

THE PIT BULL



AND
OTHER
TALES

TOM HAMILTON

Edited by Frank Burton
Published by Philistine Press
www.philistinepress.com



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The Pit Bull

“Ya got nothin’ to apologize for man,” I said to him as the drizzle began to tickle us. The tiny rain drops had gathered some momentum, and now they added a sheen to the bright, dusk-cutting light of the ‘What-A-Burger’ sign. Even though we were standing almost directly under it at the edge of the parking lot, the moniker still offered us little protection from the increasingly thickening drizzle. Not that I was looking for protection.

He stuttered: “I didn’t mean for you to find out like this ... I mean, we didn’t know it would turn out like this.”

“Ah,” I shrugged, and answered as softly as I could. “It’s not like I didn’t know something like this was coming.”

I risked a peek over at his brand new 1984 Ford Lariat Super cab. I really liked that truck’s paint job. It was a florescent teal color which looked blue under the cloud hut of the failing Texas twilight. Two teenage boys were sitting in the front seat, shuffling through cassette tapes. She was in the packed back seat with at least three other girls. I couldn’t say for sure how many others without staring, and that was the last thing that I wanted to do. She must have been sitting on one of the other girl’s laps, since she sat higher and was somewhat more visible than her feminine peers. Her multicolored dress glowed like some strange European flag. Actually, everyone inside the vehicle seemed to be wearing something kaleidoscopic. She looked over just then as the white sunset, which had managed to sneak under the low clouds, turned her eyes into two glinting coins. I looked away hastily.

He was trying again: “I meant... I meant...I mean I was gonna tell you the other night when you were in Baton Rouge, but it just didn’t seem right over the phone. I really was gonna ... I really was gonna ... we just didn’t think you’d be comin’ back that quick.”

“Ah,” I shrugged again with as much harmlessness as I could muster. “Tell me what man? C’mon, this is me. We’ve never had anything to hide from each other. It was a nightmare with me and her anyway.”

He looked at me glumly. His mouth looked like someone had drawn it on with a

ruler, as I continued to say: “At least now I can maybe stop thinking about it all the time. Try an... ya know?”

I had used up a lot of restraint pretending like he and I were still friends. What I really wanted to do was draw a line in the dirt with my boot tip. A line that he’d better not dare cross. But all that would have done was capsize a trio of dusty bottle tops, as well as tipping her off to the horror which was hurtling out of control through my soul, courtesy of the revelation of this surprising new couple.

“I feel like an asshole, man,” he said flatly.

You are an asshole, man!

“Ah,” I repeated for lack of a more humble sound.

His brow furrowed as his cheeks pulled a little mouth wash stunt. If he wasn’t genuinely sorry or concerned, then he was a pretty good actor. That’s when a rough innocence washed over his features and he said, “Hey, ya know I can drop these clowns off early tonight. I mean to Hell with her, man, we could go down to the River Walk and have a few ice colders?”

“Nah,” I answered. Which was really just the same inoffensive “Ah.” I’d been repeating with an ‘N’ in front of it. “Louisiana was livin’ wet man.” I continued. “I’ve been slidin’ past semis for six hours. I’m gonna hit the hay.”

He looked honestly disappointed upon my refusal of his invitation. “All right.” He managed to begin, then after a sad pause he added, “Look, I know you don’t feel like ridin’ around with us all night.” He gestured towards the pick-up. The party garbed boys were feeding cassettes into the mouth of the radio. It upchucked odd, garbled bits of song which washed over the murderer’s row of femme fatales in the back seat. They were growing impatient with our two man conference, and someone rudely laid on the horn.

“C’mon,” he said. “I’ll take you on back.”

He took a couple of steps towards his pick-up. Although he was my first cousin, and I’d known him for seemingly as long as I could comprehend my own existence, I was suddenly struck by how lean and handsome he was. As if this were the first time I had ever seen him. His whiskered face was free of blemishes, and encircled by heavy brown hair, politely disturbed by jumping strands of baby chick yellow bangs, which

hung down near his jade and Confederate grey eyes. His glare glowed like the last two bad ass marbles inside the circle. His slightly lanky, yet muscular body filled his jeans properly, minus the dreaded love handles and cellulite pockets I'd become so used to battling on my own malformed person. He wore a rich, dashing, buckeye red Polo shirt with slashes of haunt hued silver. I was suddenly conscious of my own dull clothing – an abyss black Polo with matching Levi's and night dyed lizard cowboy boots. I noticed for the first time that he was wearing his own pearly version of those same skins. He and I had bought the boots together on our trip to Acapulco. Then we'd both worn them on the plane coming home to buck customs. We were like brothers then.

