

ABSTRACT

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The following novel excerpt and story investigate the ways in which people cope. These works look closely at the way experience affects perception, memory and thought.

Characters in these works willingly misinterpret reality and view the world through a lens distorted by their experience. These variations carve pathways in the mind's landscape, restructuring the way the world is understood.

COPING: LANDSCAPES OF THE HUMAN MIND

By

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Dedication

For Mama

Acknowledgements

Someone once told me that an important part of an MFA program is finding readers. To Davis, Fang and K—looks like I've found my readers.

To Howard Norman, for cooking me lunch and helping me realize the big picture. To Maud Casey, for opening up new possibilities in my writing.

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1: Cope

Chapter 1

2001

June flicked her still lit cigarette into the damp street and boarded the train. Anymore it seemed, at least to her, that people just didn't ride trains. It was right up there with using payphones, writing letters, taking pictures with actual film. No, it had become a world of instantaneous text messages, blog feeds, private jets. What June didn't want was internet access, security checkpoints, an in-flight movie.

"I'm so fucking tired," she said to no one. "So fucking tired."

It wasn't until an old man in a blue hat called out after her, that she realized she had forgotten her bag. Her overstuffed, red suitcase fell onto its side growing darker with each drop of rain. The man in the blue hat hoisted it up towards June who was now standing awkwardly with half her body inside the train. She leaned back on her heels and eased the bag through the slender doorway with a sigh. Smiling wryly at the man she thanked him with a nod. June wondered if she should tip the man but she didn't know if he even worked at the train station. Maybe he was just a black man in a blue hat and it would have been racist to hand him a dollar. There was something about his worn-out expression that reminded her of Chase.

This was June, hating her life. Thinking her life was nothing more than a series of bad decisions. At 24, she thought she had nothing to show for herself.

Nothing but failed paintings, failed relationships, failed attempts to give a fuck about anything. For June, it was exhausting just to move.

This is what it's like for June, wishing the train would crash so she wouldn't have to show up to the wedding alone and exhausted. She just wanted someone to ask her if she was okay. To unload everything onto a complete stranger. Feel the comfort of someone sitting beside her. A hand on her shoulder, an empathetic sigh.

June boarded the train to Georgia, absentmindedly touching her diamond necklace, making sure it was still there. On their second year anniversary, Chase had given it to her with explicit instructions, "Don't lose this June. I know how you are." Nothing he did for June could be described as kind. On paper, giving June a necklace would seem sweet, sentimental, saccharine. But nothing Chase ever did was without this sense of hatred that neither of them could describe. It was almost as if Chase saw June as the embodiment of everyone who had ever hurt him. Years of rejection, embarrassment, abandonment.

Rewind to five months ago when June got the wedding invitation from her friend, Angela. June perused the details of the invitation: the future Mrs. George Parker, the middle of May, downtown Savannah. Rewind to June beneath the covers, crying herself to sleep. She knew George, thought he was a great guy. But June, she couldn't help but mutter over and over, it will never be me, it will never be me. While everyone else was getting married, having kids, getting jobs with paid vacations, June was chain-smoking and watching the news.

It's not that she even wanted all of that. If anything, she just wanted to be like Barbie. Barbie, who never married, never had kids, all so she could have

independence and freedom. While June was crying through infomercials, Barbie was busy being an archaeologist, dentist, accountant. June was watching footage of school shootings, genocide, disease in third world countries. Really her feigned interest in these world events was just selfish. She felt better about living in an identical apartment in a copy of a pre-made neighborhood complete with nothing memorable. All of this while Barbie was leaving Ken for Blaine, the Australian surfer hottie. Blaine, whose interests ranged from snowboarding to dance parties. June figured Barbie wouldn't be a good role model if she didn't explore her options.

Once completely inside the train with her bag, June was startled by the train's heaving and coughing noises. As she wheeled the bag down the aisle, the machine sighed and whirred, gears grinding against gears, levers being pulled and locked. People all over the train seemed to be pretty comfortable, as if they had spent their whole lives there. They seemed to know just how the seats reclined, where the snack car was, how to best fit their luggage in the overhead bins.

She put her messenger bag on the seat closest to the aisle and sat down by the window. She wondered if dust and germs were trickling into her unwashed hair from the felt headrest. If the seventies couch fabric was transferring microbes to her already damaged hair. Months had passed since she had applied 1-2-3 Natural Blonde to her dark brown hair. Since she nearly puked from the alcohol smell, bent over the kitchen sink, gloved hands covered in chemicals, conditioners. Her hair now looked the opposite of natural but she didn't really care. Caring about her appearance was on June's to-do list. It was right up there with taking interest in others' lives, recycling, writing letters to soldiers.

As she tugged her suitcase close to her, a woman turned to her and spoke. “You can’t be leaving your suitcase there, ma’am. All the luggage has to go up there.” The woman motioned to the bin above her where her dark grey suitcase lay. Do you fucking work here? June thought, June wanted to say. The woman was wearing a grey skirt with a matching top. June couldn’t help but stare at the run in the woman’s black stockings, a ragged zigzag of a snare just above her ankle. The woman wore a floppy white hat with some sort of fabric and what looked to be fake flowers and a sprig of some plant. Her dark face was hidden behind inch-thick glasses, resting on the edge of her bulbous nose.

“Oh,” June said. “Well they’re going to have to put it up there for me. I’m done.” The woman nudged a man who appeared to be her husband and muttered something under her breath. June watched as the man grabbed his cane and cautiously made his way into the aisle. He wore a three piece brown suit and thick black sunglasses even though the train was dank and grey, the residue of the dreary day sneaking in through half-closed windows. June noticed a strange loop around the man’s cane. It wasn’t a cane at all.

The man felt around, reaching the metal armrest. “He’ll help you,” the woman shouted over. The man slowly caressed the suitcase with his dark, worn hands and then did the same with the overhead storage. His frail, papery hands glided along the two metal bars and the thick black straps. Once the man reassured himself of the exact location of both the suitcase and the overhead bin, he leaned back and took a deep breath. He exhaled forcefully and lifted the suitcase into the bin. June smiled at the man, but then realized he couldn’t see her face, much less her expression. As he

settled back into his seat, brushing past the woman next to him, June awkwardly averted her glance. Had he never seen a woman smile?

It was as if she had lost her sight. As if she were the one stumbling around with a cane, relying on memory, movement, sound. June had just smoked a few cigarettes that morning, sitting on her suitcase, as the sun crept its way up her dusty kitchen window. She just sat there, surveying the square imprints Chase's bookshelves had left on the living room carpet, the dusty space in the cupboards where his cereal used to be. He offered to pay rent for at least a month, until June could find another roommate. But June, with the money she got from her father's life insurance, her father's will, she told Chase to go fuck himself.

His eyes had always been a luminous blue but that night they appeared dull and grey. Tears matted his long eyelashes together as he crossed his arms as if hugging himself. She remembered his angular jaw, the way he sauntered everywhere, his head bowed slightly as if impersonating Charlie Brown.

"Thank you," June said meekly to the woman in the floppy hat. The woman waved her hand towards June as if swatting a fly. As if the thanks June had offered was completely uncalled for. But for June it was more than a friendly gesture. The man had reminded her what it was like to be cared for.

June removed her tan corduroy jacket revealing a fitted white t-shirt complete with coffee stain. She regretted wearing flip flops on the train. There, surrounded by people, she could feel abandoned gum and dirt seeping into the pores of her feet. After rolling the cuffs of her jeans down, she leaned against the window. June took her laptop from her bag and set it down on the pull-down tray, removing a set of

headphones. She thought a movie might help her relax, but something about the previews made her chest tighten, throat swell. At the end of each preview, when the date flashed, June felt sick. As if she knew she wouldn't be around when the movies finally came out. Living in that empty apartment by herself, no one would notice if she swallowed a bottle of mood stabilizers, took a paring knife to her wrists. Fifteen minutes into her movie, June was seconds away from sleep.

She felt heavy as she watched the sad man with black hair on her little screen. He slumped back in a chair and took his headphones off. June's head fell forward slightly as a blonde woman with short bangs wandered on screen.

June was rustled back into complete consciousness by a man shouting something about tickets. Without thinking, she removed the crumpled ticket from her jacket pocket and handed it to him. He stamped a hole in the ticket and returned it. June watched as he took out a black marker and printed "SAV" on a bright yellow card before sticking it in a slot by her suitcase above.

"Richmond," he wailed as he ambled past her, with a deep and guttural tone. "Richmond, leaving Richmond, next stop Petersburg."

A flight from Richmond to Savannah would only have taken June three and a half hours. But having been a flight attendant for two years now, the thought of getting on an airplane outside of work seemed nauseating.

Trains were simple. No security, no metal detectors, no fascist announcements.

She slept through most of Virginia and awoke in the middle of Rocky Mount, North Carolina for a brief moment when a little boy fell into the aisle, kicking her

shin. A few movies later, she fell back asleep only to awake in Florence, South Carolina where the passengers were permitted to detrain momentarily so members of the crew could sneak a few cigarettes. June had taken that opportunity to stretch her legs and get some fresh air which consisted mostly of fumes.

Suddenly but slowly, the deep, booming voice rustled June from sleep announcing the train's arrival in Savannah. Once off the train, June pushed past weary travelers in the waiting area of the Savannah train station. The station looked drab and exhausted to June. It had been built in 1962 and showed no signs of remodeling since then. Large women in floppy hats fanned themselves with traveler brochures on pirates, seafood and haunted cemeteries.

Pulling her suitcase behind her, June ambled outside, the wheels of her suitcase making a loud bump each time they passed over the grout between the ugly brown tiles. Once outside, she rested her suitcase against a cement bench to the right of the entrance. As she rustled around through her bag, looking for her cigarettes, she tried to locate herself in the present. Her mind was not in Savannah.

As she lit a cigarette and sat down on a curb painted in a cautious yellow, June smoothed down her pant legs, as if a few swift motions could undo hours of travel. June was so dizzy with motion sickness and the cigarette only made it worse, but she couldn't bear the thought of not smoking. The impending lung cancer, yellow teeth, trouble breathing. To June, this all paled in comparison to the thought of feeling alone, having nothing to hold, nothing to touch her lips.

June's pants clung to her damp legs in what she considered to be ridiculous heat.

She flicked her half-smoked cigarette on the street and called Angela, the bride-to-be. June couldn't remember what time she had told Angela, but it was just after eight p.m. now, and this train station wasn't a place June wanted to be another minute. She called Angela again and again but kept getting her voicemail. June sighed.

Where were her meds? What if she had forgotten to ask Angela for a ride back from the train station? Her eyes darted around, anxiously surveying the strange faces around her. Were they staring at her? Had she said these things out loud?

June fell to her knees near the cement bench and thrust her hands into the deep, dark recesses of her bag. Her ribcage felt as if it were slowly growing smaller, closing in on her heart, her stomach, her everything. Her damp hands gliding over lipstick, matches, old ticket stubs, a box of mints, finally resting on the small orange bottle full of pale, yellow pills. Tears had already welled up in her eyes, her surroundings blurred along with any semblance of reason, but she managed to get the bottle open. She placed one of the tiny pills under her tongue and lit another cigarette as the sugary-tasting powder dissolved. It would take a good thirty minutes for the pill to kick in, but just knowing she had something at the very least, allowed her to breathe.

“Excuse me? Are you June?” A playful, Southern voice asked.

A large man towered over her. He extended his right arm mechanically, as if his movements were restricted. He was wearing grey slacks and a lavender, button-down shirt. His face was bright red and his blonde hair was shaved down to peach fuzz. June shook his hand calmly and mumbled something about Richmond.

Inspecting his smile, she focused in on one of his front teeth that was chipped on the left side. She knew it was rude to stare, but if she narrowed her glance, she could momentarily forget that there was a man who must have weighed over 200 pounds staring her down. A man that apparently knew her name.

“I, uh, I.”

“Oh, well I’m Sergeant Jeremy Pryor. Apache crew chief for the United States Army. Angela sent me to pick you up. I’m one of George’s friends. She completely forgot that the rehearsal dinner was tonight and she wouldn’t have time to get you. It’s okay June, you can trust me. I swear. Angela’s got her phone on silent but you could call George if you’re worried or something.”

Jeremy edged towards June’s suitcase awkwardly unsure of how to proceed.

June sighed. George. Why didn’t she think to call George? Of course Angela wouldn’t answer her phone. Of course tonight was the rehearsal dinner.

“Oh, no,” she said. “Don’t worry about it. I’m sorry I’m ... totally out of it. I’m June, by the way. You asked me that. I’m sorry. I’m such a mess.”

June lowered her gaze feeling warm, embarrassed. She was suddenly overcome with a wave of nausea and held onto Jeremy’s arm for support. She realized that her diet that day consisted solely of cigarettes and anti-anxiety meds.

Jeremy hoisted her suitcase up in one hand and motioned June towards the back of the building. The parking lot was dimly lit but she no longer felt scared. Maybe the meds were finally kicking in; maybe something about Jeremy’s kind words comforted her.

After Jeremy placed the suitcase in the bed of his truck, he came around the passenger side and opened the door for June. The white four-door truck was hoisted up above the tires on a lift kit and seemed closer to a school bus than a car. June peered over the truck bed at her suitcase which sat next to a large, blue cooler. All four of the tires had sparkling chrome rims that looked as if they'd been engineered by a racecar driver. Each rim was a shiny set of eight spokes joined together in the middle by several rivets. Even the side view mirrors looked like they belonged to a school bus. June nodded, stepping on the metal bar jutting out from beneath the truck and into the passenger seat.

The interior of the truck looked like the cockpit of a plane to June. She couldn't help but think of the pilots, the copilots, the "hey honey bring me a snack" complete with an unwanted ass grab. Jeremy rummaged through CD's, played with his cell phone and switched lanes recklessly. June couldn't get the pilot's voice out of her head. The humming drone of the truck became "good afternoon passengers." The rush of the air conditioning, "currently cruising at an altitude of ..."

"Are you trying to tear your very own hole in the ozone?" June asked as she craned her neck around to look at the backseat. A black dress covered in plastic hung from a hook, swaying with each turn. Jeremy must've noticed the look of confusion on her face. He put the CD's away and turned to address her.

"The oh what? Oh Angela had me bring that to you for the rehearsal dinner. She said your clothes would probably be pretty wrinkled by the time you got off that train. Called me half-way here and asked me if I had a tie but I've never had a use for one."

June nodded, fidgeting with a silver ring on her right ring finger. It had only cost her ten bucks. The ring was just a ring. It wasn't attached to any broken promises, didn't remind her of anything or anyone.

She turned her attention back to Jeremy. At first she considered getting mad at Angela for the sudden change in plans. But she told herself that Angela had enough to worry about with the wedding. It would be different if June had to take a cab to the dinner and pull on her wrinkled dress. But when she focused on the small stain on Jeremy's lavender shirt, she found that she didn't really care. If he could handle being shipped to Iraq with nothing more than a duffel bag full of clothes, June could handle a change in plans.

"Oh, thank God. Is there a rest stop or gas station where we can stop?" June asked.

"We don't have really have time to stop anywhere. Don't worry, I'm a gentleman through and through. Once we get there, I'll hop out and get your shoes for you. It'll be like a fairy tale or something."

"Oh," June mouthed, almost in shock of how genuine Jeremy's words were. He seemed to view the world in black and white terms and that made her feel at ease. She sighed and grabbed the dress from the backseat. Once in Angela's dress, she threw her clothing in the backseat and flipped down the visor on her side, using the mirror to put on makeup. She looked at her face. The bags under her eyes said loss. The damp, matted hair, anxiety.

Jeremy pulled up in front of the lavish hotel and put the car in park. Cars whizzed by the street lined with bowing oak trees covered in Spanish moss. Couples

in formal wear linked at the arms walked past them and through the large glass doors of the hotel. June eased into her dress shoes that Jeremy got from her luggage.

She took a few steps towards the hotel then turned to face Jeremy.

“Shit,” she said to no one in particular.

Jeremy jumped back, concerned.

“No, it’s nothing. It’s just. I forgot to bring my purse.”

“Well, I tell you what. You give me your shit and I’ll put it in my pockets.”

June nodded as she took a cigarette and lighter from the bag and handed the rest over to Jeremy. “I’ll just wait here. I guess as my date you’re supposed to escort me in and all that.”

“Yeah, sounds good. I’m gonna go illegally park my truck in one of these here garages. There’s a gay-ass sign that says they discriminate against real trucks. But I’ll just unscrew that from its post on the way out.”

June smiled as she stood just to the right of the entrance and lit another cigarette. An older woman walked by donning some sort of fur wrap even though it must have been 85 degrees out. She ambled on, clutching the arm of a small, fat man with reading glasses. June felt out of place and unwanted, like one of those women who handed out mints and perfume samples in public bathrooms.

June sat down and watched as people, couples rather, because no one seemed to be walking alone, filed into the hotel like cows. Being with Jeremy, listening to his stories, observing his mannerisms, seemed to turn the volume down on everything else. Her anxiety, her unwanted memories, all of it faded into mere background noise. Jeremy was only nineteen, but he didn’t seem immature aside from his baby face.

He reappeared instantly. Pools of sweat had turned portions of his shirt a deeper purple. June dropped her cigarette and put her hand to her chest. Jeremy realized he had startled her and held his hands out as if approaching a snarling dog. He immediately mumbled an apology and slowly sat on the curb beside her. As he fidgeted with his keys, he examined June's expression. His smile faded as he absorbed the contempt June seemed to have for these couples. She bit her lower lip sternly, as if it were the only thing keeping her from spearing these people to the ground. She hated these people, hated their laughter, their warm embraces. June shifted her glance to her feet, focusing in on the faded strips of pink carelessly applied to her toenails. As she picked at the polish delicately, she looked up at Jeremy. Generally she put a lot of effort into feigning interest, pretending everything was okay. But with Jeremy, it would seem too dishonest. Shifting his weight, as if uncomfortable in the silence, Jeremy touched the toe of his shoe to her heel. She rolled her eyes as yet another couple ambled by, this time followed by a screaming toddler dragging a worn teddy bear against the sidewalk.

Jeremy stood up and held his hands out for June. She grabbed them reluctantly and was able to glance at the toddler without a look of disdain. Suddenly, she was overcome with the feeling that she should explain everything to Jeremy. Tell him that she couldn't even imagine having kids. Couldn't imagine being responsible for someone else's life when she could barely handle her own. That she felt nothing but rage towards these stupid, happy families. But the way he stood there, arms out, told her that it didn't matter. All the reasons she had to hate these people suddenly didn't seem so important.

The two locked arms and walked through the beautifully decorated foyer littered with healthy green plants in hand-crafted pots, bowls of candy, weary travelers and a few straggling members of the wedding party .

Jeremy led June into an elevator with two other couples. An older man in glasses wearing a beautiful blue suit nudged his wife and pointed at Jeremy.

“You’re a big boy, son! What are they feeding you?” The man chuckled, clapping his hands as if he’d won something.

“Well, thank you sir,” Jeremy said awkwardly. “I do believe my Buddha belly might sink this here elevator so don’t go getting too close to me. But I’m pretty confident this rehearsal dinner will go just fine. Me, I practice eating all the time. Hell I don’t need to rehearse dinner, I could do it in my sleep. And according to my girlfriend, sometimes I do!”

Everyone laughed at once making it seem as though the elevator itself had chuckled.

June finally reached Angela and they spoke briefly since there was a long line of people waiting to see the bride-to-be.

Jeremy pulled out a chair for June and sat down beside her at their table of ten. She was so glad to have Jeremy at her side since she didn’t know many people there. A waiter came around filling the wine glasses as others presented the food. Each guest was served a 22 ounce filet mignon, pecan-encrusted salmon cake, mushroom risotto, garlic scalloped potatoes and a fresh salad with baby spinach and caviar.

June didn't know what to say, as a vegan she doubted she could eat anything on the plate. Maybe the salad? But it had fish eggs and some sort of sauce. So as not to appear rude, she picked at the potatoes delicately, spooning small bits into her mouth. She decided she would be a vegetarian for the night and let herself eat a little dairy so as not to feel like a total outcast.

"You one of those vegetarians?" Jeremy asked, his fork poised and ready to take June's uneaten steak.

"Yeah, something like that. Want my filet?"

"No, I want your steak. And your salmon. That lady just to my left, she must be a vegetarian too. It would make my fucking night if I could have three of these steaks on my plate. What do you say?"

June leaned back as Jeremy stabbed her meat with his fork and took a huge bite out of it before flopping it down on his plate. He chugged the red wine, telling stories as he chewed the meat voraciously with his mouth wide-open. What fascinated June the most about Jeremy's life was the rigid, predictability of it. As June learned, every single day, Jeremy wakes up at 6:30 a.m., runs five miles, takes a shower and is back in uniform and fixing planes by 8 a.m. He leaves work every day at 4:30 p.m. and goes to his girlfriend's house. After changing out of his uniform and into his pajamas around 5:30, she cooks him dinner. His girlfriend, she's not from the South. She cooks him things like vegetable stir fry, tofu marinated in soy sauce, ginger. "Compliments to the chef," he always says into his drink with a big fake smile. He stabs at the roasted red pepper, pretending it's bacon. Shovels broccoli into his mouth

as if it were fried. After dinner Jeremy dips tobacco while his girlfriend smokes a cigarette on the front porch, the smoke hanging lazily in the dense Southern air.

June didn't bother checking her phone to see if anyone had called. She took a sip of water and turned to Jeremy, who was chewing and smiling, taking in the surroundings. Things were never that predictable for June. June sets her alarm for a different time every day, depending on when she has to be at work. She might have to work a 9 a.m. flight to California, stay overnight, fly back to Iowa, then somewhere else, then Richmond, then somewhere else. She doesn't usually get an itinerary from the airlines until the week before. Her time is spent in narrow aisles thousands of feet in the air, pouring orange juice over ice.

"Jeremy, I just realized I haven't even asked you where you're from," June said, surprised at her ability to follow some sense of a social code.

