

Abstract

Title of Thesis: THE TAKEOVER

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My thesis submission for the MFA program in creative writing consists of five stories: “The Takeover,” “First Proof,” “Stunned,” “Moving,” and “Escape From Pittsburgh.” “The Takeover” describes a moment in a father’s life as he struggles to care for his estranged son after his wife’s death. “First Proof” is the journey of an adolescent as he is grappling with both becoming an adult and memories of his father. “Stunned,” shows a woman descending into mental illness and doubts about her own reality. “Moving” tells the story of a newly homeless man and his efforts to leave Washington for Boston, raising money by drumming in the streets. “Escape From Pittsburgh,” describes a young journalist and his inability to appreciate the stories around him, instead escaping into fantasy. The stories address loss and contradictions between what is and what is perceived.

THE TAKEOVER

by

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Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the
University of Maryland, College Park in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts
2009

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The Takeover

My son James wants to make me insane. He terrifies me, and I don't know what to do about him. I noticed him acting differently after his mother died. I feel like I might not even be able to parent him. He says things that I can't make any sense of. Just a look from his eyes is often enough to send me into a panic. He wakes me up in the middle of the night, running through the hallway of our Georgia home. He rolls like a ball bearing, fast and silent, crashing off of walls and ceasing at impact with a piece of furniture. Whether he knocks a lamp off of an end table, a candlestick off of the mantle, or a chair on its back, its legs pleading to be returned to their place on the floor, James takes note of his butchery, and resumes his frenzied, almost nightly running. During the day, when he's not at school, he sits near the top of the apple tree that is taking over the western part of the back yard.

The branches have extended and thickened over the years. It sits on the edge of the forest that extends for miles past it, and is the biggest tree that can be seen. It now casts a shadow into the house, though just barely. It creeps along the carpet. Each spring, it grows fruit that goes unpicked and falls to the ground. I put off tending to them, but have to pick the rotting apples up eventually to keep up an illusion of home maintenance. James climbs so high, I can almost picture him plummeting to the ground, breaking his tiny neck. He sits, nestled between two large braches. They hold him like arms, but I wonder if he will lose his balance.

This began a year and a half ago, when James' mother died. It made it so I had to stop drinking during the day so I would be ready for him to come home from school. I

saved all of my drinking for nighttime, and when James had his terrors, I slept through them, worrying about cleaning up in the morning. Lately, though, I've had all-day gin fits while my son has gone to the apple tree. He won't sit still and watch movies he used to enjoy anymore.

About the time he started acting up, James came down with a terrible fever. I let him stay home from school, but the next day, it had risen from 100 degrees to 102 degrees, I went and bought some orange juice and ibuprofen. The next day, his temperature was the same. The day after that, it had gone back down to about 100.

When James was a young boy, his mother would tuck him in every night and read bedtime stories to him while I enjoyed my nightly drink. Delia loved to take care of him. She made a wonderful mother. A better mother than a wife. I had heard of other men becoming jealous of their own children after their birth. James took Delia's attention and love, and so I obliged their special relationship by retreating into myself. The more I left them alone, the more Delia would berate me.

I was a good father. I made money for a while. Enough money that Delia never had to worry about running out. She told me a year after James was born that she didn't feel like she knew me anymore. I didn't challenge her, because she was right.

I'm attempting to get a new job so I can pay for some health insurance. Maybe I can start sending James to day care or camp during the summer. Losing my last job has made finding another one difficult. I have no references from them. I send James to school and go back to bed each morning, ignoring scattered messes, and I don't get back up until noon. I dread the thought of recomposing my house daily. My energy is sapped from caring for my son. A month ago, going to work became too draining, and so, after

three days of sedating myself, I was blessed with a telephoned dismissal and an incentive to get on welfare. James might at least help me with that. I'm lucky to have him, in a way, but soon I'll be providing for him again, while relishing every moment away from him.

He wasn't like this before. When James was a baby, he would never stop crying. His head reminded me of a rotting apple, a flaming red orb with dark splotches that curved downward. Even when he slept, he looked discontented. He reminded me of his unhappiness at his own birth every time I looked at him. As he grew a little older, he began to speak. Inarticulate screaming became spoiled yelling. He demanded. He was unable, or refused, to go to sleep before his mother soothed him into bed. Six months ago, his mother finally fell to the breast cancer that she had been diagnosed with immediately following her pregnancy. When she died, I told James that his mother had gone away, and wouldn't be able to come back. He stopped demanding. He almost stopped speaking altogether.

At first, I thought it was a phase. His teachers assured me that he was a normal child. I asked him questions about his day, but he wouldn't answer me. At first, it was relieving in a way. I worried when Delia died that I would not be able to keep up with James' constant demands. I worried that he would expect me to take her place. Instead, James rarely speaks to me. When he does, it is usually a dismissive remark.

He hasn't asked me for a single thing since his mother died. I assume he gets hungry, but he won't inquire about dinner. If I forget to make it at night, he goes without it and doesn't complain. I'm sure the money I give him for lunch at school is sufficient. Though if it wasn't, I don't know that he would tell me.

I miss Delia everyday, and had hoped to see something of her in our son. He has his mother's blond hair, but his brown eyes don't match those of either of us. He was inside of her for nine months. Her body nourished him for nine months. I have to think that he gleaned some of her spirit as well, but I don't see it.

Normally, it's now that I'll drink liberal amounts of vodka or gin, then heat up a microwave pizza or a TV dinner. I'll call James inside when it's time to eat. He may come, or he may not respond. He is in his tree, I guess. I don't know what he thinks about when he's up there. He doesn't tell me, of course. I've remembered to heat the frozen pizza tonight before I pass out. I'm out of gin tonight.

Yesterday, a boy named Neil followed James home. I asked Neil where he lived, and he told me that he lived on Mill Street, which is just up the road. He could walk home, which was good, because I had had a bit too much to be driving, and planned on having a bit too much to be calling the parents of a child in my home. Neil seemed very outgoing. I picture their conversations, if they have any, to be completely one-sided. I assume Neil is not very popular.

James simply walked outside into the back yard while Neil was explaining the posters on the wall of his room.

"I've got a LeBron James poster...and...an Alex Rodriguez poster...and...oh! A Black Sabbath poster that my brother gave to me but my mom hates it because she says that they're a band that all the bad kids listened to when she was young so I can't listen to them but I got the poster..." The door opened and James left before Neil could finish his thought process. He merely uttered, "Oh, wait up!" and followed my son outside. I

closed the door behind them, poured a drink, and opened the freezer door to decide what was going to be dinner.

They stayed outside until it was dark. I checked on them once. It looked like James had climbed the tree he was so fond of climbing, and had left Neil to drawing pictures in a patch of dirt with a twig. I didn't see them speak to each other. The house suddenly felt very warm to me, so I opened the window to get some breeze moving through the room. I sat down, having picked out a pizza from the oven to let thaw, and turned on the television. I wasn't watching it, however.

I thought of what things would have been like if Delia had not been stricken with cancer. I remembered the time before James was born. We had sat on this couch in each other's arms many nights. When we found out that she was pregnant, she told me through her tears that we would keep it. When she woke up sick every day, I rubbed her feet before I went to work.

I sat on this couch as she was dying in our bedroom. James was with her then. She had fought hard for a long time, and we had thought she had beaten it at one point. She said that she didn't want James and me to lose her. She said she felt like she had already lost me. I don't remember the moment she died.

I imagined her sitting next to me, in a blurry vision of comfort. I imagined sticking my arm out, reaching for her, so I could hold her while we wasted the evening watching bad television. I closed my eyes, and almost grabbed a pillow from the edge of the couch, just to pull it into my body to pretend she was still there. I'm already starting to forget what she looked like outside of the pictures. One sits on the coffee table next to

the couch. It is a picture of her and James. I don't know the last time anyone looked at it.

The opening door interrupted my daydream, and my son entering the house.

"Where'd that kid go?" I asked. He didn't respond. "Where's Neil?" I repeated.

"Went home."

"I was going to fix you dinner."

James didn't look at me. He stared out of the window. "I told him about the man in the tree, how he won't let anyone except me get near him."

I laughed at my son for the first time ever. "What man in the tree?"

He turned to face me, his eyes gleamed with an odd anger. "I'm hungry, father."

I slowly, painfully stood up and dumped the pizza in the microwave. While we were eating, I attempted to question my son again about the man in the tree, but he refused to answer. While James finished his pizza, I poured another drink and walked out to the tree. I searched all around the trunk, but saw nothing unusual. I wondered what was more disconcerting, the idea that there is sometimes a strange man in my yard sometimes, or the idea that my son was creating an imaginary person. It was dark, though, and having had a drink or two, I thought I would look again in the morning.

* * *

I woke up today sitting on the couch with the TV still on. I changed the channel, lazily flipping through the local newscasts. My son's shouts from outside startled me. I had thought he had left for school. Terrified yells came through the kitchen window. I realized that he had not woken me up the night before with his manic running. The furniture was all still in place. The yelling stopped after only a few seconds

I went outside and saw my son sitting in his usual spot in the apple tree. His eyes were wide and he was breathing heavily.

“What’s the matter, James?”

“Nothing,” he murmured.

“Why were you screaming?”

He didn’t answer me.

“Come down from there, you should have been at school already.”

He silently stayed in the tree. I was losing my patience. I looked at the trunk of the tree to estimate my chances of scaling it. It is a sturdy tree. It’s too wide for me to wrap my arms around it. When Delia and I bought the house, I didn’t even think about its presence in the yard. I decided I wouldn’t be able to climb it even if I tried, and wondered how my son was able to do it every day.

I went back inside to calm down. I picked up the plastic bottle that I had thrown to the floor the night before. I was almost ready to yell at James for the first time in years, and I didn’t think I had the energy for that. I closed the bottle and put it on the counter. My head was clearer, and I shook it and walked back out to James in the tree.

“James,” I said, in the most authoritative voice I ever used as a father. “You need to come down from there. It’s time to go to school.”

“I’m not going to school,” he replied.

After a minute of silence between the two of us, I decided that this was a reasonable demand. I would call the school and tell them that James was sick.

“Alright, you don’t have to go to school. But you need to come inside.”

“No, I’m staying here.”

I thought of how to get him to come in. “What if the bad man comes back?” I asked him, hoping to use his own paranoia to get him to obey me.

“He’s not bad. Why do you think he’s bad?”

“Any strange man that talks to you may be bad,” I replied. I wondered if I had forgotten to teach him some of the lessons I should have.

“There is no man there anyway,” I continued. “He’s just your imagination.”

“That’s what Neil said, too. He’ll only talk to me, though.”

“Come down from the tree,” I said, exasperated.

James sat curled between the branches. He seemed comfortable. I was beginning to get impatient again as I stood in silence, waiting for him to say something.

“I’m going to stay here with him,” he finally said.

“Why? What does he tell you?” I asked in between a chuckle. I was bewildered by this person that my son had created. I wanted to know what my son thought he was hearing. It was starting to fascinate me.

James looked at me with empty eyes. “He says he’s in your shoes.”

I would have laughed at that, and asked James what the hell that meant, but his voice at that moment was like a ghost’s. It wasn’t his voice. I heard it in the back of my head, and it seemed to make sense even while it made me shiver with uneasiness. I nodded my head and walked back inside.