Now, as I went to take a step towards his truck, my toes curled up inside those same shoes, like someone who had been walking in the dark, realizing they had almost stepped into a ditch. My legs balked and refused to carry out the mind's command to stride towards the super cab. After he had taken a couple of more steps, it dawned on him that I wasn't walking with him. He turned back towards me and said, "Ya ready? I mean ... is that okay?"

The volume on the truck's radio shot up just then, making us both look towards the pickup. One of the girls from the back seat had childishly lunged into the front buckets, skying the treble on some disco song too foolish to recall. In doing so, she purposefully squashed her heavy set breasts against her intended target – skinny kid wearing a long sleeve, button up the front, blue Polo. She must have weighed at least twice as much as him. Their encounter deteriorated into a daft slapping game.

The immature melee did not involve her however, as the action was taking place at the far end of the cab. But she caught me staring at her again, and this time, I could not look away. My eyes were welded to hers like someone holding onto a high voltage cable. It was as if I was looking at her through a scope, or a fiery tunnel. I found myself thinking about one of those 3-D view finders we all used to have when we were kids. That's how brilliant her eyes looked to me now. I would not have wanted to see my face at that instant. Since I could not hide the enchantment I felt at seeing her, any more than I could stop those same feelings from being run over and mashed into the blacktop by his shining truck. Yet I could not look away. So instead I just stood there, staring at her. As she reveled in her new day with her new beau in the dreary rain-whipped sun –

even if that sun was losing ground to the low clouds. In the eternal but forgone battle of dusk. A fight which always ended with the victory of darkness.

I felt as if cold french-fry fingers were constricting around my ball point narrow esophagus. I knew at that instant, that if I were to climb inside that super cab, my lungs would lock up until the claustrophobia forced me to feel that they were all leaning against me with the solo purpose of much combined weight. Pushing my shrinking and tightening bones up against the windows and door locks, forcing me to lick the air for oxygen. The thought of being locked inside a cattle car flickered through my disgusted mind. The irrepressible stench of liquidated manure. Snots as big and lively as snails congealing inside the silver dollar sized nostrils of the livestock. Squashed rectangles of flat indestructible shafts of maize light framing my ill eyes, as I tried to peer in between the slats of boards. I hadn't even moved a centimeter towards the goofing group as of yet, and I already felt sick enough to loudly spit a jaw full of meat soup onto the pavement. Her eyes continued to drill into me. My mouth had formed the words even before my brain stopped reeling:

“I think I'm going to walk it,” I said, with a voice just as even as my frown.

He spun back around and tuned the tips of his boots until they were once again pointed right at me.

“You're pissed?” he said with a cocky sadness which seemed almost desperate.

“Nah,” I claimed through a wooden nickel smile and a quarter shake of my heavy head. “It's just that I've been ridin' in a truck for two days, man.”

“That's gotta be two miles?!” he exclaimed as he put his hand over his eyes to judge the distance.

“Not really,” I shrugged. “I jog farther than that all the time.” This bit of bullshit was actually true. During many of my hopeless diet and exercise kicks, I had built up enough modest wind to run, at a baby step pace, for perhaps two miles – though you'd never know it by looking at the crude, animal balloon, loveless handless, which encircled my toxic waistline. “Besides,” I continued, “you can see the apartments from here.”

He stared out across the dulling plain. Way down past the mall, which sat off to our right on the opposite side of the deuce lane, and in between the Mexican neighborhood, which sat a tad off to the left or south, we could see the high tower which

represented the gate, which represented the office, which represented our crude cubicles. It was the local where he, I, she, and a number of other disgruntled tenants made our excuse for living. Several muddy, weed-strewn fields targeted for development, joined up with the deuce lane to separate these landmarks.

He glared towards the tower for a few seconds without saying anything. Then, his salute hand dropped, slapping a single drum beat off his knee, before he said:

“I’m sorry man!”

Sorryist day a yer fuckin’ life!!

“Don’t be crazy.” I said in a friendly tone, before tapping his belly with a mock boxer’s jab. I felt no hint of a gut, nor fat of any kind as I came in contact with his abdomen.

“Okay.” He shook my hand and nearly giggled. “Okay,” he repeated, like he wanted to be sure that we were talking about the same thing. “Good night and God bless you.” I had always hated that expression, and on this occasion I felt particularly abandoned by God. So instead of repeating it back to him, I opted for “See ya tomorrow.”

