

Toeing the Line:
A Short Story Collection about Class and Government

Penny Quinteros

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Robert Glück
Rebecca Brown

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Penny R. Quinteros

University of Washington

Abstract

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Penny R. Quinteros

Chair of the Supervisory Committee:
Professor, Thesis Advisor Robert Glück
School of Interdisciplinary Arts and Sciences – Bothell

Toeing the Line: A Short Story Collection about Class and Government includes two parts: the first is an artist statement/poetics essay, the second is a creative ensemble of short stories. The essay delves into the understanding of poetics particularly as it relates to the working class. The author identifies the *poetics of interruption* as a function of being a working-class writer and elaborates on the challenges faced by writers who are also struggling with poverty. The creative

piece interacts with the essay as an example of how the author uses poetics as an active tool of creativity rather than a passive tool of literary critique. Additionally the author uses her experiences with the government to inform the essay and discuss authority as a restriction on creativity.

The second part of the thesis is a collection of short stories that are very dissimilar. They range from standard fiction to postmodern fiction and from fact to fantasy. The longer pieces are broken up (interrupted) by shorter pieces that are meant to act as a mental “pallet cleanser.” Despite their differences, they are all meant to share a similarity in discussing working-class characters. Frequently the government (of one variety or another) appears in the stories and acts as an antagonist or plays an oppressive role in the background. Collectively the stories serve to inform the essay and act as examples of both the *poetics of interruption* and active poetics.

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for Rodrigo, Madison, and Daniel:

because you love me even when I'm writing

Artist Statement

I haven't always been a writer, at least I didn't always feel like *a writer*. I got my undergraduate degree in Political Science, and although much writing was involved, it didn't bring with it the feel of being *a writer*. In fact, it wasn't until shortly before I applied to my master's program that I started to think I might be able to turn my talent for stringing words together into a cohesive thing. That thing, as it turns out, was being *a writer* which is a pleasant hodgepodge of a profession, a hobby, and a lifestyle. I wanted to be *a writer*, but I didn't know how to do that so I dabbled in writing which is where most writers start. Eventually I realized I might need professional help, so I applied to writing programs. After a short search I was accepted into the University of Washington – Bothell's Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing and Poetics program (UWB, MFA). Now I find myself finishing up that program and sharing my thoughts on being *a writer*.

I introduce myself this way, not to belittle my accomplishments or writing, but to make it clear that I really came from understanding nothing about poetics, intentionality, experimental writing, etc. I have learned a great deal, but also realize that there is never an end to this learning process. I want to share my experiences with others, like myself, who are not schooled in the intricacies of being *a writer* but find themselves wanting to write.

I have come to develop a working-theory of my poetics which I call the “poetics of interruption.” The term “poetics of interruption” isn't mine, but I believe I have a unique understanding of the idea of interruption, particularly as it relates to class. I will flesh-out this theory later, but essentially it involves the idea that *a writer* is not just a writer but also a parent, a child, a spouse, a worker, a debtor, a friend and so on. The “poetics of interruption” also deals

with the unique challenges faced by working-class writers with many responsibilities as opposed to those I call the “writing elite” who able to write in a more focused way. I suspect the “writing elite” may be more of an invented pinnacle than any actual person, but the idea serves to illustrate just how interrupted our lives and our work can become.

In 2012, when I was applying to MFA programs, I read a statement on the UWB’s MFA website that described poetics as, “How we write what we write.” This was my first interaction with the idea of poetics. At the time I didn’t know how complex theories of poetics could be. I just knew “How we write what we write.”

Merriam-Webster’s defines poetics as, “a treatise on poetry or aesthetics,” or “a particular theory of poetry or sometimes other literary forms,” or “poetic feelings or utterances” (“Poetics”). Other definitions or explanations seem to share a common theme. Poetics is a way to understand poetry or literature. While this paradigm of poetics might be useful to the literary critic, it isn’t very useful to the author herself because it implies that poetics is something that has already happened. It is a passive technique of study.

That wasn’t the type of poetics that we were studying in school. We studied poetics as an engaging and vibrant force of creativity. We studied scholars and authors who viewed poetics as the thoughts underlying inspiration. Sometime between reading Nathaniel Mackey and Marguerite Duras, and through the mentorship of my teachers and engagement with my peers, I came up with my own working definition of poetics. Poetics is the method and manner of a writer’s creativity. It acts like a tool in the writer’s toolbox. It asks the question: How do I turn my creativity into an active rather than passive endeavor? (Passivity in this regard might be waiting endlessly for “inspiration.”)

That isn't to say that this is a new definition or some marvelous revelation in the field of poetics. Certainly most of the poetics essays I read seemed to see poetics in this active manner. For example, Judith Butler in "On Linguistic Vulnerability," discusses how language can be an act in of itself (illocutionary speech), rather than simply a passive act of signifying something else (perlocutionary speech) (3). So, even though I am not breaking new poetics ground, for me it is helpful to clarify my basic understanding.

How do I use my poetics actively? Much of my creativity comes from my life, whether I am writing about the most common event, or far-flung fantasy. In all facets of my work I can identify things that are unique to me. It is no surprise, for example, coming from a Political Science background, that much of my work involves interaction with the government and my perceptions of a deep, inequitable division of classes in our society. I like to draw from my "writer's archive" of experience to give me a starting point.

The "writer's archive," is a term I first heard from Cia Rinne during a panel discussion on "Liveness" in 2014 at the UWB (Rinne). Although she didn't define the term, she used it in a way that suggested it was the accumulation of her experiences and memories. It also includes those things such as mis-remembered memories, thoughts, dreams, and those little bits of life that everyone experiences but never really thinks about. Some writers keep a journal, but a writer's archive is not limited to that.

I like to examine my writer's archive from time to time: to blow away the dust and remove the cobwebs. Not everything I find in my memories is great or dramatic, but that's *ok* because it is still mine.

When writing, I try to keep the useful things I find from my writer's archive and pack away the rest. Not everything should be used at once, or ever. But packing away thoughts, or

hanging onto them, is not always an easy thing to do. Recently my thoughts have been filled with the mundanity of everyday life. Wash the dishes; wash the laundry; trip over the dirty laundry; the dog peed in the house again; answer the phone, not the other phone; my doctor's appointment is tomorrow: Thoughts like these fill my mind all the time, to the point that I can't think of anything else, to the point that I can't write. I call this my *Poetics of Interruption*.

Interruption has a distinctive place in the literary world, particularly in experimental writing and work by women writers. Kathleen Fraser used interruption as a technique when she quite literally printed out her poem *hi dde violet I dde violet* in as large a font as possible and cut it up using scissors, then rearranged the sections (Fraser and Rosenthal). Fraser understood that interruption could be used in her poetry to articulate the interruption women authors endure (Hogue).

Lydia Davis, a writer of innovative short-story fiction, in a piece published by Fraser's *HOW(ever)* journal describes interruption like this:

Doesn't the unfinished work tend to throw our attention onto the work as artifact, or the work as process, rather than the work as conveyer of meaning, of message? Does this add to the pleasure or the interest of the text?

Any interruption, either of our expectations or of the smooth surface of the work itself--either by breaking it off, confusing it, leaving it actually unfinished--foregrounds the work as artifact, as object, rather than as invisible purveyor of meaning, emotion, atmosphere. Constant interruption, fragmentation, also keeps returning the reader not only to the real world, but to a consciousness of his or her own mind at work. (Davis)

In 2013 Maged Zaher shared a philosophy of his creative practice with my MFA program in an address at the UWB's Fall Convergence conference. Zaher said that he was working with a "poetics of exhaustion," and that many of his pieces were short because he was pushed to the point of exhaustion and he didn't have any more time to write longer works (Zaher). When asked if he was working under the literary theory of exhausting all possible ways to write something, Zaher said, "No, I'm just literally fucking exhausted." My idea of the "poetics of interruption" is similar, more about creative practice than about creative process. It is less about the interior mind, than it is about the exterior world.

In my practice, interruption is an actual force I have to labor under. For example; when writing *Execution* or *Mary* I envisioned a very "intense" authorial voice. Creating this voice required a certain build-up of my emotions and maintaining it wasn't easy. Any interruption – cooking dinner, taking my kids to school, or even something as small as the telephone ringing – meant I had to re-engage with this intense part of myself. Many times I would fail to find the original voice, and write work that I would later edit out. The process was much longer than it ought to have been simply because interruptions led to long recovery periods.

My other responsibilities, many of which trump writing time, were interfering with my ability to get my work done. My kids can't go to school without clean clothes, I can't miss my doctor's appointments, it is always my brother's (I have one) or sister's (I have four) or niece's or nephew's (I have lots) birthday, and so on. These are things everyone deals with, and I realize that I am not alone in this problem of interruption. All writers deal with interruptions of course, but those with a host of other responsibilities (the working class) must deal with more than those

with fewer responsibilities (the writing elite). Serial interruption is a function of the working-class writer.

I am using the term “working class” but I want to emphasize that this includes all writers who are poor or of modest incomes including: the under-employed, the unemployable (disabled, felons etc.), and the rural poor, not just the urban worker. I use the terms “writing elite” to describe those writers who are able to devote almost their full attention to their writing endeavor (no writer is able to devote a hundred percent of their attention to writing).

Working class writers have more responsibilities and obligations than their affluent counterparts. The main distraction for working class writers is likely to be their job or jobs. Elite writers are likely to see their writing as a component of their job, like writers-in-residence or professors. I can say that when I worked for a fast-food establishment writing or even thinking about writing wasn't an option. Writing wasn't discussed by any of my co-workers except as part of my “weirdness.” Working class writers take care of their children versus having child-care; clean the house versus having a maid; take care of bills versus having an accountant. These interruptions can also be writing related. A working class writer acts as her own editor versus being able to pay a professional editor; or she self-publishes because she doesn't have a network of connections to agents and publishers.

Catherine Rankovic, a poet and essayist, had this to say on the matter of working-class poetics:

...poor and working-class writers may not know how one goes about publishing one's work, or how to promote it. They may never see a living, breathing, published writer, much less get to know one. The lack of social/psychological support for their writing will usually also curtail the amount of writing

accomplished. It is also hard to persist in asserting that writing is your work when the people around you define "work" as physical labor. In essence, a working-class writer writes without a role model, a mentor, or economic or psychological support. No wonder there are so few of them. (Rankovic)

Rankovic discusses the second important part of the "poetics of interruption." Working class writers must work in an environment where writing is seen as a luxury or hobby rather than a profession. In this view, everything else becomes more important than writing, making interruptions more distracting.

I had the opportunity to interview Suzanne Williams, a successful children's book author, who said that for her, writing had to make money. She didn't even consider other forms of writing because she didn't want to "invest" her time away from her children and her few free hours if her investment wasn't going to be "productive" (Williams). Incentive to see writing as an investment also leads the working class writer into a type of work (such as genre fiction) which may be more commercially successful than poetry or experimental prose.

In essence, the "poetics of interruption" operates under these two principals: First, being a working-class author means having many obligations beyond writing which lead to serial interruption; Second, being a working class author means that interruptions are more distracting because other obligations are seen as more important than writing.

Let me try to recognize "interruption" in another writer's work. One writer who visited our MFA class was Richard Chiem, who is known for his short-story collection *You Private Person*. When asked how he found time to write, Chiem said that he made himself write for at least an hour every day when he got home from work (Chiem). Writing in short, segmented time-

periods is necessary for the working-class writer, but it also reflects a poetics of interruption in the work. Chiem said that he sees his writing as similar to putting together a film with short “shots.” I suspect this collage type writing might be a result of the short bursts of writing Chiem described. I don’t know Chiem’s social status, but it is clear that his other work influences his writing behavior.

In my thesis work I found that interruptions caused me to want to write much shorter pieces. I couldn’t maintain the concentration needed for longer pieces. Recognizing this problem and trying to embrace it as part of “active” poetics, I allowed my work to be shorter than I might want (I like to read longer works). Some of the works included here are less than a page long. I have tried to place these works throughout the thesis as “palette cleansers” to the longer pieces of fiction. They occupy a moment without pushing in any direction. Two examples of this are “Remembering Teegan,” and “The Spanking Paddle.” These pieces develop emotional resonance with the reader – a moment or thought.

I also tried to bring interruption into a story as a metaphor. This was the idea behind “The Real Life,” in which the reader is constantly interrupted. Hopefully readers will experience some frustration, but also, through their frustration, learn to let go of their expectations.

I have explained how the “poetics of interruption” can be a function of class, but other working-class issues also show up in my work. I feel the heavy weight of my class. I grew up in a very poor family. I didn’t necessarily know that we were poor, but looking back, I can recognize the times when my mother hid that she was going to the food bank and when she pawned items to pay the bills. Because so much of my “writer’s archive” comes from my childhood, I try to stay true to my identity as a working-class author. Most of my stories in this

thesis involve people from the working class. I find these stories easier to write because I identify with these characters.

Working-class poetics for me involves both the inclusion of working-class characters and a working-class aesthetic. Catherine Rankovic describes working class aesthetics:

... poetry written by someone of poor or working-class origin--regardless of whether the author has obtained a middle-class education or income--is often strongly marked by honesty (the blunt kind) and "disruptive" or "unpleasant" emotions "forbidden" to those with middle-class upbringings: Anger. Bitterness. Self-pity. Finger-pointing. Depression (unless diagnosed and treated -- medicalized). Self-aggrandizement which is an obvious antidote against a sense of inferiority. Worldviews or politics often dogmatic... (Rankovic)

Many of my pieces are “blunt” or “disruptive.” For example, in *Mary* a homeless woman prostitutes herself for the first time. I tried to mimic exactly the woman’s thoughts as this occurred, even the disassociation. It can be a little embarrassing when people I know read my work (I hope my kids don’t), but I don’t care if strangers see it as offensive. Bobbie West, a poet, asked the question, “Must all of our poetic endeavors ‘reek of brains’ (as one friend once put it) in order to be valued?” (West)

Call it a matter of pride, but I included a wide variety of pieces in this thesis just to show that I could. One of the main problems working-class writers face is that they often aren’t educated in the arts to engage the aesthetics valued by the elitist-writing community. I have been, so I want to show off just a little. I want to stay true to my working-class background, but I recognize that I have a college degree and have been to graduate school. Despite the fact that I

have degrees, my lifestyle is still working-class, and I want to remain true to my basic principles and not give in to an art community that sees my background as somehow less significant than theirs. Dodie Bellamy seemed to struggle with this same issue when she was writing about how the art-elite patronizes and diminishes working-class authors. “[To them] being working class is like being fat. It’s your own fault. You’d do something about it if you really cared about yourself” (Bellamy).

Carolyn Chute, author of *The Beans of Egypt, Maine* discussed this patronization in an interview by Ellen Lesser. Chute says that because she is from an impoverished, rural background, people in the art world felt entitled to make up stories or misrepresent facts about both herself and her book’s characters (174). Essentially Chute felt that, in the beginning, her work was disregarded because people saw the poor characters as “types” rather than as real people.

My stories deal with social class in America, but many of them also deal with the government. Although this focus was unintentional I think it relates back to my “writer’s archive.” I worked for the Federal Government for seven years. I have seen first-hand the way that the government stifles creativity and innovation. This isn’t done by one person, but rather through the codification of government culture. For example, it is acceptable in the bureaucracy of the government to do things the “wrong” way if they are written wrongly in the policy manual. Even though my colleagues and I knew our actions would cause headaches if not actual harm to the public, we still had to follow the rules. This experience is reflected in the story *VA* when the Sarah knows that Mr. George is being shuffled through the system, but she does only her job and nothing more.

Most people haven't had direct interaction with the government bureaucracy except for small events like getting a driver's license or paying for a traffic ticket. They tend to think that the government's internal policy codes are not important enough to think about. Most people don't see evil lurking in bureaucracy, but the government doesn't have a heart, or feelings, or impetus to change. I can easily imagine the government acting as the antithesis of creative culture, and some of these feelings have made their way into my stories. It's clear in *Error: Mason Kelly* that the society is based around "the Government" as a force that suppresses individuality because it is not efficient.

Within my MFA program we approached poetics as an active and engaging force behind creativity, rather than as an aspect of literary critique. Throughout my thesis work, I have attempted to understand and develop my poetics. Hopefully this artist's statement provides the reader with an opportunity to reflect upon it as well. I have tried to share what I have learned in my master's program and to develop some of my own thoughts and theories about poetics, particularly as it relates to interruption and the working class.

