eyes just enough to see her mother leaning over her. Her mother's eyes looked wounded and lost. They looked like they wanted to help.

She knew her mother had helped plenty. Rachel's addiction never shrunk no matter how much money her mother tossed at her, thinking each time that Rachel would use it to pay her debts, get a job, maybe visit her psychiatrist. She thought Rachel could be fixed, that she could be her little rosy-cheeked girl again. Rachel tricked her every time. She thought of her next scheme as she closed her eyes again.

Rachel snored like a wild boar all night, keeping most of the patients awake in that corner of the emergency room. Her mother sat next to her in the salmon colored chair, stiff despite its foam stuffed seat, and held her daughter's hand, squeezing it tightly every now and then to see if Rachel might wake up.

She finally awoke at six the next morning as she choked on a bit of phlegm in her throat. She looked at her mother in a wild-eyed daze, trying to remember what had happened, where she was, why her throat hurt so much. She looked at the web of small tubes surrounding her and felt a moment of panic deep in her stomach that burned like ice against skin. She tried to sit up but her mother pressed down on her shoulder.

“It's okay honey. Just rest. You're okay.”

Rachel's eyes bulged like someone strangled her. They rolled around in their sockets loosely. Her head slumped forward then back like it rest on a loose spring.

“Plea...pl”

“We’ve got to get you some real help sweetheart. You cannot keep on like this. It’s killing you and it’s breaking my heart to see you like this over and over again.”

“Mom, I’m okay. I just fucked up. I doing fine.”

“You’re in a hospital bed after overdosing for I don’t even remember how many times. That’s okay, that’s fine to you? You’re not fine Rachel. You need serious help.”

“I know mom, you say this every time I see you. It’s my life.”

“It is your life, but we, your family have to deal with the repercussions of your actions. I’ve never seen someone so selfish. You’re twenty-eight years old Rachel. This is not how I imagined you at this age. We all want you better, but you don’t care. I don’t know what to do anymore.”

“Don’t do shit. I got this mom. I got...”

“Just rest. You’re going to be here for a little bit. Doctor,” she said as she stroked Rachel’s greased wheat hair.

Rachel noticed the doctor, a tall man with a scarred chin and peppery grey hair, how he pursed his face at them in disgust. She knew he thought she and her mother looked pathetic. What could he do, for either of them? He’d probably seen their kind of weakness before. He talked to them in a stone voice.

“Miss Anzyrck you’ve survived a lethal dose of heroin to your nervous system. You are going to feel very bad for a few days, then you’re going to feel the effects of withdrawal from the drug, which is probably going to be worse than the overdose. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

Rachel nodded her head in a nudge-like motion, like a pig burrowing its nose into a trough, she thought. Her eyes looked as beady as a shark’s while she tried to act like she cared where she laid, where she had ended up that morning. She wanted to feel whole again. She needed to get high. She had to get rid of her goddamn mother. Why did she even come? She’d act nice now and yell at Rachel later, like she’d always done, with everything. The world seemed white and cold. She knew she couldn’t deal with being sober, even if she had just beat death again. There was nothing to be thankful for. She only had one purpose, to get out of that hospital with its white machines with red and green blinking lights and lines seeming like some kind of twisted videogame forced upon her small mind.

She’d have been happy to get out by the next day, but knew she couldn’t wait. She’d have blown the doctor to secure her discharge. She had always been resourceful, persistent, but to get out that afternoon? Junkies always came through, at least for one another, and always for the most selfish reasons: a score, a screw, both. She saw Justin waiting outside her room while her mother stroked her hair. When her mother went to pee, he helped Rachel get dressed.

They rode down the road in his red Lexus, past cow fields still wet with morning dew, the cows clumped together, laying on their stomachs in preparation for a storm. The sky looked bruised, streaked with purples and pinks, the sun's rays streaking the darkness in small gold bars. Justin drove fast on the damp road, taking turns fast enough for the car's wheels to hum. Rachel noticed but didn't care. She watched fields float by, their grass short and green, healthy except for the patches under the cow dung which dotted the ground like heaved earth. She looked at Justin. He looked like a pale bug. His eyes stuck out of his head like something squeezed them from inside their sockets. They seemed to jut out past his bulbous forehead which shined with grease almost like he had soaked it in oil. His cropped blonde hair lay disheveled on his large head, a head much too big for his skinny tall body. He looked like a giant in the small sports car, top heavy and awkward. Rachel wondered how he squished himself into it every day. She wondered if he had anything on him.

“What have you got on you?”

“That's the first thing you're going to say to me, 'What have you got?' I thought 'thanks' might have come first.”

“Come on Bri. Thank you okay? Seriously though. I need some. Now.”

“You can wait till we get to my house. You're not that bad yet. Don't fuck with me.”

“I'm not fucking with you. I feel cold. Come on. Give me some.”

“Don’t worry, I’m going to give you some. You’re going to give me some too. When we get home.”

“Whatever you want baby, please. It’s so cold.”

“There’s a jacket in the back.”

The cow fields turned into large yards with stone houses standing like monuments, each in their own plot, each quite close to the other considering their massive size. Rachel felt wet as she watched Justin turn the car into his parent’s driveway. She wanted them to get their own place soon. The sun blazed high overhead, its rays focused into the car’s sunroof as the vehicle came to a stop, its brakes squeaking slightly. She squinted her eyes to see him better, so she might interpret his actions clearly, but her mind felt as if caught in a web. She struggled to read him as he put the car in park and unstrapped his seatbelt, never once looking in her direction.

“Come on, let’s go in.”

She followed him into the large house which smelled of pine and lavender. Her feet felt heavy, her legs like wet logs. She had to pee. Must be the IV, she thought. Ornate mahogany woodwork lined the walls as raised paneling, the hardwood also covering the floor of the vestibule in long shiny streaks of the maroon timber, all of it running through the hallway and into the mansion’s subsequent rooms. She always hated looking at all this woodwork. It reminded her of her father, a woodworker, how his business had always struggled. He hadn’t built a stick of the paneling or flooring, hadn’t applied any of

the glossy lacquer to the wood either, yet it rested here anyway, without his help, like a monument to his ongoing failure as a businessman. Justin and his family had everything, she thought. They would always be rich while we remain poor, hard working, yet going nowhere. Well, the rest of them worked hard. I only work hard at getting high.

She knew, as she followed Justin up the main stairs to his room, that she never wanted this life for herself but it didn't feel right to stop now. She knew she had too much invested in getting high.

Justin entered his bedroom and immediately shed his t-shirt, shoes, socks and jeans. He sat on his unmade bed in only his boxer shorts and motioned Rachel toward him.

“Shut the door.”

She did. She knew what to do already. She walked toward him as she took off her thin shirt, then her bra and knelt in front of him. She felt her knees sink into the plush tan carpet as she pulled his boxer shorts down to his ankles and took him in her mouth.

She didn't bother to wash him out of her mouth when he finished. She simply swallowed and looked at him with her glacial eyes and asked, “Now, can I have some?”

“Yeah, now you can. Hold on a sec.”

He pulled up his boxer shorts and leaned to the left, opening a small walnut box, and pulled out an already loaded syringe. She felt happy that he already had one ready for her. He handed her the shot.

“You have a tie?”

“You sure you don’t want me to do it for you again?”

“No, no it’s okay. I’ll do it this time. Where’s the tie?”

“Use the belt on my jeans. That’s good enough.”

She yanked the belt from his jeans lying crumpled on the floor, sat on the floor in front of Justin, then quickly took off her right shoe and sock. Her heart beat fast as she wrapped and cinched the belt around her right calf. Her pulse thumped through her in waves of concussive electricity, as if she’d never shot up before, like her first time all over again. Breaths shot out of her mouth and past her cracked lips in short shallow beats, steady like a metronome’s clicks, and dry as winter wind.

She applied a minute amount of pressure to the syringe’s plunger. No air, good, she thought. She wiggled her big toe. Her leg had already turned red and slightly swollen from the belt. The needle easily slid into the end of her buttery big toe, she applied pressure to the plunger and smiled as the drug emptied into her. With her free hand, she loosened the belt, the needle still stuck in her toe. It hit her instantly, like a blanket of delicate cashmere had enveloped her, closing her in a soft and starry womb. She fell back and lay on the expensive carpet. She floated on it as on a cloud. Everything smelled of flowers. The air tasted sweet, like honey. Her body felt wrapped in one long, continuous orgasm. This is right, she thought. This is everything.

She closed her eyes slowly, and then opened them again. The magic still poured through her like dull electrical impulses. She smiled as her vision blurred and she noticed Justin climbing on top of her with a wet look in his eyes, as if he didn't recognize her anymore.

Her jenas felt wet as he pulled them off. Maybe she'd pissed herself, maybe just sweat. She didn't really care anyway. He's have her regardless.

She could barely open her eyes to watch him enter her. He looked calm. They'd done this so many times, this routine of getting high then screwing like they could actually get off. Well, he could anyway. He licked his hand and wet her crotch as she realized that she was too dry to enter. It didn't really hurt either way. Everything felt better this way, even the itchy carpet under her.

He thrust into her evenly, making low grunts into her ear that, surprisingly, soothed her. She felt her legs being lifted up as he went deeper inside her. She imagined that she floated under him, that nothing lay under her but blue sky and a world far below them. She liked sex, even if it was with him. She used to like it with him, but the shot soothed her much more. She let herself float away to a deep pocket in the sky that made her body tingle to be hidden inside. She couldn't quite make out in her mind where she was exactly, but Justin's thrusts continually brought her back to the reality that she really must be still in his room because, obviously, Justin had no means to take her to the stratosphere. He just had heroin and she just had him.

She awoke the next morning with his cum spread over and dried on her stomach, cracking and breaking apart like arid ground each time her abdomen expanded. Her right arm felt sore. On it, a faint blue bruise had spread across her forearm. She did not see Justin in the room, only his jizz. Her head ached, she felt dizzy, like she had been perpetually spun in circles while passed out on the now itchy carpet. She smiled because his semen lay on her and not in her. She cringed at the thought of Justin entering her, but she liked screwing high. It reminded her of looking at a rainbow piercing a mountain, so overwhelming, its exotic glow intersecting with the terrain. The rainbow controlled her life and she liked that something so beautiful had power over her. But the rainbow grew too large, became the drug that pierced her.

Justin entered his room. He looked like a flat long fucking bug, she thought. A tall drug-slinging bug, not a man. A bug, slimy, yet brittle, tall but meek. A sick mantis. She looked away from him as he approached her.

“Are you parents here?”

“No, they just took off,” he said. “We can shoot and soak in the Jacuzzi if you want.”

“You don’t have to work today?”

“Nah, I called off. Dad was pissed, but screw him. What’s he going to do, fire me? I got nothing going on today.”

“I kind of wanted to go see my dad today.”

“You think you’re mom told him what happened?”

“I’m sure. He’s probably pissed as hell at me.”

“Why go see him then? He’s just going to bust your chops about it, and mine.”

“I know he will. I know, but I just have to talk to him. I feel like he hates me.”

“Go, but I’m not. He hates my guts. I’m not in the mood to look at him.”

“How the fuck am I going to get there Justin? You drove.”

“I guess that’s your problem. I got you out of there last night, isn’t that enough?
You never even thanked me.”

“Thanked you? You fucking shot me with that shit in the first place. Yeah, thanks
Justin. I really appreciate it. You’re the best boyfriend ever. Way to look out for me.”

“Shut the fuck up. You didn’t seem to mind it last night. You wanted what I gave
you, all of it. You always want it you fiend. You want everything.”

She knew he was right. She had no control over heroin or cock. She didn’t know
what to do without either. One fed the other inevitably. Being high on heroin felt even
better with a cock in her and a cock in her felt glamorous with some smack coursing
through her crotch toward his half-flaccid prick. He always shoved it in like he meant to
plug a leak. She couldn’t stand it, but she knew she could cum easily, filled or not. And
he does have the best shit, she thought.

“Alright, we’ll stay here today if you promise to take me to dad’s tomorrow.”

“I’ll take you there tomorrow, but I’m not going in. You’re on your own with that fucking guy.”

Yeah, she thought, he does want to murder you.

“Go get yourself cleaned up, he said. “Then we’ll shoot and who fucking cares after that right?”

“Yeah, who cares. It’s just us baby. You shoot me so good sometimes. Just don’t fuck it up this time.”

“Or what, you’ll tell on me? Come on Rachel, get real.”

“Just leave me alone a while. I want a shower.”

“I meant just wipe off. You know it won’t be as good with clean pores.”

“I know, I just want to get this slick off me, start a new one. You’ll just have to give me a little bit more this time.”

She knew she sounded ridiculous, but what did he care, she thought. He needed pussy and he needed her high to get it. They both benefited from this arrangement, so screw it if she flip-flopped on him a few times, or every day for that matter. Her mouth tasted like metal and her nose smelled of stale sweat, dirty socks. She needed to cop now before the hole opened in her head. She remembered Justin’s finger in her ass the night before while he rutted her from behind. She thought heroin was a lot like a finger in the ass, you really didn’t know how much you liked it until it was too late.

She looked out the bedroom window. The mid-morning sun hung bright in the sky like an empty beacon, illuminating the Jones family's manicured yard, its blades of glass, gleaming like a million tiny knives. She wanted to draw the blinds, make the light shatter, make her mind black.

She looked back at Justin. He sat watching her like the blonde mantis he had grown to resemble the last few months, patient, eerie, yet somehow intelligent beneath his frail shell. She knew she looked like prey, but she didn't know why she still wanted to be devoured. She wished she could imagine herself as a hawk, so she might crush him in one of her talons and take his stash instead of being groped and scratched at by his probing pointy claws. She'd never met an insect before Justin. She doubted she'd ever have time to meet another.

She awoke face down on his bed. His teal bed sheet curled into her mouth, her drool just starting to soak it. She felt tired. Her throat hurt. It felt dry. She felt dry. Used up, like a shell on a beach. She needed to fix.

