

2017

## Well Enough Alone: Stories

Sarah Jane Huskey  
*University of South Carolina*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/etd>



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Huskey, S. J.(2017). *Well Enough Alone: Stories*. (Master's thesis). Retrieved from <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/etd/4175>

This Open Access Thesis is brought to you by Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact [digres@mailbox.sc.edu](mailto:digres@mailbox.sc.edu).

WELL ENOUGH ALONE: STORIES

by

Sarah Jane Huskey

Bachelor of Arts

Sewanee: The University of the South, 2011

---

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of Master of Fine Arts in

Creative Writing

College of Arts and Sciences

University of South Carolina

2017

Accepted by:

David Bajo, Director of Thesis

Elise Blackwell, Reader

Tony Jarrells, Reader

Sara Schneckloth, Reader

Cheryl L. Addy, Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

© Copyright by Sarah Jane Huskey, 2017  
All Rights Reserved

## DEDICATION

For Jeff: “I give you the life I have let live for the love of you.”

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful to the brilliant and beautiful people behind the University of South Carolina's graduate program in Creative Writing. Thank you for creating an environment centered on the study and practice of art. Thank you for giving me the chance to study with extraordinary faculty. Thank you for making me better. I am indebted to David Bajo for directing my thesis. His willingness to understand and, most importantly, to challenge my sensibilities as a writer over the past three years has been indispensable. For putting up with me, despite my (near-constant and objectively frustrating) anxieties and messiness, I am something so much more than thankful. To Elise Blackwell I owe more than I can say for her mentorship and support. I am beside myself—whelmed by wild gratitude—and all my words are gone in the electric aftershocks of gratitude for David and Elise. Gramercy, so much and so intense, I offer to Tony Jarrells and Sara Shneckloth for considering my work with critical care and kindness. I was fortunate enough to assist Tony in my first year, and even luckier to take the theory course he offered my second. His service on my thesis committee in this (my third and final) year, to put it plainly, I hardly deserve. I am very grateful. I am grateful, too, for Sara Schneckloth, who agreed to read and work with this thesis despite the fact that I was a total stranger. I admire her work so much for the way it examines the generative-interpretive-generative networks and phenomena in nature and human experience, the way it often deals with the somatic, modes of communication, meaning-making, and interpretation. I am honored that such an artist, such a wonderful woman, such a busy teacher, took time out of her life to deal with

my work. I am especially grateful to Gretchen Woertendyke for her wonderful genius and beautiful humanness, which has been instrumental in shaping my three years at the University of South Carolina. She exploded my way of thinking about literature and even about the way I live and I am so thankful I had the chance to study with her.

I owe lifelong debts to so much of the faculty at Sewanee: The University of the South for their support, mentorship, guidance, and love. Elizabeth Elkin Grammer completely unlocked me. When I was 17 years old, she allowed me to attend the Sewanee Young Writers' Conference despite the fact that I could not afford to. I will never be able to thank her enough for showing me that I could escape and do better, be better. Soon after, during my four years at Sewanee, she and John Grammer both gave me more than I could ever have rightfully earned. The fact that two of the most wonderful people alive on this earth are married to each other is a proof of God's existence. They are both exemplary minds and they both work and live with a wild kindness I only hope to imitate. I am grateful to Virginia Craighill for her guidance, her generosity, and her unmatched style. She taught me some of the most crucial, magical things about living life and literature. I can never return such an enormous favor. I am grateful to Kelly Malone, Matthew Irvin, Lauryl Tucker, John Reishman, Richard O'Connor, John Benson

Here at the University, my cohort and my workshop has made all the difference during our three years orbiting the same celestial object in the smallish South Carolina constellation we each found our own ways to and within.

Special thanks to Ryan Stoudemire. Without his help and kindness, I might not have finished a single sentence.

I offer particular appreciation to Kurt Hoberg not only for his sagacious handling of my work but, most importantly, for his friendship.

I am, as I have been for going on 10 years now, grateful for Amy Nelson. Her friendship and love are vital. Without her I would be lost.

To Jeff Herman I owe all.

## ABSTRACT

This collection of short stories aims to capture the difficulties of telling anything at all, let alone the truth, the whole story, or the abstract reality. Though its thematic concerns might seem a bit cheerless at first blush, *Well Enough Alone* aims to treat them as prominent features of day-to-day life rather than gloomy afflictions or the loci of trauma.



## PREFACE

I saw myself  
a ring of bone  
in the clear stream  
of all of it

and vowed,  
always to be open to it  
that all of it  
might flow through

and then heard  
“ring of bone” where  
ring is what a

bell does

- Lew Welch, “[I Saw Myself]”

-

When you work in a garden you add to its history.

- Hamlett Dobbins

*For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.*

The themes that preoccupy this collection of stories are the very same that motivate my writing practice. Fear. Anxiety. Loneliness. And each of these three seems to have an unfortunate resonance, a rather unpleasant warble sounding in the vibrato of its individual utterance. I resent this because I am a generally jovial person. I tend toward smirking irreverence. I have some playful contempt for discipline. I have been known to make an inappropriate joke here and there. But I suppose you cannot choose what type of writer you become. You cannot select your own fixations any more than you can choose your own family.

This collection aims to capture the difficulties of telling anything at all, let alone the truth, the whole story, or the abstract reality. Though its thematic concerns might seem a bit cheerless at first blush, I hope to deal with them as they are: as prominent features of day-to-day life rather than gloomy afflictions or the loci of trauma. The meaning or the implication or the ultimate operation of fear, anxiety, and/or loneliness is not fixed in any one of the stories that follow (nor, I might argue, in the collection as a whole). If storytelling is, as George Saunders contends, “a stand-in for day-to-day life,” its abstract realities cannot be objectively rendered because the life of the day-to-day is the life of all of us, all at once. Thus objectivity is not truth. Desdemona’s handkerchief is at once love token and evidence of adultery and warning to the careless woman. Jonquils are Amanda’s past and Greek mythology’s narcissism and yet not “jonquils” at all, but rather *daffodils*, the flowers “(who know / the goal of living is to grow).” “There is no there there,” Gertrude Stein wrote in 1937 of her neighborhood in Oakland and in 2005 two artists installed “HERETHERE” in another place entirely. Objects in the mirror are closer than they appear. “Never Have I Ever” is a game that affirms by repudiation. Who have I been if I haven’t been feeling myself lately? Wordless sounds do not *seem* to mean but do. The real of the day-to-day is the roll and crash of so many waves of perspective—each driven from the body of collective experience—on the shoreline of the present.

Forms of storytelling are a part of that body of experience. And I will not pretend to know them all, to be able to trace the origins and development of all the many ways that meaning has been made from the many unique voices of contemporary fiction in the United States backward to *Moll Flanders*, backward to *Don Quixote*, backward to the epic. Instead I follow

“A bad story,” George Saunders asserts, “is one where you know what the story is and you’re sure of it, and you go there with your intentionality fixed in place.” Though I might quibble a little with Saunders here (can you really *just* go without knowing where you might want to end up on a good day, where you might *not* want to end up caught in the rain with no umbrella?), my aim is to mediate the telling of a story—to try to say—by hopping over or dislocating or exploding at least some elements of my own intentionality. I am fascinated by messy assemblages of storytelling elements that aim to present lingering impression rather than pat conclusion. I like the way the photographic negative shows the same subject it intends to capture, only in reverse order. I view omission, slippage, and contradiction to be as important as their antonyms.

This collection, then, is, in some ways, an exploration of ways of telling. It plays with what is possible to tell and how it is possible to tell that “what.” I might attempt to argue that *Well Enough Alone* operates on a principle of play Roland Barthes describes in his “Écrire la lecture:”

To open the text, to lay out one's system of reading, is not only to demand and show that one can freely interpret; it is above all, and indeed more radically, to lead the reader to the realization that there is no objective or subjective truth in reading, but only a playful truth [vérité ludique]; although the game should not here be understood as a distraction, but rather as work [un travail]....

Which brings me to the concept of the archive. Though many of the stories contained herein play with traditional elements and forms of storytelling, the two pieces that conclude the collection depart most significantly from the more familiar principles—“beginning, middle, and end,” for example— the stories preceding them (loosely) follow. I am fascinated by the things that tell something—a story, a feeling, a secret— whether or not we want them to. Even now, my coffee table reveals too much about my self. A copy

of Kevin Wilson's new novel. A paper cup from Waffle House half-full of coffee that has been cold for two days now. A bottle of El Yucateco. Two parking tickets. Scratched sunglasses from the Dollar Tree. A pen that is out of ink and Post-It notes I took from the desk in my Humanities Classroom Building office because they'd been there long enough to let me know that they belonged to someone who no longer has a key. So they are mine now. Even mess means something. Even the coffee table can be seen as an archive of experience. The concept underpinning the more archive-like pieces concluding this collection is more particular than the happenstances that created the arrangement of objects on the coffee table before me. The penultimate piece, "Reporting Live," is the professional journal of an intern. The final piece, "(untitled)," is an assemblage of email correspondence between two people embroiled in a strange, performative romance. And while these stories challenge the idea of what a story *is*, ultimately I hope they provide the reader with the story the snoop or the voyeur or the eavesdropper might be in search of, the story created by deduction and intuition rather than the story created and presented by the storyteller.

As a teller of stories and collector of objects and lover of the incongruous, I have often been confounded by own preoccupation with the South and southernness. I cannot seem to get away from it. My brother (younger by one year and six months to the day) and I taught ourselves to speak without affect in the months after our family moved from Middle Tennessee to North Alabama. The kids in the homeschool umbrella organization we joined there, Covenant Christian Academy, were the children of college-educated parents. Most of the families were transplants, lured to Alabama by lucrative jobs in the aerospace industry. We sounded, those kids said, like hicks. Like rednecks. Like hillbilly

people. So we smoothed the twang out, practicing pronunciation together, correcting each other when words sounded from somewhere too far at the back of the mouth or syllables overstepped their boundaries. Mark still stops me mid-sentence if I slip into our accent. Perhaps the South that figures in my stories is a little like that accent. I hardly notice it until someone points it out.

I don't consider myself to be working in a "Southern literary tradition" (if there is such a neatly defined thing), but rather to be working up against its specter. The American South is, I won't deny, a strangely elusive subject. The South has been mythologized in literature, music, visual art, and film—a contemptible glory, a majestic disgrace, the most well-mannered barbarian, the most savage sophisticate. From *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *Gone with the Wind* to *Suttree* and *Fried Green Tomatoes*, from the Fugitive poets to Pat Conroy and Ron Rash and so forth and on, depictions of the South and its Southerners crash, one over another, upon the shoreline of an imagined island of Southern literature before retreating to the murky sea of American identity politics. In the geography of the collective imagination, the South is a place apart. North Carolina novelist Reynolds Price once told his friend William Ray:

I can travel from Durham, North Carolina, to Jackson, Mississippi, which is a distance of 800 miles, and I find that people are still speaking almost exactly the same dialect that I have grown up with and known all my life, whereas I can go from Durham, North Carolina, to Philadelphia, a distance of 400 miles, and find them speaking an utterly different dialect...So it's not so much a matter of geographical distance as it is of a prevailing tradition over a large part of the country.

Though I see what Mr. Price's anecdote intends to do—that is, to continue to set the South apart in the imaginary of the United States—I cry foul. Perhaps there was, at one point, a distinctly defined and more or less unified South. But the states that rub

shoulders in the southern United States began to individuate themselves long before the Civil War. And not just dialectically. I will restrain myself from presenting the research I have done to support my claims (although it takes every stitch of will I can find in all this mess to do so).

Regardless of whether or not a Southern literary tradition *per se* exists, the *idea* of a Southern identity was very much a shaping force in my life and it is something that shapes many of the characters inhabiting *Well Enough Alone*. For the working class—the class of people I come from, the class of people I hope to represent in at least some parts of this thesis—Southernness is essential. It is what they have. It is what they cling to. It is the thing that makes them better than. Thus the South and Southernness figures in my work whether I want it to or not.

Though some of my agendas are not fully borne out in certain stories as they appear now, I am happy to admit that this collection satisfactorily represents the progress I have made since matriculating to the University of South Carolina's Creative Writing program. It is also, I hope, a promise of my commitment to writing as an art, as an artistic practice I will tend like a garden until it bears fruit.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

DEDICATION .....	iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iv
ABSTRACT .....	vii
PREFACE .....	viii
HOW MUCH A POUND .....	1
GOOD OLD BOYS .....	15
THERÈSE.....	30
THE INTERVIEW AT MARENGO COUNTY ELEMENTARY .....	35
WELL ENOUGH ALONE .....	48
PRIVATE COLLECTION, OR, HELEN BEVEL, CURATOR .....	73
LATE BREAKING .....	88
(NO SUBJECT) .....	111
WORKS CITED .....	160

## HOW MUCH A POUND

Willy's hands were always wet. And Darryl Waltzer didn't wonder why that was as he pushed his palm against his polyester pant leg, the telephone receiver mashed into his ear and shoulder both, because he knew: Willy liked to wash his hands, but found the slower pace of drying them much too tedious to bother with. As much as Darryl hated to see Willy go, he sure wouldn't miss the little droplets and driplets and slick spots Willy left on every surface in the meat department. The little patches of moisture here and there always reminded him of the silvery tracks he found in the mornings along the bricks on his porch, the way he'd always think to himself, "Now what in the hell were they doing up there last night?"

It was first-thing Monday morning and Mrs. Trautlein was on the phone asking about chicken salad. She wanted to make a special order for fifteen pounds of the stuff and Darryl was more than happy to provide it, even if she was catching him an hour before the store was set to open. The deli salads at Star Market & Pharmacy were famous throughout the town of New Hope, and Darryl was the one responsible for that. Or so Mr. Spring, Star Market's typically absent owner, was always saying on the phone when he called in from Huntsville to make sure everything was going alright. But Darryl never liked to talk bad about Mr. Spring, of course, because he'd been the one to give him a chance when he first arrived in New Hope with nothing much to his name besides a Gideon's New Testament and a strong appetite for a sandwich he couldn't quite afford.



Mr. Spring had offered him a job in exchange, at least at first, for ham and mustard on the heels of a loaf of wheat bread, and Darryl was more than enthusiastic at the idea of joining the Star Market family. The only thing he had left of his own family, he told Mr. Spring, were the recipes his mama taught him to make, the ones she'd perfected while working at a colored sandwich counter in Montgomery. The deli salads at Star Market were famous by now: the chicken salad, the whitefish salad, the ham salad. Darryl sometimes went through a hundred pounds of chicken per week, and sometimes even more ham than chicken, and even more whitefish than ham sometimes during the weeks before Easter Sunday.

-

The moments after Johnson's patrol took fire were unfocused. When he was a kid at Christmas time, he might have recalled later, Johnson would often contract the ciliary muscles in his eyeballs while looking at the little Charlie Brown Christmas tree his mother put up in their apartment every year to make it blurry. He liked the way the lights became big round balls of fuzzy color when he did it, the way the tree's branches increased in fullness. Sometimes he would contract them for too long and give himself a headache and his mother would come home and tell him to quit that before he made himself need glasses, which she couldn't afford to get him anyway, she'd have him know. The moments in the medevac looked like that. The medic who put pressure on Johnson's arm—he'd introduced himself as Paul—he looked black and white at the same time. Johnson couldn't tell. The hospital room in the friendly territory of Nha Trang was gauzy. The wound, which zipped along his left forearm and culminated in his shattered

elbow, hurt. But only here and there. And even when he felt the pain, Johnson couldn't quite describe it.

After undergoing reparative surgery, a regimen of antibiotics, and a light round of physical therapy, Johnson was granted seven days of R&R before he was slated to report back to the bush. How he ended up at Fort Rucker instead of the Kilauea Military Camp in Hawaii, he couldn't have said.

-

As Darryl made his goodbyes to Mrs. Trautlein, who'd gone off on a retelling of her husband's tragic passing from prostate cancer, which she was wont to do, as they say, Willy popped his head into the back of the meat department of Star Market, the clean white room beyond the curtain of PVC strip that delineated the butcher and preparation area from the customer-facing area of the grocery store.

"You ain't set nothing up yet?" Willy asked, his forehead scrunching up in slight surprise.

Darryl didn't laugh but smiled and asked Willy if he really thought he couldn't do the thing he'd been doing every day save Sunday every week of every year for twenty-some-odd-years and Willy regretted saying anything at all, Darryl could tell.

"I'm waiting on little baby white girl," Darryl said and checked the wide-open face of the round clock hanging above the pristinely polished meat slicer atop the stainless worktable butted up against the back wall.

"Speaking of," Leslie said as she rubbed past Willy and into the meat department's back room. Leslie saw the direction of Darryl's gaze before he could turn it

toward her and she asked him did he really think she'd be late on her very last day of training?

“You don't trust your girl,” Leslie teased him, slipping a crisp white apron over her head and tying it tight around her waist in a bunny ear bow.

“You know I do,” Darryl said, “I'm just checking myself, you know,” and it was true: he trusted Leslie. She reminded him of the daughter he could've had if he had done things differently. Fatherhood was not, as he'd heard them say about other things not meant to be, in the cards for him. It was a few days until his fifty-ninth birthday. Darryl figured that was why he had taken to little Leslie so easily. His birthday always reminded him, and he didn't know why but it did, of the thing his mama used to say when he was scared to do something like dive into the lake for the first time or ask the quiet, pretty girl from down the road to take a walk with him. “You can always never do it again,” she would say. He was past the point of doing now and that conjured up a little sadness somewhere inside. Leslie was a relief to him. And it didn't hurt that they shared an affinity for the work of the meat department, the careful breakdown of whole hogs and chickens and steer.

Willy rolled his eyes. “He never trusts anybody, girl,” he said, “He wouldn't even let me *watch* him make that damn ham salad!”

“And now you're leaving,” Leslie said with a smirk before throwing her voice down to the low soap operatic, “If you knew the secrets of the salad,” she said and slowly turned her gaze to the empty deli cases beyond the PVC strip curtain, “You could've toppled the deli salad empire that Darryl has built!”

She laughed and Darryl laughed but Willy didn't think it was funny, didn't have a sense of humor capacious enough to accommodate whatever nonsense Leslie was on about. Darryl had always been a little tickled by the dumb face Willy made when he couldn't quite get a hold of. He swooped his arms out and enclosed Willy, squeezing him in to say goodbye.

"I'll miss you, brother," he said, "I'll give you a shout if I ever make it big and need your landscaping services."

-

Like the other boys, Johnson suspended his rifle overhead. He and eight others from his platoon were on patrol. Every patrol feared making contact with VC in the trees. With whip or punji traps. With cluster bomblets. With hay-concealed hand grenades of Chinese manufacture. They were there—the VC, the booby traps, the landmines—and just knowing they were there because they always were was enough to pound the heart and pressure the head to near bursting. The boys were always overly cautious as they moved through breaks in hedgerows or were forced to use paths to get through some areas of vegetation during patrols. But this time was different. Instead of crouching low among the underbrush, the patrol leader motioned his Marines into the creek they encountered on their way to the village of Phu Cam. They traversed the path of that tributary that would feed them right into the Red River were they to reach its terminus. Rifle still aloft, Johnson waded, third in the line of nine river-sopped patrolmen. Occasionally, when sniffing couldn't satisfy him, he wiped at drips of thin mucous that glistened at his cupid's bow with his shoulder.

“Got a cold, Johnson?” Pachinko asked and Johnson watched for movement in the trees and told him no, just allergic to the wilderness, that’s all. An empty C-ration can bobbed along the silt-line of the left hand bank. And up ahead, a motherly off-white hen duck paddled upstream among the windwaves, quickening the back-and-forth of her scull at the wet rustle of Marines waist-deep in the affluent. She rounded a mass of low-slung trees a few yards away and disappeared. Pachinko nudged past Johnson and the second boy in line as the patrol slowed in anticipation of the no-see spot.

“Sarge,” Pachinko said, right behind the patrol leader now, “You can’t go point. I’m point. That’s my job.”

And the patrol leader let him go ahead around. Pachinko pulled himself over mud-slick knot of roots and clots of brown-rot leaves and the other boys followed suit. After surveying the tributary path that lay beyond the tree mass, Pachinko looked back and nodded slightly. Johnson saw his eyes change before he heard the shots hit quick and dull into the bank, the bodies. His rifle was still raised high when he saw the blood rush from his elbow to the water.

-

Darryl and Leslie arranged the deli display case as usual that morning, unwrapping plastic bowls of pasta salad, coleslaw, and barbecued beans—the things that Leslie had made over the weekend, the things Darryl himself never much cared for. He wasn’t much for cold sides. They adorned heaping bowls of ham and chicken and whitefish salads with sprigs of parsley and nestled them into the iced cases, turned them toward the market’s interior in a way that Darryl figured would call to him if he were a customer. Willy was right about his secretiveness when it came to those salads. He’d

always sworn up and down that his recipes for each would never be recorded. How, he wondered, would he even go about describing the processes required to make each item? How would he describe the steps you take to get to a place you remember only once you've gotten there? But now, as he looked at Leslie, who was lovingly arranging raw chicken quarters in the meat display case opposite him, he figured he could at least try. Sure, he reasoned, it's dangerous to think you know someone too soon, or really, you know, at all, but he was willing to trust her. He felt that feeling, the thing people mean to say when they say "we just clicked."

-

Johnson and the boys stood on the Travis Field tarmac in Savannah. They moved in restless rhythms, limbs and digits stretching and contracting and popping and tapping in syncopated time. Johnson shifted among the lot, the sun rising slow over the protracted early morning, and just when it seemed like it wasn't so bad to be standing around out there on the tarmac at Travis Field, and certainly not worse than whatever it was they could be doing if they were already trained and deployed, the sound of an engine mounting a small hill stopped the quiet jazz of waiting.

A drab semi-trailer charged up the tarmac. "That's the cattle car," Johnson heard someone say, and the name seemed right for the snub-nosed cab lugging a capacious enclosure, low in the middle, like what you'd need to haul a drift of young swine. In a single movement, the truck stopped aslant the group of boys, all huddled closer together than before, and the rear doors of the trailer tore open. A stocky fellow leapt from the opening and the eyes of the recruits, a mix of drafted boys and volunteers, were wide and fixed on his form. "Here we go," someone said, and Johnson exhaled yes, indeed.

“You guys are all going to the Marine Corps?” the sturdy man squawked, not posing a question and yet not quite making a statement either. Johnson would’ve been amused if he hadn’t been so apprehensive and he picked at the cuticle on his left thumb until blood arrived small and round at the edge of the nail. Before any of them knew what was what they were herded into the cattle car. The doors slammed. A scrape of rust and metal and the lock was set. The ride would have been quiet were it not for the rumbling and rumbling along the way.

The cattle car slowed as it entered the depot and the doors flew open and the screaming and yelling was the worst welcome home Johnson could imagine. He pulled his bleeding thumb out of his mouth and wrapped it tight in his shirt as he and the rest of the load clambered out onto Parris Island.

-

Monday lunch could be slow at Star Market, and this Monday was that way. Though he usually did, Darryl didn’t much mind it today. He and Leslie shot the breeze, as they say, while the noon hour lumbered by with no more than a couple pounds of oven-roasted turkey sliced and sold, only a little pasta salad and two hardboiled eggs passed over the deli counter, and a single London broil packed in brown paper and passed to Mrs. Toney for company on Wednesday night.

-

Johnson and the boys hurriedly deposited their belongings in their Quonset huts, prodded along by the ceaseless screaming of drill instructors, before being driven outside in the sun of South Carolina summer. The recruit barracks of corrugated metal glinted

here and there beneath openwork overlays of pollen and they clustered around a much larger version of themselves, the head hut or bathhouse. A plaque affixed to the north-facing wall of the head hut read,

LET'S BE DAMNED SURE  
THAT NO MAN'S GHOST  
WILL EVER SAY – "IF YOUR  
TRAINING PROGRAM  
HAD ONLY DONE ITS JOB."

The bellows of the drill instructors drove the fold of recruits past the plaque and into the bathhouse, where the group was ordered to stand at attention. Two rows of sinks ran the middle of the hut, white enameled steel and chrome-finished faucets pristine and back to back to back below a faultless stretch of mirror. One side of the hut was lined with a row of urinals, the other, a rank of toilets. Drill instructors, six in total, slalomed between the rows of recruits, screaming this and shouting that, all red-faced from exertion, all showing no signs of quieting down. A seventh entered the hut, the same shorter fellow who had wrangled the boys at the Travis Field tarmac.

"All right, little bitches," he hollered, his voice straining so it became ragged though no less imposing, "This here is the basin."

He approached the row of sinks.

"You stand here," he shouted, "You shave here."

The six other instructors quieted down.

"You brush your grimy fucking teeth here. And it'll be cleaned every day."

Johnson, at attention with the rest of the boys, knew that the barking had to be coming sooner or later. He wondered how long it would go on for, how many days it would take



for the blunt instrument of discipline to pound the civilian out of him and the rest of his new unit. The drill instructor martialed the line of boys to face the urinals.

“Alright, girls,” he screamed, “This is the pissier. You stand here. You piss here. It’ll be cleaned every day. Got it?”

Goaded by the bulging eyes and sweating faces of the six subordinate drill instructors, the recruits responded in the affirmative. Again, the short man shepherded his flock in a measured promenade around the mirrored sinks, stopping them before the toilets.

“Okay, ladies,” he says, “This is the shitter. You sit here. You shit here.”

The instructor scooped himself down, dipped his hand into the toilet bowl, and ladled out a portion of the water. He brought his hand to his lips and slurped the liquid down.

“It WILL be cleaned. Every goddamned day.”

Johnson knew, as he watched the drill sergeant lick the toilet water from the tips of his stout fingers, he just knew. He could not be pressured into an old form, bridled and broken and ridden like a horse. Not when he knew better in his blood and bones.

-

As the two of them stood talking in the drafty spot of the meat department, the place between the deli counter and the meat counter that seemed framed, at least from the back butcher’s area, by the PVC-curtained doorway, a man Darryl had never seen before approached the deli counter, his eyes locked on Leslie. And Darryl realized she was a pretty little girl, short as she was and shiny-brown-headed. But the way the man looked at

her wasn't the way Darryl looked at her, and something inside Darryl flushed hot for a second.

-

A few patrols before the ambush, or what everybody who survived that patrol called the ambush, anyway, Johnson had embarked on his first-ever village expedition. None of the boys knew the name of the village, and it didn't really matter, a village is a village in country. Three small brown-skinned children approached the patrol with wooden boxes and they said, over and over, so sweetly, "Dung lai! Dung lai!" So the patrol stopped and said hello. The boxes each of them carried probably weighed half as much as they did, Johnson thought, and he smiled when he saw that they marveled at him just as much as they wondered at the white skin of his companions. Each child opened his box—they were so young Johnson couldn't tell whether they were boys or girls—and each box was packed with Styrofoam. Inside the Styrofoam was all this frozen ice cream, or ice cream-like stuff. One of the patrolmen understood more Vietnamese than the others and told them it was frozen flavored ice and that it cost just about nothing. So Johnson and the others, hot and sticky as ever, helped themselves to scoops of the stuff in little paper cones.

It was Johnson who tasted blood first and cried out for the rest to stop.

-

Darryl and Leslie both smiled at the man who stood at the deli counter.

"What can I help you with today, sir?" Darryl asked, and spread his hands out flat on the deli counter. The man looked at Darryl, at the clean fingertips and the milky hypertrophic scar that started at his wrist and rode up to some point beneath his upturned

uniform sleeve. The man smiled and extended his hand to Leslie, "I'm Ray," he said, and Leslie had to get on her tiptoes to touch her little hand to his.

"Before I got up here," Ray said, sly-like, "I was thinking about a turkey sandwich. But now I don't know what to think about."

Darryl slid open the back door of the deli case and gestured to the heaping bowl of ham salad, a soft mass of creamy pink flecked with diced dill pickles.

"Ham salad is one of our specialties, sir," Darryl said, "And it's on sale for..." he checked the pick with the sticker price, something he almost never had to do, and dug it back into the ice, "3.99 a pound."

"Was I talking to you, boy?" the man said, and the last word flew all over Darryl. He had never seen this man before, but Darryl sure did recognize him. He considered the man a minute from face to floor and noticed that his construction boots were crusted up with drying mud, that he'd left a sparse trail of sediment on the floor of the market.

Before he knew it, the man was on the sidewalk fronting Star Market, splayed out right in front of the cordwood display and the ice chest. Darryl's knuckles were bloody and he imagined the hilo sound of the siren and he looked at his fingerprints and knew. The old forms persisted, not in his own blood, nor in the bones of the man he'd taken down, but in time. He wondered how much longer it would take.

Two years before the end of the draft, Darryl and Bruce received their draft cards on the same day. The both of them were side by side on a mostly dry spot of limestone that hovered near the edge of the Flint River, their bodies lying long and leaned back on their elbows.

“What’s your grade?” Bruce asked Darryl and passed him a joint of Joker and homegrown.

“1A,” Darryl said and both of them knew that meant ready to go.

“Hell,” Bruce said, and held his breath and squinted his big blues and exhaled slow like savoring a last bite, “You know they won’t get around to taking you.”

Bruce pulled three squares of paper from the pocket of his cutoffs.

A year older than Darryl, Bruce had received his 1A card months before. And Dr. Merriman, New Hope’s only general practitioner, had mailed Bruce’s medical records as instructed by the Selective Service. The very next week, Bruce received a 1H card—he was ready to go but on hold. The third card, the newest of the three, graded Bruce a 4F.

“Never to be called,” he said and shook his head. Darryl knew why. When Bruce was fifteen, he’d lost five toes to the gnashing teeth of a cotton gin. Was he glad, Darryl wanted to know, but didn’t ask.

“Shame, too,” Bruce said, “I would’ve gotten a shitload of good camping gear.” He gathered his cards, one tattered, one wrinkled, and one new, and fisted them one good time before shoving them deep in the pocket of his denim. Darryl handed the dead but still sizable roach to Bruce, who considered it briefly before putting it on the limestone between them.

“Keep that shit, bro,” Darryl said, “Still smokeable.”

The two boys watched the river, quiet for a moment.

“You could dodge,” Bruce said, and he motioned for Darryl to hand him his 1A card.

“They spelled your name wrong anyhow,” he laughed, turning the card over and back in his hand, knowing full damn well that Darryl never knew his daddy and went by his mama’s name instead.

“You’re a son of a bitch, you know that?” Darryl said, and slipped him sun-warm body into the water.