I turned around and began walking towards the edge of the asphalt and sea shell parking lot, my blood pounding through my head as if it were too thick for my brain. I heard his driver side door close as I crossed over onto the long grass. I could feel the comments from inside the cab jabbing into my back. I knew full well that I was making a bigger and bigger fool out of myself with each passing step of this little hike, but my beleaguered brain was far beyond worrying about any form of petty embarrassment. At least I could vomit out here in the tan fields, if the green snakes of my intestines ordered such a release.

The big shiny pickup curled out onto the deuce lane, and looped back past me moving in my same direction. One of the other girls was hanging out of the rear sliding window, waving furiously. She shouted some wind sucked taunt to the twilight, and it was with considerable relief that I realized the insult was not directed towards me, but rather at a raggedy old rummy who was rooting through some garbage on the other side of the deuce lane. The dumpster man wore a long onion skin coat, which managed to look shiny and drab at the same time. He looked up at the jeering girl and then turned

away, like the final motion of a ghost before it vanishes. I feared that the knowledge that she was mocking him rather than mocking me might be the highlight of my night. I watched the truck drift away and hugged my arms.

It usually got pretty warm during the daytime in this part of Texas, even in January, so of course, I hadn't been wearing any coat. The misty wet clouds seemed to be in touch with the earth and the drizzle was making a motion to be recognized as a full state of rain. Now that I was out of sight, I felt free to remove my cap and run my fingers through my damp hair. Drops of water bled from my saturated mane as surely as if I had just gotten out of the shower. I turned my cap around and looked at the front of it. It was black of course, with a glow in the dark Chicago Cubs 'C' emblem above the brim. I inspected it for no reason before redepositing it onto my head. My face still felt hot and exasperated, yet my arms were cold. The choppy, cow brown clumps of the terrain were proving to be difficult for my boots to negotiate. So I decided to veer back up onto the shoulder of the deuce lane. An El Camino, with its headlights already turned on, blazed by, wafting me with a fresh round of spray. I tried to imagine that my thick, tight legs were peddling a bicycle, (*peddling, peddling,*) employing the traditional one foot over the other approach.

"That prick!" I murmured aloud, and my hot breath showed itself to the cold.

I could almost see the outline of his face in the silver mist, as I thought of all the times he'd looked into my eyes and lied to me.

One foot in front of the other, (*peddling, peddling,*) I battled on. One step on the gray asphalt of the deuce lane, the other dropping off the shoulder and into a limp on the weeds and gravel. Every couple of seconds another car or truck would come by, lambasting me with a new round of drizzle. Some vehicles beeped their horns needlessly. I wiped the moisture away from my eyes, with a hand that had had plenty of practice from wiping away tears.

I thought that I could spy the apartment tower in the brief distance. Even though I'd walked a few hundred yards, it didn't really seem much closer, and if anything, the deuce lane seemed to be pulling me away from my goal. It occurred to me that I might save some time by angling through the fields. The booming roar of a semi handed me my most thorough drenching yet and I abandoned the deuce lane.

The cold perspiration of the drizzle leant the prairie grass a moist sheen, turning the dull bronze plants a bright orange. This made me think of angel haired spaghetti, and I was suddenly hungry in spite of nearly vomiting moments earlier.

A chain link fence? I hadn't ever remembered seeing a chain link fence, not anywhere along here. Certainly not adjacent to the deuce lane. I looked to my right, trying to decipher if there might be a way around. Then back to the left. But the sun had dipped out of sight, and minus the rivalry of its brightness, the fog had triumphed over the fields. "Shit!" I murmured roughly. Why had I abandoned the florescent reflectors of the deuce lane? I felt as if I'd been hiking for at least ten or twelve minutes. My pace was as brisk and driven as the rising rain. I should have made some real progress by now. I didn't know how I could have gotten off course. It was only possible to walk about a mile or so in any direction before encountering some sort of recognizable structure. What-A-Burger was at my back to the east. The mall, which was where I veered off the deuce lane, should have been off to the north or at about four o'clock from where my shoulders were squared, which would place the Spanish neighborhood down to the south or southwest. Assuming that the compass inside my battered, bitter brain was still functioning, my apartment should be straight ahead or due west. I began walking along the fence line to my right, hoping to chance onto something familiar. Total darkness had settled onto the fields. I had irrepressible impression that my destination was on the opposite side of the barricade. It was time to climb.

