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Latin on the Walls

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B.A. in English, Southeast Missouri State University, 2010

A Thesis Submitted to The Graduate School at the University of Missouri-St. Louis
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree
Master of Fine Arts in Fiction

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Latin on the Walls

Roger had to retrieve his dad for dinner. His mom had already tossed the chicken in the dumplings, and the whole family was to eat together this evening, but leave it to Lee, Roger's dad, to be off hunting in the cow pasture across the pond. A few feet from its muddled bank, Cyprus Trees, and a barbed wire fence staggered along separating the pond from the pasture. All around ragweed, thistle, and burch trees shivered in unison. The blackberry vines and brush tangled the fence where rabbits tended to be.

The quiet of the open cow field ended as Roger stomped over a few fallen limbs. His complaints about the gnats and cow pies echoed across the pond. And once Lee was in sight, Roger called out to his dad petulant way. Lee was hard of hearing and didn't make out a word of what Roger was saying. Lee's voice flattened the air when he spoke; even the birds overhead stopped tweeting.

"Sara—again—now what?"

He stooped down to grab an arrow that had pinned a rabbit to the soil. He yanked the arrow up, blood and flecks of flesh circled the arrow head. Roger had trekked across the pasture and hadn't seen his dad make the shot, and was stunned to see the rabbit's brown body beneath his dad's leather boot.

Pepper pushed her nose out of the brush and pushed at Lee's legs as he raised the rabbit by the nape of its neck. He jabbed his thumb into its mid-section and yanked at the loose skin, fur floating about the cool air as dandelions do in the spring; the sound of tearing skin was much like rubber. The tawny red of the open cavity didn't steam in the cool air as Roger had seen before. Reaching inside, Lee pulled out the liver and entrails,

flinging them off where some bushes choked up along a fallen tree. Pepper lunged over a muddy hole after them.

“Sara— she’s coming back home,” Roger said. A pair of yellow finches shot out from some dried stalks of tall grass.

“I know, she’s been home,” Lee replied, “since last night.”

“Oh, well, mom says it’s time to eat and that you can’t miss both lunch and dinner.”

Roger couldn’t read his dad’s emotions that well, because oftentimes the old man squinted, producing a commonly misjudged look of anger under his gray hair. But when his potato-like nose wrinkled, Roger was certain his dad was frustrated. Roger wondered if the source of anger was because his hunting gear had been moved, or was it all that writing, strung up and down his hunting room walls, those Latin phrases. It was Sara’s doing. Roger was amazed him how quickly she had transformed it with her cryptic phrases of Latin. Even though he didn’t understand a lick of the language, he felt what she may need. She needed an outlet, or maybe, she wanted something that was hers. Did she want to claim the walls? Why stay up all night drinking coffee to write Latin phrases on the walls? She must have needed to lose it, to extend herself, to refuel, to feel closer to the family—forget about college, and take on a change.

“You know” Lee said. “I told Sara once before, don’t worry about those teachers.” His free hand—the one not holding the skinned rabbit—searched around his waist until he found a nylon bag. “Listen son, this goes for you, too. Their opinions, all the teachers out there, anyone’s ideas for that matter, simply opinions. You and she can recall what they claim as facts. Do it for the grade, for tests, and whatnot—but that doesn’t mean you have

to believe these teachers. No matter how smart they think they are—” His dad waved the bloodied arrow around, and he took a breath to stop himself from anger, so it seemed.

“Dad,” Roger said. “Dad, listen. I’ve heard this before.”

“And sure Math and science, it’s different.” Lee said. “But religion, or God for that matter, it’s—it’s all a matter of opinion.” After fumbling around, trying to put his bloody arrow in the quiver behind him, he dropped it. “Son, grab that arrow and put it in my quiver, will you.”

Roger walked behind his dad and handed him the arrow.

“‘Go easy on her.’ Mom told me,” Roger said.

“Well,” his dad said, “I suppose that’s good advice.”

They walked along a cow path near the barbed wire fence. Pepper didn’t follow them until Lee called her. The dog’s nose was down and her white-tipped tail wagged. When she scurried up in front of them, she turned back, and Roger figured that Pepper was disappointed that the hunt had ended early.

“At least you got a rabbit, right?” Roger said to the dog.

“One rabbit isn’t enough for her dumplings,” Lee said.

“About that...” Roger said.

“She put in a damn chicken?” Lee guessed.

“Yeah, those chickens beat that bunny to the dumplings.”

“Oh, that woman.”

“It’s getting dark; we only got thirty minutes left of light anyhow,” Roger said.

“Hell, I might stomp one up on our way back.”

“True.”

“Like with a lot of things, son,” he added, “there is so much out there that we don’t understand, that we think we know or expect.” Lee lowered his voice: “Don’t believe everything you hear.”

Pepper howled and it sounded like burr—burr. That’s her way of saying rabbit—rabbit. Lee yelled at her and it sounded like, “Yellsome! yellsome!”

“She’s fine. She’ll quit once she sees we are out of her sight,” Lee said.

“I hope so,” Roger said.

“Anyway, we’ll sort out Sara’s issues and all that nonsense.”

“You think she’s still upset about Jeff’s funeral?” Roger wondered.

“That may be part of it,” Lee said.

They had made it to the end of the cow pasture and Roger climbed the cow fence gate. Lee looked over it to a stretch of dirt road that ended at an asphalt street which circled the sub-division. Lee put his boot up to a plank of the wooden gate, but when Pepper circled a rabbit back to him, he pulled his foot back. His eyes darted toward her yelps. And then, she let out a howl. Lee had his bow at the ready. The rabbit popped out of the fence line. It had frantic eyes and lowered ears. Pepper popped up behind the rabbit, panting, wheezing, blood stains across her white chest. If Lee would have shot at the rabbit, he might have hit Pepper. The dry blackberry bushes rattled when she jump in after the fleeing rabbit.

“Did you see that?” Roger said.

“Did I? Heck, I almost shot the dog,” Lee said.

“It was a small bunny anyhow,” Roger said.

“Still good eating” Lee said. “Go on home. That silly bunny is mine. And I don’t see Pepper willing to quit anytime soon,” Lee said as he turned back toward the cow field. “Tell mom not to wait up and go ahead and eat.” Roger knew that meant eating dinner without him, but he also knew mom wouldn’t have it. Dad’s eating with the family. Mom also wouldn’t have the family stay in Illinois because Daphne’s husband, Jeff had killed himself.

Four days ago, the Belfry family had driven from Illinois to Texas to go to Jeff’s funeral. Dad would eat with the family. He had to. Mom also wouldn’t let any of them stay in Illinois when Daphne’s husband Jeff killed himself in Texas. To Lee, this hardly made Jeff a part of the family anymore, but for Lee, saying no to Jeff’s mom invitation, was not an option. Lee knew Elizabeth’s wide stretching notion of family ties. And before he knew it, he had crossed four state lines to see Jeff lowered into the Texas soil. Lee acted that going to Jeff’s funeral was his call, and it was true that he half-cared for Jeff. He was his son-in-law in spite of the fact, that he felt Jeff wasn’t fit for his daughter.

After their first day traveling across Texas, they stopped in Big Bend National Park, Big Bend National park. Elizabeth had been confused about the hour long detour out by the national park, but her confusion was swept aside when she awoke the next morning seeing Lee with bow in hand and his hunting hat on. The sage brush that clung to his jeans, the musky smell which lulled in behind him, was Lee back from a tromp through the Texas desert.

After the funeral, Lee bragged to Jeff's relatives about an antelope he had recently shot. Whisky seemed to have that effect on him, and he didn't care that Elizabeth was in earshot, sipping on wine, staring him down as Jeff's relative made a semi-circle around him. And they attentively listened to him brag about the antelope he had shot. They congratulated his gracious move of giving his antelope to a poor Mexican family. Jeff's funeral had had its plus side, and why shouldn't it, hunting antelope was a blast.

But what irked Lee was watching Jeff's mom mourn into Sara's shoulder, and mistakenly call her Daphne. The fourth time she called Sara, Daphne, Lee had to look away. He pressed his hands into the contours of Jeff's casket. He wanted to shake the casket and wake the body of Jeff to life. Curse him until somehow Daphne would come back to defend Jeff like she always had. Lee blamed him for her death. He would never tell anyone this. He felt Elizabeth probably felt the same way. But he dared never to voice that he felt Jeff deserved to die as he had. It hurt Lee being so hateful. Daphne would never forgive him for feeling that way. But Lee just wanted things to be as they should be. Daphne would be alive, and Jeff, hell, he made her happy, so just live it up, chum. But it wasn't that way. The air conditioner at the funeral home was on full blast, and Lee was cold.

Ever since their arrival back home in Illinois, the household lacked a sense of normalcy. Elizabeth, she should be working, managing her employees at the warehouse. Staying around the house trying to console the family had a reverse effect because the family was fine.

Lee was proud of his boys because neither Roger nor Darrel had spoken of the funeral lately. Lee's oldest son, Darrel, he hadn't been dwelling on the past, or at least he doesn't talk about it. He has plenty on his plate anyhow: depression, schizophrenia—these

impossible mental hazards—afflicted Darrel all his life, and in spite of them, he knew of normalcy. Darrel circled back to habits. He had a monastic life: praying, playing board games. Taking his prescription and maintaining his regiment, this kept him even keel. He wasn't all that dysfunctional, if he wanted a job, any employer would make good use of his strong back, he opted out of. And his boy, Roger, he was a chip off the block, so there was nothing to worry about with him. He was a self-starter who tended to fall back to his old habits as well.

Lee believed that Sara was still grieving over Jeff in a secondary way, because everyone was truly reliving the loss of Daphne again. He felt a week's worth of stress behind his eyes and clinching them shut didn't escape it. He thought he might need some more paint thinner, it'll remove Sara's Latin from the walls of his hunting room. The writings in a paint that was a god awful green, especially against these creamy white walls.

Early morning at 1 a.m. his wife, Elizabeth, pleaded to have him move all the hunting stuff out. Do it for Sara. She's moving back in, and he guessed from all the knocking around last night. They already did some of the work for him. In his half-conscious state Lee didn't argue with his wife. Worry about his hunting gear would usually riddle his mind to the point that anger and sleep would have been impossible, but he wanted to prove to himself that he trusted his wife to take care of his stuff delicately, and that she'd deal with Sara. For Lee, a slight bit of guilt surfaced, he should be there for Sara, it seemed noble enough, but why kid himself, he knew better than trying to console her. Elizabeth would say the right

things, especially this late at night, when Lee's grumpy attitude would overpower his limited compassion. He tried to eavesdrop on them, but it all sounded like mournful murmuring, and it had an eerie way of easing him back to sleep.

When Lee awoke around 5 a.m. to hunt. He thought it was miracle those two girls didn't rouse Darrel or Roger. Hell, maybe they did. He slept through it. Whatever it took for Sara to calm down, it also took on the form of reclaiming Lee's hunting room.

Forget the mess of gear that was scattered down the edge of the hallway. Forget the hundreds of dollars that he spent on his long bow, his fly rods, and his life-like rabbit targets. He sneered as he walked past them to open the door to his hunting room.

Elizabeth seemed to put the kids first no matter what. Unconditional love, it doesn't have its limitations does it: time, space, money, and love. What else must they have?

Oh Sara, Latin? Lee opened the door and gazed around in awe. Just say what you want to say? Why hide behind foreign words that no one else here knows? To Lee, it was a big mess, something he'd have to clean up in the future. It was around the window frames. It was everywhere. But there were places where the Latin phrases took on an obsessive slant, and seemed to be poorly crafted. Horace, Aristotle, who knew who inspired some scribe to write these lines down. Aristotle, Des Carte, who of these men had influenced his daughter to be so gullible to this notion that this was deep thinking? A deep thought to Lee was the lack of thought as he witnessed a thousand leaves rattling in the wind. Latin didn't provide a special key to knowledge.

Sic vita est. It was above her old bed. *Sic vita est.* It was on every wall. Was this all really worth it Sara? Expression can take on so many other forms, why this one? These speckles of green paint on the bed frame and even on his deer hide. Lee knew how she

puzzled over dogma and the niceties of religion. He had a stint of those issues while he was in college.

He also knew of Latin, *carpe diem*, *ex post facto*, and various law related phrases such as *pro bono*. And before Vatican Two changed the Catholic Church from Latin to the parish's common tongue, he had been to mass where the priest spoke only in Latin and the songs were sung in that very language. On the rare occasion when he'd go to church with Elizabeth, the Latin language wasn't as dreary as Sara's writing makes it out to be. He was fond of listening to Elizabeth sing Latin. But now, Latin was a façade to use to hide behind, and it was something bothersome and haunting. Theology may not be Sara's study in college any more, he thought. But, these writings would make people she had taken up a new no nonsense cult.

God, he knew he'd have to poke fun at this—pseudo spiritual break down. So, she hadn't any other way of showing that she was wanted to be artist? Losing it, that was the path. Painting on a canvas like most artsy types wouldn't have worked—that wasn't cool enough. Keep it cool, Lee. That's right, take it easy, she can be what she wants, don't confront her... be the cool guy, do it for the family.

He glanced at a knee level line of Latin, it gradually tangled up in a long phrase that went under a small wooden shelf that he had made long ago. It held a tiny unicorn. Sara knew Daphne had made it in Art class and had given it to him many Easters ago. And somehow, the shelf, which he had given to Elizabeth before they married, which he had stolen back from her; he gave it to Daphne on her seventh birthday, and in the stroke of a brush, Sara's Latin dispelled its whatever—whatever he and Daphne shared. Just drain its significance and smear what have you, he thought. *Non sum qualis eram*. Lee tried to

translate what circled around the shelf, “Nothing is sum...” he said, thinking he must be close to knowing what it meant, but like it mattered.

Lee gleaned that Elizabeth was the one who would understand something like this. Not that she would be able to translate Latin. No, Elizabeth had the type of empathy which extracted the deeper meaning which words couldn’t capture. Without knowing the issue, she sensed the issue, and had that way of healing her sadness. That’s what mother’s do. He’d be there if she ever truly sought him out.