“I didn’t know that brothers could swim,” Bruce teased from the limestone. Darryl shook his head and flipped him the bird and sucked in deep. He dug all ten of his toes into the ruddy muck of Indian clay and pulled himself under, intending to stay submerged in the cool murk of the Flint River for as long as that one breath would hold him.

## GOOD OLD BOYS

The morning of the party, Dottie smelled smoke. Still in her nylon nightgown and seated before her vanity mirror, she was carefully applying Bewitch Him Bronze lip pencil just above the natural line of her unenviable and unenthusiastic cupid's bow when the scent of burning something made its way to the rounded nostrils of her rather dainty Nordic nose. She examined the symmetry of her vermilion borders, top and bottom, left and right, in the pewter vanity mirror. And it just didn't seem quite perfect, but she applied a generous coat of Rose Sation lipstick over it anyway. It was smooth, she thought, rubbing her lips together carefully. It was not, she didn't think, as "glowing" or "EXTRA brilliant" as the advertisement in *Woman's Day* had suggested it would be. She should have said to hell with it and purchased the Chanel she read about in *Vogue* in the waiting room of Dr. Merriman's office, the *rouge à lèvres* of prestige and elegance, the luscious luxury she really, truly wanted. But she did the sensible thing—wasn't Jerry always asking her to be sensible? That rayon Woolworth's blouse is just as pretty as the silk blouse she coveted—the organza around the neckline might just even make it the superior, more attractive choice, not to mention the most sensible selection price-wise!—and selected a new shade of Coty lipstick instead. Dottie applied one more layer to her lips, just because, before placing the unremarkable, unglamorous, silver-toned tube of Rose Sation in the right drawer of her dark-stained vanity with the others, a small collection of "luxuriously luscious" Revlon and "enticing, alluring" Maybelline and "chic, glamorous" Max Factor. Jungle Peach, Spun Gold, Winter Mulberry, Cranberry

Glaze, Lookout Red, Tulip Tease. All audaciously rich, extravagantly plush, gorgeous and intriguing and sultry and stunning. None of them Chanel.

Dottie refused to acknowledge the smell in the air, which was, she denied in silence as she assessed Rose Sation's hue and sheen from various angles in her vanity mirror, increasing in strength. Her first guests would begin arriving in ten hours. She still had to bake and frost and decorate a spectacular sheet cake to impress them.

There was smoke. Dottie saw it, a sheer swath wafting toward her doorway, as she rose from her cream-colored vanity chair. Her eyes widened in alarm. Her lips—plump and shining, red like the single rose Jerry presented her with on the front steps of her childhood home when he arrived to pick her up for their first date—parted as if she was, in fact, truly surprised to see the smoke she had tried to pretend was only a trick of her groggy olfactory system. She did not don the robe she usually wore when venturing beyond her bedroom. She had no houseguests. Not one of her four adult children were over, no members of extended family in for a reunion or funeral. Jerry had been at the station since the cool dark of five o'clock. And her mother wouldn't be terribly scandalized by Dottie's pretty figure in pale pink, the a-line shape draping over her hips and to the floor from the alluring but tasteful lace adorned bodice, the frilly eyelash details along the neckline, the swooping v-shaped inset with fine mesh that added to the appeal of the nightgown's back.

Dottie scurried from the master bedroom of her split-level home and into the path of the smoke. The silky soft hem of her nightgown brushed the tops of her feet and she made her way. She followed it to the quiet kitchen, where it seemed, she thought anyway,

thickest. She sniffed. It was smoke. It was tinged a little with the almost floral waxy scent of creamy, hydrating Rose Sation, but it was mostly, entirely, really, smoke.

“Mother!” Dottie called out in the direction of the mother-in-law suite adjacent to the breakfast room beyond the kitchen.

“Mother!”

When Dottie’s mother failed to respond to a third call, Dottie knocked on the door, tried the doorknob, and let herself in to her mother’s suite, a really rather nice configuration of interior space featuring a kitchenette, a full bathroom with an oversized tub, a spacious walk-in closet, a generous sitting area giving way to the rather large—certainly larger-than-average, Dottie had assured herself when Jerry presented her with the plans he had approved from the homebuilder six years ago—bedroom. And of course the suite had its own private entrance. If the fire had grown big enough to prevent her from fleeing into the breakfast room, her mother would surely use the private entrance to escape the flames.

The entire suite was full of smoke. Dottie made her way toward her mother’s bed but the slight woman was not in it. She was in the sitting area, stooped and plunging her hands between and behind the cushions of the sofa.

“I can’t find the fire!” Constance cried out. She rushed from the sofa to the credenza. She strained to see the back of the television sitting atop it, the finish of the sideboard protected from the heavy color set by a large oval doily, soft white crochet.

“I’m calling the fire department!” Dottie shrieked. She opened the door with flustered hands. She tried to coax the smoke out of the room and into the little garden of moonflowers and verbena and azaleas her mother maintained so carefully. She left the



door open and dashed to the kitchen. She pressed the plastic receiver of the kitchen's wall-mounted telephone to her ear so hard that a dull pain lingered in its fragile cartilage until well after she dialed the number for the Hartselle Fire Department.

"Si," she said when she recognized the Fire Chief's voice on the line. "It's Dottie Parrot," she announced brightly before adding, "Police Chief Parrott's wife." Even though she was on a first-name basis with Si—a nickname basis, really— she felt the need to adhere to certain formal standards of introduction. She asked him how he was and smiled a Rose Station smile because she couldn't bring herself to anything resembling rudeness or, much, much worse— worse even than the whole house burning to the ground— gauche. No one could ever say Dottie Parrott's conduct was anything but exquisite, exemplary. After engaging Chief Sibert Daniels in an easy exchange for a sufficient but not tiresome period of time, Dottie told him there might be a fire in the mother-in-law suite. She couldn't be sure, she said, but there was evidence to suggest that something, somewhere, was actively burning or at the very least least threatening to ignite.

"What's that we say?" Dottie asked in a lilting manner she was sure communicated charm and grace, exuding elegance even in the face of disaster or at least under threat of some sort of danger, "Where there's smoke there's fire?"

Chief Daniels assured Mrs. Parrott he'd send at least one engine with a full crew of firefighters immediately. He said he was looking forward to the party that night, that he was sure his men would find and extinguish the source of the smoke. He recommended that she and Constance exit the home and await help outside, just in case. Dottie placed the receiver in its cradle and became frantic once again.

“Mother!” she called out as she reentered the suite, “We have to get ourselves outside. Chief Daniels says smoke inhalation can be very serious.”

Constance stood on a stool in the kitchenette, swatting smoke away from her face with one hand and opening cabinets with the other. After some coaxing, Dottie helped the slightly frail but always determined woman in a housecoat and knee-high stockings descend carefully from the stepstool.

The fire engine arrived only minutes later, leaving Dottie only enough time to fetch and slip into the most modest housecoat she owned, one appropriate enough to be worn to the mailbox but not beyond the driveway. As the four men of its crew made their way up the brick walkway, Dottie thanked them profusely for coming, and so soon. She stood atop the front steps and graciously welcomed each fire fighter into her home.

Some number of minutes later, Dottie, pursed-lipped on the porch, heard a firefighter’s voice call out from inside the house.

“Mrs. Parrott?”

Dottie hurried inside and said so as she did in a pathetic, wavering voice.

“Yes? I’m coming!”

The pained utterance was, she thought, that of the quintessential damsel in distress. She met the firefighter in the foyer. He held a blackened piece of something or other, she couldn’t quite tell, out to her.

“We found your fire, ma’am.”

Dottie considered the item and Constance emerged from the guest bathroom where she’d retreated to smoke a cigarette in peace when the fire engine arrived.

“Did they find it?” she asked and coughed and rasped, a smoker since age fifteen. The firefighter presented the charred whatever it was.

“The fire began on this and spread to the rug under the bed.”

It did some damage, he said, to the box spring, but not too much. Dottie wondered how much “too much” might be but didn’t ask. The firefighter explained that the fire was likely started by a lit cigarette, and that the burnt object in his hand was what remained of a house slipper whose mate was found beneath the nightstand. Dottie had given her mother those slippers for Christmas. Petite navy blue house slippers adorned with chenille pompoms. Those precious slippers, Dottie thought, smoldering and ruined.

As soon as the fire engine’s ignition turned over, Dottie began her tirade. She raged as she opened the refrigerator to retrieve eggs for her sheet cake. She couldn’t believe, she said, how irresponsible her mother had been. It could have been much worse, she said, she could have died asleep in a bed of flames.

“And then you wouldn’t have made it to your ninetieth birthday, mother,” Dottie said and tried to render “utter disappointment” with her face and body, shaking her head slowly, tightening her jaw, fluttering her eyelashes in a way that said, Dottie thought, “I am truly downcast by the thought of such an unfortunate thing.”

“Every woman in our family has made it to ninety,” Dottie said. “If you had died today, you would be the only Gardner woman who failed to make it to ninety.”

Constance reminded Dottie that she had had a sister who had died at age two. Dottie closed the egg container and returned it, with force, to the refrigerator. Constance did not flinch at the crash of glass and plastic. She lit a cigarette and walked into the living room. Dottie followed her, lectured her angrily for at least one full minute while

Constance smoked, staring blankly out the picture window. Dottie was getting nowhere and she knew it. And more importantly, she had more things to do to prepare for the party than time to do them in.

“I feel,” Constance said after a long pause, indignant, “like I want to spit.”

Constance did not cuss. Not because she was a devout Episcopalian, but because cussing is unbecoming. And of the things might undermine a woman’s grace, spitting was a transgression Constance considered mortally sinful.

Leaving the living room, Dottie pretended she she hadn’t heard her mother speak.

The afternoon hours dissolved prematurely, Dottie thought not in disbelief, but don’t they always on days like today. Too many of her afternoons, she mused as she beat her cake batter—not so heavy-handed as to toughen it, but not so ineffectively as to leave it lumpy—, seemed to stretch on interminably. Especially the afternoons that fell on Tuesdays and Thursdays in the most recent seven weeks or so, the afternoons she forced herself to exercise. On those afternoons, Dottie would grudgingly don her most supportive brazier. She would pull on her only Lycra leotard and her one stretchy pair of control top sweatpants—the ones she would never, ever wear outside the house, even if it were, as it very well could’ve been today, ablaze—and trudge to the living room. She would put the aerobics VHS—a very new and exciting thing, Dottie thought; the function of the VHS tape, she was certain, was much more exciting than the video it contained—into the brand new VHS player Jerry had given her on her birthday. And she would pretend not to hear the introductory tune that played for the first thirty seconds of the video, the combination of sounds she found to be the most annoying “musical” sequence ever composed. She would follow the chipper twenty-something instructor’s directives,

rather unskillfully imitating her example of the grapevine, the mambo cha-cha-cha, the hop turn. She would glance at the quartz mantle clock and wonder if it wasn't broken. It was a beautiful clock, with detailed carved leaf and rosette overlays and a burl front panel, a Windsor Cherry finish, and a polished brass finished bezel. Despite her affection for the clock, while in the throes of the aerobics routine, she sometimes, she would never admit, felt a little contempt for it.

By four o'clock, the cake was cooling on the kitchen counter. Dottie refreshed her makeup and selected her outfit for the evening before transforming her dining room table into a delightful display of hors d'oeuvres. It was five o'clock by the time each platter and dish and serving utensil had been configured to Dottie's liking. She had been preparing food for the party for four days. Part of performing your role as hostess, she thought, was making the execution of the event seem as effortless as possible. The table for Judge Richards's retirement party was, Dottie was absolutely sure, a master's piece of an expert hostess and homemaker.

Deviled eggs— Dottie always made hers with sweet relish and Hellman's, the way Jerry preferred it—were displayed on a cut glass egg platter, each oval white offering a pretty piped yolk mixture, garnished with a dusting of paprika and a single parsley leaf. Dainty tea sandwiches were arranged on a tiered buffet server. The lowest tier held the whitefish salad, the Party Ham—a recipe she'd adapted to what she believed was ham and Swiss perfection from a Betty Crocker recipe in the first year of her marriage—occupied the middle tier, and the top tier was dedicated to the tea sandwich Dottie considered to be queen of all tea sandwich varieties: watercress, cucumber, and cream cheese. Though all of the sandwiches were made with the same bread—a thin

sliced white bread with the crusts removed—Dottie liked to think she had mastered the art of providing variety to her guests by making each type of sandwich so different from the others. Near the tiered server were two white ceramic dishes of rumaki, one chestnut and the other chicken liver. And then there was the ham-wrapped cantaloupe and its platter’s attending container of toothpicks. They were company toothpicks, of course, the more expensive type decoratively carved like spool bedposts on one end. A bounteous platter of crudité with a creamy Roquefort dressing. Cocktail sausages kept warm in a four-quart chafing dish. A beautiful crystal bowl of sherbet punch in which floated a frozen ring of fresh fruits and iced cream.

The spread alone was, Dottie thought, impressive, even without considering the delicious spiked sherbet punch, the divine red velvet cake. She couldn’t deny, either, the importance of the ambiance she orchestrated, an immersive experience created by the glow of taper candles standing in heirloom silver, the tasteful selection of even-tempered jazz records, the warm sense of hospitality generated by the hostess. And the cake! The cake would, of course, be the crowning glory of the evening.

By six o’clock, Dottie had pulled it all together. Jerry, who had returned home a bit early for the party in honor of the man Dottie would certainly call his best friend, was already dressed in the ensemble his wife had selected to complement hers. Despite the fact that it was crimplene, Dottie adored the dress she had purchased for the occasion. Long sleeve and floor length, the dress’s print deviated from her typically classic taste: bright rectangles of yellow, tomato red, and shades of blue and white. Dottie found the frock to be very avant-garde, especially so with the slit running down the side from the lower left thigh. Yes, even in spite of the crimplene, which she typically considered to

stink or at least smell faintly of cheapness and therefore tastelessness and thus the fairly low class, Dottie thought she might just love it.

A minute past six, Jerry took a tour of his home, surveyed the spread of hors d'oeuvres, smiled at the decorative soap Dottie only put in the half bath's soap dish when she expected company. Her guests arrived in a steady trickle. Chief Daniels and his wife Loraine. District Attorney Glenn Funk and his wife Clara. Mrs. Audrey Bell, widow of Judge Alexander Latham, who had been, Dottie had heard, a firm but fair member of the Madison County Circuit Court. Mr. Huey Judge Richard Richards, of course, the guest of honor. Floyd Neal, a Boeing executive, and his wife Christine, a teacher at the most prestigious college preparatory school in Huntsville.

The party proceeded pleasantly, Dottie determined, circulating as she did from guest to guest, laughing at Mr. Funk's mildly inappropriate jokes and enduring Mrs. Bell's complaints about a mysterious and worsening pain in her hip.

Of all the wives in attendance, Dottie was, it was fairly easy for her to decide, the most attractive, though Christine might rival her, she thought, were she to spend more time determining which shades of rouge and eye makeup complemented her skin tone. Perhaps Dottie would try to find a way to loan her the copy of *Color Me Beautiful*; she had found infinitely useful in assisting her selection of lip colors. Based on the knowledge she had gained from studying the book herself, however, she mused as she listened to Mr. Neal discuss some new contract with the Department of Defense, Christine was likely a Summer. Perhaps a Spring.

At the appropriate hour, Dottie emerged from the kitchen into the formal dining room with the cake. It was, she thought, a truly glorious confection, a more than worthy

way to conclude a lovely evening. After enjoying her guests' utterances—filled, she was sure, with adoration and excitement and almost awe—, she placed the cake on the oversized cake platform she'd already situated in the center of the dining table.

With careful movements she believed—*knew*, really—exuded elegance and grace, Dottie performed the cutting of the cake. With the sterling cake knife that was used to cut the cake at her maternal grandmother's wedding to the then-mayor of Wetumpka, Alabama—a wonderful politician with a future in the Democratic party that was cut terribly short when he died, like Christ, at thirty-three—, Dottie excised an oversized corner. She slipped the knife's matching sterling cake server below the cake and presented it to the room, humbly acknowledging the cake's attractiveness and, she was sure, its exceptional deliciousness. She then bestowed the cake to Judge Richards. She was almost certain she saw tears begin to form in his eyes as he thanked her for her graciousness. It was so like Rick to tamp down even the most intense emotions, to remain the consummate stoic exemplar of masculinity. He hadn't, Dottie was sure, enjoyed a confection of equal quality since who knew when! Six years had passed, after all, since his Elizabeth passed (cancer of the breast, so terrible). Dottie could not for the life of herself remember whether or not Elizabeth had been accomplished in pastry prior to her untimely death, but Dottie was inclined to doubt his late wife's skills would not pale into insignificance in comparison to hers, were she still alive. But Mrs. Richards had been, Dottie did admit, a very attractive woman prior to her illness.

Dottie wrapped her arms around Rick's shoulders in an appropriately affectionate manner and gently deposited, so as not to leave an imprint in Rose Sation, a kiss on his cheek and resolved to remember to invite him for dinner more frequently.



Dottie began to slice another piece and as she pressed the tip of her impeccably polished heirloom into the velvety near-white icing, she noticed it: how red, how very unusually bright red the cake appeared to be. She passed the next piece to Chief Daniels and recalled to her mind the afternoon's images, envisioned the movements she made at the direction of her prized red velvet recipe.

She had forgotten the cocoa powder.

-

The last to leave the retirement party at the Parrott home, Judge Richards was only one stop sign and two right turns from his home on Princeton Avenue when the red and blue strobed across the dashboard and the wood-overlaid instrument panel and the steering wheel, his hands at nine and three. He eased his Riviera to the edge of the quiet neighborhood street he traveled every day, put the car in park just after the mailbox of a dark-windowed home, and waited for the officer to approach his vehicle. The officer's footsteps loudened as Judge Richards lowered the power window of the driver's side in calm anticipation.

"What's the trouble, young man?" he asked, knowing the officer would recognize him as an eminent figurehead of the law, a bosom friend of the Chief of Police at whose pleasure and command he wore his uniform and enforced the laws of the city.

During his walk to the judge's driver's side door, Officer Childress had already arranged his face as sternly as Chief Parrott had instructed him to that morning. He peered down at Judge Richards and said, with as much put-on austerity as he could muster,

“Sir, we’ve had a call from a concerned citizen about a drunk driver. And it’s your tag number and vehicle description they provided.”

Judge Richards almost smirked. He had had some number of bourbons with Jerry that night, but he knew how to handle his alcohol.

“Now, Childress,” he said not indignantly, “All type of loonies call in all type of complaints, don't they?”

Officer Childress cut the judge short. “It’s my job to treat complaints seriously, sir,” he said, doing his best, as Chief Parrott had told him to, to get old Rick real riled up, just as fuming as he could get him, “I’ll need you to step out of the automobile, sir.”

Judge Richards stared out at the fellow for a moment, his expression indurated and awash with the pulsating light from the squad car. Officer Childress pulled the hefty black flashlight from his duty belt and clicked it on, aimed the beam at Judge Richards’s clenched-mouthed, reddening face.

“I’m sure you know who I am,” Judge Richards said, not moving to unbuckle himself from his leather upholstered seat, “but I’ll have you know that I am Judge Rick Richards, and retired just this morning from my position as the longest-serving District Judge of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Judicial Circuit of Madison County.”

“The law is the law, Judge Richards,” Officer Childress said, and he was really getting into his role, “We are all subject to it.”

He moved to open the wide driver’s side door of the Riviera and Judge Richards’s anger waxed. The newly-retired presider over the court snatched his wrist and choked its advance.

“Don't you dare, boy,” Judge Richards said and pushed the patrolman’s insulting hand back at him. He shook his head in disappointment and mounting ire and as he began to step out of the car he asked the stupid son of a bitch if he knew Chief Jerry Parrott, if he knew how furious Chief Jerry Parrott would be when he found out about this whole thing the next morning.

“I’ll have you know,” he said, standing with balled fists outside the Riviera now, “That I have breakfast every single Saturday morning with the man at the top of your chain of command. And tomorrow morning, during breakfast, I’m going to recommend he reconsider whether or not you belong in the law enforcement community in this town.”

“Walk a straight line for me, will you, sir,” Officer Childress said and Judge Richards did, his face in fury, and when he returned to where he’d started from the officer said, not even giving old Richards more than one chance to demonstrate his sobriety just as Chief Parrott had said to do to make the man madder than a hornet, madder than hell, “I’ve seen enough here.” He undid the snap of the rounded compartment on his duty belt and pulled a pair of handcuffs into his hand.

“I’m going to need you to turn around, sir,” Officer Childress said and it was almost over, he was only supposed to cuff the judge and read him his rights and then at the end of the spiel instead of “Do you understand these rights as they have been read to you?” he was to say exactly this, exactly what Chief Parrott said to say, “Do you understand that you’ve been duped again by Jerry Parrott?”

But Judge Richards did not turn around and extend his wrists out to Officer Childress like he was supposed to.

In rage, he swung wildly at the patrolman, the little son of a bitch prick piece of shit, managed to get Officer Childress to the ground before the facts of his age and waning strength appeared of a sudden as his nose scraped the asphalt and the young man's booted foot slammed into his back. Childress secured the cuffs too tight and hauled the judge up and over to his patrol car, opened the door and shoved Judge Richards's stunned body in. Pissed and bleeding a little from a cut beneath his eye, Childress fumed back to Judge Richards's Riviera and slammed its door. He stood in the red and blue and his heart rate slowed a little and he started thinking about what to do next when the glass cracked as Judge Richards, recovered a bit and piqued by the bite of the handcuffs and the confinement in the patrol car, began stamping the backseat window of the driver's side.

-

The sun rose earlier than she'd expected the next morning and Dottie carefully pulled herself out of bed to her vanity, leaving Jerry snoring in bed. He'd be awake by seven to go to breakfast with Ricky, she knew, so she knew she had limited time. Moving as quietly as possible from drawer to drawer, Dottie placed compacts and glass pots and tubes and brushes atop her vanity. She applied cake foundation in swipes with a sponge. She powdered her nose and chin and undereyes and forehead with a brush, swishing to and fro like feather dusting the mantle, the quartz mantle clock. She dabbed blusher beneath her cheekbones, dipping into a newly-acquired Charles of the Ritz gel cheek pomade in Crushed Berry. As she smoothed a soft blue eye shadow finish—so velvety, she thought!—over her eyelids, Jerry stirred in bed a little and she quickened her pace, stroked her lashes twice each eye with a wand of black mascara and then replaced her

beauty products, with adorably dainty mouse-like movement, she thought, in the vanity drawers. She crept back to bed and snuggled in, pretended to sleep flat on her bed in perfection, like Snow White or Sleeping Beauty, she thought, the sheet at her chin and her pretty face at rest in effortless gorgeousness. She waited for Jerry to wake.

## THERÈSE

Therèse. *Avec grave.*

She was not French, though people often asked her, “Are you...?” Therèse was born and raised in Houston, just like her older sisters. And all five Lowery girls had developed into young women fairly early, with pretty figures and round dolly eyes, each in her time. And all five Lowery girls had names like that. Isabel had been first. Isabel was the lucky one. Or so the Lowery girls, Isabel included, all agreed.

Isabel had been first.

Then came Octavia.

Gisela.

Elinor.

And Therèse.

Their mother, Katie, liked fine things. She liked Persian rugs and Chanel No. 5 and precious stones in platinum. She liked Veuve Cliquot and oysters Rockefeller and mink. She liked her fur with scalloped hems or rhinestone buttons or shawl collars. She liked her mink in stoles. Just like Elizabeth Taylor. She liked to *be* somebody. She liked that no one ever asked her, “Who do you think you are?” They never asked because they already knew the answer.

Katie Lowery did not acquire her fine taste. She was born with it and she wanted to make sure everyone knew that. Katie came from moneyed people who came from money and so on. She married into money. She had worn an Oleg Cassini wedding gown the day she married Therèse’s father. Oleg Cassini. Just like Jacqueline Kennedy. And

though she hired other help to do the housework and the baking, Katie paid a woman named Fanny twenty dollars once a week just to clean the family heirloom silver and dust the gold-rimmed Haviland china. Fanny was thorough, Katie always said, thorough and careful. And Katie liked that.

Since Elinor had begged her way into boarding school, Therèse, at thirteen, was the last of the Lowery girls left living at home.

Isabel. Octavia. Gisela. Elinor.

Elinor with a hard “e” like “evening.”

“Evening,” a word Therèse’s mother made three syllables of.

“Mister Nall will be over this *evening*.”

Therèse.

Their mother Katie thought the names she had chosen evoked opulence. Like the names of ancient castles across Europe, each of them the centerpiece of a stunningly steep and vibrantly green hilltop, beaming out proudly over lush vistas and gorgeous gardens and fountains enameled with gold. Something like the top tier of a fabulous wedding cake at a Bel-Air Country Club reception. Something like the penthouse suite at the Plaza Hotel.

St. James’s.  
Karlsruhe.  
Butrón  
Medici.  
*Versaille.*

Mister Nall had an Omega wristwatch. A Seamaster. Just like James Bond. Therèse made her mother a drink an hour and a half before Mister Nall arrived. Katie liked her Tom Collins straight and only slightly sugary and Therèse quickly became an

expert in the cocktail's preparation since Elinor left the year before. A slug of gin, a generous squirt of reconstituted lemon juice from the yellow plastic lemon-shaped container always kept in the refrigerator where the butter should be, a tiny bit of sugar, and carbonated water.

She liked to watch Katie drink at the vanity in her bedroom while she put on her face, as she would sometimes say. Katie was beautiful, Therèse always thought.

After accepting the Collins glass, chilled, of course, from her daughter's hand, Katie put her lower lip gently against the bottom edge of the glass. She tipped its cloudy contents toward herself. And with her top lip hovering centimeters over the rim of the rocks glass, she pilfered a little sip, inhaling quick and sharp like a sneeze or a hiccup but without any of the godawful and quite unladylike noise she associated with both sneezing and hiccupping, as Therèse knew first-hand. Sometimes Therèse had to work so hard to hold in a sneeze she'd give herself both whiplash and an instant headache.

"You'll stay up a little, won't you?" Katie asked Therèse, who had already situated herself Indian-style in front of the closet door to better see her mother.

"You know Mister Nall gets a kick out of sweet Therèse."

Therèse nodded and brought her knees up and together, made of the groove between them a cradle for her plump pretty face. Katie touched Therèse's forehead, traced something like a figure eight.

After Katie was all done up and Mister Nall arrived, Therèse watched him sip gin with her mother in the formal dining room, watched the two of them laugh and joke and caress each other. She hovered on the periphery of the scene, a stagehand idly tracking the motions on the stage from behind the curtain.



“Hey, now!” Mister Nall growled after nuzzling Katie’s long white neck, his eyes darting over to Therèse, who was picking at her cuticle on the floor by the buffet.

“Won’t you come over here and give old Papa Nall a hug?” Mister Nall asked, his flushed face a ripening strawberry. “You haven’t hardly said two words to me since I got here!”

Katie excused herself to refresh her Tom Collins.

“More ice, Mister Nall?” she asked, her voice like black silk, and he refused her kindly and took her hand and pressed it to his puckered lips and let it go and winked.

Therèse slung her arm quickly around Mister Nall’s neck as her mother departed and he scooped her up and sat her on his lap.

“That’s my pretty girl!” he said, and patted her thigh and kissed her neck.

“How about a kiss for Mister Nall, huh?” he asked.

Sitting on Mister Nall’s lap, Therèse heard her mother rummaging in the ice chest.

Therèse never wondered what her life would have been like if her father had lived. He had been dead so long now she hardly ever thought of him.

Isabel remembered everything, of course. She had been the first. She was twelve when he died. Octavia and Gisela never talked about it. Elinor and Therèse recalled their father only faintly, but Therèse swore up and down, when Elinor used to talk to her late at night, before she left for boarding school, that his funeral was her first real memory.

She remembered holding hands with Elinor and Gisela. She remembered crying. She remembered the priest blessing everyone and singing the Song of Farewell. She remembered walking away, stretching her four year-old arms up to make sure her hand

stayed held. She remembered Katie. She remembered that Katie wore a floor-length mourning gown. She wore a black veil. She needed help walking from the graveside, she was so stooped with mourning. Like Pola at Valentino's funeral.

As her girls trailed behind her, all five holding hands, Katie made her stately exit before stopping quick.

"Wait!" she screamed.

The funeral party stilled.

The gravediggers stopped shoveling.

"My babies want to tell their daddy goodbye," Katie cried.

Therèse remembered being hoisted up by her uncle. She remembered his hands dipping her down, into the ground, into the open casket.

His lips were cool and dry, something like the porcelain bisque figurines of crinoline ladies her mother kept in the china curio. Something like the Madame Alexander Snow White collectible on her dresser whose dolly eyes never closed.

## THE INTERVIEW AT MARENGO COUNTY ELEMENTARY

Allen Craig had seen the ad for the narrative project in the Sunday newspaper.

Are you a former packinghouse worker?  
Do you want to tell your story to a writer  
from the Alabama Narrative Project?  
Make an appointment to chat!  
Contact Suzanne Lee, County Coordinator,  
(334) 704 – 7261

After the student loan market crash, Alabama's Governor, the lady who succeeded crooked and scandalous old Robert Bentley, that fellow who got caught doing wrong every which way possible, well, she developed a State Works Program similar to the Federal Works Program of the New Deal era. At least that was the gist of it. At least that was what Allen could glean from *The Democrat-Reporter*.

Allen could remember his parents talking about the New Deal, though he had been born the year after Roosevelt left office. The memories of the world war he grew up with eclipsed the recollections he had of such and such a domestic program and whathaveyou. The jobs provided by the Works Progress Administration had more or less just advanced the unemployed toward the deadliest conflict in history. That was how Allen saw it, anyway.

As he stared at the ad, Allen remembered one of his grandpa's jokes. Grandpa Craig read the newspaper every day and sometimes, on some days that Allen was over with his mother for breakfast or lunch, Grandpa Craig would pick up the day's newspaper from the kitchen counter and hide himself behind it for a moment, scanning carefully

over a page or two. Then he'd sigh and close the newspaper and raise his eyebrows and put the paper back on the counter and say, as he raised his coffee mug for a sip, "Well, I checked the obituaries. Still not in there yet." Grandpa Craig got a kick out of that but Allen never really understood why.

Allen didn't check the obituaries. He was a little worried he might just find himself somewhere among them. He decided he would call that number tomorrow instead.