"Well, I hate onions, country music and cows. That answer your question? I assume you're from Richmond on account of your train traveling all the way from there. Ain't that where Marlboro cigarettes come from? You get a discount or something, that's why you're always smoking?"

"No, it's mostly out of boredom. I guess I could be one of those insipid harlots who chews gum, sucks on lollipops, twirls her hair."

Jeremy leaned back with a strange grin, as if June had challenged him in some way.

"You know I could just go on and on about Apache helicopters, throwing around words like reverse-tricycle landing gear, target acquisition, designation system."

June smiled genuinely, stabbing a tomato and shoving it into her mouth.

Jeremy chuckled triumphantly, pouring more water into June's glass.

The woman next to her said something to June that was the opposite of memorable.

"That just isn't you," Jeremy said, motioning to June's neck as he leaned over to wipe his mouth on the white linen tablecloth. June cocked her head slightly, the way a dog responds to the tone of a question. "The necklace. Looks like a Christmas gift you were too kind to return."

"Oh, yeah. You know family." June evaded quickly, eyeing the door to the balcony.

"What's his name?"

June sighed and looked away. She raised her water glass to her lips but it was empty.

Sensing that it was a sensitive subject, Jeremy shoved more meat into his mouth and poured water into June's glass.

"Fuck. Where is he?" Jeremy asked, his words jumbled by the steak, juice dribbling down his chin.

"Where's who?"

"Daddy. He said he'd be here a little late but it's almost 10 o'clock. Have you heard of Pryor Auto? Probably not if this is your first time in Savannah. Well my dad, he owns it."

"Oh, that's nice," June said. "And what does your mom do?"

“Fuck other men. I was fifteen when I came home to find my mother’s ankles sticking out from beneath Wade Tucker’s big shoulders. I waited for the sweating and thrusting to end before I introduced a two-by-four to the back of his head. Good thing for divorce.com though. A few clicks, 500 bucks and you’ve got yourself a divorce.” Jeremy offered the story with detached accuracy, as if merely reporting an incident that didn’t concern him.

“How is your dad holding up?” June asked, nervously sipping water between words.

“He’s a broken man now. We’re fine though. Just fine,” he said as if he could convince himself, convince June, that he didn’t need a mother. Something didn’t seem right to June. It wasn’t like Jeremy’s mother was dead—couldn’t he forgive her? Did they still speak? Write letters?

June felt Jeremy’s thick hand on her back—as if she were the one who needed comforting. She thought for a moment that he might cry. She leaned forward and the rest of the room faded into a blur of lights and the din of clinking glasses. People seemed somber and calm, bowing heads to exchange niceties, politely thanking the waiters, using their dinner napkins to dab at the corners of their mouths. As June leaned back she saw that he did have tears in his eyes. He mumbled something about allergies and carelessly grabbed at his glass. The effects of the wine became more apparent as he knocked over the breadbasket, sending rolls of pumpernickel, wheat and rye tumbling across the table. He leaned down to retrieve a lost fork, hitting his head on the table as he returned. June shook her head as if realizing in that instant that he was just a boy.

Seeing that Jeremy had spilled wine on his shirt, June dabbed a napkin in water without thought. She blotted out the stain methodically, pressing the napkin firmly into the fabric. Returning the napkin to the table she fidgeted with her ring and smoothed out the creases in the table cloth. She eyed the balcony anxiously. She suddenly felt nauseas, overwhelmed. The crisp air conditioning had knocked over place-cards but did little to cool her bare shoulders, arms, neck. Other women crossed their arms, grabbed their dates' jackets, shivered. June envisioned being submerged in a glass of water, clinking around with the ice, the lemon. Somewhere in the clamor of forks against plates, Angela's father appeared to be giving a toast. What June didn't hear was how George and Angela met, the endearing jokes and canned laughter. It seemed as though the people next to her were closing in on her. Ambling towards her, knocking over chairs, tables. Several faces closing in, two arms wrapped around her neck, her chest, slowly constricting, cutting off air.

June kicked Jeremy lightly under the table.

Everyone drained their wine glasses. The toast had ended. Servants appeared swiftly, fresh wine bottles in hand. The other guests clapped softly in unison which made June think sand traps, putting greens, caddies.

Dessert plates appeared with tiny wedges of lemon cake, drizzled in raspberry glaze, each topped with a single sprig of mint. As June watched people stab the cake delicately with their forks, she felt disgusted as though the cake were bleeding. Her damp hands shielded her eyes, as the dimly lit chandeliers became industrial lights, basking a field in their glow.

“Maybe we can step outside?” June asked as more of a demand than a question. June had made up her mind that she couldn’t be in this room with these people, these strangers. There had to be something, anything that would ease the pain of talking to them. But seeing Jeremy fumble around, stutter, all of this made June glad she didn’t drink. She didn’t have the confidence to be social but at least she wouldn’t feel sick in the morning, do anything regrettable.

Jeremy smiled and gestured towards the balcony as if he were giving a tour of the grand hotel. The balmy breeze felt soothing to June as she watched Jeremy take out a hockey puck shaped can of what looked like yesterday’s coffee grounds. The top of the can had golden raised letters on it, but June could only make out a “C” and an “O.” They looked out at the brightly lit bridge that linked Georgia with South Carolina.

Jeremy put a wad of dip in his mouth as June lit her cigarette.

Jeremy nodded to an older couple who had scurried back inside, apparently offended by the smoke from June’s cigarette.

Jeremy leaned forward a little and sighed, as if trying to tell June that everything was okay, that she had nothing to worry about. June thought of Chase and the way he always offered those words drenched in apathy and sarcasm, as if it were merely the words and not the tone that were comforting. She wanted to thank Jeremy but couldn’t seem to find the words. The right phrase, packed tightly beneath her tongue, seemed to fall to the ground as her mouth opened.

June and Jeremy spent the rest of the night out on that balcony, trading stories and listening to each other, just listening. At the end of the night, June actually found

herself looking forward to the wedding the next day, because Jeremy would be there. Be there with her. She no longer felt guilty, like she was letting Angela down in some way because she was too depressed to be a good friend. June could be happy, social. She could be just like all these other women instead of June, the failure, June the unmarried woman sulking in the corner.

She tried to remember the last time she looked forward to anything, but couldn't.

Chapter 2

2007

June kisses her husband goodbye. She kisses him delicately, as if his rough stubble might erode the layers of makeup she's so carefully applied. She places her hands against his chest, against his work shirt. The sewn on patch on the left side reads, *Clay*. The patch on his right, *Pryor Auto—You Crash it, We Patch it*. The first two buttons are undone revealing a dark red chest with a small patch of brown hair.

“June?” he says, waving his hands emphatically. “Are you objectifying me again? You know how that makes me feel.”

He laughs.

June smiles.

“You deserved it. I mean look at what you're wearing, honey,” June says playfully, absentmindedly touching the fake pearl necklace that falls atop her canary yellow dress, just below her collar bone.

Clay smiles, holding her at shoulder's length so he can take in the seven dollar vintage dress she bought at a thrift store. The sleeveless dress covered in little white polka dots that falls just below her knees. The layers of chiffon, giving the skirt portion a stiff bell shape.

“Okay, baby I gotta go,” Clay says, removing his worn out baseball hat to kiss his wife on the forehead. “And would you take those ridiculous shoes off? I'm not taking you to the emergency room because you insist on doing manual labor in high heels.”

“These are Alexander McQueen’s” June says with an air of condescension. These are the very same matching yellow heels she used to wear to art shows back in Richmond.

“Well then give them back if they’re not even yours,” Clay says, only he’s not kidding.

June hears the fading sound of gravel popping beneath truck tires as she pulls the front door closed. She takes a deep breath and fixes her makeup by glancing at her reflection in the microwave. Once she’s satisfied with her looks, her persona, she leans over the kitchen counter and looks out into the living room.

“Preheat the oven to 325 degrees Fahrenheit,” June says as if there is a small microphone clipped to her apron. As if there is a real live studio audience beyond her kitchen counter. Her own daytime cooking show. Thirty auditioned strangers feigning laughter, surprise, amazement. The overhead kitchen light is her spotlight. The piles of laundry are her audience members, and then there’s June, the hostess. Anyone who watches the cooking channel knows you’ve got to fit some sort of stereotype to get your own show. Either you’re the really chatty Italian girl from Jersey, the hefty Southern woman with three kids, or the geeky white guy who breaks down the chemical compounds of a cupcake. June doesn’t really fit into any of these types.

On the surface, she’s got everything—a loving husband, two sons, a beautiful kitchen. It’s all you need to feel complete, as if the ability to procreate were some sort of accomplishment. But June isn’t smiling because she loves her husband, she’s not cheerful because her younger son can now make the vowel sounds appropriate for his

age. That slightly deranged grin is the painkillers she took while Clay was in the shower. The cheery disposition is the red wine she chugged when he went outside to get the morning paper. It's nine in the morning and June is drunk, high.

That warning on the bottle of painkillers, *Do not consume with alcohol*, is merely a suggestion to June. What she doesn't care about is the resulting stomach ulcers, internal bleeding, migraines. This cocktail is the only thing keeping her from throwing herself in front of a bus, taking a steak knife to her wrists.

Clay does everything he can to help. He takes her to her therapy appointments, picks up her mood stabilizers and anti-anxiety meds from the pharmacy. But at times he just feels that June is beyond help. The meds help a little but with side effects like: suicidal thoughts, irritability, anxiety, depression, it's hard to say. Clay doesn't really know what to do, what to say. What do you say to someone who isn't there? Someone living in the past? There isn't really a cure for boredom, listlessness, the monotony of life. Doctors haven't found a cure for anything—cancer, depression, the common cold.

But in this moment, June's boredom is on the backburner. On the forefront of her mind is the cooking show, *her* cooking show. No one else is there. Her husband's at work, her baby's sleeping, her stepson is on a plane somewhere, on his way home from Iraq. Her stepson, Jeremy, will be home tomorrow. Tomorrow. So there June is, addressing her faux audience members, but it wasn't always this way. She used to be happy. Only she can't remember when.

She turns to face her audience when she hears a muffled cough transmitted through the beeping baby monitor on the counter. Her baby is not sleeping after all.

“Excuse me,” she says to no one. “Excuse me.”

June goes into the nursery and Pace coughs some more. His cries always start out that way. A little pink face scrunches up, turns red, and then little tiny coughs give way to seemingly endless sobbing. The way his tongue lolls around and his lips pucker, June knows he’s hungry. She can usually stick her pinky finger in his mouth to fool him for a few quiet seconds. But then he realizes there’s no milk and gets even madder than before.

June reaches into his crib and grabs him with both hands firmly just under the shoulders, making sure to jut out a few fingers to support his bobbing head. His pink, old man face scrunches up as his chest heaves, drawing in a big gust of air, only to be let out seconds later as a crippling scream. June thinks he looks so adorable in his lime green, terrycloth onesie. It has tiny white padded soles on the bottoms of the feet and a picture of a little chubby cow on the chest. June undoes the zipper that runs from the top of his chest, across his belly and down to his left foot. She pulls his thick pink arm out of one sleeve and peels back the cloth giving her access to his diaper. She undoes one of the Velcro strips exposing Pace’s wrinkled red flesh beneath. June lays him delicately on the changing table and pokes at the weighted down bottom of his diaper. It feels gelatinous, like a plastic bag full of human fat extracted from some celebrity’s ass. There are pictures of something cartoonish in pastels dancing across it. June peels it back revealing a puddle of watery shit that looks like yellow curry sauce. Slightly relieved from the pressure of the diaper, Pace, pisses an arc straight at June. She evades the spray and grabs some baby wipes from the shelf.

Even with a clean, empty diaper, Pace is still screaming. She holds him against her chest, bouncing up and down. This transforms his cries into a strange noise, as if someone were turning the volume dial back and forth on a car stereo. June read that placing a baby's head close to your chest lets him know you're there. Your heart is there.

“After infancy, we have no way of knowing someone's heart is really there,” June tells Pace. He screams with such force and volume that June swears she hears the scream echo from the inside of a giant aircraft. Suddenly, she's back in her navy blue blazer complete with matching skirt. She can almost hear the flight attendant bell ring from the touch of a button. And the fat man in business class who's consumed three miniature bottles of vodka and two bite-sized pretzel packs. If only he'd neglected his family a little more, he could have been in First Class with the CEO's and corporate lawyers.

Pace emits a blood-curdling scream and June's smile fades. She brings the crib gate back up until it clicks into place and walks past the changing table to the bookshelf towards the back of the nursery. The walls are a light blue with soft cumulus clouds painted in unnatural clusters around the room. There are collages of pictures, handprints, cards, and various baby-related documents adhered to the walls. June sits down in the rocking chair to the right of the bookshelf and places her feet on the stool in front of it. On the bookshelf there is a 2.5 gallon jug of water complete with spigot, a small CD player with speakers and a pastel purple lamp with a dangling yellow star as its switch. There is also a plastic container filled with empty feeding bottles, pacifiers and powdered baby formula. She grabs a little translucent container

of baby formula and flips the top open. Unscrews a feeding bottle and pours the formula powder into it. After she adds water to the mixture, she screws the top on and shakes it vigorously.

June lowers the gate again and puts Pace in her lap as she eases back into the rocking chair. With her left hand cradling him against her shoulder, she holds the nipple of the bottle up to his screaming lips. At first he jerks his reddened face away and emits another gurgling scream. A drop of formula touches his lips. He jerks his face back and closes his drooling mouth around the tip of the bottle. He looks up at his mother with his bright blue eyes in amazement as he gulps down the formula. His legs go limp and he clutches at the bottle with his dimpled hands. At four months, Pace is already too fat for his age but not in an unhealthy way. It doesn't bother June that he wears clothes that say "nine months" on the label. But her wrists certainly wouldn't mind if he weighed a few pounds less. Pace lets out a wet fart as he gulps and burps, his bright eyes never leaving his mother's face. June smiles. "We're going to see big brother Jeremy tomorrow, yes we are," June tells Pace, tells herself.

Bouncing Pace up and down walking around the house, June wonders what ineffable damage is being done to her knees. She has no choice but to sing. She thinks hard, trying to remember some lyrics that will shape Pace into a model citizen. One audible sigh later and she's singing ...

I'll never forget the first time that I heard that pretty mouth say that dirty word, and I can't even remember now, what she backed my truck into. She covered her mouth and her face got red and she just looked so darn cute. And I tried not to let her see me laugh. Yeah I live for little moments like that.

June looks around suspiciously as if someone might catch her singing a song from an album that has the words “mud” and “tires” in it. When she met Clay at a wedding six years ago, she’d die laughing if someone told her she’d marry him and move to Georgia. June was living in Richmond at the time, in one of those old tobacco buildings transformed into lofts. Her hands, covered in splotches of paint and gesso, the thick, white paste she used to prime canvases. With sixties music blasting and small paintbrushes scattered about the floor, she was doing her best to be underfed and misunderstood. She wasn’t thinking about bringing home a wide-eyed boy with a farmer’s tan.

Pace’s fast asleep smacking his lips and entering the second stage of sleep, the one where outside stimuli can still affect your dreams. June places him back in his crib and turns the dial on the mobile hanging from the ceiling atop his crib. Terrycloth cows and moons rotate above his head to the tune of some nursery rhyme, something about a broken egg or a cow jumping a moon.

She closes the door nearly all the way and hurries back to the kitchen, back to her show. The kitchen, her mind, it’s all a mess. It’s all a mess but she looks perfect. Her straight hair has spent the morning in curlers, in hairspray. It’s parted neatly on the left and curls under on each side, perfectly shaped around her high cheek bones and bright blue eyes. She tightens the strings of her pale blue apron careful not to put any creases in her vintage yellow dress. She has beautifully angled cheek bones and dark brown hair, just like the first Barbie doll, the original. June is the 1950’s Barbie complete with narrow blue eyes and pouty lips. The doll that’s now worth \$2500. Even though she looks magnificent, looks beautiful, she wishes someone would walk

by and stare her down—give her some small sign of reassurance that her breasts look great and her hips bear no reminder that she recently birthed a baby boy.

She's dressed for a lavish gala that will never take place. She refuses to wear acid-washed Mom jeans tapered at the legs to reveal bunched up, cutesy socks. What she's not wearing is an extra large shirt that says *This Mom Supports our Troops*. She does not have pictures of her baby in her wallet. She purses her lips and sticks her chest out in case her husband should come home unexpectedly. If he walks through that front door she needs to look beautiful, distraught. She needs to play that game called "I'm not drunk at nine in the morning."

"Welcome to June's Kitchen. We're so glad to have you on today's show. You're all in for a special treat. Today, we're going to make lemon bars," she says, looking out into the studio audience, "just like in the 1950's."

The audience oohs and ahhs. How retro, how charming, they might say. June thinks that's the only comfort consumers have anymore. A fridge that reminds them of the fifties when children were free to run about the neighborhood. This was before curfews, riots, school shootings. This was back when gangs wore skinny jeans and snapped their fingers. A pastel mixer that brings back the scent of mom's apple pie ala mode, bake sales, PTA meetings. Whether this was your childhood or someone else's, it doesn't really matter. In her late twenties, all June knows of the fifties is pop culture's regurgitation of the facts. The romanticized days of *Leave it to Beaver* and actual milk men. All June knows of the fifties is what her 90-year-old grandmother tells her. Stories of the boys going off to war, the women dropping out of college to take care of babies. All June knows is that she's so beyond miserable in this time

period, in this life, that the only way to survive is regression. Only June doesn't really want to regress into her own childhood, so she picks someone else's.

Based on all of these stories, these misconceptions, the fifties is where June wants to be. That way she'll have a reason for her boredom, her sadness, her inability to just *be*. She's done her research and decides she will exist in 1953. She considered time travel briefly, but she didn't know how to construct a time machine since Stephen Hawking never wrote her back. In order to travel back in time, all you need to do is move faster than the speed of light. According to Stephen Hawking's literature, scientists can get particles to travel 99.99 percent of the speed of light but that isn't fast enough to break the barrier. So basically you just need to find a shortcut—a wormhole. She explained this all to Stephen Hawking in an email, her sadness, her emptiness, her desire to live in 1953. But all she got in response was a computer-generated email:

As you can imagine, Prof. Hawking receives many emails every day. He very much regrets that due to the severe limitations he works under, and the enormous number of requests he receives, he is unable to compose a reply to every message, and we do not have the resources to deal with many of the specific scientific enquiries and theories we receive.

Yours faithfully,

Grad student #346

This was last week. June got frustrated, livid. June wrote a response. *You don't understand*, she wrote, *this is the only way I'm going to save my marriage, save myself. All I need is the formula, the shopping list, the step-by-step instruction manual*

on time travel. I can't be here in the twenty-first century. I can't be in this body. I can't be in this mind. If you don't respond, my marriage, my life will fall apart. Do you want to be responsible for that? Do you really? But she didn't have the motivation to click the send button. She figured he had more important things to do than give instructions to a lonely housewife, instructions that may not even exist. Grad student #346 probably wouldn't even mention this to him. Instead she just went back to writing her obituary. She adds a little each day. It's now over twenty pages.

But June wonders, who needs a time machine when your mind, your body can pick a year, any year and live there? It's hard to find anyone that actually stays in the present aside from Buddhist monks, meth addicts. Live in the now, one day at a time, these are merely slogans for cheap coffee mugs, magnets for mini-vans. *You don't say? Are you serious? You're funny.* All of these spill out like word vomit when really no one is paying attention. We're no different from the computer generated message that thanks you for being patient, that appreciates the fact that you're still on hold, June thinks. We're no better than a mechanical woman telling you to press 1 for questions about your cell phone bill, press 2 if you hate your life, press # to hear your options again. And no, talking to a real person isn't one of the options.

According to June, most people live in some glamorized version of the past. This is why adults still dress up at Halloween, middle aged men still buy toys for themselves, women pant and sweat at gyms trying to attain their adolescent frames. Blame Barbie, blame the media, blame the childhood you never had. June thinks that being in 1953, it's not so ridiculous. What's your year?

June looks out into the audience at the Army wives and overweight single women in search of the very best quiche recipe. All of them clichés, all of them in her kitchen, listening, waiting, their mouths watering for a free sample of her newest culinary creation. The Army wives are easy to spot, huddled together wearing red turtlenecks, white sweatshirts with pithy slogans, images, propaganda. These women knit nervously, elbow each other, they probably piss and shit red, white and blue. June doesn't like them enough to give them names, so she singles out a few and numbers them. Army wife 1 has blonde hair and a bubble butt. Army wife 2 has black curly hair and no butt at all. Army wife 3 has straight black hair and is two months pregnant with what must be her second child. Army wives 1 and 3 have one baby boy each. Army wife 2 appears to be baby free. Technically speaking, June's not an Army wife but because her son's in the military, she's still eligible for a spot in the Family Readiness Group. She's been promising Clay that she'll attend an actual FRG meeting at some point. Even though she's sure there's a website somewhere where she can virtually interact with other members of the military community from the comfort of her own home.

But June, she's relieved they are there, in her kitchen, in her world. She's not going to go out of her way to give them names, personalities, since none of the real Army wives have them. But if they hadn't shown up, magically appeared, she probably wouldn't have the energy to make these lemon bars. This show made possible by viewers like you.

"Now," June tells the audience, looking right at Army Wife 1. "Scoop two cups of flour into a metallic mixing bowl. I prefer to use King Arthur Flour because

look at that knight! He can gallop into my kitchen anytime, if you know what I mean.” The overweight women stop knitting for a minute and blush.

The front of the flour shows a medieval knight hoisting a large, white flag into the deep blue sky as he gallops along on his trusty steed. The white flag appears to have a red Celtic cross stitched onto it as it ripples in the imaginary wind.

“Now,” June tells them, “you’ll know you’ve got King Arthur flour when you see that the horse on the package is the color of charcoal. However, I distinctly remember King Arthur’s horse being white; at least it was in the text I’m thinking of. I believe it was Merlin the wizard who had the black horse. But I guess I can’t expect the arch nemesis of a ticklish doughboy to be constructed with a deep understanding of fifteenth century literature. But, it’s just flour and I need this flour to make the crust.