I believe that interruption, lack of respect for writing in the working-class community, and disdain from elitist writers are challenges that working-class writers face, but they aren't insurmountable. A greater understanding these issues is necessary to further the discourse of social class within the writing world.

The Life of Esmeralda Baker

Esmeralda hung up the receiver. She shouldn't have, but she knew someone was in the house and she wasn't the kind of woman to just sit back and let other people take care of her. At eighty-two she still carried a bit of meat on her bones, and the ladies down at the Baptist church always told her that she didn't look a day over fifty. Sweet ladies, even though she knew they were lying through their teeth. Her husband Davie, may he rest in peace, kept a baseball bat in the umbrella stand and always told her, "Ezzie, if ya have'ta use it, give 'em everythin' ya got." She had it now, gripped in dark hands that were wrinkled with age and still carrying callouses from her years of hard work.

The house was only one story, a cute little rambler that, back when they had bought it, had been in a nice neighborhood. Now all the old neighbors had moved on, either to live in the old folks home or the cemetery, and the new neighbors had installed bars on the windows years ago. Her once white porch sagged and wore a sad gray and her front lawn was mostly weeds grown as tall as her knees except when the boys from the church came to mow it for her. But this was home to Ezzie, and wasn't no one going make her leave it.

She knew someone broke in because when she came in the back with her groceries the door had been jimmied open and the frame split on one side, but it wasn't until she heard a noise from down in the cellar that she phoned the police. Now she patted her gray bun, and after working up the nerve, opened the cellar door.

“Who goes there,” she hollered down the stairs. “I know you’re there, come on out now.” She was proud of the way that her voice barely wavered. There was no answer, but she could tell that someone was down here because the air felt different. If you lived in a place as long as she had you got to know when something felt off.

“Come on now, you know you’ve done wrong. Come on out and face the medicine.” She punctuated her statement by banging her bat on the railing. It made a hollow cracking sound as it split a chip off the dry old wood of the handrail.

“Fuck off, Grandma,”

“Who goes there! Show yourself.”

A skinny young white boy stood up from behind a shelf of last summer’s jarred tomatoes. He couldn’t have been twenty, and he was rail thin. He probably hadn’t had a good meal for a while. His clothes were dirty and torn and his pants sagged practically to his knees. His greasy hair hung half over his face. She had great-grandkids that were older than him. Worst of all he had a silver pistol pointed right at her, but Ezzie wasn’t too afraid of guns, not like some people who hadn’t grown up around them.

“Back off, bitch. Don’t think I won’t shoot you.” His hand was shaking so bad he had to put the other one up to steady it.

“Listen here, ain’t ya got anything better to do than stealing from old women?” she shouted down the stairs. “You get on outta here now before the police get here.” She backed up off the stairs to the other side of the hallway, leaving an open path for the boy to run.

“You’re lying. You didn’t call no cops.”

“Son, I did that first thing. Now go on before you get yourself in more trouble.”

Ezzie picked out the sound of sirens as they wailed their way down the street. First time they’ve hurried out to this neighborhood in years, she thought regretfully.

“Hurry now, there they are.”

“Don’t fuck with me, Grandma.” The young man either didn’t hear the sirens from where he was, or he didn’t care because he just eyeballed the boxes she had in storage looking for something of value.

“Police, open up!” A loud knock rattled the front door.

“Shit,” the young man said as he bounded up the stairs two or three steps at a time. He pushed by her as he ran for the back door, knocking her into the wall. She hit her head and fell to the carpet. He skidded to a stop when he saw two officers out the kitchen window. They had their guns drawn.

“Fuck,” he said, then hollered, “Don’t come any closer. I’ve got a gun and I’ll kill the old bitch if you come in.” The officers ducked out of sight, but Ezzie could hear them radioing.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck,” the boy said as he scrambled back into the hallway and crouched down next to where she was still sitting.

“Well, what now, son?” Then not being able to help herself, she chuckled.

“Shut-up, SHUT-UP,” he shouted in her face.

“Well, it’s your own damn fault. Ain’t got the sense to run when you’ve been caught out red-handed.” She should’ve been quiet, but her dander was up.

“Fuck,” he said again. She wondered if he knew any other words.

“Listen, ain’t nothing you can do ta make it any better. Might as well just go on out there with your hands up. You’ll get a light sentence for coming in peacefully. Otherwise it’s just gonna go all ta hell. You’d be lucky those police officers don’t fill you up with bullets.”

“What do you know about it, Grandma.” He was up in her face again with his gun pointing at her.

Ezzie smiled. “Look at me, son, I’m as black as midnight and as old as sin. Don’t you think I don’t know a thing or two about the police? In my day they’d as soon as shoot me as look at me.” She looked the boy over. “Course, with your coloring, clean you up a bit, give you a haircut, and before you know it your lawyer will be calling you a ‘misguided youth’.”

His eyes might have softened a just a little bit. He sat on his rump across from her and leaned his head back against the wall. He sighed. “I can’t go out there. People are looking for me. The kind of people who can find you in jail.”

“You’re in with the gangs?”

He shrugged and dropped his shoulders.

“You got a name?”

Instead of answering, he scrambled on his knees to the front room and peeked behind the window curtains. He must not of liked what he saw because he ducked back down and came scrambling back to the hallway.

“How many are out there?” she asked.

“Five or six.”

She nodded. “You probably won’t get no more. Not ‘round here. Listen, I’m starting to see stars, you mind if I lay down on the davenport?” The pain in her head, from being banged into the wall, was spreading behind her eyes.

“I don’t think that’s such a good idea. What if they have snipers?”

Ezzie couldn’t help it. She burst out with a laugh that made her head hurt even more. “Son, you’ve been watching too many movies. If they got snipers out there, then I’m the next Pope.”

He thought about it for a minute then nodded. With his say-so she tried to get up to her feet, but couldn’t get them under her right. She had been sitting on the ground too long, and her hip was so tender from falling she wasn’t sure she could get it under her.

Seeing her struggle, the boy grabbed her by the arm and helped her to her feet. He held her arm as she walked to the faded yellow sofa in the living room. It was a good thing too, because halfway there she felt faint, and had to wait for a minute until the feeling passed. He settled her in place with a pillow that matched the sofa behind her head.

“You ok, Miss Ezzie?” he asked her quietly as he sat on her coffee table.

“Oh yes dear. I’m fine, just old. Do I know you? How’d you know my name?”

He blushed, a crimson that washed up his face and could be seen even under the dirt. He mumbled something.

“Speak up son, I can’t hear you. And get off the table.”

“I said I used to cut your grass,” he mumbled again, but loud enough for her to make out this time. He hung his head and scooted his behind from the table down to the floor. He found something very interesting in the carpeting to look at.

She looked at him. Tried to imagine him without the hair, the dirt, and the hard look life had given him. “Jesse Tyler? Your mama used ta have’ta drag you to my house practically by the ear. Where’d your mama go? One day she just stopped coming ta church.”

The white boy ignored her. He just sat on the ground fiddling with his pistol. His hands shook. Not the shakes of being scared, the shakes of drugs leaving his body.

“Don’t worry, the police won’t know your name from me,” She said.

“She found a new husband, and moved out to L.A.,” he answered. “I didn’t want to leave my friends, so I stayed here. She didn’t want me with her anyway.”

Ezzie tsk’ed. Damn women these days, always chasing after men. “Way I remember it, you didn’t have no friends, always were alone reading, or listening to your music.”

Jesse didn’t answer again, but he gave her a look that practically broke her heart it was filled with so much regret.

“Well, after all this is over, I’ll call her for you if you want. Maybe you can go stay with them for awhile, get yourself cleaned up.” Her head was really spinning now. She closed her eyes.

When she opened them again, someone was standing over her, but she couldn’t make out who it was. She squinted.

“Miss Ezzie, I said wake up,” the figure said, shaking her arm.

“I wasn’t sleeping, I was just restin’ my eyes,” she said sneaking in a white lie as her thoughts came back to her. The light in the room was dimmer. It was getting dark, and she could hear a voice shouting on a loudspeaker outside. The police were probably tired of waiting around.

“Miss Ezzie, help me get out of here? I got to get out of here,” the boy said. “I can’t go to jail. I just can’t.” He was pacing, and his shaking had grown worse. The cops outside would just not stop with the loudspeaker.

“SHUT-UP, SHUT-UP,” he yelled as loud as he could. His pacing was frantic now. “I’ll kill myself. I’ll shoot myself in the head right here on your carpet.” He put the pistol to his head. Ezzie was afraid he just might.

“Naw son, don’t do that. Be calm, just be calm.” The room was spinning and she felt like she could sick up. She leaned back into the pillows and watched the boy.

“Miss Ezzie, you doing ok?” He was shaking her arm again.

“I’m alright,” she said with a start. Had she nodded off again? “I’m more worried about you.”

“I’m scared ma’am. I don’t want to go to jail.” His face broke and he started to cry with guttural sobs. “I’m sorry, I’m so sorry.” He looked at the pistol in his hand like it was the root of all evil.

Ezzie hefted herself to her feet. It wasn’t easy. “It’s alright child, everything is gonna to be okay. Don’t cry.” She wrapped him up in her big arms, and he put his head on her shoulder.

“Come on now. You and I both know there is only one way out of this situation. You just got to go out there and give yourself up. Things will work themselves out. You tell the cops you need protection and they will take care of you. You’re going to be just fine.”

She felt Jesse nod his head against her shoulder and she gave him one final squeeze before letting him go. “Go on out there now.”

He wiped the tears from his face with the back of the hand holding the pistol. He wiped his nose with his T-shirt. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry,” he whispered again.

“It’s alright child. I forgive you.”

“Do you think you can call my mom and let her know? I don’t want to have to tell her...” Outside had gone quiet for a minute, but she still heard the police radios through the windows and the bright lights still came through the curtains.

“I’ll make sure she knows,” she promised.

He nodded and placed the gun on the table. He turned to go, but paused with his hand on the doorknob. “Thanks Miss Ezzie.”

Jesse opened the door and light flooded the room. He turned his face away from the glare and raised his hands to cover his eyes. The police had him lie down right there on her little porch – hands behind his back, thumbs up. He looked at her and she stared back at him. A police officer, a white man with a comfortably chubby face, came up and dropped his heavy boot on his back. Jesse winced and tried to wriggle his body into a more comfortable position. Another officer, a woman with dark hair, wrapped a pair of handcuffs around his wrists.

Ezzie watched the scene unfold before her. No one came in to check on her. Her eyes drifted to the silver pistol sitting on a crochet doily she had made herself. Anger grew inside of her belly and burned its way up into her throat. How dare that little shit come in here to try and take what she and her late husband had worked so hard to get. She was angry with him for being so stupid. It was his own fault for getting caught up with gangs. She was angry with his mama for leaving him. She was angry with herself for getting him caught and for being so helpless. Her hands started to shake and she tucked them up under her arms. The anger washed out of her. She felt cold. Her eyes sought out Jesse's again, but he was already being hustled to a patrol car. She would have to call his mama now.

"You alright Mrs. Baker?" the woman officer asked as she patted Ezzie on the shoulder.

Ezzie wanted to say *no* she wanted to say that things weren't alright, but she didn't know how to explain what was wrong, instead she said, "Oh yes dear, I'm fine, just fine."

Remembering Teegan

Once a month, close to a high school in my neighborhood, I drive by a sign. It is a big blue banner, stretched against a wooden fence. The sign reads, “Remember Teegan,” and has the picture of a smiling, brown haired teenager placed in the corner. I didn’t know Teegan. I never met him. I don’t know his family. I’ve never seen a newspaper article about his death. I don’t know who he was or why I should remember him, but I *do* remember him.

I remember him when I feel guilty as I drive by the sign because I still haven’t investigated to see who Teegan was. But he is not what he was. He is this now. He is the smiling face. He is the boy with a little bit of acne, but who had to take the school picture anyway. He is the boy with the unique name who got picked on in elementary school, but who grew to be pretty cool in high school.

I feel his loss, not personally but communally. Teegan bags groceries for me at the supermarket and carries them outside even when it is raining. Teegan comes to my door selling candy with a big smile on his face. Teegan plays football for the high school. The team got to the state championship, but lost. Teegan acts in the school play, and has his face on the flyer. Teegan is the quiet kid I see reading on the bus. He is the one who brushes past me, laughing with his friends, as he walks down the street.

VA

Sarah delicately pushed aside an overgrown blackberry bush, but still got scratched on the back of her hand. Her low heels poked into the spongy turf and she almost lost her balance, but she flung her briefcase out wide to steady herself.

Sarah worked for the VA. It wasn't her job to approve or disapprove applications, simply to help the veteran fill out forms. Sometimes she would be asked by family members or social services to visit veterans at their residences to help them. Today she was here to take the application of Robert George, based upon a recommendation from Social Services. The instructions in the paperwork told her to go around to the side of the house, but that was proving harder than she thought it would be. Why couldn't this have been like that middle-aged executive filing for hearing loss she had handled last week?

The yard was full of junk: broken down cars, car parts, bicycle frames, buckets with holes in them, and broken toys. A quick glance in the windows showed a house full to the rafters with stuff. She didn't get close enough to see exactly what. The porch looked rotten and she didn't want to put a foot through it. There was one little trail that ran around back, but it was slippery from the recent rain, and she had to twist and turn to avoid scraping herself on various bits of rusted metal.

"Mr. George," she yelled. There was no answer.

"Mr. George, it's Sarah Young from the VA." She raised her voice. "You were set up for an appointment today." There was still no answer, so she continued forward. Mr. George better be here. She wasn't going to make another trip.

When she got to the back yard her foot finally lost its battle with the muddy ground and slipped out from under her. Her rump landed with a splash right in the worst part of the mud. Damn it – she was still new to her job and she didn't have that many suits.

A grubby wrinkled hand poked out of the bushes. It startled her. It was followed by an equally grubby face.

“Careful, it's slippery,” the man said gruffly. He blew the words out through his grey mustache. His beard covered him down to his chest. He was dressed in overalls that once might have been blue, with a flannel shirt underneath. A floppy fishing hat held back his long hair. She took his offered hand and he pulled her out of the mud. She tried to wipe the worst of the mud off as she followed him.

He led her back to a little clearing surrounded by used mattresses. They'd been left out in the rain. A tent was there, along with a camp stove that had been set on a box of baked beans, some of which were opened others were still closed. Buckets surrounded the area, presumably for water and toilet. She looked for somewhere she could sit and decided on one of the empty buckets when he snapped, “Don't touch that”.

“Are you Robert George?” She used her professionalism like a shield.

“Yeah.”

“I'm Sarah Young, from the VA. Did you know you were set up for an interview today?”

“Yeah.”

Sarah looked around and sighed. “Do you expect me to stand up during the whole interview?”

Mr. George got a mean look on his face, but it passed quickly. He pulled in one side of his cheek to chew on it. “Wait here.”

He went rummaging through some of the stacks of stuff and after a few false starts eventually came up with a folding camping chair. He opened it with a snap for her. He brushed off some of the spider webs and other debris and motioned for her to sit. She did – reluctantly. Mr. George sat across from her on a box mysteriously labeled, *Canned Meats*.

“Mr. George, do you know the process of what we have to do, or would you like me to explain it to you?” She opened her briefcase and took a couple of forms out of their crisp white stacks. She balanced the briefcase on her knees like a writing desk, and put the forms on the back of it.

“No,” he answered. He pulled his mustache hairs into his mouth and blew them out.

“Well, in order to file for disability, you’ll have to submit a VA 21-526, and a VA 21-4142, along with all relevant evidence. This should include but isn’t limited to your DD-214’s and treatment records.” She tapped each form as she talked about it.

“I’m not disabled.” His tone was curt and final.

Sarah blinked. Her eyes strayed to her surroundings. Clearly this man needed help. “Well, Mr. George, if you aren’t disabled, then why did you set up an appointment to file for disability benefits?”

“They said I had to.” Mr. George pulled his mustache hairs into his mouth and blew them out over and over.

“Who said you had to?” Maybe it was his relatives or someone who could help her get through to him.

“The people from the county.”

“What?” That didn’t make sense.

“They said I had to get VA benefits.” Talking this much seemed to be painful for him, and he leaned back and crossed his arms in front of himself.

“Did they say why?”

“They said I had to get VA benefits in order to get my land taxes eliminated.”