She didn't feel Justin next to her in bed. She wondered where he was. She needed to fix.

"Where the hell is he?" she thought.

She listened closely. The room was silent. The house sounded empty. She called his name, but heard nothing in reply.

She needed to fix.

She rolled onto her side and coughed, a wad of phlegm stuck to the back of her throat.

She did not want to get up to find him, but it seemed like she needed to. It was more than need. She had to. It was her job to. Her life's work required her to get up and find him. To fix.

She thought about fixing, about what it meant "to fix." It felt good. Not as good as the first couple times, but still good. She really didn't know what else to think about it. Fixing is what she did. It was her, and she it. She was it. That's all she felt. She. Was. It.

A needle. A spoon. A cotton ball. A few drops of water. A ½ gram of tar. A needle. A spoon. A cotton ball. A few drops of water. A ½ gram of tar. That is what she needed to find. Now.

She sat up in Justin's bed. The room smelled stale, like a stiff sock. She looked at the wrinkled photograph of the two of them camping 2 years ago. It sat twisted on top of his water-damaged dresser in a wad not unlike the used tissue next to it.

The camping trip really functioned as an excuse to fix, only in the woods. They had hiked two miles in The George Washington National Forest, up to a ridge where someone had built a tall stone fireplace surrounded by stone seats. They would not be using anything but the pine needle beds in the clearing around the fireplace and seats. In a backpack, they brought their set of works: A needle, spoon, cotton ball, water, and tar. They brought a couple Cokes. They brought a disposable camera.

Looking back on the overnight trip, she really had no idea why they even went there. They could've just fixed at home. The place didn't matter. They stopped and started, their heads on a swivel. Their minds lay in a sparkly hole. The place didn't matter.

“Why did he save that picture?” she asked herself.

“Justin!”

“Justin!”

No answer.

“Where is he?”

She pulled herself up and out of bed using the water-damaged dresser's drawer handles. She kicked a pair of his boxer shorts as she started to walk out of his room. She hated those boxers. They were covered in angels, and she hated them.

“Justin!”

Still no answer. The house sounded empty. She checked the upstairs bedrooms, but did not see him. She went downstairs. The carpet on the stairs always itched her feet. Was it wool? She did not know, but it made her feel the need to scratch the soles of her feet, a lot.

Angels. What did he know about angels? What did she know about angels? What were angels? Why the hell did she hate angels? The site of the angels on those boxers

really did piss her off though. She would not screw him when he wore them. She did not want to look at them as she took them off him. She did not want to take them off him, again.

THE PAST IS PAIN, NOTHING MORE

I knew that my sister was addicted to heroin long before she actually died from her third overdose. I'd disowned her, left her without a brother long before she evacuated her bowels for the last time on my mom's cold bathroom floor as paramedics fought to revive her. I knew she'd die from the drug, she had already contracted Hepatitis C from sharing needles, but I did not know when we'd physically lose her. She was already gone in my mind. The drug had obliterated every beautiful part of the girl that I grew up with. Everyday, I waited for the call from one of my parents telling me that she had died. That day came on July 2, 2011. She was 28.

Blonde with sparkling blue eyes, Sarah had an infectious laugh framed by a wide cat's smile, and a jaundiced skin tone that had taken its time settling in as her liver fought the Hepatitis. She had been a ballet dancer since preschool.

The last time that I saw her, a few days before her overdose, my workday at my dad's woodworking shop winding down, she came in for the usual—money. I stared at her blankly as she sauntered in, smiling, trying not to look strung out and destitute, like I had not seen her unconscious in The Winchester Medical Center, her labored breathing filling the entire ER with a wet guttural rumble. The aftermath of her second overdose.

She waved at me and said hi. I turned my back on her and continued routing dovetails into the end grain of wood slabs to be assembled into drawers. The router bit I

used to carve the dovetails screamed from friction as it bit into the wood. I remembered this screaming as my mom told me that Sarah was dead, my head hot like the router bit as I called my dad to tell him the news.

I stood in the heart of Virginia's George Washington National Forest as I thought of the day that I saw Sarah, unconscious, connected to so many tubes and monitors. Me, my best friend Matt B., and 75 other runners waited at the start line for the 2013 Bel Monte 50 miler footrace to begin. Only 42 of us would finish.

I remember that her body lay traumatized in the ER from the numerous electric shocks and adrenaline shots that it took to bring her back to life. I remember her body shuddering as she struggled to breathe, looked transparent, more like a ghost than a girl. She had pissed herself as I held her hand, helpless to do anything for her, wondering if it would even be worth it if I could.

I asked the attending nurse if she was going to be alright.

She said that Sarah was, "one lucky girl."

They knew her well at this ER. The way the staff made it a point not to look at her while I stood there told me as much. She had been seen here on multiple occasions: 3 overdoses from heroin, a multitude of close calls from her cutting herself with boxcutters (her left arm was so scarred with massive self-inflicted wounds that the skin on it resembled a rough-hacked piece of leather), a few cases of alcohol poisoning, numerous psychiatric evaluations and lock-downs stemming from her self-destructive behavior.

As I looked past the start arc toward the mountains that I would soon traverse, I thought of the journey I that had begun shortly after her death. I had quit a steady habit of smoking and drinking and chose to relentlessly run instead. The pain induced by running felt good and made me forget the pain of losing her while I was doing it. Like I've heard some say before, "I ran to burn off the crazy." It worked, for a time.

Her argument for cash was the same the last day I saw her as any of the other times that she came in to the shop to bum something—she simply needed it. She didn't have any money. The specific excuse for needing the money was irrelevant. The fact that she lived a destitute life, in her eyes and apparently both my parents' as well, was enough of a reason to justify some "free money," as my Dad liked to call it.

I watched her plead to my Dad at his workbench from across the shop at mine. Her eyes teary, she stamped her feet like an insolent child as my Dad stood across from her, his arms folded across his chest, a solemn expression on his thick mustachioed face, his body minutely rocking back and forth as he listened to her. He ran his right hand through his feathered brown hair as she told him that she was finally getting clean, that she was ready to finally kick.

The race director fired the gun, signaling the start of the Bel Monte. We ran, everyone pacing themselves for the long trail ahead. Matt and I ran together. Over the past two months, we had talked extensively about our combined race strategy. This was our first 50 miler and we had over 6,500 feet of ascension and 6,500 of descension to

traverse in the mountains that day. We both had to be smart about how we ran this race. This was not a flat road marathon. This was a mountain ultra-marathon that demanded a certain amount of respect from us toward its natural elements. It would be steep, rocky, rooty, slippery, and technical. We wanted to finish. We wanted to finish well.

We stuck to our plan the first 6 miles, mostly downhill and into a ravine before we climbed a steep couple miles back up a mostly dirt single-track trail, we wanted to keep our pace slow and steady, maybe a 10:00-10:30 a mile for the first 20 or so miles. We thought that this would be best given that we'd naturally run faster downhill, so reigning our pace in to an average pace for both the ups and downs would keep us in check so that we wouldn't blow out our legs (specifically our quads) too early. We always train in the mountains, so we were used to the punishment on the legs that a varying terrain consisting of large rock, quick cut backs, and hidden indentations could bring. However, racing this kind of terrain is much different. Your adrenaline is pumping before the race even gets under way. You're ready to prove yourself to the course and the clock. It can be hard to just breathe, to take your time and conserve your energy until you actually need it.

My Dad gave her the money. He thought that she actually needed it this time despite my shouts from the other side of the shop that she was just playing him, that all she was going to do with the money was put it in her arm, toe, neck, wherever she had a good vein left.

To this day, I still have no idea why he gave her the money. She had just come back from a near-fatal overdose. Why did he think giving her money was a good idea? Did he think it would save her? Did he just want to help his daughter the only way he thought he could at the time?

My Dad is not a wealthy man by any means. He has worked hard his whole life and knows that money is not something to be wasted frivolously, but he also knows that money is essentially evil, that most of society thinks that it means everything in terms of our collective existence. Yet, Sarah always thought, no always expected, money to simply come her way without her having to do much of anything for it. My Dad seemed to indulge her in this expectation and I have absolutely no idea why.

Let's forget the "he never did that for me" argument because it is not relevant given that both my parents always tried to help me monetarily as much as they could. Maybe we need that support when we're young, just out of high school, preparing for college, realizing the vastness of the world. At a certain point, either the parent or the child (hopefully the child) realizes that the child needs to make his or her own path through the world. This journey, if it is to be truly realized and effective should be unsupported. Sarah always had an excess of support.

I felt lucky at the Bel Monte that day. I had my best friend Matt's support and he had mine as well. We were a team, there for each other.

We stuck close together as we quickly climbed out of that deep ravine, the rocky creek next to the trail flowing fast from rainfall the day before. The rushing water calmed

me as I looked at the trail and climbed, looked at my feet and climbed, looked at Matt's feet in ahead of me and climbed. The forest had just bloomed and I relished all the new green leaves peppering the trees, waving slightly in the breeze, the way the sun gleamed through them and onto my face that chilly spring morning.

We reached the top of the opposite side of the ravine, traversed a rocky outcropping into a flat trail section and breezed into the first aid station. We shouted out our numbers to the volunteers who recorded it throughout the race to ensure that no one was lost or unaccounted for and headed down a windy trail that switched back relentlessly as it wound down into another valley between the mountains. We were now at around 8 miles into the race and things felt really good. I was tense. I wanted to speed off, to get in the lead pack, but was trying very hard to fight that urge. My legs felt strong, like tree trunks, my breathing almost completely normal despite the hard work imposed on my lungs by the steep climbing and acrobatic maneuvers required in any mountain trail race. Matt and I were around 20 and 21st place after the aid station. We could easily jump ahead if we wanted, or we could take it easy for a while and wait for other racers to wear themselves out.

Maybe Sarah simply wore my parents out. She had had a drug problem for years. It wasn't just my Dad who threw money at it. My Mom did as well. Maybe they were both scared that they'd never see her again if they didn't give her what she wanted. Maybe they thought that it was better to keep her close where they could quasi-monitor her behavior than to shun her, leave her really alone and dependent on her vices.

Either way, Sarah was selfish, but that's the nature of a junkie or any addict really. They take until no one can possibly give any more and then they take some more. An addict simply doesn't care. Their moral compass has been magnetized. It only points one direction, the wrong one.

I think Sarah knew this that last day I saw her pleading with my Dad for money in his shop. She just didn't care. How could she? She was sick. She needed help, but no one could initiate that help but her. I imagine that she thought fixing again would stave off the pain for just a little longer until she could figure out what to do, how to climb out of the ravine in which she lay, how to come to terms with herself.

I wanted to say something to her as I watched her walk out of the woodshop that day, the sawdust lying on the cold concrete floor kicking up under her feet in the late afternoon light like blown gold-dust.

I wanted to tell her to stay, that we could work something out, that I still loved her and wanted her in my life and needed her to get better, but I couldn't. I had made a stand against her addiction. I had put up with it long enough. The emotional turmoil I felt, brought on by years of her abusing herself, was too much for me to carry anymore. I had to leave her to make things right on her own, or at least initiate that process, before I could open myself up to her again. Until then, I had to leave her behind. That was a mistake.

I made my first mistake during the Bel Monte as we descended into the valley after the first aid station, I left Matt behind. I became overzealous. I saw an opening to

get in the front of the pack as we rounded a switch back into the final steep descent into the valley floor. I took it. I broke my pact and charged down the slope at a 5:30 pace, passing other racers like they were standing still, and reached the valley floor in around 6th place. I was 9 ½ miles into the race and would run this valley floor another 5 miles into the next aid station.

I slowed down a little, to around a 7:00 minute pace, as I took in how lushness of this section of the course. New ferns covered the forest floor, almost concealing a myriad of purple, blue, and white hyacinth blooms. The sun irradiated the this area, making it ooze enchantment. The trail still had a good bit of dead leaves covering it and I could tell that some parts were rocky underneath the leaves, but I didn't worry—my second mistake. I was running fast, gunning for the lead, enjoying the forest's magic. What could go wrong?

Snap.

The tension brought on by dreading Sarah's inevitable death by heroin snapped and broke like an overstrained tendon the morning my Mom told me that my sister had died. I looked out my kitchen window toward the 17 acres of green fields and forest that made up my back yard as I listened to her speak the words, "Sarah is gone. They found her early this morning. She's gone Matthew."

Honestly, I was almost relieved to be right about knowing she would die. Knowing that only made me feel worse. My Mom was strangely calm as she delivered the news. I did not expect that. I had expected her to be so frantic that I would have to

immediately rush to her house to console her. I felt relieved to not have to do this. Instead, she told me that Sarah had died of an overdose and that I needed to call my father to let him know. My parents had been divorced only a couple of years at this point, but they hadn't been on good terms for a decade. I told her that I'd tell him and that I'd call her back afterward.

I called my Dad, broke the news to him very matter-of-factly (the way I thought he'd want to hear it). He did not act surprised, which in turn surprised me. Had he knew this all along too? Had my repeated announcements of her inevitable fate actually gotten through to him?

My Dad told me that he'd call my Mom to start coordinating arrangements after I told him that I was going to immediately call her back after I finished talking with him. This surprised me as well. He was going to speak with her? He actively tried not to speak with her usually. I knew he had been deeply affected.

I hung up with my Dad, glad that I would not have to be the middle-man between my parents for all the funeral arrangements, and immediately called Matt B. He was not shocked to hear that Sarah had died either. He knew the situation very well. I talked with him about it often. He expected the same outcome that I did. However, I did not expect his immediate reaction; maybe I had slightly misjudged his perception of the importance of our friendship up until that point.

"I'm coming," he said.

He hung up the phone with me, packed a bag, drove straight from Richmond to the countryside of Winchester, VA.