Lee tried to pull away from making any sense out of the Latin and when he stepped back from the edge of the bed, a prong from an antler poked the back of his head. Lee turned around to stare at the end of the antler and put his fingertip to its edge, and he said, “I forgot about you—you little shit—trying to get me back, ay?”

Someone was always trying to get him back, was Sara retaliating? No, he doubted that she’d go to such a length, but there still seemed to be a chance.

When Sara was much younger, he had found her on the living room floor surrounded by clippings of his hunting magazines, “It was a collage for an art project,” She had cried. Why he snatched up the scissors from her hands, he didn’t know. But then, Sara said something in a spiteful tone and Lee flung those scissors at her, cutting her foot. Elizabeth appeared out from the hallway trying to resolve things as she does. Daphne came from her room to stop the exchange of verbal assaults between Lee and Elizabeth. Everyone’s hands were waving various expressions of anguish. Darrel stood on the sideline, and he seemed to be in a somewhat drugged state, but in a spurt of energy, Darrel snapped to—his hands articulated in front of him as if they were two spiders gathering bits of web. And manically he snapped up, those magazine clippings to hand each piece to Lee

until everyone tried to calm Darrel. In truth, Lee feared he was the creator of everyone's distance from him.

As much as Daphne was his girl, did she truly love him as she seemed to? Did she play along, and act like she was his. Was his girl too much like himself? Was it that hard to be yourself? Sara had said Daphne only acted like she cared about Lee's hobbies. "How else can anyone relate to you? She wanted your attention, dad." Who didn't flip out then? What real man would stand for that? Lee scratched at his side burns anxious to stop lingering in the spaces of this room.

Non sum qualis erum, he whispered again wondering if he had said it correctly.

Lee grabbed his bow and a few arrows from behind the door, and he tossed them into his quiver. He left a note on the kitchen table between three large stubby candles.

Hunting out back, I'll be home for dinner.

Lee

Lee left in such a hurry he didn't see Sara sleeping on the couch all wrapped up in a blanket. However, he did see her car parked out front, but by then, what was he going to do, shake her awake, threaten her to paint over the walls, no way, no how. Pepper had already shot out from her dog house in the back yard, and she had her nose down, the white tip of her tail was wagging. There was no turning back from the hunt now.

Hours later, Sara went back to her apartment to get what she had left behind. Her economy sized apartment across the street from Radforth University overlooked sidewalks

where students rushed to class. But today, she kept the blinds closed, but the window open and it released a cool breeze over her exposed body. It sent goose bumps along her thighs. And through her bedroom door, and past the simple kitchen, a bathroom was wide open, and that's where Sara's boyfriend stood peeing. Todd's pee hit the toilet water in a slow trickle until he was finished, and he flushed the toilet. Sara laid quietly on her bed. She touched her chin with a finger and questioned if she should clean the relief of dust that left an ornate cross imprint centered over the bed. Unthinkingly, she wiped her crotch clean of what had happened minutes ago. She tried to ignore the subtle smell of latex and sweat which lingered in the air.

"I should be home already," she yelled to Todd as she grabbed her clothes off the bare mattress and stood up. She lifted her panties up to her pelvis. She untangled the rosebud printed dress from the bedpost. She pulled it down over her ruffled hair, shimmying into it, adjusting the arm straps. Sara stared down at the boxes at the end of the bed by the door and pulled her nails down her back, fine impressions of the bed where bumpy to her back. Here were the last of her belongings. She grabbed a small black bag from the box and unzipped it, uncapped a deodorant stick, twisted the bottom of the applicator, and smeared it across her armpits.

"I'm showering," Todd yelled.

"Okay," she said. "No clean towels though."

"Don't care," he said.

She flopped back onto the bed, feeling the thread pattern mold up under her as she listened to the water from the shower head spurt across the mold stained walls. The patter of water lost its intensity when Todd stepped into the shower.

She stared at a bare wall where the outline of the cross was faint. Now that cross was at the bottom of a box beside the bed. Darrel gave it to her for her birthday, but he seemed proud of the cross and held it as if God Himself had blessed it particularly for her. It was wrapped in newspaper and compounded underneath a books and school supplies.

Was it after her second date with Todd, when he first gave her the novella, *Franny and Zooey*? Yes, their second date because she pulled him in for their first kiss in the library then. What gift doesn't deserve an innocent kiss? Todd complained about the essay he had written about Franny and Zoey. He said his idea was ingenious, and very precise drawing on a particular perspective relating to psychological ailments that affect children that live through stardom in the 1950's. So little was known about the subject, his professor said it wasn't supposed to be a speculative essay. "It wasn't rooted in guess work," Todd seemed to be still arguing against the B- he received. Not enough research backed his ideas, which after reading it Sara agreed. She found it funny that Todd hated Zoey for chain-smoking, but Sara secretly smoked three cigarettes in a row just for the experience. And experience she'd have to admit that it wasn't worth the coughing fit to try out.

For Sara, it was a pleasure to read—the novel was unlike her assigned texts for class. It was alive and real but somehow humorous. It was a stress free read, and much easier to put herself into, Franny stole the show with her attitude. Her morose and discontent was grand. She's glamorously detached. Sara recalled saying something along those lines. They were in the library, trying to be studious, focusing on school, and kept their noses in their books. Sara and Todd strained to stay off each other then as they sat shoulder to shoulder reading.

It was a library study date, not like the date Franny had with Lane. Instead of being two people expressing their unbridled self-absorption like Franny. They were reading. Remember how Franny zapped Lane's pretentious airs by calling him a 'section man.'

"What are you talking about?" Todd's voice was crass like she was foolish for recalling what she said to some length.

"Basically, the graduate students, or what we'd call adjunct today, and how they were pedantic academics. The professors used them to be their substitutes," he said.

"Aside from what I wrote about," Todd said. "I liked Zoey's insight about Jesus. From an activists standpoint, how he was a counter-cultural figure that fought against the mainstream ideologies." His discussion would have gotten stirred up with a debate about God again, one of her 'serious God talks' which to Todd, was a dead subject, anyway. So that's what he believed though it never stopped Sara from starting up one of these talks.

What she didn't like about her own opinion about God and religion, was that it seemed soft like a soft subject—no footing, based on reality. She blamed others for her lack of faith: her dad for not being Catholic, her mom for not discussing what faith meant in the Catholic Church, and then the Church for being so ritualistic all the meaning that was supposed to be there was lost in the redundant motions. The Bible didn't seem to really have answers but only riddles and parables. Half of the students she studied with were self-proclaimed atheist. It didn't make sense that they were in Theology studies and only believed in not believing in anything

She searched for answers, like they all did, but she suffered not knowing, not understanding how careless the world seemed. How can thousands of people suffer from starvation and die from it every day? This action results from sheer humanist universal

negligence, and if God does not have to power to change this, for her, it proved that indeed God did not exist, even at a baseline metaphysical level? These thoughts animated her in anxious ways, her tongue rolled back and forth over her teeth, a habit, she developed ever since she started going to college. She clenched her jaw shut to stop it.

A month ago, she was late. She was “late,” and so frightened to take the pregnancy test, when she attempted to take test she dropped the little white stick in the toilet. After buying a second test, she was tempted to call Todd. She was tempted to not take the test and start drinking, but she really needed water, so she would pee. Should she go to the clinic? She didn’t want to call any of her friends, especially Abby. All they did was party, a baby would be a downer. But tomato juice now that’s tasty, maybe with a dash of vodka, some hot sauce sprinkled in, that seemed better than water, but she knew how awful that could be because it may harm what growing inside... She hated the idea of morning sickness. She’d become hungry, fat, but glow with love. She wanted to buy shoes. She wanted to be thoughtful, and have a loving man beside her as support as he should be there after all. She had to gather her wits. Maybe, she should open a second banking account or start buying stocks. Become frugal. Her student loans were piling up. Was she really jobless? That needed to change. Two days ago at the mall, she made an impulse buy. She didn’t need a black leather jacket that one with the roughed up look. She was goofy in love with that jacket, but her attention was taken away by the sight of a set of twin toddlers holding hands in between their parents, their cute little heads, black poofy hair, their little outfit...

Todd didn’t know yet. But he left her with a new life that will grow within her.

Those twins had a family, probably one that was like hers that went to Mass every Sunday. Well, dad didn't go, but this was her daydream... she liked to listen to Father Scaffenburg. She understood Father's quixotic homilies and all those long winded parables that he'd paraphrase from Jesus, simply hilarious. He made Jesus's word his own. But over time, Father Scaffenburg lost it. He became bitter about politics—and anti-gay notions would somehow make their way into his homilies. It seemed so uncatholic, she thought. She tried to overlook it in spite of that one odd hiccup, but more political opinions about other topics started to seep in his homilies. Everything seemed to revolve around morals that were far too absolute for her to connect her heart to. God, what happened to the freedom of choice?

Besides, while she was in college, she felt culturally obligated to break track from her initial parental embedded teacher enforced perspectives: exploring her spirituality, expanding her knowledge of the world and of herself, that was something being religious seemed to muffle. Spirituality was more than praying, that's what Todd told her. It was in her actions too, and she knew that, but the way Todd said it, it seemed to make more sense than what she remembered hearing at church. While things were getting more confusing between the notion of religion and its place with spirituality, thing also became more exciting. It was like the world she knew was a farce and thankfully, Todd was her new guide, the only thing that worried her was the amount of skepticism which surrounded what once seemed like a fairly strong belief system. The waning of those beliefs ate at her self-worth, and that's when she started to chew on her fingernails—all the way to the pads—what an awful habit to start now.

Then, there was the nice little novel, *Siddhartha*, another little novel Todd had given her. If she didn't know better, Todd was the wannabe theologian and not her. How could he study so many texts that involved spirituality, and then believe in nothing?

She bothered him with the false dichotomy between science and church. It had been a hot button item for the media. Any educated person would see the false conflict. Science and religious believers can all share the same study. Science doesn't disprove or prove God exists. Science was based on what's observable to study. But somehow, being Christian seemed to be uncool. Why was Buddhism cool and so appealing? Why not be a Christian and practice Buddhism? She knew of a monk who did.

So, nothing is everything, right? With very little research, she grasped at Buddhism as a practice more so than a religion, which deeply pleased her. Another key aspect was that everything changes, easy enough. All life is suffering. Boy, didn't she know that. But, God isn't real, that nearly stopped her from the whole Buddhism thing. Well, it did halt her spiritual strife, momentarily. However, why not experiment? She was in college. Intellectual experimentation was expected. Just try not to believe in God, and so she did: or, rather she wanted to think she thought this way, but she was skeptical of what she was capable of thinking. She didn't really get how she would all of a sudden not believe in something that was once thought to be true. Yet somehow, she knew there was a fine line between thinking and feeling, and that's what bothered her about feeling the guilt which pummeled her heart. How was guilt associated with God? And it didn't shrug off easily, "Sorry, God," was her last prayer.

Todd's shower ended abruptly, and the curtains were pushed back. Sara sat up and rummaged through a laundry basket and found a wadded up towel.

Todd's hand waited outside the door for it. "Thanks."

"No prob," she said in a dry tone.

"What were you doing in there?" Todd asked.

"Thinking," Sara said.

"About what?"

"About what caused this to happen."

"What, you mean, about us?"

"Yes and no. Just dry off. We'll talk, okay."

Sara sat at the edge of the bed, and thought about her new spiritual rules, what she called, the Buddhist rules to live by. And living through these rules had somehow freed her from the torment of not having a God. Nonetheless, her idea of Buddhism was rocky and needed some tuning up. She better read more than *Siddhartha* someday.

She continued to read less and less of the Bible, and by mistake, she read a book her professor, Mr. Canton, suggested for her to read long ago. *The Screwtape Letters* by C. S. Lewis. This novel seemingly summoned God for Sara virtually overnight. It brought the Christian Spirit out in a mindful philosophical way, a thoughtful spirit was woven by C. S. Lewis. After finishing the book, she felt buzzed with ideas. She was rejuvenated, her spirits were revived. She felt as if she had attained a spiritual middling where she seemed to truly love herself. It was unreal. The best of way to have a belief was here for her, and to think a demon uncle's letters to his demon nephew would inspire such an awaking of spirit. However, with her Bible, no matter how she tried to read it, a struggle always ensued: sleep or bible study? Sleep often won.

“Todd, do you remember, when you said, ‘Maybe, religion isn’t your forte,?’” Todd had said this during their fourth date.

“Yeah, what about it?” He said.

She remained silent, thinking back to that day of all the stupid negative things she said about God, and why, just to keep Todd happy? Back then, she was on an anti-religious kick with a full on spiritual roll—she was fearlessly ambivalent and by acknowledging this fact about herself, she felt a new sense of empowerment. A wishy washy sort of mood that teetered on the balance of a soul filled life coupled with a godless one, ups and downs were expected like usual, but it was a high. She missed that levity. “Do you miss how we were? How you once were, where you actually had opinions about this and that— and now, what do you do, you spew the same lines from the book that you hear from your professors. Remember when you read outside of the subject matter and you had perspective: one beyond a general take on things.”

“What’s with you?” Todd said. “I have a semester left. People burn out with school after a while. I mean look at you.”

“Me? What because I know I want to shift directions in what I study, it’s not the same, English Lit boy. Maybe, anthropology is my new study, but that doesn’t mean I’m burned out with school.” Sara sat on the corner of the bed, and pulled Todd to her and they held hands for a moment. “Remember at the dinner, when I wore those leggings, was that too much?” she asked.

“Why bring that up?” He asked.

She recalled gazing at her blurry image reflected through the fly flecked window. Todd ate his sweet potato fries. She wished she had talked about Todd’s obsessions instead,

because she felt that her serious God talks held significance back then. God was real and then not real, back and forth, Sara flip flopped on the subject and it made arguing about it, all too easy for Todd's agenda. It made it easy for him to make fun of her, and he strung one theory after another about the metaphysical crux of reality, was it all a collective dream that we couldn't wake from. Possibly, alien forces interacted with us without our knowledge, other dimensions were known to exist, you know.