“I see.” Disabled veterans did get a lot of breaks from other government offices, but whoever had set up the appointment was probably just shuffling him through the system. She had just started her job, but she knew how things worked. She had even done some shuffling herself.

She took off her glasses, rubbed her eyes then put her glasses back on again. Maybe he would be less reluctant if he saw the benefit of what he was doing.

“So you do want to file for benefits then?” She couldn’t help the smidgen of triumph in her voice.

“Guess so,” he said.

“Well, in that case, Mr. George what do you do for work?” It was easiest to start with the non-medical stuff.

“Oh, sell stuff here and there. Find it, take it home and fix it.”

“So, no steady employment then?”

“No.”

“Do you have any physical impairments from your time in the service?”

He showed her a bullet wound in his right calf. His legs were pasty white compared with the rest of him. “Went clean through,” he said, showing her both sides of the injury.

“Do you have any lasting damage from the injury?” she asked. She was getting back to the form questions. It made her job easier to follow the script.

“Aches sometimes. When it rains especially.” She noted his complaints.

“How about any current mental or physical impairments?”

“Nope.”

“Well, when was the last time you’ve seen a doctor?” She didn’t want to tell him something was wrong with him, but obviously something was.

“Haven’t been seen since I got out of the service.” It sounded like a point of pride for him.

“And when was that?”

“1976”

“Do you still have your DD-214’s” All service men knew what their discharge papers were called.

“Nope, lost ‘em when I got divorced.”

“Would you be willing to be evaluated by the VA doctors?” They were really contracted doctors, not VA doctors, but she wasn’t willing to go into that convoluted government mess.

“Guess so.”

“One last question, what branch of the service were you in? Army?”

He looked a little offended, and pulled his lips into a line. “Marine Corp. Miss.”

“Semper Fi,” she said.

“Hoorah,” he answered and for the first time in what must have been ages, Mr. Robert George smiled.

Sarah stacked her forms back in her briefcase, and carefully set his completed application on the top. Like a proper marine, Mr. George helped her back along the muddy path, and steadied her arm when she slipped. She made it back to her car and shook his hand.

On the way back to the office Sarah thought about Mr. Robert George – encapsulated in his own little world. He didn’t really want disability benefits, but she hoped he would get them anyway. The world owed him a break. She didn’t get to make those decisions though. All she could do was her job, fill out her forms, and hope that things would be okay. She sighed as she turned on her windshield wipers. It was raining again.

Salley Mae

Salley Mae Louis parked in the grocery store lot, and struggled out of her used Honda Civic. Her large leg got stuck under the steering wheel, but she managed to wiggle it free. The car rocked back when she stood, giving what sounded like a sigh of relief.

Salley Mae was in her mid-forties. Her hair that was frozen in the 80's with a can of super-strength hairspray. She sported a pink velour jump-suit and her blue flip-flops matched her blue eye-shadow. Salley Mae had run a daycare out of her trailer park home, until the State of Mississippi closed it down. Now she lived off of her husband's Social Security, but she always scraped together a few dollars to spend on the PowerBall drawing.

When she got into the store she picked up a magazine from the display by the register. She liked to find out which celebrity was sleeping with this other celebrity's husband. She threw the gossip rag into the buggy she was pushing, and saw that bananas were on sale. Hadn't she seen something in the magazine about a new banana facial that was supposed to be the secret to getting rid of wrinkles? She decided she would pick some up to test it out.

She brought her goodies up to the customer service counter to pay. The kid behind the counter rolled his eyes.

“Son, you ought to mind your manners with me, ‘cause I’m in no mood to be fussin’,” she corrected him while handing him her lottery ticket numbers.

She played the same numbers week in and week out and she planned to play the same numbers until she died. He ignored her and rang up her purchases, handing her back two dollar bills and some change. Two dollars was just enough to get one more ticket.

“Give me a quick-pick” she said and gave him back the money.

“10, 20, 25, 50, 53,” and “35”. *Hmmf, lousy numbers*, she thought. She put the two tickets in her enormous handbag. Later that evening when she was resting in her recliner, her husband flipped on the lotto drawing. “10, 20, 25, 50, 53,” and “35” the pretty back-up anchor read off. Not her weekly numbers. She forgot all about the quick-pick sitting at the bottom of her bag.

Salley Mae wasn't one to watch the news or read the paper, so she didn't notice the coverage regarding the unclaimed lottery ticket bought from her favorite grocery store. Six months later the lottery ticket, now a crumpled ball mixed with other receipts, notes, and coupons, was thrown into the rubbish bin as Salley Mae cleaned out her handbag.

Execution

It's loud in here. Everyone is talking at once. You want to tell them to shut up, but you don't. They wouldn't listen to you anyway. The prisoners are shouting at you, trying to get a few minutes of your precious time. The correction officers are talking about you in badly concealed whispers. This infuriates you. You are smarter than all of them, but they still treat you like *you* are the trash. You cover your ears with your hands trying to block out the noise – to find a moment's peace.

How did your life come to this? Doctors and investigators ask you that all the time. Sometimes you spout off psychobabble bullshit – the diagnosis of the day. You told that one reporter bitch, who had the balls to ask, that you were sexually molested as a child. You told another fucker that you were abducted by aliens. That gave you a laugh. But to yourself you can admit you don't know. You've always been this way. You can't imagine being any different. You like it.

It's seven a.m. You have three more hours. That crap about it happening at midnight is total Hollywood. They like to kill people at ten a.m. in this state, so they can get some breakfast afterwards. They will sit and congratulate themselves for being model citizens and gossip about how “the son'bitch pissed his self when they stuck him.”

They take you from your cell then. The CO's are wearing heavy gear, and there are more of them than usual in case you decide to freak out. They shackle your arms and legs and take you out of your cell. You shuffle past the other prisoners. The fat fucks have gone quiet now and are all looking at you. All the inmates here get fat before they die, fed on shit food, but not you. You

thought about it – as a way to give a final “fuck you” to the state – make them pay to cart you out of here – but fat people make you sick so you didn’t.

You take a last look at your cell. It’s been your home for the last fifteen years. There are pictures on the wall and letters from admirers. You get a lot of letters. All of them from people you’ve never met. Women write to tell you they want to marry you. You haven’t taken any of the sluts up on their offers, but the thought puts a smile on your face as you walk out of the cellblock.

The sunlight outside is too bright. You can’t raise your hands high enough to shade your eyes, so you lower your head and squint. The guards, thinking you’re being reluctant, start to pull you by the arms. You notice the smell, or lack of it. This is the first time in years that you’ve been somewhere without an antiseptic stench in the air.

You walk down a sidewalk across the prison yard. It’s hot and you start to sweat. You can feel a trickle running down your back. Guards walk beside and behind you. You don’t have far to go. After about thirty feet you are at the small building innocuously named “Special Facility.” You have seen it before, from a distance, when they let you into the small exercise yard on the other side of the fence. It is a brick building, painted white. It was built in the 80’s like the rest of the facility, and the upkeep here is good. You found this out from the computer in the prison library.

As you enter the building you notice that it is cold inside. The A/C is working overtime. You are led down a short hallway to a large white room. There are fluorescent lights on the ceiling covered with grates. There are two desks on one side of the room covered with telephones. Plastic chairs are scattered around. A metal table holds down the middle of the room.

It looks like any other bureaucratic prison room, except for the cell that they put you into. It is located on one side of the room and in full view of everyone. The guards call it the special prisoner cell, but you know a cage when you see one. Three walls are made of thick wire mesh, and the far wall backs up against the brick of the building. The mesh runs right up into the ceiling, which is higher than you can reach. There is a curtain that can be closed around the cell to give you privacy, but it's located on the other side of the bars.

Inside the cell is a bed, so you decide to sit on it since there isn't a chair. Why can't they give you a fucking chair? There is a new outfit of white coveralls on the bed. There are fresh boxers in your size and white paper shoes. They ask you to dress and then they close the curtain behind you. When you are finished you slide your old clothes out through the metal slot in the door. You sit back on the bed to wait.

Your eyes are drawn to a door painted a dull gray opposite the one that you came in from. It looks wholly unremarkable. Is that where they will do it? Through that door? There is a little window at the top of the door, but you can't see anything through it because you are at a poor angle. It is hard to take your eyes off of it.

There are no other prisoners here. Just you. Outside of your special cell, there is a contingent of guards who are waiting at the desks by the telephones, or at the table relaxing. The warden is there over by the desks and other guards and administrators are coming in and going out. They are acting like they need to get paperwork signed or last minute orders, but you know why they've come. You know the thrill from knowing someone is about to die. It excites you. It excites them.

“Hey,” the warden says, coming up close to the grate, but not too close. “This is your visiting time. You want to see the prison chaplain?”

You refuse because you know the prison chaplain is a fucking nigger. It amuses you to call him a nigger to his face. You like to see how the words worm their way inside of him – how they attack him. You enjoy the power it gives you. Fuck society and their rules. You think about how much the chaplain hates you and that makes you smile.

No one else visits you so the warden doesn’t offer to bring anyone else in. You wonder if your mother will act as a witness for you. You wonder if anyone will.

The room grows quiet. Everyone is waiting. You can hear the clock on the wall ticking behind its protective grate. It sounds fast. It is past seven-thirty.

“Is that the right time?” you ask.

“Yep,” Officer Stiles says. He’s a real talker. He has a hot bitch at home, but no kids. He never told you of course, but you’ve heard it from some of the other prisoners. You don’t know if it’s true.

You touch your eye where your dad broke the socket. Your mom told the doctors that you fell off your bike. The headaches always start there, where the bone was broken. You can feel one starting now.

“Can I have an aspirin?” you ask.

They confer for a bit then come back with an answer. No. It might interfere.

You feel the hate in your guts. You hate the whole damn world. Niggers, bitches, and faggots the lot of them. Psychopathic, that's what the doctor called you. He said you to have "a total lack of respect for society's norms." That doc thought he could flip a switch in your head and make you decent. You didn't tell him there was no fixing whatever was broken inside of you. Eventually he gave up just like everyone else.

"On second thought, send the priest in," you yell across the room to the Warden. Toying with him will drown out the sound of the clock.

Like all priests everywhere, he asks if you have anything you regret – any sins you want to repent. You laugh inside. You don't, but you fake it because that is what you've learned to do. You tell him some of it, but not all of it. No one can know all of it except for you.

You tell him you regret the one you killed in Texas, because of her babies. You regret the skinny one whose Daddy was on the news crying. She was just thirteen, but you didn't know that. The slut looked much older. You tell him you regret the two in Ohio, and you actually do regret this because they are the ones that got you caught. You were sloppy with them – too excited because you hadn't been able to do it for a few months. You weren't careful like you normally were.

You'll never regret the one in Tennessee though – the one that started it all – the one you've been trying to recreate all those times. Even after all these years, the details are sharp in your mind. You think of that one when you are alone and no one is watching you touch yourself.

You tell the priest how you picked her up on campus. You pretended to have a twisted ankle and convinced her you needed her help carrying your books. Bitches couldn't resist the broken bird lure. Their caregiver instincts took over. She helped you to your car and when you

got there you cracked her over the head with a crowbar. It made a wet sound as you hit her. You only hit her once, but you probably should have hit her more, because she started to mumble from the backseat of your car. “I didn’t bring the snacks to the library.” She wasn’t tied up or anything, and for a minute you panicked and wanted to ditch her, but you’re so thankful you didn’t. After that you learned how hard to hit them.

You took her way out into the woods to a private spot where you knew you wouldn’t be interrupted. You duck taped her hands and her mouth before you slapped her awake. You wanted her to know what was going on. You had to wrestle her jeans off. You would look for ones in skirts after that. You raped her and she didn’t struggle. She just looked at you with large sad eyes with tears streaming out of them and long, ragged, breaths coming from her nose. She tried to scream past the tape as you sunk your knife into her soft, sweet belly. You fucked her and stabbed her, and fucked her and stabbed her. You get a hard-on just thinking about it. You don’t try to hide it from the priest.

You don’t tell him about the bodies you kept stashed away in your special spot in the woods where the cops never found them. You don’t tell him about how you used to visit them, to look at them, and how you enjoyed the feeling of owning them. No, you will never tell anyone about that. The power it gave you, to take everything from them: you used them because they were nothing.

Some of the other ones you don’t remember so well. The details blur together and though you try to talk about them it comes out in a confused mess that even you don’t understand. Did you kill that whore in Montana or was that the time you wanted to but got too chicken-shit

because her boyfriend was there? How many did you kill altogether? It pisses you off that you don't know.

Cops from all across the country came to interview you. They ask you about missing women. Were you ever in California? Yes. How many women did you kill there? Who knows. Illinois? No. They are trying to tie up loose ends. They want to find the bodies, but they are yours and you won't give them up. They didn't even offer to take the death penalty off the table. You're not sure you would give them up even then. You do like to string the cops along though, until eventually they get tired of you and stop coming.

You pray with the chaplain, but what you are really praying for is that your shyster lawyer from New York will get you a last minute reprieve. You pray that he isn't screwing your mom out of her last thousand bucks, when you know damn well he is. The chaplain gives you a final blessing then leaves.

Your eyes keep going back to that gray door. Families out there want answers and you are the only one who can give them. You hope it is enough.

Yesterday the guards asked what you wanted to eat for your last meal. You told them roast beef and mashed potatoes covered in thick brown gravy because that is what your mom gave you on Sundays – back when she still had hopes and ambition for you – back before she started to tell folks that she wished you had never been born. But she still puts up money for your appeals, and you're thankful for that.

They bring your meal now, on a blue plastic tray. They give you a spork to eat it with. Even now they don't trust you with a knife and fork. The gravy is congealed and lukewarm, but it is the best thing you've eaten in fifteen years. Someone took time to cook it right, with salt and

everything. They bring you a Coke, like you asked for, but they put it in a cup instead of giving you a metal can. The gray door watches you and you watch it while you eat. You have one hour left.

You think about how you got caught. You remember going in through the unlocked sliding door. There were supposed to be three there. All three were beautiful brunettes just like *her*. You killed the first quickly by slitting her throat. You could come back later. The second one woke up as you stood in the doorway to her room. She started screaming. You rushed to her bed and tried to stab her. She kept screaming and put her hands in the way, but you stabbed her right through the hand and into her neck. It was easy after that.

The third one must have woken up from the noise because the next thing you remember is chasing her down the hallway. You grabbed her by the hair and tried to cut her throat, but only got her fingers instead. What you didn't know was that her boyfriend had stayed the night. He rushed you and tackled you to the floor. You hit your head hard as you fell to the ground, but you managed to hang on to the knife. You stabbed him twice in the stomach but he wouldn't stop. He kept smashing your head into the floor until finally you blacked out. You woke up in a prison hospital.

Eventually the warden, guards, and chaplain go quiet and then someone says, "It's time."

They take you from your cell, and you go along with them because you don't know what else to do. They lead you through the gray door and you shuffle along, walking weird so that the new paper shoes they've given you don't fall off your feet.

The walls of the next room are beige. The floor is made of white tile. The only thing in the room is a medical gurney with blue cushions. The arms on the gurney are stretched ninety-

degrees. There is a metal table next to the gurney holding some gauze, medical equipment, and a red plastic safety-box to dispose of the needles. The warden comes in with you and stands next to a red telephone on the wall. Officer Stiles is there too.

There is a small window at the far end of the room and you see people in there. You suppose that is where the chemist is who will actually push the button. There are two other windows into the room. At least you assume they are windows. They are currently covered with white curtains. That must be where the witnesses are.

They ask you to lie down on the gurney and you do, but when they go to strap you down you start to fight. You hate feeling helpless. You struggle, but it doesn't matter. In a few minutes they have you trussed up better than you did that one bitch who laughed at you.

A man in blue medical scrubs comes in. You don't know if he is a doctor or just a nurse. He has to stick you twice to find a vein. They run the tubes through a small hole in the wall and something starts to drip into the IV. You panic, but the doctor/nurse pats you on the shoulder and tells you, "It's just saline, to make sure the IV is good and the lines aren't blocked."

Officer Stiles pulls back the curtains and you can see two rooms: one room that is full of people – witnesses for the victims, the other room has just your mother and your lawyer in it. There is no glass over the windows. They can see and hear you and you can see and hear them. No one makes a sound. You try not to lock eyes with anyone, not even your mother.

The warden asks you if you have any last words and you tell him to go fuck himself.