-

The week before the interview, Allen brought three cans of Glory Foods collard greens with ham to the woman he assumed was a librarian behind the counter at the Demopolis Public Library. He should've known better than to take out a book from that branch. He hardly ever went there.

"This counts against my fine, doesn't it, ma'am?" he asked the youngish woman who was staring at her computer screen.

"Do you have your card, sir?"

He pushed his Demopolis card toward her, then put down the book he'd kept for three weeks too long. *Don't Blink* by James Patterson. The problem had been that he'd blinked too long. He'd fallen asleep every time he tried to read the damn thing.

"That leaves you with \$1.85 left," she said, and put the cans in a box Allen couldn't see below the counter.

He paid the woman the dollar eighty-five and thanked her and made his way to the little cluster of public computers near the kids' section to continue his research.

-

The day before the interview, in the late afternoon, Allen made a grocery list on the back of a receipt for his blood pressure medication from Walgreens. Before, when Linda was still here, he had not liked to go to the doctor very much. He did not like the chitchat with the nurses taking blood pressure and listening to his heart go on. He did not like waiting: waiting in the waiting room, waiting in the exam room, waiting for the EKG results, waiting to be told what was, to him, the worst, worse than the stint itself: to avoid bacon, to eat more leafy greens, to cut back on salt.

But anyway, he continued his grocery list on the crumpled receipt, putting Special K (strawberry kind) beneath 2% and instant coffee. He was out of those three things, he knew—those three things, at least. He didn't check to see if he was out of butter; he just put that on the list too. He could always use more butter, but he'd never tell his doctor that, no matter how much he might get a kick out of the scolding he'd receive for it.

He liked visiting the doctor now. He liked chitchatting with the ladies at the reception desk. He liked the playful kittens and puppies and songbirds and the cute little palm trees and hearts with smiley faces patterning their scrubs. He liked waiting in the waiting room. Sometimes he had conversations with other people who were there waiting, because they were waiting with him and he didn't mind waiting so much if he wasn't doing it alone. He even liked waiting in the exam rooms. He knew someone would come in, eventually, and it was the coming in that he waited for with something like serenity, thumbing through a germy-looking *Reader's Digest* or picking at the edge of a raggedy thumbnail. His blood pressure hadn't even been that high the last time he'd gone in, and he was sure it was not just the Lisinopril. No, sir. Sure, he was taking the damn pills. But he had also finally started following the advice he had always overheard

his grandmother, rest her soul, giving other people with angina back in the day: drink vinegar after every meal. It had been difficult to do at first, he couldn't deny. Taking a big glug of pure distilled vinegar is not an easy thing to prepare yourself for. After a while, though, he did it almost without thinking. Sometimes he wouldn't even taste it. Instead he would think all of a sudden about dyeing Easter eggs with his siblings or making science projects, even! How strange, he always thought after something like that, to taste and then see something you smelled.

Allen put vinegar on the list. And then he scribbled "clear value" beside that. He had discovered he preferred the taste of Winn-Dixie's cheaper off-brand to the sapidity of the forty-cents-more distilled white vinegar from Heinz.

After putting Ivory soap on the list with a question mark after it—he figured he might try a different soap this time, maybe something fruity—Allen took a trip to the Winn-Dixie.

-

Allen liked to tour each aisle of the Winn-Dixie, just to make sure he wasn't forgetting anything. He liked to look at his options, survey the familiar territory of Aisle 6, with its aluminum foil and trash bags and party packs of paper napkins, and Aisle 10, with its array of prepared meals and potted meats and packets of gravy or hollandaise.

Sometimes he would make a section on a shelf right again. If a box of Hamburger Helper had been picked up by some shopper who came before him, thus making the rows of Hamburger Helper uneven, he would pull the second box in line forward, make it flush with the others. Hamburger Helper, House Astry Cornmeal, cans of Green Giant kidney beans, deluxe-sized bags of M&Ms. He would put the item next in line in the empty

space left by the taking of the first, and that empty space would be moved to the next row. It was hardly visible, he thought, especially if you weren't looking for it, which most people, he was sure, were not. He liked to make the shelves look brand new, untouched. And he liked to think that he was being of some help to the people who worked at the Winn-Dixie by doing this.

He liked to look at displays of new products in the Winn-Dixie.

He liked to take the products down—new stuff he'd never seen before like almond butter or spaghetti made of some "Ancient Grain" to make it gluten free or gummy candies shaped like somersaulting children—he liked to take them down and turn them in his hands. He liked the words on their labels and boxes. Like "The best of nut and seed nutrition" and "Taste and Texture of Traditional Pasta" and "Tear into snacktime!" Sometimes he talked to the products, but only low-like, so low no one could hear him.

"What is nut and seed nutrition, anyway?" he might ask.

"I could just eat the damn traditional pasta," he might declare.

"I bet you would stick in my teeth," he might say.

The week before he had made the mistake of trying one of those new Velveeta Cheesy Bowls. He had picked out the Buffalo Chicken Mac flavor because he thought it sounded the best. And he stood in his kitchen while it twirled around atop the glass turntable in the microwave and he listened to the dull, solid sound the machine made, a muzzled roar, and he looked at the laminate countertop. He had never liked that counter top, with its flecks of brown that looked like scattered burned-up breadcrumbs or

splattered pinpricks of lentil soup. He picked at a flake of pepper that had somehow affixed itself to the lip of the laminate. And he knew already, even before the microwave beeped, that he would not like this prepared meal thing very much, even if it had come with a dollar-off coupon that might've made it a little more worth it, with the discount and everything. Allen took the paper plate bearing the sturdy little throwaway bowl out of the microwave and put it on the counter. He snipped the silver foil of the cheese sauce packet and stirred its contents in, mixing it all up with the anemic squares of chicken and sallow-wet penne-looking noodles he had just microwaved on high for one minute. It smelled like something soggy that had been kept inside something plastic for too long. Well, that is what it is, Allen had to admit. As Allen brought a second forkful of the Buffalo Chicken Mac to his lips, he wished he had a dog to feed this thing to. He almost made himself laugh wondering if a dog would even be desperate enough to eat it. And though he was never one to waste food, he always said, he made himself quickly respect the act of throwing the barely-touched tray straight in the trash by telling himself he could never do that to a dog in the first place.

-

The afternoon the day before the interview Allen spent four straight hours at what had become his usual computer, computer number seven, in the library near the kids' section. He hadn't gotten much work done for the first, he'd say, hour or so. Maybe forty minutes, but it sure seemed like an hour. Allen thought it seemed like the longest hour of his life. As he scrolled through the pages of search results for "packinghouse worker job," looking for something he could actually use the next day, he just couldn't concentrate. There was a woman on her cell phone three computers down, just yelling away at the



person on the other end, someone Allen figured must've been an insurance company representative or a slow-moving peon at some government agency. Maybe one of those DMV folks, Allen thought. Whoever it was, this lady was nonstop—like she was shouting to someone hard of hearing at the other end of a ranch-style house. And they were both strapped down to something so they couldn't get any closer. Allen found himself getting madder and madder the more he thought about the scenario. Hot around the ears, even. Who talks on the phone like that at the library? Who doesn't know that the library—not just the Demopolis Library, but every library everywhere all over the world, Allen was sure—is famously quiet?

He was on page 28 of the search results for “packinghouse inside pictures” when she finally shut herself up and logged out and left the computer three down from his.

He realized only then that he'd forgotten to take his ACE inhibitor that morning. No wonder she'd riled him up so much, Allen thought and tried another search phrase. No wonder.

Allen pushed his cart up behind the last person in the longest checkout lane at the Winn-Dixie. He checked his Walgreens receipt against the contents of his cart, just to make sure he didn't need to go back. He'd gotten everything, he saw, and more than that: he'd picked up a new toenail clipper on Aisle 15, cosmetics and personal care, since he'd lost his old one somehow. He'd also put a pack of six bottles of Budweiser in his cart. He wasn't a drinking man, of course, but he figured he could stand one or two that night, to put himself to sleep. The line advanced and Allen looked at the squat woman in front of him. She had her face so close to her cell phone it might've washed her features in a glow

of blue if the Winn-Dixie lights weren't so blue-bright themselves. He wondered what she was doing with all that cream soda and all those Red Delicious apples. Perhaps she was the mother of a boy on a baseball team and she had snack duty that week, he thought. Maybe she was confused about what to bring to Bible study so she just chose the first things that looked good to her that day. He wanted to ask, but figured she would think that was rude. What if she was just really partial to cream soda and apples? So he just kept looking at her cart until it was empty and then full again, everything in bags, and wheeling itself out of the electric sliding doors.

The cashier at the checkout asked him how he was and he offered her an eager reply.

“Well, I’m just good as ever,” he said and asked her how she was.

Her name was Lunetta, he saw, and after she said “fine” he said, “What an interesting name, Lunetta!” and smiled big and broad and felt his face make the wrinkles around his eyes push in deeper. He didn’t so much mind that anymore because they had been there for a while now.

“Everybody says that,” Lunetta said, and looked at him after she scanned his Budweiser and asked, “Can I see your ID?”

Allen got a kick out of showing his ID to purchase alcohol. At his age, he thought. “I’m old enough to be your grandfather, little lady,” Allen said as he pulled his wallet out and retrieved his driver license.

“Even if you were my grandfather,” Lunetta said, “I’d still have to ID you. It’s the law now.”

Allen didn't much mind showing her his ID. In fact, showing his ID was one of his favorite parts about buying beer. So much so that sometimes—not all the time, now, just sometimes—he'd buy it just for that extra step at the checkout lane. Lunetta looked at his license.

“Crazy, I know,” she said, “But the law's the law.”

“Allen Craig,” he said as she typed his birthdate in to the keypad, “I have a last name for a first name and a first name for a last name. Or two first names. Or two last names. Depends on who you ask or how you look at it.”

Lunetta smiled weakly and passed his license back to him. At least he'd made her smile, Allen thought.

-

By the time Allen had pantried his groceries and put his Budweiser in the refrigerator, it was completely dark outside and he was, he would've told you if you were listening, pooped. It began to rain and he rummaged through a kitchen drawer for his bottle opener. He couldn't just use his hands anymore. He was strong enough but his skin had gotten too thin. Better safe than sorry, he thought, and popped the cap off the beer. After his Michelina's Fettuccine Alfredo with Chicken and Broccoli had cooled for, oh, about three minutes, he pulled the paper plate bearing its paper tray out and set it next to his beer on the kitchen table. He sprinkled a little Clear Value brand garlic powder over the contents of the tray to give it something extra. Though he really was quite partial to the Michelina's dinners, and the fettuccine with chicken and broccoli was, in fact, his very favorite one. It was just like the box said it would be. “A classic dish, made to perfection. Tender chunks of white chicken with crisp broccoli, tossed with fettuccine

and creamy alfredo sauce.” He had grown accustomed to eating alone at night in his shadowy, cool kitchen. But he did appreciate the murmur of the rain. While he ate and sipped, it talked to him. And he listened.

-

Allen didn't eat breakfast before his interview. He was too excitable, he figured, having woken up with a flutter in his belly anyway. He wasn't quite sure how to get to the Marengo County Elementary School from his home, so he left forty-five minutes early. Sure enough, he found it alright, especially for having only remembered that the school was a few turns behind the road behind that Dollar General off U.S. 80. He pulled his Corolla into the parking lot. He parked a ways away from the three cars already there. He thought he should give them space. He didn't know whose they were, after all. It was Saturday, so there were just the three of them. Four of them now, if you counted Allen. Allen looked at his car's dashboard and realized he was thirty minutes early. So he sat in the parking lot and imagined what the interview would be like.

“Well,” he said, “after I lost Linda, I made my way.”

That didn't sound right to him, he thought, so he tried again.

“Linda McNeese Craig was the love of my life and in losing her, I lost myself.”

And that was true, of course, but it sounded so desperate to say it so.

“I always thought I'd be the first to go,” he said, to no one.

And maybe that was closer to the truth than anything; he'd never thought about losing Linda. He'd only thought about what she'd do after he was gone. He imagined she'd be doing something very different right now if things were the other way around.

-

Seven minutes before the appointment he had made two weeks before with Suzanne Lee, County Coordinator of the Alabama Narrative Project, he entered the Marengo County Elementary School. He looked at the CVS receipt for antifungal cream he had written her instructions on then.

“Fourth door on left – sign says Mrs. Fields.”

Allen counted the doors on his left and found that the fourth was the only one open, the only one with its lights on. He had a few minutes, he knew, so he slowed down to look at the oversized squares of construction paper hanging in a neat row across the hall. Each square featured a child’s self-portrait. And some of them were quite good, Allen noted with pleasure, admiring the pencil work of a little girl named Emma, whose portrait showed her holding a giant flower out to him.

“Mr. Craig?” a woman’s voice called as he moved to the next piece—the self-portrait of a boy named Jayden who depicted himself with big round cheeks and a smile so straight it looked like it hurt a little—and Allen almost jumped.

“Oh, I know, I’m early,” he said, “But I’m old!”

He hoped she would think he was nice.

“Come on in,” she said, and escorted him from the threshold of the fourth door to the teacher’s desk.

“Mrs. Fields,” a crafty nameplate read. It was made of tented cardstock and decorated with glittery stickers of butterflies and ladybugs and Allen quite liked it. It suited his idea of who Mrs. Fields might be. It gave him the idea of who she probably was, in fact. His own nameplate hadn’t done that. His nameplate, the one he’d had at his job—his one and only job, for nearly forty years!—as a bookkeeper for a lumber

company, had been brass. Brass and permanently affixed to his desk with screws. He sometimes wondered what had happened to it after he retired.

“I’m Kathleen,” the woman said, and extended her hand to him. He shook it and found her grip to be firmer than his. Perhaps he didn’t have the strength he once did, who knows.

“Thank you for participating in this project,” she said, and gestured for him to sit down behind the teacher’s desk.

“That chair is nicer,” she said, and pulled up a plastic one taken from a classroom table.

Allen hadn’t imagined his interviewer would be so young. Kathleen looked to be no more than twenty. But almost everyone looked young to him, he thought. Younger than him, at least.

“I’m assuming you know a bit about the narrative project,” she said and Allen said he did, that Miss Lee had told him a bit about it, she sure had.

“I’m going to ask you some questions about your experience as a packinghouse worker in Marengo County,” she said, and Allen felt his eyes soften because he hadn’t imagined it like this. He hadn’t been a packinghouse worker, per se, you see, but he hadn’t imagined that that made too much of a difference. He wanted to tell his story to a writer, right? And the writers, he figured, well, they wanted him to tell his story to them too, didn’t they?

“Don’t you want me to start from the beginning?” he asked.

Allen wasn’t too good at telling stories that weren’t true, but he was too embarrassed to tell Kathleen he hadn’t, in fact, been a packinghouse worker. That he had

worked in accounts payable and accounts receivable at a lumberyard. That he had known a few packinghouse fellows from Weaver Meat Processing but that he sure didn't know anything about what they did. That's why he'd done the research. But he didn't think she'd want to start from the packinghouse, not at first.

“What sort of beginning do you mean, Mr. Craig?” Kathleen asked.

“Well, you know,” Craig said, rubbing his left earlobe to try to show her he was uncomfortable just getting right to it, “Where I was born and all of that beginning stuff.”

Kathleen smiled and glanced down at her questionnaire.

“Mr. Craig,” she said, “I'm afraid the parameters of the project are pretty rigid. We're really just looking to create narratives of the packinghouse experience itself.”

“I see,” he said, and settled into the teacher's chair. “Well, ask what you're going to.”

For about half an hour Allen provided fibby answers to every question Kathleen posed: about union matters, about labor disputes, about Jim Crow laws' effects on employees, about his own responsibilities. He claimed he'd been a butcher on the chain, the position he'd spent the most time researching on the internet. Even after all the sites he'd perused, he didn't know much of anything about what is really meant to be a butcher on the chain, nothing beyond what he imagined based on the way the words meant when put together. He'd read people talk about it, about the animals hanging down and making their way around the factory. About how difficult it was to slaughter the animals and prepare their carcasses. But he didn't know what it felt like to slice the jugular vein. To saw the ribcage open and take out the vital parts. To sever the head and make the body into cuts of meat.

Kathleen was frustrated by his lack of detail, he could tell, but she kept typing, tip-tapping every word he said onto her laptop as he responded to her inquiries.

After she asked about his relationship with the bosses and he said, “Oh, I guess they were good,” and then he said, “Oh, yeah, they were, you know, pretty good,” she took a deep breath in and smiled hard at him.

“Well, Mr. Craig,” she said, “thank you so much for taking the time to come down today!”

She popped up from her chair and extended her hand to him again. He rose slowly and reached his toward her with even less speed.

“That’s all you want to cover?” he asked, and she grabbed his hand and shook it, squeezing even harder than the first time. Allen gave half of his initial effort in return.

“Well, what do you want to talk about?” she asked, and faked another grin.

Allen didn’t know.

“Oh, nothing, I guess,” he said and smiled.

He turned to leave and spotted another man, younger than him, probably, and probably possessing real answers to Miss Kathleen’s questions, at that.

“You have a good day now,” he said and left the room.



## WELL ENOUGH ALONE

Kim Danner dusted. He knew most people in Madison County didn't know what pride was anymore, but he was proud of what he had, who he was, and he took satisfaction in cleaning the things he had. He felt fulfilled by the even horizontal stripes mown into his front yard, by the nice blacktop driveway that stood out from the worn grass and dirt and gravel paths here and there, offshoots of the hilly five-mile stretch of Steele Lane he lived on. He wasn't a wealthy man by city standards, of course, but to city folk he would say he was an American, goddamn it, and he had all he needed. In the unincorporated blip of a town, Plevna, Alabama, a place where "downtown" was one Shell station, a taxidermy, a video store that also sold Minnetonka moccasins and folding knives, and a Mennonite-run country store, everybody knew everything about everybody. And Kim Danner had his reasons for showing everyone who he was.

Though Missy was gone up to the Tennessee Baptist Convention's Annual Session in a van with a few other members of Locust Grove Baptist Church, the house was pretty much clean as when she'd left it two days before. Kim almost wished there was more to do, that the pile of dishes were a little bigger, that the garbage can in the bathroom was full of tissues and used cotton balls, the fridge had in it some of the of uneaten and leftovers Missy swore she'd fix the next day until the day they started to mold or turned rancid and watery and uneatable. Every time she cleaned that fridge out, she lamented her sinful waste of God's gifts in the face of so much hunger in Africa. She didn't think about the hungry kids all around Madison County, and Kim didn't remind

her of them. He didn't much like to think about them either and when he happened to drive by a rickety once-was farm house or a rust-covered mobile home with skinny dirty children outside of it he clenched his jaw and cursed the people who made them, the welfare good-for-nothing sons of bitches and bony drugged-up whores who made and sold crank just to make and sell more crank while their children grew up to be trash because that's what they're told they are.

In the quiet of his living room, back off the road connecting his property to the tumbledown and degradation of Madison County white trash just enough, Kim swiped his dusting cloth over the lamp shade. He carefully lifted the single silver-toned frame from the side table butted against the arm of the couch. The thin rectangle of its absence peeked out only slightly from the sheer dusting of fine, dry particles covering the table's surface, a veil so slight Kim wouldn't have noticed it had he not known it would be there.

He sprayed a loose zigzag of Lemon Clean Pledge across the tabletop and it was something like an aerial shot of a section of meandering river cutting its way through Alaskan tundra. Something like that, the kind of thing Kim had only seen sometimes before he met Missy. Those nights he woke up to find himself contorted on the couch with brandied breath, to find all the lights on in the apartment he had shared with his ex-high school sweetheart and fiancée Susan before he made her leave, to find the TV's volume so loud. It was so loud that he could hardly bear to look at the National Geographic Channel documentary on wildlife in that arctic region, that's how loud it looked.

He figured he was happier now than he had been then, that everything had happened for a reason. His daughter's face peered out at him as he put the frame back down and he was

glad she was his, glad she'd gotten to her senior year in college, glad she'd graduate in the spring and then get out of Plevna, at least for a while. He hadn't got a diploma from Jacksonville State because he quit to take a job back home but he'd done his family proud. Kim didn't like to think about the fact that Stephanie only very rarely called home anymore. About how she was always trying to spend her breaks down there too, as if she didn't want to come home, not even to see him. But he was pretty darn sure Stephanie loved him, he told himself she did, and that she was just doing what kids those days did. She'd grow out of it, he always said. He wished other people in that county would be more like him, raise a daughter right so she'd come back and make this place as beautiful as it seemed to be to passersby taking the back way from Nashville to Birmingham or Mobile.

-

Plevna was beautiful, Kim often thought as he drove around the town on account of whatever errand or agreement brought him out of the house on a fair-weather day. Retired for only a few months from his job as a federal poultry farm inspector, he had more time to really take a look at the place he had been born and raised in, his parents before him, and theirs too. Plevna was a higher-up spot in north Alabama, right up near the state line. To the south it sloped downward just a hair and soybean and cotton fields lay flat and on and on beyond the vague border between Plevna and the rest of Madison County. To the north the town overlooked a panorama of intersecting hillsides that appeared to march in lock step toward the promise of the rolling hills of Tennessee. Driving down John Hunter Highway, the one four-lane road to venture through Plevna, you wouldn't think it could be anything other than a pretty little rural southern town. Kim

would shake his head and mumble to himself now and then about his mother and pa rolling round in their graves if they could see it now.

Kim figured that's what "corruption" meant: when something looks one way but really is another. He was proud that he looked exactly how he was. And he had been hell-bent on looking that way since he was seventeen years old, since he found out about Terry Jones.

You wouldn't know just by looking at him that Terry was a crazy motherfucker. Of course Kim couldn't say that in front of Missy because she'd rip-roar into a sermon on the sinfulness of filthy language before he could even explain what he meant.

When Kim used to run around with Terry in high school—this was before Kim found out about the secret thing, of course—Terry would spend what seemed (and sometimes damn near was, Kim often noted)—like hours getting ready before going out to the bonfire or the house party or the bootleg bar run by Dame Cruise, a woman some people might've called a prostitute at that time. Her place was sort of sunk down in what looked to Kim like a big ditch a ways off the main road. The sign on John Hunter Highway pointing to Dame's was always illuminated, but on the nights Kim and Terry pulled down the two-rut trail its arrow indicated Kim always thought the sign looked sick with something, like the bile he produced the morning after drinking too hard on an empty stomach. The sign said ICE COLD BE ER but the truth was the beer was always and sour like clothes forgotten wet in the washing machine and so warm you'd want to spit it out if you didn't need to swallow to get a buzz. Dame Cruise and her boyfriend kept the place at something like a hundred and five degrees. Kim sort of figured they did it on purpose to keep their patrons' visits only so long as they could stand to sweat in the

low-ceilinged building little bigger than a lean-to, especially with the yellow light of the unclean bar making everyone look and feel queasy-wet.

Nasty as it was, and nasty as he'd get after being in there for only five minutes, Terry couldn't even go to Dame Cruise's place without making himself more than presentable.

Before leaving the house to do whatever he was up to after dark, Terry would take a long shower and the house would be filled with the steamed-up smell of Barbasol and Ivory soap. He'd blow dry his yellow-brown hair and part it down the middle again and again with the comb he kept in his back pocket or with his mother's hair pick. The choice of implement all depended on which one seemed to do the job the best that night. He'd emerge from the bathroom naked as the day he was born and saunter into his bedroom where Kim kept himself occupied with a *Playboy* or one of the raunchier porno magazines Terry kept in a messy heap below his twin bed. He would pump his hips a couple times at the poster of Farrah Fawcett taped up on his closet door before putting on his tighty whiteys. "I don't have shit to wear," he'd always say as he jostled all the wire hangers around in his closet even though he had too many shirts and too many pairs of identical Wranglers. Kim thought so, anyway. He wore the same couple shirts on irregular rotation and almost always based his night-out apparel selections on the result of a quick sniff test. Not Terry. Terry would watch himself in the mirror as he buttoned up a shirt and then consider his reflection right and left before stripping it off and repeating the process again and again like he might just try on every damn button-down he owned by way of theft or purchase. He hardly ever settled on one his Aunt Jenny had traded good money for at Dunnivant's discount department store in Huntsville, the small city that

seemed, in comparison to his unincorporated hometown in rural Madison County, like New York to Kim. Because he was Jenny's son, Kim never said anything to her about how Terry liked or didn't like the gifts she'd get him for holidays or his birthday or when she felt bad for him. He could understand, too, why Terry didn't like them much. His mother's button-downs were almost always cheaper looking, flimsy-like; they seemed to say CLEARANCE even though the tags were already off. Kim didn't ask where Terry lifted his higher quality shirts from or how he'd managed to get so many without anyone noticing. Not that there was anyone to notice a missing shirt or two, really, besides the employees at wherever the hell he'd stolen them from. At least Kim's mama had good intentions when she gave Terry gifts. At least she was around. Terry's mama, Jenny's youngest sister, had run off when he was thirteen and his stepfather, who'd adopted him when he married Kay, the prettiest sister of all the Jones girls. Kim thought so anyway.

Kim thought sometimes that people looked at Terry but didn't really see him how he was. In Terry's bedroom, watching his cousin dress himself, Kim wondered if he could really see him either, but he figured Terry was more Terry around him since the two of them were first cousins, since Kim first met Terry only two days after his birth. He couldn't remember Terry's welcome home from the hospital, though the pictures of that day in one of the many albums maintained meticulously by the grandmother they shared confirmed he was. Even after knowing him all that time, though, Kim still wondered what it was that made Terry do what grandmother called gussying up with such zeal.

Dressed only after Kim said he thought the party would probably be over, the prettiest girls would probably be home asleep, the world probably on the brink of apocalypse before they even left the godforsaken house, Terry would grunt and grumble

something shit-talky, call Kim Two Shirts, say that's why I get pussy and you get quality time alone with your left hand to make it seem like someone else is jacking you off, ask what do you know about style anyway.

Once, as Kim turned a page and flashed his eyes at Joyce Gibson's rolling breasts in some issue of *Climax*, Terry tightened his lips and raised his eyebrows a little like gotcha before bucking his head slightly and saying, "Hope you don't have any cum on your hands, man. She got it good this morning."

After that, right before Kim found out about the lie, the secret thing, he stopped killing time with Terry's magazines. Sometimes, waiting for Terry as usual, he'd spot one of them peeking out from under the bed and feel uneasy like he used to when he would hold his pee all night because he believed there was a monster waiting below his bed to clutch his ankles, drag him down, devour him. On those occasions, he didn't want to kick the exposed part of *Hotel Love* or *Sexpert* back under there because that would mean he'd have to look longer. He would slash his eyes away instead, try to push back the split-second conjuring of Terry, angry-eyed and furious, milking his snake. Kim didn't want to know the whole story because he was afraid it would be worse than he thought it was.

Terry never seemed to notice the change in the way Kim killed time after that. His own routine remained the same: he'd douse himself in Chaz cologne and ask, earnest, and always more than once, "How do I look, dude?" either before or after warning Kim, "You better fucking tell me if I look ok."

-

It was his carefully groomed appearance and smug charisma and sort of good-looking face that still made Kim double take when he saw Terry around after the night he

found out about who he really was. It was almost like he was wearing a real believable getup at a masquerade ball, Kim sometimes thought, the type of party he assumed didn't even really happen anywhere outside of that damned *Dallas* soap Missy would always get a little excited about even though she felt guilty about watching it. *Dallas* tempted Missy to enjoy a whole mess of sordidness, to become rapt by the sinfulness she renounced in the morning but would then turn right back to each Sunday night.

Kim didn't give a good god damn about who shot J.R. but of course he never said so to Missy, partially to avoid the tedious lesson on how Jesus says that what comes out of a man's mouth is evidence of what is in his heart, on how filthy talk of any sort should never pass a Christian's lips. Mostly, though, he didn't tell her he didn't much like *Dallas* because he wanted her to keep watching it. Each episode was the only full hour of his Sunday he was let alone.

Most of those hours Kim spent walking around the backyard. He liked to half-zigzag around from the small brick patio Missy was always nagging him to expand to the two-story detached garage full of the furniture mother left him that Missy didn't want in the house and boxes of stuff and junk he figured would probably never be opened again. He reckoned Stephanie would inherit whatever was in them after he and Missy passed and that she'd turn right around and leave them to her own kids who'd never care enough to be curious about their contents but would keep them out there beneath whatever else had got piled on top, holding on to them because they'd always been there and it would be work to get rid of them anyway. He liked to look out, as *Dallas* played in the living room in the house he'd grown up in, at his property, the land he owned that made him an American. His mother and pa built the red brick ranch that sat on it but he had made all



the improvements to it, had made it become more his house than theirs. It sat about a half acre back from the road but if Kim could've had his way it would've been further back, way back. He had worked all the years he needed to put down cash for the acres of land to the left and right of his original inherited property. He never could get his Uncle Ronnie to give up the acreage butting up against the backside of the Danner property line. Ronnie liked owning the cemetery that sat at one corner of it, Kim guessed—he'd always been a mama's boy and maybe selling the land she was stuck into would be like giving her away. But Kim couldn't say, really, he just knew that when he brought it up, Ronnie would look at him sort of empty-eyed and act like he hadn't heard a word of his great-nephew's proposal. Still, walking around out back like that, Kim liked to imagine empty fields he owned the deeds to spanning out in all directions before shrugging a little and lighting another Winston. He'd be damned if he wasn't proud of what he had, what he had got for himself: The homemade range he built beyond the garage for target shooting. The rusting clothesline that, unused after he got Missy the Maytag she wanted when they first moved in after mother's death, he had turned into a place to hang the bottle gourd birdhouses he liked to make when he felt like messing around with something like that. The sun porch he'd added to the backside of the house that Missy liked to invite her Bible study group to use for potlucks because it was bright like the promise of heaven and long enough to fit comfortably two eight-foot folding tables end to end.

Missy liked to invite her small circle of Christian women friends over to quilt or crochet or do whatever the hell other type of handicraft she'd got them all into. She always suggested the sunroom as the ideal spot for embroidering little flowers or

finagling yarn with metal instruments that Kim could hear click-clacking if he happened to walk through on his way in or out.

Last winter Missy convinced the girls to make an assortment of Christmas ornaments to give as gifts to their extended families. Kim knew that each of those gals, Missy included, had pretty long lists of aunts and uncles and cousins, first, second, and third. Everybody in Madison County, the folks from his parents' generation, anyway, had bookoos of kids. His Aunt Edna had had the most—thirteen—and when he'd taken the forty-minute trip to see her at Huntsville Hospital the week before she passed on, he'd tried to make her smile by telling her she was tough as hell, that she'd be out of that bed and back singing at Locust Grove the very next week.