The pain, so intense that it deafened me for a few minutes, shot up my left leg, just slightly above my ankle. I had misjudged the trail. I had been overconfident and violently rolled my left ankle over, all of my weight coming down on it as it lay, mashed horizontally under my leg as it strode into a crevice in between two rocks not much larger than 2 baseballs. My foot had rolled off the side of the rock on the right, which had caused it to wedge itself between the rocks. The ankle was mashed in between them as well, my forward momentum bending it and the side of my shin above into a violently executed contortion.

I fell to the ground, my ears not taking in sound, my eyes barely able to focus past the swirling eddy of pain clouding them. I crawled to a small tree and pulled myself up by its branches, keeping my left foot off the ground, making my right leg do all the work in hoisting myself up.

I touched my ankle. It throbbed. I could feel blood pulsing through it. It had already swollen to three times its normal size. I gasped as I tried to put a small amount of weight on it. I pushed my forehead into the rough bark on the tree's trunk and tried to gather my thoughts. I began to hear a gurgle behind me that slowly transformed into a young woman's voice as my hearing returned to normal.

"Are you ok? What happened?"

"I rolled my ankle pretty bad. I'm trying to decide if its broken."

"Aw, wow. Do you need my help?"

"I don't think so. Thank you. You should run your race. I'll be alright."

“Do you want me to get someone to help you at the next aid station? Do you think you can make it there on your own?”

I was 10 miles into the race and still about 3 ½ miles from the next aid station. I still had another 40 miles to go in the race.

“No, its ok. You go ahead. I’m going to see if I can run on this thing. I’ll at least make it to the next station.”

“You’re sure? That ankle looks pretty tweaked.”

“I’m sure. Thanks for stopping. Have a good race.”

She nodded, patted me on the shoulder, and took off. I watched her bound down the trail. She was quick. I envied her 2 good ankles.

Matt was 2 ½ hours away from my house, so I had some time to myself before he arrived. My girlfriend at the time was home, but I really didn’t want to wake her to tell her the news yet. I’m not sure why. She knew the dangers of addiction. Her older brother is an alcoholic who has steadily torn his life apart over the years. I guess I didn’t want to speak at all. I needed the silence. Instead, I quietly whistled for my heeler/border collie mix, Johnny. He came trotting into the kitchen just like he always did, a happy guy, his tail wagging. He didn’t know anything had happened. He licked my bare leg as I opened the back door and headed out into the dewy pasture with him, trying to enjoy watching him leap over the taller grass as he chased an old groundhog into its hole.

The morning was bright and still. The countryside, its blades of grass wet and sticky on my legs, was churning up steam from the sun already burning bright in the East.

I thought about where Sarah's body was that moment, the morgue probably. My Mom had said that someone had called 911 from a payphone up the road from her house to let the authorities know that Sarah was inside, dying. My Mom had been at her boyfriend's home in Springfield, VA (about an hour away) the night before, and got a call from the Middletown Police Department's Chief telling her that they had found her daughter's body. She called me and drove straight following this call.

The Chief had suggested that foul play might have been involved in the overdose given that an anonymous call had been made from a location removed from the actual "crime scene."

Crime scene?

"Who was she with?" I thought as I watched Johnny careen through the field and into the cedar forest. Brian, her "boyfriend" aka drug dealer who used her for sex. She needed the smack and always came crawling to him after she was sick from withdrawal.

Crime scene? I'd heard of junkies being charged with the death of another junkie because they had shot the fatal dose into the deceased. In fact, a close friend of mine Lyle, his brother had died from a heroin shot injected into him by someone else about 10 years prior to Sarah's death. The state had tried to prosecute the "shooter," but had been unsuccessful due to a lack of evidence tying him to the scene. Was this the same type of scenario? I thought it had to be as I stared up at the sun. However, I also knew that Sarah fiended for heroin, that if Brian shot her up she had asked him to. I knew that she had the strength to fight him if he refused her request to inject her. She could be very persuasive.

SURRENDER

The man with the trombone case hanging from his right hand stepped off the rusty Greyhound bus and into the heart of Belvidere Street. Richmond looked different than he'd expected. Trash hugged the gutters, beer bottles, cigarettes, wrinkled news papers. Hazy clouds blanketed the sky in an orange hue, something he'd never seen before. He'd like to have felt some rain splashing on his face after the long ride from St. Louis. Rain had always calmed him. Water soothed his soul.

He wondered where the jazz clubs were in this city, and which ones he could sit in at. He'd wanted to leave St. Louis for a while. Amy lived there. He never wanted to see her again.

He saw an old man in a faded red baseball cap sitting on a corner bench. The man walked over to the old man and asked if he knew a good place to play jazz. The man suggested Bogart's on Broad, only seven blocks away. The man nodded and headed South down the street. Richmond looked dirtier than he had expected. Trash lay everywhere. It practically clogged the gutters.

"This is home now. This is where I belong."

He walked east on Broad Street, noticing the how many homeless people lined both sides of the street. They almost filled it. Most sat hunched like low rise sign posts,

marking the open spaces where one could still find a seat, a home. He pretended that he would never fill one of those spaces.

It's good to dream sometimes.

It was evening by the time he reached Bogart's. It had been a long walk down Broad Street. The sunset hid behind a tall red brick apartment building, its orange rays creating a halo behind it. The man stared at the building and the obscured sunset behind it. He thought of bread baking in his mother's oven, the way the butter slid across its slices on cold winter mornings. He sighed and walked into the club.

Bogart's pulsed heavily. His head felt pleasantly warm as he watched the house band tear through "Straight, No Chaser" at a much faster tempo than he'd ever heard it before. He watched the old tenor player leading the chorus, his horn shining under the house lights like fresh ore. He smiled and waited, his trombone cupped patiently in his left hand, the mix of smoky haze and anticipation of song felt perfectly balanced in his mind as he waited patiently for his turn to sit in with the house band.

He lit a cig and dragged on it methodically as he watched the tenor player trill up the and down his horn, moving his body erratically, making the sax scream through the dense club air. The older man played with confidence, and towered over the other three house musicians like a giant. His stout arms gripped the horn tightly, built as solid as brownstone blocks, connected to shoulders which almost jumped from underneath his shirt as he composed the combinations of keys needed to swing hard, in presto time. The old tenor player gave the younger man a nod. He picked up his trombone out of its case and sauntered up onto the stage.

“Hey man, names Sam. Just got into town. Thanks for letting me sit in with you guys tonight.”

“Sure kid, name’s Charles. You ready to do this?”

“Yeah man, let’s go. What we playing?”

“You know ‘Greensleeves,’ Coltrane style?”

“Sure man, sure.”

“Alright then.” Charles mouthed, “A one. A two. A one, two, three, four.” And the band screamed off the stage with Sam in tow. Sam watched Charles glide along with the piano, bass, and drums like water tumbling through a sieve. Charles’s tone filled the room and Sam felt it jump into his soul. Charles’s light illuminated the club’s shadowed corners. The star in Sam’s heart showed the path he would follow. He knew he would chase Charles’s song forever. Sam thought of a feather barely touching an arm’s hair, of the lavender scent on a woman’s neck as she captured the world with her smile.

A brick-paved alley housed Sam and Charles for the night. “The last two years have not been good to us,” Sam said as he quietly watched Charles open a can of smoked oysters, the men’s meal for the night.

“Hmph, my life’s been this way as long as I can remember. What do you know about it anyway? You think two years is something special? That’s child’s play son.” Sam did not reply. Why would he? The old man had been right about everything else since Sam started following him around.

They sat at the foot of a building, using the structure as a backrest, a hard couch, the lights attached to it shined a bright white light, gave the bricks a silky sheen. Sam thought the city's grime overflowed into this alley, like a hostel for trash, and them, the nomads. A crusty condom lay sprawled on an empty beer bottle. Boxes surrounded them, shielded them from the filth...rats, roaches, other homeless.

The night felt cold compared to the rubbery heat of the afternoon. They smiled to one another as they passed the large can of oysters back and forth, each man slurping down its contents steadily. Charles hummed a quick tune to himself and Sam jumped in every now and again to accompany his friend. He tried to forget about how annoyed Charles had been with him earlier. Charles had been that way with him a lot recently. They tapped their feet and rocked back and forth as rain began to softly patter on their heads. Sam heard trains winding down a quarter mile away as the inflections of a bow against an upright bass' strings. He swung with their beat through the night. He felt freedom in their industrial song. He felt their metal in the back of his throat as he hummed.

“You remember the time Waxy muted his horn with that old pot top he found before that gig at Smithy's?”

“Yeah Sam, played that thing like a plunger! Sounded like a nightingale screeching through foil didn't it? Oh man it was a feeling! I wanted to stand up during his solo and just toast the man, keep him going all night, keep that feeling in me forever.”

“He sure could whip that trumpet into a frenzy on the spot...just terrify you with that sound...so bright you know? So damn rich. Made me proud to be near him.”

Charles nodded in agreement.

“Where you think Waxy is now Charles?”

“Last I heard he caught a bus to Chi-Town. Probably got himself a nice classy gig up there you know? Makin’ it sing sweet there too.”

“You ever think about leaving Richmond Charles, making a break North?”

“You know kid, I do. Sometimes, I really do. I’ve been in this goddamn city so long I feel like my head will burst if I have to look at it one more day. But I just keep on playing to it anyway, like a damn fool. I keep thinking someone will clean it, someday.”

“What else can we do man? I mean, I think things’ll get better. This can’t be the best. It just can’t. We’ve held on too long to give up now.”

“Sam, I’ve known this for years. I’ll live like this till the day I die, with nothing. This is the best and knowing that is the worst. You better start seeing that, or you’ll end up just like me someday. Just like all of us down here. You son, you still have a chance. All I have is my sax.”

Sam knew what Charles felt, but he’d never agree with him out loud. He’d have swung with Sam until they stretched every note over the city, but Charles seemed beaten, like he’d given up on his future, their future.

The next afternoon, the two men took their horns into the heart Richmond’s Fan district, a niche neighborhood in the center of the city, its topography shaped like its name, its residents slightly less tolerant of the homeless.

The heat on Belvidere Street stifled Sam and Charles as they banged out cascading harmonies into the steady flow of traffic pulsing past them. They riffed on a

call and response pattern. Each answered the other's interpretations in an eternal loop. Sam watched Charles sweat hard, watched him squeeze his eyes closed as he combined his finger's movements with the reed's compression. He chirped short long, short short short, long. Up, squeal, backward, down. Sam watched him. He thought of dripping batter, an eggshell cracking, corduroy, a comb bristle against his skin. Sam wah-wahed his trombone right back, which invoked in him the remembrance of the bitter lemon taste, as well as a soft breeze on the eye, combined with the soft touch of fingers on a lip while lying on a cold concrete floor. Sam blinked slowly as he played. He watched Charles's expressions. He felt the melodic connection between him and the old man, but Charles looked confused. His notes began to waver off and crack in Sam's ear. Sam thought of needles in the elbow and road tar bubbling in the sun. Charles laughed into his tenor as he did it. He strode into traffic, blaring his tenor at the sky, his shirt soaked I sweat, the veins in his neck swollen.

A car screeched to a halt in front of him and Charles honked the tenor at the driver. The old man high stepped like a drum major directing a battle. Sam thought of angry bees oozing from a hive and his tongue's tip touching the positive end of a C-cell battery. Charles looked at Sam and threw his head back. Sam followed him and they wailed together, creating a musical cyclone in the street.

The traffic around them slowed and stopped, helpless to the men in rags with screaming horns. Sam watched the motorists stare at them with confused expressions. He glanced at Charles. The old man's skin glistened in the warm afternoon. Sweat ran down his face to his neck and disappeared into his ragged green and brown flannel. He stomped

his feet in black scuffed wingtips. The left shoe, the one with the duck-taped sole, stomped to their furious beat as if Charles punished the pavement.

A few motorists smiled, and snickered at the old fool. A couple, a husband and wife probably, in an expensive blue sedan rolled down their windows and sneered, the man saying, “Get out of the freakin street you dumb assholes.”

An older woman with white hair and dark glasses threw money at the men, telling them to get the hell out of there, asking them if they were crazy. Burly men in a dump truck cursed them, the spit flying out of their mouths in a soft mist. For a moment, Sam felt freer than he had since he had arrived in Richmond two years ago.

The two men played in the street until they heard the sound of sirens in the distance. Then, they moved on quickly, Sam thinking of the filtered light that shone the tree leaves as the world froze around he and Charles.

The two men were silent as they walked down the median of Monument Street, under the leaves, with the trees, the grass smelling almost like Sam’s mother’s ambrosia. They didn’t speak until Charles asked Sam to join him for an afternoon drink.

Sam smiled as he sipped his cold beer. The basement of The Village Café’s décor, almost as worn as the men’s clothes, had a soft brown film covering it which always reminded Sam of the way a strip of packing tape looks after being dropped on a dirty floor, like it held the world’s smallest bits of trash. The beige-colored booths added to the grime. Sam poked the upholstery continuously to see what would materialize on his finger next. He looked toward the juke box and bopped his head along with the Monk he had tracked. Charles sat still, silent, stoic. With a beer in hand, Sam focused his gaze on

the wood grain of the table. He shifted his eyes back and forth, glanced at Charles again, then the street. Other homeless men shuffled by amidst fresh college students who glided past as if blind, practiced in privilege.

“What is it Sam? You don’t want to celebrate?”

“I don’t know what we just did Charles. We could’ve been arrested.”

“But we didn’t. I feel great. You don’t?”

“I mean, it felt good to not care what was around me and just play, but we do that in the clubs.”

“When they will have us Sam. When they let us. What happened today, that was on our terms.”

“But people hated it. We were practically spit on Charles.”

“So what Sam? So fucking what? I’m tired of this town and the way I have to slink through it. I could do this anywhere and you know, I think I will. I’m living on my terms now. I have nothing left to keep from that, especially not you.”

“Charles, I want more too. I just can’t stand all that bad attention I guess.”