"You were an ass, remember?" Sara said. "Explain how the Egyptians built the pyramids? I mean seriously, why didn't I call you out on that shit?"

The Sara that was naïve and happy, the one who didn't yet believe that she learned a very narrow set of ideas and that she was sheltered away in a closed environment. The version of who she was now compared to herself then wasn't even close to poking her head out of Plato's cave allegory.

"Because, I never acted like what I said wasn't true," Todd said.

His arrogance nearly kept her from ever telling him this, "But Todd," Sara said. "How can you be so sure about this world being so Godless, when God may translate better from the novel than any form of artistic expression?"

"What has gotten into you? I thought we were through with this. Can't you stop, just stop searching for nothing. Can't you put energy into something useful? Todd stood back at this point, and gather up his jeans. He brought them up to his waist and zipped them.

"Listen Sara, I hate saying this, but if you didn't know God won't save children who starve, okay. Other people save starving children. Praying won't keep them from dying. People, not prayers, save people from dying. Jesus is dead. He had a great message, but he doesn't save people either.

“Right, right, more answers, Todd with the answers, sure, whatever,” she said.

A mantra, one to ease her mind, what did Franny repeat “God,” she whispered, “have mercy on me, a sinner.”

After a few repetitions, it would clear her mind—momentarily—the Jesus prayer that she read in Salinger’s *Franny and Zoey* became wonderfully meaningless and almost Zen.

“God, have mercy on me...”

“Are you mumbling something?” Todd said. And he crossed his arms, and then searched around the floor and found his v-neck turquoise t-shirt.

“Umm, no.” She swiftly stepped off the bed to Todd, who reached out playfully to touch her as she passed by him on her way to the bathroom. She pulled her panties down again to wipe her crotch with handful of toilet paper. She pulled up her panties, and then stooped over the sink to wash her hands in cold water, drying each finger individually on a bath towel. Should she pack this away? An after-sex towel? Nope, and in the trash bag it went. At this moment, the amount of things that she wanted to blot out of her memory seemed to increase.

“Look at the time,” she said at the door of her bedroom.

“Kicking me out already?” he said.

“I’ll miss you. You know that. But I discovered what I thought—what I thought I wanted wasn’t me. I have to move on.”

“Feel free to wonder. You can do whatever you want,” he said.

“How ideal. Look, I’m drained. I can only imagine how my family will be and they’ll probably drive me nuts in a passive aggressive way. That’s my family” She poised her arm

across an empty spot of carpet, “Egg shells will be everywhere—they’ll talk and walk about like I’m about to break down any minute.”

“Sara, you know that you were the one who chose to go to them,” he said.

“Yes, yes. It’s not like I don’t know that.”

“It wasn’t like you were failing a class.”

“No, it was like I was about to fail myself—It wasn’t me, enough already... are you trying to make that easy for me to leave?” She sighed, “is that the goodbye that I get: annoying.”

“No,” he said, “just go, do your thing. If you ever need me, call me. He took his blue jean jacket from off the floor, swooped his arms into it, and put his arms out in front of her. She leaned into his arms for a hug she didn’t give back, her arms braced against her chest; she wanted to hate Todd more than ever, wishing he’d had never stopped by to say goodbye, she wondered if they had never met, if she’d be in class right now taking her mid-terms.

Elizabeth tinkered around the kitchen, re-tasting the gravy, the stuffing. Was the consistency of the dumplings just right? Everything was set, plates, knife, fork, spoon, gravy bowl, salt and pepper shakers, butter dish, and paper napkins. Roger and Brenden should be filling the glasses with ice soon. The kitchen window hung over the sink and Elizabeth stationed herself before it. The towel over the facet had been bunched and rebunched. On the window sill, a small hand carved turtle that bobs its head rocked ever so subtly, and she

felt it was an ironic symbol of patience. She tapped its head and it bobbed up and down as if to agree. A clock in the shape of a sunflower ticked away the minutes; she promised herself to stop looking at it. A pot of dumplings boiled on the burner.

Lights flicked on in the house across the street The Havards were an elderly couple, both retired, a mail man and a banker. What a happy couple who barely left the house. How simple they must have it with only their birds. And they stay outside, the nasty squawking Martins and their oblong gourd huts. Those birds swoop around at dusk and at dawn, gobbling up bugs. The few shabby shrubs in their front yard were ugly and just wouldn't die. They look horrible compared to the row of shrubs Lee had bought. At the end of the summer, The Havard's would pay Roger to cut those awful things. "Clean the gutters before the snow comes, could you?" It was always Joy Havard, who'd call Elizabeth on the phone, too old to walk across the street, well, maybe, how awful it must be to get that old. Yard work, that was their only reason to talk to the Elizabeth or Lee, but whatever, it was something to do.

No one seemed to visit them; not on any given holiday had anyone else ever parked over there, but the recluses were pleased in their visitor-less home, or so it seemed. They have each other. Happiness: it must be a complacent beast without 'want.' It shouldn't be impossible for The Belfrys to be happy sometime in the next few years, she thought. It wasn't exactly high aspirations, but If Lee would ease up, downshift from running on all eight cylinders as he says he does; maybe someday he would find the cruise control. In these whereabouts sitting on the front porch, bird watching, while tea cooled in hand, ignoring the phone, and watching the sun fall into the rushing interstate which was just across the way: dual lanes swishing back and forth, it was soothing. She welcomed

forgetting what was supposed to worry her. She welcomed giving in to thinking everything was A-Okay.

Certainly, the Havards don't have a daughter who arrived in the middle of the night, drunk, craving significance in the world—"What about world suffering, what does it all mean? Why do people suffer needlessly and starve to death in the streets?" Sara had cried about this last night. Who can answer such questions for a girl who wouldn't accept the answer if it was there for her? And God knows what really ate at her.

Why wouldn't she be dulled down to the glow of television like everyone else? Across the small coffee bar that separated the kitchen from the living room, a television flickered and emitted screams and shotgun blasts. Her son and his friend, Brenden, who lived across the highway both of them cross-legged in the middle of the floor, and the idea of transfixed took on a new meaning when these two played video games. Their eyes jutted up and around to aim the shot gun that their character hauled around. "Roger, just because Brenden's here to stay the night, that doesn't mean you can neglect your duties."

"Mom, you got me killed," Roger said.

"Don't say that. It sounds horrible," She said facing the steaming oven.

Three hours had passed, and Sara had promised to be back in a minute. What did it matter? Lee and that damn dog were still hunting, too. And Brenden, he shouldn't even be here. His attitude seemed to be contagious to Roger—who didn't need help in being rude or pretentious not that Roger had these traits by any degree. The family didn't need a meddling nuisance like Brenden. He had a way of needling in on "family only" subjects. On any other day it would be fine for him to be here, and thankfully, he hadn't been a nuisance yet. She disliked that knew she was pushing her worries off on the boy, but whatever.

Blast after blast sounded from the television. Elizabeth wasn't upset that her son's video game was full of frantic movements or even violence; and in a way, it soothed her, even though everything on the screen made little sense to her.

"It's my turn, you died—for like the millionth time too," Brenden said.

"Be careful with the controller. My sister bought it for me."

Exactly, you little shit. Daphne gave it to him, Elizabeth thought. And a smack to the back of the head was what Elizabeth wanted to give Brenden, but instead she chewed at the inside of her gums. Had it been three years ago? It seemed like yesterday when Elizabeth told Daphne not to spend the money on that silly thing. Roger complained it was outdated but he still used it.

The dumplings were about to get squishy. Elizabeth set the burner on three—the flame shrunk under the pot, and the white sauce boiled and rolled over the dumplings. She had given up on the idea of a rabbit for dinner and had put the pieces of chicken in, knowing Lee wouldn't be back in time. She knew him well and didn't regret giving up on him.

Sara's red Mazda pulled in the driveway and the headlights splashed across the gray carport. Without hesitation Elizabeth opened the front door. Sara with a bag slung over her shoulder and a box in hand, pushed it off to Elizabeth. "Carry this in could you, please."

"Boys," called Elizabeth. "Grab this one Roger. Brenden, help Sara with whatever else she has."

Roger bolted up while Brenden dillydallied. He stamped the pause button on his control and threw it down stomping out the door. Roger handed him a box and he looked in seeing, a three sets of yoga pants and a bra. “Nice, just take it to the hallway.” Roger said half-winded.

Sara stumbled through the door carrying a laundry basket. A roll of socks fell out and onto the floor. She put the basket down to gather the socks. Brenden stood over her, watching, her stoop over while he had his hands on his hips.

Elizabeth walked through the door, “Brenden grab that basket. Put it with the boxes.”

Sara tossed the socks in and the boy plodded off.

“Thanks,” Sara said. “I thought I felt him looming over me.”

“That little shit.” Elizabeth said. “Why’d I let him stay the night?”

“To make Roger happy. So, he can be distracted from all of this?”

“From what?”

“From what’s going on here.”

“Oh, you mean you?”

“No, well, I guess yes, me, too,” Sara said. “No, because of Jeff’s funeral. It brought back a lot of old feelings.”

“Daphne has been on all our minds.” Elizabeth’s voice went to a whisper.

“I know. But I’m here and we can push through together. Right?” Sara said.

“I like the optimism. What happened between those three hours you were gone?”

Todd—“

“We went through this—I’ll take incompletes in my religion courses and begin nursing school next semester.” She shook her hair around and pushed her hand behind her head as if to keep everything together inside and looked Elizabeth in the eyes, “And that doesn’t mean I can’t believe the way I want.”

“Or?” Elizabeth said.

“Or read, or write, or do what I like, think about being a nurse maybe,” Sara said. It was a list obviously reiterating something they had talked about last night. Sara went along with it to please Elizabeth. “Can’t we all eat now?”

Elizabeth opened her arms. She pulled her daughter in for a hug—a warm hug, sweaty, smelling of chicken broth and flour.

“Any minute Lee will be here,” She said.

Elizabeth mixed herself a special drink in the kitchen and Sara found a spot on the couch. With a bang, the front door crashed open.

“Pepper, no,” Lee commanded from outside, his voice traveling throughout the house. Pepper paid him no attention, her muddy calico body led by her black nose. She glanced up at Elizabeth and clattered along the kitchen tile to a dog bowl where no food or water waited.

“Good Lord, Dog. What happened to you?” she said.

Blood and spittle dangled down Pepper’s muzzle and she limped into the hallway.

“Oh Pepper,” cried out Roger. They left their game and sprinted after her, disappearing into Darrel’s room. Elizabeth sighed at the sight of blood and paw prints trailing through the house.

What chilled her skin was Lee, he nuzzled his chin into her neck with a big hug. The embrace startled her, and it repelled her, but as a second passed she relaxed for a moment. It was the first time he had held her like that since their last anniversary, but mandatory romance loses its romantic appeal. So it was a surprisingly nice gesture from Lee, but Elizabeth felt like Sara was watching. It was odd to feel self-conscious of intimacy when you were thirty years married.

“Lee, you smell as bad as that mangy dog,” Elizabeth said.

“Can I shower first before,” Lee said, taking off his shirt, “before we eat?”

Elizabeth and Sara turned their heads from his perspiring hairy chest, his arms still pushing his shirt off and yikes did he reek—much like vinegary red onions mixed with an iron hint of blood. The smell increased when he lifted a nylon mesh bag, and pulled a rabbit out. Its fuzzy paws, the rest of it was stripped of its fur, red muscle and white tendons and its chest cavity empty of guts enclosed by ribs. Its knobby head flapped as he thrust it to Elizabeth, who snatched it up in a movement somewhat spitefully done. With rabbit in hand, she hurried to a cabinet under the sink, opened the door, found a large zip lock bag, pushed the body in tightly, sealed it, and in a couple steps she was at the refrigerator, opening the freezer to shove it in a side compartment.

Darrel’s room was filled with music from the 80’s band Genesis. It played from his computer’s speakers, distorted from too much bass, and reverberated through the tiny bookshelf. The speaker held up his collection of bird books and below that a cathode

monitor protruded from his desk. Across the screen was a story with no paragraphs. Only the blue, black, and red blocky font gave it some structure. Darrel wrote his fantasy role-playing quests: shadow realms, various planes of existence all magically bound to an unfathomable nexus which included necromancers, humans, beholder beast, orcs and kobolds. The reference books to the game pressed against the base of a small statue of Jesus on the cross.

Darrel had taken a break from his writings, and in his usual nook beside his bed frame, knelt at his prayer bench. He had been kneeling some time, still managing to keep his back arched upright: posture was something he had become aware of as of late, seeing how he slouched when he brushed his teeth for exactly two minutes. His posture shocked him as gorilla-like, but his knees hurt, the cartilage grinding, and he swore he could hear the bones crushing together while he prayed. A black rosary draped across his wrist, the beads pinched between his fingers, meeting his thin pink lips after each prayer. The drumbeat of "Easy Lover," by *Genesis* played, and his eyes moved under his closed lids until he felt too disrupted to continue, and he opened them. Failure to complete the entire rosary was unusual for Darrel, but he put no stock in such an expectation; besides, his eyes felt like new after being closed for so long. He blinked a few times, adjusting his eyes to the pale yellow glow that lit his room in an aura much like a dreamy fog.

From off the floor, he gathered up a purple Crown Royal bag that his dad had given him and dropped in the black rosary. He cinched the bag tight and looped the bag on the end of his bed post near where a scatter of overlapping bird books lay.

From his prayer bench, Darrel tried to ignore what was on top of his pillow, but the letter that he was looking at had already been open. He forgot to put it away. It was the

disrupter of his prayers so silently there, but the words on it had lapsed over him—much like terrestrial projection—something he wished were real. In his stories, souls could launch a trajectory traveling miles, enter realms, communicate with demigods, and even convene with the dead while traveler could still return back to his body. However, that letter on his bed nearly had the same ability while he prayed—his thoughts wouldn't stop returning to a joke Daphne made about him being the “family monk.”