“You survived raising thirteen young'uns,” Kim said by her bedside, “You're tougher than all get out!”

She said she didn't know much about that and Kim surprised himself when he interrupted her to ask, almost laughing, “Aunt Edna, why in the hell did you have so many kids, anyway?”

She raked her fingertips over the textured hospital blanket for a few seconds, smiled and said, “Nothing much else to do in Plevna, Kim.”

Most everybody must've felt that way, then, Kim almost believed when he thought about all the people who came from them big old broods Missy and her girlfriends were making ornaments for that winter. He didn't say anything about the enormity of the workload he imagined, of course, since they let him alone for more hours every Saturday in November, and for even longer after it hit December. Plus they'd seemed so excited when they brought their first batch of supplies to the house. They'd

bought out the stock of Jiffy Stitchery embroidery kits, specifically the Jolly Elf model, of two many-miles-away Wal-Marts. For two Saturdays they sat in the sunroom, heated by a radiator that always got hot so they had to open the storm door to let the cool air cut the swelter. Missy and her companions sat around the folding tables and unboxed the little red forms that didn't seem elf-looking to Kim. Once they were done transforming the forms that Kim thought were more like red potato-shaped pillows, though, he conceded that they were pretty elf-looking in their finished state. The second Saturday of the Jolly Elf, Kim didn't have to step out of the living room to know exactly what was happening out there in the sunroom. He knew Missy and her Christian lady friends were affixing little red and green sequins to the little elf bodies, embroidering little brown, black, or blue eyes into their little elf faces, stitching tiny jingle bells to their little Santa's helper-looking hats and curled-up toes. After the elves came the Gingerbread Boy ornaments, then beaded snowflakes, then frosted pinecones, then yarn and ribbon wreaths.

-

On the Saturday Terry showed up saying he was in a little trouble, the ladies were busy-busy-busy, necks bent down toward coaster-sized rounds of wood, painting on them, by number, little snowy cabin scenes and chubby flushed Santa Claus faces and pale blue mangers showered in guiding light.

At peace as the paintbrushes tried at perfect strokes in the sunroom. Kim knew full well that Missy and them was sick and tired of Christmas ornaments, though they'd rather talk about the reasons why they needed to pray for Vicki Vandiver's wayward boy than admit it to themselves or each other. Right before Terry appeared, Kim sat on a

turned-down milk crate and watched the woods, his woods. Just above the ditch between the house's lot and the property Kim had purchased for himself, he spotted a deer pull itself back into the brush at the sight of him. Kim had never been one to hunt despite his love of firearms. He shot his collection of rifles and pistols and revolvers—a smallish one compared to those belonging to Terry and probably tiny up against those owned by the rough-looking men Terry ran around with those days—to relax, to make sure any intruder would be a one-shot kill. He didn't much know many people he'd like to spend a whole bunch of whispery hours in a tree stand with. And a good handful of the men in Madison County didn't much like him, anyway, him being a government man and them being the chicken farmers whose properties he was paid to inspect. Aside from those who had an automatic distaste for Kim because of the poultry inspector thing, more and more of the other men in Madison County were nothing like him. It seemed, he reckoned, based on all the new damned trailer parks popping up like weeds all around, to be getting worse every day.

The county was, Kim had always been aware even in his high school years, about as corrupt as they come. Terry knew something like a little more than everything about the various systems of corruption operating behind badges and judges' benches and elected officials' tax-bought doors. At least Kim thought Terry knew it all. He knew all about the illegal networks running all over each other, after all. He'd have to know about exactly how closely they entangled the law enforcement and civil servants whose mirages looked real to people who didn't know better. Being in the sheriff's office is probably like being at one of those damn masquerade balls, Kim would've told Terry sometime if he thought Terry might have any idea what a masquerade ball was. He doubted *Dallas*

was on view much at all in the Madison County Jail, the place Kim called Terry's second home. He didn't ever stay longer than a day or so, since he was pretty tight with the boys in the Sheriff's Department, in-good, it seemed, with Sheriff Ernest Baker.

That Saturday afternoon, Kim heard Terry pull up into the driveway. He recognized the sound of his Silverado. Terry still smelled like a late night drunk when he came around to the range where Kim sat smoking. The smell of Jim Beam hit Kim's nose and he thought he might give Terry a little shit about drinking whiskey that tastes like machine oil, but he just stayed quiet. He could tell Terry was on crank, as he usually was these days. It was something about his eyes, the way they opened up too wide. Even high on methamphetamine, Terry was still groomed and sort of handsome-looking, to Kim at least. He was a little mad at himself for thinking that, especially since Terry was running around with them white trash boys. Kim was glad the two of them didn't share a last name. He didn't want anyone in or around Madison County to associate him with Terry Jones and his kind, drug addicts and convicts just as happy as pigs in shit to destroy the county his family worked for generations to build.

Terry didn't spare any moments pretending at a reunion.

"Look," he said, "I have to be honest," and Kim thought that sure would be a sight to see—Terry Jones being honest—as Terry told him he was in trouble.

"Ernest don't put up with any bullshit," Terry told him, the Sheriff of Madison County with a familiarity that made Kim's jaw clench a little bit.

"Ernest don't care if you use drugs. He tells me all the time, 'If you want to mess up your mind, that's your fault.'"

Terry told Kim he'd been running his cook operation without much any problem for the past few months, but that this guy he'd been working with fucked up and fucked him by fucking up, fucked him pretty good, too. Kim didn't want to know what he meant, exactly, but Terry told him something like the truth anyway. Kim never could tell when Terry was lying anymore, and maybe he hadn't ever been able to. Behind the garage, Terry sat down on another of the many milk crates stacked up against the building's wall and said this guy he'd been working with lately didn't know Madison County as well as he thought he did. Didn't ask for Terry's advice on things sometimes.

"The only time Ernest gives a damn about what we do around here is if the money's no good or if someone starts breaking down doors," Terry said, "He don't like that one bit. And this motherfucker don't know what he's doing round here."

Terry told Kim that this guy, Squirrel was his name, had taken one of Sheriff Baker's informants into the woods a few weeks ago and pulled out four of his teeth with pliers because he'd said some shit about Squirrel's wife.

"She ain't even nothing to look at, Kim," Terry said, holding his palms up as if Kim could feel the same sort of exasperation he did.

"Anyway," Terry continued, "This dude wanders out of the woods all covered in blood and goes walking over to the Toney house at three in the morning."

Kim knew Joan Toney. She lived a few miles away from him, in a respectable house on a good-sized horse farm. She was a veterinarian and had recently been widowed. Her husband, Kenneth, had overcorrected his Jeep up in the mountains on his way to his hunting cabin and had run himself smack into the grill of an eighteen-wheeler coming down the ridge. Kim had heard a couple fellows whispering in a booth at Skip's

Grill the other morning about how the cleanup people had had to spend hours picking little pieces of Kenneth Toney out of the engine of that Peterbilt. Kim had heard them say there wasn't nothing left of that Jeep that was recognizable, save the tiger's eye gear shift knob the police gave to Dr. Toney when she got up there to bring Kenneth home.

Though he thought he could guess, Kim asked Terry what happened with Joan Toney after Squirrel got up to the house.

"He knocked and hollered and she come out the door with a shotgun on him, Kim," Terry said, "I guess people been trying to break in recently, maybe, and now that she's alone she wants to be ready for em or something."

Kim figured Terry probably knew someone who'd tried to break into Joan Toney's well-kept farmhouse. He pulled his lips in between his teeth and looked at that son of a bitch and almost wanted to thank God right then and there that he was nothing like that crazy piece of shit.

Terry continued his story, describing how Dr. Toney, after getting a fuller picture of the predicament on her porch, got Squirrel cleaned up a little and took him down to Huntsville Hospital.

"So this guy does this damn stupid thing to Squirrel and everyone thought that was it but then nobody has seen him since he was at the hospital," Terry said, "And I asked this motherfucker, hey, you done something to him, you better tell it right now because my name is gonna be in this shit."

Terry wrapped his fingers tight into a fist and put them against his head.

"You just don't do Ernest that way," he said, his clenched jaw making his words sound like those he probably said before he punched someone. Kim was glad Squirrel did

Ernest that way but he didn't tell Terry that. Sheriff Baker was ruining Madison County and the more corrupt he got the more meth-head hell-raisers relocated to Plevna, making his ancestral home feel filthy.

“That ain't right,” Kim said to Terry, though he didn't mean it.

“What ain't right,” Terry said, “Is that this guy don't know his place. When I asked him if he knew anything about where Squirrel went after he got out of the hospital, he said, ‘I don't know where that boy is, but he ain't eating no corn on the cob anytime soon.’”

Had he not hated everything this mystery goon stood for, Kim might've smiled. Terry said he figured the whole thing would blow over soon, but that Sheriff Baker was on his ass pretty hard about it right then. He asked to borrow the old Bonneville Kim's mother had driven, the car he never drove but kept parked beneath a small shed-turned-carport on the property to the left of his house. Sheriff Baker hadn't got elected 'til after Aunt Jenny died, Terry explained, saying he thought this would be the best way to get around without leaving, since disappearing would rile Baker up even more. He liked to make sure those envelops of money kept piling up on his desk. And he liked to make house calls when he wanted something done.

“I just don't want Ernest to have deputies pulling me over and messing with me all the time while this thing sorts itself out,” Terry said, not imploringly but pretty damn earnestly, or so Kim thought.

He studied Terry's face a while and smoked a little on his cigarette. If he said no, Kim imagined Terry would get beat on some and maybe have his car damaged—who knew, really, he thought, what might happen? That car hadn't been pulled out of that shed



since it got there after mother died, he thought, and it'll probably stay there until I pass on too. No use in saying no, although every little bit of him wanted to.

As Terry departed with the keys to the Bonneville, which he'd replace in the shed with his Silverado during the lay-low days to follow, Kim knew he'd been wrong to let him do it. He despised Terry Jones. He wanted him dead. He wished he'd never been born. Terry Jones was a monster. And Kim Danner wasn't no monster, and when people in Plevna talked about Terry Jones he sure as hell hoped they didn't talk about Kim Danner in the same breath.

-

The night Kim found out was just before his eighteenth birthday, just a month or so before he'd graduate from Buckhorn High School and leave Jacksonville State. He and Terry settled on heading over to Dame Cruise's for the evening. Terry always said the place made him feel like he was swimming in a piss test and Kim had never taken one but sometimes he'd drunk-lean against the wall of the bathroom in the back and look into the commode and know a diluted version of what Terry was talking about. The last time he went to Dame Cruise's with Terry was the night her boyfriend beat Terry's ass.

Standing behind the chipboard bar top was Nap, short for Napoleon, the only black man in Plevna. When Kim told the story to Missy he'd said something like, "Why'd his mother name him a fool thing like Napoleon when she knows ain't nobody going to call him the whole thing ever?"

Sixteen and drunk, Terry had just developed fresh knowledge of old stereotypes about the people he already called "jiggaboos." He learned that shit from Ricky Russell, a kid in his sophomore class. Kim had never met Ricky, but he'd seen his father, Buddy,

around town, noticed the strange green of the tattoos he'd got in prison. Kim had heard his parents talk about Buddy Russell's gatherings, about how they knew full well they were Klan meetings, about how shameful it was to have someone like that in their community.

Kim didn't even hear what Terry said but it must've been bad that night. Nap bounded from behind the bar. Dame Cruise, too-tall and red-haired and so sometimes called Big Red, lit a cigarette and let out a sigh as Nap came around and socked him good. Kim looked at her but she stared at Nap, on top of Terry and just going at him, and Kim couldn't tell what her face said about the blood that dripped a little on the dingy linoleum. Terry, drunk and wild and wriggling beneath Nap's knees, didn't listen as Kim yelled stop and neither did Nap, Terry going on and on about n\*\*\*ers and Nap throwing punches to the gut. Suddenly, Nap jumped back, cat-like, and then stood over Terry's body like he was satisfied with his work.

After trying to make supplications to Nap, which Nap sure as hell didn't want to hear, and to Dame Cruise, Kim pulled Terry by his shirt out the door of the bootleg bar and to Terry's Caprice. It wasn't really Terry's Caprice, it was his mama's. She had left it behind when she ran off with some wealthy business type she met at a bar somewhere. Kim didn't know all the details. His mother liked to keep those types of things from him.

Kim drove the two of them to Terry's since Terry was drunker and bleeding and starting to swell up. Terry's house was a small, cramped-looking place down the way with a broken window in the kitchen his stepfather, Randall, didn't ever bother replacing for some reason. He just taped the hole up and let it live there like it was right and good, like everything happened for a reason. Beneath the double carport attached to the house,

Kim looked at Terry in the passenger seat and he looked like hell. He knew Randall would want to beat Terry's ass for this since Randall and Nap worked together on construction sometimes. He didn't know, at the time at least, that the two of them grew marijuana together in a clearing behind Nap's woodshop. He didn't know that Nap had changed Randall's mind about black people, had made him feel a little dumb for hating them like he'd been brought up to. He didn't know Nap and Randall told each other, I love you, brother, after hours-long conversations in the woodshop. Kim didn't know shit.

The lights were all off as Kim and Terry headed toward the back door that led to the kitchen. As he opened the kitchen door slowly, Kim hoped Randall was asleep so he could get Terry to his bedroom and avoid witnessing the fallout, at least for that night. Following Kim into the kitchen, Terry couldn't see shit, he said, and he elbowed the light switch on.

Randall sat at the kitchen table. The tight red of his face and the ounce of bourbon remaining in the rocks glass in his hand said he already knew what had happened. The fluorescent light buzzed into the silence of the room, which was always clean because Randall and Terry never ate meals together anymore. Kim stepped away from Terry and steadied himself against a kitchen counter. No point in trying to hide him now. Terry started to laugh. As Kim looked at him, he thought Terry looked like how he imagined a tormentor in hell or a serial murderer. Guilty and bloody and broken but still awful.

"You're more trouble than you're worth, Terry," Randall said, his voice flatly furious, "You think you can do whatever the hell you damn well please."

He let the buzzing drone on for another while. Terry let his head roll loose on his neck.

“I wish I’d never taken you in,” he said and then he looked at Kim.

“I’m surprised you haven’t been worse than you are,” Randall said. He sniffed and adjusted his nose as if deciding on something.

“I bet you’ll turn out, though,” Randall said, “I bet you will.”

He eyed Terry, who didn’t seem to hear him at all, teetering a little at the kitchen door. Randall cut his eyes over at Kim and pointed at Terry.

“That bitch’s blood runs in you too, boy,” he said. Kim thought he meant Terry’s blood, and it was odd to hear a man called a cuss reserved, he thought, for bad women. Randall pointed and pointed at Terry, his elbow on the glass top of the kitchen table and his whole forearm rocking forward and back, indicating like a hazard light.

“And his sumbitch father is your father too,” Randall said.

Kim blinked his eyes a whole bunch and thought Randall was just a little drunk and a lot angry.

“Ask Jenny,” Randall said, saying the first name of Kim’s mother like an incantation, like the way menacing ghosts or demons whispered in the ears of sleepless women in the horror movies Kim didn’t much care for.

-

The morning after that night, Kim knew Terry probably still couldn’t believe Randall had actually kicked his ass out for good. But he lay in his bed disbelieving what Randall had said. The two of them didn’t even look anything alike, Kim thought. And yeah, he liked to go out with Terry and pal around and all, but he never committed no crime like Terry did, never went wild like he hadn’t been raised right.

That afternoon, when he found out that what Randall had said was true, Kim felt like he was falling or melting, like a windshield with a crack that ran itself all the way across just from the impact of a single piece of gravel. He didn't know how he felt, really. He learned Aunt Kay, Terry's mother, was his mother too, had had him out of wedlock. Kay had gotten pregnant two months after meeting an auto mechanic from Brownsville named Clay, and he wasn't about to be responsible for no baby. Kay wasn't about to be responsible for no baby neither, Jenny told Kim. Kay was seventeen when she got pregnant with you, Jenny said. Kay and Jenny's parents, in fear of being scandalized publicly in the Plevna community, among the congregants of the Otey Baptist Church they belonged to, and before the customers that came to them to use the cotton gin that was their family's bread and butter, kept Kay confined in the house as soon as she started to show. They told the neighbors and their pastor and the cotton farmers that Kay had got lucky and would be finishing her high schooling at a private boarding preparatory school. After her baby came, Kay kept saying she wanted one more day with him, Jenny told Kim. She told him it was the most heartbreaking thing she'd ever seen, Kay holding him in her childhood bedroom, staring into his little face and wiping away all the tears she littered him with. Their mother and pa came in after a few days' time and said that it was time, that it had to be time. Jenny had just married her husband, Roy, four months before Kay's baby was born. By the time Kim came, Jenny and Roy were already settled into a sweet little starter home on Steele Lane. She and Roy talked about it for three nights in a row, lying in bed and saying how sad, how awful.

It was Roy who suggested it, Jenny said. Though Kay didn't like the idea of Kim leaving her at all, she disliked the idea that she could see her baby grow up under her

sister's care a whole lot less than she disliked sending him away, acting like he just didn't exist. Jenny and Roy never concealed the fact that they'd adopted Kim from their friends and neighbors. They just never said whose baby he had been before he was theirs.

Everything was pretty much fine, Jenny told Kim, until Kay started fooling around, acting strange like she had nothing to lose. Less than a year after Kim was born, Kay got back together with the Brownsville mechanic, got pregnant again somehow. That girl, Jenny said. She surprised everyone when she announced the two of them were going to get married, were going to keep this baby and raise him and make a happy little life together. He moved in with Kay, alright, Jenny said, but then he moved right back out.

-

Kim and Terry were brothers. As Kim watched Terry pull the Bonneville out onto Steele Lane, he was glad he'd never been like Terry, could never be like him even if he tried. He told himself that same thing what seemed like all the time, even as a grown man, although he did it less frequently now than he had then, he thought. He worked hard to build himself a life that looked nothing like Terry's, after all. He'd had a rough patch or two, sure. But he'd never been a monster. Not even when he found out about Susan, not even when he thought his life might end.

Though he spent a few months at Jacksonville State University after graduating from high school, Kim dropped out to be with her. She played him like a drum, that girl, and he was happy to be longed for by her. Susan was beautiful. She had blonde hair like his but lighter, and she always wore it long around her shoulders. Kim had fallen in love with her, he always told her, the moment he looked into her copper-colored eyes. When he got back into town from school, Kim borrowed money from his pa for an engagement

ring, a sort of advance for the work he'd do at the cotton gin. It wasn't the most extravagant setting or stunning diamond, but if it was what Kim needed to get in order to marry Susan Verden, he'd get it, by god.

In the months leading up to their wedding, he never noticed any difference in his relationship with Susan. Everything seemed pretty much like it had seemed when they were in high school, except now they were getting ready to vow to keep doing it forever.

Two months before the wedding, Kim caught Susan screwing Garth Hammond. He saw it with his own eyes. Susan was a two-backed monster in the dreamy glow of a candlelit bedroom he could see through the window from outside.

-

When Kim met Missy, he told her Susan cut him down so low it would take a stepladder for him to climb onto a matchbox. In a short few months, however, as his relationship with Missy deepened, Kim felt like he'd more or less forgot about Susan. When he looked at Missy he told himself he had found the right one. He felt like he had taped her over his ex-fiancée like a poster.

Kim didn't think much about Susan anymore. He forced himself not to when he could manage it, at least. He never quite understood how he hadn't seen who she was deep down, someone who needed something more than he could give, he reckoned. That's why he always told his daughter, Stephanie, not to take anything whole hog. You got to poke at it, he would tell her, you got to see where the good parts are and you got to see where the bad parts are. You gotta see if it's really what it seems to be. And if it ain't, if it's got more bad than good, you should let well enough alone and walk away while

you can. He used to tell Steph that all the time. When she used to talk to him, he used to, anyway.

-

She'd come around, he told himself on the Sunday morning after he dusted the tabletop where her picture sat. She was so pretty. Pretty like Aunt Kay, he thought. He wondered what she'd have looked like if Susan had been her mother.



## PRIVATE COLLECTION, OR, HELEN BEVEL, CURATOR

Trey had always been a mean boy. When I was nine, he, big for a ten year-old, had hit me in the head with a rock while I hung upside down on the swing set in my backyard. He liked to set crickets on fire then.

I hardly recognized him in the gingerliness of his treatment of that clumped substance on the toilet tank lid eight years later. He used the razorblade he kept in his half-empty pack of Camels to slice the substance fine, moving quickly, effortlessly, a chef mincing herbs in a sterile stainless kitchen. He rolled up from his stooped position over the toilet tank, squatted, leaned back on his haunches, and admired the symmetry of the two straight white lines.

“You first,” he said and handed me a short segment of straw from a fast food place. The plastic in my nose, at least, was familiar. I had been waxing badass for a few weeks already, blowing hydrocodone since I’d managed to coax an extra script out of my doctor following wisdom tooth removal earlier that summer. But the substance was strange. It hit me like a wave—coolness to the brain that ebbed outward, made my eyes see everything. Trey took his with one deep, rough sniff, quick and hard. He licked his finger and collected the residue from the toilet tank lid. He put it in his mouth and ran it over his front teeth, the enamel already yellowing from a couple years of cigarette smoking. I asked him didn’t he think it was a little gross—what germs from countless shits might be commingled with that residue. He raised and lowered his shoulders slightly.

“I wiped it down first,” he said.

His eyes smiled. He had shared with me only to feel the power of being a corrupter of things, like he’d always been.

“I mean, this shit was probably smuggled here in a sheep’s ass, Shar.”

He sprung up from his squat and his left knee made a grainy popping sound.

“My fucking knee is cracking and I haven’t even hit twenty yet,” he said, to no one in particular, certainly not to me.

“Isn’t it crazy that we get older every day?”

I didn’t have the self-confidence then to acknowledge how pointless I thought his wide-eyed coke philosophy was. He put one hand on the doorknob.

“Just keep it cool,” he said, making a flattening gesture with his other hand, like petting a cat.

I followed Trey downstairs and toward the kitchen. Aunt Helen was perched on the edge of the sofa, talking to her sister-in-law Charlotte, the matron of the farmhouse full of beautiful things. Aunt Helen looked at me. I didn’t look at her.

-

The summer my parents went on a three-week cruise to the U.S. Virgin Islands, I was eleven. As mother packed my bags before taking me over to stay with Aunt Helen, she told me to order water to drink if we went to a restaurant.

“Aunt Helen and Uncle Reggie aren’t as blessed as we are, Sharon,” she said, folding yet another pale pink dress and stacking it atop the other iterations of itself in my pale pink suitcase.

“And order the least expensive thing on the menu if they let you order for yourself,” she said. “Maybe see if you might split something with Trey.”

She lightly pinched the layer of fat that slowly was beginning to accumulate around my hips and rolled it around it back and forth between her thumb and pointer finger.

“You don’t need much,” she said.

Aunt Helen didn’t take me to any restaurant during the three weeks I stayed with her and Uncle Reggie. And I didn’t split anything with Trey, not even his small cluttered bedroom, since he was away at Boy Scout camp with the troop Uncle Reggie had forced him to join.

Aunt Helen started dinner around five-thirty every night, putting on piano concertos and the London Symphony Orchestra while she lovingly doctored cans of green beans with minced-fine garlic and olive oil, defrosted potato soup from early spring, and sautéed carrots with brown sugar and salt. My second night at Aunt Helen’s, a Saturday, I had watched her prepare a chicken to roast. Her hands glistening with butter, she had rubbed the raw pinkish bird like a masseuse, pushing bits of fat beneath the skin of its breasts and legs before adorning it with sprigs of rosemary and thyme from the little garden she kept by the back stoop.

-

Trey skipped the family reunion the year I turned eighteen, the summer before I started my freshman year at Auburn. Aunt Helen avoided talking about him all day. Instead, she chatted to me about Auburn, her alma mater, and to Uncle Jim’s wife, Charlotte, about Charlotte’s latest addition to her collection of Tiffany stained glass. I

watched Aunt Helen gazing at the piece in unself-conscious wonder, her lips parted and her tongue digging into the root system of her bottom teeth.

“I didn’t know what I was going to do with it exactly when I bought it,” Aunt Charlotte said, the laughing gesture of her left hand causing her mimosa to swirl almost to the lip of her glass.

“It was too weird for the Florida house and so I had it shipped to Nashville,” she said and sighed.

“And then it was way too much for the Nashville house. So it’s here now.”

The farmhouse in Columbia, Tennessee, was one of Charlotte’s growing number of interior design projects, all financed by Jim’s inherited oil industry wealth. The Nashville “house” was a sprawling palatial thing next door to the governor’s mansion. The place in Florida was a three-story, beach-front vacation home all done up in pale blues and seafoamy greens. That particular summer Aunt Charlotte had coaxed Jim into buying a little condo in Washington, D.C., and had only just begun to purchase nautically-themed art work and brass-ornamented furniture. Aunt Helen was barely listening when Charlotte said she thought she was more or less done with the farmhouse now. She was examining the stained glass, a five-foot-by-five-foot window pane featuring an obviously Christian knight in a pastoral setting with trees and purple flowers, cotton bolls, labeled, all of them: “Love,” “Live,” “Pray,” “Think,” and “Dare,” a Confederate flag, and the inscription *Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori*. I edged closer to Aunt Helen as she translated the Latin. She jerked her gaze from the inscription and met my gaze.

“It is sweet and noble to die for one’s country,” she said and smiled.

“When was this piece produced, Charlotte? Do you know?” she asked, interrupting Charlotte’s rambling on about the new D.C. condo. Aunt Charlotte raised her eyebrows and sipped her mimosa and said, “1925? I think that’s what the antique dealer said.”

Aunt Helen moved her head back and forth and whispered, “Amazing.”

She looked at me and looked at the piece, she looked at Charlotte and she looked at me.

“By then the mythmaking of the Lost Cause of the Confederacy was in full swing throughout the South! What a *find*, Charlotte. What a find.”

Aunt Charlotte might have curtsied.

-

Six summers earlier, after Uncle Reggie had gone to work the first Monday I stayed under his roof, Aunt Helen led me around their small bungalow on Tunlaw Road, the one with the whitewashed siding and sun-baked black shutters, the one on the corner lot. She showed me shelves of books I could read. She pulled open a drawer containing paper and colored pencils I could use. She led me to her bedroom and asked if I liked old things, if I’d like to see some of the old things she had. I was eager. She was a spark.

Our afternoons after that were spent on the worn-out carpet in Aunt Helen’s neat little living room, sitting on the floor, going through her collection. She had two full brown boxes of love letters from Confederate soldiers to their wives and fiancées and lovers. She had a half box of recipes from the antebellum south, some passed down for generations, from New England all the way to Montgomery, and some stolen from the mouths of slaves and put on paper. There was also a box of things she didn’t want to

show me. She opened it, pulled an archival folio onto her lap, and looked at it so I couldn't see, a poker player with a dangerous hand or a doctor with the devastating results. I couldn't quite tell who. I begged her.

“Sharon, no,” she said flatly and closed the folio. “There are some things you just cannot unsee. I'm afraid you're too young yet to deal with things you can't unsee.”

I argued my position quietly, distancing myself from the whining of a child by making my case and letting it sit there, out in the air, for the consideration of the jury.

“Your mama would be seething mad if she found out you'd seen these,” Aunt Helen said. I knew she was swayed.

I told her I would never tell.

-

My mother talked about Aunt Helen during the evening phone calls she required I make from my dorm that fall and every semester afterward. I would pace as far left and as far right as the phone's cord would allow, listening to mom go on about every detail of her aging cat's veterinary appointments, the diet she and dad were on, the dramas playing out in her ladies' group at St. Mark's Presbyterian, and Aunt Helen's despair.

Since Uncle Reggie's heart attack, Aunt Helen had just lost control of Trey. He'd dropped out of high school again and was indifferent to the purported benefits of a GED. Aunt Helen found a plastic cigarette wrapper containing some number of unidentified prescription pills in the pocket of his jeans. He was arrested for possession and Uncle Reggie's closest friend had convinced the judge a two-year probation would suffice. The judge was sorry for Aunt Helen's loss and averted his eyes again. The day after the funeral, Trey stole Uncle Reggie's credit card and maxed it out with cash advances. He

pawned a few pieces of Aunt Helen's heirloom jewelry. He came and went at all hours, smoked cigarettes in his room as Van Halen's "Eruption" blared from his stereo at 3 AM. He had no steady employment and rarely made any money before being fired from Wenger's Hardware, Whitt's Barbecue, and the concessions stand at the civic center. No call/no show. Telling his superior to go fuck himself. He got his on-again/off-again high school sweetheart pregnant. He "borrowed" money from a tearful Aunt Helen to pay for an abortion and spent it on drugs instead.

Trey was in jail when I graduated from Auburn. Aunt Helen had cried herself to sleep for days after seeing his mug shot broadcast on the evening news. Reginald Allan "Trey" Bevel, III, 24, the culprit behind \$10,000 in hot checks.

-

Phone calls from mother became every other day or so as I entered my 30s, a married accountant with a toddler in daycare. She wanted to make sure I knew everything, of course, even when I was busy with my own news. Trey's ex regained custody of their son and showed up to Aunt Helen's house on a Saturday morning in her latest boyfriend's car, a 1985 Chevrolet Citation, and drove away with eight-year old Matt and a box full of his clothes and toys and schoolbooks.

Aunt Helen would look at the bright drawings Matt had dedicated to her that covered the fridge and cry. She would call the last number she had for the ex and no one would answer. She would pick up Matt's Ninja Turtles pillowcase or the block toy he'd outgrown and left behind and she would cry. Trey gave her his ex's new number when Aunt Helen visited him in jail. She cried at the second of three tones that sounded before, "We're sorry, the number you have reached has been disconnected."

-

My son was seven when mother called excited after dinner. Trey's ex had left Matt with Aunt Helen for a week while she went to a car show in Chicago with her new husband, a man who refused to acknowledge an awful thing such as a Chevrolet Citation had ever existed.

Aunt Helen returned from her volunteer work as a docent at the historic Kildare Mansion early Saturday evening to find that Matt had burned an irregular circle into the carpet in the hallway. He had been playing with matches, rubbing alcohol, and pages of the answer key from his social studies workbook. Mother said she would've whipped that boy with a belt or at least given his behind a switching if it had been her. But Aunt Helen loved him so much and missed him so much that he could've burned part of that house down and she would've forgiven him. She'd better not leave that boy alone in her house with all her things again, mother said, no telling what damage Trey's only son (that we *know of*, anyway) could do in an unsupervised home!