“Now, add a half cup of powdered sugar to the flour.” She forgoes the measuring cup and plunges her neatly manicured, well-lotioned hands into the bag of sugar. It’s cool and smooth like, (insert cliché here). She cradles the soft, white mound in her hands and lays what she imagines to be a half cup of sugar on top of the flour in the bowl.

As she wipes her powdered hands on her apron, she tells the audience that her desire to live in 1953 is purely selfish. She just wants to live in a time where things were better, simpler even. She wants a reason for her sadness. She wants something to blame for her inability to feel.

The crowd claps nervously, unsure of how to respond. This audience, her audience, they thought they would be getting great recipes, cooking advice, not a

morbid soliloquy from an alcoholic host. This is like getting vodka when you're expecting water. A perfect marriage and two kids when all you wanted was your own art studio, your name in print.

“We must all find our peace somehow. Some do it through baking,” June says, gesturing to the pudgy women rooting through their purses for sugar-free, carb-free chewing gum. To the anorexic mothers, grinding away at their teeth, fingering the lighters in their pockets, dreaming of menthol cigarettes. “Some do it through hosting parties, buying furniture, changing the position of your sofa. Here, let me give you the tour.

“Behind me is the oven,” she gestures with a big grin that says anything but sober. “To my left—the fridge. To my right—the sink and dishwasher.” She peels the paper from one stick of butter and peers beyond the counter, out into the dining room. Suddenly the audience members fade and turn back into laundry. The heap of dirty laundry piled atop the dining room table. Her husband's mud-caked jeans, worn-out t-shirts and grimy socks cover nearly every square inch of the round, wooden table. She lets one stick of butter fall atop the white powder in the mixing bowl and begins to unwrap another. Tosses the wrappers into a baking pan and mixes all the ingredients together with her hands. Squeezes through the soft sticks of butter, feeling their cool centers. She focuses in on one a pair of plaid boxers sleeping quietly atop a dark purple placemat that her grandmother crocheted when she was younger.

“Squeeze and knead until the mixture is soft and grainy,” she says, bringing the audience back into view.

“Now, put the bowl aside and wipe down a baking pan with the remaining butter wrappers. This way you’re not letting any of that butter go to waste without the hardships of recycling. I mean, recycling in Georgia, where does one even begin?” The audience laughs five seconds behind her. “I’m going to leave my husband, did I mention that yet? I’m going to leave my husband and live in the fifties. I will become the housewife of all housewives; I will pop sedatives before they even have generic forms and vacuum in my high heels. I am going to hold Tupperware parties, PTA meetings, and make little baskets for the boys who have just come home from war. I will make Rosie the Riveter look like a dying woman on a morphine drip. I will make Jell-o creations, little tiny muffins, and hem the bottoms of my sons’ pants so they can go back out and play stick-ball.”

The camera zooms in on June, just June. “But I can’t leave my husband yet. I can’t leave until I’ve seen my stepson one more time. But for most of this year, he’s been sitting in a tent in Iraq six hours ahead of us. It used to be an eight hour difference,” she tells the audience, “but Iraq dropped daylight savings time earlier in the year. Since it’s morning here, it’s in the afternoon in Iraq which means the temperature is somewhere around 31 degrees Fahrenheit. Luckily it’s winter because in the summer the heat can get up to 120 degrees. That makes Savannah’s summer weather of 105 degrees and 90% humidity seem mild in comparison.” The live studio audience chuckles and for a moment she hears Jeremy’s laugh.

“My stepson, Jeremy will be home tomorrow and the house is a mess. I’m a mess. I haven’t seen him in ten months. I’ve been counting down the time until his visit by crossing out the days one by one on a desk calendar from 1996. After his

leave, he should only have 45 more days left of his deployment. But I'm sure he'll get stop-lossed again and we won't see him until next summer.

“Now, pour the grainy, brown mixture into the pan and press it down making a pie crust-esque concoction. Place this in the oven where it's supposed to stay for the next 13-15 minutes.”

She gazes wide-eyed into the fluorescent fridge lights for what seems like hours. The way the retro style handle shines metallic against the pastel sea foam green door makes her feel warm and innocent. June replaces thoughts of the Iraq war with the Korean War. Replaces the death of Kurt Vonnegut with the death of Joseph Stalin. Instead of Apple announcing the iPhone it's President Truman announcing the hydrogen bomb. June imagines Clay driving her down the Truman parkway, the winding roads of concrete hoisted up into the air, pasted to the backdrop of the Savannah River, construction, bright red trolleys giving haunted cemetery tours.

These timelines, these historical landmarks limp through June's mind as she pulls items out of a rumpled grocery bag on the kitchen counter. “We seem to have arrived as successful consumers as evidenced by our thousand dollar marble countertops. We need bread, we need chicken, but I only purchased the necessary ingredients for lemon bars.

“I am going to leave my husband soon. I have to. I am going to put that on my to-do list. It's going there right after, *buy bread*. I will make pans and pans of lemon bars until I get up the nerve to pack my things and leave. It may take me hundreds of bars, but I will bake until I have reserved enough courage to leave him. Of course I won't pack all of my things. Just enough for a month. After all, I don't want the boys

to think I have abandoned the entire family—that I’m never coming back. Because I am coming back. I just need the drama, the excitement, the begging and pleading Hollywood has promised me. I want Clay standing outside my window, boom-box over his head, letting cheesy pop lyrics express his emotions.”

The crowd offers their obligatory laughter, all the while wondering what all of this has to do with lemon bars.

“With Jeremy coming so soon, I don’t have much time to make all of his favorite foods. There is so much to do, so many things to prepare. I need to get Jeremy those little pancake pup things which are little frozen pancakes stuffed with pork sausages. I need to go to the liquor store and get him the 100 proof version of that Southern whiskey. Jeremy hasn’t had a drink since February so I had better stock up. This isn’t like Vietnam where the soldiers had pot, pills, whiskey and cigarettes. There is no soldier in Iraq who is going to risk his career for one shot of liquor. I should get some dip too. Does he like the kind named after that country or that wintergreen kind with the big growling bear on the front?”

June sighs.

“Okay, crust is in the oven, now for the lemon filling.” She surveys the items on the countertop next to the sink, the one that overlooks the dining room. “Now, I realize I started to give you the tour, but I didn’t even make it to the dining room!” The audience smiles in a shared silence. In June’s mind the house is merely a set. A living room sawed in half, a kitchen made of plastic. A boom microphone dipping down into the shot occasionally, prompting the PA to yell at the key grips, the sound guys, the college intern clasping a tray of soy gingerbread lattes.

“The dining room isn’t really a room,” she tells the audience. “It’s just the space to the right of the kitchen. The only thing that separates it from the kitchen is a small bar with some vintage bar stools I got at a yard sale. My husband’s first wife, she had this thing for apples. Each of the handles to all the cupboards and drawers are little apples complete with wooden stems and leaves. You can’t open a single thing in that kitchen without pulling on a red, hand-carved, apple. The only thing I brought into this kitchen is the fridge. And I didn’t even purchase that with my own money. It was sort of left to me in my father’s will.

“My father’s rifles, pistols, his big screen TV, those all went to the other, more important members of my family. My older brother got the regulation-sized pool table complete with leather pockets. My mother was blessed with his collection of authentic Civil War military uniforms and most of his savings. My father was a Civil War reenactor among other things. All he left to me before he died was an envelope full of cash. He died when I was seven in a hunting accident. I may have made that up. I’m not really sure anymore.

“In his will it says that I, June Holden, would get the contents of an envelope he left in his gun safe. Sure enough, in his gun safe, was an envelope full of cash. My mother put the cash in some sort of savings bond. Apparently it was a great deal of money because when I turned eighteen, my mother gave me a check for a few thousand dollars. With the check she handed me the note my father had written.

Dear June Bug,

Buy yourself a refrigerator. A real nice one.

- D

“I put that check into a separate savings account that I didn’t touch for ten years. When he died, I took a vow of silence for an entire year. It wasn’t that I didn’t want to talk, it just seemed like the only way to live, to be. So I wrote a note to my mother to put that check in a savings account and forgot all about it.”

The audience sits up, hands at their chests, mouths agape.

“Ten years later, after I got married, I looked online for the nicest refrigerator I could find. There I was, newly married, living in Savannah and looking at thousand dollar refrigerators. I managed to find a ridiculously priced fridge somewhere online. Since the site’s closest warehouse is in Atlanta, about 256 miles from the house, I ordered it online and paid the hundred dollar shipping fee. It was delivered in 8-10 business days and hasn’t moved since. I don’t know why my father insisted I get a really nice refrigerator. I don’t know why he did anything he did. I can vaguely recall him yelling at me every time I stood in front of the open fridge, eyes glazed over, lost in my own head. He would yell something about some inventor and tell me I was spoiling the milk. I remember his breath reeking of cheap beer and expensive cigars. I remember shutting the door only to come back and open it up again a few hours later, lost in the glow.

“Now, all these years later, here I am, staring into the fridge. Maybe it’s out of spite, or maybe it’s just a bad habit I never outgrew. But it’s not a bad fridge. The left door has an icemaker, a water spigot, and three others buttons that serve some sort of purpose. But the fridge is too close to our bedroom door. So if my husband opens the bedroom door while I’m opening the fridge, there’s a domestic collision.”

June spots a woman in the very back row waving her plump hands around as if landing a helicopter. She appears to be here with her two best friends, all clad in matching purple t-shirts that say “I ♥ Cupcakes!” June’s studio assistant makes it down the aisle with his microphone and leans over to this woman with short, brownish curly hair. She leans over the microphone, her thick black eyelashes batting behind huge horn-rimmed glasses.

“Yes,” she says, “Miss June, I just have a question for you, if that’s all right?” She looks to her friends for reassurance, guidance, for a facial expression that says, “You go girl!” They nod and wave hands emphatically, as if to say, we’re behind you, ask away.

“Well, it looks like we have a question from the audience, how delightful! You, yes, you way in the back, welcome! Welcome to June’s Kitchen! What is your question?” June turns her head to the left, until she feels and hears a popping noise in her neck. She takes in a deep breath. She exhales, wets her lips. This is it. Her first real question.

“Do you think your substance abuse is merely a coping mechanism for the sense of loss you feel?”

June’s studio assistant’s face sinks. She can almost feel the moisture in his palms, the pit stains growing beneath the short sleeves of his tight, black t-shirt.

“Okay,” he says, “let’s take another question shall we? Anyone have a question about the lemon bars? About what it’s like to have your own cooking show?” He says this, turning his back to the plump woman with the stupid question—the woman who is trying to ruin the show. He dabs at his brow nervously with a

handkerchief, his initials embroidered with blue thread. He turns around fretfully to find another volunteer and finally selects a different Army wife.

“You, yes you,” he says, prompting another plump Army wife to speak up. This is Army wife 3, the one who looks like she’s one epidural away from giving birth. “Yes, well,” she starts, “How do you keep the passion alive in your marriage? How have you managed to get your slim figure back after giving birth? How do you keep the fire going?”

June laughs, masks contempt. “It’s easy. You want to keep the passion alive? Go down on your husband in the shower. Dress up like a slutty nurse. Do all the things he thinks only exist in the movies, on the Internet. It’s 1953, this is six years before the Barbie doll. This is when the first *Playboy* magazine was just published by Hugh Hefner in Chicago. Think of the first cover girl Marilyn Monroe with her wide hips, luscious lips and normal waistline. Nowadays, that body type won’t prompt your husband to rip off your imitation designer blouse. Now you’ve got to have the waistline you did in high school, the cleavage you’d expect to see in a strip club. In the 1700’s women had corsets that cracked ribs, punctured organs. Before that women were bled to be paler than corpses. Today, we have it easy, no corsets, no bleeding. All you have to do is eat less. How do you lose the weight? Think of your husband as a bottle of pills. Think about other women putting those gel-coated pink tabs between their fat lips. Their grubby, sausage hands popping them like breath mints. Force yourself to watch a slideshow of images on repeat—shots of her mouth on his stomach, her plump hands on his hips. You’ve lost ten pounds already.

“Jealousy is the best diet,” June says into the fake microphone clipped to her apron. “You can’t eat when you’re hugging a toilet bowl, your damp, matted hair hovering over bits of regurgitated chicken parmesan. If I knew for a fact that every man I left would stay single for the rest of his life, I would never stay with anyone longer than a month.”

The audience laughs, claps, the woman sits down, content with her new plan to add spice to her marriage, prevent her husband’s infidelity, lose ten pounds by Christmas.

“Now,” June says, “On with the tour. We have a dishwasher that my husband never uses—he prefers to wash everything by hand. I find this to be odd but I never say anything because of the comforting feeling I get watching him thrust his strong hands into the warm, soapy water he fills the sink with. The only thing separating the dining room from the living room, are the two recliners facing the T.V.

“The way our house is laid out, our bedroom is to the left of the living room and the nursery is to the right. At first I was a little concerned that we would be at the opposite end of the house from our baby, but my husband reassures me constantly that that is what baby monitors are for. I’m checking the baby monitor now to make sure the green light is still flashing. It’s quiet. Pace is still asleep.

“Now then, where was I? Oh yes, the living room is still decorated with pictures and items from my husband’s first wife. I keep telling myself that I’ll take down the cross-stitched confederate flag that *is* the Georgia state flag and the miniature Civil War cannons displayed on top of the television. The sepia pictures of little Jeremy in his overalls I really like, but the rest of it should probably go up in

flames. But redecorating is on my list of things I'll never actually do—it's right up there with doing crunches or finding a new therapist. I really do like the black and white picture of my husband in his truck even though his first wife had it framed for him. It captures his sweet Southern smile and reminds me why I love him so much. Except on those days when I hate him, his stupid hat, and his stupid truck. But today, it makes me happy. I feel nothing so I feel content."

June glances at the back side of the recipe card.

Filling:

4 eggs

1/2 cup lemon juice

2 cups sugar

1/4 cup flour

1 tsp baking powder

"On the counter I have a bowl of eggs from our chickens, sugar, flour and baking powder. Next to all this sits one of those plastic lemons filled with juice instead of a real lemon. I need to make lemon bars but I'm far too depressed to slice open a real lemon and squeeze the juice into a bowl. What if I have cuts on my hand? What if a seed falls in? I pretend that these are real life, daunting questions. That I'm not using a fake lemon because I can't trust myself with a knife. The kitchen knife set we got for our wedding, it's in my husband's gun safe along with his rifles and pistols. For the past few months we've been cutting chicken with butter knives."

Army wife 2 asks June where she keeps the chickens. This woman has never heard of chickens living in suburbia, in a gated community by the marsh. June tells

her she wanted chickens, she wanted chickens so she made her husband build a chicken coop out in the back yard.

“It will be simple to leave my husband,” June says. “Relationships are like drugs, medications, pills, however you want to phrase it. When you first go off of a medication you feel dizzy and confused. You start to second guess your decision to quit the medication, start to wonder if it was all that bad to begin with. But after a while the withdrawal symptoms go away. You are able to eat again, wash your hair, take out the trash. You are able to complete all the mundane tasks in this world that make you appear normal and together.” June cracks an egg against her head and opens it over the metallic bowl. She does this again and again until all of the bright yellow contents are in the bowl still powdered with the remnants of the crust. The cracked shells lie on the countertop, the broken dates scribbled in pencil now illegible.

“When you collect eggs from a chicken pen,” she tells the studio audience, “you have to scrub the dirt off the eggs with warm, soapy water. After they’ve dried, write the current date on the outside of the shell since you don’t have the luxury of the store bought waxy cartons with stamped-on expiration dates. You can really taste the difference. Hens generally lay one egg a day, so with six or seven hens you’ll have enough eggs to feed a whole family.”

There is an eruption of commanded applause.

“But the hens won’t lay any eggs if they’re sick or brooding,” June says. “We give them ground-up oyster shells every now and then to keep them healthy, but if a chicken gets depressed, there’s not much you can do.”

“Do you have any other animals in your backyard?” One of the women asks.

“Why yes, we have about a dozen cows we raise for beef,” June says. “Of course not. No I just wanted chickens and I’m pretty sure that the management of our gated community would have a problem with a bunch of cows and horses roaming about. But we do have a garden. We grow our own vegetables. We have asparagus, squash, tomatoes, pretty much everything,” June says, nodding at the colorful display of vegetables on the counter. “Well, everything except for onions. My darling son just hates onions!”

Laughter ensues.

June’s chest tightens as if she’s trying to breathe underwater. As she beats the eggs with a metallic whisk, she feels pain shooting down her legs, through her feet, and into the tile floor. She feels the pills wearing off as she dumps the rest of the ingredients on top of the eggs. The synthetic euphoria, the motivation, it all drops a few degrees leaving nothing but side effects. What once felt like security, like bliss is now nothing more than motion sickness, dry mouth, a slower heart rate.

Giant spoon in hand, she begins to stir the mix. “The recipe, it calls for 30-45 strokes with a spoon until the mixture is moistened. I’ve lost count around 36 and kept stirring until the mix looks like something oozing from one of those pustules that poet was always writing about. In olden times, it was believed that any blemish or cosmetic abnormality was a sign of a deeper problem inside one’s soul. A gap in between your two front teeth meant promiscuity. An abscess on your nose meant sin.

“I’m removing the crust from the oven, pouring in the filling, and returning the new concoction to the oven. Bake for 25-30 minutes. Leave out powdered sugar to sprinkle atop the lemon bars once cooled.”

June imagines seeing the world in shades of grey transformed into color only to have some baby-boomers say it just isn’t the same. The way they take pastel yellows, blues, and reds shot by shot and paint them over black and white scenes. The whole town would have a parade full of trucks welcoming the boys home from war complete with hand-painted banners and girls in poodle skirts. *Thank you for serving our country. We’re glad to have you home.*

June edges closer to the window over the sink, and thinks she sees a man walk by and stare at her through her colorless, shapeless, curtains. Her curtains are flowers or suns or something lace that does little to cover the large glass squares and perfect white window panes. Perhaps it’s a passing neighbor looking through, hoping to catch her topless and vacuuming, bent over the stove, seducing the mailman.

“I’m not hungry but in no way am I full. Full.” She mouths out the word and lets it fall to the ground like some chewed up piece of bread she just couldn’t swallow. She walks back to the fridge and swings open the door littered with pictures and plastic magnets. Inside the open, glowing fridge are small, microwave safe, dishwasher safe, stackable plastic containers each full of various parts of last night’s dinner. Nothing can go to waste. Each portion of the meal needs to be presented tonight as it once was. She closes the door and there are various awards, announcements, holiday cards held to the door with magnets shaped as plastic tuna hand rolls and cupcakes. Daycare. Baby and Me Yoga. Each reminder serves to

remind her that life is now complete. Some women spend their whole lives playing house, training to be model wives, mothers, citizens. What if that's not what you wanted? What if all you really wanted was your own art studio? Your photographs in a portrait gallery? Fame?

“The lemon bars need to remain in the oven for 25-30 minutes,” June says. “When they look done, take them out of the oven and place them somewhere to cool. When they're still warm, dust them with sifted confectioner's sugar and loosen the edges a little. When they've cooled completely, cut them into squares and serve.”

The crowd full of overweight Army wives, cute and perfect Army wives, they all clap affectionately. A woman in the front row wearing a green turtleneck that matches her Christmas sweater, that matches her socks, that matches her earrings, puts her right hand against her chest and smiles.

“This,” June says, making eye contact with no one, “this is what I'm not doing. I don't want delicious, zesty lemon bars that are moist and sponge-like, yielding to a toothpick or fork. I set the timer for two hours. I want a solid mound of blackened soot that crumbles at the touch. A piece of burnt nothingness that no amount of powdered sugar could possibly save. I want to serve my husband a piece to see what he'll say. If he lies and says it's great then I'll wonder how often it is he lies to me. I'll decide that he probably lies to me all the time. That he's probably screwing one of those Army wives at the church. Oh, I'm sorry, one of *you* Army wives. If he spits out the burnt dessert and tells me how awful it is I'll be offended because that will reveal his inconsiderate nature.”

The women smile meekly as if they don't get June's humor, as if they've been told a joke with no punch line. Only she's not kidding.

"I have plenty of ingredients to make another batch for Jeremy. So I'll pace around the kitchen and I'll wait."

Laughter.

Clapping.

Silence.

Chapter 3

The show's over. The audience is gone. June hears a small crunching noise as she shifts her weight to her right leg. Stepping back, she sees what appears to be a miniature paint brush jutting out from the darkness between the fridge and the kitchen floor. Patellar tendons snap over bones, emitting small popping noises as she crouches down like a baseball catcher to improve her view. She grabs the bunch of bleach blonde bristles half expecting a domesticated rodent with giant incisors to gnash at her fingertips. She has this horrifying feeling in the pit of her chest like she's being searched at an airport checkpoint with coke residue on her driver's license.

June dangles the object by its bristles in front of her pallid face.

"It's a goddamned Barbie doll," she mutters to the floor. She's not sure what's worse, the fact that she just took the Lord's name in vain, or the fact that she feels bad about it. She roughly wipes the balls of dust and what seems to be hair off of poor Barbie's legs and torso. She's staring up at June, her lips pink and pursed into an "O" like the mouth of one of Jeremy's sex dolls. She glares blankly at June the way a corpse would if it died with its eyes open. June takes a moment to inspect Barbie's outfit, a dark pink mini skirt and a dark grey tank top that might have been white at some point. The doll's so dirty and forgotten, June can't tell if this is Artist Barbie, Neurosurgeon Barbie, Substitute Teacher Barbie.

June's not sure what she's doing staring at this doll in the middle of her kitchen. What Clay doesn't know is that June has over fifty Barbie dolls in her closet. Doesn't know that she used to collect them. That some of the vintage editions are

worth hundreds of dollars because they've never left the box. If Barbies are taken out, played with, dressed up to go on dates with Ken they lose half their value. June thinks of her favorite Barbie, the 1959 original, modeled after the German sex doll. If she'd kept it in the box, it would be worth more than her fridge, but June couldn't help it. She had to put her in the Dream House, the pink convertible, Ken's private jet.