I took a deep breath of the acid drizzle and made my hands into bird claws to clutch the sopping spokes. My boots were having a difficult time finding a foothold as I attempted to shimmy to the top. The fence was unusually high for one of that type and I was in no mood for calisthenics. As I approached the difficult pinnacle, where the sharp, sawn-off links waited, I hunched a shoulder over the highest bar and tried to take a break, but pangs of nail-sharp pain molested my armpits, and chemicals of rage leaked sideways across the breakers of my thoughts like a trash pump sucking out the septic cellar sludge from my memory banks. A night reverie came to the forefront of my forehead:

Soon, my favorite couple would be dropping off the rest of the guys and dolls, leaving just themselves. Her deceitful head nestling on his shoulder. They would find a

tight parking space behind Saint Thomas' church, where the holy windows would watch with sunless, peccant eyes, as they climbed over into the back seat. She would hold her skirt up off of her ankles. His gunrunner bangs bob as he folds the front buckets onto the dash. There, they would press against each other. Her garnet eyes smitten with permission. His hand sliding along her thigh, chased by tiny electric fibers. I could almost feel that paw, as hot and repulsive as it would be molesting my own leg, working its way up, to the baseball sized fistfuls inside her bra. Her eyes again, as cold as an imprisoned shadow to my advances, glowing with submission. Then they would kiss with the static of a key. Their hot breath painting the clear glass windows of the truck's cab. Then he would take his...

I swung my legs onto the top bar of the fence. The spikes jabbed at my feet right through the boots. When I thought that I was clear, I jumped. I felt a rough tug underneath my armpits, coupled with a ripping sound. My body twisted clumsily, and I landed awkwardly below. Escaping injury, I looked back up at the top of the fence. A strip of my black polo was waving at me through the tiny kiss of the foggy breeze. I glanced back down at my sleeve, and pulled up the portion of my shirt which had been covering my left shoulder blade. A gaping mouth had been torn in the cloth, exposing my winter-white skin. I opened my lips for what I thought was going to be a peevish laugh, but a long chilling sob introduced itself to the night instead. I dropped to the seat of my pants and hugged my legs. Rain and sadness rolled down my face. The tears stung my eyes like Mercurochrome does in a cut.

After about a minute of this misery, I stood up. As I did this, something in the pocket of my tight, wet jeans jabbed into my thigh. I realized that it was the keys to my truck. They jingled as I took them out, rearranging their direction so they would ride more comfortably on my hip. After I returned them to that snug pouch, however, the jingling noise continued. I realized my keys had not been the only source of the sound. I checked my sobs down to a sucked in silence and scanned the plains, but I could see nothing except for the freakish, dirty gray fog.

"Hello?!?" I called out, not really expecting an answer and not surprised when I didn't receive one. Then, after a few seconds, the jingle again, and this time I recognized the sound. It was a cleave of chain being dragged across the ground. I continued to

squint at the ground clouds, twirling slowly and warily. My sadness had suddenly been curtailed by a feeling of freeze-dried fear.

There was a dog in the fog.

I heard the sound again, this time a little farther off. I began to hope that maybe I would get lucky and whatever kind of dog it was would just run away. Maybe I had veered way off course, and mistakenly breeched the back yard of some Mexican's hacienda, disturbing a tied up watchdog or a put out pet. But if that was the case, why was the terrain still choppy and uneven? Why wasn't it mowed and manicured like the rest of the back yards in the Spanish area? I thought that I could remember that those homes had stucco walls around the back, rather than the chain link. And why couldn't I see any windows, or even a light from the houses? Where were the Christmas decorations that the Spanish always left up until at least Easter? And why wou...

“GGGGRRRRRHHHH!!!”

It sounded pretty close, no more than twenty feet away, so I put my hands down flat against my fat thighs and stood straight up, with my heart beating like a war drum. Still, no animal came into my admittedly limited view, and no other sounds invaded my pricked ears. Where was the screaming, soaked slash of the cars from the deuce lane?

Then the same dragging noise came from a different direction, killing any allusion that the dog might be chained up in a back yard. I thought about climbing back up the fence I had just jumped down off of. But during my fearful search for the source of the noises, I must have gotten turned around somehow. When I looked back to the direction of the rampart, it was gone.