He stood up from his prayer bench, stretching himself, tossing his hands high into the air, and then he leaned back down to massage his kneecaps. His shorts were too short, showing half his thighs, his white socks reaching half-way to his calves. They itched. He ran his fingernails over his socks, down his hairy legs.

He stepped over to his bed and sat at its edge, which was right by his writing chair, and unfolded the letter. It was rare to Darrel and in many ways, no one in his family had ever written him or had a reason to, because she was the first to move from Illinois. He wasn't jealous of her traditional step in life, he knew moving out was a part of it. However, moving out for Darrel was unfeasible, he knew being diagnosed with his disorder and all, it impeded his freedom. What he feared was mentally distancing himself too far from home. He knew he created spaces inside; spaces where no one but the Others spoke to him and sometimes the Others really care about his concerns. Concerns like, will mom let him drive at night again, can he ever forget that dream about ants, or when will the mailman leave him another letter. Without his family to reference reality, sometimes these voices, the Others were loud within the spaces, the Others were a commentary group of sorts who would convince him he was a great man doing delightful things for the world, and on other days, they said he was a lesser demon full of pride and ignorance. And on even worse days,

he didn't realize how little control he had over his thoughts. The Others were able to influence him into thinking he were God, a lesser god of sorts, and in this high state of thinking, it would sometimes be dispelled when he would take two steps outside the house, something like the glare from the sun, or any force he had not control over, which would awaken him, which would insist a conscious acknowledgement would confirm the truth, he was a human unable to command reality, helplessly weak to a harsh reality that he was powerless over.

When he and Daphne were in high school, before medicine truly helped his condition, Daphne was one of those references that let him know he was normal when he was anxious and paranoid; any minute the Other's voices would be true, bright, and real. But she reassured him. Teenagers are all crazy, some just a little more than others, that's all. So, like this evening, Darrel sought Daphne's help, and the closest thing on Earth similar to astral projection through space and time was her letter:

Dear Brother,

What would you think of sagebrush for miles and miles where no stop sign or gas station can be seen? Scary huh? Do not worry, a gas station wasn't too far away. People here are friendly, so far from what I can tell. Not that I know anyone yet. I am like that character Valentine that you like so much in, *A Stranger in a Strange Land*. Not that I am a Martian or anything. However, the sunsets in the desert appear as a Mar's landscape. I know none of these things are new to you, since you and dad helped me move here which I can't thank you enough for... I hope you enjoy your birthday gift. I hope a prayer bench

wasn't an odd gift to receive. I know prayer is important to you, so I thought, why not? Buy what others wouldn't buy for themselves, right?

Do you know about the monks in Sweden? They made cheese and beer, and it would be a great hobby. If you are on the fence whether to pick beer or cheese, for me and mom's sake, choose beer.

Someone has to compete with dad and his collection of hobbies. Surely, he is hunting Woodchuck, since that's the only game open to hunt during August, odd how I remember these things. And how is mom? Has she gone on one of those geocaching journeys with her sisters? She hasn't mentioned it on the phone if she has. Those girls... isn't it funny how they cackle when they get together? You can probably tell by reading this that I am a bit homesick. Nothing unexpected I suppose, but the last time I felt this way was when I went to Georgia for the summer with Aunt Denise. Say some kind prayers for me, and keep up with what all happens at home, so I can live there vicariously through you.

Love, Your Sis Daphne

"Cheese," Darrel said to himself with a smirk that faded to a frown as he folded the letter back into the envelope.

Past the walls he heard his younger brother, Roger, and his mother arguing over Sara. It reminded him of the birds that tweeted near his window and how they whistled what people think. He knew it wasn't true, but he understood the thoughts of other people, some people he never saw, but through bird songs he knew his neighbors thoughts. Oftentimes, his prayers would blend in with lyrics of 80's rock and his Other's opinion, the Hail Marys were far from correctly consciously being intact.

The chicken broth smell in his room grew with intensity, an intensity which grew like his hunger; his stomach growled, and he knew he'd have to let go of this letter. He didn't recall unfolding it again. Seeing his fingers were sweaty at the edges, now folding the letter into threes and returning it back into its envelope felt good, felt right, knowing he wouldn't look at it again today.

In truth, he wished he could lose it amongst his bird books, or that a wild-eyed river thrush would peck it to pieces, because he didn't feel well with his habit of mulling over the letter as he did, unhealthy, like brushing his teeth slouched over. Why was he so hard on himself? With hunger he became cranky, became ill. I should eat, he thought, eat alone and not at the table. There will be too many little mouths at the table.

Before he opened the door to the hallway, Darrel heard the front door bang open, and Lee's voice, the scrapping claws and barks from Pepper, then Brenden's voice, that pesky kid Roger kept inviting over; they both were crying out a noise about who knows what. And that faint voice, was that Sara? He opened the door and stepped out only to be rammed at the shins, Pepper's back side smearing blood along his calf. She limped into his room, knocking her butt up against his bed frame before thrusting her body underneath it.

"Pepper?" Darrel said. "You rascal, you're in a bloody mess."

Darrel stood back to stoop down to look under the bed. Darrel's red lips were wet, and he smacked them, and a bit of fat on his chin wiggled. His monastic life, and medicine had put some weight around his waist.

"Brenden." Darrel said as the boy stopped running, almost tackling him. Darrel put his hand on the boy's shoulder and said, "Settle down, okay?"

Roger was a few steps behind Brenden, and it seemed like Roger had fallen or had been pushed over by Brenden. Darrel didn't care to investigate otherwise. He knew how these two fought at times and didn't care to get in between it, so he stepped into the hallway.

The boy squatted down and begun crawling through Darrel's room toward the dog. "Think she's okay?"

Darrel stuttered, "I—I think she's fine," not knowing really, but he would rather not have the brat in his room. The dog had done this before, just a few weeks ago, actually. And after Roger ran through the room and huddled beside Brenden on his knees at the Darrel's bed, he felt that his room had become a playpen for curious little boys who were quite bothersome.

Darrel kept himself from berating the boys, wanting to tell them they had no business being in there, but that damn dog...he walked between the hallway past Sara's and Roger's doors and heard his dad talking in the kitchen. It was best to reset himself, gather his senses, so he went to the bathroom. Inside, he saw the mirror, put his hands under the facet ran the water lathered soap over his knuckles, wiped his hands on his shorts. He had forgotten about Pepper's blood and was distracted, wondering if he had heard Sara's voice. He opened the bathroom door.

Elizabeth was at the bathroom door and said, "When you're done, help me with drinks. We have a full house tonight and I need some help."

"That dog's under my bed and those boys are in my room," he grumbled.

"Forget the dog and those boys. Sara's here."

He followed his mother into the kitchen and across the bar that separated the kitchen from the living room. He saw Sara on the couch, lying down with her head on two throw pillows, like she was about to fall asleep the way people do when they're still angry.

Sara glanced at Darrel and then she stared back at the television; her blue dress seemed to dazzle, especially since it contrasted to the drab browns of the couch cushions and dirty pale whites of the carpet under her pale white slippers. She nodded at Darrel in a gesture that seemed to signal a non-engaging hello, and then went back to the television, which blinked continuously, a prompt screen: Dare to Return, Yes or No, it read. Behind these words was the pixilated view of a dead character: three bull-dog faced demons clomped about in a dark corridor.

"That game will repeat like that forever unless the electric bill isn't paid." Darrel said as he rounded the kitchen chairs of the dinner table. Coleslaw, stuffing, and mash potatoes were steaming in their porcelain dishes.

"That silly video game of Roger's," she said, not replying as if he were completely there.

"Welcome back, sis."

Darrel noticed she paused at that sentiment and hadn't anything to say in return.

"Darrel, grab these glasses will you," Elizabeth said as she forced two glasses into his hands. "The ice is in the freezer."

"Right." He pulled out three ice trays, and before he closed the refrigerator door, he saw in the side compartment a clear plastic bag with a skinned rabbit inside. "Where's dad at?"

"Dad's in the shower."

“Right.”

At the kitchen counter, he cracked ice from out of the trays, water and ice showering over his hands. He tossed ice into the seven glasses that Elizabeth had set out. After he set the last glass of ice at the head of the table where Lee usually sat, he looked over at his mom. She was standing with her back to the stove, some pots and pans stacked in the sink. And she had the look like everything was done, but seemed unhappy. Possibly it was her stance, arms crossed in front of her. With her short dark brown hair, he saw her jaw muscle flex up to her ears, and if Darrel didn't know better, his mom wasn't sad anymore but something else. A part of her was showing that he hadn't seen in a few years, three to be exact, right around the time when Daphne died.

Darrel was blankly looking at Elizabeth, she turned to her side to grab a large wine glass. The dark syrupy color of Coke was offset by a shot or two of Crown Royal.

Back then, Elizabeth was the first to ask, why Jeff hadn't died with her? Jeff was out of town when she died; he was on a business trip. And even with Elizabeth's striking question, Jeff still felt okay with staying. He slept on the couch for three weeks. And nearly every night, mom, dad, and Jeff drank in dad's garage, which was a makeshift woodshop. And each night, Darrel sat at the concrete steps by the door that led from the kitchen to the garage. He felt out of place with the adults, but they said nothing to him as he watched and listened. The men sat on tall work stools by his dad's semi-industrial sized band saw. His mom stood with her arm propped against a vice grip that was hoisted onto a woodwork table, wine glass in hand. Like Darrel, she took in their conversation, rarely speaking, looking at the walls where antique farm equipment hung, and at the enormous elk's head at the far end wall of the shop. Jeff wanted to impress Lee and talk about hunting like he knew

a thing or two, "It weighted forty pounds, not a bad sized, buck, ay?" That made Lee gaff in contempt.

"You shot a baby! Good God!"

"Lee come on," Elizabeth grasped at Lee's arm and tugged on him. She was drunk it seemed and for a moment, she seemed as if she were much younger. The giddy smile was what transformed her, and she seemed unbothered by Lee jerking his arm back, "Fine, I'll go to bed without you."

Without her presence, Lee seized the moment to argue with Jeff. It was nice how Jeff kept his cool, it was a respectable quality that Darrel appreciated. Because Lee, he was being rude, saying mean things about him, something about him being abusive with Daphne, and that she was going to divorce him anyhow she just never got the chance. "She'd be alive if she'd never had met you."

"You know what you say, it's not true, Lee." Jeff said, "We're drunk. Drunk and mean... Love looks past that hatred. You know you are my only father. My dear old dad is long dead. Liver cancer got the best of him."

Oftentimes that sweet quirky sentiment worked with Lee, and the silence that followed, was only to be interrupted by a joke. It seemed that Lee had told himself this joke inside his own mind; he'd laugh this anger off and Jeff would reluctantly add to the laughter too. One night, Lee called Jeff a dead beat hippie and once again Elizabeth left them to hash it out. And that night was when they really drank. Shots of Crown Royal, talk of guns, which guns they had and ones they wish they had. Jeff hurried off in mid-sentence, went into the house, and came back with an old double barrel shotgun. Lee was shocked by its beauty and condition. For some strange reason, Jeff had brought with him and said, "Don't plan to

hunt with it. Too nice to target practice with. I'll use it someday. After certain losses there is no turning a new leaf—just checking out if you know what I mean.”

“Jeff, I understand you all too well, and—and now that’s a shame. Really, it is.”

Darrel remembered grunting, and the two men Lee gazed at him momentarily as if he’d said something, Jeff handed him a drink. He took a sip of the shot.

“I don’t want pity,” Jeff rose his glass up eye-level and lowered it, not drinking from it. “Not from anyone. I just need a wayward journey maybe a long trip to the coast or something.”

Lee did everything he could to get Jeff to sell the gun that very night. He started to pour drinks freely and at a continuous rate, hammering shot after shot of Crown, having Jeff match him for every one he took. Soon Jeff was slurring his words and Lee was acting like he was taking each shot, not actually taking half of them, letting Jeff become belligerently drunk. Darrel even drank another shot of Crown which Lee offered, it caused him to squirm with bitter revulsion.

Lee told Jeff to stay put, as if he could walk anyway, and Lee went into the house. He came back with a pistol, “It’s nothing special, just a 1911 9mm,”

He pulled opened the garage doors and Lee took aim and fired into the front yard, and hit the mailbox. The explosion of rainwater was illuminated by the dim moonlight. It was a wonder the cops never came, since it was two o’ clock in the morning. Two years later, Jeff’s mom called. He had committed suicide: shot himself with that shot gun that Lee wanted so badly.

“Mom,” Darrel said. “Do you remember when Jeff and dad shot the mailbox?”

Elizabeth nudged Darrel and frowned at him. She took a swig of her wine glass, her breath stinking of Crown and Darrel felt like maybe he needed a drink if she did, but the memory of the Crown shots that he took that night made him think otherwise.

“I think Jeff was a good guy with a good heart,” Elizabeth said.

“Darrel,” Sara said. “How about we leave mom be and I show you something in my room?”

“Great idea hun,” Elizabeth said.

“I bet you wonder what has been going on,” Sara said.

“Yes,” Darrel said. “Yes, I have. I have been concerned...”

Sara led Darrel down the hallway, she brushed her shoulder against a crazy quilt that hung from a wooden dowel rod on the wall. When she opened the door, she pointed to the first lines of Latin.

“This phrase, *non sum qualis eram*, means, I am not such as I was, and for me, it means I’ve changed, or better yet, I am changing.”

“We change every day, simple enough.” Darrel commented.

“But it helps me remember that life goes on,” she gestured with her hand out, as if pushing something out of the way. “And that I can choose to improve. The past still haunts me, and yes, some of that is Daphne’s death, but there’s more to life.”

“What about that one?” he said, it was on the other side of the window where her bookshelf of books and Lee’s fletching were stowed. “Did you run out of paint halfway through?”

“Yes, as a matter of fact,” she smiled. “It means *he who is silent is taken to agree*. I felt this way in class; that’s why I was so outspoken and also why I got so ridiculed. If you tell them anything about yourself, sometimes people tend to use that against you.”

Darrel canted his head at Sara: “Are you okay? I mean besides school and moving back? There is something different about you.”

Sara’s face blushed red, “Can I tell you a secret? I plan on telling mom and dad, just not yet. Can you wait for me to tell them?”