I picked the bottle up from the counter and grabbed the telephone from the wall. I started dialing the area code of the number for James’ school. The rest of the number escaped me.

I woke up and it was dark outside. I went out to see if my son was still there. He wasn't. I went inside to see if he was in bed. He wasn't. Maybe he went to that kid Neil's house. I'll ask him about the man again tomorrow. What he looks like. When he's there. I circled the tree several times. I went further into the woods to try to see if anyone was there. No one was, but I'll be watching the forest now.

First Proof

Louie began a letter to his father:

Dear Dad,

I'm writing this to tell you what I'm doing these days. I'm getting good grades in school, which is what Mom tells me is important. I also score lots of runs in kickball, more than I was last year. I can kick it into the outfield every time now. Some of the other kids still pick on me, but I'm making more friends, and they're pretty nice. I don't get to play catch after school with anyone anymore. I miss you and I think about you a lot.

Love,

Louis

Louie folded the piece of paper into thirds and walked to the kitchen to give the letter to his mother. His mother had promised that his father could read his letters. He had begun to have doubts about this, but pushed them from his mind.

Louie's fists curled as he felt a twinge of impatience. He lacked the ability to identify its source. He felt a void. He wondered if other people felt this way, too. As he was getting older, he was feeling it more. It confused him. His mother felt it, too, but he wouldn't know this until much later in his life. She pointed a five dollar bill at him every morning, and he vaguely sensed her own impatience.

Louie's mother looked at him; her mouth formed a distressed frown; her shoulders hunched. Louie couldn't tell if it was exhaustion or sadness. He could only guess at his mother's feelings.

“The bus is going to be here soon, you’re going to be late if you don’t get going.” She kissed her son and pushed the letter into her back pocket. She had promised him that when she put the letters in her keepsake drawer, his father could read them. It was an important connection for him, she thought. She knew he would figure it out someday, but to put off that eventuality, she told him the truth about Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny before he had deduced the truth. She maintained the ethereal bond between the father and son. Louie picked up his backpack and dutifully marched to the bus stop.

* * *

The night before math class, Louie had successfully snuck into the living room to watch the late movie, *Godzilla vs. Mothra*. He had dreamt of good and evil monsters battling over entire cities. It had disturbed his sleep. Now the consequences were toying with him. He rested his chin in his curled left arm while he copied his teacher’s equations. As class continued further into the hour, Louie’s eyes closed. His pencil ceased scribbling, and the tapping of chalk on chalkboard lulled him to a near sleep. He continued to hear the teacher’s voice, though only in the back of his mind. The voice hid behind the squealing of Mothra during her Japanese hunt. The beep calling the students to recess pulled him from his trance.

* * *

Louie was not a popular student, though he did have friends in the other students who were sons of military men. Some of the boys’ fathers called him son, and their families remained close to his mother after his father’s death.

Louie held a romantic view of his father’s service. He didn’t remember his father well. He had never heard of details of his time in the military. At the age of fifteen,

Louie would steal a pair of skateboard trucks. His mother would tell him that his father would have been disappointed, and he would shamefully return them.

But now he used scenes from television and movies and made them his family history. He imagined his father and another soldier in the midst of a firefight, pinned down under cover. The other soldier, enraged at the enemy, charged from his placement, his machine gun lit with revenge. He saw his father, with a face like his own, react. The same flushed cheeks rose when he gritted his teeth. His thin eyebrows arched to lift his own weight out of the crouch he had defensively undertaken. He selflessly flung his body at his comrade, knowing the danger of the enemy's bullets.

It was the last day of school before winter vacation, and Louie stood on the playground at recess with his classmates. Kickball was the standard event, and sides were being chosen. Louie stood against the wall of the school with his classmates, waiting to be chosen in a juvenile draft for afternoon bragging rights. He watched as the more mature students were chosen. Greg, whose voice had already taken to tremendous pitch adjustments and who had grown to be about a foot taller than Louie, was chosen first. Art, Charlie, Craig, and Evan joined sides. The lineup against the wall dwindled, and Louie wondered at his chances of being chosen last. The blame in his mind fell on the team captains, as surely everyone knew he wasn't the worst player in the class.

"Jimmy, come on. Pick me," he protested to the captain as the talent pool fell to three.

"Grow up, Louie," he fired back. "Freaking baby."

Louie felt flush. He was unsure whether it was anger or shame. It was a feeling he had usually felt when he was insulted. He pretended that nothing was wrong while his skin burned and sweated.

“Go suck your thumb or something,” Jimmy continued. The other captain, Rick, chose Louie next, and Louie thought it was a mercy pick.

Louie kicked last, and justified Rick’s choice with a maroon streak that resulted in a double. The playground justice of kickball drafting was more based on popularity than skill, and Louie was satisfied as that fact did not elude him.

On defense, he was put in the outfield. The ball never came to him. Louie rocked from side to side with his hands on his knees. He fantasized about kicking Jimmy’s head as hard as he had kicked the ball. He hadn’t normally had violent fantasies except within the framing of good versus evil. But he felt that he was being treated unfairly. He should have been picked earlier. He was better than they were giving him credit for. He didn’t deserve to be called a baby. He was waiting patiently for adulthood when, as his mother repeated to him, the things that mattered in school wouldn’t matter anymore. Real heroes were the people who looked after others. He couldn’t wait to be up again to kick, but recess ended before he had a chance.

* * *

Memories of his father came in flashes for Louie, and had mostly disappeared since he had last watched his father walk through a gate at the airport to leave the country. When his father was away, the house felt empty. His father’s presence filled the house for Louis. Wherever he was, he could hear his father’s footsteps coming from the other side of the house. He could hear the low murmur of his voice in the kitchen

when Louie sat in his room. Even when he couldn't see him, Louie's father permeated the house like a ghost. After he died, he was less than a ghost. He was an absence. The gentleness of his mother couldn't replace it.

He didn't remember the day that his mother lost the energy in her voice. He didn't remember enough to even know that there was a difference. He knew that his father had won a medal, though it was locked in a drawer in his mother's bedroom. They rested in a case with a pair of dog tags. When she would show them to him, she told him that they would be his someday. The case was lined with velvet, and Louie thought the medal looked particularly out of place. He wanted it to be on the breast of a brown buttoned shirt.

Pictures of his father didn't match the increasingly blurred depiction Louie kept in his mind. He saw his father's face frozen in a smile next to his mother. He saw his father sitting in his favorite chair in the living room. Something about their stillness conflicted with the face that had passed in front of the television, or the stubble that had sprayed that face of the man who put him to bed at night. He conformed his memories to the wall-hangings and desk ornaments, and this unnerved him. The man in the pictures was his father, but he didn't seem like him. Louie's father had always seemed to be doing things.

When Louie would turn 17 and would be called Louis by everyone, he would break the glass of one of these pictures with his bare hand. The center of his fist would pound the bridge of his father's nose, as it would pound the glass in front of another man's face. He wouldn't apologize to that man until years later.

The pictures of Louie's father had multiplied furiously soon after he had departed for the last time. With the flurry came an opposite force on his mother. She was less of a

presence, even when she was in the same room. As he was growing older, he was understanding this cause and effect more deeply. Sometimes, when he asked his mother what the matter was, she replied “Nothing, you can’t understand.”

“You miss Dad like I do?”

“Yes,” she would tell him. But he was starting to think that he didn’t really understand.

* * *

When Louie returned home from school after the kickball game, his mother was waiting for him.

“I won’t see you later tonight, Louis. I’m going out, but I’ll order you a pizza before I leave.”

“Where are you going?” Louie asked, not particularly caring that she would be having dinner with Mrs. Astroff or Mrs. Scott or one of the other military moms.

“Just out. Don’t ask so many questions. Ashley is coming to babysit you.”

“I don’t need a freaking babysitter. She just sits on the couch all night and never talks to me anyway.”

“Don’t say freaking, it’s disgusting,” his mother said as she searched the counter for her lipstick. Louie rolled his eyes as his mother stashed her lipstick in her purse. “Go play outside, alright? It’s going to get dark soon.”

Louie went to the door and stepped out of the house. He sat in the grass and the dry, stiff blades slid between his fingers. He watched cars drive through the neighborhood and resisted the coming coldness of the night, stiffening his muscles and shoving his hands into his pockets. He decided activity may warm him, and he thought

of standing on the driveway in front of the house, squeezing a rubber tennis ball in his hands. He liked the way the felt brushed his two fingers and thumb when he threw it, and he had begun to figure out how to make the ball curve by snapping his fingers together as he released it. The wind was blowing harder, and he quickly stood and walked inside to find a tennis ball.

As he entered, his mother was speaking on the telephone. “Alright, I’ll see you in a few minutes, then. Bye.” She hung up the phone. “Louis, Ashley will be here soon. It’s getting dark so I want you in for the night.” Louie sat in the chair next to the window and turned on the television.

“I don’t need a babysitter anymore, mom. I can take care of myself.”

“She doesn’t come to look after you, just to look after the house.” Louis rolled his eyes at the excuse. He thought of an old John Wayne movie he had seen on TV, *Hondo*, where the Duke leaves a boy who looks after the ranch and his mother.

When a car pulled to the side of the house, Louie pulled open the curtain. He saw Ashley’s face through her window. She barely looked any older than him. Her look of constant boredom rubbed off on him when she was babysitting him. He wondered how much longer this girl would be a part of his life.

Unhooking his finger, he turned back to the television. The doorbell rang and Louie’s mother greeted the babysitter. He couldn’t see the door from where he was sitting, but he heard their voices.

“Here’s twenty dollars for the pizza, and don’t let Louie eat too much. I should be leaving soon.”

She walked back toward her bedroom as Ashley walked to the other end of the couch. Her blue jeans disturbed Louie's view of the television, and he ignored her as she sat. She snatched the remote control from the table separating her and her responsibility for the night and changed the channel.

"Sorry, kid, I'm in charge now." Louie fidgeted as Ashley changed the channel. He waited for his mother to leave so he could escape the lousy show his babysitter watched.

While Louie tolerated the television, he saw a pair of headlights ascend the driveway to their house. He heard the sound of a car horn. Ashley cleared her throat, and his mother's footsteps rushed down the first few stairs. Louie looked through the window at the driver, a man unfamiliar to him. The darkness and the man's beard made it difficult for Louie to clearly make out his features. He could see the man's eyes scanning the house. Louie felt discomfort with the man in the driveway. He wasn't a military friend of his father's. He seemed intruding.

"Alright, I'm leaving! Louis, don't eat too much and go to bed at a decent hour!" Louie was fixated on the driver of the car as his mother rushed through the front door. He was confused by the man's presence, as he was not Mrs. Astroff as he had been expecting. Louie saw the white of the man's teeth as his mother stepped into the car. He looked at Ashley who sat motionless, engaged with the television. The thought of his mother going out at night with this stranger made Louie feel sick and panicked. Pacing his breathing, he replaced the thought with a decision to go out himself.

Louie calmed himself and watched his mother walk to the car. The dialogue of boring teenage television drama filled the room as his mother sat in the car and closed the

door. The car pulled out of the driveway, and despite his uneasiness with her companion, he felt the first anticipation of freedom. With his mother gone, Louie no longer felt obligated to stay in Ashley's company. He stood up and looked at Ashley.

"Don't bother me," he sneered.

"What about when the pizza comes, brat?"