I never talked much during phone calls from my mother, but I forgot completely she was talking and I was listening when mother said that about damage. I thought about those afternoons with Aunt Helen, her set of 23 first-edition prints of Vincent Van Gogh paintings. Reggie had ruined one—"Fishing Boats on the Beach at Les Saintes Maries de la Mer"—by coating it with six layers of shellac and nailing it into a frame adorned with pieces of driftwood. A well-meaning surprise that sat heavy in Aunt Helen's heart. After that, she'd tucked the leather folio of remaining prints into the bottom of her cedar chest, where she kept her wedding photos underneath quilts embroidered by great-grandmother.



I thought about the pages of love letters Aunt Helen caressed in their plastic sleeves, tracing her fingertip along the profile of a lover. I thought about the boudoir photos of Tallulah Bankhead Aunt Helen had shown me, giggling on the floor about how much courage Miss Bankhead must've had, and how much she herself didn't have. I thought about her first edition print of Henry James's *Portrait of a Lady*, how I wanted to love that novel just because Aunt Helen did. And I thought about the things Aunt Helen said I couldn't unsee, the photos of young men strung up, strange fruit, their toes eye level with the eyes of onlookers whose white faces were appalled only by the flash of the camera.

-

My mother left a rambling voicemail about Aunt Helen's common sense the next night. Matt had managed to light another fire somehow, and this time while Aunt Helen was in the house.

"It's like I've always said," mother sighed before the answering machine cut her message short, "Helen just doesn't get it!"

Though her sister never mentioned the contrasts in their educations, mother always said she could *feel* it, Aunt Helen's vanity and perceived superiority seeping out around the edges of her comments on mother's subscription to Janet Oake Christian romance novels or mother's baseless eye-rolling put-downs of feminism and Green Party candidates.

"I'll have you know that no amount of school could give me the know-how I have. Helen doesn't have it, you know. I mean, look at Trey. I know that's not right of me, but look at you and Allison. And then look at Trey. And look at her choices. She

married a good-for-nothing cheating son-of-a-bitch Democrat who died and left her with nothing but a felon for a son and venereal disease. The only thing her little degree is good for is volunteer work, which never made anybody any money anywhere.”

-

“They’re so sad,” Aunt Helen said as she watched my face staring at two black boys, shirtless and lifeless, hanging.

“They make me so sad,” she said and turned the page. A middle-aged man with no shoes.

“Someday I want to catalog it all,” she said, gesturing to the boxes on top of the sofa, all full of letters and photographs and pamphlets and books and deeds and prints of paintings.

“Maybe I’ll donate all of it to museums. They could have special exhibitions on the duplicity of our people or something like that, our love and our hate.”

She closed the folio.

“They’re opposites but they don’t cancel each other out. So much love and so much hate. All at once.”

-

On the last night before my parents returned from the Virgin Islands, I lay awake in Trey’s bed, imagining that the cruise liner they were on was sinking. They were asleep in their lush private cabin and didn’t feel a thing. The water rose over their peaceful dreamless bodies and they were gone.

But they arrived the next morning bearing gifts, bright island-patterned sarongs and cassette tapes of reggae music and cumbersome sterling silver jewelry.

That weekend, my first weekend back with my parents, Trey was admitted to Huntsville Hospital because he'd gotten a staph infection from a tattoo he'd given himself at Boy Scout camp.

"Helen didn't say what sort of tattoo," mother remarked as she unpacked the Chinese food she'd ordered for dinner.

"But I'm sure it's something awful, a swastika or something."

My mother said Trey would probably turn out to be one of those horrible neo-Nazi felons.

My mother, who still said nigger.

The next month, after a dinner of Kentucky Fried Chicken during which my mother had smugly confided to my little sister Allison and me that Trey had been arrested for breaking windows at the middle school he'd been suspended from for cussing his German teacher, I lay awake in my bed upstairs and imagined what it would be like if my mother died in a car wreck. It was instant. She didn't feel a thing. She'd run a stop sign in a hurry to get to a hair dressing appointment and hadn't seen the dump truck barreling down the highway. Distraught, my father would send Allison to live with Uncle Jim and me to live with Aunt Helen. Aunt Helen would teach me to make omelets and to love old films.

I tried to make myself feel guilty for killing my mother like that but I just couldn't.

-

I picked up the call transferred to my desk from the office's administrative assistant. I hadn't even recited my practiced incoming call greeting when my mother's voice came biting at my inner ear.

"I left you three voicemails at the house and I just never know where in God's name you are at any time, Sharon," she screamed.

I didn't even bother reminding her that I'd been working eight-to-five for going on twelve years now. She was crying and sounds crashed around in her mouth, a din of sorrow and fury.

"You have to come. You have to come right now," she wailed in response my silence. I asked her where I was going to.

"You have to come to Helen's. You have to come right now."

-

The summer I stayed with Aunt Helen while my parents were on their cruise, she had let me come with her to her volunteer work as a docent at the 40-room Kildare Mansion. Built in the 1880s, the mansion was a colorful amalgamation of architectural features—a rust red turret, grass green Dutch-style eaves, toasted yellow scalloped walls, enormous stained glass doors and windows, miles of decorative molding. I followed her as she completed four tours each week. I learned everything she said about the house that Michael O'Shaugnessy built.

After her tours had ended on the last Thursday I was with her there, Aunt Helen guided me up the curvaceous staircase leading to the turret room. Flooded with afternoon light, the perfectly round space shone, glinted from all angles. Opulent silvery wallpaper with ripe blush-colored English roses, a chandelier with five tiers of crystals like beveled

sword blades pointing down, cretonne draperies shot through with metallic thread. The windows offered a full view of the mansion property, the back courtyard and its massive fountain, the front drive and its prim perennial gardens, the carriage house beyond the back gate, and the swath of green sloping toward the tree line.

“Sometimes when it’s really quiet and all my tours are done for the day,” Aunt Helen said, looking out over the mansion’s rooftops towards the city center, “I like to imagine that Huntsville isn’t quite Huntsville yet, that the war has just ended, and that I live here.”

Standing there, she was like one of those portraits overhanging the stately mantelpieces on the first floor of the mansion, her delicate arms framing the window, her eyes, looking.

–

I knew Aunt Helen was dead when I first heard my mother’s voice on the phone. She had sounded the same way when she called to tell me my cousin Laura had been killed in a car accident, when she called to tell me Uncle Reggie had died.

I arrived in Huntsville three hours after mother’s call, in the early afternoon, after calling my husband to have him pick up our son and speeding all the way from Birmingham along I-65 until I got to Tunlaw Road. As I neared the corner lot, I saw mother sitting Indian-style in the grass in front of the house in her pale pink tracksuit. She and my father had just returned home from a week in Las Vegas the night before, from a convention of Chevrolet car dealership owners. There were two white vans in the driveway and a big white trailer across the street from the house, all labeled “HWC Removal Company.” Mother’s Tahoe was in a neighbor’s driveway. I drove slowly past

the house to find a spot on a curb. As I walked toward the house from about a block away, I saw Trey for the first time since we did cocaine together during the family reunion. He was yelling something at a man in a full-face respirator and a white anti-exposure work suit. The man pulled his mask off and motioned Trey away from the front door so crewmembers could go in and out. I neared closer. "HWC" was "Handle With Care." I heard Trey scream, "God damn it!" and watched him stalk past my mother. By the mailbox, he put a cigarette to his lips and shook and smoked. At the front door, a sexless HWC employee hauled a milky plastic bag full of stuff. I could make out the brown of a folio toward the bottom of the bag. I smelled the smell for the first time.

I touched Trey's shoulder blade with the palm of my hand.

"Oh, my God," I said.

"Everything's fucked up, Sharon," he said. "Everything."

I thought he meant his world was ending, that Aunt Helen had been his anchor and that he was untethered now, of a sudden. But he didn't.

Aunt Helen had died suddenly, while cataloging the things in her collection. When she had failed to show up for her volunteer work as a docent at the Kildare Mansion, the volunteer coordinator assumed she had the flu. Mother and dad had been in Vegas. Trey had been sleeping with the new girlfriend he picked up in a bar soon after his third stint in jail. I had been in Birmingham, going to work in the morning and going home at night. Aunt Helen had been alone, with her things, with the windows sealed, and the sun entering the living room each morning without knocking.

"I really thought I was going to get somewhere, you know?" Trey said, not crying, squinting his eyes up and blowing smoke out.

Behind him, an HWC employee wheeled out a cart stacked high with box cut square feet of stained carpet, padding, and subflooring.

“All that stuff, probably worth so much money. But everything’s ruined. They couldn’t save even one thing. She seeped out all over everything.”

I wondered if he knew I thought he’d never deserved her.

## LATE BREAKING

**May 26**

I enter the lobby of WSMX – News Channel 4 for the second time. The receptionist sits at her desk, alternating glances at each of the three lobby TVs to her left, the two smaller TVs on her desk, and the copy of *Good Housekeeping* in her hands. An obviously artificial clip-in sucks the back of her head, a curly-haired leech. The heels of my shoes on waxed tile like a tongue clicked against a mouth’s roof must have broken her attention to the variety of stimulations—Spanish-language soap opera, *Guiding Light*, blue screen, the Weather Channel, and an article on summertime cupcake decorating techniques. She peers at me tiredly over glasses rimmed with little rhinestones. I am here to meet with Belinda Coffee, the station’s “Internship Coordinator” or “Administrative Assistant.” She pages Ms. Coffee and directs me to the row of chairs before the three blaring televisions.

Twenty minutes pass. A character is crying on *Guiding Light*, her chin and glossy lips quivering and I find her quite unattractive. Things are being thrown across the room on the Spanish-language soap opera. Cut to hospital scene. Ms. Coffee emerges from the gray “Employees Only” door nearby. She greets me, the tone of her voice particularly downtrodden. I follow her into a long hallway. We pass office after office—on the right a door is open, a man sits in complete darkness with his hands behind his head. We turn left, meeting a large block of cubicles and a elaborate composition of office voices and soap opera crescendo. Two giant flat screens hang from a wall above a white board listing new commercials to be aired. We take a right, reaching the hallway that leads to



the newsroom. Walls are decorated, left and right, with large promotional posters of successful NBC series such as *Law & Order*, *Scrubs*, *12 Corozones*, and *The Today Show*. Katie Couric is so obviously airbrushed. A blown-up headshot of *NightlyNews* host Brian Williams, smug and smirking. Further on are the photos of local anchor couples, Demetria and Dan, Tom and Jen. As we continue to walk, we pass the break room. A giant yellow “THANK YOU” trash can. TV thundering beyond a few public school-style tables equipped with bright red plastic kindergarten-looking chairs. The black coffee is thick like runoff this mid-morning, dribbling from the many-years-old automated Starbucks machine into Styrofoam cups. A pudgy photographer with a gray Dennis the Menace ‘do and a nasally voice puts quarter after quarter into the machine that will spit a little handful of M&Ms into your hand for the right price. He tells unkind jokes about coworkers’ kids to fairly forgettable cubicle-dwellers as he pops colorful candies into his mouth.

In contrast to the brightness of the break room, the open door adjacent to it reveals a cavernous room lit only by the glow of several computer screens. A glow-in-the-dark clock hangs above one workstation. Two graphics gooneys are glued to their computers, one watching the wipe animation of a newly developed Channel 5 logo. There is a rifle sight involved. The other rapidly changes the color of a 2004 Hyundai with the click after click of his mouse.

I follow Ms. Coffee into the newsroom. Ringing phones, rows of producers, clusters of cubicles, hideous laughter, fourteen some odd television screens, and stacks of sticky filled donuts on a side table compose the mess that is the place. Ms. Coffee leads me to her office. “DO NOT DISTURB” is scribbled darkly, crookedly on the 8½” x 11”

sheet of paper taped to her door. I realize only now she has an ice pack strapped to her side. She closes the door behind us and takes a seat at her desk, asks me to sit in one of two chairs placed before it. I do so.

“Now,” she says miserably, her eyes watering, “I would normally give you a tour of the station.” She breathes in and out slowly.

“But I have pleurisy. So we’ll have to wait on that until I’m better.” I nod.

“Okay,” she says, “Now, I really don’t know what’s going on today. But I’m going to let you job shadow Micah, the producer of the 6 o’clock.” I nod. She hands me a stapled stack of papers. “WSMX Intern Handbook” it reads, in classic Times New Roman font.

I am directed to sit with Micah until the end of my first shift, to “really get a feel” for the producer’s job responsibilities. I pull a chair up to Micah’s small desk and peer invasively over her shoulder. Though a very nice woman, she seems to structure the show she produces based on a foundational principle of balance: for every warm and fuzzy there is a bloody and/or horrifying.

I learn to operate the station’s painfully simple iNews system while managing to eavesdrop just enough to gather information on the station’s social dynamics. A reporter named Sara d’Orsey stands at the edge of her cubicle. I am sure that is not her real name. She taps manicured nail tips on drab gray plastic tempo-barriers.

“I’m on the watermelon diet right now,” she says, stabbing chunks of pink flesh stacked in Tupperware with a plastic fork. “I do it every summer.”

The dayside producer, Molly Day, whose name is probably just a coincidence, is glued to her computer screen. She types furiously between handfuls of neon orange-

colored potato chips. “What’s the watermelon diet?” she asks. Sara rests her fork and taps her nails again.

“You just eat nothing but watermelon—you know, unless there’s company or whatever. But mainly just watermelon.”

### **May 27**

It is 10:00 AM. I walk the hallway alone. Ms. Coffee directs me to shadow assistant producer Jenny Gaither. She is late for work. I wait at Jenny’s desk, examine the photographs thumbtacked to the cubicle’s carpet-like walls. There are images of Jenny at the beach with a margarita, Jenny with her arms wrapped tight around a man’s neck, Jenny with a gaggle of girlfriends at a long dinner table. Jenny finally appears, in person, with a take-out box in hand.

“I just had to have some Whole Foods salad,” she says, plopping down. She alternates typing, reading, and bites of salad drenched in pungent ginger dressing.

### **May 28**

Ms. Coffee asks me if I want to go out when I arrive for my night-side shift at 2:00 PM and I do not know what she means. I say yes, if only to avoid job-shadowing producers.

We are bound for Lebanon, Tennessee to elicit information about the potential construction of a Bible theme park. Marc Stewart, the lead reporter on this story, tells me he is having sinus issues due to a dip in an over-chlorinated YMCA pool. He is sniffing and coughing and wearing down the tissues kept crumpled in his pocket as we drive. Perhaps that is why his scent is so strong—his sense of smell is compromised. Kevin

Cannady, who turns out to be the photographer with the M&Ms from my first day, pokes fun at Stewart.

“What are you wearing?” he asks.

“Cologne,” Stewart purrs as he cakes cream bronzer on his forehead and the sides of his nose in the mirror of the passenger side mirror, “It’s *Armani*.”

Vehicles around us on the interstate honk at the presence of the very visible Channel 4 Ford. Marc Stewart busts into song, “*I make my living off the evening news— Just give me something, something I can use.*” He chuckles to himself.

“Don Henley’s ‘Dirty Laundry’,” he tells me, looking at the backseat in the rearview mirror, “My favorite song.”

As we continue to drive toward Lebanon, Marc fills Kevin in on the issue at hand, detailing tentative plans for the Bible park that has yet to be named, tentatively or otherwise.

“Apparently,” he says, “they’re gonna have a roller coaster ride where the Red Sea parts as you descend.” He relates proudly that this is an exclusive: “The mayor said he hates Channel 5. He’s not even talking to them about this shit. So that’s good.”

We meet Mayor Don Fox in Don Fox City Park. Marc, Kevin, and I climb out of the car. As I pull myself out of the backseat, Don Fox tucks his butt down into his khakis

“Oh, now you look like one of those girls I just saw in Vegas!” he says. Marc laughs and I cannot read the expression on his face. “I’m talking bout her, now,” Mayor Fox says, jabbing his thumb toward me, “Although you’re looking good today, too, Marc, you always do.”

-

Around 9:30 PM, I am working the news desk. I answer the phone too many times to count. “Channel 4 News, this is Dara.” I receive calls from elderly women asking for information about a program that aired four months ago. From middle-school pranksters. From middle-aged men disclosing sordid rumors about local government. From PTA moms soliciting donations.

“Channel 4 News, this is Dara,” I repeat. The standard salutation.

“There sure are a lot of cops next door,” the woman on the other end says, her voice ripe with Tennessee twang.

“It’s weird, you know, ‘cause the guy who lives there is a cop himself.”

I take down her information.

“Rumor is it’s child pornography,” she says in a strained whisper.

-

I didn’t think there was a story there. But it is past 11 PM and I am accompanying Kevin to the scene, which happens to be in Hendersonville, about 30 minutes outside Nashville. We talk the entire drive. Kevin does, anyway.

“People just don’t care about anything any more,” he laments before disclosing his gloomy anticipation of the age of automated news anchors.

“The TV business is changing,” he says. “That’s why I go home and smoke weed every night, you know? My profession is on death’s door. I don’t know how schools of journalism keep their fucking doors open, man.”

We arrive on the scene, the home of Officer Pelfrey, located on the corner of Iris and Hillside Drive. News Channels 5 and 2 are already present, cameras on tripods. They

are hassling every cop that enters and exits the residence. Kevin sets up his own tripod and begins to film, catching footage of police searching the home's attic through the slanted blinds of the garage.

An hour passes. Kevin and I engage in some cordial bullshitting with our rival news crews. There happens to be another intern on the scene. She's with News Channel 5. She is a junior at Middle Tennessee State University. She has a pouf of hair teetering atop her head and elaborate eye makeup coordinated to match her blue outfit and black accessories.

"I really just want to be an anchor," she says, "They really just have, you know, the best clothes. And people really just love them."

All of us crowd around the mailbox at the end of the driveway.

"Too late to be breaking news," Kevin says to me and to no one in particular, "If we do shit with this it'll have to be tomorrow. Can't get a package together by midnight."

No one says anything, really. They're too busy looking for signs.

The front door of the brown brick ranch house opens wide. The police chief stomps toward us.

"You know, you assholes really should just go do some real reporting," he says. "This is an ongoing investigation and a press release is forthcoming. You people are making a goddamned scene."

Neighbors gather in the driveway of the house next door. Kids on bikes, high school dropouts smoking cigarette after cigarette, lit orange ends pulsing in dark night. We film more anti-climactic hush-hush action, unmarked police cars lining the curb,

blocking the driveway. Officer Pelfrey's marked vehicle and red mustang sit silent, side-by-side.

After two hours of skulking around outside the house, there is still no story.

-

As Kevin and I reenter the station, another photographer assigned to overnight stories is leaving.

"I wish I'd come to fucking Hendersonville," he says when I tell him we're on the way back to Nashville, "I'm en route to the fucking Shelby Street projects," he continues. "Victim with multiple gunshot wounds to the chest. What's fucking new about that? It's the fucking projects; this shit happens every day, who even cares? Molly must be desperate for filler, I tell ya."

### **June 3**

Stationed at the assignment desk today, I listen for possible stories from scanners, hoping to identify a tellable narrative somewhere in all the buzzing, beeping, screaming. I answer the phones as calls from viewers come in.

Steven from Pleasantville rings in.

"Why are prices at the pump going up when crude oil prices are going down?"

I do not know.

"Come to Exit 23 off I-40 for a perfect illustration of fraudulent price gouging," he says.

I assure him I'll let one of our producers know about his tip before hanging up.

"Man in wheelchair hit by DUCK TRUCK!" a dispatcher screeches over the Metro Davidson County police scanner. We cover that story on the five o'clock news.

“A man in a wheelchair had been hit by an amphibious tour vehicle on Broadway this afternoon,” Demetria says from her seat behind the anchor desk.

#### **June 4**

I am given real stories to write. One story of the many I try my hand at is aired. Nothing is more satisfying than watching Demetria hold back a laugh as she reads, “It’s mating season in Fort Meyers, Florida...”

Molly asks me to review the stories for the 10 o’clock show and model my writing after them. After reading over a few stories aired earlier in the day by other assistant producers, I am sure I am doing it wrong.

“Is there a particular reason there are commas in random places? For instance, in the middle of this sentence,” I ask her.

“Does this indicate a shift in tone?” “No,” she replies. “People just don’t know how to use commas.”

#### **June 9**

Sitting in the same empty cubicle I occupied during my first day, at WSMX News Channel 4, I spend three hours staring at the back of a crumpled receipt, pen poised between calluses, hoping to scribble something, anything down.

Emerging from her office, the “DO NOT DISTURB” sign still taped there and her cough still acting up, Ms. Coffee graciously and finally offers me something to do.

I embark with Kevin, bound for the Capitol building where two short senators and a long-hired country singer speak about a new public school system legislation that somehow makes life a bit easier for students with food allergies.



Kevin has a headache, he tells me on the ride there. He accidentally left his lunch of cold oatmeal blended with strawberry yogurt, in-shell salted peanuts, and M&M-studded trail mix at the station early this morning and has yet to consume any food. It is around three o'clock. We make small talk as we hit the interstate, downtown-bound. He tells me about his history in the news business.

“Yeah, I’ve worked with Sara d’Orsey for 15 years now at various stations,” he says to fill the empty space between his comments and my silence.

“She’s hot but she’s fucking nuts.”

We pull up to the capitol building, park illegally, and leave the doors unlocked. I carry the tripod, Kevin the camera, and we set up shop in line with all the rest—Channel 5, Channel 2, Fox 17, and a heavily-lipsticked and hairsprayed reporter and her muscle-shirted photographer from CMT.

Children, most likely children with peanut or other food allergies, in their sweet patterned sundresses, little khaki shorts, and half-size pinstriped buttondowns, their diminutive brown sandals or small socks and tennis shoes, are lined up in two rows before the podium—eagle emblem on wood—at the base of the large, concrete Capitol building’s steps. They form two rows—short in the back, shorter in the front. Standing in the sweltering heat, their little feet begin to bake on the hot plate-like surface as senator after senator rambles on about the importance of this legislation—they talk about “educating educators” in Tennessee’s public schools on the dangers of certain foods to these kids with allergies. This will somehow cushion their lives more, save them from throat swelling and breathing problems. And I’m sure it will, as long as they are in the public school system.

The senators are pleased. They are so proud, too, of Trace Adkins and his diamond-draped wife, Rhonda. The former, an Opry member, talented country star, caring father, and dedicated philanthropist, looms behind the kids, the senators, the Food Allergy Anaphalaxis National (FAAN) representative, standing arms clasped at his chest with his coal-black cowboy hat, too-tight Western-style shirt, and long, stringy hair. They introduce him with honor, with great pleasure. He steps up to the microphone, his wife in her terrible Tiffany-blue pantsuit glued to his side. His voice is gruff and backwoods-stylized, but his words are almost eloquent—he reads from laminated notes slipped to him beforehand by his brown-skirted P.R. rep. The speech drags on, decorated with small, supportive quips from strangely distant Rhonda. She giggles here and there and I can't quite understand why. The kids are growing antsy. They are not getting paid for this. Neither am I, but who's counting. The redheaded girl in purple is sneezing as her eyes squint, her fair skin begins to redden. The tiny boy on the end is wiggling his quickly overheating toes, slipping his shoes on and off, testing the scorching temperature of the ground. Finally, the end of the thing comes around. Q&A is short. There is really nothing to ask, nothing to reply to.

The FAAN founder takes the mic and presents her awards. Senators receive glass boxes, each personalized with an engraving of some sort. Trace and Rhonda receive The Founders' Award, a piece of blown glass with a bubble of air suspended in its center.

“This is to honor your actions,” the FAAN founder says proudly, “your droplet into the pool of the world has created a ripple effect that touches many lives.”

Rhonda, cradling the piece of glass in her two hands like something precious, says to Trace (her statement picked up too loud on the microphone), “Oh, look at the *symbolism!*”

On the ride back to the station, Kevin bares intimate details. He was abused as a child. His father resented him—he felt that his son’s arrival into his life at 19 put an irremovable damper on his future. He never told Kevin that he loved him.

“There was this one time,” Kevin says, turning the steering wheel, checking his mirrors, “when he and my mother split up. Daddy came into the house after work and started throwing his things into a suitcase. And I remember—I was sixteen—he said, ‘Kev, I’m leaving. Now, that doesn’t mean that I don’t love you.’”

He pauses, blinks, and clicks his tongue against the roof of his mouth.

“That was the one time it was implied that he did.”

## **June 10**

I write a story on a tip I received early during my shift manning the phones.

“Livingston, TN...Overton County...family busted for growing marijuana...”

The tipster, a man I don’t name in the story, says it happened yesterday in the Taylor’s Crossroads Community.

“Everyone knows who the family is,” he says, “There was so much weed they were cutting it down with a tractor.”

Later that day, I am assigned by ever-miserable Ms. Coffee to go out again.

“He’s a trip,” says Kevin, our photog once again, in reference to Dennis Ferrell, the reported I will be following today. Dennis Ferrell talks like an overly aggressive Bostonian, has sunken eyes. Hi left shoe is untied chronically. Chronically. In the News

Channel 4 van, the three of us—Kevin, Dennis, and I— travel down the interstate to cover Dennis’ story of the day: “High gas prices are spawning a new kind of theft here in Nashville and across the nation—gas theft. Under the cover of darkness, trucks rigged with tank-like containers and hoses are hitting up used grease containers behind restaurants, draining them dry, and supposedly utilizing the used vegetable oil to make biodiesel.”

At our first stop, Dennis interviews a young couple, the owners of a restaurant called The Acorn that is adjacent to Centennial Park. Hip. Expensive.

After that, we travel to the industrial part of Nashville to interview the 65 year old owner of the Nashville Recycling Company, in operation since 1933. He is the only person in this situation that may have an issue with grease theft, Dennis explains to me before we arrive—he is losing business because restaurants previously paid him to collect unwanted grease from full containers.

He comes from a family of entrepreneurs, he tells us as we stand outside the gate of his commercial property, a family that has lived in the same square mile for over 100 years.

“My uncle started a sausage business with one hog,” he says, standing on his dusty gravel-covered property.

“Figured he’d either sell it or eat it.”

As we drive back to the station with the footage we need for the story’s packages airing at five and ten, Dennis talks. He thoroughly dislikes his fist wife, with whom he has two teenage daughters (ages 15 and 17).

“She fuckin’ left ‘em man, and moved to Tampa! Of course they feel a little abandoned an’ resentful!”

Dennis Ferrier’s sixth wedding anniversary with his current wife, Lindsay, is July 4<sup>th</sup>. Her birthday was Saturday. She turned 33. He bought her a \$67 cake. \$73 with tax.

### **June 11**

I sharpen 200 “Working 4 You” pencils. I tear 350 sheets from News Channel 4 color-printed notepads. I stuff these items, along with blank poll results forms, into 75 manila envelopes. I ask Ms. Coffee if she would like me to label them with polling places and precinct numbers. She lowers her eyes.

“I don’t think I’d better let you,” she says, “It’s really important to have it exactly right, so that the polling place matches with its precinct number.”

I would like to assure her that I am fairly sure of my competency in the matter, that I attend an academically rigorous university, worked full time as an executive assistant the summer before last, that it might be harder for me to screw it up than do it right. Especially given that the precinct number is printed alongside the polling place on the sheet of paper listing each. But I do not.

### **June 30**

I watch the evening meteorologist isolate a few strands of red hair at the nape of her neck. She snips a two-inch bit, encloses it in a sheet of paper, and seals that within an envelope. I look at her, puzzled.

“A viewer wants to take it to a hairdresser;” she explains to me, “she wants to dye her hair to match.”

-

I am on my way out the back door with Cynthia Williams, senior reporter, who lost an estimated 90 pounds by substituting Smart Ones TV dinners for every meal. Cynthia and I, followed by the photographer for the day, approach a Channel 4 car. Cynthia's two shoulders are weighted with bags, various shades of pink, full of clothes bought at Talbots, rice cakes, tattered legal pads. We climb into the car, the photog at the wheel, Cynthia first mate, and I on the poop deck with stacks of once-damp city maps. Cynthia turns to me.

"Darah," she says, "this is our award-winning photographer for the day, Mr. Kevin Canady."

Kevin waves to me and we both pretend we've never met before.

"Spelling bee. Fourth grade," he says.

"Really?" I ask, before saying, "me too."

Kevin starts the car, offers Cynthia his wallet, recently filled with recent Olan Mills photographs of his two children.

"Aww," Cynthia says, "Little Henry's got a tan!" Kevin laughs.

"Nah," he says, "He's orange from all those carrots and sweet potatoes he eats."

We drive to Spring Hill, Tennessee. We park in the weeds beside a neglected road. Canady exits the vehicle, captures images of giant potholes.

"Is it what I expected?" Cynthia Williams asks herself in response to my question, "No. I hated this business when I first got in it. I told myself I would eventually change jobs, just work a bit more until I found my true calling."

She turned the air conditioning of the still-running car a notch higher.

"It's been about 15 years now," she said, "and I have come to terms with it."

There is a long pause. She exhales loudly, recites the few sentences she has written for her walkup, the clip of her approaching the camera that will preface the rest of her story's package.

"You know," she says suddenly, staring at me in the rearview mirror, "they say money can't buy you happiness. And no, it can't. But it can sure buy you a yacht that you can pull up alongside it for a while."

She makes a phone call, her fourth of the trip. It is, like the others, a conversation drooping heavily with the droppings of avian terms. She hangs up.

"You've seen that poor peahen in the station parking lot, right?" she asks when she catches a glimpse of my face in the rearview. Or maybe she is just filling space. Either way, she tells me that someone dropped a peahen in the parking lot of WSMX, an NBC affiliate, as a joke. The staff have taken a shining to it, she tells me, feeding it bits of sandwich, pastries, and sunflower seeds.

"But it just breaks my heart!" Cynthia cries out pitifully, "I've got a little cockatiel, my little Sunny, so dear to my heart. And birds are just beautiful creatures; they shouldn't live in parking lots!"

Cynthia's phone rings again. She answers it professionally, but quickly shifts to her previous tone.

"Now, Judy, I might just cry," she says, "I'm just sick about this peahen. We've had people trying to catch it with sheets, we've called all sorts of places. It's just so sad."