“Boy, any attention is good attention, dig? We own ourselves again. Can’t you see that? I’ve got my own things to do. You can still hang with me if you want, but I’m leaving one way or another.”

Sam gulped his beer. He looked at the pedestrians on the street, ignorant of his problems, too busy. He looked at Charles and saw barbed wire in his eyes. The old man caught a fever. He’s different. Maybe his jazz started dying slowly that afternoon. Sam’s eyes bulged with red-veined fear.

Sam left Charles sleeping behind the stack of milk crates they usually called home on Thursday nights and headed out to their usual stoop on Monument Street to think a bit before he started practicing, running scales and improvising freely. He sat under a tree looking at the Arthur Ashe monument in the distance. He thought about what Charles said the previous evening. He decided he didn't like it. Something about what the old man had said felt terrible to Sam. It terrified him. He shuddered as he thought of his friend. He needed to play music to forget.

He walked to the foot of the Arthur Ashe monument, a bronze structure which stood in the median of a four-lane avenue, a break in the plush grass median, with its tall oaks which shaded the grass enough to keep it cool and green on hot summer days. The bronze Ashe smiled, frozen, a tennis racket raised in his left hand, a book raised in his right. Children sat at his feet.

He put his trombone to his lips and began to play. Traffic flowed by him, watched, even heard him too. He made his trombone scream hawkish cries that draped the day in honey-tinged borders. He made "Muskrat Ramble" sound like cherries being stirred in champagne. He thought of sweet Louis' smile, of tonal love, of perfection. The sun glared off his trombone and reflected onto his face. He noticed his reflection on the bell. His usually angular, handsome features seemed bulbous in the horn's reflection, like he faced a fun-house mirror and saw a wide-cheeked clown with a short skull and no ears. He turned his focused back toward Monument Avenue's bustle and the scenery behind it, a beautiful summer day. Leaves danced in the light breeze. The air held just the right amount of moisture, just enough to relieve the heat with the breeze. The sun's

dazzling brightness played stop-time to the afternoon song, added a deep level of chance to the waning day, like maybe time could've crawled on like this forever. Sam's rendition of Louis' masterpiece involved him improvising around the old time melody like a child playing tag at sunset, dodging the 'it' as well as the day's end. He filled the sky and his chest with song.

In the midst of the tune's crucial turnaround, he saw Charles strolling toward him on the shaded median. Sam abruptly silenced his horn and watched his friend wander toward him with a small smile on his face and what looked like tears in his eyes. Charles had the tenor to his lips. The sun shined on him through the two rows of old oaks overhead. He bounced his steps and gestured the horn up and down with each stride toward Sam, playing a song the young man had heard, but couldn't quite recognize. He thought of rain digging grooves into soil. He watched Charles play. People need to feel again, even if its anger. Sam wanted to run toward Charles and scream his horn at him for fun, for the pure joy in it, without the weight he'd added yesterday. The music had abandoned Charles's body, his soul lay somewhere in the past. What the old man played seemed to choke him as he took his necessary breaths. But Sam felt light and free somehow, like he floated on this afternoon's breeze, weightless. He remembered the song: "Be de le de le de le de du...du dap. Be de le de le de le de du...du dap. Dweeeee de le do dup do!" He recognized the giant of melody, Mingus! "Better Git It In Your Soul."

Charles winked at Sam as he stepped off the curb, walking into the path of a shiny grey Plymouth cruising down the street. The vehicle shattered Charles, his sax, tore

through them leaving the old man crumpled under its chassis as it screeched to a halt. The old man's body shook violently as Sam ran toward him. Blood pooled under his broken torso, his sax imbedded in his abdomen like a brilliant cyst. Sam stood over Charles in silence. He could not touch his friend. He knew it would comfort neither of them.

A tiny stream of moss-legged water ran over a worn quarter in the early morning sunlight, Washington's face looked smooth, featureless, anonymous. Sam watched the water glide over the coin. He wanted to snatch it up and drop it into his shabby pants pocket. He stared at the rippling water pulsing against the quarter, attempting to drive it from Richmond to the James. The water never stopped. It reminded him of the stillness he found at night. It covered him like a warm blanket, his home.

A grimy overpass sheltered the stream, the quarter, the man. Traffic coursed above him, creating a static whir that drowned his dynamic ear. The water moved fast, but the quarter remained anchored. He smiled, rubbed his grimy hands together and focused on the quarter. Its silver hue reminded him of his horn.

He thought of the last time he saw Charles walking toward him with his tenor. It had been nearly a year, but he still remembered Charles's song that autumn day before the city strangled them, "Better Git It In Your Soul." Charles used to scream that tune with a perfect balance of grit and silk and make it his own. Sam turned toward the case beside him and unlocked the latches slowly, then looked back to the quarter, to the textured water, the air so damp, the day so new. He opened the case. His trombone waited to be assembled. Its nickel coating shined brilliant in the sun, despite some random dry water

spots on the bell which obliquely obscured the horns hue like the lone cloud in an otherwise clear sky. Sam grasped the handle of the bell section and kneeled with it over the water. With his right hand he cupped the stream water and wiped the bell methodically. With a rag from the case, he polished the bell until it shined for him. He smiled and connected the slide to the bell. He stood, connected the mouthpiece to the slide, wet his lips, and placed them against the mouthpiece. He breathed in and exhaled into the horn a long steady note, soft at first, it crescendoed gradually until it flew full in the morning sun. He played a middle B^b, the tuning note. The horn sounded in. He knew this horn well. He played a D, then an F: a major triad. After five seconds his soul leapt through the horn and glided out of the bell through slow sweeping notes which evoked in him the feeling of a smile amidst a great tragedy...warmth in cold...tingling amidst numbness. Sam closed his eyes and his music filled the concrete canal. He thought of hot yellow candle wax crumpling torn tissue paper, a piece of velvet brushing skin. He pictured the quarter in the water and played to its helplessness. He felt rich in loss.

Later that morning, Sam wiped cleaned the employee bathroom in the back of the first floor of the Jefferson Hotel. The stately building resembled a palace. Its twin towers and ornate lattice work more reminiscent of Viennese Germany than southern Virginia. Sam wondered if anyone privileged had ever pissed right here in this very spot, the employee lavatory. This bathroom looked nothing like the patron's restrooms in the lobby with their marble floors and waiting towel boys. He watched the toilet water slowly trickle around the shallow oblong bowl. He smiled as he remembered the way the water

had moved over the quarter earlier in the morning. He made his face blank again as he focused on his next project, the bathroom's urinal.

The urinal had little black curly hairs on it that he couldn't get to stay on his rag. What he had in song he had discarded for a mop, a rag, a paycheck. His practice now consisted of mopping, wiping, spraying, and sleeping instead of running scales and standards. He looked at the drops of piss under the urinal as he breathed in its metallic stench. He finally removed all the hairs and stood. He looked at himself in the mirror. His eyes, once green, seemed black to him in this light. His hair once trimmed short and tight, had grown spiked and tangled. His blue jumpsuit, stained from a year's worth of cleaning toilets, stunk like spoiled milk. He turned from the mirror toward his mop bucket. He thought of crying.

VIRGINIA BREEZE

The Shenandoah Valley is a wide basin nestled in between two mountain ranges in the northern tip of Virginia. To its west lie the Blue Ridge Mountains, their broad rocky cliffs and evergreen stepped inclines glow during sunset. During the winter, if one were to look closely they would see tiny streams of smoke rising from the various points on the range, marking the isolated environments of citizens uncomfortable with life on the valley floor. They seek comfort and refuge in the mountainside's dense forests of ash, oak, maple, pine, and fir. Forests where one may step off a dirt road and walk miles through a dense underbrush of thorn, laurel and scrub cedar without coming near another person. To the east of the valley the Appalachian Mountains stand like a prison wall topped with a sharp mess, pine needled, a wire completing the obstacle's isolation from Washington D.C. and the Atlantic beyond.

These mountains, covered with giant rock outcroppings and thick forests, of mostly oak, pine and maple, divide Virginia from its neighbors, D.C. and Maryland, and create a natural abutment for the endless stream of commuters driving up, over, and down them every day from the valley to D.C. and back again. Commuters must traverse a specific mountain in the Appalachian range during their commute, Paris Mountain winds and sweeps toward D.C., carrying these perpetual travelers toward the sun on both the morning and evening.

Not quite a suburb of D.C. and not quite as rural as West Virginia, the Shenandoah Valley harbors a multitude of farms, poultry dairy and plantation, as well as an America-old city. Winchester rests thirty miles south of West Virginia and one and a half hours west of Washington D.C. A city dating back to 1750 and housing such residents as George Washington and Patsy Cline, as well as hosting seven major Civil War battles during which the city changed hands seventy-two times, Winchester exists in fusion with the emergence of America's history. Walking down its streets transports one to a bygone era. Cobblestone and brick sidewalks, uneven and bulging from almost a century of tree-root growth, carry its citizens through streets lined with the bleached sycamore, stout oak, marble churches, Quaker style homes alongside Victorian, row house shanties on one block and brick castle-like dwellings on the next. Winchester supports brick, brick, endless brick with stained-glass steeples overhead and a wide quiet walking-mall at its heart, where squirrels and sparrows carouse among the wealthy out shopping and the poor out resting.

There are two main arteries running south to north through Winchester. Interstate 81 stretches across the entire east coast and passes through Winchester like a shaft of dark light bound to reflect somewhere better. 81's neighbor, U.S. Route 11 runs parallel to the newer interstate as an older brother trying to keep up with his more limber sibling. 11 used to function as 81 does now. However, 11 reflects the mobilization of an extinct era in American history. An era of wagons and carriages left behind by the Model T's inception.

If one were travelling north on Route 11 from the tiny hamlet of Strasburg, about twenty miles south of Winchester, they would pass an abundance of farm fields with hand-built stone walls standing three and a half feet tall. Scrub cedars dot these fields, lie in perpetual stillness, the only movement seen in cows switching tails back and forth, along with the horizontal scraping of their mouths against an infinitely ground cud. Route 11 dips and elevates cyclically from Strasburg to the next town five miles north. Middletown, a mile long and even less wide, lies in between 81 and 11. It exudes a sentimentality only found in the smallest of American townships. Sentimentality felt through its homes built in tight proximity of each other with neighbors perpetually conversing with one another as one passes through, the up-kept look to the various styles of architecture of these homes, Cape Cods next to Victorians next to split-levels next to one story ranch, a cross section of American building from the past one hundred years. A vision of progress and community, close lawns and a lack of fences at property lines allow for an openness rarely seen in communities anymore. An openness harkening back to a worn out time when church bells rang instead of hiding in recordings piped through speakers, when fire alarms alerted a community of danger in a deafening eagle scream magnified and drawn out to mimic a prison camp's escape siren. The sky glows blue here and the trees' leaves softly hiss in the lethargic drafts of wind created by 81's back-door presence.

Upon entering Middletown from the south on Route 11 one would see the second house on the right, a two-story turn of the century home facing the Blue Ridge Mountains to the west and pink under sunsets. Yellow with black shutters a scarlet front door and a

black tin roof, the wood-sided home stands north of its own acre of soft-grassed lawn exuding a velvet green glare like palm leaves in sun. Upon entering the back door on the eastern side of the house, one finds themselves in a modest kitchen with white walls and sapphire blue wainscoting. The home's pine floors appear ancient, but only in patina and span the entire first floor, which from the kitchen moves west through a neatly kept maroon-walled dining room housing a large antique oak table stained honey-orange, like amber oozed from a pine knot, and enters a three foot wide hallway. This hallway continues westward to the front door, but its beginning offers an egress on the left, a doorway, the door half open and a low light burning.

In this bathroom, lingers the stench of death, shit and piss and sweat and a metal water smell stirs the air into a thick soup, so much so that one cannot open their eyes wide enough to see the dirty green panties lying crumpled on the floor, the vomit-soaked undershirt with bra insert on the brilliantly white toilet's seat, the array of heroin works scattered across the sink's faux granite Formica countertop: a crumpled scorched spoon, a syringe mottled with smudges and a sticky substance vaguely resembling syrup but really resembling blood, a late '90's pack of complimentary matches from 7-11, a limp rubber tube with imbedded with the dirt of a thousand junkie biceps, a scrunched up cotton ball turned to fuzzy mud by dope tar, and the pacing female cockatiel with its red cheeks, yellow mohawk, grey wings, and soft chirps sounding like little bits of glass crumpling under hard-soled boots. She chirps sporadically, almost anxiously, as if trying to wake the figure lying sprawled on the pine floor, in between the toilet and a porcelain bathtub with clawed feet like a dog's paw. She oozes green death puss, even through her pores.

Her body lies facedown, her left arm lying horizontally across her back as if previously handcuffed. Her long blonde hair lies in a tangled mess about her face, her back, the floor. Her left jaw and neck show through the blonde web and reveal the only visible sign of a face, a person, a corpse with a name, Rachel, a corpse with a punctured neck where a needle entered and where her soul exited in a slow numb dribble.

Max waited by the solitary window of the eight by eight living room in the miniscule two bedroom ranch house. His eyes, exploding blue sapphire stars, reflected from his stare into the window pane and back again. His bright blonde hair glowed like fire's coals against the small room's lamplight. His lean fit body snuggled tight to the wall, the window, its sill, legs against the wall underneath. He drew short but fast breaths at an even rate which continuously fogged the window's pane and caused a slight film of condensation to collect on the end of his wide and long Polish nose. He saw the maroon Dodge van enter the house's mile long driveway and a huge smile enveloped his face.

“Mom, Rachel! Dad's home!”