They tell you it isn't supposed to hurt, but they are fucking liars. You feel everything, from the pinch where they poked you placing the IV, to the burn of the sodium thiopental as it

enters through your arm and spreads through your body. You feel everything, from the ticking of the clock on the wall, to the people breathing in the viewing rooms. You've never felt more alive.

Grocery Shopping

I walk into the Safeway with \$27.19 in my bank account to spend on groceries for the week. I need to spend the money today because tomorrow I will be over-drafted and the money will be gone. I walk past the deli section on the way to the bread aisle. The Chinese food and fried chicken aromas waft around me. It is 5:25 p.m. and I haven't eaten anything all day, but I ignore the smell because I can't afford anything there.

Safeway brand bread costs \$1.19, but I've downloaded a coupon that makes it \$.89. GE Capital is calling. My cell-phone rings in my pocket. I know it is them because they call every day at this exact time. I take the phone out and slide the ringer to vibrate. Next to the bread is the refrigerated dairy. I pick up a box of eight Yoplait yogurts, \$4.89 because my kids like them and they are easy for the kids to get by themselves when I am writing. Wait, do the individual ones cost less? No, they are \$.65 each. I do the math on my phone. Not that I can't do it in my head, it's just easier on the phone.

Next to the yogurts is the milk. I skip it for right now and head to the meat department. Pork is the cheapest meat right now at \$1.79 per pound, which is strange because I read a news article about how a swine virus had caused a lack of pork in the country. I know beef prices have gone up dramatically, but there are no explanations in the news. It used to be \$4.99 per pound for a package of tougher-cut steaks. Now they are \$7.99 per pound. The pork roast I want costs \$7.11. I put it in a thin plastic bag and put it in shopping cart. I will make carnitas tomorrow and we will have left-overs. I buy a package of ground beef even though it is \$5.51. I have two boxes of Hamburger Helper at home and I will make those for dinner tonight.

The tortilla shells are on an end-cap near the meat department. I like the corn ones with carnitas. Corn is cheaper than the flour anyway. A package of 40 is \$4.89, but I have a Personalized Deal Coupon that makes them \$2 off.

The produce department is at the end of the store. I go there next. I pick up two limes at \$.25 each. I think about it, and then put one of the limes back. I pick up one tomato and put it in the cart without weighing it. I figure it will be about \$.50. The cilantro is \$1.29 for a bunch. It's cheaper at the Fred Meyer, but it costs more in gas to drive there than the savings is worth. I put the cilantro in my shopping cart.

I go back to the refrigerated section and look at the quart of milk. It is \$2.79. I look at the eggs. They are \$2.89. I need the milk for the Hamburger Helper, but the kids like to eat scrambled eggs for breakfast. I pick up the eggs and put them in my shopping cart. I have expired milk at home. It isn't bad yet.

The Real Life

Patty's husband is cheating on her, but that's ok because she doesn't care anymore. The marriage is flaming out, and that's just the way things are. He doesn't live here anymore and that's a huge relief. They don't have kids or anything. She has to take care of enough kids at her job. Patty is a pediatrician at Valley Hospital. She doesn't have time to worry about men. Maybe that was the problem to begin with. Her co-workers and patients keep her together. It was a long day at work and she doesn't even have the energy to change out of her faded blue scrubs. She parks herself on her cat-scratched sofa with her fast-food bag and turns on the TV. The soft, alien glow fills the living room.

“Doctors are still deliberating the causes of self-harming behavior.”

She hears a noise coming from the hallway. *What the heck?* She scrunches her nose. She leaves the grocery bags on the counter of the sundrenched kitchen and walks down the hallway. The noises get louder as she approaches her bedroom door.

“John,” she calls, starting to get worried. *Maybe someone is in the house.* John isn't supposed to be off of work yet. The noises stop. Then she hears whispering.

“John, is that you?” She doesn't want to, but her soft eyes take on a determined look. She reaches for the handle of the white paneled bedroom door and pushes it open. The neighbor looks back at her. He and John are playing Monopoly in her very own bed. Her legs grow weak and she leans up against the doorframe.

“Oh God, how could you?” she asks with a trembling voice. “You fascists,” she screams.

“Patty!?! Patty, I’m sorry. He means nothing to me,” the neighbor says as John tries to cover himself with her freshly pressed white duvet.

It’s too much. She grabs the keys out of the basket by the front door and hops in the minivan she takes her kids to karate classes with. The tires squeal as she pulls away from the curb. The ice cream melts on the counter.

“And now, here’s Aaron with the traffic report.”

Patty’s husband is cheating on her. She wants to kick his ass, but she doesn’t. It isn’t like they have kids or anything, and he is free to do what he wants. She’s so done with him anyway. She works hard enough trying to keep her karate dojo on top of its bills, she doesn’t have extra time to worry about men. Maybe that was the problem to begin with. She doesn’t even bother taking off her *gi* before she climbs into bed. She turns on the TV and the soft, alien glow fills the room.

“Jurors are still deliberating in the trial of a husband accused of the brutal stabbing death of his wife.”

She hears a noise coming down the hallway as she comes in the back door. *What the heck* she thinks and her nose scrunches up emphasizing her frown lines. She sets the bag of groceries on the counter and they spill everywhere. *Damn it* she thinks, but she leaves the ice cream melting on the counter.

“John?” she calls. He should be at work, unless he got fired again. She hears furious whispers coming from the living room. She doesn’t want to, but she steps into the room, and sees John and a woman naked together on the cat-scratched sofa.

“Look honey, no more pet hair,” she says. The living room sparkles.

“Wow, that’s like magic.” John comes up and gives her a hug.

“It *is* magic, Pet Magic!” She holds the pet hair roller up proudly. “And it was only two easy payments of nine ninety-nine. And look! It comes with a free gift.”

“This is going to be hard for you to hear.” He grabs her hand.

“What is it? I’m already freaking out.”

“I’m not from here.”

“Of course you’re not from here, you’re from Indiana.”

“No. I’m not from *here*. I’m not from Earth.”

The ice cream is just soft enough to start blending into the cooled espresso. She roughly chops the chocolate covered beans to add another dimension of flavor.

“This is John’s favorite. I always make it for him after he comes home from a business trip,” she says aloud with a large smile. “Now, make sure to freeze it again before it gets too soft – otherwise ice crystals will start to form. It goes great with a warm slice of chocolate cake.”

She tips the ball into the basket. Piece of cake. She crouches down immediately as the Cougs go right to an inbound play. Her basket puts them up by two, and if they can just stop this drive, they can move up in the rankings. Her eyes gaze up into the stand at the cat-scratched sofa as the buzzer goes off.

“And in other news, a woman’s husband is cheating on her with his secretary. They were doing it on the freshly pressed duvet, wrinkling it in the process,” she says to John who is seated beside her at the desk.

“Thank you, Patty. I can see how that would be irritating. Now in other news we discuss the self-harming behavior of playing board games.”

“Get incredible savings for aliens, call us today.”

“Disculpe señores, ¿saben dónde puedo encontrar una hamburguesa?” she asks as she stretches out on the bed.

Patty is dead, but that’s ok because she was so done anyway. It’s not like she has kids or anything. She is being buried in a ditch beside her minivan.

“Patty, come on down!”

“I’m so glad to be here,” she squeals. Her breasts bounce up and down as she jumps in excitement. John gives her a hug and they get started with the game. Does an ice-cream maker cost nine ninety-nine, twenty-two ninety-nine, or thirty-nine ninety-nine.

“Thirty-nine ninety-nine” she guesses and then squints her eyes almost closed.

“Patty,” John says, “that is correct! Tell her what she’s won!”

“A new mini-van,” a voice announces from the air, “complete with all the bells and whistles to get the kids to soccer practice, or just take a relaxing drive to a ditch!”

“You mean nothing to me,” John says as he covers her in dirt. She doesn’t have time to worry about men.

She rushes into the hospital, “Please help me, my ice cream is melting,” she screams.

Mary

The route 66 bus drives by blowing exhaust in my face. On the side is an advertisement for a museum. Some sort of cave art. Is that a snake? Billy had a snake that he kept in the aquarium in the bedroom. Every time we did it the snake would stare at us. Sometimes I stared back. Billy always forgot to feed it. I'm starving. I'm not sure if I mean that literally or figuratively, but my stomach hurts so bad right now. When was the last time I ate? This morning when that guy in the red car gave me five bucks and I got hashbrowns and a coffee from MickyD's. Must be figuratively then. Coffee comes from the jungle. I bet they have huge ass snakes there. Coffee farmers probably have to dodge them just to get me my cup of Joe. Why do we call it Joe? Why not Billy or Fred? Joe is such a Christian name anyway. My mother would have named me Joe if I was a boy. She always wanted a boy, for my father not herself. I wonder if I had kids would Billy and I still be together?

The fumes from the buses tickle as they sink into my pores. The grime makes me feel sticky. Outside is supposed to be wholesome. But not this outside. This is noxious and dead. The parking lots are like concrete graveyards, complete with little lines to show to clearly indicate where the dead people need to go. I should be upset about it but whatever. The streetlights click on, suddenly the world becomes filled with an orange hum. It's menacing, like a swarm of bees. I was never stung by a bee. I wonder if I'm allergic. Maybe one of these days people will find me dead attacked by a swarm of angry streetlights.

What the fuck does this dude want? What the fuck do you want? I say.

Fuck off asshole, before I call the cops.

Fucker thinks he can buy me just because he drives a Cadillac. How dare he? Asshole. Does your wife know what you do on Friday night fucker?

Maybe I shouldn't have turned him away. My stomach hurts. They don't lock up the dumpster behind the Pizza Hut. I've already been there three times this week.

Wait, I yell. The Cadillac is still stuck at the light. Its brake lights flash at me as it pulls up to the curb. I grab up my bag and race towards the car. Horns honk, but fucker ignores them and so do I. The man's grin reminds me of the Cheshire Cat. I want to throw up. I get in the car, sliding my backpack between my knees.

Of course I stink, you try living on the street and see how good you smell.

Fucker doesn't know I haven't shaved my pits for months, I wonder how he's going to like that.

It's Mary.

Yeah, asshole, just like the fucking Virgin Mary.

What's so good about it?

Damn, it's quiet now. Like the times I had to hide quietly in the closet. So damn quiet it hurt.

I'm alone with this fucker. Fuck I'm alone. I can hear my own breathing. I can't stop thinking about it. If I stop thinking about it will my breathe stop? Just one final rattle and no more.

Fucker won't stop staring at me. Holy Lord get me out of here. Wait was that a prayer? I don't pray anymore so it must not have been a prayer. Just a reflex. Like the gag reflex.

What kind of trashy place is this? Very classy, asshole. My stomach hurts.

Let's get food first.

I don't want to wait until later.

Fine, but you're gonna have to throw in at least another twenty.

My stomach hurts so bad. What if I pass out?

The bell rings he pulls open the door. The bells at school never rang like that. They always buzzed. I would have liked it better if they had rang, like a little musical symphony between classes.

Fucker has a wad of money in his pocket, more money than I've ever seen in cash. He pulls off a fifty and hands it to the nosy bitch behind the counter.

Don't give me that pitying look bitch. I know how to take care of myself. Who asked you anyway.

Ouch, fuck. I pull my arm away from the asshole. Don't grab me. You don't own me.

You haven't paid me yet.

Fucker digs the motel room key out of his pocket. I haven't seen a room key for a long time. A card key sure, but not an actual key. On a plastic keychain with the number eleven on it. My lucky number. I did my first blowjob when I was eleven. It wasn't Billy.

The room is decorated in institutional beige. Just like the hospital my mother put me in when I was thirteen. I can't remember what the excuse was that time. It smells stale, like smoke despite the "no smoking" placards dotting every surface.

Fucker hands me the toiletries he picked up off the counter.

There is a ring of soap scum in the bathtub, but the shampoo smells nice. Like oranges.

Surprising for such a scuzzy place. There was always nice smelling shampoo at home, my mother liked it. My father yelled at her sometimes because it cost more. Billy never cared how much things cost. He was always doing crazy shit like that. Buying a new TV on credit, coming home with a pet snake, quitting his job because his boss was a dickhead. But look where it got him, he was always broke. I wonder where fucker gets his money from. Maybe he works as a lawyer or doctor or some shit. No. He doesn't dress nice enough for that. His clothes look brand new, but not professional like. I can't remember the last time I had new clothes. The lady from the clinic gave me a package of underwear, but I've already put holes in most of them. How long ago was that anyway? There is no razor with the toiletries. Good. I didn't want one anyway.

I haven't had a bath in god knows how long and he has to bang on the fucking door? I put more conditioner in my hair and turn the water hotter. Mom always put conditioner in her hair twice. When I was little I would sit in the bathroom on the toilet while she was taking a bath and we would talk. She would tell me how grandma taught her to shave her legs down instead of up.

Alright, alright, I'm coming.

I wrap a towel around my waist and open the door.

Wrap it up asshole or I'm walking.

Stop, give me a chance to get wet.

I moan a little, maybe he will give me some extra money if he thinks I like it. Billy always liked it when I did that. The snake would just watch us. Hell if I know why. The vibrations probably,

because I think snakes are deaf. At least they don't have ears. They don't have necks either, just heads and bodies. Give me the shivers.

Ouch. Fuck. Stop. Get off. He doesn't. He likes it rough. I saw in a magazine once about a snake that killed a person. Just killed him and ate the whole body. Or maybe eating him was what killed him. I'm not sure because I didn't read the words, but in the picture there was a huge bulge in the snake's belly like a full-size person got swallowed whole. I wonder if Billy's snake could eat someone.

Finally he finishes like it is a big fucking deal. I try not to cry, but I can't help from sniffing as I pull on my clothes.

Nothing's wrong. I'm fine. Go fuck yourself.

I go in the bathroom to wash between my legs. I'm bleeding a little, but not too bad. Not enough for a maxi. I pull on my dirty clothes. They seem even dirtier now than before. My jeans are stiff with grime and so are my socks. My hair is wet and limp. Cold to catch a cold. Mother would kill me if she saw me leaving it hang.

Fucker's left his money on the table beside a no-smoking sign. I should take all of this and run. Fucker is looking at me. I pull out my hundred, plus the extra twenty. Maybe I should take more? The bruises say no. I stuff the money in my pocket as I walk out the door. I wait for the route 66 bus at the stop. It is still blowing black clouds of cancer causing smoke. It still has caveman art on the side. I hop on and ride it to the spot I normally crash for the night. I forgot to get food. Fuck it. It is a long fucking night.

Error: Mason Kelly

Mason opened his eyes and immediately wished that he hadn't. They felt full of grit and sand, and if it hadn't been for the tiny alarm beeping in his ear he would have happily slept for another four hours. Still he had things to do tonight, so he rubbed his face, ignoring the way dirt flaked off, and sat up. He heard a noise then, a wolf howling at the moon, or more likely, a dog turned wild. It was full dark, but thankfully his alarm had woken him with enough time to get where he needed to go. He didn't want to spend another night out here, outside the precinct limits. The country around him had turned back to nature. Millions and millions of acres had been designated wild preserve and it was bereft of human involvement, except for those few areas that held cities or agro-business. But he was here and occasionally from a distance he saw another loner walking through the wilderness illegally.

Mason sat up and struggled to get rid of the feeling that someone was pounding on his head. He poked at the remains of his tiny fire until a few flames started to stir. A fire was still safe here, but once he got within range of the precinct he would have to be more careful. It wasn't as if people would actually see him because it wasn't as if people actually worked for the Government. Sure, he had heard of a few, but he had never met one. It was too expensive to hire a person when a machine would do. Efficiency had its merits. The Government, in most places at least, was a system of cameras, drones, and automated machines. It functioned but, lucky for him, imperfectly.

Mason curled his six foot frame around the fire, trying to soak up the entirety of its heat. He was tall for a Cosmopolite, but of course he had been born country-side, a Sider, even though he tried to hide it. His brownish hair lay limply on his head. He couldn't wait to get back to his

flat to take a real shower. Get back to work, get back to life, he amended. People at work would never recognize him like this; to them he was just a cute, if slightly average, beat reporter trying to work his way up to anchorman. None of the suits he worked with would ever suspect he was outside the perimeter. Of course none of them would ever step foot outside either. They were all happy.