After a fairly pointless ten minutes of this, Cynthia puts her phone down. We finish our business in Spring Hill, which also seems rather pointless if I'm being honest,

and return to the station. The glossy peahen is perched high atop a Channel 4 News live truck.

“I am just sick about this peahen!” Cynthia says. The peahen descends, hops down to its Tupperware container filled with dirty water. Surrounding the hen’s water container are sunflower seeds, gray in the sweltering summer sun. Cynthia puts her hand into one of the many bags hanging from her shoulder. She pulls a plastic baggie full of white grapes out. Cynthia chases the peahen around the parking lot with the grapes for far too long, coaxing it to consume them. She is in a full sweat by the time it finally picks one up and chokes it down, the round lump visible as it descends from throat to stomach.

### **July 2008**

The hot dog stand was closed, so Cara Carmack and Kevin stop to get McDonald’s on the way to the courthouse. I am in the back seat. “Do you want anything?” Canady asks before he makes his order. I shake my head no. He proceeds to order two double cheeseburgers, a large fry, a soft serve cone, and a Diet Coke. Cara orders a chicken snack wrap.

“You’ve been keeping up with the Kelley Cannon story, haven’t you?” Cara asks me and swallows a bite. I tell her that I am slightly familiar with it and run my facts by her for confirmation. Kelley Cannon is the estranged wife of a prominent lawyer who was murdered last month, found strangled in his closet. A year before that she had been arrested for attempting to run him over with her SUV.

“That’s what we’re going to do,” Cara says, “See if we can catch her at the courthouse. Her first court appearance is today. Not for the murder yet, for the attempted murder thing.” Kevin drives, eats his hamburgers and fries, licks his ice cream cone, and sips his Diet Coke almost simultaneously.



“Also,” she says, “When the police searched Kelley Cannon’s home for anything possibly linked to the case, they confiscated—get this—a pair of size zero black denim jeans, a pink jersey dress size small, and an empty carton of Virginia Slims cigarettes.”

She cranes her neck back around to look me dead in the eyes before she asks, “What the hell is that, you know?”

We pull up to the courthouse and park in one of few open press spots. We ascend the courthouse steps, register ourselves as press at the door, and find the courtroom. It is half full at this point. Two cameras (Channel 2 and Channel 5) are already set up beside the stand. We wait. After twenty minutes, more and more people begin to fill the room. No Kelley Cannon.

“I don’t think she’s gonna show,” Cara whispers to me, adjusting the collar of her Ann Taylor suit jacket.

But she does. Kelley Cannon, rail thin in a Jackie O-style sheath dress, minces into the courtroom. She sits down between her mother and her lawyer. Her gaunt face is overwhelmed by enormous black sunglasses. The judge appears from his chambers, calls court to order, and shoots dirty looks at the cameras present. He calls the Cannon case first. Ms. Cannon’s lawyer jumps up, his salt and pepper hair slicked back. It nearly matches the color of his suit. He approaches the bench. After a few minutes of buttoned-up conversation between judge and lawyer, the latter shakes the judge’s hand and heads toward the door, beckoning Kelley Cannon and her mother to follow.

Sensing a quick exit, the cameramen smoothly detach their cameras from tripods. They begin to run. I follow Cara, who follows the Channel 5 reporter. Kelley Cannon can be seen a few yards ahead ducking into the bathroom.

“Leave us alone!” her mother pleads as she follows her daughter. Cannon’s lawyer stops us and asks us to talk. The group of almost-panting cameramen cast shifty glances from his calm face to the still-shut bathroom door. Kevin hovers the hand not holding his camera over his stomach. The McDonald’s must be settling in now. After her lawyer delivers his monologue addressing his client’s innocence and her sadness at the whole thing, the bathroom door opens. Once again, the cameramen move to give chase, leaving the lawyer with his closing statements unspoken. As we all herd behind her, Kelley Cannon suddenly stops. We slam into each other with the grade of a one-speed bike put in full stop by accident. But we recover and approach her, a pack of rabid news hounds.

“Ms. Cannon, do you have anything you want to say?” Cara asks. Kelley Cannon adjusts her sunglasses. The bones in her hands are visible.

“I am just absolutely devastated by all of this.”

## **July 7**

I call police department after police department in all counties that comprise WSMX’s viewership.

“Hi, this is Darah at News Channel 4,” I say, as if they do not recognize the number I am calling from, a number that calls them at least three times a day.

“Is there anything going on in INSERT COUNTY we should know about?” The answer was always the same, paraphrased: “No, ma’am. It’s just hot down here.”

I peek around, watching the newsroom scene. Belinda Coffee is in her office. She is staring down Excel sheets on a dusty desktop while groping for snack food in the baggie hidden among crooked stacks of papers. She finds a morsel and, without altering her gaze, brings it to her slightly cracked mouth.

Molly Day, the producer for the noon show, is talking animatedly on the phone, “No, well, see, our viewers aren’t really the type that exercise or are concerned with healthy eating. So, you know, doing a segment on vegetarian cooking would be pointless...”

The news director paces in little circles around his office, a pen tucked behind his ear, hands in his dark green slacks.

Kevin, approaches me, hat backwards and square black plastic-rimmed glasses, approaches me. “Wanna go to Wilson County?” he asks. I ask what the scoop is. I do not use the word “scoop.”

“Massive pot bust,” he says. I gather my things and follow him out the door. En route, we are mostly silent. The sound of wind against the car, tires turning quickly over interstate.

“You’d think that like everyone in the station would be drug-addicted or alcoholics,” he says, unprovoked, “And like no one even smokes cigarettes.”

We arrive at the Wilson County Sheriff’s Department. Channel 2’s cameras are rolling. Terry Ashe, the sheriff of Wilson County, approaches the Channel 4 car as we park.

“What we got here,” he says with a painful Southern drawl, “is a major narcotics bust.”

He gestures to a huge pile of black objects like fatty cinderblocks, marijuana wrapped in black trash bags and covered in gear oil to help mask the smell. Kevin unloads his camera and begins to film, offering Sheriff Ashe a microphone that he might give us some handy sound bytes. Four undercover narcotics officers lean against a rusted portable storage unit that stands against the wall of a building. They are in plainclothes,

striped polos and plaid buttondowns, jeans, and cowboy boots. Dark sunglasses adorn their faces. Each has a gun strapped to one hip and a badge visible at the other.

A man walks up to watch the scene. His hair is unkempt, his clothes unclean and torn, and stripes of dirt cover his face, neck, and arms. Noticing Sheriff Ashe's presence, the man walks quickly away.

"Most arrested man in Wilson County," Sheriff Ashe tells us, "83 times since 1987. He does it on purpose, of course. Sometimes he even climbs up to the second floor of the jail, where the kitchen is, and knocks on the windows, looking for sandwiches."

Sheriff Ashe approaches the pile of marijuana blocks, takes a pocket knife from his pocket, and slices one open. Kevin zooms in on the exposed marijuana, packed tightly. Ashe comes up to me, smiles a bit.

"My boys are lustin' after you," he says, gesturing to the four narcotics officers still leaning by the building. I feign a smile. "They're lookin' at you like a pack 'a one-eyed dogs at a meat market." Kevin moves to my side, begins filming the sheriff.

"How much marijuana do you have here?" I ask, reporting notebook ready, pen poised. "Around 815 pounds," he says. "We got this and the three vehicles you see to the right there," he says, indicating the large white Yukon, flashy red sports car, and the small Toyota pickup parked near the drugs.

"Your hair sure is pretty," one narcotics officer says to me, grinning like a Cheshire cat.

"The boys," Terry Ashe continues, "staked out the dealers for two weeks. They tracked this shipment from Mexico to a tire store on the main highway in Lebanon.

Using our surveillance technology, we caught at least 12 suspects on film. Four are currently in custody.”

Kevin tells me he has what he needs film wise. “Do you need any more info for the story?” he asks. I shake my head. “Let’s go,” he says. He packs his camera in the trunk. I open the passenger side door. “We’ll get you to come back here, princess!” one of the narcotics agents calls to me, “You’re just pretty as can be!”

-

I write the story but I leave most of it out. It airs.

### **May 29**

I am off today and I do not watch the news. Kevin calls me on my cracked Nokia cell phone around noon.

“We’ll never know the story now, D,” he says.

“What story?” I ask.

“The story about the pedo cop or whatever,” he snorts and I hear him crack open a can of something. He might be in the break room.

“I guess they didn’t have enough to charge the motherfucker,” Kevin says.

I sit in my car outside the grocery store.

“They left him alone,” Kevin says and I hear him pop the tab of something, a Coke if he is at the station, who knows what if he is not.

“Officer Pelfrey or whatever his name is. And he ended it. Four a.m., Hendersonville PD says, right after the cops and news crews left.”

Kevin laughs and sips his drink.

“Anyway, I thought of you when I heard,” he says.

“On to the next one, you know.”

(NO SUBJECT)

Katie-Jean Hendry <kj.hendry@gmail.com> 1/30/08  
to David

Dear David,

Caught in the pouring rain last, walking sans umbrella, water soaking through the thick material of my jacket, dripping quickly down my shirt from the ends of my hair, I imagined myself walking to your door to tell you as you opened it and spotted smudges of mascara at the corners of my eyes, "Baby, it's raining out."

Warm feelings to you at the top of this morning hour. After a night of falling asleep as excited cell phone conversations paced my dorm room and then dreaming through scenes of surreal check out lines in dimly lit grocery stores selling all manner of fantastical products, it's nice to be up, about, and sitting at the Academic Technology Center as my lab report prints nearby.

As you can see, I finally broke down and got a g-mail account. I'm not sure it has gotten used to me yet, though, as it's currently inviting me to visit a dating website for older women with interest in younger men.

KJ

--

David Ammons <david.ammons@gmail.com> 1/31/08  
to Katie-Jean

Dear KJ-dot-Hendry,

You haven't broken down, or even sold out... you just *bought in* is all. Welcome to the best and creepiest email service this little global village of ours has to offer. I think I will *indeed* check out those home sites on the Boise River, get a quote on lap band surgery, and order a new office chair. By confiding this to you, in this way--well, maybe you'll come to feel the same way before too long.

But seriously, I'm wishing now I could pull your thought-bubble double into my door and tell her (you) what I think about that (the rain). Even though it's a night later, and the cold is all that's left of the rain, and you've doubtlessly washed your runny liners from your shimmery shiners, in my dreams tonight (coming soon, please stay tuned!) I hope I get

to... *finish* that thought. (Then of course we pile into one of our Rubbermaid autos and head down to the Krueger's on Elm to buy some fantastical blood sauce and ravioli). Anyway, Nashville weather services predict more precip tomorra', but just some clouds by the time you roll (me) over head (over heels) in from The-University-on-the-Hill.

I'd babble about my A+'s in my first post-college big-boy job and more of my tiresome schemes for building a career (as well as a small society), but frankly, my dear, I am so tired I only just realized I should have gone to sleep about three minutes after dinner. I've stayed up til midnight on my Friday night and accomplished just about nothing worth remembering tomorrow. Which means tomorrow will start an hour or three later than it might have. But no sense crying over pillowed guilt.

My car isn't likely to start very early in the day anyhow. And my list is long, even if it is largely trivial.

I can't wait for you to come visit. Really. I have to stop what I'm doing from time to time and imagine you're coming, just to keep from getting irritable and impatient. On the plus side, my lungs feel bigger already after modest cutbacks in my regular inhalation of smoky particulate matter.

I'll be talking to you soon baby.

I'm down for this count...

Your

David (TKO, stable condition)

--

David Ammons <david.ammons@gmail.com> 2/4/08  
to Katie-Jean

Dear Katie-Jean,

The first (and now second) days have come and gone. It's nice to know I'll be getting money next week. It's nice that this office is only five miles away. It's nice that I figured out how to listen to streaming NPR news and talk programming this afternoon. It's nice that there is all the free coffee I want. Because the work itself is brainless, menial, and likely to give me carpal tunnel syndrome. But I'll make it for a few weeks as long as I'm bringing home these bucks, you know. Anyway, the other (high-rent) staffing agency branch wants me to come in for an interview, too. I guess I'll do that when I can. Still got my doodlies crissed that a magazine and/or the Watley College of Art and Design will lower the drawbridge and raise their gates for me soon.



In fact, it is kind of neat that I spend all day looking through cell phone customers' personal information (names, addresses, and best of all, policy passwords that must be given so that ex-husbands and teenage children can't sign them up to receive Super Message Packs), only to give them the axe on their mobile phone insurance. That's right, I cancel insurance plans on people who can't stop breaking, losing, or donating their phones to the local criminal element. I do it all day long. I'm so poorly trained (not my fault!) that I'm not always %100 sure if dropping or not dropping said axe is the appropriate action. (In one such hairsplitter of a case I let Mr. Therno Balde keep his coverage as long as he promised to keep having the coolest name I'd seen all day). Apparently if I'm wrong any customer capable of reading their contract will be able to reinstate coverage, so my supervisors (Candy and Dawn) pay very little attention to me. If I stopped working and just clicked around on the screen once in a while, I wager it would take them at least two days to catch on and send me home. This is something I'm weighing heavily in my mind for when I know the assignment is about to end, or I accept another job offer that doesn't start for a few days....

Sitting in the cubicles all around mine are the silken-voiced claims handlers--ordinary looking people who sound like the gods of TV commercials. If I were talking to them on the phone, I would probably A) assume they were voice recordings and push "#," or B) ask them who their plastic surgeon was, even though in real life all three of them are dumpy, show their years like sawed-down trees, and wear goofy clothes. When they're not on the phone (talking down hotheaded cancel-ees or scrambling to get the translator), they seem to retain their highly artificial communication style. I can't decide if that's because their job has warped their mind, or if it's just for the benefit of the rest of us in the office, so we don't become disappointed, like Dorothy looking behind the green curtain.

When you come to Nashvegas we'll have to see some things at the Belcourt art house theater together. The clientele are not very diverse, I'm afraid, but they bring in good things at cheaper prices than any corporate popcorn hole, and they have a full bar, too. They're running *Vertigo* on matinée this weekend and I might just have to go git dizzy on it.

"In the story Massey told often during the last twenty years of his life, the three of them were in the Colonel's office trying to negotiate a price when suddenly Sanders turned away and said he still did not know whether he wanted to sell. He then opened his desk drawer and read his horoscope, which his secretary was required to put there every day. 'Something good will happen to you today,' it said. Sanders then decided to sell, unaware that Massey had timed the meeting to coincide with that very horoscope."

A Marine recruiter accosted me at a chicken-themed discount gas station about a year ago now. I politely told him to bug off, which he countered by telling me I "had to" scrape the old Army base parking stickers off of my car. Several months later, when I decided I wasn't mad at him any more, I made peace with him and Uncle Sam by doing so.

Goody goody--maybe I can catch your debut on streaming audio... why do I feel like a

dork just now? (Hint: it's nothing to do with the fact I'd be listening to *you* , or to poetry in general....)

Let me know what your next two weekends look like (not counting the one starting tomorrow after work). I may be able to head down that way, and catching you like a fly ball at the Sunday double-header would really help get my wheels turning down the highway.

David "The MSISDN is no longer eligible for insurance until a qualifying event in..." Ammons

"If the gravy meets his low expectations, he delivers one of his withering gravy critiques, sometimes emphasizing his points by banging his cane on whatever furniture is handy. Years after these ordeals, franchisees still wince at the memory of such a gravy judgment from the Colonel as 'how do you serve this God-damned slop? With a straw?'"

--

David Ammons <david.ammons@gmail.com> 2/4/08  
to Katie-Jean

Dear KJ,

I'm starting a temp assignment tomorrow that should, if it works out, dig me out of my immediate cash crunch. I don't know how long it's supposed to last, but I'm really hoping I hear back from the *Nashville Scene* Classifieds and Watley later this week.

It's great living in my house now, even though we don't have hot water yet. So here I am in Fort Grantland with a groovy dude, a full size bed, and (the best part of all) my grandmother's old desk for drawing and computering. This neighborhood--"Woodland in Waverly, an Historic Nashville District"--is totally outrageous. I took a little walk around earlier yesterday evening, and couldn't help noticing that gorgeous mansions and dilapidated brick shitboxes coexist within one or two blocks of one another. There is a sculptor about a block away from us (Miles Marley or something like that) who has towers of stacked, slightly altered concrete or plaster cubes standing in his front yard, lit with red floodlights. The mailman walks his route, and came up to meet me on the porch today and wrote down all of our last names to better serve our new household. There is a retired greyhound (a once-famous racing dog in fact) named Lawman living next door to us. And one of my roomies gave three dollars to a door-to-door bum the other day because he was home alone and scared.

I dreamt the night before last that there was this drunken old floozy of a woman who a group of individuals I can now only describe as "County Services" came to rescue or condemn or whatever. At one point I was standing in a room with this lady and a County Person who, acting as a medium, somehow "cast" my consciousness into the woman's. I think that's the first time I can remember having an out-of-body type experience like that.

It didn't last long. It was hard to get her to walk, I/we may have fallen down. I wonder if this has something to do with the house... definitely an experience on par with when I slept in the University art building almost a year ago and dreamed of the fantastical animals overrunning the drawing studio.

Living off my Tracfone as primary communication device is quickly becoming preposterous. But without any credit the deposit required to get a new cell plan is astronomical. Looks like Mommy may be saving me yet again (the blessed woman) by cosigning.

I'm within 50 pages of the conclusion of *Fortunes, Fiddles, and Fried Chicken*, which will perhaps go down as one of the densest and most engrossing summer reading projects I've ever undertaken. I just finished the chapter about Opryland and had to relive the triumph and the tragedy from an older, wiser perspective. I wish individual consumers had the good sense to band together when things like that happen and sign pledges to boycott shopping malls that pave over psychedelic wonderlands.

As for me, David the Man, and how I'm doing--I'm better than I have been. (Even though every day I fail to wear my retainer, I know my teeth shift a little bit back towards their disheveled natural seats). On the whole it is a big relief to no longer live with my parents after college, have found at least temporary employment, and discover that I'm still making drawings. Once I have a few dollars I might venture to have a social life here in the city. I'll also acquire a few pieces of technology that should facilitate my art practice and maybe help me get some gallery shows later this year.

I'm just getting input from the art dealer I mentioned when I saw you last about the show he wants me to put up in Shelbyville... I need to be careful about this thing because it could mean money I don't have and more trouble than it's worth, but if I made a measly \$150 or \$200 sell, without having to frame anything, it would probably be worth it. And I guess it will look okay on my resume and CV...

I have the theme song from those Scruff McGruff commercials on loop in my head right now.

I'll have some folks help me take some pictures of me here at the Fort to give you a sense of what we're up against here on the frontier, and to make sure you still think you're cut out to accept that season pass....

Yours,

David "Take a Bite Out of Time" Ammons

--

Katie-Jean Hendry <kj.hendry@gmail.com>  
to David

2/12/08

Baby Gravy,

Gmail is giving me the quote of the day ("The real problem is not whether machines think but whether men do." - B.F. Skinner) and offering a link to a recipe for Indian Garam Masala Tofu Scramble.

Spent another shivery late-night in the ATC, starting some ultra-early research for my Modern Drama presentation of "Long Day's Journey Into Night."

When I got home tonight Amy was drunk on the floor eating chips and salsa. She had opened the bag too fast, it seemed, and there was a spattering of tortilla, big and small, in a circle around her. "I fucked up," she said when I opened the dorm room door. "But I'm cleaning it up," she said, "I swear." And she picked a chip off the carpet and blew on it on both sides before dipping it politely in the jar of Tostitos.

I wish I had a good story to type to you, but it looks like that's about all I've got too, mundane moments like milling outside the library near one a.m., examining the stalled building process of the science building addition from afar (it has progressed now from the bright-white skeletal metal structure that you saw to one bulked up with cinder blocks and real working windows) and turning back inside to take a satisfying sip from the water fountain.

I'm mustering up my courage now, preparing for the final dress rehearsal of "The \_\_\_\_\_ Monologues" tomorrow evening. I've been reading lines to myself in the mirror-- have even been pretending to search for "the locus of my womanhood." The performance is Friday so I'll probably be up the Nashville way around Saturday afternoon, unless I head straight from the show to the interstate.

It's only Tuesday and I miss you, darlin'.

--

David Ammons <david.ammons@gmail.com> 21/4/08  
to Katie-Jean

Dearest Katie-Jean,

My most precious of acquaintances, locus of my focus, best supporting actress in all my most glamorous dreams,

Please accept this freshly clipped and scarlet-clad man as yours today, in lieu of more lavish surprises (ok, dinner) which are still to come on Saturday.

While we're at it, and this being the day for declarations sweet, erotic, and otherwise,

You blow fires in my ribcage, stir up my guts, drive my hands crazy, and set my brain

buzzing.

All of that feels very good.

Love,

Your David

2 Attachments:

<david in red sweater 1.jpg>

<david in red sweater 2.jpg>

--

David Ammons <david.ammons@gmail.com> 2/26/08  
to Katie-Jean

Dearest Katie-Jean,

I wish I could meet you there again at 4:15pm today, and do it all again. I can't do either of those things today. But I'll be thinking about you, probably (if this moment is any indicator) holding back an urgent teardrop or three. Or two, one for each of us.

You are the darling of my affections. In the year since we first kissed (and since you've become a college coed and I a post-collegiate wreck, transformed respectively from high school senior and camp counselor, which was, I confess, very weird, at least at first) I've felt a tender sprout in my (yes...) heart take hold and bury roots into critical, hard to reach places that would have grown tough and dark without such stirring. Looking back at the note that made me know I was to kiss you on this day last year, one word sticks out to me as the turning point. "Dig?"

I dig, Katie-Jean, I still do, I dig you and I look forward to the opportunity to continue digging you. Which means, I am still innately curious about you and in awe of your brains, your abilities, and your heart. I want to renew my lease. I want to get my "KJ" bicep tattoo touched up, I want to buy the T-shirt and schedule my next appointment.

Got your signal darling, loud and clear--and did I mention, excellent work. The disguise is genius. And gorgeous. Let's take a walk together baby, just over to a little place I know of where no one will disturb us, at least for a short while.

With Love and Gratitude at Your Being with Me Through the Shortest and the Longest Year of My Life,

Your David

--

**bliptastic blip before work**

David Ammons <david.ammons@gmail.com> 3/3/08  
to Katie-Jean

So So Katie-My-Jean,

Check out this YouTube clip of Billy Graham in 1949. <youtube.com/"Billy Graham in 1949"> He doesn't get to talk until the last minute, but it's a damn, er, *darn* sight more interesting than the more recent footage I've seen of the man.

How are you doing baby? How about the Long Hard World of Prep for Presentations, Which I Assume Takes One Late Into the Night?

I had one of the best weekends of my life with you.

Something else. I was going to wait and show you this weekend, but was afraid I would have already backed down by then. This was kind of a spontaneous decision I made last night... I'd like to be able to convincingly say that Dr. Graham wasn't somewhat responsible (and you might jump from this video to the 1957 crusade sermon in NY, about 10 min....), but he may be. Let me just snap a picture real quick, okay? I'm not expecting miracles, but I'm just going to see how it goes day by day, see where I am after the 2 weeks is up.

Love,

David

1 Attachment

<a snapshot of a forearm adorned with an off-brand Nicorette patch.jpg>

--

David Ammons<david.ammons@gmail.com> 3/4/08  
to Katie-Jean

K, and most beautiful J,

My car is now choking down a gunky brown concoction which may or may not stop its greeny leakage. I have about 10 minutes to wait.

Your body *is* pure.

Day 2. I took some puffs on a poorly rolled smoke between the patches last night. I think I could have gotten by without even that. Now I'm going for the gold if I can, perhaps having 1 or 3 while Kevin's here, and maybe the same with you. Don't think I'm

expecting any action of this sort on your part, my habit's got 5 years on yours and I'm doing this first and foremost to increase my productivity, breathability, and usable daylight. Secondmost to save some dollars I could spend on fun stuff.

I put mine on at night so I'm strong in the morning and don't stop at the Shell under the excuse I'm not awake enough yet to be thinking clearly.

Let's talk soon. Voices like moonlight falling on tin roofs.

Your David

--

Katie-Jean Hendry <kj.hendry@gmail.com> 3/12/08  
to David

A little while ago I woke up from a short pre-bedtime nap and a dream in which you walked and talked and followed some fairly unclear plot line. Now, in the world of the awake, brain clouded with sleep like older eyes with cataracts, I miss you so much that when I lay me down "for real for real" I'm going to will my dream-self back to dream-you.

News of the day:

On the 27th of this month I have an interview for an internship with a newspaper. Maybe I'll use some hairspray and pay careful attention to my enunciation.

Goodnight, David, goodnight.

--

**whisper time 2**

David Ammons <david.ammons@gmail.com> 3/18/08  
to Katie-Jean

Hey KJ,

'Bout to jump between my sheets and couldn't help but reach out and give you a little squeeze, initiate sum whisperin's...

How have you been? Practicing for your interview yet? Batting off any more beggarly profs. wanting The-University's brightest star to grace their department roster? How's about Amy? She still trying to drag you with her to Delt parties every night?

I can't wait for you to come back to Nashville. But of course I *will* wait. A "durnk" Kev was just messaging something at me about "plans." Also (you especially will be proud to know) he and one of his buddies called the televangelists tonight it seems. They sound

like they did a top-notch job— Kev's pal kept an operator busy for upwards of 7 minutes feeding fake credit card numbers, and Kevin quoted them something from James about gold and silver tarnishing among the earthly things.

On the verge of finishing my first drawing with the *Believer* specifically in mind. I'll share something else with you as well, when you make your way back this direction come Easter weekend...

Sweet dreams my lovely... [simulates fading off into sleep. she continues to watch him for a beat. curtain]

--

Katie-Jean Hendry <kj.hendry@gmail.com> 3/18/08  
to David

D-,

Haven't done any serious rehearsal just yet for my appearance in the internship coordinator's office. I have, however, been catching my reflection in mirrors and windows and making faces briefly to see which I should enter wearing that'll make the best first impression.

It does my heart good to know that the televangelists' call centers are getting a little spice. I'm sure they'd be especially proud to discover that the very Kevin they prayed for a while back (you know, that he might be delivered from the hands of the Japanese) is alive and kicking and dialing their digits. It's a miracle!

I can't wait to see your drawing and your something and, above all things, you. Speaking of you, how's it going on Grantland?

--

David Ammons<david.ammons@gmail.com> 3/19/08  
to Katie-Jean

Katie-Jean Most Hyphenated,

Grantland is swimmy. It's my Friday night, and all I've managed to get through so far is this stack of bills beneath my elbows and two Red Stripes. I needed them, and they haven't let me down. Ready to curl up at the old Threshold of Dreamgate Frontier (which sometime I did call my bed) and pop up at, say, six, ready to kick the first ass that stirs in the bush, and then, systematically throughout the day, every ass in town.

I would like to catch the main event now... would you mind if we picked up from here sometime tomorrow? Give me a ring any time, or I'll get hold of you. Mmmm...



Your Davy Gravy Compartmentalized Lime Twist *Yeah*

--

Katie-Jean Hendry <kj.hendry@gmail.com> 3/29/08  
to David

M'Davy,

At two this morning I picked up my new copy of James Tate's *Return to the City of White Donkeys* stamped "BOOKMOBILE" in blue and read a few lines in anticipation of crossing the threshold into dreamland.

And whady'a know, I had some wild dreams-- tape recorded conversations, betting, and small green Gideon's New Testaments. Details I can't recall, just themes and the glossy apartment advertisement phrase, "Equipped with a genuine Frigidaire and authentic ice cubes."

I woke up in a cold sweat wearing my evening robe, hand draped melodramatically across my forehead, like some soap opera production still.

I feel good. I'm steadily scratching off items on my list of to-dos, drinking lots of water, good things. But it's not even that. Maybe it was even just the men on the green this morning, playing their game futilely, their hexagonally dimpled golf balls flying up, visible for a millisecond before dissolving like tiny Alka-Seltzer tablets in the thick fog. I haven't stopped laughing since then. "Hell and damnit, boys, she's a ring-tailed twister!"

Upcoming stories: Tuesday, 2:00 PM, meeting with Dean Jones to fill in the blanks on some paperwork/design summer independent study centered around the newspaper internship's curriculum.

If I were sending this note to you secretly, folded and passed from palm to palm, you would receive it four days post-composition and it would end, in broken German,

"My dearest, I remain, with thousands of kisses, yours,"

--

David Ammons<david.ammons@gmail.com> 3/31/08  
to Katie-Jean

M'Lady Jams,

I just deleted a very long description of some dreaming I did two nights ago. It still wasn't finished, was never going to be, and since it was part of a letter to you, it had to go so I could just plain *write you a letter*.

So sorry I missed your call earlier, I've been, er, asleep. This wasn't exactly intentional.

Good work on getting this intern-al business all sorted out.

I don't know if I'll get editing done for my artist's statement now or sleep another 3 hours. I am sad I didn't get to talk to you (it was like, a big goal of mine tonight) and I'm determined to talk tomorrow night (if you're still game).

Does that last bit mean I'll see you in four days, or that you're reading more about the Holocaust?

I miss you a bunch... take solace in the attached anti-photographic photograph and I'll talk to you very soon, dear.

I'll take 500 on each cheek,

Your David

--

Katie-Jean Hendry <kj.hendry@gmail.com> 3/31/08  
to David

Oh m'darlin',

Late night transmission from "miss" (in cases like #48: Gas Station Scene, speaker gray-haired but bright vested attendant, preoccupied with jabbery phone conversation) or "ma'am" (in cases like #124: Grocery Store Scene, speaker blonde cashier with paper clip cartilage piercing, rapidly scanning, furiously number-punching) to "sir" (in all cases, #1 til--):

*Now I lay me down to sleep,  
My cell phone on its dying beep...*

I'll stop there. I will.

I guess it's been a day full of typetype deletedelete type with strong room-brewed coffee and conversation cut in (like butter in the biscuit dough, suave stranger in the dancing couple). Amy and I are both working on papers for our Shakespeare I class and we keep convincing each other to go outside for smoke breaks. The things we say outside seem much more interesting than the things we're saying in our essays. But that probably means we have a lot more work to do on the essays than we do on our selves, at least for right now.

That's all that's moving across the screen for highlights today-- no aggressive journalism or *Hard Copy* material, just lifestyles fluff and cutesy color photos.