"I'm not hungry," he said as he walked toward his room.

"Fine, your loss. Stay in there all night as far as I care." Louie walked down the hall, but silently passed his room and turned the corner toward the door to the garage. He used all of the tricks he knew to get into the garage as silently as he could. He avoided the spots on the floor that creaked and slipped through the door, carefully not opening it so far that it groaned. Finding his skateboard among the dying beams of light slipping through the window of the garage, he opened the door that led outside, and went through as silently as he had through the other door.

Louie had decided he wanted to be away from his house, but that was as far as he had gotten when a car pulled up next to the house. As the driver got out of his vehicle and walked toward the front door, Louie snuck with his skateboard, cutting a wide berth into their neighbor's yard. He rounded the front side of the car and hid behind the far rear tire while Ashley exchanged the twenty-dollar bill for the cardboard box. The front door shut and Louie looked at the house he was about to leave in the care of Ashley. It was a gift from his father to his mother and him. The porch light turned out over the familiar front door that he had walked through almost every day that he could remember. As the deliveryman returned to his car, Louie kept the car between himself and the driver, and when he heard the door open, Louie stepped onto his skateboard and gripped the

bottom of the rear bumper. His destination would be determined by fate, he decided, in return for a quicker escape.

* * *

Louie clung to the bumper, crouching to avoid detection. Traffic was fortunately light, but he worried that that would not continue to be true as the car took him into town. His recognition of landmarks had steadily diminished the farther the car traveled. As the driver approached a stoplight, Louie released his grip, sat at a standstill until he saw the shine of the pavement turn a spongy green, and grabbed the trucks of his skateboard to slink to the sidewalk. He was still in a familiar area, near the shopping center that housed the grocery store his mother often took him to. He carried his skateboard through the parking lot and reveled in his sovereignty. With his goal of escape already achieved, he walked toward the stores lined in front of him. He would let them direct his evening activities.

He approached the movie store sure that he could browse through the DVD's that he wanted and still arrive home before his mother did. As he opened the door, the clerk behind the sales counter mumbled "Evening," then looked up to see the adolescent walk into his store. Louie unzipped his jacket and glared back at the man. He enjoyed the thought the clerk would be watching him. He enjoyed the thought that his skateboard, previously just a vehicle, was now a warning to the clerk. He walked to the back of the movie store just to see the clerk stand up and monitor him.

He turned the corner as he came to the end of the aisle and looked back to the clerk, who didn't seem to be watching him as intently as before. He gazed past the foreign films section to the action movies. He began browsing the titles. Most were R

rated and most he had never seen. Most of the artwork on the covers depicted guns firing, or killer robots, or impossible computer-generated beasts. A few had lines of car headlights underscoring the movie's title. Some showed the familiar image of soldiers.

"Are you just waiting for your parents, kid, or are you going to buy something?" the employee asked from his station. The man raised his eyebrows waiting for a response.

"Yeah, my mom's at the store, she should be out soon."

"Alright." The pitch of the man's voice raised on the second syllable, then lowered to create a third syllable indicating suspicion. Louie turned back to the movies.

He handled one title called *Platoon*. The images on the cover were of a couple of dog tags, similar to his father's, and a soldier on his knees. His arms were raised in what Louie could tell was a victory pose. The glory of being a soldier was personified in this image. When he would turn 18, he would think of this movie when he would decide not to join the military. Now, he could imagine his father acting as the soldier on this movie cover after a particularly harrowing battle, clutching the air as it was sweet that it still existed and was better because of the conflict that had just occurred. He wanted to see this movie, and he wished he had had money, and was old enough, to buy it. He looked at the clerk who was twenty feet from him. The clerk looked back. He slid the case back in front of the plastic divider that identified it and continued to browse. He wondered if he would see any of these movies before the age of seventeen.

Louie walked out of the store, quickening his pace as he neared the door with the hope of scaring the clerk into thinking he stole something. The man stood up with his jaw hanging in preparation to accuse as he stared at Louie rushing through the exit.

Louie felt exhilarated in his deceit and dropped his skateboard on the asphalt to push his way toward home.

* * *

The breeze had become a cold wind that scraped the skin on his hands and cheeks. Skating on the streets was more dangerous now. There were more cars, and they were racing home. They were also less likely to see him. Worse, he suspected that one of the trucks of his skateboard was coming loose. Louie's shivering made it more difficult to steady himself with his one-legged stride over rocks and up hills. He buried his hands in his pockets whenever he crested an elevation in the street. He eyed an alley that could serve as a shortcut and veered to his right, happy to avoid more traffic and extra time in the cold.

He rode through the well-lit alley between two brick buildings. Heavy green doors without doorknobs flanked him, shouting orders of "*NO TRESPASSING*" and "*EMPLOYEES ONLY.*" The words annoyed him, locking him out when he felt so free to explore. A drab trash dumpster warned "*NO DUMPING*" as he rolled past, and he hopped off of his board startled by a low growl he heard behind him. He turned around and saw a gray cat, thin and hunched away from him. He carefully walked toward the feline that was staring at the corner created by the dumpster and the brick wall.

The cat growled again then batted a paw toward the corner. Louie bent over the cat and saw a brown mouse, its leg pinned by the metal of a trap. The cat was toying with it and paid no attention to the boy observing the event. The mouse desperately dug its free hind claws into the wood, trying to gain traction to pull itself free. The cat was laughing at it, amused by the ease of conquering this prey.

The aim of an orange light centered on Louie like a spotlight. His shadow stood next to the teasing feline. He felt like more than a witness. He felt like an overseer.

The cat's taunting annoyed Louie. It went beyond primal survival. The cat tormented the weaker creature while it was most vulnerable. Louie imagined the mouse's fear as he watched the event. Its legs continued to push, but it was captive.

The teasing continued with the cat smacking the brown fur, hitching a claw into the skin of the rodent. Muted pleas received no mercy, and the cat quickly shifted its weight from side to side a few times, until momentarily resting. Its joints looked stiff and pointed and it assumed silence.

The cat pounced jaws first, and Louie reflexively found himself scooping his hand under the forearms of the cat with a swift grab. He heard an awful screech and hiss as his hand continued to rise. While it crossed his body an anxiety to be rid of the carnivore overwhelmed it. It was like throwing a tennis ball when he let go. His index and middle finger lingered on the body before it flew toward the wall. Rather than the familiar hollow thud, Louie heard a crack, and the cat landed on three paws and a collapsing arm. It screamed, and Louie heard it scream, but he didn't shudder. He didn't feel his skin crawl. He felt his heart beating. His breath shot between his teeth in foggy blasts. The cat clumsily dragged itself toward the street that Louie had just arrived from. Its fur creased across the corner of the building and it was out of sight.

The cat had felt dirty to him. Beyond the fact that it was an alley cat, its greasy fur had left a stain of aggression that Louie wiped onto his jacket.

He held his arms in front of him. He thought of holding them in the air, victorious and virtuous. Instead, he closed his eyes and nodded to himself.

Louie looked at the still-imprisoned mouse. He felt confident that he had done the right thing. The mouse's escape attempts had become more frantic since the cat had been dealt with. Its neck fully extended, its head was trying to provide the last amount of inertia needed to free the leg. Louie carefully secured the base of the trap with his right hand and took the metal clamp between his thumb and index finger. Not wanting to touch the mouse, he strained to separate the bar from the wood as close to the spring as possible. He saw the tiny claws rip past the metal and the mouse silently slipped free. Louie attempted to free himself from the situation just as quickly, but the metal pinched the tip of his finger before the extraction was complete.

"Fuck!" he gasped, and he shook his hand until he could squeeze the injury with his other palm. He squeezed until the initial sting dulled, and he looked at his fingertips, examining the redness overcoming the digit. He pressed on the middle of the finger and watched it turn purple. He shook it again and the pain rested in a pinched pinpoint surrounded by numbness. His violence had been justified, as it prevented further violence. The adrenaline of the rescue had worn off. He knew the necessity of his act. Both creatures had escaped.

* * *

Louie sat on a bench next to a metal sign that identified one of the town's several bus stops. The bench offered little comfort, but he needed to stop. He had almost twisted his ankle when the front truck on his skateboard came halfway off. He heard the screw bounce along the pavement with a ping as his ankle curled underneath his weight off of the side of the board. Louie was able to find the screw after a few minutes of his face

being close to the ground. The light of the streetlamp was a small help, and he pocketed the bolt with no available tools to help him repair the damage.

The pain fortunately evaporated in seconds, unlike his still irritated finger. His transportation was unusable, though. He debated finding a telephone and calling his house. Louie did not look forward to Ashley's voice on the telephone. Walking home would take too long, though, and hitchhiking was probably not possible. He was angry at himself for suddenly being so helpless. If he was unable to secure a ride, he would only be slowing himself down. Louie begrudgingly began walking up the street toward a row of stores. He hoped one would let him use the telephone. In trying to escape his dependence for one night and assert his self-sufficiency, he had been provided a reminder of it.

He took his time approaching the shops. He moped up the street with an intense shame. He hated the rocks that poked the rubber bottoms of his shoes. He despised the wind that forced him pull up the collar on his jacket and push his nose underneath the zipper. He stepped to the side of the road as he heard the whisper of approaching tires on the pavement behind him.

He thought about just running away. He thought of the real, total freedom he would have. He pictured his home in the alleyway he had left. Walls would shelter him rather than people. Cars would pass by both the previous entrance and exit, until those identifications lost meaning. He stepped back to the side of the road and another car passed him. He could scavenge food from the dumpster and the pink noise of the town would be his lullaby. Survival would be his everyday mission. The cover of bricks and green metal would make an effective station.

“And the rats would be my neighbors,” he thought as he walked into the parking lot of the mini mall.

The entrance to the grocery store was lined with fake tinsel and cheap holiday lights. The cashier said “Good afternoon,” to Louie without raising her head. He noticed a pay phone secured to the wall near the entrance. He lacked any kind of change, or any money at all, and hoped someone in the store would show him mercy and allow him to use their phone for free. He decided the best action would be to see if the pharmacy was overly crowded. He walked toward the back of the store with no haste to speak to his babysitter.

He walked through the dairy aisle. A wall of milk, then organic milk, then butter lined the row. A woman opened a carton of eggs and inspected the bottoms of three of them, carefully placing them back in their cardboard beds to choose another. The clerk said something over the intercom that Louie didn’t understand. The woman reclosed the carton of eggs and placed it on the stack adjacent to the one she had chosen from. She resumed her research on the next carton in the series. Louie reached the end of the aisle and turned right, dragging his feet toward the empty pharmacy counter.

He rang the bell as his skateboard dangled from the fingertips of his left hand. His injured finger pointed out to avoid the cold metal of the unbroken rear truck. The ring went unanswered, and Louie smacked the bell repeatedly. The area behind the counter was unattended except for boxes and plastic containers sitting on shelves. He grabbed the other side of the counter he stood in front of and pulled himself up and forward to see further. An unused telephone adorned the end of the desk, too far to reach.

He looked at the door on the wall that seemed to lead into the pharmacy. “*EMPLOYEES ONLY.*” The closest person wouldn’t be able to see him if he were to try the door. The man had a beard that was speckled with gray. Louie thought of the man who drove the car his mother had gotten into earlier that night. He pushed the thought from his mind, since he felt that he was already upset enough. A row of laundry detergent hid his view of the person from the neck down, so he couldn’t determine if the man was a customer or an employee of the store. He took long steps toward the door and pushed down on the handle. It was locked. He would have to ask someone else in the store or try next-door. He followed the row of cleaning supplies to make his request of the woman at the register.