He was happy too, for the most part, but this wasn't the first time he had crossed the border, not even his first solo trip. It started with curiosity and a wish to be somewhere else. Then he met somebody, Jonathan, a marginally employed junker who scavenged the periphery of the preserves. They met on the street when Mason was tracking down a story about a black market for metal. It took a while and many, many cups of coffee, but eventually Jonathan trusted him enough to tell him that his most lucrative hauls came from the outside. Judging by his wealth relative to most junkers, it was a claim that Mason believed.

At first it was just quick day trips, just to see what it was like out there. Jonathan would only go with him once, claimed he didn't want to get a young kid in trouble. Technically it wasn't illegal to be outside, just to bring things back or to travel between precincts without permission. But just because it wasn't illegal, didn't mean that being in the preserves wasn't highly frowned upon. After all, it was dangerous outside. Too dangerous to allow people to go out roaming around when the Government would be the one who would have to go to the expense of recovering them when they, inevitably, hurt or killed themselves. Think of the good of all. Think of the Government.

And Mason did think of the Government often these days. Being outside the precincts brought it on. He didn't want to cause any trouble for others, or himself. His life was right on

track and he didn't want to mess that up. But he didn't stop his trips outside. He tried a couple times, but after a few days the urge to go back out again was overwhelming. His trips made him feel alive.

Mason had never felt fear like he did the first night he stayed out alone. It was churning and visceral. It hung in his stomach, each little noise announcing his sudden doom. Eventually he learned that even if humans had mostly forgotten or ignored the animals that lived on the preserves, animals hadn't forgotten humans. It was tough to catch a glimpse of anything. The animals would skit away at his slightest movement. Hunting was difficult, but possible. Growing up in the agro-farms helped him to find edible plants. Short trips turned in to two or three day adventures. After the first time Jonathan never went with him again, but he didn't try to stop Mason either. It became something of a ritual. When he got back he would stop by Jonathan's place first thing. They would discuss his trip and Jonathan would make biting comments about how Mason could have done things better. Jonathan knew the draw of being *outside* and he did his best to make sure Mason was careful.

This, his first illegal trip, had been his longest yet. His mom told him in their last video chat that she was sick and the Government refused to grant him travel papers. They said the trip was a needless indulgence, and that he would consume resources for his own gratification. But dammit it was his mom and he hadn't seen her for ten years, not since he had been granted his job in the city. So he arranged for his boss to think he was on an undercover assignment and took off. A trip that was less than an hour on the sleek mag-lev trains had already taken him a week. But he was almost there.

He stood up and stretched. The ground made a very hard bed for someone used to ergonomic comfort. As he kicked dirt over his fire, he realized how dark it was out here beyond civilization. This was his first time actually travelling at night instead of hunkering down in a camp. He could have made it to his mom's house earlier, but he didn't want to get picked up and questioned. He tried not to think about what he would tell his parents when he got there. His mom's face popped into his mind; her bright eyes and face lined from years of being quick to smile. She wouldn't care how he got there – he hoped.

The first part of the journey was difficult. The tree roots and gopher holes seemed to grow exponentially in the dark. He was swearing to himself by the time he finally reached the outskirts of his home precinct with its miles and miles of fields and greenhouses. Once he got into the town proper he walked openly down the sidewalk. There was no keeping secrets in a place this small. He knew everyone in the community. Even if someone in town had wanted to turn him in, the process was so long and involved that it was practically non-existent. Something he learned from Jonathan: if the Government didn't catch you in the act, they didn't catch you at all.

All of the houses here were short, cramped, and built in long utilitarian rows. Space wasn't an issue, so there was no need for the skyscrapers that filled the cityscape. The houses were all painted white, ostensibly because that made them easier to cool in the hot summer, but Mason suspected it was because someone somewhere had idolized the image of the little white house with the white picket fence. But there were no fences, as there were no yards. Grass simply consumed too many resources to be scattered about.

There were fifty houses on this street, twenty-five on each side. Then there was a short alley and fifty houses on the next street over. That was it, the sum total of the 277th Farming Precinct, one hundred tiny houses and about four hundred lives. His parents' house was the twelfth house on the right, sitting snugly in the middle of town. It was early morning by the time he reached their house. He hesitated at the front steps, suddenly nervous. There had been no way to send a message ahead of time. All forms of communication were the property of the Government. He climbed the stairs, skipping the middle one just as he had when he was a kid, and knocked on the door.

His dad pulled back the curtains and peered out. Mason noticed his eyes narrow then his eyebrows reach his hairline as he recognized the person standing on the doorstep. Mason waved. The curtains dropped back and the deadbolt was unlatched. He didn't have any more time to prepare himself as his mom, a tall, thickly built woman barreled into his arms.

"Mason, Mason, Mason, is that really you?" She put her hand to his face, rubbing his jaw through his week's worth of scraggly beard.

"Hi, Mom. I thought you were sick?" He was a little embarrassed about the trip now that he could see his mom was up and moving about.

"Come inside, come inside. Don't let me keep you out on the doorstep like a stranger."

He gave his dad an awkward hug. They had been apart ten years. He had left when he was sixteen. Now he was bigger than his father, if maybe not quite as strong. His mom was excited. She peppered him with questions. When he went to sit on the sofa his mom stopped him.

“Honestly Mason, how did you get so filthy? Do Cosmopolites find it out of fashion to bathe anymore? Run upstairs and shower while I fix you up something to eat.” His dad gave him an anxious look. He had figured out how Mason got there, even if his mom was still in the dark.

The shower was wonderful, and when he stepped out he smelled something that made his mouth water, so he pulled on his dad’s grey workout clothes and hurried down.

Breakfast was delicious: oatmeal, but with fruit sliced on top with a honey drizzle. His mom and dad still only had ration tickets for low-fat foods because of his dad’s heart condition, but with his mom cooking he didn’t mind. Everything tasted fresher out here. It tasted like home.

“Honey, what are the Cosmos like? Are they as big as they say?” She had never been outside of the precinct. His dad also perked up. He was from another Side and had moved here when he met mom online.

Mason thought about his answer. They had asked him this before and it was tough describing something so incredible yet depressing. “They are clean, and beautiful and full of glass and steel and all things modern. They are big. You’ve seen the pictures and the maps. You can walk for days and not come to the end of the city. They have precincts inside of precincts there.

“The buildings reach so high that almost no light reaches the ground except where gaps are mandated. People don’t usually travel at street level. They move over bridges that connect all of the buildings at different heights. Inside each building is like a town. Thoroughfares criss-cross and businesses set up shop along these ways. The flats are built towards the outside of the buildings, but only those closest to the edges have windows, those are the expensive ones. Everywhere else is lit by light panels that change color based upon the sun.”

“So you never see the sun?” His mom’s lips turned down.

“There are parks built on tops of the buildings, high up where the winds are strong. Plus with my job I have to go outside to the streets almost every day.”

His mom’s eyes teared. “It sounds wonderful, I wish I could have visited it.”

“There’s still time, when I get back I’ll start saving to see if we can purchase an exemption ticket for travel.” Exemptions were available for almost anything you wanted to do, if you paid the Government for the trouble. He had never considered buying one before because they were simply too exorbitant.

But it turned out there wasn’t time. His mom had a rare form of cancer. She hadn’t wanted to worry him because there was a cure, but his mom’s name never made it to the top of the waiting list. She died eight days after he got to her house. He stayed with her the whole time, wanting to make up for the time he was away, and knowing it was too late.

As he was sitting with his dad in front of the computer making funeral arrangements he thought of all the rich Cosmos who had probably paid to get put at the top of the list. Even if his mom had the money for that, the idea would never have crossed his mind.

The funeral director was a man out of the Angeles Cosmopolis who looked like his shirt was hiding the fact that he didn’t have a spine. His mom had already made arrangements. She would be cremated, but there were still details to take care of. There would be a service of course, and friends were dropping by.

“Your mother’s name?” the shirt asked.

“Margaret Kelly.” Mason’s responses were on auto-pilot. The man on the other end of the conversation was old fashioned enough to use a pen and paper.

“And your name?”

“Mason Kelly.”

A knock sounded from the door and Mason jumped up to answer it while his dad took over the conversation. It was Mrs. McKay, his elementary school teacher. She gave him a hug and told him she was so sorry for his loss. It was difficult, dealing with the grief of the community. He knew he should be crying or grieving himself, but all he could feel emptiness. Being back in such a close community was overwhelming. It would be a relief to go home where no one knew anyone else.

The service went well. Everyone had fond memories of his mom to share. Leaving his dad alone in the house had been hard, but he was anxious to make the trip back.

His boss still thought he was working on an undercover story and Mason had no way to contact him. He might be getting concerned over how long he had been away. His dad had given him plenty of supplies to journey with, so he was well prepared. The wilderness was lonelier than it had been.

A month after he left, he finally set foot again in the Cosmopolis. It wasn’t quite dawn. There was no point waiting until night because the heat-sensors here would register him either way. The best strategy was just to enter quickly and lose himself among the rest of the warm bodies. The city was quiet. The cosmopolis’ heart beat slow and steady as people began their day, as opposed to the frantic beat it acquired in the evening. It was hard being away from the

city for so long. As much as it grated on him, there were many things he loved about it. He wanted to head straight for his flat, but he took a detour first to stop by Jonathan's, who lived on the outskirts of the city.

Mason walked between two buildings. This was a different kind of neighborhood: down on the ground, in the dirt. The shacks here were mostly made of scrap metal, but he could see bits of colored plastic sticking out. For the most part, people here didn't hide behind closed doors, so it wasn't a surprise to see one woman up early washing laundry and another man cooking breakfast over an open flame. This alley wasn't officially part of the Cosmos society, because the people living here either couldn't or wouldn't fit it. For the most part they liked it that way. He didn't get any nods or waves as he walked in, just a few surprised looks.

Jonathan had one of the better places, a home and a scrap yard where he did most of his business. Luckily he was still in his yard and not out salvaging. Mason nodded to him. Jonathan stared back with his mouth open, then he hopped up and rushed Mason into an uncomfortable hug.

"Mason, I'm so relieved. I never thought I'd see you again."

"I was only gone for a month," he said, shrugging off the enthusiasm.

Jonathan's smile fell. "We all thought you were dead! You don't know?"

"Don't know what?"

Jonathan didn't answer right away. He went inside and Mason could hear him rummaging around. Finally he came out with a tablet.

“It was in the news. You’ve become a bit notorious.” Jonathan handed him the tablet which was already on the correct news feed.

Mason looked at the headline: *Reporter Dies After Unsanctioned Trip to Country-Side*. His eyes scanned the story. The story said that Mason had died two weeks ago.

“Well, obviously this is a mistake...” he started, but he didn’t know how to finish that sentence.

“Course it is. You’re standing here aren’t you?”

“I’ll just go to the newspaper and get them to retract the story.”

“Come on now Mason, you’re smarter than that. You know this goes deeper than just the newspaper.”

His mouth felt dry. Of course the Government had received a bad report. You couldn’t really do anything without their involvement. And the paper knew about his trip to see his parents. They even had listed him as dying in Precinct 277. How else could the news have gotten that information without the Government getting involved?

“I’ll just have to make a report, to correct the record.” Mason thought back to the shirt that took the death report on his mother. He would bet eight of his ten toes that that bastard caused this mix up. He hoped it didn’t take too long to fix the mistake.

Mason wasn’t sure how to report the mix-up but he knew there must be a way. He couldn’t have been the only one this had happened to. He just had to find a way to correct the mistake. That was all it was, just a little clerical error. It should be easy.

Jonathan snorted. “If you think it’ll be that easy, more power too you, but people down here know that things are never that easy.”

Mason had to admit that Jonathan had a point. Mason knew that things never ran as smoothly or as efficiently as everyone liked to think they did, but he was more worried about his job and what his co-workers would think of this situation once they found out he wasn’t dead. He didn’t know any of them that well. Hopefully he wouldn’t lose his job on top of everything else. The Government would likely levy a steep fine against him for his illegal travel and without his job he would have no way to pay it.

“I’ve still got to try.”

Jonathan nodded. “Just come on back to see me if things don’t work out the way you want.”

Mason promised that he would and then asked for a bucket of water to freshen up. It wasn’t a shower, but it still felt good to wash some of the road away.

His next stop was his flat. He knew the route by heart and didn’t pay much attention to anything until he was in front of his door trying to swipe his fingerprint. It didn’t work. Apparently the locks had already been changed. He was about to leave when he heard noises coming from behind the door. He knocked.

“Hello?” A woman’s voice came out of the intercom.

“Yes hello? Umm... my name is Mason and I live here.”

There was a short pause. “I’m afraid you must be mistaken. This is my flat.”

“No,” he said. “I live here. I have a picture of my parents sitting by the television. My favorite jacket was hanging on the back of the kitchen chair.”

“Well there was someone who lived here, but he died.”

Mason almost laughed. “Yeah, that’s me, except I’m not dead. It is just a mistake. I was going to get it corrected after I took a shower.”

He had to wait a long time for an answer. “I guess you can come in, but don’t try anything or I’ll call in the drones.” With that, the door opened a crack and the face of a woman a little older than him peered out. She had dark hair with bronze skin and very rare light blue eyes. She pulled open the door the rest of the way.

He tried to thank her or introduce himself but his tongue was stuck to the top of his mouth. She was beautiful.

“Well, are you coming in?”

“Uh, yes. Thank you,” he said and awkwardly came into her – his flat. Everything looked pretty much the same. The same functional kitchen set. The same grey chairs and sofa. The one chair was still stained where he had spilled coffee on it. He smiled. The only difference was that his personal belongings had been removed and were replaced with a few pieces of the woman’s.

“All of your stuff is still here. The Government gave me a discount off of the first month’s rent if I got rid of it, but I haven’t had time yet.”

“That’s a relief I guess. I’m Mason, Mason Kelly,” he said holding out his hand.

She took it. Her skin felt delicate and soft. “I know. I saw it in the paper. I’m Sophie.”

“Thanks for letting me in. This has been a very weird day.”

“It’s not every day you meet a dead person.”

“Yeah, the Government really messed up big time on this one huh?” He cringed a little. Most Cosmos would never admit the Government could be wrong. But instead of arguing, she nodded in agreement.

“Would you like some coffee?” She gestured to the chairs.

“Would you mind if I got cleaned up first?”

Mason barely caught her hesitation as she said that would be fine. He tried to hurry as he pulled clean clothes out of one of the boxes his things were in and cleaned himself up. He shoved his dirty clothes into the box. He could take care of them later.

He sat down in the stained chair. Sophie had chosen to take the other one. He inhaled the scent of his coffee. She served it in the mug his co-workers gave him when he got hired. They talked about the apartment. What needed to be fixed, and how she had packed his things.

“So what now?” she asked.

It was a good question. What was he going to do now? The first step would be getting a report to the Government to let them know he wasn’t quite as dead as they thought. There was only one place in the city that a person could go to interact with the Government.

“I guess I’ll have to go to City Hall.”

Sophie moaned. Everyone felt that way about City Hall. It was surprising though, when she popped out of her chair and said, “Let me get my things.”

“Wait,” he said, “you’re not going.” The coffee cup was empty and he placed it gently on the table so the ceramic didn’t chip. She had already helped him enough.

“Of course I am, this is too good a story to pass up.”

He paused. “So... you’ve not only got my apartment, you’ve also got my job?”

Sophie shrugged. “Someone had to do it.”

“I see.” And he did see. The Government needed someone to fill his role. He was dead wasn’t he? But the thought of how quickly things had moved on bugged him.

They walked through the large hallways that were filling up with kids on their way to school and men and women on their way to work. The metro station had its usual crush of travelers. They waited in line at the ticketing stations. Sophie went first, and stepped onto the pad that calculated her ticket based upon her weight as she swiped her thumb over the fingerprint reader.

“Congratulations, you are at your ideal weight,” the device chimed, and she stepped off the other side.

Then it was his turn. As he had done thousands of times, he stepped onto the pad and swiped his thumb.

“Unable to verify, please try again,” a pleasant robotic voice sounded.

He swiped his thumb again.

“Invalid, please step away from the scanner to allow traffic to proceed.”

“Fuck,” he said under his breath.

“Please refrain from using vulgar language in public places,” the device kindly warned.

“Come on, get out of the way. We’re going to be late!” someone in the crowd yelled behind him. He turned around and saw a few sets of narrowed eyes glaring back at him. He stepped out of line and Sophie came through the exit to join him.

“Well shit,” she said.

“Yeah.”