Whatever it is she's supposed to be doing, she's not. She doesn't even know how this disproportionate piece of plastic made it into her kitchen in the first place. June made sure that her Barbie collection was sealed tight in a box and labeled "tampons" so Clay wouldn't go near it. June is pretty sure that none of her Barbie dolls fell out of the box and met its demise behind the fridge. Maybe the previous homeowners left this miniature stripper here. Maybe June and Clay moved in all of their furniture, appliances, and personal belongings in on top of this poor, poor doll.

"And we're back!" June exclaims, turning her heaps of laundry back into Army wives. Filling her dining room chairs with women who want to drop two dress sizes, throw parties, raise perfect children.

"Welcome to June's Kitchen. In our last show we made delicious lemon bars and you got the grand tour. Today, folks, today we'll be doing things a little differently. Today we have a guest!" June says this with the Barbie doll behind her back. June says this with her eyes on the microwave.

"Now, if you'll all give a warm welcome to our guest, none other than Barbie herself!" June produces the doll from behind her back and watches the women offer meek smiles and say things like, "how precious" and "look at that."

June poses the doll on the counter top and brushes a few dust balls off of her face. Barbie stares wide-eyed into the audience, her permanent, frosted-pink lips motionless and perfect.

“Now, Barbie, why don’t you tell us a little about yourself? Are you married? Do you like to cook?” June waves at the invisible cameraman to zoom in on Barbie’s imagined responses as the viewers lean forward.

“Well,” June says like a ventriloquist, moving Barbie’s arms about as if gesturing to the crowd, “My name is Barbara Millicent Roberts. I’ve been dating my boyfriend Ken since 1959. We met on the set of a TV commercial. Well, there was that brief love affair with Blaine, the Australian surfer hottie, but that didn’t mean anything. You know how that goes, ladies. But me, I’m never getting married. I’m never having kids. I want the freedom, the independence. I couldn’t imagine a life where I couldn’t travel, couldn’t just decide I wanted to be a helicopter pilot.”

The audience laughs at June’s words coming out of Barbie’s mouth. What Clay doesn’t know is that June’s read Barbie’s biography, attended Barbie collector conventions, she’s even watched a few of Barbie’s feature films. June’s therapist thinks this collecting, this obsessing was prompted by the loss of her father. But really, June just likes dolls. She doesn’t buy into the theory that she began collecting the dolls, their houses, their cars to fill some emotional void in her life. June has never really liked being alone, not since she was a kid. But really, this Barbie thing, it’s just a hobby like fishing or reading.

“Now,” June says to the audience, “do we have any more questions for Barbie?”

The plump Army wife in the Christmas sweater stands up and shields her eyes from the bright glare of the studio lights. June's assistant hands the woman the mic and gives a thumbs up to June. "Well," the woman begins, "Why haven't you ever gotten married?"

"Oh I just can't be tied down. Well anywhere but the bedroom," June makes Barbie say. The crowd laughs. But what June doesn't tell the audience is that consumer researchers knew that Barbie's market value would go down if she ever got married. They made sure that Barbie could have all the independence she wanted. This way Barbie could be an entrepreneur, a teacher, a scientist. Little girls would never play with overweight, Mother of Two Barbie. But that's not to say that Barbie's not great with kids. She let her consumers know that she loves to babysit her cousin Skipper, that she doesn't mind taking other dolls' children to the park. But what June never understood, is why Barbie gets blamed for everything, why feminists hate Barbie dolls. What's more feminist than a woman who retains her independence so she can hold any job she wants? But what about Barbie's unrealistic body image? In real life, Barbie would be 5'10" and 110 pounds. June wonders, is that really so hard to achieve?

"It's true," Barbie continues, "The next five vocations I'm considering are: environmentalist, architect, computer engineer, surgeon and news anchor. If I had to stay home and watch screaming kids, I'd never be able to solve the global warming dilemma. I couldn't report from Iraq, design energy efficient homes."

"Now," June continues, "if you're a good woman, a good feminist, place Barbie into the microwave, like so. If you envy Barbie for her freedom, her waistline,

all you have to do is destroy her. Really, this works with anything in your life. If your marriage bores you, have an affair. If you don't like your kids, put them up for adoption. There's never a single reason to feel sorry for yourself. There isn't anything you can't just destroy. Personally, I love Barbie, I'm proud of my collection. I'm supposed to hate her, supposed to feel oppressed by a piece of plastic with matching outfits. It's the 21st century so I'm supposed to fight for my rights as a woman. We already have jobs, voting rights, pantsuits. The only thing left to do is get offended. I wouldn't be a good woman if I didn't attack children's toys, magazine ads, shampoo commercials. So I'm oppressed, I'm offended, I'm fighting for rights I already have.”

The women watch in a mixture of fear and excitement. After all, they're not the ones who are destroying Barbie. After all, they're just here to watch.

June bends Barbie at the waist into a sitting position on top of the glass disc in the middle of the microwave. She pulls her arms out akimbo so Barbie can brace herself when the disc starts spinning and she begins to lose her balance. June looks back at her face to make sure she's comfortable. Barbie's still glaring at June with that vacant visage, so she proceeds.

“I'm a woman so I'm supposed to be jealous of Barbie. I'm supposed to hate her, want to destroy her,” June tells the crowd. “Who Barbie is, where she came from, all of this makes it really hard to melt her face off. Feminists, they like to remind us that Barbie's weight to height ratio is unhealthy. She's what toy distributors call play-scale—one sixth the size of a real person, just like G.I. Joe. Critics claim that Barbie would be so underweight as a real woman, she wouldn't be capable of menstruating. I'm not entirely positive I'd want a menstruating Barbie. It's bad enough her

accessories are sold separately. The last thing I'd want to buy for my children are Barbie tampons, Barbie birth control, Barbie's check up for ovarian cancer.

"I don't really see her as a model for some unattainable body image. With a steady diet of painkillers and cigarettes, you too, can have Barbie's frame. I can't really blame her for my insecurities, my desire to look perfect. After all, it's not like a man even created her. What most feminists don't know, is that Barbie was created by a woman. It doesn't really add to the feminist argument to tell you that this woman wasn't trying to relegate women to a lower status. All she wanted was to make toys for her kids. Most feminists don't know that this creator, this Ruth, her kids names were Barbie and Ken. But leave it to feminists not to do their homework."

As June envisions each of Barbie's limbs melting and festering, turning white and black, she thinks about the real Ken. The real Ken died of AIDS. He resented the neutered doll modeled after him, named after him. The real Barbie, she hated her mother too. She felt neglected, abandoned, never getting as much attention as the doll. But she's fine. She turned out just fine.

"Blame Barbie when you find out your daughter's bulimic. Blame Ken when your gay son contracts AIDS. Relish in the fact that Barbie's creator died of breast cancer. The queen of unrealistic breasts sizes, six feet underground. Whatever you do, don't take responsibility for your actions. Blame that toothbrush commercial for your eating disorder, your sexual orientation."

Once June shuts the door, the light goes off and she hears a click. She glances at the names of the buttons on the right hand side of the microwave. There seems to be a button for everything, *leftovers, pizza, potato, popcorn, single-serving dessert.*

But June can't imagine ever purchasing anything microwavable and single-serving. She's pretty sure it would be more time efficient to swallow a bottle of mood stabilizers than to heat up a single serving chocolate cake and watch a romantic comedy. Because let's face it, June thinks, you're sitting there eating your emotions to something about a thirty-something wedding planner who still hasn't found love when you might as well snap the DVD in half and use it to grind away at your wrists.

She closes her eyes tightly as if the tighter she closes them, the closer to the fifties she'll be. As if she could open them to find a button that says, *sock hop*.

She lets her fingers glide over the buttons, opens her eyes and hits *frozen entrée*. With one beep, a yellow light goes on and Barbie begins to spin around in her mini skirt.

June stops, opens the microwave, lets Barbie out.

She shuts the door and holds the doll next to her face, staring into their reflection in the microwave. June's never been a very good feminist so she can't bring herself to nuke a Barbie doll. She can't support the destruction of America's most misunderstood toy. Because June, she didn't misunderstand Barbie, she didn't feel subjugated by a miniature fashion model, nurse, zoologist.

Placing Barbie back on the counter, leaning against the King Arthur flour, June returns to the microwave. She hits the *defrost* button, thinking maybe microwave radiation does cause cancer. Thinking, it's worth a shot. She watches the glowing green numbers count down from eleven minutes.

June's staring at her pink food processor thinking about the fifties. Everything was black and white. This is back when Barbie was nothing more than a fashion

model. Before politically correct Barbie. Cerebral Palsy Barbie complete with pink wheelchair. It's some warped version of the American dream. You're in your pink wheelchair, in your dream house, with your dream boyfriend. Only your wheelchair doesn't fit in the elevator. Those poor toy industry execs who had to deal with the constant stream of letters from unhappy customers because MS Barbie's meds don't fit in MS Barbie's purse. Angry mothers all over the country writing, lamenting, complaining because HIV Positive Ken doesn't have visitation rights to see his partner in the hospital.

June examines her manicure that some woman at the mall told her would accentuate her feminine qualities. The nail on her right ring finger looks cracked or chipped which pretty much says right away that the rest of the nails are fake too. From afar, June imagines that her nails look pretty perfect the way they refract light and make her hands look dainty and small. But up close the paint has begun to flake off revealing grainy human nails beneath that say anything but poise. There's a thin pale band across her finger where her wedding rings used to be. She took off her engagement and wedding ring this morning before she had her first cigarette. She's not quite sure what that means, but part of her doesn't care if the rings will be there on the dresser where she left them earlier. June imagines angry mothers writing in because people with mental illnesses just aren't represented in the Barbie world. There is no Bipolar Barbie complete with maxed out credit cards and cigarettes. No OCD Barbie complete with hand sanitizer and stopwatch.

Six minutes and eighteen seconds.

June hears a tick and shifts her view to the Elvis clock swaying in the corner. She thinks maybe it's 10:37 or 11:45. She never learned to tell time really. What woman needs that skill anyway? June wonders. There are digital time markers on ovens, microwaves, coffee pots. And what respectable woman ever leaves the kitchen? If June were a crusader for women's rights, Barbie's petite nose would've disappeared or congealed somewhere into her chin. Her chin would've been reduced to charred, festering bubbles.

Five minutes and fifty-two seconds.

Realizing that she's ignored her audience, June turns to address them.

"As a collector I know that some of the vintage dolls are worth so much, you can even collect their heads. A classic Barbie head is worth anywhere from 50-100 dollars. Why there are all these headless Barbies lying around, I'll never know. Picturing that reminds me of the time my friend Taylor took me to a morgue. She wanted to show me a human heart.

"When you walk into a morgue the first thing you notice is the smell of old flesh and formaldehyde. 'Don't worry,' she tells me, 'they don't have heads.' On each table there is one headless torso cut open the way a rotisserie chicken looks an hour after dinner, a yawning brown carcass with a few bites of meat still attached. Taylor is a cardiothoracic surgeon now. Barbie has held over 100 careers including ballerina, astronaut, paleontologist. And then there's me, sad, sad me."

Four minutes and one second.

"In med. school, they take one of the corpses at the end of each term, give it a name and bury it behind the building. They have a ceremony to remind the students

that yeah, corpses were once people. The overzealous students fake tears, wipe their faces, and go back to the table with the bone saw that can cut through the frontal lobe like a pad of melting butter.”

“June,” the studio assistant calls over, “you have another question.” He says this exasperated, as if this isn’t the life he wanted. As if he were nothing more than a failed soap opera actor who thought this gig would be short term.

June nods and gestures to the Army wife to go ahead with her question.

“Why did you burn the lemon bars? To manipulate your husband? Would Barbie have burned them?”

“That’s a good question,” June begins, “What would Barbie do? Well she wouldn’t have gotten married to begin with, so I believe that negates your question, now doesn’t it? What do we do with our time? We’re not looking for a cure for cancer. We’re not volunteering our time in third world countries. What is it, then, that we do? We buy phones that read the newspaper and play streaming videos of television shows that haven’t aired yet. We buy and sell stocks in public restrooms, order antidepressants while in staff meetings, buy houses, pets, and children with a few clicks. iPeople, iMarriages, and iDivorces. E-dating, E-cheating, E-breaking up. The illusion of accomplishment when all we’ve done is press a few buttons.”

Three minutes and twelve seconds.

“This is how my mind works. I start out every morning with cheap red wine. I read my horoscope, celebrity news, I check my email. I receive my daily dose of solipsism and look forward to the day ahead. Today I planned to cross several things off of my to-do lists and still have time to go the gym, clean the house, and read a

book for fun. Perhaps I'll even start a book club for the other mothers around the neighborhood. I'm doing this while Barbie's a chef, a pilot, an ambassador for world peace."

Nine seconds.

"You can be happy like the rest of us if you just put your mind to it, you Army wives like to say. I'll put my mind to the faded yellow dashes on the pavement just in time for an oncoming bus to shatter my skull, forcing bits of pulp out onto the highway. The bus, it will keep going because it was already eight minutes late and all the workers will get fired if they're late to the slaughterhouse one more time. We've taken all the care to smuggle these immigrants over the border to cut strips of beef using dull, worn out knives and we're not willing to sacrifice that for one disillusioned housewife who contemplated herself to death on the freeway.

"The cops stop by later after an anonymous phone call but there's not much they can do about the shards of skull, the clumps of pink brain matter still pulsating with neurotransmitters torn apart and useless. The radios go off at the local fire station and two boys jump into their prepackaged pants and boots. They pull on jackets, helmets, everything but the fireproof neck guards on account of there being no fire. The boys hop in the engine and haul ass towards the scene. Once they arrive they unravel the hose and spray the human remnants off of the road like a spritz of window cleaner chipping off dried bird shit.

"Next week the family puts up a cross in the median where pieces of your body have begun seeping into the soil. There are dollar store teddy bears left over from Valentine's Day, balloons, and flowers. What looks like a fifteen-minute office

birthday party is pulling cars off the road and causing pileups the size of well, something huge. This is what the police refer to as rubbernecking; when people can't help but stare at some tragedy that has befallen in some voyeuristic way that they pass off as concern. Before too long, more wooden crosses crop up around the one sticking out from the mound of dirt where your body has begun to decay.

“Bits of human skull, the corpus callosum finally split, these are places my mind takes me when I'm trying to remember if my husband needed white bread or wheat. Or was it even bread at all?”

“One day until Jeremy comes home. I have one day.”

Beep. Beep. Beep.

The microwave is hissing, black, the opposite of functional. Barbie's shoes must have fallen off during her rescue. June peers in through the foggy microwave door to see that Barbie's bright pink high heels are now forged into the glass disc in the microwave. June waves at the smoke apathetically and there's Clay's lunch pail on the counter. Clay's lunch pail.

“Shit,” June says as the audience disappears, leaving her with Barbie. Barbie, who's still resting against King Arthur (insert deeper meaning here). June's chest hurts, her feet ache, she almost loses her balance.

“Honey? Are you in here?” Clay says, bustling through the door, his sweet, scratchy voice upstaged by the synchronized smoke alarms. He doesn't look too happy that his kitchen smells like an L.A. freeway, the smoke alarms are screaming, that June's not watching the baby.

“Clay, you’re,” June starts to say, her voice tired and weak from talking to no one all morning long. She grabs a few potholders and fans at the smoke emanating from the microwave. Pulls out a stool as if she’s about to step up and turn off the smoke alarm in the kitchen. She pretends that she’s about to do all of these things. Only the smoke, the pills and the cheap red wine, make it pretty difficult to stay in those heels. June begins to see little flecks of light, driving over a horizon, an oncoming train, something, something flashing.

Clay takes June in his arms.

“Are you okay?” he asks June, his voice showing more frustration than concern. “Where’s Pace? June. Where’s Pace?” Clay methodically puts his keys and cell phone down on the dining room table. He sits down at the table and takes off his tan work boots splattered with oil and grease. He’s still wearing his light blue work shirt. His face is a darker red. To June it looks worn, different, like she hasn’t seen in days.

His dull blue eyes stare down into June and the way his dimples are speckled with stubble make her think sex. The muscles in his jaw grit and release either holding back anger or putting forth effort. Either way, June thinks he’s fighting who he wants to be right now because no one can remain this calm. He’s wearing his favorite jeans—the ones with a big faded “O” imprinted on the back right pocket from years of dip cans.

“Jeremy’s coming home tomorrow,” Clay says fiercely. “This place is a mess. You said you were going to spend the day getting ready. And by getting ready did you really mean setting fire to the kitchen? Answer me, baby, where is Pace?”

“I, uh,” June stammers as Clay stands up abruptly and slams the chair into the table. June opens the windows. Turns off the smoke alarms. She starts to put away the flour, the sugar, the eggs. Her heart sinks. Her chest sinks. She feels warm and dizzy. My husband hates me, June thinks. He forgot his lunch, thought he could just come home, grab a kiss from his wife and head back to work. But no, Auto Mechanic Ken is married to Bipolar Barbie.

Clay returns, assures June that their baby is sleeping, their baby is okay.

“June, come here, baby. Take off those ridiculous high heels and come sit on my lap like you used to.”

June welcomes the respite from standing. The way the cold floor feels against her callused feet. She sits down on his right leg and leans back against his chest. He smells of mint gum, tobacco, leather. She nuzzles her face against his as he takes a deep breath.

“How long did you leave Pace alone, baby? How long have these smoke alarms been going off with our baby back there crying? You know, I just came home to grab my lunch and now I gotta deal with this? Baby, I haven’t been gone but a few hours and you nearly burn the place down. You have got to stop doing this June. Ever since—“

Clay stops himself, tries to wrap his arms around her but she stands up.

“Since what? Since Jeremy left? Is that what this is about Clay? You don’t know what it’s like to be a mother. To be worried all the time. I haven’t heard from him in weeks. I haven’t seen his face. I haven’t gotten any of his letters. All I can do

is sit, watch the news, read the news, Clay I don't even pray, so what the fuck am I supposed to do?"

"June, *we* haven't heard from him in weeks. *We* haven't seen his face in such a long, long time. I miss him too June. But I'm here. Pace is here. You can't keep looking right through us muttering things about Jeremy. We are a family and we're right here. I bought you all those books you said you wanted. All that baking supplies. I'm trying, June, I'm really trying. But what I don't see is you trying. I come to check on you and here you are amidst all the smoke, the alarms, the God only knows what you did to the microwave."

He puts his hands out on the table, his head bowed in exhaustion.

"You came home to check on me? How dare you, Clay. You said you came home because you forgot your lunch. Or are you having trouble keeping track of all the lies?"

Clay laughs. "Seriously? June, you have got to get yourself together. I love you baby but I can't live like this."

"Then leave," June says, "Just leave."

"Why, so you can actually have something to be depressed about? You have everything baby. You have me, you have Pace. Jeremy will be home tomorrow. How do you think that makes me feel if that's not enough?"

"I never said that."

"You didn't have to. Now June, come here, I'm sorry. Just, come here."

He holds his hands out and grabs June's, warming them instantly. She can smell him again and feels at ease.

“I love you,” he says, “I love you. Now please just tell me what happened to our microwave. Please.”

June sighs. She bites her lip.

“They’re Barbie’s shoes,” June says, “I microwaved Barbie’s shoes.”

Clay cracks a smile and shakes his head, whether he’s about to yell or laugh, June can’t really tell.

Chapter 4

“Can we talk about the kitchen?”

Clay says this with his fork hovering above his plate of leftovers he’s just taken from his lunch pail. The leftovers he was going to microwave at work. He eats all of it cold, the lemon pepper chicken, mashed potatoes, and green beans cooked in ham hock. A chunk of chicken remains suspended in air, the tongs of the fork stabbed through the middle of it. June stares at the Elvis clock in the corner. She looks everywhere but her husband’s face. Even though he doesn’t say it, June can sense the anger Clay must be feeling. The fact that he’s eating cold leftovers because the microwave is ruined makes them both a little sad.

Clay sits at the head of the dining room table with June to his left. The table is still half covered in laundry and the air still smells of burnt plastic. Clay made the table one summer from some pines he chopped down in the mountains of north Georgia. He left most of the wood’s natural blemishes and warped eyes, covering it in a cherry finish. June told him that she saw the same table at a store downtown for a few hundred dollars. He wasn’t too pleased with June’s suggestion that he just buy that one and save himself the trouble.

June cranes her neck slightly, trying to catch a glimpse of the text glowing blue from the T.V. It’s on mute but she can see the headline at the bottom of the screen. “Missing soldier found dead outside of Fallujah.” June thinks that’s an hour outside of Baghdad, where Jeremy was, so she tries not to get too concerned.

“June Bug?”

June looks up to see that Clay's plate is nearly empty save a few green beans glued down by a clump of mashed potatoes. Clay drains what's left of a beer bottle and places it gently on an old cardboard coaster that says, "Happy St. Patrick's Day."

"The kitchen," June says without the necessary inflection needed to make it an actual question.

Clay sighs. He cuts a piece of cold chicken and places it delicately into June's mouth, careful not to smear her persimmon colored lipstick. To June, the chicken has too much seasoning, or perhaps not enough. Either way, she's too aware of the chicken taste, of the dead animal she's eating. She chews carefully, without emotion, so as not to disturb the thin layer of foundation applied neatly to her face. But none of this matters because her dark mascara has left little splotches of black beneath her eyes. June's mascara is supposedly waterproof but when she made herself cry it was as if her tear ducts were exuding some sort of black bile.

She didn't know what to say when Clay got angry, didn't know what to do when he accused her of seeking attention, of sabotaging their marriage. So June did what she always did when Clay was angry with her, she tried to think of the most painful moments in her life. Tried to think of all the movies, the songs, the poems that always made her cry. The image of her mother weeping at her father's grave. Flashes of Jeremy being blown up by a roadside bomb. June would conjure these images until a few tears streamed down her cheeks, until she sobbed enough for Clay to stop yelling.

June watches Elvis's lower hips swing to the rhythm of the ticking clock.

Clay stares at June gently, demanding an explanation for the microwave incident, the melted plastic, the burnt lemon bars. June's stomach drops the way it would seconds before an airplane crash. June can still close her eyes anywhere and feel the motion sickness, the jolting aircraft. She can smell the recycled, germ-filled air of the cockpit. Sometimes she can even hear the pilot.