*If I die before I wake,  
I pray the world my bones to make*

Into cremation jewelry!: <<http://www.gemsmart.us/>>

Aw, now, that's just too much. That's just delusion and too-full brain spilling out unnecessarily through my fingers, traveling through computer wire, bouncing off satellite dishes and emerging from coils of more computer wire onto your monitor.

Today I was standing in the middle of post-lunch placidity when a girl wobbled over to me, slices of pizza folded in each hand. "Hey babe," she said, "Drunk senior watch!" She bit the lefty slice, left the dining hall for the English department once again, and, according to recent reports, slipped and fell on her ass. How did you escape making a fool of yourself like that as you neared your graduation this time last year, again?

I'm glancing at the spot on my wrist where a watch might sit. And until your voice is in my ear, I think I'd better chase you down sleepy hollow.

KJ

--

David Ammons <[david.ammons@gmail.com](mailto:david.ammons@gmail.com)> 4/7/08  
to Katie-Jean

My Katie-Jean,

Thought you'd be interested in portions of my journeys through PatchLand (the most exciting and treacherous portion of DreamLand, of course) last night.

I hung out with Barack. We walked around The-University-on-the-Hill at night. He was interested in getting into some building that was near the ATO house, but a strange blockade kept us on the sidewalk. He liked my joke about this, which was to pretend I was wearing my Masonic Lodge ring, press it against the gate, and *open sesame*. Then I was in his car (a sort of blue BMW/Toyota compact) with his wife and a friend of theirs. We were driving and then, just outside Nashville somewhere, he accidentally rear-ended someone because we were all having so much fun talking and laughing. We had to pull over on an offramp.

Strangely, once again the story starts on the Hill and centers around difficulties reaching Nashville. If I were an analyst dissecting myself, I'd be on easy street--a bunch of hockey built around an "adjustment phase" thesis, then a pat-on-the-back 'til next time, kid.

*BelieverMan* sounded real happy to hear from me and gave me the address straight to his digital doorstep.

My income tax check just got my mailbox today.

I am stuffed silly with pasta. Coffee is waiting.

So, Jeanie... how is the dorm room setup now that it's worn in all the way? And your rigororous exam schedule? And Ms. Amy, the roomie-friend? And your perfectly calibrated self?

K-max is beeping me now.... Jot back when you get the minutes. No hurry sugar. I hope all is *wunterbar*.

Your David

--

Katie-Jean Hendry <kj.hendry@gmail.com> 4/7/08  
to David

Ugh.

Driving back from CVS this evening with my red plastic bottle of codeine syrup, I glanced briefly at the label to determine how many swigs to take. "THIS IS A RED, LIQUID," the label read, extra comma and all. I sipped until I felt I'd ingested the recommended 2 teaspoonfuls.

I woke up this morning feeling a little tickle, but then by 2:00 P.M. I was sickkkk, so sick. Heading to Health Services tomorrow.

I tucked the bottle of syrup in my purse and parked in the only remaining blue-liner outside the lecture hall. Pulitzer Prize-winner Susan Someonesmart was speaking on "Myth and Misogyny in an Insecure Age." And I'd have to say that it was one of the most engaging talks I've been to at The-University, though I kept myself curled up in one of the back left rows, taking notes, periodically pulling tissues out of my purse, sometimes sipping RED, LIQUID. She talked a lot about Mr. Obama and the media's depiction of him as more effeminate than usual candidates who are lifetime duck hunters and seem more suited for sheriff than president.

*"An article in a late 2001 edition of Newsweek said that the post-9/11 era would be particularly traumatic for the unmarried because they would not have anyone to call on their cellphones if their planes were hijacked by terrorists."*

What a good dream! And wonderful job with your analysis. If you could just, uh, incorporate some Freudian elements, I think could get a little more qualitative writing done and put you in print.

Hungry for the eager and unpaid, the Nashville newspaper and its internship coordinator, Tammy, who wants a start date as soon as I "become aware of when [I] can be [there]," have invited me to join the fold. I'm pretty excited.

The new place is definitely interesting— there is a lingering smell on carpet and upstairs-downstairs and a wet-smelling communal kitchen stocked with giant kitchen spoons but no small usable utensils, pasta strainers but no pots or pans, and cereal and milk but no bowls.

Exams are being ticked off my list pretty steadily. This morning I angrily completed one of the testy psychology persuasion, scribbling short answers to tricky bullshit questions like, "How do you feel the study on e-mail communication conducted by Kruger et. al could be extended to provide evidence for a belief commonly held by laypeople that thought is language based?"

Ms. Amy Nelson is as swamped as I am, which is not too much but just enough, saying quietly into the phone when I called her to wake her up on my walk to class, "You sound like shit." She's definitely working up here at school this summer, and spending the money she earned every summer before now working at Salvation Army while in high school on a new-to-her automobile.

I could be better, but I can't complain. I'm skipping work-study at the ATC with emphatic self-permission, resting my body and feeling pretty okay despite my springtime affliction.

And how about you, the wonderful man I just now almost decorated with a terms of endearment necklace, long and colorful? How're your new developments treating you? Your pasta-filled belly? Any idea of what past events and recently-absorbed news events might mingle tonight in that unpredictable suburb of DreamLand?

Sleep is in my immediate future. It's the codeine conspiracy.

Your Katie-Jean

--

David Ammons <david.ammons@gmail.com> 4/10/08  
to Katie-Jean

My flaxen-hair deer,

My most sane Sharer,

Your varying phases and numerous faces  
Permute across my mind's eye like heavenly graces

Grapes hanging high in golden sun

Making the sky worth looking at.

And this is just later in the morning  
that's the same.

I'm glad to hear you've gotten better. Easy on your voice  
as it silkens back out, and have a lovely

*convalescence.*

Love,

David

--

Katie-Jean Hendry <kj.hendry@gmail.com> 4/15/08  
to David

D!

I am doing fine, living in a state of normal health that I could never have fully appreciated without experiencing the tragic onset of brief illness. You should really hear me breathe in and out now — it's something.

ATC Sitting tonight for work-study. Behind the desk and disoriented, I glanced at the clock on the wall that runs a few minutes too slow. I was surprised at how quickly time had passed. *Time warp?* I thought, *Brief moment of complete and total Wittgensteinian consciousness?* As I surveyed my surroundings, I began to realize what had happened. I spotted Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* lying open on the wrong page at my feet. It became terribly apparent that the book had slipped from my hand, that I had succumbed to the fluttery urges I'd been fighting earlier in the evening and had...fallen asleep. I blinked rapidly, contact lenses sticky on my eyeballs.

All's quiet on the dorm front now, as roommate Amy and innumerable other excited folk have fled to Atlanta for the night to be swept into the sweet and low melodies of Iron & Wine. Mr. Beam's slide guitars and dead-love letter lyrics like,

"Do his hands in your hair feel a lot like a thing you believe in/  
Or a bit like a bird stealing bread out from under your nose?"

are sometimes spinning around this room. And it's not that bad, really, once in a while, to add soundtrack to observed moments of mellow content or uncomfortable heartaches. If his tunes were playing all the time, though, it'd be like living perpetually in some contemplative-revelatory scene from a stylish and indie coming-of-age flick.

Raisins-in-oatmeal sounds wonderful, as does catching you, image or sound or \*gasp\* real-life talkie-type.

I'm going down fast, feelin' fine and fluttery-eyed again even now. But this time I'm prepared, I know what's coming next. First blurry black-splattered visions, then stray senseless thoughts will be given courtesy time just for waiting in the day's queue, and then: ----->

Your Steadfast on the Second Floor,

Katie-Jean

--

Katie-Jean Hendry <kj.hendry@gmail.com> 4/24/08  
to David

Baby Davy,

Thank you for comin' up here to visit me. I had a wonderful time and will miss you 'til I see you next.

Love,

KJ

--

David Ammons <david.ammons@gmail.com> 4/25/08  
to Katie-Jean

Thanks back your way for being so hospitable. And fun. Today took the cake for pleasurable adventures this month. That's right--straight to the top of the list. I can't wait to get another dose this weekend. Til then I got memories to feed my missings.

Love,

David

--

Katie-Jean Hendry <kj.hendry@gmail.com> 5/6/08  
to David

Dear David,

A quick blurb to you from the basement of the library, my surroundings all books on medical botany, virology, aspirin therapy, bacterial systematics... There is one cougher three carrels ahead, one fast page-turner two behind...

I'm done after 10 tonight and will immediately begin the end-of-semester process of recycle (now-useless psych notes), fold (dresses, socks), stack (books in car backseat), and cram (in trunk).

I can't decide if I want to leave here tomorrow or Thursday. Pros of Wednesday: I'll have done it and will not wake up to a half-empty and white cinder block dorm room. Cons of earlier: Zero down-time before next round of family feud (an exaggeration, of course-- but you understand). Pros of Thursday: I'll be making Amy happy by bending to her will that I actually attend one of "our" room parties. Cons of Thursday: I'll be making my Amy happy by bending to her will that I actually attend one of "our" room parties.

I hope you got to sniff at a little bit of the nice breeze blowing outside before and after your new gig at the art supply store.

Back to it!

--

David Ammons <david.ammons@gmail.com> 5/6/08  
to Katie-Jean

I imagine you having just finished writing a creative long-one for the big exam, now breathing a little more slowly, flexing tired fingers, but still not quite out of the character's heads (and living rooms), perhaps still trying to make sense of everything around you through the light of an invisible author's intentions.

Congratulations. I suppose you're, like, not even a freshman any more.... I remember when you started school and seemed a little worried, or at least politely anxious about it. Looks like you turned out to be a Pro, and your magnetism and energy helped you stand out as a... okay, enough with the recommendation letter stylings here. I'm happy for you, KJ.

As to leaving campus, I think I usually tried to stay as long as I could, unless I was going somewhere, which was seldom. I would be happy to entertain you Wednesday should circumstance and stomach-pit leanings end up leading you up this way. It sounds like most everything weighs on the party, and I could imagine it serving as A, a fond wrap-up ceremony to an era ending, or B, a gratuitous burst of antic behavior and hangovers for all. Or most likely, something with a little from each column.

I was imagining the page-turner two-behind was making about three "flips" for every "cough" emitting from three-ahead. Was I close?



Let me know how "it" feels (referring to your landmark accomplishments), where the wind of the new season is blowing you (and, as you learn it, when).

Sleep tight on your grassy tuffet of triumph, blooming with tonight's special dream species, "reliefodils."

Am I spelling "tuffet" wrong? Don't tell me Mother Goose was teaching bogus, unusable words to all the children of the extended former scatter-chart of British colonial domain....

Love,

--

**i remember this from yesterday...**

David Ammons <david.ammons@gmail.com> 5/15/08  
to Katie-Jean

A pale white boy with a buzz cut approaches the counter at the art supply store. A sales associate who is not David engages him.

"I need the first year packet for Nossi College of Art."

The sales associate turns to David and asks,

"Do we have any Nazi packets?"

I think I'll call you soon.

--

Katie-Jean Hendry <kj.hendry@gmail.com> 5/19/08  
to David

I'm sorry for being so downhill-dreary on the phone earlier this evening. I was, though the tone of the earlier, not-so-great part of my day might have bled into the tone of the moment, extremely glad to hear your voice and tale-tellings.

I'm fairly certain I'll be haunting the downtown Nashville area during the early afternoon. Could I maybe drop by your lieu de travail (ou, en d'autres mots, la art supply store) demain et apportez certains dejeuner pour tu ("and bring some lunch for you")?

Clovers and blue moons to you on this eve with its cricket-chorus, cricket-chorus and flash of headlights in my window as all the gold-clad graduates steer their courses home.

Love,

--

David Ammons <david.ammons@gmail.com> 5/19/08  
to Katie-Jean

Kj,

That sounds beautiful. Haunt me all you like. Spook me some, too, as you see fit.

FUNNY THING ABOUT LUNCH TOMORROW: I cannot take lunch while the boss is gone (from noonish 'til probably 1.30 or so since we're understaffed). I don't know how that factors in. f you come during the noon hour, and the store's busy... I may be hard to catch for long. Let's maybe plan this by phone some when the time comes... that way we can maximize our U+Me factor.

And darling, your apologies are superfluous to any noted drear, and certainly to my (yes) love for you. Besides. There's no denying I've built up enough BCCs (Bumbling Conversant Credits) to outweigh any momentary lapses of zest you may periodically experience in your otherwise sparkling record.

Then we will reconvene on the phone tomorrow morning sometime, then to discuss a lunch recess.

ADJOURNED

Love,

The Honorable D. A. Isyors

--

**matin ensoleillé poteau-nuit**

Katie-Jean Hendry <kj.hendry@gmail.com> 7/15/08  
to David

I dreamed that you sat in a straight-back chair, dozens of battery-powered candles at your feet. I watched your profile, contemplative eyes lit by fake flicker amber. You said, "It was like placing a telephone call to the middle of the ocean."

I awoke to find dim daylight seeping through cracks of night sky. A murky Crown Victoria slowly cruised the apartment block, headed my direction with headlights offending fresh eyes. I imagined the driver and possible passenger(s) were, naturally, there to shoot me dead through windowpane and slanted blinds.

A plastic-wrapped Tuesday *Tennessean* slapped the walkway as the Vic idled before my mom's apartment.

--

David Ammons <david.ammons@gmail.com> 7/15/08  
to Katie-Jean

Dear K-Jean,

Kevin dreamed about having a pet rat last night. He had to crush pebbles of dog food for it to eat. That's about the most promising dream activity we have to report now.

A compelling candle-lit monologue... what was I wearing?

David

--

Katie-Jean Hendry <kj.hendry@gmail.com> 7/16/08  
to David

Dear D.,

Even Dream Kevin would have to be a conscientious pet owner.

You were in tattered leather vest and formerly white (now aged brown) thin cotton button down-- something was around your neck, too, but I'm losing the image. Not a tie...

--

**Action Flicker:**

Katie-Jean Hendry <kj.hendry@gmail.com> 7/28/08  
to David

Dream.

***Featuring:***

You (as yourself)

Me (as myself)

Unnamed couple (as themselves)

You and I sit at a red light on a baking-hot highway in a tropical climate. Palm trees stretch high over telephone poles. We are listening to the engine purr. Your left arm is resting at the open car window. My right arm does the same.

I hear a car door slam. You don't. Paranoid for unknown reasons, I slam my door's lock down, peek in the rearview mirror. Line of cars behind us, sizzling. A few more moments of red light pass. I hear commotion. The rear driver's side door of the car opens. A couple

scrambles in, talking fast and loud. He sits behind me, she sits reluctantly behind you, bitching all the while. He has a gun. "Drive," he says, placing black semi-automatic to the back of my head. You run the red light. No traffic now, running red light after red light after red light. We come to a stop sign. You stop. You, slick-like, put into Park, reach your hand under your seat and produce a gun of your own. You examine each other, your guns nearly touching tip-to-tip. You and I both know the gun in your hand is unloaded. The hijacker (thick eyebrows) smiles menacingly, crosses his right leg over his left comfortably. He puts the semi-automatic between his gray-socked toes and dares you to shoot. He seems to know we're unloaded. I grab the gun and spray his face with little round BB-like bullets. They congregate on his right cheek and form a sideways pyramid. He doesn't slump over-- he seems fixed in place, eyes closed and lips in stunned open position. The woman has disappeared. You look at me.

Fade to black.

--

Katie-Jean Hendry <kj.hendry@gmail.com> 9/4/08  
to David

Water fountain H2O tastes slightly of mold down here in the basement-level ATC. Serving my 4 hour institutional servitude, facile et froid.

"Yes and no were at war in my brain," doleful Dante says in something like the sixth canto. It's more complicated than that for me at this point. My braincells have been in the business of splitting themselves up today, forming little thought cliques dedicated to the snobbish study of one issue and one issue alone (but perhaps the related commentary on "one issue's" handbag or hat).

I know I didn't talk to you last night but somehow I feel like I did, sometime between walking on damp grass and waking up to find every light ablaze, all fans oscillating, and Amy's bed empty (save discarded day dress and empty cardboard box), clock rolling to 2:30 AM. I have somehow fabricated a conversation during which I told you, so plainly, "Greg's class was great; I can't believe you love me but I'm really glad you do," and "He told me he was wild about the fireflies." I know this did not happen. I checked both the "Dialed" and "Received" logs of my cell phone.

Can I call you tonight?

--

David Ammons <david.ammons@gmail.com> 9/29/08  
to Katie-Jean

Dearest,

Developments have buzzed up my late-waking wire as well. The dealer interested in my latest piece preempted me (I was planning to write him today), saying he thought the price was fair but had to wait for a London auction to blow past in a couple weeks before he knows if he can spend the dollars... not sure if I'll bargain or wait. I found a \$1,000 artist grant to be awarded next spring that I'm going to apply for— only taking 50 apps. And I might get to deal some blackjack as early as the 13<sup>th</sup> for the new part-time casino party job I applied to from Craigslist.

You are Sculptural, and have great Ideas.

Love,

David

--

**skin dumplings**

David Ammons <david.ammons@gmail.com> 9/30/08  
to Katie-Jean

Jeans,

I dreamed that I was getting fat. Not very fat, just putting on small bits of fat. They were like little dumplings in my skin.

--

Katie-Jean Hendry <kj.hendry@gmail.com> 10/14/08  
to David

What a blowout Monday evening. Singing along to all the best Dylan and toasting to "again and again," "forever and ever," and "this year and the next!"

Confession:

The good news is: I do not absolutely abhor the smell of flat champagne hovering around the six empty bottles lined up by the bathroom.

The bad news is: Amy tried to stop me but she failed. I somehow managed wiggle past her and enter into a confrontation regarding the upcoming election with residents of the frat house across the street. I did not have shoes on. The police came. I requested some one-on-one time with the cop, who ended up encouraging me (as I cried drunkenly in his front seat) to carry on, but to pick my battles and opponents wisely. "You'll make it through," he told me, "You need me to take you back home?" We were parked beside my dorm parking lot. I said, "No, I can walk."

Contribution:

I feel so, so silly. I think I may have employed the formal language of the defensive inebriated, slurry phrases like "be that as it may," "I understand, gentlemen, but," and "may I finish my statement?"

Satisfaction:

I tried to feed myself an omelet in the dining hall this morning. I am going work in the art dept today-- teaching a girl in my class how to solder (hah!) and finishing my project.

Love,

1 Attachment  
<"hurricane" by bob dylan>

--

David Ammons <david.ammons@gmail.com> 10/14/08  
to Katie-Jean

I can just see you tackling the MCCAIN-PALIN yard panel with a righteous 'hooray!', attracting the attention of burger-flippers on the other side of the complex. Hurricane Hendry, they called her.

Shoeless Jean was another favorite.

You've got to love a good University-on-the-Hill cop story. Those are good stories to remember to tell in barrooms years later. It sounds like you held together without losing any political ground, and that's what's important. What else is a blowout for?

My day thus far? I've been writing emails like this:

\*\*\*

"Hello Charles,

Here are some more examples of my work featuring men in various attires. My recent works are detailed pencil drawings that illustrate both narratives and aesthetic propositions. I am interested in clothing (especially suits and uniforms) as an aesthetic proposition that helps form a character. This is part of what interests me in the opportunity to work extensively sketching fashion, even though it is not my primary trade.

I'm looking forward to meeting you tomorrow afternoon at 2.

Best,

David Ammons”

\*\*\*

Well, more about that later. I'll talk to you soon,

D

--

**what if...**

David Ammons <david.ammons@gmail.com> 11/18/08  
to Katie-Jean

...i were a coin-operated country singer?

blindfolded, strapped to a chair, and motionless

then sprung into song by the sound of clinking change

if you wanted,

you could wear a jumpsuit and perform maintenance,

like lighting cigarettes

and giving me sips of coffee

or if you wanted,

we could be strapped in back-to-back

and you could sing and play a keyboard

there'd be a set up

we could cart around to birthday parties

and street-corners

...

just a thought

...

love,

david

--

**the fall of Jeanie's Jamestown**

Katie-Jean Hendry <kj.hendry@gmail.com> 12/15/08  
to David

Dear David,

I hope your perspectives are in focus this afternoon and that you're having a grand old time.

'SPLODE!

December 14, 11:12 PM

There is a loud knock at my window. I angrily pull apart the blinds, pissed that people continue to do this when they just need to find their key cards. At first I see nothing. Then a flash of fake gold, whites of widening eyes, and a sideways Atlanta Braves cap (with tag). Amy, just as angry as I am, says, "Who the fuck is it now?" I tell her: Jeremy Character. "Tell him to fuck himself!" Because we are so close to the keycard entry people are always knocking on our window when they've forgotten their keycards.

December 15, 3:23 AM

Amy says from the study room, "Yo, I still have three whole chapters to read."

December 15, 6:30 AM

I press snooze on my alarm clock. I get five minutes.

December 15, 6:54 AM

My eyes flutter as I re-review (for naught, I now know) the three mysteries revealed to Dante in the Empyrean: the Trinity, the Creation, and the Incarnation. I set my alarm for 6:57, thinking three minutes will perk me right up.

December 15, 8:38 AM

A girl from down the hall busts into my room and asks if she can get a ride to the English department. I tell her I have an exam at 9:00 in the science building. She says, "Yeah, man, me too-- could you just like take me there real quick?" I say, for the first time, "No."

December 15, 9:25 AM

The guy who always sits next to me in my Dante class, prescription drugged up as hell, wedges past my seat for the third time since the exam period began to go to the bathroom. Cheater cheater pumpkin eater.



December 15, 11:04 AM

I overhear a woman saying she feels bad for her class as I approach the counter to buy a blue book. "Yeah," she relates to behind-the-counter man, "It's going to be a real test of their deep understanding of everything within this course. And I was thinking this morning, you know, 'I feel bad about making this so difficult.'" The woman is none other than my Econ prof. She's talking about my next exam.

December 15, 11:37 AM

I sit outside with Amy and watch her fail her physics exam. I feel my lungs begin to turn gray.

December 15, 1:03 PM

My stomach is boiling with a noxious mixture of coffee and Diet Coke. My phone, which rarely gets service down here in the ATC, rings obnoxiously: "Lower your interest rates by 9%," Robo-Call-Rita says.

EEk! As this day drags on there'll be more to come, I feel it.

To do for December 15:

Shower.

Finish soldering hand in art dept. (17.5% of grade)

Write Greely Myatt review (Extra credit)

Edit journals a tad + e-mail to English prof

Eat.

Sleep.

Love,

katiejean

--

David Ammons <david.ammons@gmail.com> 12/15/08

to Katie-Jean

That's not no kind of Jams-town collapse! Just a sort of rough wintry trial period. Your little colony will continue to flourish, I'm certain of it. Might have to scalp that Jeremy guy, though. And put Robot-Rita and Pumpkin-Cheater in the stocks.

HEAR YE: BIG CHANGES IN JEANIE'S JAMESTOWN

There wasn't much framing to do. Later this week I'll pack up pictures in shippable boxes. Probably following a fashion drawing session. I have NO IDEA what that shit's going to be like.

Started drawing the individual bricks in the curvy-wall compound. Yeesh.

That's a noxious mixture all right. But it happens to us sometimes, good people as we are.

"I got a lot of sleep last night." Sleep I did not need.

Good luck with the rest of your soggy, busy afternoon. I'll talk to you soon darling.

Love,

Your David

--

**fall of jambly Jamestown II**

Katie-Jean Hendry <kj.hendry@gmail.com> 1/10/09  
to David

Dear David,

I want to apologize for perhaps seeming a little distant or strange over the past few days. I've been staring at computer screens for long periods of time and staying up past my preferred bedtime. I have been sleepy and cranky and brain dead. I have been listening to chefs on the Food Network moan about berries soaked in balsamic vinegar as I edit business documents for nearly-illiterate half-millionaires. I haven't had anything fun to think or talk about except dreams I have and stupid shit I overhear.

You're right: I am stroking my leg right now, between sentences. This is probably the best shaving job I've performed on those fuckers in a long time.

I am doing just fine, but somehow daydreaming about dropping out of school and running away to start some "new" and "exciting" life full of god-knows-what and glamorous black and white photos. I don't know if it's possible to be simultaneously content and miserable. But there are parts of me that differ in their daily sentiments. This causes me to believe that perhaps I (temporarily) am (nuts).

Nothing is hard and nothing is easy. Maybe that's it.

I am taking off my earrings now. I am cracking my knuckles for the final Bed Time. I am removing all my bobby pins and

--

David Ammons <david.ammons@gmail.com> 1/12/09  
to Katie-Jean

Dear Ms. Hendry,

Thank you for a fantastic 2009 transition, a wonderful weekend sleepover, and especially for your heartfelt letter and the general spiritual goodness you shine on my path.

As a small token of my appreciation, I offer you this over-'Shopped image of us pushing our jokey limits. I kept fooling with it so as to have an excuse to look at it for a long time.

I am glad that you trust me with your feelings and I hope I am an ever-ready vessel for receiving them. Know that, whichever way the wind is blowing at a given moment, our roots are happily spooning together down under the yard where time is measured in seasons and love abides.

Signed as unpoetically as possible:

Your David

1 Attachment:

<photo of KJ and D clinging to each other, unanchored in space.jpg>

--

Katie-Jean Hendry <kj.hendry@gmail.com> 4/19/09  
to David

Thank you so much for being with me for a little while today. I appreciate your presence in my life SoVery much.

Ended up finishing some student newspaper work (including editing a pre-opening review of the undergrad one-man play, *Muslims Don't Kill People, Guns Kill People: And other things I don't believe*, which ended up being an entirely self-absorbed stringing together of disconnected monologues on sex, "Christopher Columbo," the founding fathers, September 11<sup>th</sup>, geography, and Indian folklore, all mixed in with overly moralistic statements on God, the meaning of life, and pacifism).

Since then I've been tying up loose ends with my latest paper on Hitchcock. And all of the while trying to be extremely quiet in the room with sleepy Amy and her new boyfriend, who are naked and sprawled out beside each other (it's alright because they're wonderfully peaceful right now and strategically lit by Amy's blobby hot pink lava lamp and I can').

But I didn't really want to give you a total rundown of tiny events. Mostly I just wanted to tell you that I wish I were near your right now, soakin' up your body heat and freely givin' you mine.

I love you so much.

Your

--

Katie-Jean Hendry <kj.hendry@gmail.com> 8/19/09  
to David

Dear David,

I want to apologize for being a bit colder and more distant recently than I usually am. I have been frustrated about a lot of things lately and, as a result, I have reacted to certain things with much more sensitivity than is necessary or even healthy. I adopted a new habit of guzzling alcohol to make myself feel different-- not better, just different-- about things, but it doesn't help. Evidentiary finding #1: The fact that I spent nearly two hours crying in my car in your backyard last night, something that only exacerbated my negative feelings. Evidentiary finding #2: The fact that I wake up in the morning feeling the gross physical effects of over-consumption of alcohol, effects that serve as conduits for the continuation of my bad feelings by (sickeningly) reminding me of why I began drinking in the first place.

I don't know why I've let minor frustrations expand to make me absolutely miserable, David, but I have decided to make a conscious decision to alter my thinking patterns because it is hurting me and possibly even you and/or our relationship. And I'm sorry I've stayed so pent up about it. I'm also sorry that I may have been taking it out on you inadvertently by shutting myself down.

--

David Ammons <david.ammons@gmail.com> 8/20/09  
to Katie-Jean

KJ,

I'm having a chipper little day at the Watley admissions office. I'm glad to finally be working a real "real job." Selling art supplies and cancelling insurance, those are real jobs. But they aren't the real real kind, ya see?

It rained really hard and my new coworker John and I hung out for a few under the big gray sculpture shelter out back overlooking the lake behind the College which you could almost see rising in the downpour.

You are my number one (and only) baby! I'm glad we got to take a break and be together last night. You're really hot.

Love,

Your David

--

Katie-Jean Hendry <kj.hendry@gmail.com> 11/1/10  
to David

Hihhi,

Gmail is now offering me options for "low cost beekeeping!"

I'm going to be in a screening of *Lolita* (puke) from 7 to whenever Kubrick decides. Just in case you try to call me and I don't answer...

--

David Ammons <david.ammons@gmail.com> 11/1/10  
to Katie-Jean

I got the "bee commerce" ads too now, they're contagious like a certain smile I know of. What is the scary road you're talking about, from *Wizard of Oz* maybe?

Ack. Nabokov and Kubrick on the same ticket. My "sophisticated pervert" meter is in the red, I'm sure yours is about to blow a gasket. =) Never finished watching that version, would like to hear about how it goes.

Just got into Mem-city. My first presentation as a Watley rep, ya know. I'll go get dinner and catch up with you later.

--

**BAD Dream Country**

Katie-Jean Hendry <kj.hendry@gmail.com> 1/10/11  
to David

Dear D--,

I have been up all night! Paper writing, screenplay class assignment, and this bad country song from last night's dream have all kept me up past a reasonable bedtime. Thankfully, Amy has stayed with me throughout it all. She and Nate are broken up again, which means she has the freedom to do as she pleases. I'm grateful she has chosen to weather this all-nighter with me.

Anyway, I thought maybe you'd want to help me fiddle with a tune. I've got one sort of but not really-- don't think it's worth going down to the basement to do a recording just yet. Because the lyrics are so...bad...thus far, I feel like this one could be a real winner in the mainstream country market.

Don't laugh. I've already laughed enough about it for both of us. I am a foo-oo-oo-ool. The first verse-set-thing isn't long enough; it needs two more lines. But here goes absolutely nothin':

Ours was that kind of love  
That many only dream of

We shared a home, we shared a bed  
And I had got it in my head  
That you & I would never part  
I didn't think you'd break my heart

But then one night she caught your eye  
And you said it made you cry  
To think of all you might have missed  
If that night you hadn't kissed

I said I'd try to understand  
And I reached to clasp your hand  
But you turned away from me  
You told me I must set you free

I begged and pleaded, but in vain  
Outside I heard the sound of rain  
Softly, heading toward the door,

You said  
I don't want you anymore

I left for Birmingham that spring  
Walked out and left most everything  
I tried so hard to forget you  
I learned to be someone brand new

I was alone, but not for long  
Forgot the words to all your songs  
Soon my eyes began to dry  
And I let out a happy sigh

'Cause I didn't want you any more

Now you're here, I don't know why  
You say you just want us to try  
To try and build back what we had  
And I don't want to make you sad

But  
I don't want you anymore

-----

I imagine the "refrain" as being this sort of grand liting thing that doesn't need any more words than that, but whatever-- I probably won't even touch this after tonight, I'm so afraid of ridicule for the ridiculousness of it.