He rushed out of the house and sprinted up the clay and gravel driveway toward the oncoming van. His legs jutted out far in front of him as he careened forward down a slight decline and then up the driveway's tall hill. The van passed him, and funny how Dad didn't slow to wave or even roll down his window to say hi, as he crested the tall hill. Max turned and propelled himself back down the hill in which he had just come. His feet moved quickly, nearly out of control because of the sharp pitch of the hill, and he

smile as he tried to catch the trail of dust left by the van. He had nearly reached the hill's center, the steepest part, when he felt his right foot catch a rock which had not quite settled into the driveway's grade. His body lifted in the air and crashed hard into the clay gravel mix, facedown, his left palm sliding deep into the driveway's interior, the skin tearing and peeling, the gravel digging deep into his flesh, his gasping cries barely audible over the van's engine ahead. The van stopped at the end of the driveway. His father got out, turned around, and saw his son wriggling like a worm in the dirt, wincing in pain, but unable to cry out now for some reason. He walked back up the driveway to where his son lay, creating spasmodic dirt angels in the fine clay powder.

“Aww shit. You okay Max? What the hell happened?” He reached down and grabbed Max's right arm and casually lifted him up onto his feet.

Max's face scrunched into a popcorn ball of tightness, his knees barely able to hold his weight yet. “I tripped on the driveway. My hand really hurts.”

His father looked at Max's hand, turning over and moving it up and down and back and forth by manipulating the tip of Max's index finger. “Skinned it pretty good boy. Have to take you to the doctor I guess.”

The hospital ride took close to twenty minutes. Max's mother held his filleted hand while his father drove a steady fifty-five miles per hour along Pennsylvania's Interstate 70. The van's interior of cracked, faded maroon leather with seats covered and patterned with a worn looking saddle blanket design of stitching around a center vertical stripe. The radio played and filled the van's interior with the track “We Are the World.”

“Goddamn this song!” his father said. “What the hell’re they playin’ this crap on the radio for? Can’t find anything to listen to anymore. And then this song comes out? Relief for a country on the other side of the Atlantic. Bad enough I’ve gotta listen to ‘Bored in the USA,’ hehe, now I gotta listen to Michael Jackson cry along with Lionel Richie and a bunch a other jerks? Jeeesus Christ.”

“Joe, give it a rest. Max is hurt. Turn it off if you don’t like it. Play a tape or something. Max it’ll be ok honey. The doctor will fix you right up and it won’t hurt so bad in a little bit. I promise,” his mother said.

“Eeahhh, it hurts so bad mom. Eesssh. I don’t know if I can take it.” He felt a little tug at his right arm. He opened his eyes, looked right, and saw Rachel smiling at him. Her rosy plump cheeks like gleaming cherries and her white blonde hair creating a dazzling contrast to high liquid blue eyes. She caressed his arm from her car seat. Max smiled back and chuckled a little.

“Yeah I’ll play a tape I’ve heard a million times already. That’ll be just fine Shel. A tape. Maxwell, what were you doin’ runnin’ like that on the driveway? You gotta pay attention boy. Then things like this wouldn’t happen.”

Max’s pediatrician talked like Donald Duck, not all the time unfortunately. He only did the duck-speak to calm and break tension in his young patients with comic relief. His neatly combed brown head of hair bobbed up and down and his clean sharp jaw line made chewing movements, as if he might have some gum. He held Max’s hand and slowly scraped bits of gravel out of his palm in tight little sweeps. “Khyou Khoing khery khood Khax. Khust kha khittle khmore khkay? Khuuust kha khittle khmore...”

Max sat paralyzed with the throbbing in his hand while the duck man doused his hand in iodine for the fifth time and wrapped it tight in a layer of gauze about a quarter of an inch thick. “Oww”

“Khwall khone Khax.”

“Doctor Spranglowski, how long will Max have to wear the bandage on his hand?” his mother asked.

“Oh, well, Mrs. Sobczak Max is going to need to come back here to have this wound cleaned once a week for about three to four weeks. We’ll change the bandage then, so in between visits you’ll need to make sure to keep these dressing clean. This is a nasty wound and we don’t want there to be any chance of infection. Do you have any questions about what I’ve told you?”

“Mom I’ve gotta do this again? No, please mom. Tell him no!”

“Max, you heard Dr. Spanglowski, you’ve got a bad cut and we’ve got to take good care of it.”

“Will he be able to keep going to school? Shel, hold Rachel will ya?”

“Yes Mr. Sobczak, Max should have no trouble attending school as long as he takes care to keep the bandages on his hand clean.

“Good. That’s very good, isn’t it Max?”

“Khon’t khworry Khax. Kevrything’s khoing khoon be khine.”

Rachel and Max skipped along the wood line of their yard with its closely trimmed grass neatly butted against the wall of unmanageable trees with tumor-like

growths for bases. Their roots bulged from too much moisture and one could almost smell sour bark beginning to rot in the humid Pennsylvania heat.

The summer sun shone bright above them, casting a menacing glare into their small blonde heads, but the forest beyond the tree line sat shrouded in darkness. An enormous black dog with a shaggy retriever's mane bounded by them and down the solitary path leading into the forest.

"Zeus! Come back! The Gidgets live in there!"

"What's a Gidget Max?"

"The Gidgets sis? You know the Gidgets. Mom told us about them, remember?"

"No..."

"Okay, well the Gidgets are that crazy family down the road from us, but that path Zeus just ran down goes there too. Mom told me to stay away from them. She said their Dad's gone for good and that Gidget's boys are scum and Gidget's mean too, and she said to stay away from them because we're too good to be near them."

"What's 'scum' Max?"

"Uh 'scum's' like someone who doesn't do anything good for anyone and is mean to people just to be mean I guess."

"So we don't like them Max?"

"No, I guess not. But the nuns at school teach us to love everyone, no matter who they are. They say hate's a sin."

"And sin's bad."

“Yep, sin’s bad but so’s church. I don’t like going there every day, so I guess I sin everyday.”

“You don’t sin Max. You’re the best brother in the whole world to ever sin.”

“C’mon, let’s get Zeus outta there before the Gidgets get them. Zeus! Come back! Here Zeus!”

The path winded through the woods like a narrow snake winds through the tiny cracks amid a pile of rocks. The forest, mostly pines of about forty feet tall, looked darker once inside. They heard an occasional ‘crack’ or rustle of some kind of leaf being crunched, but they could see nothing but the few feet of sandy path in front of them, the nettles and ferns blending in around one another along the path’s edge, and a few lines of sunlight poking through the forest’s dense canopy, and the millions of granules of dust particles floating in the illuminated lines. The air tasted thick in Max’s mouth. He smacked his lips together in an effort to push the thick taste through to something sweeter like maybe his own spit as a swarm of insects followed them down the path, nipping at every exposed part of their bodies. Mosquito specks, gnats, and little biting bees both tickled and stung their skin in irregular intervals.

“Zeus!”

“Zeus,” Rachel said, mimicking her brother in a playful manner, a game of hide and seek on her mind. “What’s that over there?” She heard a rustling to her right twenty feet away.

“I dunno, hopefully Zeus. This place is scary. You heard about the witch that lives in here? She guards the forest for the Gidgets.”

“Shut up Max! There’s no witch!”

“Uh, yeah there is. Dad told me so.”

“Told you what? Max, stop scaring your sister. Zeus come!” Their father stomped through the underbrush and onto the path in a slow, deliberate manner, a sweaty can of Busch beer in his hand. Zeus trailed ten feet behind him and wagged his tail excitedly, his jowls perched in a tall smile, a fawn’s severed leg in their grip.

“Nothing Dad.”

“That’s what I thought. Now, apologize to your sister for scaring her.”

“Sorry.”

“It’s okay.”

“Dad, what are you doing in here?”

“What? Max, I’m your father and I don’t have to answer to you for anything. Got me? I go where I want, when I want. We clear on that?”

“Yes. Sorry Dad.”

“Rachel, you want a piggy back ride to the house?”

“Yes Daddy!”

“Well get on up here.” He bent down and hoisted Rachel onto his shoulders.

“C’mon Max. Let’s go have dinner. It’s gotta be about time, don’t you think?”

“Yeah, I guess.”

The three moved out of the forest and back into the wide flat yard. Their little house sat amidst lightning bugs beginning their night’s flickering. The house emitted the warm sour smell of cabbage rolls and Max smiled upon realizing which dinner his mother

chose to make for the week. All three forgot the unexpected meeting in the woods, but if one would have looked into the thicket past where Joe Sobczak emerged on the path, they would have seen a green blanket laid out in a tiny clearing. Peering closely at the blanket, one would have seen a gelatinous stain not unlike a slug's trail and amid the stain one would have seen the tiniest of curly red hairs unwittingly shed by one Gidget Lewis.

Joe Sobczak grew up in the tough Pittsburgh neighborhood of East Liberty. The son of poor Polish immigrants, Joe fought for his life almost every day. Whether he ran from beatings by his perpetually violent father, or whether he ran from the fear induced by almost killing a peer with a knife in a schoolyard, Joe seemed destined to run forever. His father, Anatol Sobczak, worked as a processer in a steel mill, and came home everyday smelling of sulphur, a key component in the steel production. Joe despised this smell, and his father for bringing it home with him. His father smelt poor. Being poor and smelling like shit created boiling frenzy in Joe for his father.

However, aside from the smell, Anatol and Joe resembled one another dramatically. Both father and son had strong jaws which jutted from their necks like great supportive shelves, both maintained sharp, almost catlike, features in their faces which denoted a look of inquisitiveness imbedded in carnal sharpness and the men's gleaming blonde hair drew women to them like moths to light. In fact, the eyes denoted the only feature distinguishing father from son, beside the twenty-two year age gap which explained the coarseness in Anton's skin which Joe had yet to develop. Anton carried a dark pair of brown eyes in his skull like to shadow marbles of fury. No emotion seeped

from their depths as they appeared motionless and protected at all times by the dotty marble's brooding nature. Joe's eyes, in opposition to his father no doubt, struck an onlooker at once with their singeing blue, almost Antarctic in their glacial quality. Joe's stare electrified its intender. Women fell into their static abyss, longing to be trapped in their slow melting ooze for as long as he deemed necessary.

Joe's mother, Iwa, wrought the feeble life of a housewife, a woman often beaten into submission by Anatol for the slightest deviation from a daily routine consisting of cooking three hot meals and the infinite cleaning of their squalid apartment. A woman built like a sturdy bronze statue, Iwa took Anatol's abuse with the stoic silence of a big cat fallen from predatory status. Iwa maintained a life of her own outside the family though, despite Anatol's best efforts. Part of her daily duties included the stitching and general upkeep of Anatol and Joe's clothing as the family could not afford to readily purchase new garments when others failed.

One Thursday, a neighbor woman stopped by the Sobczak apartment on her way upstairs to her own asking if she would mind performing a quick stitch to the hem of her skirt as she had just snagged it on a protruding fence rung earlier in the day. Iwa obliged her neighbor's request, mending the skirt hem in minutes and an idea came to her as she continued her own chores of sewing for the day. Iwa's only superfluous income for the family became small sewing jobs mending the stitching on coats, pants, blouses, and pretty much anything she could get a hold of to repair for profit. Anatol rejected the notion of Iwa seeking gainful employment at first, but consented after he realized he may have more money to spend on Stolichnaya instead of Gordon's. Anatol's consent had its

benefits, chiefly that his choice in Vodka's improved dramatically, but it also had its drawbacks. Iwa became righteous in his eyes. She began to gradually despise housework in a slow, steady, methodically vicious manner and let Joe's father know it through aggressive outbursts of maniacal hate, both physical and emotional. She tromped around their tiny one bedroom apartment screaming obscenities and insults at Joe's father in an appalling tone which channeled both the spirit and aggressiveness of a harpy in heat. She turned sex between them into a series of punctures and prodding designed to feign sexual exhilaration while simultaneously masking intricate intensities of pain such as burred finger rings being dug into Anatol's back during the most exhilarating moments of their lovemaking. Anatol would scream in both delight and horror while Iwa came knowing he lay inside her in pain.

Joe wanted nothing more than to leave his family, the incessant hostility and cruelty toward one another overwhelmed him. He longed to be free of his too grim parents. He became obsessed with exodus at the age of fifteen and began selling pot acquire the money to do so. On an especially cold day in March, during a particularly aggressive fight between his parents, Joe packed essential items in his thirty-four liter daypack, toothbrush, paste, three pair underwear, two pair Dungarees, six tees, and nine pair socks. Joe thought, "One can never have too many socks and must have a great pair a boots to put 'em in."

In fact, 'boots' constituted the only thing Joe had in common with his father. Both men loved Red Wings boots, so much so and with equal fervor that Anatol had treated them both to a new pair once every two years since Joe's feet had stopped growing.

Father and son took a trolley to the 'clean smelling' section of the city and Joe's father spent a month's pay on two pair of Red Wing Iron Rangers, guaranteed to take a myriad of abuse while keeping their wearer's feet comfortable in a padded leather pillow, so said Joe's father anyway. There, father and son exchanged a smile, the only one between them since their last annual trip, as they strutted in their new boots still imbuing factory shine. One would think, happening upon this scene, that these men sincerely enjoyed each other's company.

However, a bi-annual new pair of boots could not keep Joe home, and so he packed his thirty-four liter daypack and hopped a trolley for the nearest Greyhound station, destination unknown. At the same time, a frustrated and sexually scared Anatole drove a penknife into his wife's temple, silencing the profundity of abusive wrought on his psyche since Iwa's entrance into the female workforce.

Shel often wondered where Joe had gone after leaving his home at such a young age, but she had never formally broached the subject with her husband. Her inquiries came in the form of talking about her own life during the same time as Joe's exodus in the hope of him coming out with some stories of his own. But Joe's experiences never materialized for her and she perpetually wondered about her husband's path. And with every bit of wonder there arose bits of doubt in his character which sprang like weeds into the cloven pasture in which their marriage lay during its first five years.