As Clay's voice drones on, June pictures the masks dropping from the ceiling of the aircraft, the emergency lights going on, the other flight attendants scurrying around to calm the passengers. June can't recall the number of times she's sat in a too-small seat, the metal armrest branding a red diagonal line into her skin, and made that single wish. On the way to Atlanta, coming in through D.C., taking off, making the descent; she has wished for a 9/11-style plane crash. But whenever June prayed for a crash, her stomach would drop to the bottom of her heels and she would take some time to reevaluate the situation. She decided that she wouldn't want her last meal to be seven lightly salted peanuts and a Bloody Mary so small it could be soaked up with a thin "light days" maxi pad.

"Honey, there is melted plastic stuck to the microwave. You have yet to make any of Jeremy's favorite foods, a welcome home sign, anything. And who were you talking to, baby? Were you pretending Jeremy was here? Answer me, please. C'mon, take another bite of this. Have you eaten anything today? And no, wine and pills aren't part of the four food groups, baby." Clay laughs and promptly clears his throat once June throws him a disapproving glance.

June gets up nervously from the table and takes Clay's plate to the sink, his fork full of food still in mid-air. She secures the uneaten food in microwave safe, dishwasher safe container and puts it in the fridge.

"You didn't eat a thing, sweetheart," Clay says with all the concern he can put into one statement. He takes a big swig of water and motions it in June's general direction. Although he's just eaten, his teeth are spotless and bright.

"I'll eat later. I'm not feeling well. I just ate." June strings together several excuses not bothering to feign an ounce of sincerity. She says this while staring down at the dishes, as if she couldn't possibly look up. June draws in a deep breath wishing her live studio audience were here firing questions at her. With her audience, June can rely on her studio assistant to shield any inappropriate questions or at least move on to the next person quickly. But with Clay being real and Clay being here, June has to answer his questions. She leans against the sink and looks out the window at their perfectly manicured front lawn.

Clay stands up and approaches June, his arms resting peacefully on the kitchen counter, staring at her anxious face. "Do you think you're fat? Is that what this is? I think you're afraid of gaining weight so the minute you take one bite you give yourself a stomach ache. You know you're beautiful, don't you? Don't you, sweetheart?" Clay rambles on, unsure of how to proceed.

"Thank you, Dr. Phil."

"Well I'm afraid I've missed yet another one of your pop. culture references. Please eat something. You're already looking too thin. You're just about the skinniest thing this side of the Mississippi." Clay chuckles again.

June shakes her head and pulls out the little spray thingy from the faucet and turns it on full blast. June sees Clay's mouth moving but all she hears is the rush of water and the din of plates clanking against the wire racks of the dishwasher. She's run out of dishes to wash so she flips the food disposal on and lets it run as long as possible. The sound of dull blades whirring against cold food provides the soundtrack for Clay's silent speech. June's pretty sure he's mouthing the words, "sweetheart" and "eating disorder." She squints in his direction so that the words become, "fuck me" and "baby."

Still squinting, Clay's blurry image floats past June, past the fridge, and into their bedroom. June stands there under the whir of the food disposal and turns it off without moving her gaze from where Clay just stood.

June follows him into the bedroom and sits on the edge of the bed and stares at her reflection in the twenty inch television screen.

On either side of their bed, there is a small table complete with an industrial, sterile silver lamp. Beneath the television rests a rich mahogany dresser with two sets of drawers. In their perfectly symmetrical Southern bedroom, there may as well be a line of duct tape down the middle. Clay's bedside table is neatly polished with a stack of alphabetized magazines visible from a small box beneath. *Bait and Tackle. Guns and Ammo. Maxim.*

On the wall nearest this table hangs a black and white portrait of Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson from an 1863 *Harper's Weekly* cover. Lee stands proudly with binoculars in one hand and a sword in the other. Stonewall stands next to him

with nothing but a hat in his right hand. Beneath the immortal images of the South's greatest rebels are short biographies that Clay has taken upon himself to memorize.

On June's bedside table there are three half empty cans of cherry flavored diet soda with different color straws poking out from each mouth. There is an uncharged mp3 player collecting dust next to three bottles of pills for which there are no refills. A mound of change complete with green pennies and shiny new quarters she refuses to spend because of her attachment to the raised outlines of states on the backs. Beneath the table there are coverless celebrity gossip magazines, empty baby bottles, a remote that belongs to nothing. On the wall nearest June's table there is small framed portrait of Lord Byron hanging askew on a rusty nail.

June follows Clay's gaze over to his Robert E. Lee portrait. Clay's staring at him the way he does when he's trying to find the right words. Sometimes it's as if he's expecting Mr. E. Lee to drop the sword and tell him exactly what to say.

He sits on the bed gently. It squeaks in that old rusty hotel way. A hotel with a name like La Quinta that is just Spanish for, "I cheated on my wife here."

June's barely even breathing. Images of Clay's toned arms and tired eyes come to her in undulating waves. He pats a ruffled space of bed beside him that looks faded. The comforter is a patchwork quilt that has little squares with moose and deer sitting by a lake. June's chest tightens as she stares at their vacant faces.

June feels the onset of a panic attack, the hyperventilation, dry mouth, clammy hands. She feels as though the room is tilting, spinning. Suddenly the sky, the ceiling, whatever is above her feels closer than ever before.

“I didn’t. I couldn’t. You weren’t here. You weren’t here,” June mumbles through soft tears, not answering Clay’s questions, not even looking him in the face.

“Honey, you’re not making any sense. You’re shivering. Let’s get you into the bath.”

His voice is soft and scratchy, each syllable drawn out in a drawl. If June were to look him in the face she might forget her imagined rage and restlessness. She would acknowledge that he has gently taken off his blue work shirt leaving nothing but a fitted white undershirt. That his sideburns are cleaned up and angled in such a way that would make her want to rip his pants off. June glances over at his crumpled blue work shirt in the corner—its fading white nametag curled, revealing the first half of his name. He doesn’t smell of tire grease or blood-red transmission fluid. When she breathes him in, she thinks of oiled horse saddles and fresh tobacco leaves.

June’s staring right through Clay. She’s not here. She’s not present. Her mind has drifted to the margins of a self help book, inside a little purple box entitled, “Did You Know?” *When a loved one is suffering from a mood disorder, try not to make statements in the form of commands. Stay away from “you” statements. Instead of, “You always act this way,” try, “I feel that you are upset about something.” Sit down calmly and smile with your eyes instead of rolling them.*

June brings Clay back into focus and addresses him. “Stop. Just stop. Calling me ‘honey’ and using collective pronouns isn’t going to change the fact that my chin is down, my outlook is down, my mood is and will stay down.”

“Babe.”

“Babe.”

“Look, sweetheart, forget the microwave. I’ll run to the store tomorrow and get a new one. But, c’mon, a Barbie?” he laughs.

“Barbie’s shoes. I burnt her shoes. I’m so glad that my misfortune is fodder for your own amusement. I believe the Germans have a term for finding joy in others’ pain. What is it? Sadism? Are you a sadist?”

“I’m sorry. But you can’t blame everything on me. If I haven’t been home enough, tell me. Tell me you miss me—don’t destroy a microwave. Don’t push me away. Don’t tell me you love me like you’re trying to convince yourself that you do. I never know which June I’m coming home to. The other night you ran into the hallway the minute my keys clanked onto the table. You wrapped your arms around me and grabbed my pants, pulling me into you. You took your shirt off and walked back towards the bedroom, peeling off another article of clothing with each step. You tore my shirt off and giggled. But as soon as we were done, you rolled over and stared off into the distance. You wouldn’t let me touch you, sweetheart.”

Insert absolutist statement here: i.e. *You always do this.*

“Why don’t you let me hold you?”

June stands there, staring at the cream carpet. The carpet could be an area rug, or it could be wall-to-wall. But right now, to June, it’s just a carpet. Right now, her mind is in that Swedish furniture store. Right now June is wondering why ten square feet of lime green shag carpet costs a couple hundred dollars there. Why they keep the cacti next to the bathroom sinks as if you’d grab one as an impulse purchase and put it on the toilet. An hour later you’re sprawled out on the floor trying to assemble a sweatshop futon with a miniature tire iron.

“Why did you burn the lemon bars?”

She lets Clay hold her then saunters off towards the nursery, following the sounds of Pace coughing.

“All right baby, I’m going back to work,” Clay says before he stops June in the hallway and kisses her forehead. June smiles, a real smile, for the first time all day. She nods and watches Clay grab his keys from the dining room table and go out the front door.

“Don’t burn nothing else,” he says almost to himself as he leaves.

Chapter 5

2007

I'm at Camp Striker in Baghdad Iraq, laying on my cot beneath a tent with twenty other dudes. I get to start my trip home tomorrow. We fly to Kuwait, then Germany, where we got a six hour layover, then from Germany to Charlotte, then back to Savannah. It fucking sucks. Won't be able to talk to my girlfriend, my parents, my friends during all that bullshit. And I wouldn't be surprised if we didn't make it back home until next week. That's how the fucking Army works. Hurry up and wait. They'll wake your ass up at 0400 to go to the airport and then you sit around all day while they change the departure times every fucking hour.

I'm itching to get home but I don't mind being around some of these guys. I know three or four from my company back home, but the rest of them were total strangers when I first got here. They're all pretty decent guys I guess. Well, except for Killem. Killem's a scrawny motherfucker from Missouri or Connecticut, and he's got that sick desperation in his eyes. He's got oval type glasses that are always askew—that means they ain't sitting right on his face. He's been trying to grow a beard ever since he got here, but the only thing he's got is a faint mustache like the ones them Mexican kids have in like, fourth grade. He seems like a nice guy but he can't get a girl in his bed without slipping some GHB in her drink first.

GHB is short for Gamma-HydroxyButyric acid, or as I like to say, Get Her Boned. I ain't a podiatrist or nothing but I do know a thing or two about substances. From what Killem's told me, GHB is real easy to slip into a girl's drink because it

ain't got no smell or color. It can taste a little salty based on what kind it is. Just make sure you buy the girl a margarita or whiskey sour and she won't know the difference. It ain't really that easy to prove someone's given you GHB on account of it being untraceable after 24 hours. But you gotta make sure the bitch ain't taking anything for anxiety cause if she's on benzos that will not mix well with the alcohol and GHB. Last thing you want is a bitch O.D.-ing on you when you're too drunk to drive.

But I don't really condone all this bullshit Killem tells me about. Me, I have a slamming body and a great personality so I don't need any chemicals to get a girl in my bed. I don't know why Killem don't just get himself to the gym. It ain't like we have a shortage of those in our camp. But no, he'd rather sit on his ass looking at internet porn while us real men are doing bench presses and arm curls.

Every night he waits until he thinks everyone's sound asleep and then starts chafing his carrot. Everyone else is sleeping like date-raped sorority girls and there I am, eyes wide open and listening to Killem fixing to nut himself. Me, I'm so starved for sex, I could fuck a couch through a living room wall. But you ain't gonna see me rubbing one out in a tent full of men. Daddy taught me better than that.

I grab my mp3 player and scroll through play list after play list, trying to find something loud enough to drown out Killem and his fucking dick. I finally decide on my "Fuck you" play list that I usually rock out to when I'm lifting weights. I pop in my ear buds and stare up at the top of the tent. The wind's moving it slightly and I can hear tiny bits of sand scraping along the top of it just before I hit play.

I close my eyes, squeezing real tight, as if the harder I squeezed them the closer I could be to home. My mind fights it at first, seeing flashes of sand, Hummers, and canteens. But after squeezing hard enough, I'm back home.

Back home you can try to sleep in, but the scent of June's biscuits in the morning will pull you right outta that toasty bed. You'll sleepwalk into the kitchen, still wiping the crust out of your eyes, and smell the crackling of fat back and eggs. The table's weighed down in the middle like an old horse barely supporting jugs of fresh milk, sweet potato pie, greens, and a big old tub of butter that would make Paula Deen cum in her britches. That's that scary cooking lady who has that restaurant in Savannah. She's from Albany, Georgia and has one of them rags to riches stories. I'm pretty sure that means she married a rich guy while she was on the rag. I guess what I'm trying to say is that June Pryor can out-cook that bitch any day if she ain't too depressed. But when she feels well enough to cook, you can't barely see her, just flashes of her arms running back an' forth between the kitchen and the table.

Please go ahead. It's getting cold.

You had better learn not to say things like, I ain't a breakfast person or, I'll just have coffee. One of the most offensive things you can say to June is, I ain't hungry. This is only second to saying you like them books about faggy wizards. Ain't nothing more upsetting to June than books for sixth graders getting so much attention.

"Babe, sit down already, you're making me nervous," Daddy always says.

"Clay, please. I'm not quite hungry yet," June always responds.

But June never does sit down with us. By the time I look up from my plate, she's back at her computer watching clips of that news show. Don't know why cause

that motherfucker's on ten times a day. But I like him 'cause he's one of the few news people that will admit we're winning the war in Iraq. Some people try and tell me he's just kidding, but I don't believe them. I mean, he's from South Carolina, and Southerners know better than to make light of things like war.

Why do I call her June if she's my momma? She's Daddy's second wife and calling her Momma would make me think of my biological mother. To tell you the God's honest truth, that cougar ain't nothing but a lazy slut. I'm surprised the bitch fits in the church pew on account of that disorder she has—open leg syndrome, I believe. June, the woman that just had a baby boy with my old man, the woman that sends me emails while I'm over here in the sandbox, well that's the mother I come home to back in the states. She's soaked up all the Dixie she could since she moved here with Daddy all them years back. Got to know the other women in the church real well and was cooking pork and greens in no time. She's even got a slight Southern drawl if you listen real close. That's the thing about the South—you stay here long enough and you start to ask yourself, "What would Jesus fry?"

My friends love staying at my house on account of all the good food and company. One morning right before I deployed, my girlfriend, Chris and her friend, Sydney spent the night. The next day, right after breakfast, we put our boots on and grabbed the rifles from Daddy's safe. I considered grabbing the pistol for Sydney but she crossed her arms and glared at me. She's really got that *eat shit* look down. Most guys are afraid to talk to her. They come to me and ask my permission, which is how it should be. You can't just go up to a girl and tell her she looks good in them jeans of hers. You have to find the man of the house and tell him your intentions. That's how

it was back in Shakespeare's day. Ain't like that in some parts of the country, but it's like that here. If I tell a guy no, he knows better than to so much as look at Syd again. Syd's one of my girlfriend's friends which means I'm accountable for her and anything that happens to her. Damn I miss my fucking girlfriend. I'm surrounded by men whose wives, girlfriends, girls they're just talking to and wanna fuck, just flat out leave them. I imagine it's hard for these guys to deal with shit over here. I guess it depends on the guy. Some guys think it's better being dumped out here because you have more pressing issues at hand.

But all I can do anymore is count down the days until I can see Chris again. I wonder what she's doing, what she's thinking, whether she still loves me just as much as she did when I left. I miss those bright green eyes of hers, that red curly hair. At least, I think it's still red on account of her dying it every few months. I don't think our commander-in-chief really thought it through too much when he bumped up our deployment dates, then decided to keep us here even later. I don't think he really considered that he'd be tearing apart families, relationships, marriages. No, from where he sits in his egg-shaped office, his life looks pretty good. Damn, I sure do hope Chris still loves me when I get home. Otherwise, I'm gonna take a shot of tequila and wash it down with some Drano. That shit's good for mildew, clogs and a simple case of "need to die now."

I roll over onto my side and find myself staring at the back of Mason's head. If we weren't assigned the same cots every night, I'd never know who I was sleeping next to. The back of Mason's head is shaved so good from his ears on down that his

skin almost looks blue. With that same dumb haircut, and that same brown t-shirt, Mason, he could be anyone. And in a way, he is.

I close my eyes and go back to that day when we was all out in the field shooting bottles and old beer cans. I think about a conversation I had with Syd. Since I ain't never been up to the North, I rely on her to tell me what people are like up in the free states. She was sitting savage style on the grass patting herself down for a lighter as she started telling me how some guys up there consider themselves "feminists." I believe feminist is French for faggot, but I ain't sure. Could be Greek. I can't explain it as well as Syd does, but I'll give it a try. So say I'm a feminist—I want my woman, excuse me, my partner to be an equal. So I don't buy her dinner or hold the door and I let other guys eye-fuck-the-shit out of her every place we go. I got my head in books all day so I don't notice my girlfriend bent over a hay stack as naked as the day God brought her into this world. While I'm busy plucking my eyebrows, I can't see his camouflage britches bunched up around his ankles, his undone belt buckle dragging across the dirt with each hard push.

The way I see it, somewhere in between that Spartan War and World War I, chivalry lost due north and sunk down into a bottomless ocean. I'm not saying it don't exist, but them city boys talk about it like it's slavery. Don't know how buying a girl some chicken and keeping her outta harm's way is going against feminism. Around here that is a four-letter word. That means it's become unacceptable to use that word even though it's really a eight-letter word. I ain't saying a man has to be all hard. If he comes home from war and won't dance with his girl, she's as good as gone. Like last year at the Army Aviation Ball down on the river with Syd and Cooper.

“Would you do me the honor of dancing with me?” Sydney asked Cooper.

“I’d love to, baby, but I’m a soldier first and foremost,” he replied, getting high fives from all his boys.

“Well, then. Keep that rifle of yours good and ready so it doesn’t get rusty and start shooting blanks. You and your right hand have a splendid evening,” Sydney retorted, smiling as Cooper’s face grew redder than a flesh wound.

Syd’s quick like that, never leaves home without a book, but she ain’t all pretentious like them other city girls. A lit cigar sat between her moist lips that day, as she shut one eye and took a big breath. The ember at the tip glowed red then turned straight to ash. She grabbed the Remington from the grass and snapped it open, resting it softly atop her folded knees. She put in two buckshots and snapped the rifle shut, cocking it loud enough to scare a few birds perched on the fence down yonder.

Syd smiled with her eyes as smoke hung lazily around her face. She stood right up, and pointed the rifle at a big, empty bottle of whiskey. With one straight shot, she shattered the bottle and took out a smaller bottle next to it without blinking.

The smoking shells sat idly in the grass as she handed the smoking rifle to Chris, and sat back down to enjoy her cigar. It was a Petite Corona, which is French for little cigar. It’s dipped in bourbon and vanilla and Syd never has less than three a day. But don’t bring up the fact that it’s a little cigar to Syd, or she’ll spear you right into the ground and choke you out with a smile on her face.

Syd is always whining that a guy is either big and dumb or scrawny and smart. She dated this one paramedic who moved all her furniture up to her third floor apartment in twenty minutes. She said there wasn’t nothing sexier than a big shiny

badge and work boots. His hands were so big, he made a bottle of wine look like one of those old-fashioned soda bottles you see in a big barrel of ice in a candy store. But she had to dump him on account of him calling that black guy who's running for president a fucking rag-head.

Laying in my cot, I start to wonder. Girls usually date the smart/sensitive types, but they'll always fuck the strong ones. Maybe that's why you hear so many whiny songs about pasty-face writer types losing sleep 'cause they just got dumped for construction workers and football players. I mean, ask yourself, how many dirty calendars do you see full of poets and painters? What girl ever wants to roll-play with a liberal? Me, I don't understand that at all. I can bench one of them hybrid cars on a bad day but still write a whole mess of poems about shooting guns and fucking women. I'm sensitive. I cried once when I was a kid.

All that medieval stuff, jousting, slaying beasts, it was all to get them ladies out of their britches and on their backs. Now all we have are bar fights and they just ain't as sexy as having a long, sharp pole gripped in your hand as you ride towards your rival, with the sharp end pointed straight at his heart.

There's a gap in between songs and I hear Killeem rooting around in his bag for his smokes. I throw him a soft pack of Camel Lites and it hits him square in the face.

"Don't forget to wash your hands, cowboy," I say with a grin.

Moments later I drift off to sleep with images of Chris in my head. Chris in that little white dress of hers. Chris giving me one of her famous backrubs. Chris. Chris. Chris.

I'm jolted awake even though it's dead silent. My eyes pop open at the feeling of a presence hovering next to me. They got us sleeping on bunk beds so as to make us all comfortable and the like. Me, I'm on the top bunk sleeping in a cardboard box. I know, it makes me sound like one of them homeless guys who wait by the bridges in Savannah hoping to catch some tourists on the way back from the river. There's one guy who always stands out where the Harry Truman Parkway meets up with the Islands Expressway with his tattered brown sign that says, "Homeless. Starving. God bles." Even though he can't spell for shit that guy eats better than I do some days. Every half hour or so a brand new SUV pulls up and hands him a squeaky, white to-go box full of crab cakes or fried oysters.

But my box is more for privacy's sake. It's a real nice box and I put a door with a working handle on it. Hell, I like it. I even got some curtains hung up and tons of picture plastered on the inside. I got pictures of all my closest friends and family members, but most of them are of me and Chris. Most of the time, seeing her face makes me real depressed. I know it sounds weird, but I don't wanna forget what she looks like.

Thinking about that makes me want to die just a little bit. But I guess it could be worse—a lot of guys here have little ones back home that don't have memories of their daddy during those first few years. When they first get deployed, their wives send them pictures, little finger paintings, and some other shit kids can pass off as art. But as time goes on the letters and pictures come every other week, then every month, and before too long there ain't none at all. So when the guys finally do make it home they don't recognize their own kids. They never see their first steps or hear their first

words. A lotta times, kids first words are “Momma” or “Da-da.” But with a kid who ain’t seen his dad in years, his first word is most likely “Da-da?” as in, where the hell is my pops?

I open my little door and sure enough, Killem’s standing there—his face stone cold. Although we ain’t gotta be up for another hour, he’s already in his ACU’s, boots laced—cover on. Our uniforms look like a bunch of pixels outta focus the way shitty pictures look on the computer when you try and zoom in on them.