City Hall was located as near as possible to the center of the cosmopolis. Normally it wasn’t a problem as the metro trains got there in a few minutes, running on their sleek rails built high in the sky. But on foot it would take two full days

“We could try to go together. I will just swipe my finger and we can go.”

“Maybe, but if the scanners see the two of us, they won’t let us pass.”

“Shit.”

“I have an idea,” he finally said, “but it will have to wait until it’s not so crowded around here.

They sat at a café table that was near the station. They each ordered a scone waited until the morning crowds died down. Then they tried again.

This time he had Sophie get on his back and he covered her with his jacket. She wrapped her legs around his stomach and slipped her arm down his jacket sleeve. His own arm was curled up next to his chest.

He stepped onto the machine carrying her and held his breath as she swiped her thumb.

“You are significantly overweight, your diet will be modified,” the device chimed in a sweet tone, but it didn’t stop them from passing.

“Great,” Sophie mumbled under her breath. He laughed as he carried her over to the now arriving train and they got on. A few odd looks later they were back to normal.

“Thank you for your help,” he said as the train swayed and made mechanical hissing noises.

“You don’t have to do that,” she said. She took a seat and gave him a serious look.

“Do what?” He sat down beside her. The cityscape zoomed outside the windows faster than the eye could catch. He focused on the inside of the train, the stale smell and the plastic seats which were worn by thousands of butts.

“You don’t have to thank me. This is going to make a great story. Besides, it’s the least I could do considering...” She didn’t look at him. Her hands were tucked into her jacket pockets.

“For all you knew I died in Precinct 277. You don’t owe me anything.”

“That brings up another question.” This time she looked up. “What were you doing there? You weren’t on any scheduled trip. Rumors have been flying around the office...” Instead of

being embarrassed by her prying, she just sort of shrugged as if to say, *hey, I'm a reporter it's my job.*

“What sort of rumors?”

“You know, the stuff people make up. You were a smuggler, or an anarchist. That sort of thing.”

He laughed. “None of the above. I just went because my mom was sick. The Government wouldn't give me a travel pass.” He didn't want to talk about his mom's death.

“Oh, ok.” She sounded disappointed.

“It was a long trip. Until this morning I was really happy to finally be home.”

“What's it like out there? I've never been out of the cosmopolis.”

“The country-side is pretty. The town is small, only four-hundred people or so. That means that everybody knows everybody else.” He smiled remembering the way they had all come together after his mom passed. “The town is surrounded by farms so big you could walk through them for days. Thankfully most of the work is done by machines and robots, but people still supervise. You can't regulate the way wheat is going to grow, or when a cow might stray. Everyone there works in the agro-businesses, except for maybe the teacher and doctor and a few others.”

“And the Preserve, what's out there?” Her eyes lit up. This is what she really wanted to ask him.

“Nothing...” He knew the answer was vague but it was essentially true. The only thing out there was basically nothing except for trees and bushes. He had come across the ruins of a town once, but it was empty and the buildings had mostly crumbled. He also had come across a wide area where there might have been a fire in the past, but grass and trees were already starting to grow back up. Seeing she wasn’t satisfied he added, “...it’s just nature. Trees, bushes, animals... that sort of stuff.”

“So no signs of the war?” The war unified the world under the Government. There had been some resistance, but for the most part people welcomed the change with open arms.

He shrugged. “I don’t know. Maybe. It was so long ago that anything that might have been there has grown over, but I didn’t spend a lot of time looking around.”

“Ohh,” she said. She sounded disappointed. “I heard that there were rebels out there still, that maybe you had gone to meet them.”

“No. I didn’t see anything like that.” If there were rebels out in the preserve maybe Jonathan would know.

The train pulled up to the City Hall terminal. The room they entered was massive, cavernous even. The ceiling stretched so high that the lights had to be hung on long chains. There were lines of people in all directions. Everyone looked bored and tired. A few people were sitting down in line, and one family was having a little picnic right there on the floor. Together they found the line to make death reports and commenced waiting. The people in front of him showed signs of grief on their faces, but for one reason or another, the Government insisted on talking with them so here they were.

It took hours to reach the front of the line. Once there they stepped into a little room with privacy glass between them and the public. Mason went up to the tall shiny terminal placed against one wall. He tried to access it with his fingerprint.

“Unable to verify. Please try again.” He had never noticed before how much he hated that voice.

“Looks like it’ll have to be you,” he said to Sophie.

She reached around him to press her finger to the device. Her hair smelled like that field of flowers he had come across out in the preserve. Maybe an agro-business somewhere cultivated them for shampoo.

“Thank you,” the cheerful voice said. “Please tell me the reason for your visit.”

The screen displayed three options: *I received a message asking me to make a report; I received a message stating there was something wrong about the report I already made; I want to make a report on my own.*

Sophie selected option three and new choices appeared: *This report is about a death; and This report is NOT about a death.* Sophie selected the second option.

“Thank you, but this terminal only takes reports about deaths. Please visit the appropriate area for your report. Goodbye.”

“Damn,” he said. Sophie sighed and started over.

This time they selected three, then one. They got three more options before the computer kicked them out again.

After fiddling with the computer for half an hour they got to the option: *There has been a mistake in a death report*. Finally they were making some progress, but once they selected that option none of the conditions fit. There wasn't an error in the date, or the place, or the time. There wasn't a mistake in the manner of death or the responsible party.

Mason left the cubicle very discouraged. He knew how the system worked, but the fact that it could be so wrong crushed whatever faith in it he had left. Sophie wanted to try the miscellaneous line and he acquiesced only because he had nothing better to do and no other ideas

The miscellaneous report line had grown so long, that people didn't actually wait in line to make reports; instead people waited in line to get a ticket so that on a specified time and date they could return and get admitted to the line to make a report.

They waited four hours to get to the front of the waiting list line. At the front was a slick looking terminal with only one button. Sophie pushed the button and the device spit out a cardboard ticket with the date *November, 03; 10:00 – 16:00*. Sixty-three days away. Sophie carefully put the treasure into her wallet.

"I'm sorry," Sophie said when they were back at her apartment. His apartment.

Mason was numb. He couldn't quite focus on what she was saying.

"I'm sorry," she said again, "about everything." She looked around and a slight frown flickered across her features. "You can sleep on the couch I guess."

It was one thing to help a stranger for a day, it was quite another to invite a stranger into your home for the next two months. He appreciated her offer, but he couldn't impose on her like that.

“Thanks, but I have somewhere I can go.”

“Ok,” she said. He tried not to be hurt by the relief in her voice. “We should set up some sort of schedule so we can keep comparing notes and make sure we make that other report right.”

He nodded. He didn’t think there was anything to discuss, but he agreed to her schedule just so he could see her again. She was pretty and kind and after all he wasn’t dead.

Jonathan would probably let him sleep there. If not he could pick up his things and head out into the preserve, but he was reluctant to do that. As much as he hated being around crowds he didn’t like the loneliness that waited for him on the other side of the boundary. Plus that felt like giving up and accepting his fate. He wasn’t ready to do that yet.

Jonathan was expecting him and already had a bed ready. The people who lived marginally always knew how ineffective the Government could be.

“Tomorrow I’ll take you to see a guy I know,” Jonathan said after he was settled in. The night air was cold in the non-climate controlled environment. The wind whistled strangely as it made its way through the maze of caverns formed by the skyscrapers.

“Who?” Mason punctuated his question with a yawn.

“He doesn’t like us to talk about him. You’ll see tomorrow.”

Mason settled back and tried to sleep. The darkness was more complete here, more substantial than it was even out in the preserves. It was disturbing. It took him some time to fall asleep.

The next afternoon found him in a different alleyway community. It wasn't in an actual alley though. Mason looked around, amazed. He had been by and through this set of buildings often, the one on his right housed his newspaper office, but he had no idea an area like this existed. It was a courtyard, except it was completely closed off from all of the surrounding towers. There weren't even any windows that overlooked the area. He could only conclude the city planners had made a mistake in their building plans, or maybe it was intentionally left open as an airshaft.

Regardless of its pedigree, the now forgotten courtyard served as a residential area for those who had nowhere else to go. Shanties made of wood and other materials wove through the open space with no thought for things such as streets. Mason's nose told him that they forgot to include sewer access too. The best make-shift buildings in the block-wide area were those built against the existing skyscrapers. Using the structural support of the existing buildings, the shacks were taller. Most only had two stories, but he saw one behemoth that looked to be four or five stories tall. Men and women entered and exited that building regularly and from the amount of traffic dodging through the makeshift paths, Mason suspected this was also a large hub for the black market.

It was an ideal location for non-Government sanctioned activities. The only way into this courtyard was down through an old sewer-grate, then back up via ladder to a vent wide enough for only one person at a time. Mason looked for other exits, but didn't see any. He was completely closed off from the rest of the city.

People here looked harder than they did in Jonathan's neighborhood. They stalked around in challenging way, or they huddled close not looking at each other. He didn't think the drones came here.

Jonathan led him through the narrow paths until they arrived at a shack set against a building. Once inside he could see the location was very important. The shack was just a screen to hide the hole that wormed right into the side of the skyscraper. Mason could see the metal beams that held up the building. Thankfully they still appeared to be in good shape.

Inside the building they entered an access room. Miles of cables roped their way into the ceiling, and Jonathan and Mason made their way via a tunnel-like path.

"Come in, come in," a voice said from the back of the room.

They pushed their way through one final wall of cables and came into an open space. Open was a relative term. The area was filled up with computer terminals and monitors set on a variety of types of tables and desks. There was even a bed with dirty covers pushed to one corner.

The man was sitting in front of one of the desks, focusing on the screen. He wore a pair of lightly tinted green glasses, a faded t-shirt that was now grey, and a pair of jeans so dirty they looked like they could stand by themselves. He glanced at them from the side of the glasses and then turned back to his work.

"Who are you?" Mason asked.

"You didn't tell him about me?" the man asked. His words were clipped and fast, as if he couldn't spare the time to actually talk.

“No,” Jonathan said.

“Good. Keep it that way.”

“The Government listens out in the open?” Mason had suspected that, but he wasn’t sure.

The man turned from his monitor for the first time. He was about Mason’s age. If he bothered to take care of himself he would be handsome. “Yeah. The system monitors random conversations and processes the information for random keywords. Say the words “kill you,” or any of a hundred others and you’ll get extra special attention from the Government.”

“Ohh... but you just said it.”

“This room is shielded.” Done with his tutorial, the man turned back to his work.

“Ok.” Maybe the man was serious, or maybe he was crazy. He turned to Jonathan and whispered, “What are we doing here?”

“We’re trying to get your life back,” Jonathan whispered back. He took a seat at one of the tables.

“I can hear you, you know. Yes, that is exactly why you are here. I’m going to try to hack into the system and get your life back,” the man said.

“Can you do that?” Mason looked around for somewhere to sit. The only other place was on the bed. Reluctantly he took a seat.

The man’s shrug wasn’t very inspiring. “I am already in the system, never left it. I have to constantly play a game to hide my tracks and keep ahead of the system’s digital scrubbers so I don’t get kicked out. That’s a real bitch, getting kicked out. It takes days to get back in. What

you're asking for..." he shrugged again. "... that's harder. It's in a secure area of files. It would be easier to rip off someone else's identity and give you that."

"Wouldn't that person eventually find out that someone else was using his identity?"

"Not if they were dead," the man said.

"Who dies and it doesn't get reported?" Mason asked.

"People," he answered. The man shared a look with Jonathan.

"I guess that could work."

"Let me try to get your life back first."

"Ok." Mason couldn't believe this was actually happening.

"Sit back. This is going to take a while." The man returned to his computer. A series of inarticulate noises started to come out of his mouth, punctuated by the occasional, "fuck, damn, or son of a bitch."

After half an hour or so Jonathan turned to Mason and said, "Lunch?"

"Yeah," he answered.

They wound their way back out of the cable zoo and out of the shack façade. They followed their noses to a street vendor selling grilled meat on top of freshly toasted rolls. The sandwiches might not have been approved by the sanitation department, but they tasted delicious. Jonathan handed the vendor some small slips of metal for it.

"What were those?"

“Coins,” Jonathan said, then seeing Mason’s blank look added, “Money, old fashioned money.”

Huh Mason thought. He never knew things worked like that.

After lunch they went back to check on Hacker, as Mason thought of him. He hadn’t moved much since they’d left. They settled in again. This time he took the plastic office-style chair and left the stinky bed to Jonathan. Mason fidgeted. He didn’t like what was going on here. He wanted everything to be okay, and he wanted to think that hacking into the Government like this didn’t happen. It shouldn’t be *able* to happen. If Hacker could rewrite him into the system, then what else was he doing? What were other people doing?

He wasn’t sure how much time had passed when Hacker finally announced loudly, “It’s done!” Mason had fallen asleep in the chair while waiting. He wiped drool off his face with the back of his hand, and then he forgot everything else as the news settled in.

“As in I have my life back now?” He couldn’t believe it had been that easy.

“Yes. You can go now.” Hacker gestured for them to leave, as if he were living in the penthouse instead of the basement.

“Wait, how do I pay you?”

“You don’t,” Hacker said. “Don’t you think I could have all the credits in the world if I wanted them?” He gestured around to his terminals and monitors. “What I need is parts. Illegal parts. And your friend has kindly already supplied them.”

Mason looked at Jonathan and the old scrapper had the decency to look slightly abashed.

“Thank you anyway,” Mason said, “from me. If there’s anything I can do…”

“Yeah, yeah. I’ll let you know. It’s not like I don’t know how to find you,” Hacker said with a grin. “Ohh, I almost forgot.” He handed Mason a tablet with an address and other information on it. “I got you a new apartment. Apparently somebody was already in your last one. And you don’t have your old job anymore. You have a better one. Now get out of here, I’ve got more work to do today.”

When Mason got back outside everything seemed a little darker. The world looked a little less pure. People seemed to skulk more. But it was done, over, and he could finally move on with his life. He walked with Jonathan back to the alleyway house to pick up a few of his things and then they were off to his new apartment.

It was a nice place. Clean and white. It was bigger than his last place, and he actually had windows. Huge floor to ceiling windows that fogged up when he wanted privacy. They didn’t look out over anything except the street and the building next door, but still he had them. There wasn’t any furniture, so he threw his bags into the closet and lay down on the floor, just to stretch out and claim ownership. The door scanner had let him in without a wayward bleep. He really owed Hacker.

The next day he went shopping. The train let him on without any trouble, except for telling him that he was underweight. He picked out furniture, choosing options from the display and having them holographically displayed to see how they would look in his apartment. He held his breath as he swiped his finger to pay for the pieces: no problem. The salesman promised to deliver them the next day.

He took the next few days to settle in to his new apartment. He wasn't expected at work, so he relaxed. He video-chatted with Sophie to tell her about the exciting news and to let her know his new address. She promised to stop by after work one of these days.

He had enough time on his hands to start thinking that if his death was reported instead of his mom's then his mom's death wasn't on record at all. He couldn't let that happen. He didn't want his dad to have to deal with whatever repercussions might come of it. He decided to take the train down to City Hall.

The line for making death reports was very familiar. He pretty much knew what he had to do. Just go up there, make the report, but he was still nervous. He tried not to worry about it. He had even brought a sandwich to eat while he was waiting. By the time he got to the front of the line he was chatting with everyone around him, making friends.

He stepped into the glass walled room and up to the terminal. He swiped his thumb on the device.

Slam. The glass door quivered with the force that had been used to slam it. An automated female voice filled the room.

“Citizen,” she said, “you are under arrest for tampering with Government systems. Remain calm. Thank you.”

Did he just get thanked for getting arrested? He went to check the door. It was locked tight.

“Remain calm, the drones will arrive momentarily.”

Like hell he would. He looked around for something he could use to break the door. Seeing nothing he started to kick at it. On his third kick he saw small cracks forming. He kept it up until he went to kick and the door wasn't there anymore. It had opened up. He caught a flash of a metallic flying object and there was a burning sensation on his neck. That was the last thing he knew for some time.

A loud clanging sound woke him. He was lying on the floor in a small room made of steel, even the ceiling. There was a narrow bed against one wall with a rounded block used for a nightstand. There was a toilet and a shower-head against the other wall.

A tray slid under the door. His mouth tasted like a rag. There was a plastic cup of water on the tray so he took a sip.

When he tried to stand up off the floor he felt an unusual weight around his shoulders. He felt some sort of metal collar around his neck.

“Prisoner, remove your hand from the collar,” a familiar voice said. He ignored it and kept feeling the thing around his neck.