I can't emphasize enough how much I don't want you to judge me for this horrific unartistry. JEAN, whatchu doin'?!

Phew. I'm probably going to go try to catch some shut eye!

--

David Ammons <david.ammons@gmail.com> 1/10/11  
to Katie-Jean

Haven't got to spend much time with your song but it seems not too bad! Might even work just fine. Wherever do you get your material? ... =)

It was good talking to you, cheese-cracker breath Jean!

Being a diligent cloudspacer and putting pictures for each of my songs....

Keep churning it out girl, you're flamin' with your screenplays! Maybe do your academic work too.

--

**in my defense:**

Katie-Jean Hendry <kj.hendry@gmail.com> 1/10/11  
to David

Check out the supreme obnoxiousness of these Carole King lyrics!

"You've got to get up every morning with a smile on your face  
And show the world all the love in your heart  
Then people gonna treat you better  
You're gonna find, yes, you will  
That you're beautiful as you feel"

Hahahahaha. Over 25 million copies of *Tapestry* sold with that on it.

--

David Ammons <david.ammons@gmail.com> 1/11/11  
to Katie-Jean

That is genuinely terrible. Can just see her running free copies out to the senior center.

Good morning, Jean! I wonder if you slept in super-late or got up and started your clickety clickety at the final essays of your college career?

--

**An Indecent Proposal**

Katie-Jean Hendry <kj.hendry@gmail.com> 1/19/11  
to David

I want to see you.

--

David Ammons <david.ammons@gmail.com> 1/19/11  
to Katie-Jean

you do?

--

Katie-Jean Hendry <kj.hendry@gmail.com> 1/19/11  
to David

See, I don't want to force it.

--

David Ammons <david.ammons@gmail.com> 1/19/11  
to Katie-Jean

Don't gotta force nothing! Gimme a ring and we'll discuss this real quick?

--

**I Really Hate**

Katie-Jean Hendry <kj.hendry@gmail.com> 1/27/11



to David

That

I'm

So

Wishy-

Washy.

But...

I *can* do this. I can. I can do this pal thing, this sometimes talking, sometimes seeing thing.

I can. Because I want to.

Wishing, washing,

--

**this email**

Katie-Jean Hendry <kj.hendry@gmail.com> 2/24/11  
to David

When I burned that Moleskine I used to document everything since last summer (yeah, I definitely burned a Moleskine, which is almost like burning \$-- one of those paperback kinds, but still...) it was like a ritual. I was standing on the concrete landing with no shoes on, smoking those Camel Turkish Silvers and slowly drinking box wine. I am sorry I did that now. Reason Jean Should Quit Drinking #39.

Anyway, I ripped out a lot of pages individually and burned them but can vividly recall some first sentences, some dates, despite the fact that I want to destroy them still-- "January 5, 2011 - The thought of you loving someone else makes me want to claw through my chest..." Words, words, words. There was a conspicuous lack of entries in November and December. I don't know what that means.

Regardless, let's begin here at the acute: the pain center: the fucked up part. I guess I'll just type this like I'd talk it to you. I've locked my door. I've lit two scented candles (hazelnut cream ones you haven't sniffed yet). Annd I've already started crying. I bought a humidifier and it hums by my bed.

Phew.

Okay.

A few days, a week or so, before that one night in the summer I felt it. I felt something wrong. And I felt crazy. I convinced myself you didn't feel me any more. I crawled into bed in the loft room I shared with my sister and thought I felt my chest cave in. The house was empty and I ate myself up with this weird sad thing. It was so weird, D. Too weird. I thought I was dying. I had perceived a change in your aspect (your face, your everything) and it made me feel so bad. And I was too scared to ask you about it.

And then it was real. (And *here in real life 2011 I just want to close this store and go home*. I have an emergency Xanax saved up for this journey but I can't take it yet, not until I finish this procedure.)

DIGRESSION: (Sometimes I used to get jealous of Kevin. You looked at him with a sort of playful awe and respect I felt I'd never command. You were pals and I was the girlfriend. Not even the girlfriend then, really, just the girl. Later, on K--'s first visit back to the states from Japan, I felt the sting of inferiority-- You had asked me to come, probably at his suggestion, and I knew that. We had a nice ride to Nashville together. I was a bit awkward because I had just blazed beyond blazes by myself at the bike shed outside my dorm *right* before you called all impromptu. That's why it took me so long to get my shit together. Anyway, I wasn't big enough to play with you boys back then. I wish I'd been who I am now.)

I felt so small that night. I felt out of place. Like an invader. I didn't feel comfortable in a house I'd learned to treat like a second home. After you got high with your roommate you left me alone on the couch that no longer sits there. He has always been real nice to me. He engaged me in a conversation while you played your guitar in your green room. I felt like you forgot I was there. Forgot that *you* had asked me to come over that night. I could have been home. I could have been reading, making money, talking with my mom, anything-- but you asked me, so I came. I guess it was routine. I guess you felt it a duty. I guess it was the most dramatic show you could put on.

Then later that night. Your roommate engrossed in painting. You an absentee. The noise your door makes so specific-- scrape of floor, metallic clink of lock and wood, the doorknob's squeak, the hinges' creak. I hope I forget the way you delivered your lines. I asked if you were okay. Your gaze on the green wall. I don't know that David very well. I asked if it was some black, intangible thing. Fixed, you said, "I wish it were something like that." And you turned (cue stock sound, the first few strains of "Free Bird"? No...too soon...). Your face. I couldn't read it. Your nostrils flared, your chin pulled back (your tongue no doubt writhing, What words to form? *Was that it?*), your hair, your glassy eyes, your every aspect strange to me. I moved closer to you. You did not warm. I felt an acceleration in my chest and then and then you said, "I have feelings for someone else."

*I could keep narrating this memory in its full state of preservation, but I am afraid my housemates will think something terrible has happened just now. I don't feel like pretending another funeral.*

"I felt it here, Jean," you said and pounded your chest with balled fist.

That scene from *Amelie: The Two Windmills*: Audrey Tatout's character melts, becomes a statue of water for a split second before collapsing to the floor. Like that but not water, oil. Flammable, potentially injurious.

And you kept going. Like you'd forgotten who I was.

"It's not like I want to jump in the sack with her immediately. But if I do I'll use a condom."

"I know it's presumptuous of me to think I could get a date with a rising indie popstar."

I tried to be understanding, David. I hope you thought I was understanding, because I was really putting on my best performance. I think I did pretty well.

*Phew.*

In my car. I screamed so hard I thought my tonsils might remove themselves-- fly out, slam into the windshield. (*Mom asked me when I was little if I thought that maybe tonsils would be useful. She had hers removed at nine. She told me that if God makes things he always makes things with a purpose. So maybe the appendix and the tonsils have one we just haven't discovered yet. Maybe they can help us breathe on Mars.*) I hated myself so much. I was nothing. All I had ever wanted was to be loved by you. I tried to be so good. I tried so hard to be so good. I thought that was what love was, to give yourself, to trust someone with the whole of you, to succumb to altruism. I was a fool. I was a failure. I was not good enough.

*Just gave myself a nosebleed. What the fuck.*

At home I made myself a stiff drink. 3/4 of a glass (those tall cut glass ones I remember always, in every cabinet in every house I've lived in) of that Finnish shit, topped with orange juice (and I hate pulp, I really do-- but my mother drinks the pulpy juice and that was all I had). I went downstairs to mom's bathroom. Shaking and drinking fast. I stripped off my clothes and got in the shower. I let the water run on my face, hot to make my whole body as red as my eyes and nose and mouth. Then I felt comfortable in it, in the weird sadness, in mourning for a relationship that I had ruined somehow. My brain began to fuzz at the edges. I put my body in the tub and laid down and sobbed for an hour, lying there and taking swigs until everything ran dry. The water heater couldn't keep up. I had stopped crying by the time the water ran cold.

Towel on my head, I went upstairs. I made another drink. Mom on the couch. "I heard you crying," Mom said. "What's wrong, baby?" Ice on glass and vodka. I sat on the couch beside her. Mom's hands on my head. I told them my friend Daniel had died. I made up a story about him—he was a friend from freshman year, I told them. He'd moved to Colorado, transferred to be nearer to his family. I told them he was a good guy but that he'd died driving drunk. I talked about mortality and how awful, how awful. Mom made me another drink, put a teaspoon of sugar in the vodka and o.j. My eyes were swollen. I felt hollow. What was real? Daniel, alive in Colorado rolling his own cigarettes. You, a stranger.

I woke up at four a.m. I sat upright in the dark. I could hear my mom snoring in the guest room. I crept downstairs with a book I'd pulled from the case nearby. *The History of American Law*. I wanted so badly to return to the non-existence of sleep. I read and processed not a word. I walked out on the porch. My bare footprints in the dew and the sun coming up light gray on gray.

Soon we were back. And I felt fake and faked. When we had sex I thought about her. It made me feel closer to you, because I convinced myself you were thinking about her too.

October 30th, 2009: I hated myself. I ran into our friend La'akea at the party where you stood away from me with someone else, talking. I watched country starlet in mouse costume on the couch canoodling with a man I didn't know. Me, Cher. You, Sonny. Off the air. I envied La'akea's level of inebriation. She took off her Star Wars storm trooper helmet. We stared into each other's faces. I told her I wanted to die. She told me I'd never look like limpfish Cher and that she wanted to die too. I watched you chatting other women up. I hated you. Later, in the shower, I was raw. Even later, in bed, you told me you wished I hadn't done that, made a scene that way at the Halloween party over what La had told me about the time you propositioned her via text message.

Fast forward, a breakless break. Pretending pretending pretending. You not talking, never talking. You over here, me trying. Me not being good enough. Again and again and again. Your excuses and my blindness. I stayed awake for days and days trying to think about anything but you. I smoked a lot of cigarettes. I studied every day with Amy. She was so good to me. But I couldn't even see myself for you, for trying to make myself mean something to you.

December: I had to bring it up. That night was nice. A professional breakup dinner over pasta. I felt relieved. But then I felt terrified by how easily you let us go. By how cool (unused sheets in an air conditioned house) you were. I felt I had never even been there--in your heart, I mean. Losing me wasn't what you cried about. Losing you was all I cried about. Your nose was wet when you cried into my shoulder about the possibility of other men being bad to me in the future. I wondered what you meant.

When a Volvo is in a head-on collision in which the force of impact has the potential to compromise the cab's interior, the engine drops. Rather than pushing into the vehicle and

onto the passengers inside, the engine responds uniquely to that type of accident by dropping as opposed to moving along the fatal direction of the impact.

I began to try to train myself. It hurt me to think about you not responding to my desperate (in retrospect, I fully admit, I seem pretty desperate) attempts to make you love me. So I thought about it all the time. I tried to normalize the experience of rejection. I thought about the night you told me you had feelings for someone else every day, multiple times a day. I thought about instances in which it was apparent I was trying to hard. I couched my memories in self-loathing. I visualized you fucking me and fantasizing about other people. I imagined you dismissing my existence over nothing (boredom, intoxication). I was vapor to you until I became a physical thing for you to use, look at, feel superior to, screw, wake up next to, shake hands with, and leave for someone more interesting. I wanted to be used to that feeling so that when you did fuck someone or even flirt with intention the next weekend (which, God knows, you might have been doing all along), I'd already be in the basement.

I wanted you to reject me so badly. But I loved you so much.

A week snowed in and alone at the beginning of the semester of my senior year, I drank Coors Light and smoked cigarettes and thought about how much of a failure I was, how worthless my love, how stupid my fantasy of reciprocity. I listened to snow hit dead leaves, sound like thousands of little crunchy insect bodies floating down together.

I was (I am) so confused by you.

"You should pray that we get back together," you said in the passenger seat of my car as it ran in front of your house in the freezing cold before I left Nashville on January 9th. And you said it sweetly (though it looks so unsweet in print like this). But I didn't want to have to pray. I prayed I wouldn't love you anymore. Prayed that I would no longer love you like I loved you then, I mean. Like some desperate bitch, a dog chasing after a speeding Bronco, barking, howling. I was panting. My legs were tired. My throat stretched to soreness. I wanted to tuck my tail between my legs as gracefully as possible and go home, get fed and watered, curl up beside the blaring television, and never wake up. I drove back to The-University-on-the-Hill that night— it was the darkest I have ever seen I-24. I sang loudly. That Chris Isaaks song. I Am a Victim of This Song. All I wanted was out of that feeling and you just wouldn't let me.

*I took the Xanax. Only half. My nose is still bleeding. Pa-thetic!*

I still don't understand why this is happening.

I thought about you all the time after we started corresponding in the safe non-space of the internet. I thought about you more after we met and walked around all aimless and awkward for so many weeks and months during your senior year. You were so different from other people I had met. You seemed so much like the person I wanted to become (the person I would be sort of like naturally). Your touch was electric. Your

understanding of the world was so interesting. I idolized you. And I thought you were constantly judging me, assessing my wildly cultivated intellect. I was worried you only liked me because I was considered pretty (but even then I was only fleetingly concerned about that—I tend, as I hope I've shown, to devalue everything about myself in the interest of some kind of fucked up self-preservation/push for bettering).

"All men live enveloped in whale-lines. All are born with halters round their necks; but it is only when caught in the swift, sudden turn of death, that mortals realize the silent, subtle, ever-present perils of life."

Losing you (which I have) has made me see my need for you more clearly. (Yes, that's *Moby-Dick*.) I hurt to think that you do not see love in our losing each other. Melville (who has what some poet or other calls "the gift of seeing likenesses in unlike things") reminds me that loss of love has merely alerted me to love itself. And thinking that you do not see love (the value of it or its existence period) indicates to me that you are either not in love as I am (was?) or that you are particularly blind for a visual artist.

Return to *Moby-Dick*. Ishmael in the chapter "Squeezing Sperm." "For now, since by many prolonged, repeated experiences, I have perceived that in all cases man must eventually lower, or at least shift, his conceit of attainable felicity; not placing it anywhere in the intellect or the fancy; but in the wife, the heart, the bed, the table, the saddle, the fire-side, the country; now that I have perceived all this, I am ready to squeeze case eternally. In thoughts of the visions of the night, I saw long rows of angels in paradise, each with his hands in a jar of spermaceti."

Ishmael is aware of the possibility of experiencing something eternal-like in squeezing sperm. I am aware of the possibility of experiencing *lasting* love (one with a strong foundation and sound structure) in shared experience and mutual respect. I don't believe in 100% understanding without effort. I don't believe in a love that surpasses *human nature*, but one that exists within it.

I'm losing it. Heh. Or did I lose it before I even started this e-mail?

So here I am now in simple statements after my prolonged diet of turmoil on the rocks:

I don't know how I feel.

I am worried you don't want me.

I am worried I don't want you.

I am scared I'm cutting my love for you out.

I am scared you've never loved me.

I am terrified this will happen again (later on, with higher stakes).

I am terrified that I am inadequate (as usual).

I hate the idea of you wanting other women.

I hate the potential reality that you do not respect me (a potential supported by, it seems to me, sound evidence).

I want more than anything to be able to leave you.  
I want more than anything not to leave you.

I am still the girl who told you four years ago (almost exactly four years ago) that I had a problem running red lights. And I don't much do that on the road anymore. I am a more experienced driver. But I still have the problem I was really referring to, you know—like there are all these red lights and I just seem to be fucking color blind. I want to barrel on through. I am absolutely ready and willing to do so (you just really bring out the fast 'n loose in me sometimes), but I gotta watch myself.

I can't wait to see you tomorrow.

Proceeding with caution,

Your Katie-Jean

--

David Ammons <david.ammons@gmail.com> 2/25/11  
to Katie-Jean

Dearest Jeanie, my Sweetest Kate,

(Sorry if some of this is jumbled, doesn't seem to all of the many many things I need to speak to, I'm at work now, I look forward to spending time with you starting tonight to continue sorting our business out).

I want to put in the effort to build the understanding and appreciation of you I neglected to form during our first "go" as a couple.

I want to clear up one notion you have had: that I pretend you are someone else in bed. I will confess to all kinds of thinking of other women - an occasional sin for the last few years, and of course more than that during the fiasco that has been life since August - but never have I pretended another person onto your sacred body. I thought that you might have that impression when you joked about tattooing your face on your butt - I thought it was so funny and you were so light about it that I didn't do what I should have done: immediately reassure you that this was an unnecessary measure.

If any of my higher-ups are able to snoop around on my email writing while at the office... they just bit into a big juicy one today. =)

Kate, in the last several months I have taken you for granted and, by dent of personal decisions, weaknesses, and habits, opened my heart and mind to emotions and thoughts that are harmful to myself and very, very harmful to you, and to our love. I have violated your trust and I don't know how to build it back. I'm fumbling at trying to though, like the novice bricklayer we imagined playing foil to your chef-Jean character the other day

when we began talking about a new life for us both.

My problems, my demons that I want to think I have suddenly got a rein on, are really deep-seated issues that have, as you have identified, been festering for some time. (I wish I wasn't thinking of Bill and Hilary Clinton right now....) If it is possible to purge them by openness and surrender and daily hard work and strictures and tender love / hard knuckle combo punches, that would not only be a preferable future for me but also my best shot at salvation. And if in doing so you find that you can love me still, I will serve you in life and love. I'm more than imperfect, I need to change A LOT about myself. Starting with how I think about you, especially when we are apart.

The blindest visual artist ever.

I am so sorry for the agony you have gone through over the last few long months. This is no proper consolation.

We are texting now so I'm gonna just hit send and if I'm offending you any worse in this email, forgive me and I'll try to do better and better as we begin to build up something from our rubbles...

--

**Red-Eyed Jean Report**

Katie-Jean Hendry <kj.hendry@gmail.com> 3/10/11  
to David

You keep sending me suggestive text messages. I have a lot of suggestions that we should go over when we see each other next. If you know what I mean.

My body is tired and I am in a Starbucks responding to e-mails from the guy I'm doing editing work for. I am having a hard time thinking of the words I want to use, so I have to continually access the Oxford English Dictionary — I'm scared I'm going to string together a bunch of false cognates and send a message instead of my meaning.

Soooooo

There's this guy who moved into this cute bungalow in South Nashville, you remember it, right? All neat along Blackmon Lane that turns into Huntington Ridge (near my mom's apartment) and leads to the University of Tennessee Ag Center. WELL, this dude lives in a white house. He reminds me a little bit of Myles Maillie, the wacky painter who lives on your block. Or at least he did when I drove by in the afternoon. He has erected all of these spraypainted objects in his yard. And signs-- lots of signs. He also has multiple Tennessee state flags that it seems like he has fashioned into curtains. As I drove by, I slowed to read the signs and only caught one word, "RAPIST" in red, each letter outlined in black. I turned around. I drove by another time. Multiple signs-- "RAPISTS WILL BURN IN HELL," flames licking feet that descend from the top edge of the sign (an



arrow indicating that these are the feet of "RAPIST"), large signs condemning the evils of rape... And the City of Nashville has stapled citations to certain signs (I'm assuming because of the use of the word "hell," which some people perceive to be a swear word??)... Tonight as mom drove me down to Thai Garden (yes, she forced me to come home for spring break; she wants me to eat), I was able to really just take it in. He has the signs lit individually so they are entirely legible in the dark. And there he was! The man behind the spectacle. He had a 50 gallon drum ON FIRE on his porch. He was soldering something beside the fire with a small welding tool. I assume it was for one of his lawn ornaments. Later, when we passed by again, he was spraypainting a new sign (I assume in response to the city's citations)-- "THIS SIGN IS ILLEGAL..." it began. I'm sure he will flesh out the message before I return to the Hill in a day or two.

I hope you are having a good time, D-Diggity. I am about to get some sweet, sweet rest. And I am full to bursting with spicy Thai food! After I had finished all I could of the portion I was served, our server laughed and said, "Now you can go to Thailand, spicy lady!"

Love.

--

David Ammons <david.ammons@gmail.com> 3/11/11  
to Katie-Jean

Spicy Lady, that is so funny. I'm glad you're getting some rest over your winter break. And I'm eager to hear your suggestives, cute thang. =)

This guy sounds like he will be a continual thorn in the side of the city until he holes himself up indoors permanently or just dies. Who knows, maybe the story will end with Hellboy volunteering to lead a prayer group at the registered sex offenders' banquet each year, but i kiiiiinda doubt it. Kinda sad that it usually takes someone that angry or off-kilter to put up wacky yard signage.

Just waking up here in Austin on my trip repping Watley, I get to fly home tomorrow! For dinner last night we had two carved rotisserie chickens and some styro-cup sides from a grilled pollo stand connected to John's friends local gas station. Actually quite delicious. And drank lots of beer. Eager to get away from beer soon. Kinda hoping I'll get to see some kind of live music tonight, otherwise, it's like I spent 5 or 6 days in Austin, "live music capital of the world" or somesuch, and didn't see nothing!

If I were your client and you sent me a massage, I would likely get the wrong idea and get a little too excited. =)

I will catch up with you today sometime if that works! Text me if you got any scheduling challenges or whatevs. Have a great day.

I love you

--

Katie-Jean Hendry <kj.hendry@gmail.com> 3/25/11  
to David

D—

December 24, 2008 was the first time I felt an overwhelming desire (maybe even *need*) to tell you "I love you." I stood in the back parking lot of my mom's apartment waiting for you. I was dressed to go with her to her office Christmas Eve party. I saw your profile, framed in the metal of your Sentra, emerge from the straight edge of the brick rectory. You pulled into the parking lot and walked toward me. I couldn't read the look on your face. It was something like sadness (with a tinge of the strange almost-despair your expression betrayed as you watched Kevin's Saturn reverse after your graduation from The-University, drive, and roll away before turning to me, not looking at me, and putting your head on my shoulder—your eyes were wet— it was the first time I had seen you cry). You walked toward me quickly with something in your hand. You kissed me and placed a mixed CD and a Moleskine planner (the fat one!) in my hand. Your lower lids were highlighted—weird gray twilight on water. I wanted to cry too. I asked you what was wrong. You responded with a litany, listing almost everything, money and temping and loneliness, and looking sort of scared. You hugged me tightly and I loved the way your body (in that corduroy jacket with your smell all over) felt. You put me at arms length and we stared at each other. I wanted to tell you so badly. But I was too scared. And then you left for your family's place outside town.

You were out of view when I broke down. The doorways and halls were empty (Oh, thank god!) as I scurried down to the one-stall bathroom, a sort of sick beige with a cracked window. I was so hot with fear and my chest was bursting. The bathroom was so cold and my hand was sweaty around the Nokia cell phone with your phone number in it. I wanted to press the green button so much. I was crying so hard and I didn't know why. I tried to practice "I love you" in my head, then pronounce it with my mouth. Its meaning (a *real* one heaving and pressing and I had no idea what to do) was too much-- "I love you" dunked and violently pulled out of sobs and aches and strange bathroom echo. I wanted to tell you "I love you" so much. But I worried that you did not love me back—though I felt (and hoped!) that there was no "me" in the sad meaning of your face. I prayed to a God I only sometimes believed in with earnest. Please let him be happy, please let him be hopeful, please let him love me. I knew the final plea was selfish, but I repeated the sequence again and again in my head as I fixed my makeup.

Then I sat in the backseat of mom's egg-shaped hatchback and watched our progress to her gray blocky office building near the Opryland Hotel (all net-light trees and manger scenes and piped-in country Christmas songs). I sat in mom's cubicle while everyone mingled in the lobby and put the CD in her disc drive and played it low-like. I didn't want

to read the song titles or see the artists' names, wanted them to just pop on, one and then the next, naturally. Some of the songs I'd heard you sing to me at night while we lay in your dorm room twin when I was 18. I took each song as some sign. At the end, "Think I'm In Love." I ate rumaki and made small talk without worry after that, relieved and full.

Please don't be upset about the way I feel right now. I am content with me and all my care for you. "Work with me, Kate," you said into my ear as I walked toward my room and a place I wanted to create with you. The sidewalk stopped short — we've got to build that first.

--

David Ammons <david.ammons@gmail.com> 4/12/11  
to Katie-Jean

Hey, I want you to know it's okay if you need some time, as in, I don't mean to push you to hang out. I will level out here! I can be not so... needy.

Thanks for understanding as I get my head back on my shoulders, and my feet planted, etc.

--

David Ammons <david.ammons@gmail.com> 4/25/11  
to Katie-Jean

Hi Sleepster,

Weren't you supposed to send me a funny youtube video or something?

Jean. Jean. Jeaann ohhh, Katie-Jean. Just saying your name. =)

I hope you're off to a glorious start today...

--

**what up / wake up!**

David Ammons <david.ammons@gmail.com> 5/6/11  
to Katie-Jean

Hi,

I have many questions.

What are you doing today? What did you do yesterday? Is your paper done? Are you excited to graduate? When are you coming to Nashville this weekend? Are you still

eating lots? Anything particularly delicious?

OK, that's probably enough.

If you let me know roughly what time I could buzz you during the day today sometime, I'd like to say what up to my G Jeanie.

Fuzzily in the half-awake morning,

David

--

**i know, sposed to wait til wednesday...**

David Ammons <david.ammons@gmail.com> 5/10/11  
to Katie-Jean

...so i will be brief. you are on my mind and i miss you a lot. i hope you and Amy are having a good time this week before grad week and that your work is going well.

i tried hard not to send this!

i love you, jean

david

--

**pssst(!)**

Katie-Jean Hendry <kj.hendry@gmail.com> 5/18/11  
to David

(a little whisper in your ear [and a flash-quick slip of tongue]...)

I feel different and I thought I would tell you so. I feel you differently, all over and everything-- I don't really know what it is, but I think it is an important feeling. Hard-hitting hope. Maybe that is the best way to describe it.

Thank you for being my friend for a really long time. I know our "-ships" have served different purposes (and that my vessel in our fleet of two must have had different names at different times... "The Jaunty Jeanfriend" one day and "The Crying Compadre" the next...), but I reckon it doesn't bother me too much and I hope it doesn't bother you... I think we have summer to steam through (HAH!)-- take our salty schooners to the fresh water of some mile-wide river...

I love you, David Ammons. I can't help it.

This weekend: you and me and dinner and such?

Yours,

--

**Discount Debbie**

Katie-Jean Hendry <kj.hendry@gmail.com> 6/1/11  
to David

Dear DAVID,

I got steel-toed work boots for my new job today. It took three hours to find a place selling steel-toed, slip-proof safety shoes for women. I visited Elliott's Boots near Antioch—and I was a bit frowny inside when I saw how pricey the damn things tend to be. Even at sale price, they average around \$130. And I needed a high-ankle model per the wait staff handbook...rare and MORE money than the average low-ankle versions!

But then...then Elliott (the only employee of Elliott's Boots) mistakenly brought out a pair of boots that had been returned. They were perfect. And \$150 plus tax. When he realized they had been worn, he apologized and began to take them back to the back. I stopped him and asked if he might give me a discount, even a small one, I'd buy them.

He gave 'em to me for \$59!

I hope you are having a nice 'n easy office time.

JEAN

--

David Ammons <david.ammons@gmail.com> 6/1/11  
to Katie-Jean

Dear K-to-the-everloving-J!

That Elliott, what a swell shoe salesman! I am glad you got a good deal on workshoes, way to speak up and turn things in your favor. I hope you enjoy your job... !!!!... or that at least it doesn't suck. =)

I have been scrambling to get in a day late application to this workshop happening later this summer that Watley higher-ups failed to mention the first time around was subsidized by a grant! Damn them. It's a professional development seminar, these peeps from NYC or something, gonna be at Vandy. Wish me luck.

Tonight is gonna be framing, more painting, and less sleep... AAAH!

Keep that krank a turning! I love you, KJ. You are on my mind.

DAVY!

--

David Ammons <david.ammons@gmail.com> 7/17/11  
to Katie-Jean

What it is, Jean? I hope you are doing well.

How is your job? Are you still thinking about law school?

It was great seeing you Thursday, Jean. The next milkshakes / coffees are on me, let me know if you get thirsty for either,

D

--

**Fwd: was that you?**

----- Forwarded message -----

From: **David Ammons** <david.ammons@gmail.com>

Date: Mon, Oct 24, 2011 at 5:05 PM

Subject: was that you?

To: Katie-Jean Hendry <kj.hendry@gmail.com>

You sent me a half-off Thriftsmart e-Coupon this morning?!?! That place was great fun when we went. Just making sure it was intentional. And my gmail kept trying to log out when i tried to open it. And you never know these days, although the problem might have just been that I had the calendar open on my work gmail account and google doesn't like you to have 2 accounts open anymore. If it's really you, the Katie-Jean at 18 in the rose garden right off campus, I might just bite...

--

**old images**

Katie-Jean Hendry <kj.hendry@gmail.com> 1/6/13  
to Katie-Jean

Do you still have those photos I think I left at your house a long while ago? The ones you asked for to make scans of for that one painting series? They were in a white box, I think, and include old images of my mother...

--

David Ammons <david.ammons@gmail.com> 1/6/13  
to Katie-Jean

I have the family pictures you left in a gray HP photo box, it looks like there are a few older ones of each of your parents. I just found them a short while ago cleaning out desk drawers, texted your mom about them but didn't hear back. Also there's a sushi-making kit which I thought maybe you'd brought over but wasn't sure. I hope you and all yours are well. I'm still on break through Wednesday this week if you'd like to get these sometime. My number is the same.

--

David Ammons <david.ammons@gmail.com> 1/12/13  
to Katie-Jean

Hey, I'm around this weekend and through Tuesday. Also, I can mail these to you or leave them with my roommate or someone else for you to pick up, whatever works best. I'm attaching a white bean chili recipe, based on an [allrecipes.com](http://allrecipes.com) recipe but with tasty improvements.

Attached:  
<white bean chili recipe.jpg>

--

David Ammons <david.ammons@gmail.com> 1/14/13  
to Katie-Jean

Looked up your mom's apartment address in email history. I'll mail these to her. Just let me know if that's not where they should go.

## WORKS CITED

- Barthes, Roland. "Écrire la lecture," (1970) in *Œuvres complètes*, t. II, Seuil, pp. 961-963. Web.
- Berry, Wendell. *The Country of Marriage*. Berkeley: Counterpoint, 1971. Print.
- Couch, Leigh Anne. "Obsolescence." *Beloit Poetry Journal*, 55 (Fall-Winter 2004-2005): 75. Print.
- Welch, Lew, and Donald Allen. *Ring of bone: collected poems of Lew Welch*. San Francisco: City Lights/Grey Fox, 2012. Print.