Killem’s Adam’s apple bulges out making him look like some three-world brown kid who swallowed a golf ball. His hand, clutching a big, serrated knife, is shaking so bad I swear I can hear the cold blade vibrating against his wrinkled pant leg. I cut my eyes at him and he backs off, still not cracking a smile. I shake my head and try to go back to sleep but I got one of them gotta-piss-real-bad boners so I slip into my ACU’s and lace up my tan boots. I really do hate these boots but I think about that king and his Spartans who fought in those flimsy sandals. I couldn’t imagine going against a Persian with nothing but a sword, a shield, and a pair of them shoes you’d see Jesus Christ wearing. But I really wish I could’ve been a soldier back then. Before you had crazy motherfuckers blowing themselves up in buses and city markets. But I don’t think I’d look too hot in a big diaper and a cape—that shit’s just plain gay.

I consider whipping it out once I’m thirty feet from the tent but the last thing I need is piss splashing off the desert sand and onto my boots. I get a whiff of them porta-shitters and it excites my gag reflex because they sure do stink something fierce. It’s all I can do not to puke up the bile swishing around in my stomach.

I shake it off and zip up wishing they'd show some porn in the MWR, that's the Morale, Welfare, and Recreation tent they got with a big screen TV. We just tend to watch football, movies, anything but porn. But I tell you, nothing would boost morale more than some barely legal oriental chicks making out on some black velvet sheets. I can just seem them in their green plaid skirts, white collared shirts and ties, long white socks, and come-fuck-me boots. Damn. I don't know why you always hear Vietnam vets whining. They had some hot prostitutes that would suck your dick for a few dollars or whatever them chinks use for money—Chuck E. Cheese coins I believe. But we never really go into town, and when we do all them chicks are covered head to toe in sheets the way Klan members look in their stupid parades. I bet you Iraqi porn just shows some chins, or maybe some ankles. I mean how do you hit on a woman like that? I really like the breasts I can't see under that beekeeper costume of yours. Wanna go back to my tent and show me your nose?

Sometimes we watch those bootleg DVDs we get from the haji shops that come out before the movies are even in theatres. They are real shitty quality like most things here but they're only three bucks so I can't really complain. They sell other shit at those shops but it's all worthless crap that only first time deployers blow their money on.

I go back in the tent and root around in my bag, picking up a can of Iraqi dip. It's really nasty and weak so I go through a can every couple days or so. I really miss my Cope and I'd kill to be at an American gas station right now. When you're out here in the sandbox, it makes you homesick for the little things. Back in Georgia, I wouldn't think too much of driving to a gas station to pick up some things. But sitting

here, surrounded by guys I'm sick of, makes me wanna be home real bad. I've come to memorize all the moles on Parker's face, Christiansen's told me all his blonde jokes, and if I hear about Mason's kids one more fucking time, I'm gonna unload a hundred dollars worth of rounds on our whole company. Just like that little Asian boy who shot up his school. Too soon?

PT ain't for awhile so I get back in my box, back in my bed trying to convince myself that tomorrow I'll wake up in Georgia. That tomorrow I can sit on the front porch with June, Daddy and Chris. I can almost hear Daddy slamming chairs around 'cause June stole his truck again. Hear Chris singing country songs as she draws my name in the dirt with a stick.

I turn my death metal back on and try to focus on the good memories I've had with my boys, only for some reason I can't. All I can think about is Kill'em. Maybe 'cause he was just standing above me acting all weird and shit. I just can't look at him the same way now. Sure, I gotta work with the faggot and be all nice to him in front of our commanding officers, but the night he raped Sydney, that's not something I could ever forgive him for.

It all started out as a typical night with the boys. We're picking some things up before we get more fucked up than a short bus full of third graders. That's one of them metaphors—it don't mean that we were really retarded or even in a bus.

It's one of them nights where it ain't cold enough for a jacket but your nipples get so hard in a t-shirt you could cut glass with them. It feels like winter here but I imagine in other parts of the country it'd be more like fall. It ain't too much after dinner but it's late enough that there ain't too many cars driving with us. As we drive

around the corner towards post, I sucker punch Killem in the chest so we can stop off at the gas station and get me some dip. He rolls his eyes like he's got better things to do then turns his truck into the lot blocking two gas pumps. I slap him on the back and give him one of my endearingly sarcastic grins. I've heard once or twice from people that I have what they call a "baby face" on account of my big blue eyes and pudgy cheeks. Me, I don't like the word "baby" being in the same sentence as my name, but I guess it makes sense. I ain't self conscious about it or nothing because of my size. When I'm in my ACU's at work, all you can see is my face—and even half of that is concealed by my cover. Anyway, I ain't worried about my "baby face" because it never stopped me from getting pussy. If anything, it helped. Chris thinks it's damn sexy, staring into my baby blues knowing I could kill her with one hand.

Parker's in the back texting his girl and I don't wanna bother him none by asking if he thinks my gentle complexion takes away from my bad boy persona. Parker's a swell enough guy. He'd suck your dick if you asked him real nice, but I think he's one of them manic depressives. I think he might be bipolar too—I ain't sure. He's got a baby face too but on account of his size, he really does look like a pussy. And I mean that in the figurative like sense. But I keep him around 'cause he makes me feel like more of a giant than usual.

So I'm staring out of the window all longingly and shit at that beautiful glowing sign "Cope 2 for \$5" That sounds like a pretty good deal but I do believe this station don't sell no Copenhagen Black long cut which is the only kind I ever dip. Then there's that other shit that comes in all types of queer flavors like watermelon strawberry and pink lemonade. And don't get me started on wintergreen dip—they

make that with menthol. Menthol is just a ten dollar word for mint. That means it's a word them Ivy League guys use to pick up big-breasted girls in tight sweaters you always see running up the stairs in horror movies. I ain't black and I ain't gay, so you won't catch me putting anything menthol in my mouth.

Killem hops back in the truck and grabs a warm beer from the cup holder in front of the radio. Although I'm pretty sure you pronounce his name like, Chill-em he always corrects people and says it's pronounced like Kill-em. Guess that makes him feel badass but he's still a pussy in my book. I ain't really wrote a book but that means according to me.

“What you doing man? This ain't Atlanta, you can't just drink and drive.” I say giving one of my signature looks.

“You ain't gotta worry. I ain't gonna drink and drive—I'm gonna put it down before I start the engine back up.”

That was the night Killem raped a girl.

That day Chris called Sydney and could barely hear her at all. Sydney's a real nice girl. She's got a good head on her shoulders and an even nicer ass. Chris met her downtown last summer throwing darts at some bar. When Chris got a little closer, she could see that those weren't darts Syd was throwing. Evidently, she got pretty tired of losing at darts, so she came back from her car with a set of throwing knives. I tell you she hit the bull's-eye every fucking time. I think what Chris liked about Syd was how tough she was. Most girls are so focused on acting drunk and giggling at some guy's dumb jokes when they're at the bar. But Sydney tends to walk past all the guys without so much as looking in their direction to get to the dart board. Even so, Syd

can walk home with ten guys' numbers without so much as saying a word. She's the type of girl that could walk into a bar in a clown suit and still get ass from anyone there. Chris is the same way, but everyone knows she's property of Jeremy Pryor, so they don't even try.

Sydney's a real character once you get to know her. She's got hair that's three shades of blonde cut short and angled-like that stops just short of her chin. You'll see her in tiny, ripped and faded denim shorts year round. In the winter you can see the goose bumps and splotches of blue on her freshly shaved legs. I wanna tell her she looks cold and she's welcome to get into my pants if it'll warm her up.

Sydney was staying with Chris for the summer, maybe longer on account of her having a bad breakup. Sydney had spent the day sobbing into her cell phone and playing that country song about taking a baseball bat to some guy's truck.

Chris felt bad for her even though the breakup was all her doing. Leave it to a woman to cheat on her man than cry about him leaving her. Way I heard it, her man come home from a long day making websites or some shit and uttered the words no man ever wants to say, "That ain't my truck." Only, this was up North so I'm sure it was more like, "I am unfamiliar with that energy-efficient vehicle."

It sucks when Army wives cheat on their husbands, but computer programmers? I mean, those fuckers can work from home, and if they do go into work they're only gone for eight hours at a time. Can't you women fucking wait that long before calling your ex-boyfriend?

Girls know what they're signing up for when they date soldiers. Dating a soldier means he'll be gone for one to two years at a time, then they act all surprised and hurt when it's time for us to deploy.

A big old truck parked in the patch of dirt outside your trailer means one thing. You're girlfriend's a whore and the man inside her is gonna have a broken nose.

Chris does her best to comfort Sydney and convince her to go out.

"Meet me on post, sweetie," Chris pleads.

"I don't know. I don't want to go anywhere," Syd responds.

"Come on. Bring your ID and registration to the guard at the front gate and he'll give you a pass to put on your dash. I'll meet you there and you can follow me to the barracks."

Sydney sighs, the song blaring in the background. The one where the chick carves her name into the guy's leather seats.

"Okay."

"Sweetie, it'll be all right. We'll have fun tonight. Okay, drive safe."

Sydney walks through the door and sees me grabbing a big old bag of ice from the freezer. I'm wearing my black shirt with the naked girl straddling a motorcycle and some jeans I got at the PX. I can tell by the way Sydney looks at me that my size is all kinds of intimidating. She's wearing khakis—the kind that stop just below the knees—petal pushers or clam shitters or something like that. She's wearing a diamond necklace from one of her old boyfriends and one of them lacy tank tops, the kind with the built in bra. The necklace, it's got three diamonds strung together

vertically in a way that's supposed to stand for yesterday, today and tomorrow. Little did that guy know that he would turn out to be yesterday and some other guy would be tomorrow. I tell her she's welcome to anything in the fridge and she makes herself a tequila and Coke. I find this kinda strange but I can't say nothing as I'm drinking whiskey and cream soda which is pretty odd too.

It's a real nice night, warm and humid but not so much that you'd start sweating and slip right off your girlfriend if you tried to hump her. She seems real tense and her eyes are red with little puffy blue circles underneath that just scream heartbreak and loss. Reminds me of the first time I met June. She had the same sad, exhausted, "we just broke up" look in her swollen Mickey Mouse eyes. I try to tell a good joke to put her at ease. Chris told me she's one of them political types so I try and rack my brain to find a joke that ain't about blacks or women which don't leave me with much.

"What do you get when you cross a damn onion and a donkey? A piece of ass that'll bring a tear to your eye," I say putting all my emphasis on "ass" and "tear" so she'll get the joke and I don't gotta explain it.

She laughs and takes a sip of her drink. She leans over to Chris and mumbles something in her ear. I get the signal and head out to my truck to get some cowboy killers. Sydney cleaves her pouting lips with a cigarette and Chris holds a flame to the tip. She's sitting on one of them picnic benches we have on post in the commons area outside. I can see in her eyes that she hasn't had a smoke in a few months. She looks like hell and I feel terrible for her. Chris's shuffling a stack of cards, her breasts nearly popping out of her boy beater. A big wooden cross swings across her chest

with each movement of her hands. She's wearing jeans so tight it looks like an optical illusion. I see her smile at Sydney without an ounce of pity, and it makes me love her even more. Chris always says she don't know what to say when someone has a personal tragedy, but I ain't ever seen her sit besides someone for two minutes without making them smile.

From that point on, things get a little hazy for Sydney. We're playing a drinking game with a deck of cards. Sydney being one of them straight-laced, go to church on Sunday types, ain't got much of a tolerance for alcohol. There are always two types of people drinking: people that drink to remember and people that drink to forget. Let's just say, for Sydney, it was the ladder. That means it was the second one, like how you need a ladder to get to the second floor.

Not to sound gay or nothing but that night ain't something any of us could ever forget. I can imagine it's etched in Sydney's mind worse than 9/11 for them Yankee firefighters. I don't get why them motherfuckers need so many car stickers. If you cared enough to buy a sticker that says "9/11 Never Forget" chances are it ain't gonna slip your mind that we lost some good Americans that day. And besides, if anything, it was good for them firefighters—the ones that made it out alive at least. Just you wait 'till the three largest St. Patrick's Day parades in Boston, New York, and Savannah. Them FDNY boys get more ass than a toilet seat in a downtown bar.

According to Syd, she starts to get all confused in a drunk-like stupor by ten p.m. I remember it's her turn, and we's all waiting for her to draw a card. Her hair and makeup still look perfect which is hard to do in the Georgia mist. That perfect blonde hair makes her look like Barbie's hot cousin, Skipper. I think she's the one

who had two kids but no husband. Think there was a big pink trailer too, sold separately of course. June told me those Yankee feminists don't like Barbie. That they're always whining because Barbie's waist is too small or some shit. Of course Barbie's smaller than you, she's a fucking doll. You won't see me getting bent out of shape 'cause Ken has a slimmer waist than I do. That fucker can't even have sex. Shouldn't that make feminists happy? Instead of getting married and having kids, Barbie hangs out with this neutered guy that takes her shopping and shit. Like that news guy says, "There's nothing wrong with being gay. I have plenty of friends that are going to hell."

Sydney absentmindedly touches the diamonds resting against her chest, half checking to see if they are still there, half wishing they aren't. She finally draws a card which is a "2" so she points to me and I take a big old gulp of my whiskey. After that she doesn't much touch her Tequila. I see her try to bring the cup to her lips a couple times then watch her scrunch her face up like she smells dead babies in a dumpster. One of them boys, Sanders I believe, asks her something then returns from the PX with a six pack of beer. They don't got a huge selection on post but at least the alcohol is tax free. She has half of one before she excuses herself and stumbles back towards the barracks. She told me she don't even remember making that walk. That the last thing she remembers is the first sip of that dark red beer.

This is where Killem's story and Syd's story go their separate ways. You see Killem, he was my roommate at the time. So we's each got our own little single rooms that share a common kitchen-type place with a sink, fridge, microwave, stove, you know, a fucking kitchen. So my plan was to give the girls my bed and sleep on

the floor in Killem's room. I usually go over to Chris's house after work but we thought it would be fun to get shit-faced on post.

Chris told me that she watched Syd walk slowly towards the kitchen, her bony, perfectly manicured fingers gliding along the bumpy smudged walls for balance. She finds Syd curled up all puppy-like at the bottom of Killem's bed. She looks so peaceful, been through so much, Chris don't want to disturb her none. So she looks Killem in the eye and makes him promise to sleep on the floor. Makes him swear up and down he wouldn't try nothing. Besides, I figured he knew better than to mess with any girls on my watch. Everyone knows that I'm responsible for every person I'm with—especially them women. But I felt pretty confident about Killem, him being such a dork and all. Ain't no way he'd try something with Syd, her being so smoking hot. Besides, she pinned him real good earlier when they was wrestling in the dirt. And like every country girl do, she got herself a knife tucked in the front right pocket of her pants.

I can just see Syd now, her little puffy eyes blinking in and out of consciousness. Her bare arms hugging her knees in close to her chest. I imaging she's thinking way back to middle school, before boys, before liquor. Back when she could pitch a tent in the backyard and spend all day reading books and writing in her journal. Before boys she focused on her friends, her family, her schoolwork. She didn't have to worry none about breakups, strong drinks, guys' hands groping her breasts without permission. She tries to think if she's been happy since then, but I imagine she can't. I imagine she's thinking she's never been happy.

In her mind, she's twelve picking lemons off the big tree in her backyard. Setting up a table in her front yard made of milk crates and an old door. Cars creep to a stop and windows roll down to see a blue eyed girl with choppy bangs that scream, Momma don't know, but I did them myself.

But in the present, her tan pants glowing grey in the darkness are being unbuttoned, unzipped, and eased off of her hips revealing a tattoo of a big cross on the bottom right of her stomach. He slips her knife out from her left pocket, her cell phone from her right pocket and places them carefully behind the glowing blue computer monitor on his desk. His play list is taking up the whole screen but there ain't no point in playing songs now. It ain't like he's got to serenade her or find something loud enough to drown out her screams, her moans, her "stops" and "no, don'ts." Her head rocks lazily from side to side in failed attempts to raise itself up, stay conscious. She sees flashes of this scrawny boy, his dog tags swaying towards her with each movement of his dirty hands. Hands soaked in oil and grease from working on Apaches for ten hours straight. Hands that never get clean no matter how many hours are spent scrubbing with steaming hot water and government issue soap. While he pulls the waist of her pants over her motionless ankles, she's anywhere but here. She's not looking at him; she's looking right through him.

She takes a small wire sieve that looks the way the earth would if it were made of chain mail and cut in half. Three little wire pegs stick out on the sides, keeping it steady on top of a big plastic pitcher filled with water. She takes a lemon half in one hand and carefully inspects it, picking out any seeds she sees on top. Tiny cuts on her fingers burn as she folds the lemon in half. Bits of pulp and streams of

juice trickle down through the mesh and into the pitcher, not quite mixing with the water, but not quite on top of it either.

He pulls his white t-shirt off, the kind with a picture of a small mouth bass on the back of it and a little pocket on the front that used to say something only the letters have faded. He folds it neatly knowing that time ain't an issue 'cause Sydney ain't waking up anytime soon. That's the thing about date rape; you got all the time in the world. You ain't gotta make the girl laugh, be sweet to her, once she's too drunk to talk, she's as good as fucked. She looks nauseas, dizzy like she's missed her connecting flight and spent four hours trying to sleep in an airport chair. She hears the clanking of metal as he undoes his brown leather belt he made himself one summer. His name is carved in the back of it. When leather's wet, it's real easy to manipulate. You can make all sorts of designs. He eases his baggy jeans down a little and sits on the bed to pull them off and fold them. He don't bother taking her shirt off so he can throw the blanket over her half way if anyone tries to come in. If anyone asks, she's sleeping peacefully and he's just in his boxers on account of the room being so stuffy.

She takes a big freezer bag full of sugar, slides her lemon scented hands inside and scoops out two big cups into the pitcher. She grabs a big wooden spoon from atop her makeshift table and stirs the mixture around without no effort as if completely from muscle memory as she peers out into the street, looking for cars that might be fixing to stop. She spots a minivan off in the distance as she stacks plastic cups neatly beside her empty coffee can full of coins and some dollar bills. Her momma gave her a few dollars to start out with so she could make change and make the customers think she's running quite the successful business. A big smile reaches her eyes as the

minivan slows down to a stop and three muddy, cleated boys hop out, sweaty shin guards undone, blue striped socks bunched down around their ankles.

Killem straddles Sydney and cups his hands around her sleeping breasts from underneath her t-shirt. He rubs himself up against her, feels her light blue panties that say “Lucky You” with a little shamrock on either side. “I never thought an old Missouri boy like me could ever get a pretty looking thing like you,” he says to her, stroking her face with his greasy hand. “I have to say, I never saw this coming,” he says. “Is this okay, Sydney? Is this okay?” he asks. She doesn’t say yes but she don’t say no so he eases himself inside and breathes heavily into her right ear.

This whole time I’m next door cuddling with my girlfriend, completely oblivious to the sick, fucked up shit that’s going down thirty feet away.

The soccer mom hands Sydney a five dollar bill that she tucks away in her jeans’ pocket, her ear to ear smile fading as the car drives away.

This is what goes through my mind when I should be getting ready for PT, packing up for tomorrow. I have one day until I get to leave. One day.

2: Dear Alexander

It is quite rare that there is one moment in which I do not feel Pain. And if I am blessed with such a moment, it is only fleetingly so. It has become so that I enjoy these moments of Pain more because in them, there is nothing to dread. Let it not be said that I write merely to escape the Pain. For as my quill scrawls ink across this paper, my hands still shake and my heart doth ache. I have loved portions of my Life, but I am sure I will love all of my Death. For it is only in Death that I shall finally and wholly be free. It is only man's final rest that can cure what ails me. And so I pray unto God to succeed where the doctors have failed.

Wearing a black silk waistcoat and cream linen pants, Alexander Pope entered the card room at Hampton Court. It was 1712 and as he was known to do, Alexander planted himself among London's elite society, hid beneath a table, and took notes. A scarlet cloak made of wool hung well past his knees, brushing the floor. Alexander hoped the cloak would conceal his hunch, his short stature. He wore a garment similar to a corset because his spine was so badly twisted. He coughed quite often, spitting up blood into his fine handkerchief. For this reason, he held the cloth over his face, his small head tucked into his chest as if folding into himself.

In doing so, he hoped to conceal his ill health from the men and women of the court, as only his beloved friend, Jonathan Swift knew of his ailments. The Irishman had learned all the idiosyncrasies of the poet, his facial expressions, sighs of exhaustion. He knew that a deep sigh with phlegm meant Alexander would need two drams of peppermint extract. The clenching of his jaw would require a heating pad to

soothe the dull aching in his back. It had taken Alexander months to open up to Swift, tell him he was in pain, dying. He didn't want to be a burden. Alexander thought that telling someone about his illness was the equivalent of asking to be carried. What might they do if he told them how much pain he was in? Fetch a doctor? Offer him a bed? No, he didn't want to bother anyone. After all, he was only at Hampton Court to observe, to research. Didn't see the merit in engaging with any of his test subjects. No, for the evening he would cough furtively, avert his glance, then return to his lodgings through an underground tunnel.

Alexander crouched down beneath a card table, washing the taste of blood from his mouth with sips of cold coffee. The coughs became more frequent and he worried that his presence would be discovered. He had been bled by Dr. Edmond just three nights ago and still felt the residual stinging where the needles had pierced his veins. The doctor advised him to stay in bed and promised he would be by later to check on him, as Alexander was known to escape.

But Alexander did not heed his advice. He wanted to, needed to, research the polite society of Hampton Court. He needed to observe their behavior, interactions. To capture the image of a woman feigning interest, giggling, whispering. And so he did what he always did when fooling the doctor, he stuffed a few pillows beneath his sheets to make it look as though he were asleep in his bed. He then left a big chunk of ham beneath the bed so his trusty Great Dane would eat himself into a stupor and begin to snore. And just as planned, Dr. Edmond stopped by Alexander's room that night, only to see the figure of the poet in bed and hear the awful, raspy snoring of a man in pain.