The brooms and dustpans traced a path for him, past the many varieties of latex gloves, to the notebooks and pencil sharpeners with the school supplies. He turned his head to the other side of the aisle and stopped. He berated himself for not thinking to look for a screwdriver earlier, as now he may not have to put up with Ashley’s anger after all. He pulled out a plastic container full of wrenches, then continued searching and found one full of screwdrivers. Louie pulled the screw out of his pocket and held it up to the tool. He placed the screwdriver back to find one that was smaller. The shelves of tools concealed him as he knelt down to be out of sight and placed his skateboard on the ground with the wheels up. His shaking hand lined the truck up to insert the screw. The screw turned and tightened to secure the stability of his board, and the task was almost complete before he heard a voice behind him.

“Son, what are you doing?”

Louie looked up and saw the man he had avoided minutes earlier with his lip curled and his eyebrows arched. He didn't know what to say. He knew he was in trouble by the accusing tone in the man's voice. He was so close to getting home himself; he didn't want to be picked up by Ashley from jail.

Louie stood up and ran toward the exit. When he almost dropped his skateboard, he heard the man shout behind him. "Dammit!" The same rush that he felt when he saved the mouse was exploding through him now. He imagined the man was chasing after him. He prepared to push past the woman at the register if she attempted to stop him, but he saw the unobstructed door and ran through it. The woman watched him as he escaped but didn't try to stop him.

He ran the length of the shopping center and rounded the corner to the other side of the wall. There were no pursuers chasing him. The screwdriver was still in his hand, though he had intended to drop it before he fled. Worried that the police would arrive soon, Louie completed the repair of his skateboard and resumed his trip home. It was good to be mobile again, and he shoved his hands into his pockets. It was too cold to be outside anymore

* * *

Louie usually loved to ride his skateboard. He didn't often ride all the way into town, but even riding through his neighborhood gave him time to think and to be relatively alone. Tonight, his leg was tired of pushing his weight. Instead, he walked up hills, and only rode downhill until a car finally stopped at a stop sign in front of him. He quickly crept behind it and hitched a ride on its rear bumper for two blocks before he had to turn while the car continued its straight path. He coasted another two blocks until he

arrived at his house. The only light came from the living room. The house seemed empty, though he could see Ashley through the window.

He felt relieved to be home, and hoped that the car sitting outside his house was an indication that his mother hadn't returned home. The bushes that lined the walkway invited him to the front door, but he had to refuse them. He approached the door to the garage that he had snuck out of. The doorknob wouldn't turn. It was locked. Frustrated, he tiptoed across the driveway, past the bushes, to the front door. It was also locked. Louie was more annoyed than afraid of being caught. He didn't feel like being scolded by a babysitter. He had no desire to hear Ashley's voice at all.

He thought of knocking on the door, as it was a better alternative to being locked out when his mother returned home, but he sighed and walked back to the garage with the ridiculous idea that the large garage door would be unfastened. He bent down and pulled on the handle with a gradual increase in force, careful not to open it too quickly. It didn't budge. The hum of a car's tires on the pavement approached, and Louie looked up. As it neared his house, the headlights indicated that it was slowing down. He rushed around the corner to the side of the garage and pounded his fist against the wall with the lack of a better idea of what to do. The brakes creaked in the driveway. A car door opened.

"Well at least let me walk you the door," a muffled voice said. Another car door opened. Louie peeked his head around the corner.

"It's really not necessary," his mother said. "I had a nice time tonight." Both doors shut simultaneously and the stranger rounded the car quickly to wrap his arm around her.

“So did I. I’d rather it not end right now. Don’t you want some coffee or something?”

“There’s a babysitter here,” she replied as they stepped onto the front porch. “I have to make sure my son is in bed.”

“Alright, well we should do this again sometime.”

“We’ll see.”

The bearded man put his hands on his mother’s hips and pulled her closer to him. He leaned in as her face turned and she put her hands on his chest to push away. His hands moved to her lower back and she pushed again. She lifted her foot to his leg and shoved his body backward. The man muttered something that was inaudible to Louie and stepped off the porch. Louie’s mind frenzied. Fury bounced between the walls of his skull to the point that his head was throbbing. This man was an intruder. He thought that if his father were there, he would protect the family and the house and kill this man. Louie wanted to do the right thing. He wanted to protect his family.

The man rounded the front of his car and Louie left his hiding place. He ran at the man with his injured hand extended. It was holding the screwdriver tightly and he stabbed it toward the side of the man’s ribcage. He felt the screwdriver scrape against the man’s skin through his jacket and shirt. It was not sharp enough to puncture, but Louie’s thrust was heavy enough to scrape and break skin.

“Ah! Fuck!” The man grunted. The man instinctively swung his elbow around and caught Louie’s face. Louie fell back into the grass. His entire face felt frozen and he was dizzy. He could vaguely tell the man was holding his side with both hands when he heard him say “Damn it, kid,” under his breath. The man quickly opened his car door,

raced back out of the driveway, and sped from the neighborhood. Dazed, Louie laid down and put his hands on his chest. He closed his eyes, and the only thing that made sense to him right at that moment was to go to sleep, unaware that his mother would be frantically shouting for him when she found his room empty. He was unaware of the thought that would go through her mind that she had lost him as well.

He laid thinking that his father would be proud of him. He hadn't done anything before that he thought was worthy of adulthood. Louie wondered what it would be like when he was an adult, and if he would have to do things like this again. He felt like he was starting to figure things out as his eyes closed.

At the age of 33, Louis would be writing the eulogy for his mother. He would feel a small regret about not saying anything about his biological father, but he wouldn't know what he could say.

Stunned

Leah Warner went to her psychiatrist's office hoping, as she always did, that he would have a new idea. She hoped for some new drug, or even some new method, to help her with her unhappiness. It was only out of habit that she went anymore. It seemed to be an exercise in futility. Since she began going ten years before, her condition hadn't improved. The fact that she saw no results only made her mood worse. She was told that she suffered from depression. She had been prescribed medication and had been encouraged to talk to her doctor, a man she knew nothing about. Nothing helped, and she wondered if she was even sick. This only depressed her further. The doctor changed or refilled her prescriptions after every visit.

She looked around the doctor's office as she sat on a couch to his right. A diploma hung on the wall from the Emory University School of Medicine. Dr. O'Donnell used to live in Atlanta, thought Leah. That was the only piece of personal information she had about him. It felt strange to tell him her most personal thoughts. It also didn't make her feel better. It made her feel invaded. So after three years, she stopped talking during their sessions. She went to receive her newest drug prescription. It was a meaningless gesture to her mother.

“How did you do this week, Leah?”

“Fine,” she told her doctor. It was the truth, or at least close to it. She was doing as well as she ever did. They sat in silence for several minutes as Dr. O'Donnell waited for her to volunteer information. She could feel his eyes looking at her, but she did not return his gaze.

“How is the medicine working for you?”

“Mmph.”

“Does it make you feel any better?”

“It makes me feel like a zombie.” She felt as if she had said that about every drug she had taken since she began her therapy. She had been prescribed more drugs than she could count, and wondered what was next in line on her buffet of medications.

“Well, let’s try something new,” her doctor said, as she expected. He scribbled onto his pad and tore off a sheet. He handed it to Leah. She didn’t bother to read it. “Just take that in and come back to see me in a week. You shouldn’t start feeling any effects for another two weeks anyway.”

She took the prescription and shoved it in her back pocket. She thanked her doctor and left his office. She was thankful that, in the past few years, they no longer went through the charade of having an entire half-hour long session. It had been excruciating to sit in silence waiting for her time to run out.

* * *

As a high school student, she had retreated to her room most days after class. She hadn’t been interested in a social life. She read and listened to music, as they interested her more than sleepovers and movies.

One evening, unexpectedly, her mother told her that she was worried about her. Leah was unused to her mother taking an interest in her life.

“Your teacher said that you aren’t really socializing with the other students.”

“I guess I’m not.” This was true for most of Leah’s time in high school. For years, Leah had stayed away from friendship. But two weeks before her conversation

with her mother, a boy named Jamie began to talk to her at lunch. She didn't respond, but he was persistent. At first, she felt like he was forcing himself on her. After a few days, though, she was surprised to be enjoying his company. She hadn't enjoyed anyone's company since starting high school. Leah didn't see the need to tell her mother about her fragile friendship that would probably be over soon regardless.

"Are you unhappy for some reason?" Leah looked at the wall. She didn't know what to say to her mother, so she remained silent. She could sense a feeling of duty in her mother's voice that annoyed her.

"I'm going to call a counselor for you. It would be good for you to talk to someone." She told Leah that her teachers were concerned that she wasn't connecting with other students. Leah didn't know why this was such an issue. She didn't feel the need for friends. She hadn't asked anyone to help her make friends. Leah didn't want to upset her mother any further, though, so she began visiting the psychiatrist.

* * *

"Hey, Mrs. Fitzhugh," Leah shouted. The bell on the front door jingled as she entered the bookstore. The December air followed her into her workplace. "Is the heat not working?"

"Thank you for coming in, Leah. I felt hot and dizzy, so I had to go to the back and sit down for a bit. I need to go home." Leah had gotten the cell phone call on her way home.

Mrs. Fitzhugh was always feeling ill. She was an old woman, and Leah thought she might be taking care of the store on her own sometime soon. Leah knew she was

crucial to the operation of the store. Without the store, Leah thought Mrs. Fitzhugh didn't have much else. So she felt responsible for Mrs. Fitzhugh's life. Leah pushed her hat and gloves into her pockets and walked to the back to hang her coat.

"No problem," she told her boss. "Take care of yourself."

"I'll give you tomorrow off. I'm sorry to make you come in."

"It's fine."

Leah walked through the aisles of books. She had read so many of them. The emptiness of the store meant that Mrs. Fitzhugh couldn't afford to pay her much. But she embraced the time alone. When she wasn't reading she was daydreaming. She walked past the books to the back room and sat at the table. She closed her eyes. She remembered the day that she had received after-school detention for skipping class and Jamie came to visit her. She had been staring off into space when he surprised her in the cafeteria. He sat next to her as he would every day until he was killed in a car accident.

"What are you doing here?" she had asked him.

"I thought you could use some company."

She fell silent. She hadn't been used to anyone making such an effort to get to know her. For the first time, and only time until he died, she had wondered what it would be like if he asked her to be his girlfriend. Leah had looked down at his leg, and at her hand that rested next to it. She had thought of touching him at that moment, more as a reward for his kindness than for anything else. Sitting in the bookstore now, she stopped reminiscing. She had an awful feeling as she realized that they never had come into physical contact.

She stood up, shaken, and went into the retail area. She walked to the health section and looked through the literature. She ran her finger past *The Old Man and the Sea*. Leah often thought that she was the reincarnation of a famous author like Hemingway. She had such an active imagination, she reminded herself, and even if she had never put it toward writing, her natural inclination for editing suggested to her that she had been a great literary figure in some past life.