“Sure,” Darrel said as he arched his shoulders forward, “What is it?”

“It is something I am unsure.”

“You are going to marry Todd?”

“Shush, no. I am not ready for that—God!”

“I might be pregnant end of conversation for now, okay?”

“Got it.”

Darrel watched Sara and Elizabeth talk in the way arguments begin—Elizabeth seemed to want to close in on Sara who had taken her place back on the couch. The two seemed to increase in a sarcastic tone, clearly they were annoyed with each other, but they kept on talking anyway. Sara sat up from lying on the couch when Elizabeth approached her. Sara sat upright and tossed a wool blanket across her legs while Elizabeth settled down to sit in Lee’s comfy chair. Darrel tried to act busy with setting the kitchen table.

“What happened between here and your apartment,” Elizabeth said. “You said it’ll take a few hours, you were gone most of the day.”

“What happened? You really want to know, mom?” Sara said, her hair flipped onto her shoulder, and she brushed it away with an open hand. “If you want, I can just go back to my apartment if I have to put up with this.”

The amount of tension in the room was unsettling. Darrel looked away from them and noticed the ice in the glasses at the dinner table slid closer to one another. Darrel was jumpy and flinched a little when Elizabeth lunged at the television, which still had the demons running about. The helmet on the floor continued to roar, the system still on. “We don’t need that nonsense on while we talk. Sara, you are welcome to stay here.”

Elizabeth sat back down and continued, “I will leave you alone if you need to sort this out on you own. It’s just I was worried sick about you being gone so long. That’s all. Sometimes it is difficult to show you how I care without getting you getting upset with me.”

“Mom,” Sara said, “No one likes to quit something they thought they would enjoy.”

“Fair enough,” Elizabeth said. “Boys!” she yelled down the hallway, “time to eat.”

“Well,” Lee said, back from his shower, now standing at the opening of the hallway, “I’m a clean old man, and ready to eat.” His blue bath robe had long ago lost its fluff, and out from beneath it Lee’ spindly legs were stark white, and shooting up from its collar were curls of pepper colored hair. His silver hair was slicked back, making him look as if he was trying to be some sleazy old geezer who ought to have a martini in hand instead of having a family dinner. Lee lay a hand up on the side of the hallway wall.

“With that on?” Elizabeth sighed, “I thought I threw that away.” She walked back over to the dinner table. She leaned over to pull the tinfoil off of the dishes and Darrel

watched his dad impishly stare at his mom's cleavage, Darrel turned red with embarrassment. She turned to the burners at the pot of dumplings. "Listen, Lee. Go change and come back and then you can eat."

"What, this old bathrobe—I'm not going anywhere after we eat. I figured I'll eat comfortably," He said as he seemed to inspect a thumbnail with scrutiny.

"Comfortably?" Darrel said. "Ha, I bet dad, but what about the rest of us." Darrel gawked at his dad from the kitchen counter. He shuffled behind Elizabeth, who went back to the kitchen to spoon chicken and dumplings into bowls. She tapped Darrel on the shoulder, pointing to the bowls on the plates.

"Hand them here," she said.

"Yeah, dad," Sarah said. "We don't walk around half naked. What makes you think you ought to?" She kicked her legs out from under the blanket and angled her toes at her dad as if to point to his bathrobe.

"Well, Sara," he said, "In Ancient Greece, the elite spoke Latin and there's those bath houses in Rome, so I thought, why not? If in Rome, wear a bath robe. It can be Greek night; I went to college only a hundred years ago. I didn't graduate after six years, but the parties were fun. Besides, we had Greek on the walls, I figured it is like a step brother to Latin, so why not?" He winked at Sara and cocked his head to the left.

Sara hopped off the couch and walked over to lean on the chair at the end of the kitchen table. Lee was only a few steps away from her and she felt like crackling static of

animosity shot through her already. For her, Lee had poked at an old wound. Maybe, it was that gesture, Sara thought. Lee's little cutesy wink--it was devious. She wanted to retort, wink back and sneer. But she knew Lee played as the innocent jokester for only so long. The fun dad attitude would last for a while as long as guests were around. But boy, whenever Brenden leaves... out from the woodwork Lee would rear his true self. If anyone disagreed with Lee and it seemed to him they spoke insincerely, which to him was commonly the excuse, he'd become a raging mad man. Lee had been thrown out of basketball games. It was for heckling, it was because Sara had been benched for a flagrant foul. Lee ranted and cursed directly at the referees as the game played on. Then with a forceful fist to the door the ref ejected Lee from the game. Then, Elizabeth slapped him upside the back of his head, and she tugged Darrel and Roger off the bleachers and pushed them through the gym's doors. Lee spouted every four-letter word in the book as a faculty member showed him the same door. Half of the parents witnessing Lee at his best, they were muffling their kids' ears with their hands.

Sara was unsure how long she would be able to play along with Lee's fun dad act. Maybe, if he didn't push his bullshit too far around the house, this day's version of peace might last long enough so that by the end of the night there's a possibility that no one will cry or break down in tears because of Lee's self-righteous anger. If Brenden stayed tonight and another night, Lee might act half-decent for the entire weekend. That would be a blessing.

"No, dad. No, I get it." She said, "Obviously you've seen my room. Well, it's only a few lines here and there. How about you change before you scare us? The more I see of you, the more I want to go eat in my room instead."

Roger and Brenden's voices echoed down the hallway; they were calling for Pepper.

"For Christ's sake—boys," Lee yelled over his shoulder and then turned towards Darrel's room, "just leave the poor dog alone. Let's eat."

The two boys approached Lee, and they both looked him up and down.

"Everyone so far says I have to go change. Does my bathrobe scare you?"

The two boys nodded yes.

"Bunch of babies," Lee cried out. "I don't care really. We are eating."

"Okay, okay, sicko," Sara said, knowing she can push at Lee with some liberties. She tried to play her own game, being a gracious host, and pulled out a seat for Darrel and Brenden to eat.

"Thank you," "Thank you," They said as they smiled up to her. And she sat next to Brenden and in between Elizabeth, it was a sight to see how fast Brenden jammed a fork of potatoes into his mouth.

"Elizabeth," Lee said. "Will you led us in prayer?"

The Belfry family said a prayer that was usually reserved for Sunday dinner. Brenden had stopped chewing to watch their bowed heads, his eyes widened, aware of his lack of manners. To join in, he bowed his head, but it wouldn't stop him from peeking up to see them all pray. Once the prayer ended, Brenden began to slowly finish chewing. Lee nailed a piece of browned fluffy stuffing with his fork while Roger, Darrel, Elizabeth, and Sara commenced to do the sign of the cross, moving their right hands from their head to

their sternum to each shoulder. Brenden swallowed and Lee let out a hearty laugh. "Don't feel bad Brenden, they get me with that all the time."

Lee mocked the sign of the cross with fork in hand, making Sara wince and shield herself with her hands as the fork was flailing about. "Enough already," she said.

"Sorry," Lee said as he apologetically bowed his head.

"Yeah, well," Brenden said, "we're not too religious at home."

"Not a problem here," Lee said.

Brenden slid his eyes away from Lee over to Sara beside him. She was lifting a gravy boat, pouring a circle of rich coffee colored gravy over her stuffing. It seemed like everyone watched her except for Lee.

"So," Roger said as he shuffled in his chair. "Sara, what do those Latin phrases mean?"

Elizabeth shifted in her seat and faced Roger so quickly, she bumped the table, and the dishes and forks clattered. She seemed to be in mid-movement, employing a stern look to him, the stink eye, some would call this expression, and Darrel acted as if he were ducking an eye beam.

"Son," Elizabeth said. "New subject. Can't we appreciate our food first?"

Everyone voiced their approval with specific accolades and it seemed that was only done once they had thoroughly chewed up all their food. Elizabeth nodded in approval and after she finished each morsel she smiled to the giver of gratitude.

"Stuffing? And it's not Thanksgiving," Sara said. "Wow, mom."

Roger mumbled something about the Brussel Sprouts.

"Speak up, son," Lee said. "Show Brandon we have some manners here."

“Brenden, dad. His name is Bren—den.”

“That’s what I said, Roger.” Lee said.

The needless amount of tension was daunting. And to cut the tension, Brenden thought he help out, “I have the constellations on my walls and over the ceiling in my room.

“Taurus, Gemini, and then the big dipper,” Lee said. “I’m fond of Taurus.”

“You forgot to mention Orion,” Brenden said in a snappy way.

Ignoring Brenden, Lee said, “For me it goes with a motto, I don’t know how to say it in Latin, but in English its goes, play with the bull, you get the horns.”

Brenden used a spoon to stir at a mix of mashed potatoes and stuffing.

“Lee,” Elizabeth said. “And how did you manage not to graduate college?”

“My interests were everywhere. Not one subject kept my tiny attention span,” He said.

“When I was in high school, Daphne,” Darrel said. “She—we had a class together, and she just remembered things—never forgot them like I did all the time. Because she was a lawyer, people think she oh she liked social studies, but science that was her passion. She told me she would go into environmental law...”

“We know Darrel,” Lee said, “So, that was her mod operand, correct?”

“No,” Sara said, “Mod—us operand—i.”

“Oh, please enlighten us, show us the way,” Lee said.

“Different ideas about life, mottos to live by, you know, improving one’s self. I think that is something we should all want to do.” She said, “I had them written down on posters that were on my apartment walls, but they didn’t make it during the move.”

“Oh, okay.” Lee said in a half-suspicious way. “I have a lot of hunting supplies in there I’ll have to move out after we eat.”

“Yeah, I saw that.”

“Daphne, she used Latin, she was learning it from a priest while she was in law school, remember?” Darrel blurted out.

It stopped Lee from talking to Sara. Roger swallowed the Brussels sprout he was eating and Elizabeth took a long drink from her Coke in a wine glass. Brenden glanced around at each face on the table and felt as he did when they started praying. “Who’s Daphne, is that Daphne?” He pointed to the family portraits in the foyer.

“Brenden,” Elizabeth said in a solemn voice, “she passed away. It happened while she slept.” Elizabeth paused and then she said, “It was Carbon Monoxide poisoning. They had an old faulty heater.”

Darrel twisted in his chair to face the wall and pointed towards her portrait: “that’s her senior picture—that was long ago, it seems.” A series of portraits hung in the foyer. The kitchen light sent a glare across their faces, but Brenden’s chin moved with his scanning eyes over the two portraits in black and white that were above the other three that were much newer. Brenden figured that was Lee and Elizabeth at top, and below them were the kids: Darrel, Daphne and then Sara.

“Why isn’t Roger’s picture up there?” Brenden asked.

“He hasn’t graduated yet,” Elizabeth said.

“Three long years to go,” Roger said.

“Daphne,” Brenden stuttered. “She has your cheek bones, Mrs. Belfry.”

“Call me, Liz. Brenden,” she said. “Why thank you. Yes, but she has Lee’s mind. She wanted to be read to all the time when she was little. In school she always made A’s; never had to help her with homework. I wouldn’t have been much help anyhow.” Elizabeth blinked and smiled quickly. A leaflet of a Brussel sprout fork slid off her fork to her plate.

“She was my little sis. I am two years older than her. I started school late so we had some classes together,” Darrel said. “In that room where that dog lays under the bed licking her wounds, Daphne barged in there like you two did, but I wasn’t around to catch her and she fed my mouse. His name was Gus. Which I didn’t mind her feeding him, but she got the idea to take it from my room, without me knowing, let it swim in the bath tub. But she forgot to make the water warm—she didn’t know the water could send him into shock. We guessed he died from shivering to death. I can’t tell you how many times that she apologized. Gus, the mouse lived a shorter life than expected—a few months only.”

“Okay, okay. Nice story, Darrel,” Lee said. He shifted back from his chair, stood up, looked around at everyone, and strode his way out of the kitchen, past the foyer down the hallway. “I’ll go check on the dog.”

Roger shook his head at Darrel.

Darrel raised his hand up to gesture with his palms out, “I can’t be the only one here to talk about her.”

“No, Darrel” Sara said. “You know...the dog needs checking on.”

“Pepper,” Brenden said.

“Oh Pepper, you look awful,” Sara added.

Everyone stood up from their seats to watch her limping toward them from the hallway. One paw raised as she hobbled to her empty dog bowl. No one went over to her bowl to fill it up, so Brenden took upon himself to feed the poor thing. An old potato bin was where they stored the dog food. It wasn't far from the stove, which was kind of gross, thought Brenden. He scooped up too much kibble, and when he dumped it in Pepper's bowl, it scattered all over the kitchen floor. The vinyl false tile was grimy with boot scuffs and indentations; the mess was barely visible to Brenden.

Lee followed behind Pepper and stopped in the foyer with blood on his hands. Why was Lee all smiles like he had cured the dog, Brenden thought.

“I inspected her wounds and she must have gotten clipped by some barbed wire. At least, I fooled her into getting out from under the bed to eat. We'll have to keep an eye on her leg, and hope it doesn't get infected. After she eats, someone will have to hold her down, so I can wash it clean and sterilize it with alcohol.”

“Did Lee the animal doctor talk some sense into Pepper?” Sara said as she walked over to Pepper. She stood over the dog as it ate. Its mouth chomped vigorously. “I'll get her some water.”

“I'll get it,” he said as he filled a cup full of water from the sink and dumped it into the dog's water bowl. Pepper scooted over to lap up the water; her tongue flapping it up in tiny waves.

“Pepper,” Lee said. “She knows what she needs. And yes, maybe I communicate better with animals, Sara. Maybe, that's why I like to work outside in nature.”

“Why don’t we sit down and eat?” Elizabeth said.

Everyone complied without a word and a collective focus seemed to pull them back to their plates. Forks and knives clattered against plates. Grunts and crunch sounds mixed with slurps of tea. Brendan watched Pepper from the corner of his eye as he ate. The dog looked up from her water bowl and water slid off her hairy chin.

“Where do you work Mr. Belfry?” Brenden said.