Alexander felt quite pleased with this little deception because it afforded him the chance to pretend he was just like everyone else. He could go into town, sip exotic coffee, listen to beautiful music, all while his likeness was asleep in his bed. But as Alexander moved slightly from beneath the table, he began to regret his decision to pretend to be well. Alexander felt dizzy and rested his head on the windowsill (which was at a convenient height since he was barely five feet tall). He shielded himself with a soft red curtain and vomited into his coffee cup. Since the bleedings had begun again, he could not bring himself to eat. Coffee was all he could tolerate, but now even that was making him ill. He tilted his head down, watching as blood, phlegm and coffee swished around in his cup. He thought he might vomit again and fell to his knees, but it was nothing more than a few dry heaves.

In the din and clamor of teaspoons clinking glasses, hands clapping, no one seemed to notice the strange form the curtain had taken or the awful smell that emanated from it. He felt as though he might faint and got lost in the deep red curtain, stumbling around like a dog beneath a sheet.

He peered out the window on the far wall, surveying the lovely courtyard in squares of greens and browns. As he wiped the blood and vomit from his mouth, he noticed a painting of Queen Anne posing with her fourteen children. As he turned his glance from their cherubic faces, he caught sight of Martha Blount.

Martha and two other women sat at the card table, fanning themselves in the same cadence, as if rehearsed. They giggled and whispered, motioning to Alexander to come join them. He coughed into his cloth again and took another swig of coffee. The other men were too busy smoking fine, hand-carved pipes to notice Alexander.

They glanced at the women at times but seemed more contented with themselves. A slender man with high cheekbones and a fine hat made a pun about Whigs wearing wigs. Both the men and women hummed and guffawed, laughed and yawned. But for Alexander, each laugh was derisive, each gentle smile, no more than a sneer. For Alexander could not imagine that a single person in the room would laugh at anything, anyone, but him. This was of course, until he met Martha's gaze. For he realized then, that Martha was not laughing either.

Martha rolled her eyes, as if to convey to Alexander, leave him alone, he's trying.

Alexander responded with a cocked eyebrow, as if to say, one shouldn't have to try. To him, Martha was the warm spot in the room that couldn't jilt him. Her smiles were smiles. But it was not long before the tall, slender men shifted their posture, shielding Martha from Alexander.

He shook his head to rid himself of his contempt. Something about Martha made it difficult for Alexander to move. If there were personal ads in the eighteenth century, Martha Blount's might have read: voluptuous coquette with olive skin and gorgeous black hair seeks likeminded poet. Enjoys being courted, wooed and chased through gardens. Surely Martha would be perfect for him, if she could see beyond his exterior. Alexander's ad might have read: deformed poet stricken with consumption seeks attractive misanthrope. Enjoys a sedentary lifestyle, mocking elite members of society, drinking coffee and poisoning critics.

What blue was left of his eyes had grown red and weary from his constant headaches and hacking cough. He imagined spending an afternoon with Martha,

sitting in the park eating chilled cucumber sandwiches. Imagined that the food would stay in his stomach, that his hands wouldn't tremble. Maybe he could even shield her from the sun, read her a poem, trace her name in the dirt with the toe of his shoe. If only he could tell her that he would adore her with every ounce of his eight stone body. One of the servants dropped a plate, shaking Alexander from his reverie.

He sat down beside Martha to join a game of Ombre. Smiling at the women for using too many cards, he stripped the eights, nines and tens out of the deck.

The women reddened, placing their delicate hands over their mouths, letting out teaspoons of laughter.

Alexander sat on five books and two pillows he had pilfered from the foyer. Even so, he couldn't reach over the table to deal the cards. Alexander left nothing to chance and rigged the deck so that Martha would be the dealer. Martha drew a King and began to hand out the cards. It seemed to be understood that the card game was merely a front. Martha dipped a spoon in tea and blew at it delicately. Once the tea was cooled, she brought it to her lips and sipped at it gently. She let the spoon stay at her lips for a moment too long, her eyes never leaving Alexander.

Martha had played Ombre several times and never gave much thought to winning or losing. But with Alexander at her side, she pouted her lips in false disappointment and frustration each time she lost a hand. And each time, he would place his hand gently upon hers and whisper strategies in her ear with false oblivion.

Generally Martha would jump at such a forward gesture, but Alexander was different. He did not flatter the women by listing off their attributes and promising

them great riches. Alexander merely listened and when appropriate, responded with eloquence and grace, as if the King had hired him.

“Know you that Prince George drinks breast milk with his biscuits?” One of the women offered.

“At every word a reputation dies,” Alexander responded.

“Oh my!” Martha retorted almost, making it difficult for Alexander to gauge her emotion. “Are you not a common knave like the men you see before you?”

“Let us not ruin the reputation of others, kind Martha. Instead, tell me everything, everything about Martha Blount.”

Alexander gulped down more coffee and began to feel a little better. His legs throbbed but his dizziness had faded and his back numbed.

Martha smiled, fanning herself swiftly, nearly blowing all the fine powder off of her chest. She gestured to the plump woman beside her.

“This, little Alexander, is my sweet sister Teresa. She is nothing like me, nothing at all. For she eats her vegetables, practices the piano and never misses a single horse riding lesson.”

Teresa, an older version of Martha, laughed and gestured towards her, hand out in mock preparation for her introduction.

“This, little Alexander, is my horrid sister Martha. She eats nothing but biscuits and cake. She has not exercised since Queen Anne’s face was put upon the half-crown coin! She has yet to do a single lesson in Greek or arithmetic for she spends her days reading poetry. Poetry!” She gasped. “Do forgive me sir. Are you not? You’re—“

“Alexander Pope. Yes. At your service, milady.”

Amidst coquetry and banter, the women reveled in the fact that they were with *the* Alexander Pope. And Alexander was quite content to be in the presence of such women. At the end of the night, he walked Martha to her carriage. He asked for the address of her estate so he could write her a letter. She scrawled it across the back of his hand with a fine quill dipped in blue ink. He closed the door to her carriage and listened to the hoof beats disappear against the cobblestones sullied with rain water.

He wished that Martha could, even for one moment, look beyond his posture, his strange gait and give him a chance. A chance to show her more of himself.

But Martha seemed like all the other women in Alexander’s life—she saw him as nothing more than a talented pen pal. Behind his pen was the only time he could be the Alexander without the hunch, the coughing, the fever. Martha, like all the other women, thanked Alexander kindly for his wonderful love poems, translations of Homer, warm conversation. But Martha giggled at the mere idea of ever loving a man like Alexander. For what would her father say? The town? She couldn’t imagine turning down royal suitors to spend her time with little Alexander. Martha was special to Alexander, but shortly became the first of many *not* to love him. His body was too peculiar, his ailments too severe. Perhaps now there is a love that great, but in the eighteenth century, in England, there was no such thing.

Alexander Pope died alone, suffering. In the last months of his life he had Swift steal all that he could from local apothecaries, but no medicinal elixir could lessen his pain. There was a radiating pain in his muscles down to his bones. His head throbbed constantly from intense aches and he was seldom able to keep down food. In

his last weeks he grew pale and coughed up blood with every breath. Dr. Edmond explained to his patient that the tingling, prickling, numbness he felt in his skin was the result of a poor diet. Because of his low body weight, his malnutrition, his bones grew weak and brittle, further damaging his spine. The doctor lamented that there were no contraptions, no machines that could take images of Alexander's bones. If only they could see his skeleton, they could stabilize his spine, drain the abscesses.

And just as Alexander was known to do in times of great pain, he picked up his pen.

Dearest Martha—

Every moment my eyes are employed upon this paper, they are taken from your face. Every moment my trembling hand grasps this pen, it is not held by yours. I envy these words for your eyes are cast upon them. Is absence not Death to those who Love? I cannot help but mourn your scent, of flowers and tea. I have grieved your touch, your embrace, the weight of your head 'gainst my shoulder. Can the winds hear me sigh? Do the waves know I weep? The place you last were is the only place I'll sleep.

Your humble servant,

a. pope

Dear Alexander—

I thought you to be a man of honour, not a wolf waiting in the wings. You once said that fidelity is more often found in dogs than men. While that may be true, I find

that men too, can be dogs. You call yourself a friend, yet at every instance, attempt to compel me with your verse, your words, your failed parodies of the great poets. You are no more a friend than I am The Pretender. I bid you adieu, my dear Alexander for I am to marry Sir Witwould of Shropshire in less than a fortnight. He is rather protective and would that I cease all communications with unmarried men.

Fondly,

m.b.

Alexander continued to fill countless pages of vellum with his lamentations and complaints selling his verse to anyone who could read it. For the illiterate (those who did not speak or read Latin) he translated his works and the works of others into English. He did this mostly in hopes of gaining favor with the ladies as they seldom knew Latin. The ladies were greatly impressed with Alexander's knowledge of the word and the world, but he never got past the point of glorified pen pals with any of them.

One of his most infamous was Lady Mary Wortley Montagu. Mary was stunning, intelligent and worst of all, married. She had slender hands and bright blue eyes. Her dark blonde hair was always wound up tightly into a bun, never a single strand breaking free and tickling her forehead. Shortly after she and Alexander met at a banquet, she left for Turkey. Her husband, Edward Wortley Montagu was selected Ambassador at Istanbul and they had to relocate at once.

As soon as she arrived in Istanbul and got settled, she sent Alexander an unexpected letter. Once he caught a glimpse of the flowing, loopy script on the back of the envelope, he cancelled all appointments for the day. Could it be? A letter from a

lady? A letter from Mary? Indeed it was. He hobbled over to a reading chair in his garden and sat down to peruse the letter. He committed each word to memory, reciting them aloud to perched birds and bumbling bees.

He scanned the lines over and over for some sign of flirtation, double meaning. She told him of the Turkish children, of the Ottoman medicinal practices. He was very excited to learn that they had found a treatment for smallpox. Alexander had some silly hope that Lady Mary would return to England with a cure for his ailments and love in her heart.

When Mary finally returned from her travels in Turkey, she invited Alexander out for coffee despite her husband's wishes. But he was much too ill to leave the confines of his home. With Swift back in Ireland, he was quite pleased to have Mary sit with him in his garden. They sipped coffee as swallows circled the herb garden, twittering off into the trees. As he sat in his chair, swaddled in blankets, Mary giggled silently, her shoulders shaking with each laugh.

"I have missed you so, dear Alexander. I was saddened to hear of Mr. Swift's departure to Ireland. Do send him my regards."

"Indeed I will, milady. And how did you enjoy your travels?"

"I enjoyed my time in Turkey yet my chest felt hollow and empty without England's gardens, rain, the chatter of the marketplace. Do tell me, kind sir, what have I missed these past few months?"

"Other than the talented Mr. Pope? Well, nothing at all, sweet Mary. Nothing at all."

Alexander stared longingly at Mary's gown, the unstiffened bodice, the skirt and high neck. Taking in the sights of her pallid face, plump red lips and almond eyes, he was able to sit up in his chair. His back did not ache, his legs did not swell. He did not feel anger towards the squirrel that could run about as he could not. He did not dread the inevitable and for the first time in a long time, he felt at peace. Perhaps after years and years of writing love poems he could finally feel the warmth that two lips make. And it was at that moment, that Alexander went in for a kiss.

Lady Mary slapped him clear across the face as soon as his quivering lips came within an inch of her cheek. Alexander dealt with it as any writer would, by ordering the woman to leave his estate and rushing to his writing desk. As with any challenge, Alexander pushed forward, pen in hand. He wished there were some way to inform the masses all at once. Some sort of wire that could connect his quill to every writing desk in the country. He would not rest until every English citizen believed that Lady Mary was truly, madly insane. If the town believed her to be mentally ill, Alexander would have an excuse for the rejection. But deep down he knew that Lady Mary's reaction was quite sane, logical even. Alexander was not a courtier, a knight, no, he was merely a hunchback'd toad.

He published and distributed pamphlets attesting to the lady's madness, for it was the only way he knew to tell all of England his side of the story.

I, Dr. Periphrasis attest that my patient, Lady Mary of Turkey, has indeed lost her mind. I have cured many of London's greatest persons, but confess that even I could not cure Lady Mary of her bouts of madness. Lady Mary's mother had found her turning over tables all around the house, muttering and sputtering, and even

sending a nice clay pot through the window and out into the road. "Alexander, Alexander," Lady Mary kept muttering, rocking in her bed, holding her knees to her chest. And although I have tried everything from hypnosis to medicines, nothing could cure Lady Mary of her great obsession with this alleged Alexander.

Alexander was all too familiar with the fact that some conditions were permanent, the length of one's life, forever. It gave him a sense of solace to play the part of the doctor who could find no cure. A doctor who would never be affected by his failure. When any physician failed to find some semblance of a solution, it was Alexander who felt the pain. After Alexander disseminated this pamphlet, he felt at peace with the fact that Lady Mary would rather cause him physical harm than receive a simple kiss from him. He thought back to his days as a schoolboy when he was caned for misbehavior. As he grew older, any physical sensation seemed to blur, congeal into a lifelong aching.

Lady Mary caught word of this pamphlet a few days later and knew that Alexander penned it. But without the proper evidence, Lady Mary could neither prove nor confirm him as the true author. Even so, she did not wish to expose him. When she recognized his tone, his diction, she felt shame, guilt. She wandered around all day, twinged in sadness. She sent Alexander a letter of apology which remained unopened and unread. He pitched it into the fire and watched the curls of smoke and bits of ember as the apologies turned to nothing. It is difficult to say whether it was the fire itself that kept him warm at night, or the idea of her unread words transforming into smoke.

Publishing the pamphlets, burning her apology, all of this made it easy for Alexander to deal with the fact that she did not want him. But what he couldn't bear was the idea that *no one* wanted him. He was left with nothing but pain and regret. He wished he had never even met these women, as any scorned lover would. What was the point? At the time, the only way Alexander could deal, survive, was to sit in his garden and think back to his days as a boy.

Before he was the infamous Mr. Pope. Before Mary, before Martha, before love.

I read Homer in my childhood, and that is when, that is how I caught the itch of Poetry.

Prior to this discovery, Alexander would awake to the throbbing in his chest, the swelling in his legs. He could still smell the potions and elixirs the apothecaries would rub on him before swaddling him in blankets. Resting his tired feet on the hardened wood floor, he would shuffle to his desk, gulp down some coffee and return to his bed.

But as he began to spend his days with Homer, he awoke to nymphs, warriors and gods. As time passed, he awoke to the construction of his own lines, his own images. It was as if he himself did not exist until he had stumbled to his desk and recorded the lines in his head. His legs were not his own. Not until he had scrawled down lines he was contented with, created the image he desired. His aches grew dull,

mere background noise in the dulcet tones of verse. He had finally found a way to push through the aching and sometimes the day.

Although he very much enjoyed these times, he was extremely eager to get to school. He imagined it to be a wonderful place full of boys with whom he could share his great love of poetry. He wondered if other boys experienced the same type of joy he did from perusing lines about shepherds, maidens and knights.

But as soon as they caught sight of Alexander's deformed body, they would snicker and whisper, taunt and tease. Tears formed with each mocking glance. The other boys spoke in hushed tones, nothing more than a bubbling creek, waves crashing. Although these words did not reach Alexander's ears, their meaning reached his heart. Alexander tried his best to mask his deformed body but could be heard coming from half a mile away because of the metal braces affixed to his legs. His every movement clinked and clanked, each step drowned out by the clatter of metal against metal. Alexander was lucky enough to have a blacksmith for a father who would spend many hours working away in his shop, attempting to create contraptions that would compensate for Alexander's discomfort in walking.

He walked with a gorgeous oak cane that once belonged to his grandfather. Although he seldom ate, a little tummy like that of an old man protruded over his belt. When the other boys pointed and snickered, his pallid face reddened with embarrassment. His once beautiful black locks had gone grey and were constantly caked in mud and horse patties. (Since his cane often slipped, he fell down in the road about two to three times a day).

Alexander thought that at the very least he could discuss poetry with his teacher, Mr. Wait. However, Alexander shortly found that he knew much more about the word and the world than his teacher. Alexander was quite loquacious and learned at the age of twelve and for that reason many boys his age had trouble understanding him. Alexander presumed that his elevated diction would not be a problem when conversing with Mr. Wait, but he was quickly proved wrong. Alexander could scarcely utter half a sentence without Mr. Wait stopping him and asking to define the terms he had used. On the third instance this occurred, Alexander grew very flustered and decided that he would never learn a single thing from this alleged teacher. It seemed to Alexander that Mr. Wait could not even guess at the meaning of a word using context clues. Alexander used the term, Homeric in reference to the similes in *The Iliad*, to which Mr. Wait responded with nothing more than a look of confusion.

Alexander considered the treatment he received from Mr. Wait to be a sort of abuse, since the teacher often ridiculed the student in front of the class. And for some reason, Mr. Wait seemed to turn a blind eye whenever the other boys taunted or bullied little Alexander. What Alexander could never say aloud, what he could never control, he expressed through his pen. In addition, Alexander often drew caricatures of Mr. Wait, depicting him as a vagabond who snacked on the dreams of little children.

One day, Mr. Wait had incorrectly spelled satire on the board as “satyr.” Alexander attempted to correct him and inform him of the lewdness of his mistake, but the embarrassed teacher waved him away. Furious little Alexander then scrawled out a letter with such anger he could’ve written in blood. Since Mr. Wait would

refuse to hear him speak, Alexander felt compelled to leave this note on his desk one morning:

Satyr: One of a class of woodland gods or demons, in form partly human and partly bestial, supposed to be the companions of Bacchus. Roman sculptors assimilated it in some degree to the faun of their native mythology, giving to it the ears, tail, and legs of a goat, and budding horns. The most widely known satyr is Pan, the goat god known to prance about in the forest playing complaints on his lute. Satyrs are also very sexual in nature, generally portrayed in art as mythical creatures that pleasure themselves day and night.

The note was never mentioned by Mr. Wait so Alexander never knew if he had even received it. Even so, Alexander was impressed enough with himself that he honestly didn't care.

Not long after Mr. Wait proved himself to be an enemy, Alexander drew the attention of the school bully, one Christopher J. Stuckinpuff. Christopher, or Topher as his lackeys called him, was a tubby little boy with rosy cheeks, eternally covered in smears of chocolate. He always wore short pants regardless of the biting English cold. His little beady eyes seemed black in the sunlight and Alexander thought he resembled a plump crow more than a boy. Topher would often kick the other boys and pull their undergarments up over their heads. And because he was a well-researched bully, Topher knew how to placate the adults. He had a bully's sense, not unlike a dog's incredible sense of smell that told him the authority figures were near. Topher was infamous for pushing the smaller boys into the brush and searching their pockets for sweets. But when he sensed the teachers were near, he would fashion his

best puppy face. Mr. Wait found this face to be so adorable that he would often tussle the hair on Topher's head and pinch his chubby little cheeks. During the breaks in between lessons, the boys would go out onto the beautiful field of grass which was surrounded by brush and trees.

There was a rickety old bench under which Alexander usually sat, scribbling into his notebook while the others played. The beautiful landscape kissed by the intermittent rays of the English sun inspired little Alexander to craft equally beautiful verse. The symptoms that plagued his body could not be alleviated by medicines or doctors. It was only in his verse that he came close to being distracted from his coughing, his vomiting.

*Music can soften pain to ease,
And make despair and madness please:
Our joys below it can improve,
And antedate the bliss above.*

As Topher and the others threw the ball about and hit each other with twigs, Alexander drew sketches of the surrounding forest and Mr. Wait himself. In Alexander's sketches he exaggerated Mr. Wait's pointy nose and shrewd, green eyes. Although Mr. Wait was paid well and often seen sporting a ruffled shirt and pants made of London's finest silk, Alexander did not see him that way. He often drew him in shabby rags, clutching a vial of poison in one hand, a whip in the other. It was not unlike Alexander to make snap judgments about the various characters he encountered.

One Tuesday morning just before noon, the boys were excused to play out in the field. It was an especially chilly day, with the sun hidden behind tree branches and

clouds. The shadows and shards of light cast about the frozen ground seemed to sparkle to young Alexander. He was sitting beneath the bench attempting to find a synonym for “green” as the other boys kicked the ball around. Once he settled on “olive,” he flipped the page in his notebook and began to compose a new piece, entitled, “A Satire of a Failed Teacher.”

Alexander illustrated his piece, as he often did, redrawing the portrait of Mr. Wait, complete with an evil, shrewd face, vial of poison and whip. This time, though, Alexander added flames around Mr. Wait’s feet and a throng of slaughtered angels around him. Amidst the slaughtered angels, there were young boys sleeping softly dreaming of beautiful forests, sunrises and snowflakes. Mr. Wait could be seen hunched over, laughing maniacally as he chomped down the boys’ hopes and dreams. Affixed to Mr. Wait’s coat was a nametag that read, “satyr.”

“The Satire of a Failed Teacher” was never intended to have any readers other than Alexander himself. Because of this, he kept the piece folded up and shoved deep into the pockets of his trousers. Despite his best efforts to conceal any evidence of this satire, Alexander did not account for the crafty manipulations of Topher the bully. As Alexander sat beneath his favorite bench, shaded from the bright English sun, he watched Topher approach Mr. Wait and tug on his shirt sleeve. Mr. W. leant down and exchanged words with Topher in a hushed tone, covering his mouth as he spoke. Alexander couldn’t hear the dialogue, but guessed by the look on Mr. Wait’s smug face that Alexander was in all kinds of trouble.

Topher must have seen Alexander scribbling away into his notebook and stashing it within the recesses of his pockets earlier. Alexander could not understand

his motivations for tattling, besides the fact that Topher took misery in others' suffering. As Mr. W. approached Alexander, Topher hoisted two boys into the air by their ankles, laughing demonically as their milk money showered the ground below.

Mr. W. kicked some fresh English dirt beneath the bench, pretending not to see poor Alexander. The young invalid came out from under the bench, coughing and wheezing, wiping bits of earth from his tiny waistcoat. He dabbed at his face with a beautiful handkerchief and cleared his throat.

“To what do I owe the pleasure of this impromptu meeting? Surely the gods have blessed me today if I have you in my presence a quarter of an hour early,” Alexander said.