When it was time to close, Leah locked up the store. She was exhausted. Her rural West Virginia town was covered in snow. The streets were relatively empty, with the occasional driver passing her. She took off her gloves and put the heat on low. Obligatory Christmas songs played on her radio, but she didn't care to hear them. Her eyes were locked on the road. The view of the road was repetitive. It was a dull movie. She had been flirting with the idea of treating life like a movie. She could live as a detached observer, just waiting to see what happened. Things seemed more interesting that way. Her own boredom, if she wasn't trapped by it, could be interesting. She watched the white lines of the road pass through her peripheral vision. The recognizable green, arrowed sign pointed toward Bayfield. She followed its direction off of the highway. Her eyes drifted off of the monotonous pavement to the guardrail on the left, but she continued to exit.

* * *

Jamie had walked with her outside during lunch one day. It was cold and the rest of the students were in the cafeteria eating lunch. He had asked her to go outside with

him. He wore a black jacket that was zipped up to the collar, and she had been sure he was going to try something, but he didn't. It was her favorite memory of him. He just wanted to skip class, so they sat next to each other for almost two hours. He told her he was planning on going to college. He asked her where she was going, and she shrugged, which seemed to be enough. She almost felt really connected with him that day. It wasn't anything tangible, but she enjoyed it.

* * *

Leah entered her apartment and turned on the lights. Plants sat on the counter next to a picture of Jamie. She looked at the kitchen. It needed to be cleaned, but she put it off in her mind for the fourth day in a row. She picked up the remote control to the television and pushed the power button. A sitcom that she didn't watch was on, but she didn't bother to change the channel. It was late for dinner, but Leah pulled out a box of noodles anyway.

That's when the picture of Jamie spoke to her the first time, although she thought it was the television. She heard a constant murmuring, and as she stood facing the television, decided it was coming from behind her. She turned around, and sitting on the counter, confined within a frame, was the picture she had kept in her kitchen for years. She had taken it on the last day of school before graduation. She blinked twice and continued to hear the murmuring. It was almost a whisper. The words were running quickly on her ears, but she couldn't understand them. She took three steps toward the photograph. The image remained static, but there was definitely a voice coming from it.

“What the hell?” Leah spoke aloud. The voice stopped. “Oh, God.”

The murmuring stopped. “Heeeeyyyy!!!” she heard the voice say. It was definitely coming from the photograph. There was no doubt about it. Leah shook her head and looked back at the image. “Heeeyyy!” the voice continued, singing now. The photograph was singing badly. Not even a crooning so much as a wailing, but loud and cheerful nonetheless. The lips in the picture didn’t move, but were frozen in a smile. The voice was similar to how she remembered Jamie’s voice sounding, but not exactly. Leah screamed and the voice got louder, and her scream turned into weeping, then back to screaming. She had never been at such a loss as to what was going on. Her paradigm had never come into such question, but she couldn’t deny it. She was the captive audience of a singing photograph, and a lousy one at that. She covered her ears, and the picture began humming. It seemed to get louder when she covered her ears.

With one final scream, Leah leaped at the picture, grabbed the frame, and threw it to the floor. It shattered, splashing her feet with glass. The photograph lay limp on the kitchen tile. As she sobbed, she heard screaming, even louder than the previous singing. She felt she was going mad, and the squealing persisted, a constant expression of agony that drilled into her ears. It was the worst noise she had ever heard. She picked up the photograph and placed it face up on the counter. She bawled some more as soon as the rescue was completed.

“Jesus fucking Christ.” It might as well have come out of Leah’s mouth, but it didn’t. She put her hand over her mouth. It sounded like the image was breathing

heavily. Leah was too shaken to consider the impossibility of that. “That was pretty fucking unnecessary, wouldn’t you say?”

“Alright, what the hell is going on?”

“You tell me, you just threw me on the ground.”

She turned her back and walked to her room, confused. She laid her face in her pillow. Twenty minutes passed, and she heard music in her head. She pounded her fists on her mattress. She was alone. Except for the foul-mouthed photograph in the other room.

* * *

The day that she found out Jamie had been killed in a car accident, Leah laid in bed and refused to leave her room. She didn’t feel that she could go to his funeral. She stayed in bed and tried to sleep as much as possible. Even when she couldn’t sleep, she closed her eyes and tried desperately to leave consciousness. After about twelve hours, she began sleeping in two to three hour bursts. She tossed in her bed in between her sleeping fits. Her mother tried to bring her soup, but she refused to eat or to open her door. She stayed in bed for three days straight, until her mother finally picked the lock. Leah was barely lucid enough to hear her mother say that she could either come with her to Dr. O’Donnell’s office, or the doctor would come to their house. She rolled out of bed and her entire body hurt. She remained completely silent during the therapy session, and the psychiatrist changed her prescription.

* * *

Leah got out of bed, trudged to the kitchen, and glanced at the image of Jamie.

“I feel as though we got off to a bad start,” it said. “I obviously scared you.”

Leah didn’t know what to say. She was about to converse with a picture.

“See...Leah, right?” She didn’t respond. “See, Leah, the key is to disconnect yourself from reality,” it continued. “Stop living and start watching. Like a movie.”

“What are you talking about?” She picked up the pieces of broken glass on the floor and laid them on the counter. There was no turning back now. She would humor her sick mind.

“Pretend that reality is a movie. You don’t need to be an active participant in it, at least not right now.”

“Why are you talking to me?”

“Because you want to hear me.”

“This is ridiculous. I’m talking to a damn picture.”

“A damn picture, yes. You know, you’ve never talked to me before. In all the years you’ve known me.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me. Are you Jamie?”

“No, no, that’s ridiculous. Jamie is dead.”

“Are you a ghost?”

The picture sat on the counter. Its corner shook from the breeze of the air conditioner. “No.”

Leah was frustrated. “What are you then?”

“A photograph. Well, a memory. That’s maybe more accurate. Anyways, as I was saying, you need to relax,” the picture told her. “What were you thinking about while you were in your room?”

Leah thought that the voice definitely wasn’t the same that she remembered from high school. “That’s none of your business.”

“It doesn’t matter if you tell me, I already know.” Leah stared at the image of Jamie angrily. “Fine, if you don’t want to talk to me, that’s fine. I just figured, you’ve kept me in this frame for years, you threw me to the ground a few minutes ago…”

“Oh, Jesus, I’m leaving.” Leah grabbed her coat from the coat rack and marched outside, slamming the door on her way. She needed to get away from her apartment. She thought that she might as well go to work. There might be something she could occupy her disintegrating sanity with. She sat in her car and turned the key. Christmas music filled the car, and she quickly turned it off and began driving.

* * *

Leah arrived at the store, and she parked in the space closest to the door. There were rarely any cars in the lot, but Mrs. Fitzhugh asked her to park in the back of the lot, “Just in case.” Leah wasn’t in the mood to walk, so she indulged herself. As she walked to the door, she noticed that the lights were off and the sign on the door read “Closed.” Leah sighed. She was desperate for some human contact, but figured Mrs. Fitzhugh must have felt ill again and closed the store. She unlocked the door, flipped the sign, and walked to the back room. She hoped that someone would come in to buy something, or

just look around. Even if a little kid came in and ripped up some coloring books. Even if she had to clean it up. It would be something to do.

She sat at the table in the back and thought of what the picture had said to her. That it knew everything she was thinking. She started to think that maybe she was too transparent. She started to wonder if other people could read her emotions too easily. Mrs. Fitzhugh was always kind to her. Maybe it was because she knew that she was always so upset. She felt guilty. It occurred to her that she was not the stabilizing influence on her boss that she thought she was. Perhaps she was a cloud that hung over her boss's life. Leah felt like someone who had to be taken care of. A liability. Her throat felt sore as she buried her face in the inside of her elbow. She felt heat rush across her face. She wanted to escape, to spare Mrs. Fitzhugh her company. But she had nowhere to go. She fell in and out of sleep. She woke up and looked at the clock. Three hours before the shop was due to close. Leah put her face back down. When she woke up again, it was ten o'clock. She didn't know what to do except go back home. Maybe sleep was all she needed, and the photograph would stop talking to her.

* * *

Leah arrived back at her apartment late at night. As she walked through the door, the voice bellowed.

“Hey! I was wondering when you were getting home!” It sounded even more alien to her than before.

“Shut up,” she replied as she took off her coat. “I know I’m going crazy, there’s no point in talking to nothing.”

“What? Don’t call me nothing. Don’t you care what’s on my mind?”

“No.”

“I’m a talking photo, damn it! No one else can talk to a photo! It’s a power only you have.”

“You’re not a talking photo, you’re a figment of my imagination.”

“Maybe I am, maybe I’m not. Who cares? As far as your ears are concerned, I’m talking to you. So let’s talk. If you’re crazy, there’s no going back now. Like I said before, just pretend this is a movie. It’s interesting at least, right?” She couldn’t disagree with the voice. This was possibly the most interesting conversation she had ever had.

Leah sat down on her couch, twenty feet away from the picture. “Alright, so, what does a photograph have to say?”

“I’ve got a lot to say. Do you know how photography works?”

“Not really.”

“Well, ahem, you see, film is sensitive to light in a way that makes…”

“I don’t care.”

“Hey, what’s wrong? Rough day?”

“Great,” Leah thought. “*My imagination is patronizing me now.*” She didn’t respond.

“Hmmm, hum de dum hmmm...” The voice was humming a song Leah didn’t recognize. He could hum all he wanted. She was going to sit in silence and see how far this would go. His humming crescendoed and decrescendoed, moving in themes that Leah actually found quite soothing, despite her rattled state, like some sort of aria. The humming climaxed, died down, paused, and began again from the beginning.

“Alright, alright, that’s enough of that,” she interrupted.

“Okay,” he responded. The two remained silent for a long moment. Leah opened her eyes and glanced at the counter. She couldn’t see the picture from her current vantage point.

“So...uh...I was meaning to ask you something...” the voice mumbled.

“What?” Leah replied, groaning.

“Heh, well...”

“What?!”

The voice sighed audibly. “Never mind.”

The silence resumed. Leah breathed deeply, trying to relax her body, hoping that would relax her mind.

“So, uh, what do you do when you leave this place?” inquired the photograph.

“I go to work.”

“Is that it?”

“Pretty much.”

“Where do you work?”

“At an old bookstore.”

“Fascinating.”

Again, a minute of silence.

“Do you ever go anywhere else?”

“Of course, I go to the grocery store, the gas station, you know, where everyone goes.”

“Do you ever go out for fun?”

“Not really.”

“Do you ever go out on dates?”

“No.”

“Intriguing.”

Leah felt as though the conversation was getting awkward. For a disembodied voice, it was fittingly creepy, she thought, but surprisingly normal. Seemingly well-adjusted to his life as a photograph, at least.

“So...” he stammered.

Had the picture run out of things to say? Had this miracle of nature, or, at least, this abomination of reality, talked himself out? “*What a letdown,*” she thought. She stood up and walked to the photograph.

“So, what if I throw you in the garbage?” she responded to the picture.

“Now, why the hell would you want to do a thing like that?”

“Why not?”

“Well, for starters, I’m a talking photo.”

“No, you’re not.”

“Touché. Alright, how about the fact that I’m a representation of someone you care about?”

She paused. She didn’t want to throw away her only picture of Jamie, even if some alien voice was now inhabiting it.

“Alright,” she responded. “I won’t throw you away. What do you want from me?”