Joe never revealed to Shel that after he left the East Liberty residence, he hopped a bus bound for San Antonio, TX. That he worked as a cattle hand for the next year and a

half, losing twenty pounds in the sweltering heat. He never told of his eventual migration to New Orleans where he took up the guitar while working as a bartender in small roadhouse in the French Quarter. That he became prodigal on the instrument, earning as much as \$200 a week on playing alone. That everyone wanted to lay with “The Pole Django,” as he came to be known. He never spoke of his first wife Rosalie, a half French half African waitress he met playing in a small juke joint in Marksville, LO. How she had been hit by a car two weeks into their union. How he had put down the guitar in mourning for the only woman he had ever truly loved and ever would again. How he had come back to Pennsylvania only after Rosalie’s death, determined to toil away in mediocrity till the dark keeper drew him near to the often silent and smiling woman who had taught him to feel warm and prosper inside as only those rich in happiness can. A woman who abruptly left him to wither in the wind as an unkempt awning tearing away from its brittle aluminum skeleton. How he had been too much a coward to live the rest of his life alone. How he had married again for the security in knowing someone still wanted him in this world even if he had no desire left in himself. How his guilt at having two children out of selfishness had eaten his soul alive. How could never forgive the three of them for it.

While Joe’s life had been masked with the hurt of loss, Shel’s life before Joe and her two children emerged from the blackness of coal and always swam upon its shadow regardless of her efforts to “accelerate the positives in her life,” as she put it.

Shel grew up in Dilliner, a rural Polish-Dutch-German Pennsylvanian town dedicated to exporting coal from the dense mountains enveloping the landscape around

the town. Likewise, Dilliner's labor force dedicated itself solely to the mining and support of the miners of coal. Waitresses quelled miner's hunger. Doctors healed miners so they could continue pushing coal across the continent. And women screwed miners so they had enough pleasure outside of the mines, thus insuring their reentry into the pits lacked the sullen limping gait of an unsatisfied male apparatus.

Shel grew up in a German-bred family of seven, of which she was the oldest sibling with three brothers and one baby sister behind her. Her father, Daniel, a miner in a Dutch family history rich in dying of black lung, barely interacted with his family, preferring to spend his time in Dilliner's lone brothel during his time off from the mine. Subsequently, his death at the age of forty-two from a slow nagging asphyxiation and settling of soot in his chest made little impression on his wife or her oldest daughter. Shel dismissed him as a traitor to the family ever since the time she had caught him fingering a prostitute outside the brothel on a warm summer day in her tenth year. His wife Genevieve, in response to Daniel's death, simply married the local town parson, of whom she had been sleeping with for the last two years of her absent husband's life.

Although Shel liked her stepfather much more, she promptly left Dilliner after graduating high school to attend Boston College in pursuit of a career as a elementary school teacher, of which she promptly became four and a half years later. She met Joe while celebrating her twenty-third birthday with a night of barhopping with a few close friends. They had meandered into an out of the way dive bar in Pittsburgh's east end and, upon entering the bar's dark and sticky interior casually illuminated by the most chintzy

of Christmas lights, she could not resist gravitating to the sullen blonde man drinking alone, as if with purpose, at the bar.

“This place looks perfect Joe. Whatya think? Three bedrooms. The kids’ll love it.”

“Yeah, it’s nice. Rent’s a little high though. Haven’t looked at all our options down here either.”

“Joe, if we keep looking it’s gonna be next year before we find a place and by then this job’s gonna be gone and we’re still gonna be stuck in P.A., making the same money for the same people and probably for the rest of our lives.”

“You say that like it’s a bad thing Shel. I like Washington. It’s only an hour from Pittsburgh and I’ve had my business there long enough to get clients by word of mouth. You know that. We’re established there.”

“But Joe, this job offer down here’s so much better for us. I’ll make more money and we’ll be able to give the kids more.”

“They’ve got it good enough in Washington godamnit. I don’t see why they’re even entering into this conversation. We’re the ones keepin’ them in clothes, food and whatever else...”

“Yeah Joe, we are the ones. But I make more money than you do already. Not to be a bitch about it, but if you’re going to pull this ‘male running the house’ shit I’m gonna give it to you straight. It’s my checks footing the bills around here. Your pay, if that’s what you want to call it, barely pays for the groceries and the electric bill for the

month. It's my salary holding this family together, so I think you might want to consider taking my opinion a little more seriously."

The house in Middletown, VA, a yellow farmer with wood siding and a healthy bit of age to it grew quiet inside for a moment while Joe considered his wife's argument. "This fuckin' bitch. I'll never get out from under this shit," he thought. "You think because you make more money than me that you can fucking tell me where to live my life? You've got some fucking nerve Shel. I'll do what I want. Always have, always will. You think you and the kids'll change that? You're dead fucking wrong. Dead wrong."

"Joe calm down a minute. I didn't mean to piss you off honey. It's just that I think we could do something great with this place. Like maybe rent to own. I also think the kids would do better down here. Rachel'll be starting kindergarten next year, so she won't have to make new friends again and you know Max hates Catholic school and would go anywhere else in a minute."

"Yeah, well sending him to that goddamn school was your idea, so that's on you isn't it?"

"Yes, it was my idea Joe, but that's not the point. The point is that he'd be happier down here. He's always made friends easily, so I don't think there'll be a problem. You pulled that chauvinist crap with me first anyway. You know I don't put up with it so why do you do it?"

"I don't know. Let me think about it for a minute. I can't decide right this second goddamnit."

"Think about why you do it?"

“No, about movin’ down here. I can’t commit to it just from lookin’ at this place. I gotta see the rest of the area. Don’t you think that’s a good idea?”

“Yes, Joe. I think that’s a marvelous idea.”

Driving around that afternoon, Shel and Joe saw much of the Shenandoah Valley, “their new place,” as Joe put it. They drove through dark little hollows where the sun barely shone through the naked fall trees. Where trickling springs dropped into windy creeks, skinned a glossy black which reflected the orange bare hills with leaves scattered and moist with upturned worm dirt on its surface.

They saw Bass Hoover Elementary, a brown-bricked structure with a look more factory and fundamental, with its low slanted roof that slid upward from the road, a sky ramps, or a ramp to nowhere. Students played in the sparsely furnished playground, its main slide solid steel and ominous against the closely trimmed grass. The merry-go-round, with more potential for rusting and creaky than fluid spinning. The happy drawing of a bumble bee giving a thumbs-up adorning the school’s front sign, “more a suggestion for attitude than what could actually be the case inside,” Joe thought.

They strolled along the Shenandoah River, twigs crackling under their shoes and burrs catching their coats, and Shel took Joe’s hand as they closely watched a hellgrammite devour a sick minnow amid the river’s steady flowing water with bits of green algae like discarded mucus.

They ate an early dinner at Carl’s Pizza in Middletown, its pizza came cut into square pieces and Shel teased Joe about the slices’ shape resembling his outlook on life. Joe feigned amusement, even gave Shel a slight chuckle to satisfy her, but he couldn’t

help fixating on the presence of three attractive females eating at another booth, apparently having a girl's night out based on their over the top dress, which Joe consider slightly flamboyant even for the innovative fashion era of 1986. One of the women, a youngish-looking blonde in her late '20's , smiled at Joe while tweezing a long strand of gum out of her mouth and twirling it around her index finger in long swooping motions. Her deep red fingernail polish glimmered against the pizza joint's fluorescent lighting and matched her taught snake skin patterned lycra top, a lusty red which Joe found quite alluring. The women laughed and talked as if old friends as Joe continued to watch the blonde young woman who watched him.

Slowly, Joe began to realize that he had seen a multitude of attractive women on during his tour of the valley with Shel. The blonde in the shop at the moment, her two friends: quite alluring in their slinky stretching body skirts which clung to their taught breasts, compressing them so their nipples shone through with extraordinary pointedness. The lone woman in her late forties with the plumb lips and breasts swollen through her sweater at next to Joe at the stoplight by the school. She had stared at Joe while Shel watched some geese rummage through a yard in the opposite direction. And the young gas station attendant, barely twenty, who flirted with Joe while he bought gas and doughnuts earlier that morning.

She kept Joe from leaving the station, talking about the weather that day and where he lived because, as she said, "You don't look like you're from here. Guys around here have no life in their eyes. You seem different, like you've seen things."

Joe, not used to speaking with women except for Shel, brushed off her banter as forced small talk by her due to the extremely boring nature of a gas station attendant position. However, now, as he watched the teased-hair blonde twirl her gum in a predatory manner, he knew this strange little valley held something special.

“Shel, I think we should make an offer on the house,” Joe said as he bit into his little square slice of pepperoni.

“Joe? Really? That’s wonderful. I’m so happy. The kids are going to love it here. I love you so much.” She leaned over the table, her loose pale pink sweater dragging slightly through the a saucy bit of their pizza, and kissed Joe softly on the cheek.

Joe smiled, his deep icy eyes doing most of the work. The woman with the gum blushed.

“Stop it!” Max screamed. “Please guys, please!” But the crab apples continued to smash against his body, staining his clothes and skin, stinging and wet as a dog bite.

“This fuckin’ pussy. Look at this fuckin’ kid, crying like a little girl,” J.D. said and the other boys laughed hard while they gathered more apples to break against Max.

“Guess you’re going to school with applesauce on you huh little buddy?”

“I thought you were my friend. J.D. Why are you doing this to me?”

“Shut up Max. You gotta grow some balls man. Toughen up. We’re just havin’ fun. You gotta have fun too. Get it?”

Max didn’t get it. In fact, he didn’t get this whole area, or the boys in this small town. One minute J.D. acted like Max’s closest friend and the next he acted like a vicious

predator obsessed with killing him. "Please stop, please stop." Max slunk down on his butt against the brick wall of the antique shop next to their school bus stop just as an apple the size of a golf ball broke against his cheek leaving a welt which stung like a million little rabid needles burrowing into his blood vessels.

The bus arrived. Max's tormentors lost interest in their torture and waited casually in line for their turn to board. J.D. lingered at the end of the line, watching Max brush apple from his face. Max tried to stand but slipped in a smashed bit of apple. He closed his eyes, still wincing from the stinging in his cheek, when he felt a hand grab his arm and pull him to his feet.

"Listen Max, don't take this stuff too seriously. You're in middle school now. Things are different. You gotta take a little shit from people, especially eighth graders. Eighth graders gotta give sixth graders shit or we're not doin' our job. You just gotta be tough and don't act like it bothers you. The more you cry and shit, the more you're gonna get picked on. It's just the way it is. You understand right?"

Max nodded and boarded the bus behind J.D., who went straight to the rear with all the other popular kids in Middletown leaving Max to sit in the bus' only empty seat next to a unkempt long haired boy appearing much older than anyone else named Punky. Max didn't think Punky could have been named Punky by his parents. Probably a nickname. He wore a ripped up jean jacket with numerous gory patches of heavy metal band logos attached to it in random spots, a spotty grey t-shirt with dozens of micro-holes in its chest area, and blue Reebok high-top sneakers. Punky's hair, straight and fine with

a greased sheen, hung at his shoulders and semi-covered his tan pock marked face, slight mustachio bits and eyes exuding nothing but nothing. Calm and uninterested.

Punky turned his head and looked at Max as he sat down, then turned and faced straight ahead again not giving away any sign that he recognized anything in Max other than him being a reason he had less room on the bus that morning. Max compacted his body into a tight unit so as to not touch Punky during the jostling ride to school, leaned his face forward against the back of the seat in front of him and thought of running with Zeus in the woods by his old house, and the way he used to smile thinking of school.

Max returned home and headed straight to the back yard where Zeus lay tied on a five foot chain to the yards thick maple tree. “Come here boy. How ya doin’ huh?” Zeus slowly wagged his tail. He did not stand to greet Max. Instead, he laid over on his side and let out a deep exhausted sigh. “It okay boy. I know. I know. Maybe we can go for a walk later after soccer practice? You wanna do that? Sound like fun?”

Zeus tugged hard and pulled Max down the Church Street. The sun setting overhead washed the sky in a haze a pink and purple, “Deep and soft enough to sleep on,” Max thought. T Soccer practice disturbed him for some reason and he didn’t feel like being with his team. During practice he couldn’t wait to get home to walk Zeus, but now the walk felt like work because Zeus wouldn’t calm down. He kept pulling Max around, his leash stretching tight, choking himself with every step. “Goddamnit Zeus! Quit pulling! Just walk.” But Zeus continued to pull, his tongue beginning to lull out the side of his mouth which already salivated in long streams of thick goo clinging to his thick coal-black fur. Max’s leash arm began to hurt. His bones popped at irregular

intervals. He grabbed the leash with his free arm and yanked backward hard with both arms causing Zeus to writhe back on his hind legs and emit a liquid cry, both screech and sneeze, quite bubbly sounding. Max, startled by the sound, released tension at once. Zeus immediately jerked Max forward again in a frantic attempt to arrive at some unknown destination. “Goddamnit Zeus!” Max became infuriated. He grabbed Zeus by the collar, pulling himself forward and in front of Zeus with it. Max reared his right hand back and struck the dog hard in the nose with his fist. Zeus jerked backward and shook his head sneezing, bewildered, his nose emitting a thick stream of blood. Max dropped his hands, letting go of the collar at the same moment. He felt dazed, cloudy in his vision. He saw Zeus bleeding and vaguely realized what he had done. He set his jaw and squeezed his teeth together in a scowl.

“Can I come too?”

“I don’t know, you think you can keep up? I don’t want to worry about how you’re doing the while time?”

“Yeah, I can do it. Lemme come Max, please.”

Max stared at Rachel a moment. At her trembling lower lip which curled upward slightly, her eyes trembling with wide locked expectation. “Sure, you can come. Just try not to ask too many questions, okay?”

“Yay! I won’t ask too many Max.”

“Good. Well, get your bike. Everyone’s meeting at St. Thomas Chapel in ten minutes.”