But just as he was about to return to his place beneath the bench, Mr. W. grabbed Alexander by the right ear and dragged him out into the middle of the field. Alexander got motion sickness rather easily and nearly vomited when Mr. W. snatched his ear. Shouldn't he be excused from the corporeal punishment the other boys received? Alexander looked back mournfully, as his beautiful wooden cane remained unprotected near the brush. Mr. W. threw the boy on his knees and let out a shrill whistle so as to draw undue attention to the situation. All the little school boys gathered round to hear what Mr. W. had to say.

“The boy you see here is a snot-nosed, traitorous perjurer!”

“A snot-nosed, traitorous perjurer? Has your majesty confused me with a full length mirror?”

“Shut your mouth, cripple, or I shall shut it for you! I am no perjurer as I have hard evidence that you have written a parody of me! You think you’re so clever, little Alexander, but you’re not. Show me this parody! Empty your pockets!”

At this moment Alexander’s fear was replaced with the giggles. The other boys came closer for a better view of this exciting incident (except of course for the boys dangling from Topher’s hands—who did their best to swing and writhe in Alexander’s direction).

“Rest assured, your majesty, I have no parody in my possession. Nor do I have Pan, playing a lute in my pants. What I have here ...”

Alexander produced the pamphlet from his trousers,

“Is a treatise on the follies of man. Whether or not you are guilty of the same vices outlined here, is of no concern to me. Tis only part lampoon, dear W., which exonerates me from writing something that solely attacks you and your failings.”

The boys began to file in behind Alexander as if announcing their alliance. They didn’t know the meaning of Alexander’s diatribe but they couldn’t ignore Mr. W’s anger and frustration. The boys began to rally and cheer, “Alexander the Great. Alexander the Wise!” which only infuriated Mr. W. further.

Mr. W. snatched the pamphlet from Alexander’s hand and tore it into bits. He snapped his fingers and had Topher bring him Alexander’s gorgeous cane from beneath the bench. He then pulled Alexander’s pants down around his ankles and beat him several times with his own cane. Alexander laughed the entire time, because the whipping was hardly punishment. Compared to the spasms in his back, the constant nausea, the whipping was nothing. It was merely a few tines of wood being slapped

gently across his behind. This might have been the worst punishment in the world for the average boy, but not for Alexander.

Alexander had worked with doctors, healers, apothecaries. They gave up promising that he would ever heal, convalesce. Instead, they attempted to teach him how to cope with the pain. They tried using elixirs, infusions and tinctures. Had him take several drams of extracts from dandelions, lavender and lemon. Taught him deep breathing exercises and chants. Although nothing worked, nothing helped; these tactics gave him some semblance of hope, of peace. The only thing Alexander didn't try, was more pain.

The light whipping took the focus off of the aching in his chest, in his heart. He could imagine for one minute that he was just like the other boys. That the only twinge he would feel was being whipped for misbehavior. That he would never feel the pain of consumption or the aching of solitude. So for those few moments, Alexander smiled. Alexander shut his eyes, pretending he was someone else. Someone who could run home at full speed after school. Someone who could go fishing in the lake, ask a friend over for dinner, see a play downtown. But when the whipping had ended, when all the children had disappeared, Alexander began to cry. He could no longer pretend to be someone else as he looked down at the metal braces on his legs. He couldn't imagine that his spine was perfect and normal, that he could walk straight. Couldn't imagine that he had a single friend in the world. So Alexander hobbled home, now hurting even more than when the day began.

Shortly after the Mr. Wait incident, Alexander went on to study under Thomas Deane. Deane, a rather sinewy man with blondish hair a shade darker than his full-

bodied beard, had a penchant for wine, women and little pastries full of lemon custard. He never raised his voice or took a stern tone with the boys. Instead of whipping the boys for acting out, he merely rewarded good behavior with chocolate. Deane found that it made the boys giddy, yet docile. Alexander, who had been imbibing seven cups a coffee per day since the age of three, found the chocolate a delectable companion to his caffeine.

For his fourteenth birthday, Alexander's father gave him a beautiful pony. Alexander had taken to riding to school on the pony, which he referred to as a Pope-sized horse. His horse, Shelley, was a beautiful dark brown with tiny spots of grey and white. His soft pink snout sneezed so often that Alexander swore his horse was allergic to sunlight. With each sneeze, Alexander was hoisted a few inches into the air only to land with a hard thud back on the saddle. Alexander took great pride in riding his little horse to school with a self-important swagger.

Perhaps what made these scenes so beautiful is that Alexander could see them from above. All too often, Alexander was resigned to talk to someone's belt or blouse. He was much too small to look anyone in the eyes. Too often, he felt like a little lapdog, the way people always leaned over to speak to him. It was as if they were saying, "Good boy! Fancy a treat?" instead of "Good Day! Pleased to meet!" But riding on his gallant steed, he could see for just a few moments what it was like to look down.

The morning rides to school were times of great reflection for Alexander. He wondered in amazement at the soothing sounds of the bubbling creek, small currents of water splashing against rocks. The creek was shallow enough so one could see the

busy lives of the fish bumbling about beneath the surface, biting at insects that dared come within snapping distance.

As Alexander rode on, he could see young mothers in wool caps and dirty aprons chase little children with milk mustaches and patched up breeches. He had never seen the tops of these hats, nor the way the women wobbled. At times these scenes would bring Alexander to tears. Although he enjoyed seeing the town from this view, he knew it was fleeting. He did not experience more than three days without discomfort and grew quite envious of those who did.

*Blest, who can unconcern'dly find
Hours, days, and years slide soft away,
In health of body, peace of mind,
Quiet by day.*

Although he was choking back tears, there was always something about these scenes that brought great peace to his soul, images he would later recall as a man. If he squinted just enough, he could blur out the happy, plump faces of these children, and take in only the bright blue sky, the way the wind rushed past him when he galloped. Once through the countryside, Alexander would stare in awe at the frenzied stir of the marketplace. The giant, gutted boars strung from atop great hooks, freshly caught fish filleted on mountains of ice. Blacksmiths pounded metals and thrust irons into hot coals. He would pass his father's little shop, sometimes stopping in to get a bowl of water for Shelley to drink. Women walked about, great baskets on their heads full of grains, cakes and textiles.

What amazed Alexander most was the drive, the motivation, the strength of these workers. His muscles were not sore from working; he was not sweating from exhaustion.

Once Alexander passed through the marketplace he could see his school house off in the distance. When he came close enough to the school's doors he would pull back on Shelley's reigns and dig his heels in his sides. Shelley would stop, his hooves sliding into the mud near the posts. Because Shelley was so small, Alexander was able to tie him up to a short post just outside the schoolhouse. Yet it was not long until the other boys grew jealous of Alexander, for they were not allowed to bring their regular-sized horses to class. After enough complaints, the head of the school showed Alexander a written law stating that horses were not allowed at school. Alexander told his father, lamenting the loss of his small horse privileges but did not contest the law. At times Alexander's life was so full of trauma that he didn't have the energy to care what happened to him. If he rode a pony into school, he was in pain. If he walked to school, he was in pain. It became difficult for him to make any decisions, care about anything. Knowing he would be hurting, aching made everything else indistinguishable. Unimportant.

He figured that it was for the best. That perhaps he was never meant to look down upon anyone. So it was that Alexander went back to addressing stomachs and the tops of breeches.

Despite the pony incident, Alexander very much enjoyed the time he spent at Deane's school (although he would later on claim he had not learned a thing). He spent many an hour sitting in hard wooden chairs learning music, arithmetic, Greek and Italian. Because of his shortness he had to stack all of his books upon his wooden stool to even see the teacher at the front of the room. When Mr. Deane called on Alexander to read, he had to hop off of his mountain of books, remove the correct

book and flip through the pages frantically to find his place. He would then snap the book shut, replace it in the stack and jump back on his mountain. He did all this whilst trying to ignore the jeering and name-calling from his peers. With each snicker and degrading quip, Alexander felt the great stone building close in on him.

He borrowed some money from his father and purchased a year's supply of vellum and ink. He felt shamed in doing so, but he hadn't the strength to acquire a job in the marketplace. And ultimately, he knew his father understood. His father wanted Alexander to feel more than okay—he wanted him to feel good. He supported Alexander's love of poetry in hopes that it would bring him health and happiness. So, each morning, Alexander took to writing, composing.

If I live but five months, I shall not be able to live as I used to. I will not pass an hour without fever, without swelling in my legs. I can hardly keep down bread, nor scarce take any meat. So I must do what I can from my bed, wrapped in warm blankets, pen in hand. I may say one good thing of Sickness, it is the best Cure in the world for Ambition.

At the age of 24, with school a distant memory in Alexander's mind, he had grown accustomed to teaching himself. One afternoon, when Alexander went to see his publisher, Mr. Lintot, he met the fraudulent bookseller, Edmund Curll. He was a rather portly fellow with cherub cheeks and greasy black hair. He was a glutton in all senses of the word—drink or sex, he indulged too much.

Something in his drunken expression reminded him of Topher the bully.

Edmund claimed to be a very important figure in the publishing world and offered to edit and publish Alexander's work. In reality, Curll was pirating pornography and selling "signed" copies of authors' works. Alexander declined the offer as he already had an agreement with Mr. Lintot to publish his translations of Homer by subscription. In addition, there was something strange about Curll that Alexander just didn't trust. He seemed to be the type of man who would compliment a snarling bear, a pebble, a forgotten shoe. Alexander took nothing Curll said to heart and merely pretended to be kind. Generally Alexander had to fake sincerity at 50% so others would not catch on. But with Curll, Alexander got away with feigning sincerity at a mere 8%. Alexander thought nothing of the meeting and returned to his writing desk.

Working on Homer, I have experienced the candour and friendship of so many persons of merit; and in which I hope to pass some of those years of youth that are generally lost in a circle of follies, after a manner neither wholly unuseful to others, nor disagreeable to myself.

One of these persons of merit was Jonathan Swift, who made a call to Alexander's estate on a daily basis. The two would sit in beautifully crafted wooden chairs, drinking coffee but never tea. At times, ladies of the court would come by to see them, or to see Mr. Swift rather. For Alexander was sure that no woman would pay him any attention. Surely they just appeared from the brush to witness the exchange of witticisms between the town's finest writers. Alexander had a gorgeous garden at the time with orange groves, artichoke plants and pineapple trees. Pineapple trees were assuredly not commonly grown in England. When a local garden

enthusiast asked the poet why he had gone to all the trouble of importing pineapple plants to his garden, Alexander responded, “I wanted pineapples, dear sir.” Swift had a good laugh at this because with all of Alexander’s wealth, if he wanted pineapples in his backyard, pineapples he had.

One afternoon, the two poets began to work on a project which Swift aptly named, *Dunciad*, a satire in which the townspeople worshipped the goddess, Dulness. Swift sat in the garden with Alexander, wearing his hunting shirt and spatterdashes, woolen cloth leggings perfect for sport. Although Swift neither hunted nor labored in the fields, he preferred this dress to the upper class apparel that Alexander usually wore. Since Swift commonly spilled ale on himself and rolled around in the grass in a drunken stupor, he didn’t bother purchasing nice clothing. Alexander’s clothes could not be seen beneath the layers of blankets he had wrapped around him. As his consumption worsened, he developed a skin condition around his neck, caused by the swelling of his lymph nodes. His neck was so swollen that he couldn’t even wear his fine, white cravat, embroidered with a loopy “A.”

Alexander was excited about the project, but had trouble getting through one idea without coughing, heaving. Swift knew Alexander well and disappeared into the kitchen to acquire more coffee, which was the only respite Alexander had.

Coffee was exotic, new. It had a rich, full-bodied taste and at the time, was seen as a sort of panacea for all physical ailments. Alexander relied on coffee to get him through the day. Because Swift usually roasted and ground the beans for Alexander, it seemed as though the coffee made itself.

*For lo! the board with cups and spoons is crown'd.
The berries crackle, and the mill turns round.*

The two writers spent the afternoon crafting parodies, lambasting the vices of man and writing lampoons of various members of society. Swift was a boisterous man of drink who had no qualms about sitting in pubs with people he didn't know, people he didn't like. But for Alexander, it was always difficult doing research for his satire. So it was that Swift enlisted some of his drinking partners to dig an underground tunnel for dear Alexander. The group of strong Irishmen dug a tunnel from Alexander's garden to a little pathway in the midst of Piccadilly Square. This allowed the little poet to come and go as he pleased, ducking back into the tunnel should anyone catch his gaze.

The next morning, after a long night of discussing the degradation of human thought, Alexander began to feel a little better. He ambled over to Will's Coffee-house in London, holding onto Swift's sturdy arm for support.

Alexander took a seat in the corner of the shop, sipping freshly brewed coffee from a giant, earthen mug. Swift had his usual Irish coffee, which was more whiskey than coffee, covered in a thick layer of sweet cream. He was in the midst of telling Alexander that he had sent some satiric poems to Curll to be published anonymously—and that Curll had attached his name in big bold letters. Swift then made a strange face and mumbled something about being late for a meeting with members of the Tory government. Since Alexander knew Swift served as a mediator for the Tories, he thought nothing of it. Swift bid Alexander adieu and walked out the backdoor.

Alexander gulped down what was left of his moderately warm coffee and approached the barista to get another cupful. And there, perched awkwardly on a barstool, was none other than *the* Edmund Curll. Curll's doughy elbows rested on the bar supporting his misshapen, greasy head. The majority of his rump was visible in the large gap between his breeches and shirt. His backside appeared to be forcing its way out of its garments—a loaf of baking bread squeezing its way out of an oven.

The great poet was no longer the young Alexander who other boys teased. No, he stood tall at 4'6'' in his beautifully tailored silken waistcoat and matching breeches. He had a special tailor who did excellent work making tiny suits. Even crafted little shoes for Alexander with gorgeous golden buckles. Alexander was now wealthy, successful, but still short. It took him one, two, three tries to hoist himself on top of the stool closest to Curll. The clangor in the coffee-house must have drowned out the sounds of wood scraping against floor, for Curll looked quite surprised to see Alexander sitting next to him.

Alexander took in Curll's visage and thought immediately of Chaucer. Curll had a pock-marked face perhaps from illness, perhaps from drinking and a large wart on his swollen nose.

Curll turned and looked down at the small, bright-eyed hunchback.

“Pope?” he stammered in a mixture of embarrassment and fear.

At that moment Alexander removed a large anthology of literature from his shoulder bag and wedged it beneath him so that he was (almost) at the same height as Curll. He cleared his throat and wedged a monocle in his right eye. Alexander had perfect vision but thought the monocle would make him look distinguished, wise.

“Your knavery is inexcusable. Your traitorous actions speak highly of your character whereas men do not. I will neither excuse nor pardon your actions and you, sir, will be the greatest source for my very next satire. Yes, yes, the gluttonous old publisher who disseminated pornography and the Irishman’s secret poems. You want to tell the world what Mr. Swift has written anonymously? Very well. I shall tell the world you’re a mentally deformed sodomite! Then, my good sir, we shall be even!”

Curll stammered more and drank the rest of his coffee. The barista walked to the other side of the bar and struck up polite chatter with some beautiful coquettes. Alexander was deeply hurt by what he saw. As soon as the barista flashed his smile, the women blushed and fawned. The poor poet wondered if there was perhaps a special antidote that would allow him to inhabit a normal, healthy body, if only for a day. The barista was not even that witty or charming, but his spine stood straight and he towered over the women at an impressive 6’3”. Sadness washed over the man’s face as he caught Alexander’s melancholic glance. Alexander thought for a moment that the man understood. That he could sense Alexander’s jealousy. Although the man wore a peasant’s shirt, he was healthy, strong and happy. Alexander had more money than he could ever spend but he couldn’t purchase health, toned arms, a strong angular jaw. The barista looked at the poor poet, hunched over the bar and considered bringing him a biscuit. But the man saw the sadness in Alexander’s eyes and decided his pity would only make things worse.

Before Curll could even respond to Alexander’s threat, even apologize, Alexander interrupted him.

“I’m sorry. Do forgive my brashness. Let’s have a toast shall we? A peacemaking? Barista! Two coffees!”

Alexander attempted to pat Curll on the back, nearly falling over on his face. The poet tried to hide his roguish grin as he imagined causing this man physical harm. As an invalid, as a cripple, Alexander could never muster the strength to strike a man in the face. He could never grab Curll by the waistcoat and hurl him into a crowd of unsuspecting patrons. Could not spear him to the ground and stand over him with a trembling fist. Even so, those acts would not speak well of the poet’s character. To the polite society in their midst, Alexander would simply seem like a kind gentleman offering one man a drink. He wanted this glutton to know, to feel what it was like to be sick. To fall asleep at night, hoping and praying to wake up as someone else.

Because Curll was far from intelligent, he did not question Alexander’s sudden change of heart. He simply smiled and stuck his pudgy chin up towards the ceiling, reveling in his own self importance. He ran a thick hand through his greasy hair, telling himself that the poet had merely lost his temper. That he realized the gravity of his mistake; knew better than to burn bridges with someone as influential as Curll.

Curll shook Alexander’s hand swiftly and forcefully as the barista placed two large mugs of freshly brewed coffee on the bar. As Curll reached for his mug, Alexander slipped a hand into his breast pocket and unscrewed a vial of poison ever so slightly. He then sneezed dramatically into his handkerchief, which he then conveniently dropped on the floor.

“Oh! I’m afraid I can’t reach! Would you mind, dearest Curll, for this cloth has been in my family for years and I can’t bear the thought of it being trampled by these charlatans! I would forever be indebted to your service!”

Alexander exclaimed this mawkishly, feigning an attempt to retrieve the handkerchief from the floor.

Curll waived his hand at Alexander, muttering, “yes, yes.” As Curll stepped off the stool and knelt down to retrieve the handkerchief, Alexander tipped the vial of poison into his acquaintance’s coffee cup. When Curll returned to his seat and grasped his mug once more, Alexander had already returned the vial to its home. Realizing that the poison may not taste so agreeable, Alexander pounded on the bar and demanded powdered chocolate. He plopped two generous spoonfuls of chocolate into Curll’s mug and did the same with his.

“I hope you don’t mind, dear Curll! Lady Mary has told me that the Turkish custom is to add chocolate to coffee for strength and virility. And I must say, it does taste quite excellent. I myself would never be well enough to travel to Turkey. But who sayeth Turkey can’t visit England!”

Alexander laughed boisterously. He was not sure if the Turkish even used chocolate nor did Lady Mary mention anything of the sort. Curll had never heard of chocolate in coffee nor had the barista. Unbeknownst to Alexander, he had, at that very moment, invented the mocha.

Curll vomited all over the poet, feeling a deep pain in his gut that radiated down to his feet. His hands grew cold and clammy, his already oily scalp beaded with

sweat. He stumbled home and proceeded to vomit all over his wife. He then apologized to God and begged forgiveness for all the literary sins he had committed.

*Th' avenger sees, with a delighted eye,
His long jaws open and his colour fly;
And while his guts, the keen emetics urge,
Smiles on the vomit and enjoys the purge.*

A few months later, Alexander returned to his old town of Witshire. Over time he had lost touch with his father so he was unaware of his recent death. Upon returning home he was deeply saddened to find that his father had been dead for an entire year and his land sold to a nearby farmer. Alexander managed to convince this farmer to sell him back his father's land where he intended on rebuilding the house where he spent so many a gay day as a child. Alexander was astonished at his newfound ability to stand up for himself in the eyes of a stranger and thought perhaps he was not meant to be a poet after all.

Sitting all alone in his old living quarters, Alexander began to cry. He knew that shedding warm tears did nothing more than wet his cheeks, but he had not the strength to stop them. His servant appeared in the doorway with a tray of coffee and biscuits, but Alexander waved him away as if offended by the very smell of the meal. Nodding in silence, the servant placed the tray in the hall and pulled the door to a close. Alexander heard his muffled footsteps disappear into the vastness of his mansion.

When he regained enough strength, he hobbled to his writing desk and dipped his quill in ink. He began to draft a letter to Swift, but his hand was shaking so that the lines looked more like waves. With trembling hands and chattering teeth, the poet returned the quill to its compartment in the desk and rested his head on top of the

letter. He sat back in his chair, attempting to breathe deeply. But in the midst of his exhale, he coughed and sputtered blood all over the half-written letter. Tears soon followed, turning the paper a strange hue. Alexander sighed as he longed to tell Swift how horrible he felt, how deeply he missed him. If only there were phones. Grabbing an envelope from his desk, he decided to send the letter just the same. At least then Swift would know the poet's days could be counted.

Alexander could not even enjoy the riches he had acquired by his pen and he missed his father greatly. He wondered if there was a place far, far away with other four and a half foot, chronically ill young men who would understand his plight. He lay there on the cold stone floor and contemplated building a fire. But he had run out of letters and was too small to chop wood. Besides, his constant stream of tears would surely put out any flame. So there he lay on the cold slabs of stone, curled up into a little weeping, shaking ball.

Alexander's health worsened rapidly. The tissue around his vertebrae began to die, leaving nothing but bone grinding against bone. He was seldom able to walk about the cottage without the help of his cane. He resigned himself to the fact that no woman would want the company of an old, sickly man who could barely walk for half an hour without the sensation of needles afflicting his feet. He could not imagine a woman who would be willing to sit by his side and be contented with his sedentary lifestyle. Even if there were such a woman who didn't mind missing out on long walks through the brush or horseback riding by the lake, such a woman would never fall for a man who barely stood five feet high. It was as if Alexander had committed

an inexcusable act which no woman would forgive. As if it were Alexander's fault that his body curled into a ball—a twitching shrimp tossed into a boat.

And at the age of 56, Alexander died, having known fame and fortune, but never love.

*Thus let me live, unseen, unknown,
Thus unlamented let me die,
Steal from the world, and not a stone
Tell where I lie.*

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Note:

Portions of the italics and dialogue have been taken from Pope's works and letters whereas other parts have been fictionalized. The letter excerpts were taken from Pope's correspondence with: John Arbuthnot, Allen Bathurst, Martha Blount, William Broome, Henry Cromwell, John Dennis, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu and Jonathan Swift.