“Um, I work for myself.” He said. “Like you know taxidermy is my hobby-job. Darrel didn’t tell you I work part-time at cable locating company. I locate underground lines and fill in for the boss, but of course I don’t get paid any extra for it. Your dad deals with that sort of thing, I’m sure.”

“No, he is the boss and he gets paid for it,” Brenden said proudly.

“Isn’t that nice. Bet that makes your old man feel real swell. Is this the sort of thing you want to do after high school? Be your own boss?”

“Who doesn’t, Mr. Belfry?” Brenden said. “Like you know, it takes hard work to get there.”

“Being the boss isn’t all it’s cut out to be,” Elizabeth chimed in. “Then, I wouldn’t have to worry about anyone else not doing their job. I would have just my work to do.” She takes another swig off her drink and digs at her roast beef.

“Mrs. Belfry,” Brenden said. “People at work probably miss you.” His face wrinkled above his dark eyebrows and it seemed to be a concerned look to Elizabeth. It seemed both sincere and insincere. What a difficult expression to read, since his youthful face was typically filled with a little smirk at the corner of his mouth.

“Thank you,” Sara said. “But you don’t have to say that. But thank you.”

“Bren—den,” Darrel said. “What about school, how is that play coming along,

“If it’s okay, I want to say one last thing,” Brenden said.

“I know what this sadness is like, I really do, when I lost my aunt, no one was the same.” Darrel seemed alarmed by Brenden’s caring voice. It was like he was about to say something really stupid, and maybe it was the expression on Lee’s face. The way he chomped down on his roast beef. The alertness in Lee’s eyes and the way they seemed to stare Brenden down.

“Right, okay, fine, but please, I’m good.” Lee’s emotions had him shaking, and he stood up so fast he knocked he knocked the side of the table and it shook. Everyone’s drinks swooshed back and forth. “You little sh—son of a gun, this isn’t the time or place.” He said this as Lee walked away wiping at his face.

“Damn it, Lee,” Elizabeth said. “He’s just a boy.”

“Dad,” Sara screamed. “Why do you have to do this? Fucking bully.”

Lee walked to the back door and opened it and he gazed around outside. A cow across the pond moored.

“Why did you have to ruin my room,” Lee mumbled.

“Sara,” Elizabeth said. “That won’t help.”

“Mom, you’re siding with him?” Sara said.

Lee turned around to everyone at the kitchen table. He clinched his teeth as he stared everyone down. Tears rolled down Sara’s face. Elizabeth reached under the table and held on to Darrel’s leg while Darrel put his fingertips to his lips. Silence stung over them, and the lapping sound of Pepper’s tongue finishing her off her water ended. “Listen young man,” Lee said in measured words, “don’t come here thinking you know what kills

me—you know what kills me though. What kills me is people who think they can pity me. Save that for someone else.”

“Lee, stop this. I have to send him home, he can’t be around you when you’re like this,” Elizabeth said. “He can’t—he just can’t be here.”

“I’ll drive him home,” Darrel said in a seemingly too enthusiastic mood and he strode out of the kitchen to grab his keys in his room. He tripped over the dog, kicking the water bowl, and a yelp sounded from Pepper.

“Jesus, Darrel,” Elizabeth said. “Watch where you’re going, son.”

“I’m going with him.” Roger said. “I don’t want to be here.”

“Me either,” Sara said.

“Sit down, Darrel.” Lee said. “Brenden, sit. Sara, just stop,” Lee stared her down, “okay. I get it. I do. But listen, I’m sorry. I got a bit fired up, I did, so I got a little ridiculous,” Lee stepped into the middle of the living room down. He rolled back his fluffy bathroom to his elbows. Brenden noticed everyone’s eyes darting one way and to the other.

Roger had pleading eyes at Brenden.

“I don’t want to leave here,” Brenden whispered. “I can’t go home. My parents aren’t there.”

“Who cares,” Roger said, “That’ll be even better then.”

“Roger, Brenden,” Sara said. “You two go play basketball or something.”

“What, I don’t think so?” Roger said crossing his arms.

“Well,” Sara said, “I have something to tell mom and dad.”

At the front door was a loud knocking sound. Brenden jumped up from his seat and went to the door. Lee told him to sit back down and strode to the door to see who it was. It

was the neighbors from across the street. "It's Judy," He said in a tone meant for Elizabeth to hear. "Mrs. Havard?" He spoke into the door as he pulled it open.

Behind Mrs. Havards hunched over frame, Mr. Havard yanked against her grasp. She pulled him back to herself by his beige jacket. They both had brushy gray hair that fluffed up from a breeze. Her round face was sunken as if the wrinkles were pulled down into her gaping mouth. His face was pale, but his cheeks were rosy from exertion. He fought against her in an unwieldy way. "Look at him," Mrs. Havard said. "I can't hold him much longer. He's gotten outside."

Everyone in the family gawked for a moment, and had huddled around Lee's back. Elizabeth stepped forward, and pushed her arms around Lee to nudge herself forward to press Lee in with the family.

"Get in here you two," Elizabeth said. "Out of the cold."

"Back up," Lee commanded, and he stepped back, stepping on the dog. She yelped and Roger picked up Pepper and waddled off to the couch with her.

"Oh, Pepper," Sara said. "My little baby."

Mr. Havard resisted even more once Elizabeth stepped in to help. The old man's face twisted and he sneered, and sat back with his weight.

"Damn it," Lee said. "Mr. Havard, what's gotten into you."

"This old woman..." He said between his teeth. "She won't leave me be."

Lee grabbed him by the collar and said, "That woman is your wife."

“I can mow the yard. I can and... and.” He said. And then, he began to calm down a little, and he stopped fighting his wife and Elizabeth. They shook their heads at him when they let go of him, he swung his arms from their grasp.

“She won’t let you. Well, you’ll probably kill yourself doing it.”

“I wanted to do something,” he said. “Tired of waiting around.”

“He doesn’t know,” Mrs. Havard said. “He’s senile. He doesn’t even know who I am half the time.”

Elizabeth smirked at the thought, and wishing that she didn’t know who Lee was half the time, and then, again she didn’t. “Well, that can’t be all too bad.”

“Liz,” Lee said. “This is no time to joke.”

Mr. Havard coughed, choked up, or so it seemed, then it turned out to be he was sick, crunched over, and Mrs. Havard stooped over with him. And he stood back up right, and his mouth opened up with a laugh. A stifled, stuttering half-laugh, and to Elizabeth, it was a damnedable sound, and it sounded horribly fake. Mrs. Havard rolled her eyes to Elizabeth and Lee.

“Frank,” Mrs. Havard said, “You ain’t all there. We need to get you home.”

“Get him to a hospital is what you need to do,” Lee said.

“What so they’ll drug him up,” Elizabeth said.

Mrs. Havard shook her head in agreement with Elizabeth. She knew if she were that bad off, Lee would drop her off at the nearest nursing home. Not that she would blame him, it was just the last thought she wanted to have.

Sara appeared at the door beside Lee. She chewed on the inside of her gums as she looked everyone over. “Can I help?”

“Yeah,” Lee said, “Keep those boys entertained.”

“Hi, doll,” Frank said in a matter of fact tone.

Elizabeth noticed that Sara seemed to feel invited by Mr. Havard. Her presence seemed to shift the volatile mood. As she made her way outside, a certain innocent between the two’s simple interaction seemed to calm everyone down a degree. “You don’t talk to her like that, you dirty old man.”

Mr. Havard didn’t react to his wife and was seemingly taken by the sight of Sara who stood next to Mr. Havard.

“Easy there,” Elizabeth said to Mrs. Havard. “Let them talk.”

“Hi, Mr. Havard,” Sara said.

“My deary, how’s school coming along?” He said.

“I’m done with it to be frank, Frank,” She said.

Pepper slid past Lee’s legs down the steps to the porch, and hobbled out into the front yard where wild onions waved about. Everyone except Frank watched her, he was back to laughing again. Sara’s little joke must have tickled another good laugh in him. Just past Pepper’s knobby head, out across the street by the Havard’s house, the martin houses seemed empty, and their bushes were overgrown. The interstate whooshed with the sound of a tractor trailer. Elizabeth wanted to ignore the sound of Frank laughing again. It seemed too irrational and almost scary. His laugh seemed just as fake as before, but this time, Sara joined in with him. Then, Elizabeth gave up and decided to follow her Sara’s odd action. Was she trying to give the old man a sense of belonging or something? But before long, they all joked in each one modifying their fake laughs in different octaves, mixing it up with grunts, until someone authentically snorted. It was Lee. And Elizabeth hadn’t ever heard

him snort and laugh before, and she laughed, an honest one that reached down into her gut. Sara slapped Lee's back as she let out a hearty laugh which finally drew in Mrs. Havard, so it seemed. The boys came running up from behind Lee and in between Sara, and Darrel asked what was so funny. "Why are you all laughing"

Slowly, they stopped and no one answered him. But for Elizabeth, it felt good to laugh like that. She was unsure when the last time it was that she was able to laugh like that. Quickly, everything fell back into place, and she'd have to go back to her role. "Darrel, go in and do us a favor. Get Lee a beer, bring my wine glass, and what do you want Mrs. Havard?"

"What's that?" Mrs. Havard said.

"Lee, open up the shop doors. I think it is time we relax."

"I'm fixing coffee," Sara said. "And I'm going to paint."

"Mom, is Brenden still staying the night?"

Elizabeth rolled her eyes. "Yes. Yes, son." Then she put her hands into her hair with frustration, especially at Mr. Havards, who perked up with an expression of interest toward Sara painting. Lee looked mad, but possibly shut up for the sake of a beer reroute. Elizabeth wanted to steal Mrs. Havard away so they were able to drink in peace, clear of the nonsense that never seemed to ease up. They would be able to complain about their men, just for a little while, but then, they'd talk about what really matter. Like the antiques that they had both purchased. Or, what winery did they plan to visit together soon. These were the thoughts that drinking was meant for, Elizabeth sighed. "Go, make your coffee."

Pill Form

The dirty infantry guys—the soldiers who rode in the back of tanks—they did some dirty ground work. During this part of the war, they raided a government building in downtown Bagdad room-by-room, and that was more or less what these grunts did. They seemed to pride themselves on blasting out the windows for fun, because why not it's not their building and besides, not one Iraqi civilian or combatant had been present and the cleanliness of the Conference Building it was all too eerie for the squad. All of these clean tidy rooms—how was it possible for them to be left so spotless—save the sand of course. The offices were tossed and the dusty sand swathed around.

The squad and the rest of the platoon were amped by the news that this place would be their base: a temporary home for at least a month or two. After a few days of serious cleaning, the mechanistic ability of standard operation procedures set in and each ensuing day into the next, begun to establish a fairly relaxed environment. Guards were posted at various points, some men cleaned weapons, others rested, and some fellows prepped for an occasional mission to raid some suspect group just down the street.

With newly found downtime to do whatever this platoon wanted, war seemed to become an exotic background for them, and the yellow-grey sky flickered with explosions and gun shots, all which seemed to lack the fear it used to induce. And at night, an exploding weapon cache seemed to mimic a local firefight, but anyone who lived here knew the difference now. Besides, the city had been fortified and made into a stronghold, and so it seemed... Bagdad was theirs. It echoed throughout their thoughts, that they were safe in the center of Bagdad. And some caches finally burned out, some gained a rhythm when a belt of ammunition would cook off in succession. These chaotic sounds seemed to lull First

Platoon to sleep that night, but for a squirrely specialist these explosions were the perfect cover for his operation. Specialist Jeff Madigan was up to some nonsense—doing some bull-jiving-ass shit, when translated this meant revenge.

His gear rattled and his boots squeaked. His helmet sat squat on his tiny head. He crept to his victim's room. Startled by whacking his M16 into the door, he cringed and then squeezed on the muzzle of his gun as he would a dog by its nape.

This circular room that he entered was once used for conferences between international dignitaries—handshakes and signatures, variations of diplomacy. Now, sectional couch cushions propped up mosquito nets, protecting the circle of sleeping soldiers. Grunts, moans, whimpers, and sighs rose from each one. On the circular sectional where they slept, what divided each of them from putting their feet into each other's faces? Their gear: the ruck sacks, the bullet proof vests, the M-16s. And one by one, Jeff lifted the netting, and with his other hand, he squeezed the top of a Barbasol can, filling their boots. And these boots were much like their owners: they were worn out, and stank of rot, and brine. And sometimes, he put several layers of whiteness along the laces, especially the boots belonging to sergeants he didn't like. Light coats went on the few he did like. He didn't feel bad for playing favorites. Jeff wanted to see how embarrassed these sergeants would be in the morning, knowing they'd been invaded.

The downside was the longer he was in the room, the more his injured back throbbed, and the more the heat drained him. He snickered at himself being frightened by the sound of the cream pressing through the nozzle. Would it wake them? He wouldn't admit that he feared the two men in front of him the most. In spite of his trembling hands, he added extra fluffy spire of foam on the platoon sergeant and Sergeant Epsom's boots.

If they woke up, so what? He told himself to ease off the silly idea they'd ever find out it was him. Darkness surrounded them and Jeff, and he liked it that way, because after all he had been wearing night vision goggles the whole time. Everything was black, green, and white.

And to be kept from being caught the next morning, Jeff even applied shaving cream to his own boots and everyone else's except for Sergeant Aphid's; these rotten toed boots remained untouched. Sergeant Aphid was Jeff's scapegoat.