“I don’t want anything. I’m a figment of your imagination, remember? I’m here for you.”

“Alright, then what are you offering.”

“I don’t know, you tell me.”

Leah was exasperated. “This is insane.”

“Yes, it is. So, why are you insane?”

“I don’t know. I was born with it?”

“Have you always been talking to photos?”

“No.”

“Well, obviously, something bothers you.”

“Obviously, something bothers everyone.”

She looked at her own reflection in the broken glass that sat next to the picture.

She hadn’t looked at herself in the mirror lately. She thought she looked terrible.

“Well...you could still talk to me.”

“Yeah.”

“Leah, you’re talking to a picture. You can talk to anything, it just won’t always respond.”

Leah stood up and walked to the photograph. “Maybe I’m tired of talking to you. You’re not offering me anything. You’re just talking to hear your own voice!” She looked straight down at the picture. She looked into Jamie’s eyes. “I still have the trash can, you know!” She yelled directly down at the image. Her voice bounced off of the counter and back up to her. The image of Jamie stared back at her.

“Hey, let’s not be hasty here,” the voice pleaded. “Let’s think about this for a second. You have a power that other people don’t have.”

“You’re right. Maybe I should use that power to do something besides talk to a worthless picture!”

Leah picked up the photograph and marched with it into her bathroom. The voice went silent as she carried the picture. She put the picture next to the sink and opened the lid to the toilet. She glared at the picture and sneered.

“Watch this,” she told it. The image of her old friend watched her. Leah threw open her medicine cabinet and pulled out the bottle that contained eight white pills. She pushed the cap down and twisted, and in one motion, opened the bottle over the toilet. The contents spilled out. She reached into her pocket and pulled out the prescription. She hadn’t washed the pants in weeks. She ripped it into small pieces and they floated

into the toilet like confetti. She wiped her hands on her shirt and flushed the toilet. Leah slammed the lid down triumphantly, almost breaking it, and looked at the picture of the 18-year-old Jamie.

“There, it’s done,” she smiled, and she saw the picture smile back.

Moving

I approach the apartment building with no hesitation. I haven't chosen my new home, but I've watched the gray monolith for three days now. My duffel bag is on my left shoulder and a paint bucket I scavenged from a construction site is in my right hand. The bucket is empty and easy to carry by its cold metal handle. The bag is almost as light. It holds the few things I've needed since being evicted. The things that have kept me alive and kept me sane. A toothbrush, soap, a comb, a razor. A bag of trail mix that a sympathetic young lady gave me. A beat up Baltimore Orioles cap. A pair of drumsticks. A half-empty pint of vodka. My life savings, which currently amount to \$50.

The metal black gate opens easily. I push on the knobless door to enter the lobby. It is sparse with little light. The boring checkerboard pattern of the tiles on the floor is difficult to perceive. I see an apartment that I think could be empty to my right and debate a residence on the first floor. A quick escape is appealing, but I would be more likely to be discovered. I walk up the dark stairs.

I walk slowly to the end of the hall on the second floor. The place in the corner has had its lights off for the past few days. The floor betrays me by creaking as I walk by two trash bags sitting next to a door. Reaching the apartment at the end of the hall, I turn the doorknob, praying that it keeps turning. It locks after half an inch. I purse my lips to suppress a curse, then tiptoe back to the stairs and walk up another floor.

The top floor has an apartment with its lights on, even at two o'clock in the morning. I sneak past it and reach the top floor corner apartment, another spot that hasn't

had lights on in days. The doorknob turns freely, and I look through the open door. The apartment is empty.

I can barely see anything, but I can see enough to know that there's no furniture. The door is fully open and I confirm that no possessions occupy the sitting room. I breathe out and swing my duffel bag off of my shoulder, closing the door behind me and clearing my throat, free to make a modest amount of noise. I put down my paint bucket and immediately go to the bathroom to urinate in a toilet for the first time in two days, not bothering to check for active plumbing. My first feeling of true privacy in days strikes me. In fast food bathrooms, even when alone, there's always a good chance that someone is about to walk through the door. When you're outside, who knows who's watching. Something about this privacy and the darkness is immensely comforting.

I finish and the toilet mercifully flushes. My new home needs investigating. It will be my shelter until I can make the money to get to Boston. There is only one other room in the apartment. A small bedroom. I push its door open as moonlight spills out of it onto my torn sneakers and the old wooden floor.

My legs clench as I see a shadowy lump pasted against the wall. At first, I think it's a human, somehow sleeping through my invasion. No. Just something left behind. An unneeded or forgotten bundle of clothes. Or something else. I walk closer to the heap of fabric. My eyes try to make out the dark mass in contrast to the light coming through the window.

I stop breathing when I see human hair and skin. The top of a man's arm. He's not moving. He's asleep, somehow. The room is empty of anything that could be used as a weapon. My options are limited. I have to prepare myself. I may have to kill this

man. I don't want to, but I couldn't take being homeless another night. The thought of him waking up to me standing over him enters my mind. His shock would be quickly replaced by survival instinct. He would stand up and my advantage would be lost. It's impossible to tell how large the man is while he's lying down. I am a good fighter, but I would hate to take my chances. He could have a weapon with him. I regret having to take my eyes off of the man, but I move to the sitting room to retrieve a drumstick from my bag. As I return to the room, I pray that I see his slumbering form still in the corner where I found it. It is there. Standing above him, squinting to look among the grey wool blanket that covers him, I see a flannel shirt wrapped around his torso. I decide to search him for a more effective weapon before I beat him clumsily with a wooden stick. My breathing ceases as I lean over his body. I carefully reach my hand toward his shirt pocket, imagining his face turning toward me, eyes wide open, before I hammer his head back to the floor. Somehow, I don't wake him. My fingers feel wet in his flannel shirt. With my right arm cocked and ready to strike, I pull my left hand toward the window. I don't need to kill this man. It's already been done for me.

It's too dark for me to tell how he died, but the blood suggests that it was violently. I feel sorry now. This man who was a maniac in my mind thirty seconds ago is now a victim. I'm sick with myself that I may as well have been the one who killed him, but I'm relieved that I wasn't. My adrenaline is racing now, but my energy can go toward nothing but preventing sleep. I want a cigarette for the first time in three years. I check the man's pockets. No weapons. No cash. Nothing at all in the apartment except for this body. It's time to return to the sitting room, retrieve my other drumstick, and tap

out a snare drum exercise on my tense legs. I sleep horribly, waking up before the sun rises.

* * *

I sit on the ground outside the Metro station. The skips of the Metro on the tracks determine my tempo at times. Sticks on the industrial pail slow as the train stops with a squeal, and blur as the clunking accelerates, like a pulse quickened with excitement. Sometimes, the pace of a person with loud shoes marks my cadence. Usually, though, my mood matches my tempo. It's best to be in a good mood. I usually get paid more when I play fast. And getting paid more puts me in a good mood.

A young woman stops and listens to me play for a few minutes. I let the double beats of diddles fall out of my limp fingers, two notes bounce off of the plastic drum faster than either of us can see. Accents hit every third note. There's something primal about that rhythm. With a straight rhythm, you feel two and four. It's driving. The syncopation of this rhythm makes you feel two and three, which makes the body have to do more interesting things to keep pace. It's a staple of both jazz and rock, and even if people aren't visibly moving, I think it's moving their insides. I lift my left stick off of the pail and single tapping with my right, quickly. My left hand hovers, waiting with eagerness to finish with a flourish. She patiently listens, and I please her with a loud three-note conclusion. She laughs, claps a few times, and throws a dollar into the dirty Orioles hat that sits beside me.

And that's why I'm doing it. Playing for the money.

Entertaining people is rewarding in its own way. Though I may not be a strong enough player to do anything professionally, I can always be a maestro on the streets.

My technique after so many years without playing is horrible. My diddles are louder on the first strike than the second. My flams lack the delicate spacing that they deserve. But it has improved in the few days I've been doing this.

Old percussion exercises from marching band make good street music material. My history of playing them repeatedly in practice allows me to play them without thinking. I play them as fast as I can so more people take interest. I bang on the sides of the pail to get a different sound. Lifting the bottom of the pail with my foot also changes the timbre. I hammer out loud staccato notes in between almost silent tapping. My sticks attack the drum with dramatic rimshots. Old stick flashes - twirling one drumstick between my fingers or flipping it into the air – seem to please anyone paying attention. I start a slow roll, increasing tempo with each strike. People probably don't appreciate the stick control that it takes, but as it ends in a buzz roll, the sound, like that of a coin falling onto the ground and settling to rest, may remind them to throw something in the cap.

At the end of the day, I pick my drum off the ground. It looks like I may have ten dollars. I shove the money in my pocket without counting it and start my walk, wanting to get back before dark. As I walk toward my new apartment, I pass another construction site. Two buckets of unattended paint give me an idea. I need more attention to make more money, and I want to leave the city as soon as I can. My roommate would probably agree.

I sit in the apartment that I'm currently stealing. The bristles of the toothbrush are easy to pull back. Speckles of blue paint spatter on the white plastic. I wash the brush under the weakly flowing water of the sink and sit back down on the floor. A streetlight burns a chemical light through the window. My artwork is Pollack just because I've

always considered Pollack a drummer with paint. Red dots fly from my fingertips onto my instrument. I will leave my art supplies behind. No need to take them to Boston. They will stay with the other occupant of the apartment who sleeps in the bedroom.

I let the slimy hairs slip off of my index finger, and feel fat globs of paint peel off of the digit to strike the drum. The bristles are too wet for precision. The visual effect is less attractive than what I had meant for, but I don't care much. Splotches of blue will satisfy their main purpose: to make the black and brown streaks look more intentional.

I shake my hands dry over the drum and stand up. The slow trickle of water in the sink washes most of the excess paint from my hands. I avert my gaze to avoid the bedroom, even in the darkness. With my razor in hand, I moisten my scruffy face with my hand. I measure the edge of my hairline by touch, and begin shaving. Wet specks of hair fly into the sink each time I bang the razor on the side of it. The process takes longer than it should, but I need a shave and I have no mirror or shaving cream. My fingers search my face to find any missed spots. I shave the unshaved areas and bang the razor on the edge of the sink one last time. It almost slips out of my wet fingers. The black stubble will greet me the next time I see the sink. Hopefully that will be sooner than later. Scruff will not overtake my face like so many others in my position. I lie against the wall and wait to wake up. I usually prefer total darkness when going to sleep, but since I began squatting in this apartment, I avoid the darker room of the house at night. Hopefully, tonight is not the night that the police show up. Sleep does not come easily. My fingers tap on the wooden floor, and I think I hear an echo coming from the other room.

* * *

When I was younger, my older brother made a deal with me. He was always good with money, and was about to go back to college where he was majoring in business. I was nearing the end of my senior year of high school, and was debating what to do after graduation. My brother loves making deals. He told me that if I took his girlfriend's sister to prom, he would help me out when he was a rich businessman and I was a starving artist. I thought he was kidding. His girlfriend's sister was extremely popular.

“That's the problem. She's so pretty, all of the other guys are too intimidated to ask her to prom.”

“I don't buy it. You're setting me up.”

“Look, I'm trying to teach you a lesson. You'll be getting more out of this than a free ride off of me. You'll be going to the prom with one of the hottest girls in school.”