A shock rolled through him, making his teeth clench and his muscles jerk.

“Prisoner, remove your hand from the collar.”

His hand dropped to the ground.

“I demand a lawyer!” he shouted to no one in particular. Even prisoners had certain rights.

“Please identify yourself, and a lawyer will be provided.” Again the voice seemed to come from nowhere.

“Mason Kelly,” he said.

“Unable to verify, please try again.”

He stood up this time, ready for the unfamiliar weight around his neck. He spoke as loudly as he could. “Mason Kelly.”

“Unable to verify, please try again.”

“Mason Kelly!” He screamed his name, the panic was clear in his voice.

“Unable to verify, please try again.”

“Fuck!” he couldn’t believe this.

“Please refrain from using vulgar language.”

He put his back to the door and slid down it until his head was resting on his knees.

“Mason Kelly, Mason Kelly, Mason Kelly,” he started to whisper. “I am Mason Kelly,” he sobbed, and his shoulders shook.

“Unable to verify.”

The Spanking Paddle

I remember the paddle on the wall of Abby and Lisa's grandparents' house. Abby was seven, like my sister; Lisa was five like me. We lived within a few blocks of each other, and my mother didn't care if we walked that far alone. Sometimes, if Abby and Lisa were bad that day, we were turned away.

The paddle was the size of a small bread board, but thinner. There were words on the paddle, burnt in with wood-working tools. I can't remember the words, but I think it said "Spanking Paddle" and underneath and smaller, "Spare the Rod, Spoil the Child." Someone had taken a lot of time to make it. It was homemade.

Abby and Lisa lived with their mother and little brother at their grandma's and grandpa's house. Later I found out that they lived there because their mother had divorced their father. He had beaten her. They never talked about it. Divorce was a sin to them and they kept their shame to themselves. They worried that they would be with him again in heaven.

The spanking paddle hung on the kitchen wall between the telephone and a corkboard. When we ate lunch there, we prayed. It was across from us. I always avoided walking near it. I thought it would be used on me if I broke one of the rules. There were many rules.

Abby and Lisa knew most of the rules, but their little brother didn't. He was two. He cried in the house while we played on the back porch. I remember the sound of the paddle.

I imagine myself getting hit with it. I would be crying before it even started.
One... Please, I'm so sorry I won't do it again. *Two...* I scream. *Three...* Stop Mama please.
Four... Please Mama.

I imagine my butt bruised black. I I feel ashamed. I imagine flinching when I sit at school, but hiding it from the teacher.

Good Fences

“rrr...rrr...rrr...,” the blades on the lawnmower sang as they continuously clipped the disobedient grass. Dan could feel the heat in the form of sweat trickling down the back of his semi-bald head. He wiped it with his thin, age-worn hands. Still he felt he looked good for sixty-six. He liked to wear khaki shorts that showed off his hairy calves above his tube socks and tennis shoes.

Perfection was what he was looking for and he walked back and forth over the grass until perfection was achieved. Not a single blade of grass could be out of place. They had to turn in the right direction to make the lawn look like it was striped.

It was the middle of summer now, but the neighbors in the cul-de-sac could find him, summer or winter, at 7 a.m. three days a week out in his yard retouching his grass. Rain was the enemy for disrupting his schedule. He hated the rain, odd for somebody who chose to make his home in Renton, Washington.

“rrr...rrr...rrr...” The sound of the lawnmower soothed him. It never complained like people did. It was his scalpel, his chisel and hammer, for his great work of art. Why didn't everyone feel this way? His neighbors let their grass grow wild, at least four inches in height. He hated them for that, among other things.

He stopped the mower and started to wrap the cord. It was electric because gas was too unreliable. He moved the mower into its spot in the garage. He was proud of his garage. Everything was in its place, not like his neighbors' who couldn't even park in theirs.

“I’m done,” he wanted to shout, but didn’t. It was part of the routine: his mowing and his wife waiting for him to finish. But she had moved out a month ago. He could still see the empty holes gaping where the furniture she had taken had not yet been replaced. He was still looking for close matches, but nothing was perfect. He hated her for taking his furniture.

He grabbed some aspirin out of his medicine cabinet. He bought big bottles of it now. He took it out onto his deck and looked over at his neighbors’ yard. His deck was raised about four feet off the ground so he could clearly see over their fence. There were piles of dog-poop over there. They picked it up once a week, but a dog shits quite a bit in a week and he knew he could smell it, even though his wife hadn’t been able to. The perpetrator was over there in the neighbors’ house barking at him. He opened the bottle and dumped the contents over the fence. He knew the dog would scarf them down when they finally let it out for the morning. He hadn’t seen any sign of poisoning yet, but he was hopeful.

“Pick up the dog shit, you lazy bastard,” he yelled over the fence when he saw the light turn on in his neighbors’ window. He smiled as he walked inside the house and neatly tucked the pill bottle into the recycling container. He washed his hands then went to make sure the doors to the house were locked. Once that was done he went back into his garage to rearrange his tools. He had nothing else to do.

“rrr...rrr...rrr...” There were weeds growing in his backyard. Backyard was kind of a misnomer because he didn’t actually grow grass in his backyard. It was just gravel for easier upkeep. Nobody could see the back. He pulled out the little green sprout that had dared invade and then sprayed weed killer on the spot just in case. Crabgrass, thistles, nettles, clover, dandelions, he hated them all. They came from his neighbors’ yard. He was sure of it.

He walked up the steps to his back deck and took off one glove so his doorknob wouldn't get dirty. He was about to go in the back door and throw the weed in the trash when he saw a tiny round object pointing out of his neighbors' window at their joint fence. He got closer, still carrying the weed in his one gloved hand. His deck wrapped around the side of his house, and came within three feet of his neighbor's property line so he had a good view. He bent down to fence level and got as close to the edge of his deck as he could. They had put a goddamned camera up. Can you believe it? A fucking camera! They were the bastards who were ruining the neighborhood, and they were spying on him!

He dropped the weed on the deck and extended his middle fingers at the camera giving it a good view of both his gloved hand and his bare one. He counted to thirty to make sure they had a good look and then pumped his fingers in the air. He bent over to pick up his weed and went back into the house. He had replaced some of the furniture but it bugged him that the pieces he had found weren't exact matches. His armchair was the right color, but the wrong size. The divots in the carpeting were still visible from where the right armchair had been. He was still hopeful his online search would turn up the right one.

He got a piece of printer paper and a sharpie from his office and wrote in nice big print: PERVERT, CAMERA ON HOUSE, PICK UP THE DOG SHIT. He pulled a clear thumbtack from his drawer in the kitchen and took the note over to his fence. He had built it. The neighbors' hadn't helped at all and it had taken them three weeks to pay for their half. He thumbtacked the note right in front of the window and the camera. Let them ignore that.

“rrr...rrr...rrr...” That night he got a knock on his door. Standing on the stoop was a brawny police officer. His head was shaved and he had darkly tanned skin. “Officer Baumgardner,” his badge read.

“Sir, are you Dan Freeman?” the officer asked.

“Yes, can I help you?” Dan looked outside to make sure the man had come up the driveway and not stepped on the grass. Everything looked ok.

“Sir, your neighbors informed us of a property trespassing crime and criminal harassment they experienced tonight.”

“What! They are a bunch of lying bastards.” Dan’s face flushed and his lips hurt they were pinched so tightly.

“Sir, do you recognize this?” The officer held up the note he had written earlier.

“Sure, yeah, so what?” It was just a note.

“Sir, you can’t put things on your neighbors’ side of the fence. The fence signifies the property line and you can’t cross it, and you can’t put or throw anything across it. Moreover I’ve advised your neighbors to file an anti-harassment complaint if you swear at them or call them anymore dirty names.”

“But what about the video camera... they are invading my right to privacy.”

“Your neighbors have the right to video tape. The camera is set up on their side of the fence, and can only see open, common areas. Anyone looking out their window would see the same thing.”

“That’s hardly fair,” he said to the officer.

The officer asked him to stop his behavior and Dan told him he would. The officer asked him if he would apologize to his neighbor, but he couldn’t agree to that. It would happen over his dead body.

“rrr...rrr...rrr...” There was a mole-hill in his front yard. Dan bent over to examine the kicked up dirt lying on his precious grass. This was his fucking neighbors’ fault. Their dog had scared all of the moles out of their yard and now the neighborhood had to deal with them. He grabbed a spade out of the tool belt on his waist and firmly put the dirt back in the hole. After he was done he grabbed some grass seed from the bag of special blend he used for his lawn and sprinkled it on the patch. He would have to keep a close eye on it for the next few weeks and make sure to give it extra water.

“rrr...rrr...rrr...” The neighbors left their garbage cans out on the curb. The company had come to pick up it up on Monday and here it was Wednesday and they still were not put away. They were close to his house too. They were practically on the property line. He didn’t want to look out his window and see two big trash cans sitting on his sidewalk. He was in his yard spreading mulch in the flowerbeds. The neighbors’ vehicles were gone from their driveway. Dan stood up and stretched the kinks out of his back. If they weren’t going to take care of it he would.

He checked to make sure no one else was around then quickly went over to the cans. First he rolled one can and then the other. He left one on one side of the driveway and one on the other side. In order to park they would have to move the cans. Maybe it would teach them a lesson. He finished the mulching and picked up.

That afternoon e went out to check the mail as he always did at 3:45, but he stopped before he got to the mailbox. The damn garbage cans were back. Those sons of bitches he had for neighbors hadn't put them away. They had moved them back to the curb. His eyes widened and he could barely catch a breath. How dare they? His hands were shaking and his legs were stiff. He was pissed and he didn't care who knew it. He grabbed the cans and put them right behind their SUV. With any luck they would run them over. He stalked over to grab his mail before anyone saw what he had done.

“rrr...rrr...rrr...” Dan checked over the potatoes to see which were the freshest. Last time he bought potatoes from this store they started to grow within a few days. He didn't want to make that mistake again. The red potatoes looked good, but the Russets were cheaper. He loaded up a five pound bag in his cart and something caught his eye. It was his neighbor's wife. The fat woman was picking out celery just on the other side of him. Damn. She had seen him. She rolled her cart over close to him.

“Hi Dan,” she said. He thought she sounded snide about it.

His jaw tightened. There was no way he was going to say anything or even acknowledge her presence. He kept his eyes on the potatoes. She waited a second, then when he didn't respond she turned and left.

Dan hurried to the front of the store as fast as he could. Who knew what that vindictive woman would do. Maybe she would confront him in the store and embarrass him in front of everybody. He loaded his groceries onto the belt: only half of what he had to get today.

“rrr...rrr...rrr...” His trees were brown. There was no getting around it. His trees were brown on his neighbor's side. The other sides of the trees were healthy. They had done

something to them, but he had no idea what. He grabbed his digital camera out of the drawer. He would sue them for this. He went to take pictures, and crouched down to get the right angle. The early fall heat was beating down on him and the glare interfered with his shot. He heard the neighbors' door open. He thought about going back inside but didn't. This was too much. He glared at his neighbor as the man got into his SUV. He pointed at him and then pointed at the trees. He didn't believe the man's puzzled face. The fake – Dan knew what he had done. He wrapped the camera strap around his wrist and went back inside.

“rrr...rrr...rrr...” *Squish*. The dog shit was still warm. He could feel it through the bottom of his shoe. He carefully stepped away from the pile. No way was he going to wipe it on his precious grass. His heart thumped as he took off his sneaker and walked with one stocking foot over to the hose to spray off the turd. The fucking neighbor and his fucking dog. He threw his wet shoe on the ground. He couldn't stand any more. They were ruining the whole neighborhood. He walked down his driveway and up the neighbors'. He pounded on their door, rattling it in its frame.

“I know you're in there” he yelled with as much force as his lungs would yield. He heard the dog barking. He had a moment's reservation, it was a big dog: a German Shepherd with long hair, and bigger than he'd ever seen. It was too late anyway. He heard his neighbor behind the door and saw the man peek out the side window.

“What do you want?” the neighbor asked as he opened the door. He was holding onto the dog's collar as it lunged and barked.

“Your fucking dog shat in my yard this morning. I want you to come pick it up.”

“Be quiet, Grizzly,” the man told the dog. “My dog has been in the house all day. Pick it up yourself,” the neighbor said. The neighbor straightened his back and flexed his shoulders. The neighbor wasn’t tall, but he had broad shoulders.

Dan threw a punch right at the bastard’s glasses. The neighbor ducked and Dan stumbled backwards. He was ready to go back in for more when he heard growling. When the neighbor ducked he’d let go of the dog’s collar and now the animal was standing in the doorway with its teeth bared.

Dan put his hands up in a pacifying gesture and started backing away. The dog followed. Once Dan had gotten off of the front porch steps he turned tail and ran back into his house. The dog was faster. Dan tripped in his yard, right next to the dog shit, as he felt the animal clip his ankle. The dog didn’t get much skin, but tore the sock right off Dan’s foot. Right there in front of him, that damned dog swallowed the tube sock in one gulp.

Dan thought the dog would attack him again, but instead it sat down in the grass and looked at him with its head cocked to one side. He heard the neighbor laughing as he called the dog back to the house.

Dan stood up, wiped the grass off of his face and shirt, and limped back into his house, dog shit still in the yard.

“rrr...rrr...rrr...” He was mowing his lawn on a Monday. The rain had disrupted his schedule. He hated the rain. It was still cloudy even now, but despite the miserable conditions Dan had a big smile on his face. There was a moving truck parked in his neighbors’ driveway. He did it. He won. He finished mowing and wrapped the electrical cord up neatly. He went into

the house, washed his hands and sat down in his armchair. What a perfect day, he thought as he sat looking at the walls.

When We Broke Up

- When we broke up you took the *Golden Girls* DVD's we were going to give to your brother. The one with the drinking problem. Sure he is your brother, but they were from us. How is he going to know we saved them from the bargain bin because we knew he had a secret fetish for them. We did things like that together.
- They aired our favorite episode of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* tonight. Remember the one where Principal Snyder reverts to his teenage self? We laughed because we were playing that drinking game where anytime we saw "Sunnydale" on anything we had to take a shot. We were so shit-faced that night we couldn't make it to the bedroom so we slept draped over the arms of the chair. We said we would marathon watch *Buffy* one of these days but we never did.
- "We're not home right now, so leave a message," the answering machine answers still. We only got that phone because you were afraid of solar flares after that *Star Trek* episode where Picard saves a colony of Utopians from their sun only to find out they are clones who don't want to have sex and won't repopulate. We always wanted to have sex except for those times when you wanted to masturbate alone.
- We watched *TRON* together on our first date. The new one, not the old one. But you never said if you liked it. Maybe that was our second date.
- We wanted to have kids together maybe someday. You said if they were twin boys you would name them James and James. If they were girls Faith and Hope.
- When we broke up you called the police and told them I hit you. The county jail smelled like that old folks home where my grandma lived. You insisted we visit

even though it was *my* grandma. There were no beds so I slept on the dirty tiles.

My mom got a loan on her 401k to bail me out.

- We were eating Coco Puffs and we started arguing about who had purchased milk last. You slapped me, but I didn't care. You told me that you never loved me and that was worse.
- We never finished that movie we started. I think it was called *Machine...* something. About the guy who hasn't slept in a year and starts to go crazy. You always remembered the names of movies better than I did. You knew every actor by name, and usually the directors too. I needed you for that.
- We could never agree on what to watch in the mornings. You would wake up early to go watch anime. I would stay in bed and turn on the news.
- We used to share the same bed, until you kicked me out. Not how most people get kicked out of bed, but with your feet. I had bruises all over my ribs, but I didn't show anyone.
- We haven't seen each other since that night. You asked the judge to give you a protection order against me, and she granted it. We haven't been together since.

Gambling Winnings

“Mike, come on,” Jessica was holding the twins by the hands, but that still left Tyler free to run around. They were all hungry and were going to the buffet to get a late breakfast. The casino was busy and no place for a six-year-old to play. Children had to stay on the path marked in the carpeting or the casino security would bug them.

“Ok honey,” Mike said to his wife, then turned back to the scruffy man who had grabbed his arm.

The man’s hair was thinning and looked greasy. His jeans had stains on them and he was wearing a t-shirt with a bible camp logo on it. The shirt hadn’t been washed in a while and something greasy had dribbled down the front of it.

“No thank you,” Mike told him.

“Come on man, you don’t know what this charm can do. It will change your life. A hundred bucks.”