The thought of Sergeant Aphid caused Jeff to grind his teeth in anger. If that son of a bitch wouldn't have put him on a work detail for the First Sergeant, Jeff would be pain free. Now, his spine throbs in a dull pain on good days and on a shitty day it just throbs to the point he doesn't want to move, nearly leaving him inoperable. Ironically, Sergeant Aphid had nearly gotten him killed several times by making poor choices during the invasion, and somehow Jeff went unharmed during each door-to-door raid as well as that time when a RPG blasted pebbles of concrete across his face. Sergeant Aphid nearly shot him in the foot and bumped into him causing a tank to nearly run him over. Jeff felt that luck had kept him alive and if anything Sgt. Aphid was the opposite of luck. This proved to be true, when Sgt. Aphid was a push over to the First Sergeant's bullshit needs and put Jeff on a work detail to steal an air conditioner unit out of nearby buildings that was when Jeff's luck dried up. Walking with the air conditioner's bulk in his arms, dials and knobs pressing into his chest, he hobbled down several flights of steps, the second to last one, he over stepped, and twisted his back. And that misstep, to Jeff, was all Sergeant Aphid's fault, and in some sense, it was, because he ordered Jeff to do this dumb task. This called for retribution, and that

started with Sgt. Aphid. To Barbasol the platoon's boots was a success, and that was unlike most nights, because most nights, success was normally based on sleeping past the pain that crept along his back.

Hearty laughter from across the hallway woke Jeff up. Jeff slowly turned over on his stomach, and the leather couch underneath him squeaked with each movement. Slyly, he squinted, acting as if asleep. And he saw Sergeant Curtis, the platoon sergeant. He was hot-footing it out of the double doors. He crossed the large hallway, foamy boots in hand. Jeff muffled a giggle at Sergeant Curtis, who scooped the shaving cream off the boots and flung the foamy whiteness out a broken window. "I feel like someone thinks they're funny." He said. "Yes, I really do. There's a funny guy among us."

His chieftain look, the one exemplified by his a toucan beaked nose, looked less threatening at the moment. Jeff was pleased with this especially when he saw Sergeant Epsom flinging foam at other sergeants. At least Sergeant Epsom took it in stride, so it seemed at the moment. It's doubtful. Sergeant Epsom was an easy guy to identify. The birthmark that smeared down the side of his left cheek, and its special little twitch to the side, that was all him, and when he said. "Don't think I'm not having fun, oh, I am," his face tightened to a steady grimace. "So whoever did this, 'fes up, 'fes the fuck up."

It was as if the Sergeant Epsom had an anger switch and he could flip it on and off with strict control. It seemed as if he had a prankster radar while he stared right at Jeff from across the hallway. Other guys were making haste out from other rooms, dripping

boots in hands. These soldiers crossed between sergeant birthmark's stare and Jeff. It was a needed obstruction that his low ranking compadres provided. That sergeant was giving Jeff the heebie-jeebies, and that sort of talent was what made Sergeant Epsom feared by others as well.

"If I were you," Sergeant Epsom announced. "Joe better police Joe. Meaning: find out who did this, before I do. Joe Fucknuts make this easy me. Then, I'll make it easy on all of you."

About that time, shots rang out a few city blocks away, and then the call to prayer from the nearby minarets blared out an eerie melodic chant. It seemed that the platoon tried to ignore it. But the spiritual notes, their charming effect caused a pause among most of the platoon, except for Sergeant Epsom who hadn't missed a beat, walking out by the entrance of the restroom to the middle of the hallway. And right nearby Jeff's couch, he stopped and yelled. "We, sergeants, know we didn't do it. You all got that?"

"Well, that is true, so I hope." Platoon Sergeant Curtis said. He stood with his arms crossed; he was still by the window, no snipers at ground level, Jeff thought. Clouds of smoke rose into the sandy-blue sky behind him. Sergeant Curtis's eyebrows arched up at the sight of Sergeant Aphid. In his normal, oblivious attitude, he was picking at his teeth with a butter knife as he jauntily walked to the rest room, but he was the odd man out, because there was no sign of shaving cream on his boots.

"Sergeant Aphid," Platoon Sergeant Curtis said.

"Good morning, sergeant. How can I help?"

“What are you a Wal-Mart employee—I don’t need your damn help, sergeant,” Sergeant Curtis said with a smile, “But answer me this, where you stay, it’s not here with us sergeants, right? You still sleep over by your two team leaders, am I correct?”

“That’s right. Why do you ask?”

“Your boots look just fine.”

“I take good care of them,” He said.

“Doesn’t it seem,” Sergeant Epsom interrupted, “odd that yours went untouched?”

“Who did what touching to who’s boots?”

“is this something that in your rodeo days, you and your fellow cowboys would do. I see this as some ass slapping, towel whipping sort of fun, am I right?”

“Damn right, cowboys have their fun, include myself in those ranks, but I hate to inform you, I use an electric razor.” Sergeant Aphid said, his eyes narrowing as he scratched his chin with the butter knife in hand.

Even though Jeff knew that Sergeant Aphid was under suspicion for assaulting the sergeants with shaving cream, it didn’t have the effect he was looking for. He felt that he just fucked himself and his fellow soldiers, especially if Sgt. Aphid wasn’t taking the blame. But for now, wait and see, Jeff thought. Wait and see.

He pondered for a second, what prank would come next, but only a blank thought followed the pain that shot up his spine.

Mid-day that Sunday after Jeff’s guard duty, he finally had some free time, so he met up with Sergeant Aphid who gave him permission to visit Mara. And rumor had it, Mara

went looting with the company medics about a week ago, and stole some painkillers from a pharmacy. The three retrieved five gallon buckets of pills, and they did so unseen. Jeff was somewhat impressed by this stealthy task, but he was even more delighted to know about the healthy surplus of pills, because he wanted a heavy buzz with a pain-free spine. It had been week since he had heard the rumor, so that means by now, Mara would have painkillers galore. Better hydrate—pills dehydrate, and Jeff gulped down a whole bottle of water before he geared up to go. He tossed the empty out a shattered window and made a b-lined through the interior of the Conference Palace.

Jeff wiped off his wet chin and wished the water had been a beer. Jeff wasn't even a beer guy, but it seemed like something nice at the moment. Back at Ft. Stewart, Jeff knew Mara to be one hell of a beer guy. He was the sort who'd line empty bottles along the railing of the barracks balcony. That bastard made a routine of lobbing beer bottles at folks in the middle of the night. He'd run off laughing if someone came after him. On one occasion, Mara must had misjudged Jeff for someone else, and whoosh a bottle zipped by Jeff's left ear. Mara just leaned over the railing and howled with laughter. It seemed Mara was so drunk he didn't care who he hit. If Jeff had to go on with his back in shambles, Jeff wouldn't care who he had to hit either. But would robbing a thief truly be considered a bad thing. Jeff murmured to himself, naw. It's the way of the world, dog eat dog.

On the west wing, Jeff entered the makeshift "Alpha Co Movie Room". The First Sergeant's Humvee driver put the sign up. The big screen television was hauled in curtsey of a few guys from the supply platoon, they found it in one of the suite's upstairs. A platoon sergeant from 2nd platoon was seated in the back row, and up front with bowls of popcorn, were some tankers. A couple of HQ paper-pushers were being goofy playing ass grab with

one another while everyone else seemed to casually watch television, a commercial was on in French, and the show *Friends* was in French with Arabic and English subtitles. The text overlapped one another distracting most of the humor from the show. The First Sergeant hung out by the exit door. He was puffing on a cigar and taking peeks at the show every so often as he blew smoke outside. Jeff hurried by him, hoping he seemed like any other soldier casually passing by to go out. "Who gave you a pass to leave?"

Jeff stopped in his tracks and looked back and almost snapped to parade rest to show proper respect to a senior sergeant such as the First Sergeant, but caught himself in mid motion knowing that in wartime, garrison etiquette didn't have a place here.

"Relax, Madigan," First Sergeant said.

"Can do, First Sergeant."

"Who let you leave?"

"Who?"

"Yes, who gave you permission, listen."

"Sgt. Aphid did."

"My main man from the infantry platoon," First Sergeant said. "Tell that goofy cowboy thanks for that air conditioner. I may need one for my office too. Anyhow, get this." He pulled from his cigar and he gently let smoke roll up into his nostrils, then he blew the smoke out toward the white cascade of light. "Was it you? Yes, he sent you. But get this, I never thought I'd have to pull out a blanket from being so cold. Hell, it's July in Iraq. And I'm cold. Ain't that a hoot?"

“I’m glad I could help First Sergeant.” Jeff said in a tone that accidentally came off a bit too sarcastic. But from the way First Sergeant eyeballed him, Jeff had a feeling his tone slipped out just a hair more than he realized.

“I appreciate you, infantry guys... one of your platoons is like a company of us tankers when you look at it in terms of man power, so don’t think you guys go unrecognized for your labor. Captain Helms and I always tell your Platoon Leader and Platoon Sergeant how dynamically versatile our tank company has become with infantry guys on the ground.” The seemingly rehearsed accolade was nice to listen, thought Jeff. But he knew how little good such praise did for his hurt back. As he felt a spasm shoot along his spine, he tried not to wrinkle up his face to show any signs of his anguish toward the First Sergeant. Jeff wanted to tell the First Sergeant to fuck off, but instead managed to say what everyone was thinking. “We toppled Baghdad, now won’t we leave soon?” A creeping pain around his mid back pulled a wince out from Jeff, “That’s what General Tolbert promised us all.”

“Listen, don’t believe what some big brass says in a speech,” The First Sergeant said, “I’ll leave it at that, okay?”

He swung his cigar around, and then abruptly started to laugh. It was something on the television that had everyone in the room struck with laughter. They want to laugh so terribly bad they fake it, he thought. Jeff would not look at the television and force a stupid laugh, he had business to do.

A blast of sunlight crossed his face. And all the moisture from his uniform evaporated and his armpits got sticky while his uniform became starchy stiff from the heat. To the north, a cool shadow spread out before him. It belonged to what seemed to be a

twenty story hotel. All the tankers in Alpha Company called it Al-Rasheed's Hotel while Second Squad, who lived in and guarded it, named it, "Scooby's Haunted Mansion." He kicked up dust as he hauled-ass across the hotel's parking lot.

It was odd that second squad hadn't left a guard at the door. Their tank left tracks deep impressions in the soil and slung some dirt. It left skid marks in a fanned out in a L-shape that led to the highway. Second Squad's tank was in one hell of a hurry, so it seemed.

At Scooby's Haunted Mansion, a red canopy hung over the granite tile entrance. Once Jeff entered, the walls were blackened with smoke. A charred pile of furniture was stacked up in a corner. The ceiling had fallen and crumbled over the receptionist window. The only sounds in the hotel were the hisses and occasional beeps of a radio from off in the distance.

He knew the elevator didn't work, so he took the stairs. Up four flights, and his shoulders felt it. They collapsed inward, awkwardly pressing at his spine. And when he pulled off his helmet, the top of his head seemed to float. He held his helmet like a football in his arms. He let his gun dangle from its sling. The barrel seemed to nod at the floor as he shook with pain.

"Hello," Jeff called out.

"I heard you hobble up here," said a voice. The door opened and it was Mara standing before him in flip flops and blue shorts with a baseball cap pushed low over his eyes. If it wasn't for his dog tags and brown tee shirt, he would've seemed like a civilian, a typical American.

"What ya want?" Mara asked.

Jeff grimaced at Mara and said nothing.

Mara gestured with his hand to Jeff that he should follow him.

They circled around the squad table in a small foyer where the radio buzzed and crackled. Jeff overheard that second squad's raid was in progress. It sounded like Lieutenant Hart on the other end, reporting to Company HQ. A nearby bank had been used as a weapons cache and was filled with artillery rounds.

Jeff stopped at the over-watch position by the window. A long link of bullets ran up to the feed tray of a long clunky machinegun on a tripod, and it was aimed out toward the skyscrapers in the distance. Bagdad was still smoldering. The view put Jeff into a daze, and as he daydreamed, seeing into the blackened sky an overlay of memories, flashes of bullets chipping away at a cinder block above him, as he crawled on all fours and a helmet beside him wobbled and blood and grey matter pooled a couple of feet away from his fists. To Jeff, it took him a long time within his thinking, which were truly micro-seconds, to realize and to actualize that one of his own, Private Terpak was laid out and motionless. Jeff felt a hand on his shoulder tug him back.

"Don't stand in the window for too long," Mara said with a smirk, "You'll silhouette yourself."

"Good thinking," Jeff said, and then thought, were snipers still roaming about?

Jeff walked behind Mara. Tiny bits of glass popped up from underneath his flip flops as they entered a hotel room.

"I have to sit down," Jeff said. He leaned his gun in the far corner and then threw himself down on the bed. He unlatched his vest and it slid off his shoulders and fell off the bed making a thud sound against the floor. He rolled over on his stomach and used his helmet as a prop for his elbow.

“Is this Hayward’s bed?” Jeff asked.

“He won’t care.”

“As you can tell, the rest of the squad is gone,” Mara said.

“Yep,” Jeff said. “By the way, nice hat.”

“Yeah, can’t play soldier all day you know. Isn’t it nice? They left me here with the gear. And to kick in the goofy slob who sprayed the shaving cream.”

“Hear about that, did you?” Jeff said this with tight lips.

“Did you hear about the belly dancer?” Mara added.

“No.” Jeff said, “Is this the start of a joke?”

“Not at all, Captain Helms hired a dancer for us tomorrow. It’s at seven after dinner chow.”

Jeff imagined hooting and hollering men, all chomping at the bit, fighting one another, so they can half a dollar bill long ways, and aptly lay it on a wooden stage, and doing so with a pervasive respect for a bell shaped dancer who might gyrate her hips. The idea of any spine contorting in such a way reminded him why he was here.

“People hear about all sorts of things,” Jeff said. “Like if we’ll ever leave Iraq.”

“I can only imagine, man,” Mara said, taking off his hat, ruffling his brunette hair, which was getting long, exceeding the limits of army regulations. His eyes were dilated wide and seemingly unblinking. “Wait, what did you say?”

“We aren’t going home from here,” Jeff said.

“Who said?” Mara asked accusingly.

“First Sergeant,” Jeff said.

“Well, fuck.” Mara sighed. “Prolong our time here and multiple our chance of dying, really nice, huh?”

“Remember what that General said at the border before we crossed the Iraq border?”

“Yeah, yeah,” Mara said. “Higher ups like that are nearly politicians—they just wear rank to fit in.”

“I guess once you’re that high up the ladder you are paid to lie,” Jeff said.

“Make any trips to the pharmacy lately?” Jeff said.