“I still don't believe you.”

The next day, my brother brought his girlfriend over. They were on spring break from school. She encouraged me that it was a good idea, and that her sister wasn't going to prom, because no one had asked her yet.

It was two weeks before prom, and I spent the first week plotting how I would approach this girl. I hadn't asked a girl out before. I remember the day I decided to do it. I decided I would just walk up to her the next time I saw her and ask her without thinking. I didn't see her until two days later. She stood at her locker, and I looked down the hall at her. Between classes, every other student in the school was walking between classes. I unthinkingly took a step.

I was at her locker before I knew it.

“Excuse me,” I muttered.

“Yeah?”

“So, I was wondering if you had a date to the prom yet.”

She giggled. It wasn't a nervous giggle. “I'm not going. I'm going to the beach. Have fun though.” She rolled her eyes and walked down the hall, meeting with some friends. They talked and laughed, but I didn't feel embarrassed. My brother owed me now, and I reminded him of this via collect call when I decided that it was almost time for me to move.

* * *

My spot is near the U Street station today. I woke up late and missed the morning rush, but I'm not too worried. People willing to pay money for music from an amateur are rare, but I almost have enough money for a bus ticket.

A man takes a spot against the wall across from me. He stands in silence, but I assume he's homeless. Or in a similar position as me. I'm not considering myself homeless now. If nothing else, I have a home with my brother in Boston. I don't belong with them, if for no other reason than I have a tangible reason to be hopeful. The man is wearing a torn jacket and a wool hat. A full beard stained with gray hides his face from the wind. He stands against the wall. He probably hopes like I do that the clouds don't foretell rain. He begins shouting things that I can't understand at the ground.

His presence is competing with my playing, and perhaps making me appear crazy to my potential customers by proxy. He begins to repeat himself, and I start to understand what he's shouting.

“The future is now! The future is gone!”

My sticks vibrate as I try to ignore him. Crazy.

“Go to your homes! Where you’re safe! At least you’ve got one!”

People are actively avoiding him. They’re bee lining toward the escalators. He stares at the ground as he yells. I don’t know why.

His voice has the rhythm of the newspaper sellers in the old movies. “Extra, extra, read all about it!” I match my rhythm to his. My accents match his shouts. He doesn’t seem to notice me or our duet. His ranting almost sounds profane. Things that people shouldn’t be saying and wouldn’t want to hear. I kick my drum on the downbeat and smack it on the up. I make his shouts into a punk song.

I get lost in the duet, and it feels good to play with someone else. Even if he doesn’t riff off of me, I can follow him well. The audience is not as impressed as I think they should be, and continue to rush away. For the first time since I’ve been drumming for money, I don’t actually mind the lack of the audience. I don’t know if my partner even recognizes our collaboration. If he even hears me playing.

He continues to shout for several minutes. No one stops to listen. He stops shouting, and I resume playing on my own. As he stands against the wall, the rain begins. He walks away, and I find shelter under an overhang.

My hat sits almost empty beside me. A man in a suit joins me under the overhang. He lights a cigarette, and I can’t tell if he’s listening or just seeking refuge from the rain. I consider asking him for a cigarette to get through the night. I watch tiny drops of water splash off of the pail as I flam and diddle old exercises. My foot stomps the ground as a little extra entertainment for the man. He smokes his cigarette

and looks elsewhere. I pull a fast roll and shout “Tut! Tut! Tut!” keeping the tempo like we used to do. The man flicks his cigarette and my effort is wasted.

Even before the economy crashed, I read an article in the Post. A genius violinist had played Bach in a Metro station for 45 minutes. One of the best classical musicians in the world playing on a million dollar violin. Barely anyone noticed.

I take a little solace in this. He barely made any money, and he was a virtuoso. I’m playing high school warm-ups on a plastic can, and I’m making almost as much. The rain starts coming down harder and everyone has abandoned the streets. Maybe the rain will stop before the evening rush hour. Then, I’ll try again. The homeless man is long gone.

* * *

As I walk up the stairs, I see my neighbors for the first time since I’ve taken residence in this apartment. A man and a woman. A couple, I assume. They’re about my age. They don’t seem wealthy, but they don’t seem like they’re squatting, either. The shadows of the hallway hide most of the details of their faces from me, and I think I am hidden from them. They say nothing as they open their door, each holding a bag of groceries. As they enter their apartment, I hope they haven’t seen me. I have done a good job of remaining quiet, and I wonder if they’ve known that anyone was living here at all. If I ever come face to face with them, I’ll greet them normally in an effort to suppress any suspicion.

My back rests against the wall as I empty the hat that I’ve carried like a purse. Flimsy one-dollar bills drip onto the floor, and I let them lay to dry while I move to retrieve the rest of my earnings. There’s a tapping coming from the other room. It

freezes me. It holds a steady tempo. Incredulously, I picture the man that I stole this apartment from revived. He has been tapping impatiently, waiting for my return.

I walk carefully to the bedroom where my roommate has been staying. The tapping stops as I walk in. I stand over the man's body. What kind of man was he? What had he done to deserve this? Why was he in this apartment? It's as if someone just left him here. Like he was forgotten. Was he a squatter? Why is he dead? I feel sorry for him. Maybe he was a good person. Christ, all the homeless people I've seen lately. After the newspapers said the economy had collapsed, you couldn't tell. Except that everybody was talking about it. Everything looked the same. People still rushed to their jobs. They still kept a brisk pace; they were still always late. Now, months after the financial world was reported dead by the papers in the news racks, I'm seeing more homeless. Usually, I see it as more competition, but the other day, I saw a teenage girl asking people for money, and I can't see how she deserves that.

This man looks older. He has the unshaven face that most transients I see have. I wish I could look at his eyes, but they are appropriately closed. I hate myself for being so ready to kill this man. My fear of him is gone and I touch his shoulder. His body rolls over surprisingly easily. I pull him into the light coming through the window, and I move his bloody hand to see his wound. My knees shake as I walk back into the sitting room. Slumping against the wall, I play the most basic percussion exercises on them, struggling to keep a steady tempo. I wonder who the last person was who was in here with my roommate. I sleep, poorly, with my drumsticks in my hands.

* * *

In the morning, I skip shaving. My belongings are hanging from my shoulder. The full cans of paint will be left behind. I hope that I don't have to return to this apartment, that at the end of the day, I will have \$75 to buy a bus ticket to Boston. I return to the Metro station I worked at the day before, wondering if I would have another duet.

The ground is cold on my legs that are wrapped around the empty bucket. I twirl my sticks while I play the only jazz song I know. It was adapted for marching band, but I remember it and it gets attention. It's an unusually sunny day, and I'm feeling good about my chances of making \$15.

A little boy starts dancing in front of me. He can't be older than six. I tease him by stopping my bad Buddy Rich impression to play quarter notes on the paint splattered plastic drum. He realizes he can't dance to it, and looks at my slow-moving sticks. He tries to grab one, and I pull it away and play quick sixteenth notes with the other. He tries to grab it, and I pull the same trick. He laughs, and I relent, resuming the fast jazz drumming so he can dance. His mother applauds him and puts five dollars in my hat before they walk away.

The yelling man does not reappear. I don't really miss him, and I don't think anyone else does, either. There is more foot traffic today than usual. Commuters drop in a quarter or two. Sometimes a dollar. But there are enough of them that I start to think I'm nearing my goal halfway through the day. In my head, I've counted a conservative \$15, so I take a break to count my earnings. I've earned almost \$20. I stuff my hat and money into my duffel bag and eye an empty corner of the street. The urge to toss my

makeshift drum into the street in triumph is pulling at me, but I'm not ready to give it up yet.

I walk toward the bus station. I'm ready to leave the city, but I'm feeling sentimental. Feel a little foolish, I want to pay proper respects to the man I've shared an apartment with for the past few days.

I walk to the apartment for the first time in daylight. The grass is poking from the pavement on the front step. There is rust on the black iron gate in front, and the lock has been broken off. The paint that lines the windowsills is peeling. I push on the steel plate that serves as the only front door ornamentation. A broom has been thrown off of the side of the outside steps. Its bristles are frayed and stiff from the weather.

I walk up the steps to say goodbye to my apartment and roommate. There are baseball-sized holes in the wall on my way up. I don't take care to be quiet. As I reach the third floor, I see the door of the apartment I've been stealing for the past few days. The wood around the edges is splintering. It is ajar.

My desire to pay my respects to the dead man in the apartment now must be reconsidered. No longer needing to have a faux wake, I still walk into the apartment out of sheer curiosity.

I walk through the sitting room quietly and step toward the bedroom. Through the doorway, a man with his back to me stands over the dead body. He holds the gray wool blanket in his hands. I can hear him crying. I'm shocked at the sight, and I think I gasp, because the man turns around and looks at me. He is the man who lives next door. He doesn't wipe the tears from his face but he stops crying. The man's eyes are not sad. He spins around to look directly at me. His knees bend as he drops the blanket. It is a

dance I have seen, one that I have performed myself. His jaw slacks and his eyes focus on my waist.

I waste no time in turning my back and running. I can hear his steps gaining on me briefly, but as I turn toward the stairs, I see him burst into the adjacent apartment. A woman screams, something falls. I run down the stairs and past the busted iron gate. I run three blocks until I start to see other pedestrians. Feeling safe, I stop to catch my breath. My duffel bag is secure under my arm and I walk toward the bus station. The buildings are nicer the closer I get. Everyone is rushing to work. Everyone is late. I'm rushing to the bus station with \$75 in my bag for a one-way ticket to Boston. My brother will meet me there.

Escape From Pittsburgh

Jeremy Caddick swore he saw a bush rustle in an empty part of the forest in the park. But then he saw a lot of things he sometimes wished he hadn't. He saw things on television when he wasn't even watching it. He saw places he could be but wasn't. People he should be but wasn't. He saw people with jobs that didn't crush their souls with heavy fingers and a smile while doing it.

"What?" he thought to himself. "What was that?" He was walking into Highland Park, and he thought he saw the movement in a small wooded area to the right of the entrance. Thinking he saw something and seeing something were two very different things to him, though. And Jeremy was not in the habit of following things into the woods. He continued his pace through the park. He forgot that he had seen anything while doing so.

The park was where he felt that his expectations and reality were matched. He expected nothing from it, and got nothing. This particular day, it was especially so. The paths were empty. He looked at the line of trees that usually served as a backdrop for people doing whatever people did in the park. Back at him stared only trees.

He would come to the park to relax sometimes, and he had had a very trying day at work. He had been forced to do someone else's work. The inanity of it. It brought him zero steps closer to a good job. It brought him one step closer to tired boredom, when he preferred regular boredom. His nerves twitched all day at work. He would settle into a small cubicle until some duty, a past issue to be found, a copy to be made, would lug him to the opposite side of the office, a journey laden with unavoidable brushes and collisions with dashing co-workers. He came to the park because it wouldn't lie to him.

It wouldn't offer rushing reporters or excited chatter. About what? A high school football game? Who cared? The reporters on TV in the office spoke calmly while they told him anything. They could say the world was ending, wipe a stoic tear, and dutifully state where the missiles were coming from. Meanwhile, the assistant editor of his paper laughed while talking on the phone about the new school opening. "Yeah, I'll bet you do," he said. "I'll bet you all do," and Jeremy didn't wonder about it because he knew it wasn't funny.