Brother and sister pedaled their bicycles down Church Street. Hers, a pink BMX with white tires, a purple seat, and assorted rainbow-colored streamers protruding from its handlebar fluttering in the breeze. His, a dark blue mountain bike with white handlebars and speckled free-form spatter effect of whites and grays scattered over and throughout its frame, spokes, rims, seat, a bike worn in, a bike which squeaked a pained-mouse sound with each pedal's revolution around their gear set, never more never less, a tiny squeak, expected from years of use, a comforting sound to the boy.

The group of children crowded together in the lawn of St. Thomas Chapel, sand tan stone structure, its walls five by five foot rectangles staggered and stacked with precision, a brushed look implying archeological excavation, a dark green tin roof pitched at a steep twelve degree angle, a cupola white and tall, ten feet and supporting a white cross twelve feet of faith staring down on the bare church yard, no cemetery, just children congregating on a damp spring afternoon. The grass wet, dew stuck to tires, dripping from the leaves of the rosebushes flanking the three steps leading to the eight by eight brick courtyard, its flat tight mortars around the chalk red brick, two dimensional and dense, barely returning a sound when stepped upon.

Eight boys ranging in age from ten to fifteen, dark-haired mostly, one blonde, but all in shorts and tee, sneakers, rode down a wide street on bikes. All dirty from the day's activities. All smiling for bike tag, the best use of their little town. One girl, Rachel, nine, easy prey.

"Alright," said J.D, the oldest. "We're gonna play that 11, 6th street, and 1st street are all out of bounds. No crossing 11 to hide, got it? It's too big a space. Now, we're also

gonna play that you gotta actually touch the person to get ‘em out. So, that means touching their bike doesn’t count and there’s no safe space either. Everywhere in the boundary’s fair game. Questions?”

“Yeah, J.D.,” said William Riley, fifteen. A tall lean scruffy boy with shaggy brown hair, uneven, greased and knotty, he wore a black Def Leopard shirt with graffiti squiggles scattered all over and spandex biker shorts under light blue jean cut offs, pretty short, needed the spandex, and loosely tied nike high tops, white, scuffed, smudgy. “Who’s ‘it’ first?” He smiled, looked at Rachel, then at J.D. after passing quickly over Max.

“We’ll all pick a number that I’m thinking of and whoever’s the farthest from it loses.”

“How’s that fair? How come you get to pick?” said Jeremy, a short pudgy redhead, freckly and pale, rose-cheeked.

“Cuz I’m the fuckin’ oldest Germ. That’s why. You gotta problem with that?”

“Naw man. Just wonderin’ that’s all.”

“All right then. Let’s do this. I got the number,” he thought of ‘1.’

Max thought of ‘20’ and lost, ‘it’ first and recklessly scrambled to tap anyone he could, speeding through the prescribed Middletown boundaries, sweating in the moist spring heat, not used to it, shirt stuck to his back, sweat in his eyes. He lunged for Germ, almost lost his bike from under him with the length of his reach, lurching like a frog’s tongue at prey, just not fast enough. Skidding around corners after William who taunted

Max by slowing down, then careening forward, yelling, “C’mon ya little pussy. Catch me. C’mom pussy. C’mon.”

And Max pedaled harder, saying “Goddamnit” to himself, grimacing at William, never coming close enough. The afternoon waned, Max ‘it’ for an hour, two and still nothing. The children rested, scattered throughout the town, Rachel with Max in the afternoon with splotchy malt-red marking clouds of intensity, as if torn apart from the flat solid sheet of the idea of heaven in the idea of happiness. Insects played lightly on the sibling’s noses, wandering in to his mouth, stuck between teeth, biting her little shining ears leaving small bites which barely itched later.

“How you gonna get one of them Max?”

“Jeez. I don’t know. I guess I’m not. I’ll just go home and see what Mom’s making for dinner. They’re all too fast or I can’t find them.” He turned his bike around to head back up Third Street to Church then home, but Rachel grabbed his arm as he started to ride away.

“Tag me,” she said.

“I’m not gonna do that. You’ll be ‘it’ forever. You’ll never catch anyone. You’re too small.”

“Yeah, but you’ve been ‘it’ forever. You need a break. Tag me instead.”

INSTINCT

The rats came at night. They skittered on the corrugated metal roof of the house on Kaua'i, in Hawaii, in the jungle, on a mountain. It sounded like they had built paths through the house's walls, laid out blueprints, and erected scaffolding. The walls which usually sounded hollow, like they lacked insulation, until you heard their tiny claws scratching and ticking in a disjointed Morse Code more akin to instinctual movement than relaying information. I heard their claws tapping on every surface they touched as if they tested the surface for weak spots, vulnerabilities in the inner-wall structure. These rats seemed smart, like they'd run this kind of operation before. The noises they made in those walls gave me this impression. They sounded careful, practiced, and alert to the sounds they made as well as the sounds they heard on the other side of the drywall. My world, but not really.

I wanted them to sound considerate, like they didn't want to arrest my slumber with too much noise. I knew this wasn't true. I was a new guest in their home. They controlled this space, this house. I merely waited in silence for their eventual arrival. We were still getting to know each other. They didn't want to mate in front of me, yet.

There were two rats. I saw them often. The first, I think this was the male, was about a foot long minus his segmented tail. He carried his fur on him like a wet bird's feathers. It stuck out in points on its ends and appeared innately greasy as if he lived in a

near-empty container of petroleum jelly. His eyes were black shiny seeds, his ears ragged twitchy, constantly listening, assessing danger. The other, the female because of her smaller size of about eight inches minus her tail, retained a downy fluffiness to her fur not unlike that of a newborn baby ostrich. Her eyes stood out more than her counterpart's, appeared to look at objects beyond their surface value. She haunted a room with her stare.

I slept little on Kaua'i. I knew my friends living in the house had already stopped one previous invasion of jungle rats just prior to my arrival, that Adam and Andy had managed to finally kill them all off, in the most violent ways possible. Some died by the conventional spring-loaded trap which had to be much larger to accommodate their unusually large bodies. Others died by high-powered pellet rifle, their guts exploded out of their torsos. But the real unlucky ones, these were also the dumbest and slowest, the real unlucky ones died by a "three-prong pole spear," a tool usually exclusive to spear fishing off the Hawaiian coasts. The ones who died by "three prong" suffered a slow and bloody death, just the way "Chef" and "Captain" liked it. Both Adam and Andy spear fished regularly. They both liked this land version a little too much.

A "three prong" is just what it sounds like, it is a trident, but a loaded trident, meaning that a thick rubber band attached at the end opposite the prongs' pole can be stretched with the hunter's hand while the pole rests comfortably under his arm. When it is time to strike, the hunter merely needs to point his arm and release the band from his grip to fling the trident, prongs first, at its target by the fastest means possible. Fish are not aware of "three prongs" as predators, neither are rats apparently.

The rats reeked of wit, and feces. They waited until the house fell silent before invading, until the lights darkened, until I rested comfortably on the floor. That they could be killed by an opponent with such a long and obvious weapon surprised me. Questions, maybe asked then, definitely in rotation now: How did Adam and Andy get so near them to strike? Why did the rats let them? And why did these questions matter to me anyway? What good did they do while I was lying on a thin beige carpet in a light sleeping bag with rat chatter ticking by my head every few seconds? Why was I here? How had I become a rat- infested traveler?

At the time, these questions did not matter, maybe they still don't. Making sense of my time on Kaua'i was often like that, trying to understand my instincts, my senses, why I felt the way I did when I did.

The island stands green in the Pacific like a jagged oasis, its mountain peaks sheer and veined as if time had not a chance to ruin them yet. Touching down there felt powerful, like I was finally somewhere, like I knew where I belonged. I had brought my running gear and planned to explore its wilderness endlessly, and I did do this, but that's not what this story is about. Sometimes the island had other plans for me. Sometimes just being static in that place was enough of a journey. Sometimes I learned from rats what I couldn't from the mountains. Sometimes I knew if I was careful I might never come back.

Tourists are not welcome on Kaua'i, well let me put it this way, we're welcome but only in the resort area, the south side, where we will not disturb the people who actually deserve to be there. I knew this before I came. Adam had told me this many

times, how outsiders, especially whites had to watch their backs on this island. I appreciated this fact and agree with the native culture's point that whites, we do not preserve culture, we corrupt it. All the same, I still felt slightly uncomfortable. I am white. I am corruption. I am not of this land, I simply scar it. My attitude and character needed to speak ahead of my race; my blue eyes would not help me here.

I'm used to feeling uncomfortable in social situations. I'm used to being treated violently in them as well. Rural northern Virginia is not Kaua'i aesthetically, but the threat of violence always felt imminent because it was just that. It would happen. I never had to wait too long. Where I come from, you had to fight to be accepted, especially if you were not born in the Shenandoah Valley. I had to fight a lot. It never felt good. I hate it to this day. I hate myself for accepting it as a reasonable reality.

Fighting is a strange thing. There are lots of different kinds, right? There are physical fights, the kind in which body parts, usually ribs and noses, sometimes jaws, are broken. Then there are emotional fights, the kind in which the mind is the most scarred. Oftentimes, physical violence manifests into emotional trauma. The mind also seems to scar much slower and deeper as well. These two "fights," for lack of a better term, are almost one in the same. But what other kinds are there? Well, there are the everyday disagreements we have with others that make us tense and pummel our emotions into putty at the end of the day, making us just want a beer, maybe three, and a sound lock on our door. There are also the internal fights we have with ourselves. The ones in which we debate our choices, raise moral concerns, and generally kink our emotions until they are knots, knots which can never be untangled, or ever decay.

My mind often struggles in solitude. My knots lay tangled inside a reinforced web of over examination. This web's tensile strength causes immense inner tension. I need interaction with others, but often feel compelled to be quiet and shy, maybe even distrustful, around them if I don't feel included in the social dynamics of a given situation. There is an irony here. I hate fighting, its erosion of communication into its basest form, physicality directed at another, yet I readily accepted in the moments when an aggressor pressed his will upon me like a wide iron anvil. I felt an unspoken communication between us. He wanted to hurt me bad, but knew the same could happen to him if he wasn't careful. I always wanted to cry, yet somehow knew I'd pay even more if I did. I accepted the aggression instinctually. I used it to live, to defend myself, brokenness and all.

I could've fought these rats in those still jungle nights on Kaua'i when the only sound came from their screeched mating. I could've loaded Adam's air rifle and waited crouched on the kitchen counter like a gargoyle for them to finish screwing and look for some scraps of food to shit out on the floor, but I didn't. I could've bought poison and laughed to myself as they tore into it at night, and laughed even harder when I smelled their decaying flesh somewhere within the walls of the house, but I didn't. I could have bought traps, loaded them with peanut butter and waited, pairing my fingers, for the tell-tale snap, but I didn't. I did nothing. I questioned my inability to act every night they came out to play.

I wondered why I just laid there, why I froze and just listened to their clicking instead of springing off the floor and chasing them around like a pale jungle beast of

Satan. My inaction troubled me because I felt like it was my problem for some reason. I didn't want to bother Adam and Andy about it. They were being very hospitable. I did not want to complain. I wanted to bear the stress of the rat occupation alone. I owned rats, well at least the idea of their nightly presence. Maybe they'd get bored and leave if I just ignored them. Maybe they made my nights more interesting. Either way, they were mine to deal with as I saw fit and I sensed that doing nothing was best, for all of us, after all they needed to eat and screw too, right? They weren't like the goddamn wild roosters who started crowing at five in the morning right outside the house. The roosters were a cruel gang and their stench permeated the jungle at times, but they were phantoms. They were always gone after their demonic fits of laughter. They spoke in tongues just long enough to freak everyone out, but that's another story. Let's get back to my greasy little friends.

The nights were long, yes. They were lonely too. During the day I bounced around Kaua'i, running throughout Waimea Canyon, traversing the Kalalau Trail, etc. At night, it was just me and my thoughts, my insecurities really. I was in a very unfamiliar place and there was a certain amount of stress attached to me traveling the areas in which I wanted to run. I was going way out into the wilderness, in both the urban and rural sense. I had to drive right, not like a mainlander. I had to take my time, acknowledge everyone who stared at me by making eye contact and nodding upward with my eyebrows raised. I had to keep my music low in the truck lest someone should be offended by its easternness and decide to offend my face with their fist. There was an etiquette I had to follow in order to see the places on Kaua'i that I wanted to see and I

was fully prepared to abide by it, but it wore me out by the end of the day. I tried to decompress at night, to not feel so bad about being white, but my conscience always hindered any progress.

I genuinely feel for others and want the best for everyone. This has always been my disposition, even when my actions haven't shown it to be true, when I've had to hurt someone bad in order to not be as hurt myself. Being bullied is not an option I would recommend anyone have to endure, but I had no choice. I had to fight, sometimes hard and long, bloody. It broke me to act this way as a child and teenager and I thought I'd never be the shy nice kid I once was again. I thought violence had become a part of me even though I never wanted anything to do with it. The nights alone in the house on the side of the mountain reminded me of my violent scars and it scared me to think of killing the rats just like it scared me to think about the possibility of a violent confrontation between me and a local on Kaua'i. I did not want it, but I if it happened I would have no choice but to react.

These threats lingered in the air like rotten fish on more than one occasion while I was on the island. I kept my guard up, never letting on that I might be ready for an attack, praying that it would not come. I wanted to be liked. I wanted to stay on Kaua'i. I had to be careful. The people there deserve it, are as beautiful as the green-silken land they protect. I've always wanted to be accepted. Looking back, maybe the rats, although probably dumb, lacking logic and feelings, maybe these rats were the first chance I had at being me again, maybe being shy around them would be good enough. Maybe it could be everything.

FEELING IT OUT

My body feels different today. As I run, it feels stronger, more in tune with my pace, but it also feels weaker. Not like I can't continue, or that my running regimen stresses my body too much. No, it feels weaker because I'm rigorously conditioned, aware of an invincible feeling inside. I'm terrified of losing it.