“I don’t think so.” Mike shook his head. *Some people*. He turned to walk away but the man jumped in front of him.

“Listen, twenty-bucks, that’s the lowest I can go. Please. I really need the money.” The man looked desperate and his hands shook. The good luck charm he was holding looked like something you could buy in any casino gift shop. It was round and made out of wood. The center had a raised triangle and slash marks were set around it in groups of three. A black cord was threaded through the whole at the top of it.

Mike looked at his wife. She was glaring at him from where she was waiting. He looked back to the stranger.

“Fine, whatever, twenty-bucks.” He dug the money out of his wallet and held it out for the man. He didn’t really have twenty bucks to spare, but he was in Vegas and feeling a little loose with his money.

The man got a sad look on his face as he pressed the amulet into Mike’s hand. “Be careful what you use your luck on. You only get so much,” he said.

“Okay,” Mike said handing over the bill. “You should try to get yourself some help, you know.”

The man shrugged. Mike lost sight of him as he turned and walked between the slot machines.

“What was that about?” Jessica asked as he caught up with her. He took Tyler by the hand and they started walking again.

“Nothing. Just someone wanting to sell me something.” He pocketed the amulet and forgot about it.

The waitress at the buffet spilled orange juice all over their table. It wasn’t a big deal, but the manager insisted on giving them their meal for free.

After breakfast Mike and Jessica took the kids out to the swimming pool. It was brutally hot outside and Mike could feel his skin baking under the desert sun. They were supposed to meet Jessica’s parents out here, but they hadn’t shown up. They had probably texted, but his phone was hidden under a towel on the pool deck and he hadn’t bothered to check it. He looked longingly over at the poolside cabanas set aside for VIP guests.

“I’m going to go see how much those cost,” he told Jessica who had the twins clinging tight to her in the water.

“No,” she told him. “They’re probably expensive.”

“Just stay here, I’ll be right back.” He scooped up Tyler on his way out of the pool and placed him on his shoulders. They walked over to where the pool attendant was sitting behind a wood paneled desk.

The young man looked up and smiled at Mike as he approached. “Can I help you?”

“I was just wondering how much the Cabanas are?” Tyler was wiggling on his shoulders and he reached a hand up to steady him.

“Three-hundred dollars per hour,” the attendant said as if that exorbitant price was routine.

“Oh. Ok, thank you.” Mike said and turned to walk away.

“Wait,” the attendant called to him. “If you want, we’ve had a family make a late cancellation; you could have their Cabana for the day for free.”

“Seriously?” Mike asked, turning back to the desk.

“Yeah, I don’t see why not. They are going to be charged for it anyway, and trust me,” he said with a conspiratorial smile, “they can afford it.”

“That’d be great.” Mike said. “You’re sure about this, no strings attached?”

“Cabana seven, help yourself.” The attendant gestured to the far side of the pool near where Jessica was.

“Thank you very much,” Mike said and walked over to the Cabana and waived to Jessica and the twins.

They spent the rest of the day lounging by the pool. They ordered complimentary snacks and drinks from the servers and just kicked back while they watched the kids play in the water. Mike couldn’t remember the last time he had felt so relaxed. He felt almost disappointed when their time on the cabana was up and they had to head back to their room.

That night was Mike’s turn to go out since he’d had babysitting duty the night before. Jessica’s parents were already down on the casino floor somewhere. They always acted like he was supposed to wait for them, but they never waited for him or Jessica. He texted them quickly to let them know he had decided to go solo tonight. He had never played craps before, but he wanted to learn. He had a good feeling.

The casino floor was brightly lit. There was excitement everywhere. Flashing lights and bright noises tried to catch Mike’s attention, but he knew where he was heading. The table games were in the center of the casino. He had played Blackjack before and considered himself adequate. He had even tried Pai Gow, but craps was different. He had always looked on from the sidelines as cheers erupted from the table. The players were in a world of their own, but hell he was in Vegas and his kids were watching a movie upstairs with his wife, and he just had a feeling.

He walked up to the table just as an older woman was leaving with a handful of red chips. He slid into her spot, next to a black man in a dress shirt with the sleeves rolled up and a white

preppy looking kid who was probably here celebrating his twenty-first birthday spending money out of his trust fund.

“New shooter, new direction,” the dealer holding the stick in the middle of the table shouted. “Craps, Low’s, High’s, Yo’s. Get ‘em in while the dice are in the middle.”

“So how do I do this?” he shouted to the dealer standing across from him. Everyone at the craps table was shouting. It was the only way to be heard.

“Put your money on the table sir and I’ll change it for you.” He was an older man who looked like he had a lot of experience with new customers. He looked away from Mike to move other people’s chips.

Mike pulled a crisp hundred dollar bill from his wallet. It was his total money for the night. He dropped it onto the table in front of him.

“Hands high, dice fly,” called the stickman.

“No bet,” called the dealer across from Mike.

“No, I want to bet it,” Mike called out, not understanding what was going on.

“Ok it’s a bet. Hundred dollars in the field,” the dealer called just as a woman at the other end of the table threw the dice down towards Mike’s end. They bounced around a bit before they settled with each di showing one spot.

“Two craps. Craps two, line away don’ts to pay. Aces in all places.”

Some of the players around the table cheered as others put down more money to replace lost bets, but he quickly lost interest in the others as the dealer in front of him put three large stacks of red chips in place of his hundred dollar bill.

“Pick up your bet sir,” the dealer said to Mike.

“But I only gave you a hundred,” Mike said, not daring to touch the chips.

“You said you wanted to bet it on the field. Two pays double in the field. So instead of one hundred it’s three.”

“Oh. Oh...” Mike said as he realized he had just bet his entire night’s allowance on one throw. He quickly scooped up the three stacks, trying not to spill them as he placed them on the rail in front of him like the other players.

“Now what?” he asked the dealer.

“If you’re feeling lucky, most players put their money on the pass line. If you’re not, then the don’t pass is the way to go. Just don’t go cheering if you win betting on the don’t pass.”

Mike was thoroughly confused, but he managed to put two red chips in front of him on the *PASS* spot, like the player beside him had.

“You can also bet any number in the middle of the table that is marked in the pictures. The odds are shown below,” the dealer explained.

Mike nodded, but didn’t put out any more money. The woman threw the dice again. A *four* and a *three* turned up.

“Seven, winner, front line winner. Winner winner chicken dinner.”

Mike's dealer paid everyone around the table and put two more red chips next to Mike's money. "Pick up your winnings sir," he said as he went on to the next customer.

Mike picked up his ten dollars and decided to stack it on his other chips. What the hell, he had already tripled his money.

Another seven rolled, this time *five-two*. The dealer placed four red chips next to Mike's stack.

"Third time's the charm folks, anyone up for a seven on the hop?" the stickman called.

"Sure," Mike said. He put his winnings down on the table, all thirty dollars, and left his original bet on the pass line. He watched as his bet was moved to the top of the table with a picture showing the various combinations of sevens.

Mike almost closed his eyes as the dice came bouncing off the back of the table and landed in front of him. It was another *four-three*. He let out the breath he had been holding.

After the dealers had paid the winning bets around the table the stickman pointed to him with the stick. "One-thirty, my second."

"Parlay, sir?" the dealer asked him.

"Sure, Parlay," Mike answered. He didn't know what a *parlay* was but it sounded good to him. An energetic buzz filled him.

The dealer stacked Mike's chips up in the center of the table.

"Hands up, dice out."

“Man, I hope you hit that seven,” the man with his sleeves rolled up said. “That’s about eight hundred bucks.”

The woman blew on the dice before she threw them down the table. *Six-one.*

The man next to Mike clapped him on the back and let out a loud “Yeah.” The kid on the other side of him gave him a high-five.

“Parlay again sir?” the dealer asked.

Mike got a bad feeling all of a sudden. “No,” he said. “Give me it back.”

The dealer took him off of the bet and handed Mike eight black chips and a small stack of reds. Sure enough when the woman rolled the dice this time they crashed into some chips and came up with a *four-two*.

Mike ambled back to his room sometime in the early a.m. He wasn’t supposed to be out that late, and sure enough when he got off the casino floor his phone started buzzing with a ton of missed messages from Jessica. He normally didn’t drink, but he had had a few too many. The waitresses kept bringing them for free, and he kept giving them large tips out of his winnings. The hallway seemed to spun a little as he walked through it.

He slid the plastic key in his door and opened it quietly. Both Jessica and the kids were sleeping. The three kids were piled across one queen bed and Jessica was in the other, snoring softly. His clothes smelled like smoke, so he dropped them on the floor and crawled into bed naked.

“Mike, get up!” Jessica said as she pushed him on the back. Sunlight was streaming in through the open curtains. He groaned and put a hand to his head. He closed his eyes against the pressure building in them.

“Get up,” Jessica said again with another shove. “Where were you last night. I was worried!”

Mike was in no shape for an argument. “What time is it?”

“Ten a.m. You’ve already slept through breakfast and now we have to check-out.”

“I want to stay another day,” Mike answered sleepily

“Come on, we can’t afford it. Besides, you’ve got to go to work.”

“Look in the pocket of my pants.”

“What?” Mike knew she didn’t want to get derailed from her berating.

“Just do it. Look in the pocket of my pants I was wearing last night.”

She picked the pants up with one hand. Mike looked around the room and noticed she had already packed up the kids’ things and they weren’t even in the room. They were with her parents probably.

Jessica fished around in his bulging pants pockets and came out with a handful of yellow chips.

“Oh my God Mike, what are these? These are thousand-dollar chips.” She looked at him with her freshly lipsticked mouth open and her eyes wide. “How did you get these? How much is here?” She asked as she kept pulling more chips out of his pocket and set them on the bed.

“Forty or fifty thousand. I kind of lost track. I was playing dice and just couldn’t lose.”

“Oh my God,” she said again. There was silence in the room for a few minutes as they looked at each other. Mike couldn’t help the grin that spread across his face. Jessica seemed to have the same problem. Together they started to dig through the chips and started to count them.

“Hey, what’s this?” Jessica asked holding something up. It was the wooden good luck charm. He hadn’t thought of it since he’d bought it.

“It’s a good luck charm. I bought it from that guy yesterday.” Mike took the charm from Jessica and rubbed it. It felt good in his hand.

“Well, it must work,” she said then laughed. Jessica was more religious than he was, even though he kept up appearances for her. She didn’t really believe in things like luck or fate. Even though she was willing to come to Vegas once a year and kick back, she still only thought in terms of ‘God’s plan’. After last night he wasn’t so sure luck didn’t exist. He rubbed the charm again then set it down on the bedside table. He showered the smell of smoke off and got dressed. He made sure to pick up the charm and place it carefully in his breast pocket.

Together they counted out the yellow, purple, and black chips. He had won even more than he thought he had. All together it came to \$63,475. He put the chips into a plastic tub designed for that purpose.

Just then a knock sounded at the door.

“Hello, everyone awake in there? Honeymoon’s over,” Jessica’s mom yelled through the door. She was always saying slightly inappropriate things, as if she wanted to be dirty, but didn’t have the guts.

“Listen, don’t tell your parents about the money,” Mike said as Jessica had her hand on the doorknob.

“Why not?”

“I just don’t want them to know about it yet. Plus we have to leave without getting robbed, and I don’t want them accidentally telling the wrong person.”

Jessica opened the door and the kids came bursting into the room. They didn’t even stop to say hi, just started wrestling with each other on the bed. The two girls, as always, were ganging up on Tyler, who was only a year older and no bigger than they were.

Jessica’s dad gave Mike a glare as he came in. Apparently her parents weren’t ready to forgive him for bailing on them. Mike didn’t care. Last night had been the best night of his life and he didn’t care what they or anyone else thought. He knew already that he was staying an extra night. Hell, he might even stay an extra week. His boss might get mad, but he would tell her that he was sick.

“Is everyone ready to go?” Jessica’s mom asked, trying to be in charge as usual.

“I’m not going. I’m having too good of a time.” *And making too much money.* “Let’s stay a few extra days.”

“What? Honey, no. We’ve already spent enough time here. Besides Alexa is starting to get sick,” Jessica said. She leaned in close to Mike, “Let’s take our money and go,” she whispered.

Mike looked to where Alexa was wrestling with Alyssa and Tyler. She looked healthy enough to him.

“I’m staying. You can go home if you want to.” Mike was counting on the fact that Jessica didn’t like to fight in front of her parents.

“I guess so. Just promise me you’ll be home in a few days. And promise you’ll be careful.” She frowned and put her hands on her hips.

“I’ll be careful,” he said. He kissed her on the cheek.

Jessica had the kids go to the bathroom, while Mike looked into keeping the room for an extra three days. They didn’t have this room available, but they were willing to comp him a suite. Would that do? Yes it would. He grabbed his luggage and walked his family out of the hotel and into a waiting taxi. He paid the driver in advance and gave him a big tip. He stood on the curb and waved as they drove down the Strip. A few minutes later he had checked into his new room and was back at the craps table.

He played craps until he was bored with it, then he moved on to blackjack, roulette, and poker. His luck seemed to work best with things that were random and not strategy based, but it didn’t matter. Anything he touched he made money on. He traveled up and down the Strip visiting big name casinos and a few not so savory ones too. He rarely ate and almost never slept

for the three days. He was on a roll and couldn't let it end, so he spent as little time as possible in his room.

He called Jessica with periodic updates on his bankroll. Alexa was getting sicker and Alyssa had started to come down with the same thing. They both had fevers now. She was getting worried and needed his help. He promised her he would be home soon.

By the time his allotted three days were up, Mike had raised his funds to 1.6 million. His boss was getting pissed and threatened to fire him if didn't come in, but he didn't need that job anymore. He could buy the company soon if he wanted. He decided that he would try to get to 5 million then quit. That would be enough, he told himself, to pay off all of his bills and live comfortably for the rest of his life. He didn't have the heart to tell Jessica by phone, so he sent her a text instead and then promptly turned his phone off.

He was sitting on his bed in his suite, which felt very empty. He looked at himself in the mirror on the wall. He looked rough. All his clothes were dirty and he didn't have any more changes. He had large black circles under his eyes and his hair was sticking out. He couldn't stop yet though. He didn't have enough. He left his room to find somewhere he could make larger wagers.

A few days later he lost, not just one or two hands which would happen occasionally, but the entire evening. He kept checking the amulet in his pocket to make sure it was still there. It was, but it didn't feel the same. It didn't give off that spark of energy, but he knew it would come back. The luck would come back and it would make up for all he lost that night and more. He didn't even go to his room that night. He played straight through. He knew any moment could be the next lucky one.

He checked his phone only once after he started losing. Alexa had been admitted to the hospital. The doctors didn't know what was wrong with her. He promised himself as soon as he was back up to the 1.6 million he would go straight there. He needed the money. His boss had fired him by email since she couldn't get him by phone. He needed the money now.

Another night of losing and he was penniless. He even spent all of his and Jessica's savings, the half she had left in the account anyway. He didn't even have enough for a plane ticket back home. He wandered around the casino floor. He came by the young kid he had met that first night on the craps table. He was hanging out with some other people his age near one of the banks of slot machines.

"Hey kid, remember me?" he said as he walked up to them. He tried to straighten his clothes and smooth his hair down.

"No," the kid said and turned back around. His cronies were laughing.

"Yeah, sure you do. I won all that money on the craps table."

The kid turned around and gave Mike a hard look. "Ohh yeah, I remember you. I made a lot of money betting with you that night. What do you want?"

"Listen, I won that money because I had a good luck charm. I have it right here." He fished the wooden amulet out of his pocket. "It doesn't work for me, but it will work for you. I'll sell it to you for a hundred bucks."

"Get out of here," the kid said to him.

"No seriously, it works. It really does. Besides I could really use the money to buy a plane ticket home."

The kid rolled his eyes. His buddies behind him were laughing again.

“Fine, whatever. A hundred bucks. But only because you won me a lot of money the other night.”

“Deal,” Mike said. He held the amulet out for the kid to take. He hated the thing. It had ruined his life, but it was still hard to part with it. It felt like giving up hope.

“Listen kid, when the luck runs out, it’s out. It doesn’t last forever.”

“Alright, sure. Just make sure you get home. This place is obviously not good to you.”

“Yeah,” Mike said and walked away. He intended to take the hundred bucks and walk away, but when he walked by the craps table it was calling to him. He walked up to the table and put it all on the pass line.

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