But the park wouldn't lie to him. It knew it was boring. It knew nothing happened in Pittsburgh. Even when the Steelers won the Super Bowl, there was a "riot." One lousy person went to jail. One! He longed for Detroit in 1967. He saw the L.A. riots in 1992. It was an offense to the word to say that Pittsburgh had "rioted."

His job with *The Independent* was never as glamorous or exciting as he had imagined it. In his interview with the editor when applying for the job, he had been asked about his knowledge about current events. Have you been following the primaries? Do you know who the prime minister of Israel is? How often do you watch the local news? Cable news? Do you read any blogs? All of these questions provoked a sense of importance in the position for Jeremy. The world of politics fascinated him. It was why he had majored in journalism and he had goals of working for a major media outlet. He saw himself moving to Atlanta and working for CNN someday, or being a correspondent in Washington or New York. He spent his evenings scouring news stories on the Internet. He was in love with the idea that elected officials played a complex game publicly, and the media were the referees. He watched them lie to everyone's face. They knew most people weren't paying attention. But he was. He was in on the joke.

He had read the front pages of *The Independent* and, although they were a local paper, their coverage of national and international politics was enough to satisfy his early expectations. He felt that his knowledge on the subject would enable him to quickly position himself to write stories covering major events, or perhaps to even write editorials. The actual daily responsibilities of his job, though, immediately disappointed him.

The majority of his time was spent writing and editing local notices. He put together long lists of obituaries, wedding announcements, and church events. Every morning, the editor would present him with a stack of papers containing the data he needed to organize and record. He took his position in the corner of the small newsroom, behind the sports department. The sportswriters were usually gone, covering high school basketball or baseball games. Jeremy had no interest in local sports, so even when the writers were around, he avoided talking to them about their work. It allowed him to concentrate on compiling his own data efficiently, and he was often able to hand in his work hours before he needed to. He alerted the community to the wedding of Anna Martinez and Clayton Nelson. He soberly told them of the great loss of Phillip Gilliam, 89, grandfather of seven and respected member of the Elk Lodge. He implored the greater Pittsburgh area not to miss *Oklahoma!* being performed at NAI High School. He kept his work to himself and left work early as often as he could.

After having worked in social solitude for two weeks, he overheard some co-workers discussing the President's recent visit to Poland, and what Russia's response might be. Even at this small paper, he would embrace talking about grander things than high school musicals. But he couldn't. He had not spoken to anyone apart from his boss

since his first few days at the paper. He was embracing his self-imposed exile in the corner of the room, and accepted his current fate as the grinder of generic copy in the office. The urgency with which his coworkers worked would sometimes disgust him. Nothing happened here that was so important. He knew that, and he responded appropriately. He continued his daily seclusion for four months until he was finally presented with an assignment. Weeks before, he would have thought, "It's about time."

Jeremy's editor unexpectedly walked to his desk while he was typing the details of an upcoming wedding into his database.

"Jeremy, I have an assignment for you." Jeremy was slightly intrigued, a feeling he would later feel was a stupid response.

"Angela called out today, so I need you to go cover the story she was going to report on."

"What's the assignment?"

"A soldier just got home from the war, and his family is holding a welcome home gathering for him. We thought it would be nice to cover."

Nice was about all Jeremy could realistically hope for. It wasn't a stimulating assignment. He promised himself that he would never again feel an iota of excitement for anything that happened within the walls of *The Independent*. He had a significant desire to stay in the office and finish his work there, then go home, eat a TV dinner, and watch the news. But the newsroom was always a place he wanted to leave as soon as possible.

“I need you to take some pictures while you’re there, too. Take the camera with you. I feel bad asking you to do this, but I have to on another assignment. There’s an escaped convict out there. Just broke out this morning.”

“I know,” Jeremy replied, recalling the story from the morning news.

“Well, I have to go talk to the police about it. Sorry to give you extra work.”

Jeremy stood up and gathered the camera and his jacket. His editor handed him the address of the house where the neighborhood was gathering and he walked to his car. He threw the camera in the passenger seat of his car. It would be his lazy, uncaring eye into the aftermath of a story he couldn’t see.

* * *

Jeremy berated himself at the park for feeling a twinge of excitement over an assignment. For a second, or probably even a millisecond, the idea of writing a story about presidential polls had flashed through his mind, ever so briefly. He was happy with himself that he had realized he should be disappointed before he heard what the story was. And on his way to the event, the more he thought about it, the sadder it seemed. He was picking the bones of a story that other journalists had already taken the meat from.

When he arrived at the press event for the soldier, he noted him standing in full uniform. An older couple stood next to him. Jeremy assumed they were his parents, and a group surrounded him, speckled with the brown tints of old military garb. The parents had invited the local newspapers to come, but he was only one of two reporters there. The houses on the street were repetitive. The color of paint was the only differentiating feature of them. The grass of this house shined with the comfort of having been spoiled

with water and trimmed for the special occasion. Jeremy briefly appreciated that he didn't live in the suburbs, but the feeling was fleeting.

He took his place at the back of the crowd. The parents of the soldier stood in front of the audience, made up mostly of neighbors. Glowing at having their son back in the country, they said how proud they were of him and how they corresponded with him as best they could. Jeremy began writing down guesses as to what they would say next. "We missed him everyday and we're so happy to have him home." The mother dried her eyes, and the father said that his son would speak and then answer questions from anyone who wanted to ask them. Jeremy looked up from his notes helplessly. He hadn't expected to be able to ask questions, just to cover the event. He felt stupid. They invited reporters. What had he expected? He hadn't expected much, actually. Despite the tediousness of his assignment, he did have a job to do. He just wished he could care.

The soldier stood in his uniform proudly, and smiled as he addressed his neighbors. He was clearly happy to be there. "Most nights we were interrupted by something. It was never a full night of sleep," the soldier explained.

Jeremy resisted slamming his pen-clenching fist on his head and struggled to construct a relevant question.

"I spent some time driving a tank. As hot as it was in the barracks, it was an inferno inside the tanks."

Jeremy wasn't listening. The soldier recounted his time overseas to middle-aged suburbanites who nodded as he spoke. Small children were legitimately fascinated by the soldier's tales, and hung on every word. Two boys were pointing their fingers at each other, recreating a battle. Older men wore their own uniforms from previous conflicts.

Jeremy would later consider adding the details of the veterans' attires, but he couldn't think of any respectful words, as the uniforms looked like costumes from a long-expired era, especially compared with the modern example that had been in front of him. The older uniforms were covered with colorful stripes and large medals. Some of the veterans wore hats that reminded him of cheesy old war movies. He figured his editor would not be happy with that description, so he left it out.

Jeremy struggled simultaneously to listen to the speech and think of a good question. Before he knew it, the soldier stated, "If any of you have any questions, I'd be happy to answer them." His uniform was suddenly terrifying to Jeremy, as if he were about to be court-martialed by the proud, brown-dressed young man for his lack of preparedness. He didn't have a question ready. The terror aroused anew the sense that he didn't belong there. He wished he was on the front lines, witnessing the battle, reporting for the armed services. He longed to be off of the suburban lawn, away from the desperate need to think of something to ask.

The other reporter asked a question. "How's it feel to be back in Pittsburgh?"

"It's great I couldn't be happier." The soldier smiled. The reporter jotted busily in his notepad.

"When were you the most terrified?" he continued. Jeremy started to take his own notes.

"You're never really terrified until after something big happens. It doesn't hit you while it's happening, but when you realize what just did happen, then it's scary." Some of the children nodded their heads. Jeremy realized that he couldn't have thought of these questions anyway. He thought bigger. But this wasn't an appropriate event to

discuss what war was really like. Make nice with the neighbors. Use the quotes from the other reporter's questions.

Jeremy remembered that he needed a photograph. He reached into his bag, and pulled out his camera. He didn't see an easy path through the crowd. He turned the zoom to full and snapped a picture over the men's heads. "Good enough for *The Independent*, he thought, and that was good enough for him. It was a worthless assignment for a job he was starting to loathe more every day.

He sulked to his car, drove back to the office, and typed a story with little enthusiasm. He included some details, just so the story had *something* in it. He wrote the line, "The bare grass laid a welcome contrast to his previous desert footing." He was a little proud of it, but thought that there was no real way that he could make the story interesting. And no one would read it anyway except for his editor. He laid the copy on his editor's desk and left before he had read it fully.

* * *

Jeremy drove to the park instead of driving home. He was seriously considering quitting his job, but had no idea what he would do instead. Maybe he could just move to New York and try to write for a paper there. There was more of a chance of excitement in New York. He was tired of writing copy about church functions and new schools being constructed. If something interesting would happen, he could write about it without feeling like he was faking it. The city started to look dead to him. He looked at the field off of the walk where high school kids sometimes played football. They would yell out "Roethlisberger!" when someone threw a touchdown pass. No one was playing today. He looked down the path where couples would walk, being somehow fascinated

with each other. Not having to notice the absence of wonder around them. The park was dead. No one was there. Jeremy found it fitting.

He would forget the day and find a secluded spot and just lay in isolation. He would dream of covering the big one when it finally came, or breaking news of police brutality in Queens, or the state of the stock market. Even a visit from the pope would at least be a big enough event to excite him. He fantasized about the fury of reporting that would be his if he just turned in his notice the next day. A violence of reporters ceaselessly careening within loud newsrooms. *The New York Times*. Real things happening. People needing to be places.

He wished he could be somewhere were he didn't have to find stimulation that he would never find anyway. He wanted to be in a place where he would be seeing it all day.

He found an isolated patch to lie down on at the east end of the park, rested his camera bag next to him, and closed his eyes to dream of his new career. He heard a rustle behind him, then a grunting. Suddenly he was not isolated enough, and he sat up to move elsewhere. As he rose, he glanced in the direction of the sound. Reality smacked his forehead as a large man in prison garb glanced back at him.

The man stood, swaying on his legs, looking around. His eyes were darting from side to side, and then focused on Jeremy. The man was intimidating to Jeremy, holding a danger that was impossible to ignore from this distance. The massive, gray-haired man loomed over him with an authority that forced him to take notice, both as a human and a journalist.

Jeremy's fear was real. Sitting in the grass, his hands trembled and he locked eyes with the escaped prisoner. He calmly crossed his legs while he was sure of his imminent death. His knee brushed against the camera bag. He sat still and the man took a step toward him. He wanted to run, but he couldn't move. He heard footsteps in the distance then felt a sting in his back. He grabbed at the pain and felt a piece of metal sticking out of his skin. Before he could even think to pull it out, reality began to disappear. He could see the man, very far away now, attempting to run. The man screamed. He studied him, wondering what was making him upset. He was getting further away, and Jeremy felt like he was floating as the prisoner flopped to the ground. He closed his eyes and rested in the grass.

* * *

Jeremy lay in the hospital bed, recovering from his tranquilizer injection. The doctors said he would recover as if he had just had surgery. In the meantime, the hospital bed faced a television. He felt comfortable lying in the bed, relatively frozen, watching the local news. He decided that he was done with this city. He closed his eyes and thought of the masses of people rushing desperately through the streets of Manhattan. He was mentioned in the local news that night. The convict had been recaptured after being shot with a tranquilizer. Two people were hospitalized. Jeremy wasn't identified, and didn't watch the report. He had fallen asleep.