My thighs feel like stone, my feet electricity. The woods pass by as if frozen, each feature still, brilliantly detailed. Large trees, their leaves shiny in the sunlight, stand as statues, silent in the still afternoon. Birds chirp in the distance, the occasional squirrel bounding about rustles the dense population of ferns covering the forest floor. The trail beneath my feet feels soft under my shoes, the smooth dirt only occasionally interrupted by baseball-sized rocks. I feel free, without worry. I notice every detail of the forest with the time and intricacy of a photograph.

I think about Mike. He runs behind me, somewhere. He knows me well. I think we run for the same reasons, meditation, relief, escape.

"You close?"

"Yep, just a little back from you."

"You want me to slow it up a bit?"

"No, this is fine. I'm good."

"How's Laurie?"

“Still pretty broken up man. Neither of us expected this. We both miss him.”

Buckley died a few days ago. Mike’s strong, but anyone’s going to miss their dog, be sad, feel cheated. Death seeps into the spring of life like a cold thick bog. It lingers, still, dense, and wet.

Mike moves up beside me. We’re the same age, 34, our birthdays are a mere seven days apart. We share a strong kinship, understand each other, feel we are brothers. We used to drink hard, a nightly twelve pack, or the equivalent in liquor, along with a steady dose of cigarettes and pot; we weren’t the healthiest men in the world, but we always had fun, at least until morning came. We roomed together in college, but remained hard partiers well after. I moved away after school. We always stayed close and visited each other often.

When my sister Sarah died, I threw away my chemically-choked lifestyle. I chose running as a new and healthy outlet. A lot of people close to me couldn’t understand my change. They wanted me to continue with them, keep quickly scratching years off my life. They didn’t understand my mission, maybe because I never told them. I choose to live a better life in the wake of Sarah’s death, to live healthier in her honor, transcend the grip of vice, a grip she from which she could never break free.

Sarah and I only partied together in minor ways, drinking and smoking pot. I never knew she used heroin until two years before her death. She was four years younger than me, so I broke off my partying with her when I found out about her addiction. We grew apart, mostly because I chose to lecture her on the importance of getting clean whenever I saw her. She didn’t want to understand why she should be good to herself,

much like later, when no one close to me wanted to understand why I chose running as the new focus of my life. No one understood, except Mike.

“Do you think you’ll get another dog?”

“I don’t know. Laurie’s pretty upset right now. So am I.”

“I think you guys will. It was sudden though. Same thing happened to Rob’s dog. His stomach flipped, no one knew it happened, and he just died right in Rob’s arms. No warning, nothing.”

“That condition is crazy. I’d never even heard of it before. It seems like vets should always tell owners of large dogs to watch out for GDV.”

“I know, why wouldn’t they if it’s so common? Doesn’t make sense.”

“No, it doesn’t.”

“It’s beautiful up here today,” I say.

“Perfect.”

Three Ridges’ trail, half shaded half sunlit, winds up the mountain at a forty-five degree angle, a steep climb. The sunlight toasts my skin when I’m in it. It feels wonderful, like heated silk cloaking my body. The breeze, slow and tempered, wisps my hair back as I climb, a little faster every step.

Mike supported me when I decided to become an obsessive runner. He listened intently when I spoke of my newfound passion. I think, as he became aware of how much happiness I found, he decided to take it up too. His choice drew us even closer. We traversed a major boundary together, began steadily building a new basis for our close relationship. Running became our shared priority, began to define us. We talked of our

exploits, our increased mileage and varied training methods, our tools to achieving top spiritual and physical form. We formed a healthy bit of competition, not necessarily who was better than whom, but more like a, “See where I’m going with this? Want to follow? Or take the lead?” attitude.

“Are you ready to do this? I want to get up it fast,” I say as I continue to pull ahead of Mike.

“Yeah I’m ready, but I want to see the views a little. I don’t want to kill myself getting up here.”

“That’s cool man,” I said. “You stop when you want, but I’m going to move up this thing as fast as I can.”

“You’ve never been up it before. Don’t you want to see the views?”

“I will, but I’ve wanted to run Three Ridges for a while. I want to test my strength.”

“Alright man, but you know a lot of hiking isn’t about the exercise. It’s about talking to the people you’re with and relaxing in nature. If we just speed up this thing we’re not going to talk, we’re just going to work.”

“That’s what it’s about to me man. It’s the work that matters. I can talk to you on the ride back just like on the way here. This is what we came to do right?”

“Right, but I don’t think we need to be so strict about how we go up. We can relax a little.”

“Listen Mike, you go up it any way you want, but I’m going up quick. Let me do it how I want alright? You move the way you want and I’ll move the way I want.”

“Alright buddy, alright.”

I feel the front of my thighs burn as the terrain steadily rises, steeper and steeper. I stay on the balls of my feet and push harder up the trail, concentrating on the pain as hard as I can. My mind becomes a liquid washed in silver light. My thoughts jump up and down like the bubbles in boiling water. I smile as a drop of sweat stings my eye.

Sarah died on July 2, 2011. Running tramples the pain of her loss into the ground. The solitude of long distance running gives me time to think about her, how things could've been different. A ballet dancer most of her twenty eight years, Sarah used her physical presence, her movement, to evoke emotion in audiences. Her fitness astounded her audiences. She seemed to glow onstage. Shimmering blond hair hung straight and thick to her waist. She flipped her mane around as much as she could, on the stage and off, with a wry wide smile over her shoulder. Onlookers stood paralyzed in front of her butane blue eyes which had the power to warm even the most frozen soul when light danced across them, their brilliance sparkling like sunlight on a thousand tiny-fingered sea waves. Her wide deep smile, combined with her grace and power on stage, warmed me whenever I watched her perform. I always felt both nervous and excited for her. I wanted her to succeed so much, but I always doubted her just enough to believe that she could fall at any moment.

I move steadily faster, but quieter, lighter, concentrating on my breathing. I let my thoughts come and go freely. They often involve Sarah, how I'll never see her again, how our family fractured after her overdose, how I anticipated her death for a year or more

before it finally happened. Oftentimes, I find myself having conversations with her,
“Why did you do it? What did you shoot that last shot?”

“I couldn’t help it Chris. I was on it so long. It became second nature.”

“You should’ve told me. I’d have tried to help you.”

“No one could help me but me.”

“I could’ve helped you. You crushed Mom you know?”

“I know. I know.”

“You know? I don’t think you do. She’s lost everything, starting with you. She’s not the same. None of us are.”

“We were always fighting anyway. What does it matter if one person isn’t around to do it?”

My thoughts become too sporadic to pin down. They feel like lead, dense, dark. A dirty film coats their surface. A strong wind blows in my face. It feels forceful, like it intends to keep me from fulfilling my promise to Sarah for the day. I need to run to improve my life; she needs to see me heal.

I concentrate on the surrounding forest. Thick oaks, pines, delicate maples glide by me as I push forward up the long incline. The ground crunches under foot, acorns and dry leaves lingering from last fall break down into tiny granules indistinguishable from the sandy brown dirt of the trail. Birds chirp and sing repetitive songs overhead which put me in a soft trance as I watch a light wind slip through the leaves.

I cruise at a six minute mile pace, joy energizing every cell in my body. I feel weightless, free, thirsty, acutely aware of my surroundings, but sweaty and swirly. The

wind brushes me slightly sideways, knocking me off balance. Hot anger boils in the back of my eyes like a cinched vise. I strain to reset my thoughts.

Once negative thoughts creep into a run, they poison it slowly. They intrude on a blank space like a scream interrupting silence. My body tenses. I feel hot, pulsing anger, not because I'm unhappy, but because I cannot control my emotions. Control is essential, especially when everything around me radiates a harsh static whine.

But the mountain's scenery silences the whine. The thick summer air shoot sunbursts through my head. I'm calm. I can control the stress on my body. The world seems right somehow, maybe it's the magnetic pull I feel for a strong finish. Maybe it's the feeling I have that Sarah might be watching.

My body still feels different today. It reminds me of my first sexual experience, anxiety and triumph blended into one mechanical motion too complicated for me to break down into individual steps. Better to just go with it and hope it gets better, hope for the best. That's what we all do in the end anyway right? Do our best, or what our mind perceives to be our best in a particular moment, in a particular time, in a particular place.

Sherri, she made me laugh. She was five years older, nineteen when I was fourteen. She knew I loved this about her. What teenage boy wouldn't love an older woman hitting on him? We worked together at my first job ever. I was a busboy, she a server, at a colonial inn slash restaurant in the small town in Northern Virginia in which I grew up. Her blonde hair, slightly shiny like wheat fields caught my eye immediately. I've always been attracted to blondes, but her emerald eyes and the naughty way she smiled didn't hurt either. She stood about 5'10" and, I realize now, carried herself like a

runner, all hip swagger and carefully swaying shoulders. She took me back to her house after work one late winter night. She lived in an old beat up camper, moved around quite a bit, camping in whichever national forest she felt suited her seasonal needs. She took me to her trailer. The whole way there, riding in her beat up baby blue Ford pickup, I'm anticipating touching her tight stomach, moving her thin white panties aside if she's game. She must have been anticipating some things herself because, after getting me in her camper, she switched on some tunes and she jumped me in one swift motion. All I could think about was how good she felt compared to how good I felt. She felt great to me. I wanted her to feel great too, and here lies my first memory of bodily disparity. My body felt great, but I knew I could lose that feeling at any moment. Nothing good lasts forever. If it did, it wouldn't be better than normal, it would actually be normal because it would be constant.

“Does it feel good?”

“Yes, yes.”

My god I hope it feels as good for you as it does for me. “You feel amazing.”

“So do you baby.”

“I almost can't take it.”

“Me either. Try though, try. I want to come together.”

“Okay, okay, okay.”

Some people say it's not worth it if it doesn't feel good, but how can that be true?

Those people have led easy lives. Never had their will tested and known themselves when their nerves were frayed like old yarn strands.

I push myself into a fatigued state, into pure exhaustion. Where is Mike? I want to enter the running dream, where the world moves by slowly and I catch every minute detail as my senses strain to grasp at anything resembling the velvet touch of rest. The mind blanks, yet doesn't. A myriad of thoughts, ideas, still appear in the mind, but they are glossed over, coated in something sticky and sweet. The mind becomes a honeycomb, its thoughts saturated in rich nectar.

Whether through persistence or luck, I achieve the running dream today. My body still feels different, even under the dream's influence. A snowflake slowly melts inside me as I run. The tiny drop of liquid left after the flake melts serves as my body's last resort to quench its thirst. The tiny snowflake has always been there. I only realize its presence after it starts to melt. It carries my body weight, disperses it, frees it from gravity in the same way that a stone falls slower when under water than in the air, gravity maintains its pull, but loosens its grip for a brief moment, enough to soften the concussion of the stone landing on the bed of whatever particular body of water it has been dropped. My body gradually becomes heavier because the weightless flake inside me disappears, transforms into boiling blood.

I keep moving through the mountain trail, my weight crunching forest scraps into dust. My feet are anvils, the melted snowflake disintegrates under them, but at least my feet feel like something. They are here. My body feels different, like a metal cable connects it to my mind.

The mind is a very powerful resource for me as a runner. It allows me to persevere, to traverse fifteen plus miles a day. My mind is my will, but it also has the power to destroy

my progress, make me think I don't have the strength to do what I do. I walk a tightrope made from metal cable, daily. The cable itself is me staying on course and completing my daily pilgrimage, along with everything else my life throws at me, but on either side of the cable lays a void, dark as water on a moonless midnight. In this dark void, defeat waits for me to acquiescence for a simpler day, a simpler life in which I don't push my body and mind to the extreme places I need them to inhabit. I must continue on my path. My mind can trick me into inhabiting this void, usually while I am still on the cable. My mind constantly tries to trick me, make me think I'm too tired, overworked, that I need a little rest, that I need a little time to regroup. Accepting these excuses incepts doubt in my ability, the first step toward never running again. Once doubt sits comfortably in my head it may never leave. The cable must be springy enough to bounce on, if it's too slack it bows and slips into the void. The rope feels tight.

I see Mike in my peripheral. "Hey, I'm sorry man. I get a little nuts about this stuff sometimes."

"It's alright man. You're right, we should just do what comes natural. I'm just stressed out, you know?"

"Yeah, I know. I'm sorry about Buckley man. I know you loved him, even if he was a spazz."

"That's one word for it. Yeah he was a good dog, goofy and dumb, but cute."

"Loyal."

We're just guys going here, moving there, with no particular purpose to our journey, just to climb, each step faster than the one before. We embrace pain, continue a

relentless pace forward. Without pain, the pace becomes dull, tarnished, like a mind caught in addiction's snare. Sarah, a girl who jumped into addiction instead of running toward the freedom I knew she attained as a ballet dancer. She worked hard, but in the end she worked hard at the wrong things and it compromised her life, and almost compromised mine as well. She brought me back. She brought Mike back too. So many people remember her, but what did they do to honor her? What did they do to honor her life?

Maybe everyone's sense of honoring the dead varies. Actually, I'm sure does, but there have to be universalities. We've all made choices for our lives based on others' deaths. We have to learn from the deceased's mistakes, or we might as well be deceased ourselves. Practice strains both the mind and body, but becomes easier as it becomes routine. There is no routine to death. It happens once. We have no more choices afterward.

Sarah, today is fine, thanks to you being there somewhere, smiling at me regardless of how many times I curse your choices. In the end you're really all I've got to keep me grounded, to keep life from pushing me forward too fast, to keep me free. It's slow right now and the scenery passes by in intricate detail, every tiny limbed tree, every small fluttering bird, every glint of sunshine on even the smallest of puddles radiates in full, and undeniably beautiful, focus. Thank you for talking to me in your own special way these past years, for keeping me aware of the dark void lurking around every bend on the trail.

BIOGRAPHY

Matthew P. Christovich II graduated from Sherando High School, Stephens City, Virginia, in 1997. He received his Bachelor of Arts from George Mason University in 2012. He is currently employed as a teacher in Fairfax County.