“You ought to have seen all the lubes, contraceptives, and antibiotics, man it was—”

“Cut the shit, dude. Spare a couple pills,” Jeff heard the desperation line his voice.

“Who the fuck are you all of a sudden?”

“Hook me up, okay. Don’t make me ask again.”

Mara’s eyes flinched and then it was like he had paused himself, but then a muscle flexed along his jawline and leaned over to look out the window. Jeff thought, where was that sniper now? The sun beamed down on Mara’s hair, turning it a rosy hazel tint. To Jeff, it was obvious that Mara was drifting in an oxycodone daydream. His cheeks seemed swollen enough, to an abnormally degree, or maybe Jeff was just looking for him to be this way, sick and weakened to be push around.

“Hook you up, and with what, mother fucker?”

“Pills, Mara. Want me to scream it, huh?—fucking pills. Okay. Yeah, people talk. They told me. Look, my back is screwed up. The other day, I had to help First Sergeant set up his

fine little office, so I stole an AC unit for him. It was from here, Scooby's Haunted Mansion. Just a few flights above this room."

"No shit," Mara said.

"Yeah, no shit. And after twisted my back at the last step."

"Listen, Jeff."

"Fuck that, you listen. I'm not fucking with you, feel this knot," Jeff slapped at his own back, showing Mara what pained him.

"Dude, dude, I believe you." He waved his hand away. "I'm not feeling you up."

"Oh, why not?" Jeff said.

"You know me, I'm giving. But, hey, not that giving," Mara joked.

"You got me."

"You couldn't handle me," he motioned out his pelvis, "I'd kill you with what I got," Mara winked.

"Seriously, dude. Come over here. Feel this." Jeff rushed over to Mara by the window and pulled up the back of his shirt. A fairly large knot of muscle along Jeff's spine was lumpy and Jeff motioned to Mara to feel it. Jeff backed into Mara.

"Jesus Christ," Mara said, "Step off. Damn."

"I will—oh, I will. You son of a bitch," Jeff turned himself around and faced Mara. Jeff puffed out his chest and closed in on Mara and started pushing him. "Where's it at? Huh, where?"

"For fucks sake," Mara pushed him back, and slapped at Jeff's head.

"I'm not up for this," Jeff said. "I'll push you out the goddamn window."

"You'd rat me out," Mara said.

“Don’t make me go that far.”

Jeff wasn’t sure why he let Mara catch his breath, but he saw how weak Mara appeared to be when he defensively put his hand out. Jeff stared Mara down, making sure their eyes met. Mara dropped his hand down, and he slowly moved toward the door.

“You got something for me,” Jeff said.

“Let me catch my breath for god’s sake.” Mara lurched into the bathroom and the sound of a cabinet door creaked. When Mara reappeared he held a green waterproof bag, and he laid it on the bed next to Jeff. Inside the bag, pills illuminated a pure whiteness against the green interior. Mara shoved his fingers down into the mass of pain killers. Each pill clinked over one another like little dominos. He dropped at least two dozen in Jeff’s cupped hands. And Jeff shoved three pills into his mouth and tried to use the bathroom facet. Mara told him it didn’t work and handed him a canteen, “Here, dummy.”

Jeff swallowed the pills and nodded his head.

“Do your lungs ever feel,” Mara said. “Like you’ve huffed hairspray—my chest aches with every breath. And I have this cough. Remember the days of Mars: the dust storms we went through on our way up here?”

“Yeah, I remember... Hey, man, I got to go. Chow waits, ya know.” Jeff said.

Jeff’s drug-induced sleep along with a stomach full of MRE crackers made for the best night of sleep that he’s had in weeks.

Jeff wanted to wade through the laziness, recollecting memories of Saturday morning cartoons, bowls of sugary cereal, and video games, but that was interrupted by the sight of his own squad dragging their gear, duffle bags, and rucksacks in tow. He saw them through half-open eyes, a dozen more men in the platoon formed a group that reminded Jeff of how cows move, back and forth, and heavy and slow. Everyone in the platoon wore sun bleached camouflage. Zigzagging through the line of men was Sergeant Aphid, he was chewing on something as he spoke.

“Specialist Madigan,” he said, “You look like shit—I know your back hurts and that’s why I’m here. But, you can’t miss the formation. I’ll help you grab your gear.”

“Formation? In a combat zone? Not wise, we’ll be fun for snipers.”

“Sergeant Curtis is pissed. He said, everybody. No questions asked.”

Jeff’s throat swelled up and dried. He snapped to and became energized with fear.

“I need to use the bathroom, Sergeant.”

“I’ll have to watch,” Sergeant Aphid said.

“Watch what?” Jeff said.

“Sergeant Curtis said, that we have to watch everyone, especially if they try to use the bathroom.”

“That’s insane and it makes no sense, sergeant. Fuck it, watch my pecker piss.”

They turned a corner to the restrooms where the toilets were backed up, strips of toilet paper hung over the stalls. Someone had written “out of order” on the doors. But the urinals still functioned—they smelt of bleach and sewage. “Enjoy this do ya?” Jeff said.

“Oh you know it,” Sergeant Aphid said as he plucked a hair from his nose in the mirror. Jeff thought this would be the perfect time to drop the pills from his pocket into the pisser. But would they even go down the drain?

“You ready, Madigan?” Sergeant Aphid said.

Two palm trees waved in a dull breeze over the bustling platoon. The platoon sergeant’s tank was a few feet away. It was the color of a dried peach and it reeked of deiseal. The men shuffled about, forming and reforming ranks and rows, checking each other’s placement in regards to who out ranked whom. Recent promotions had shifted the pecking order. Jeff snuck in behind the group and gravitated into the third rank, cutting past the right corner of the formation to situate himself near his team leader.

Sergeant Curtis ducked out from the darkness of the tank’s troop door. He swung himself down onto the dusty sod. He found his place at the head of the formation. If only Sergeant Curtis would get this over with, Jeff thought. This damn formation better be about going home, proving the First Sergeant wrong, but that was a fantasy.

Where was Sergeant Epsom or Mara’s squad leader? Or Mara for that matter, these people missing from the formation didn’t seem coincidental.

Near the hotel just beyond the platoon sergeant’s tank, three men exited “Scooby’s Haunted Mansion” lugging a bag and what seemed to be a bucket. Mara was the first one Jeff recognized. Someone was pushing him from behind while Mara was tangled up in his gear as his head bobbed from the weight of his helmet. Sergeant Epsom was the one doing the pushing, shoving Mara to the front of the formation, and Mara’s squad leader was doing

the muttering. All that Jeff understood what his sergeant said, something about “putting soldiers’ lives in danger.”

Silence simmered over the platoon as a gust of hot wind seethed throughout the platoon.

“Listen up! Here’s a top notch shit bag...” Sergeant Epsom said as he and Sergeant Ski placed the buckets and the water proof bag on the shadow of Sergeant Curtis. The men knew to ‘fall in to attention’ and then they assumed ‘at ease’ without an order given. Mara was held back by Sergeant Curtis. “Just stay here, super troop. They need to see what a fantastic example you make.”

“Platoon, attention!” Sergeant Curtis said, and the men snapped to ‘attention,’ their eyes forward, legs and rifles were side by side in unison, “Now, stand at ease.” Sergeant Curtis said. Every soldier turned their heads to Sergeant Curtis. “Somehow, we have failed. We failed this soldier—we failed his family. We failed the Army. I’m ashamed to say this. But this isn’t about me. It’s about Mara, who is trying to kill himself? In what way does he want to die, you may ask? Not in the line of action. No, but by using drugs, which is probably the very problem that he tried to escape back home. But, here, he’s a liability to himself, to me, and ultimately to all of you.”

The dramatic tone of the speech drug on for Jeff.

“He kindly shared his drugs.” Sergeant Curtis said. “I can only wonder who else he infected.” He reached down into the bucket and let the pills fall between his fingertips, trickling down, letting everyone see them.

Jeff anxiously popped a pill, knowing the evidence better disappear. He grunted and gagged, and then he let out a cough. The pill was still caught in his throat and with more

intensity he coughed with his hand over his mouth and the pill flew into his palms. He pressed the pill into his pocket and its exterior smeared inside his pocket. His other fist remained clenched on the muzzle of his gun's barrel. And the more Sergeant Curtis spoke, the more Jeff felt the need to either eat more pills or make an escape. Escape by diving into the nearest driver's hatch and rolling out of town. Escape, the punishment he fears that he'll take all too soon. The oxycodone taste soured his tongue and thoughts. He began to fidget, letting his left leg bounce, which somehow reduced the building pressure in his back.

"Mara told me he had plans," the sergeant spoke with the tone of a Baptist preacher, "He had plans to send these pills back home. That's right, he wanted to make a profit. He had our four drivers in on it, too. He coaxed them into hiding another three buckets of painkillers inside our tanks."

Mara whispered to Sergeant Curtis something.

"Say it out loud boy." Sergeant Curtis said.

"I am sorry," Mara whimpered.

"You are sorry. *You* are sorry," Sergeant Epsom mocked him, yelling from the front row of the formation.

"And that just won't cut it." Sergeant Curtis cut in, "Listen Platoon, did you know Mara has some up-and-coming prison time? Here's the thing our tanks would have been freighted across the ocean. No biggie, right? Well, he was going to sell pills at the barracks—at your home."

Sergeant Epsom broke ranks and stepped up to Mara. Snot and tears were running down Mara's cheeks, and Sergeant Epsom spoke in barking phrases, "What do you think about Federal prison? Are you ready for years of man-love?"

Jeff cringed while most of the platoon laughed. Mara mumbled that he was sorry again, while he rubbed his sleeve across his nose.

“At ease, everyone. Sergeant Epsom back in formation,” Sergeant Curtis said.

“Shipping a controlled substance internationally is an infraction against the army and that is a can of worms above my pay grade. I am still waiting on the battalion commander to find out what will be done. Count your blessings Mara, Lt. Colonel Ames is a forgiving man. We’ll know your fate before the close out report tonight.”

Sergeant Curtis nodded at Sergeant Epsom. He did an about-face and his birthmark flexed into a grimace that seemed to focus on Jeff. It made Jeff a jittery mess. He was startled when, Sergeant Epsom yelled at the platoon. “After the platoon is dismissed. Break into squads, and your squad leaders will now search your gear. What shit bag took pills from Mara?”

Jeff clinched his fist around two painkillers, hoping they’d dissolve, but he knew the only way they’d disappear, he’d have to swallow them. Gulp, two more down.

Mara waited for Sergeant Aphid to step out of rank, and did an awkward about face, he managed to keep a stolid face as he looked his team leaders up and down. Jeff felt squeamish and tried to act like everything was cool and he spoke to himself, in a sing song way, be numb, play dumb, be numb, feel the ease, drugged up and cool, feel the breeze—but his squad leader worked his way down the squad line—he lost his song. Sergeant Aphid was slapping and feeling up his team leaders’ legs, and patting them down across their back, “Good to go.”

Some of the guys coughed and made profane jokes as Sergeant Aphid inspected others. One soldier made a fart sound when Sergeant Aphid felt him up.

“Cut the shit,” he said. “And I am not searching everyone’s duffels and rucks either. Team Leaders, I’ll search your gear, and you search your team’s.”

The Team Leaders mumbled, “Yes, sergeant.”

Jeff readied himself for inspection trying to be nonchalant. Sergeant Aphid quickly patted him down and he felt like everything was going to be just fine.

His team began dumping their bags, laying all their gear out in an orderly manner.

Jeff put his duffle bag upright and was shocked to see the lock missing from its clasp. He swore he’d locked it, and recalled using the key looped through his dog tags. Droplets of cold sweat formed on the back of his neck. Now, he regretted being in a haze for the last couple of days.

Fumbling with his duffle bag, he lost his grasp on it and it tumbled over. Three empty cans of shaving cream rolled out. Jeff was stunned and instead of trying to hide the cans, he scratched at his face. He was so stunned, he accidentally let the pills in his hand fall to the ground. He dropped to his knees and to recover the cans, instead he accidentally kicked them, and that ping sound, that very distinct sound, brought attention to Jeff’s mess.

“Looky here, the shaving cream bandit,” a soldier said.

“Specialist Jeff Madigan, you shit,” said Sergeant Aphid.

“What’s this?” Sergeant Epsom strutted from his squad and leaned over Jeff who was on his hands and knees collecting his cans.

“Well, it was all in good fun, right?” Jeff said, as he held a can up.

“I knew it was you that morning.” Sergeant Epsom kicked the cans out so everyone could see them. The red and white striped cans spun in circles. “You’re not as smart as you think you are. I bet he’s doped up too. Probably high when he did it.”

“Excuse me, sergeant.” Sergeant Aphid said. “But, Madigan is my soldier.” He spat dip at the ground. “We do not make accusations without proof.”

Jeff started to spread out his gear and also, pushing the three loose pills into the ground with his knees. The two sergeants continued to argue.

“I swear if you have one pill on you...” Sergeant Aphid said.

Sergeant Epsom stomped off toward Sergeant Curtis, gripping about shit bag squad leaders and poor leadership.

“Madigan,” Sergeant Aphid said. “You’ve got my special attention now. I am going to personally search your gear.”

“Yes, sergeant.”

As Sergeant Aphid probed through a set of rolled up socks, the netting in Jeff’s helmet, and inside the pouches in Jeff’s body armor. Inside one pouch, an old MRE wrapper of a Lemon poppy seed pound cake was found, but underneath it was a dozen 800 milligram Ibuprofens, Jeff had completely forgotten about.

“I got those from the medic,” Jeff said.

“I need a fresh dip now.” Sergeant Aphid said nervously as he groped his pocket, and popped out his dip can. He opened it and slung a wad of tobacco in his lip. “Okay, Madigan, I’m going to thoroughly search you, again. The shaving cream joke is one thing... but these pills.”

Jeff didn’t want to say a word. He wanted to ignore the problem, thinking it would disappear, especially if he wouldn’t find the pills, or maybe, since Sergeant Aphid was so concerned about looking good in front of the senior sergeants, he won’t try to follow through with turning him in. The fought war together, that must have meant something.