The cold leaked through my saturated clothes, until they felt like freezing rags. Offering my person all the protection of a wet paper towel. (*Rasta girls in lightening beige, tangerine orange, sun red and cheese yellow, wet, blonde hair cascading onto their colorful dresses like a golden waterfall.*) And now I could hear the cadence of soft padded paws, jogging around the prey, which was unfortunately myself, in a measured circle and slowly closing. My blood raced in a tingling rush to the finish line which was located in the balls of my numb feet. Then, the animal stopped as it came into view, and although I could not make out its features in the ever present gloom, I could see the unmistakable outline, the body of a Pitt Bull canine.

The fog was drifting past its still frame like it was the trick shape of some dark log on an icy lake. I could not see the curve of its snout, nor the sneer of its teeth, just the drab silhouette of what appeared to be a black body. It looked relaxed, unhurried, as if it knew that I wasn't going anywhere. Confident that it could close the distance between us in three kinetic steps. Sure that it could tear my throat out whenever it wished. I stood frozen. Afraid to move and too terrified to stand still.

The wetness seeped through my clothes as God continued to piss onto the plains. *(And the boy in the bright teal football helmet purposefully takes it off, so he can kiss the brunette cheerleader who is dressed in rasta flag baked yellow, rubber ball red, rich house lawn green and the blue in which those weeping see the world through.)* Still, it just sat there, sizing me up. Its head turned slightly, but I still could not tell whether or not the look on its face was quizzical or viscous. I reached into my jeans groping for a pocket knife or a razor blade. Anything to defend myself after the inevitable charge, and could only come up with my keys. I quickly arranged them into spikes between my fists.

“RRRRRRRGGGHHH!!!”

This time the growl was a bit more drawn out, lower, meaner, cutting through the live silence. I was too afraid to clutch at my chest and the panic began to escape. I tried to speak, to call out to it as if it were a person, but the air in my throat wouldn't drag across my vocal chords and no words found the silver blackness. It came off the haunches as if it were about to spring. Then, an anomaly occurred:

Like during the miracle at Fatima, a dancing red sun found its way through an impossible hole in the dense clouds, just when I was positive that the day was gone for good. This unlikely light exposed a second chain link fence which was no more than fifteen feet away. I didn't even bother to risk a glimpse at the Pitt Bull.

I broke and ran ... my arms flailing in a girlish dervish. .. drizzle and tears of loathing and ridicule chromed on my dry, chapped cheeks ... I didn't hear the dog bounding ... Yet I knew that it was behind me as sure as the sun would dip behind the seam of the horizon ... In three frenzied seconds I was near the fence ... I jumped like a pole vaulter long before I normally would have ... The anxiety charging my limbs with a superhuman level of athleticism ... I catapulted myself onto the links ... Climbing before

I even clutched them ... I felt the scrape of yellow canine teeth narrowly slide off the back pocket of my black Levi's ... That same animal head crashed up against my boot on its way to the ground ... I reached the top of the fence ... The off balance dog must have curled into a ball ... For I heard the musical chime of the links as it rolled up and collided with the fence ... I quickly cleared the spikes and hopped down from the top ... Absurdly afraid that it could somehow still reach me up there ...

But this was just an alarmed assumption. The fence had to be a good ten feet high. No dog, cat, puma nor mountain lion could leap that high. As I hit the ground, the air hissed out of my lungs, the terror squeezing out, vanishing like the end of a song. My cap, which had flown off, floated down as softly as an open parachute, landing miraculously back onto the top of my head. I turned towards the spot where the dog should have hit the fence as I straightened my hat properly. I wanted to see the look on its retarded face. I wanted to revel in the helplessness that it would feel in the wake of my escape. I really did hate those fucking, filthy beasts anyway. Always shitting and pissing all over the ground. Barking stupidly as people were trying to talk. I wanted to stare right into its feeble, canine mind. Glare at it, with a seething blue hatred and gray disdain. A sentiment so ill, that even something with a brain the size of a dime could understand and feel it. A piercing voiceless underhanded eye which said: "I beat you. You couldn't catch me!!"

But there was nothing there. It was gone. It must have scurried back into the gloom as quickly as it had rushed into the light. Too bad. It would have been fun to humiliate it even more than I already had by getting away. I sighed heavily and looked around at the tan fields. I swore that this would be the last time that I would ever walk home.

I brushed the straw off of my Levi's and resumed walking (*peddling, peddling*), looking for any sign of the direction home. I just wanted to bury my head in an oversized pillow and ethereally advance to what would have to be the better world of dreams. A place where the bright colors did not torment me so. A place where you could eat a meal without a round, white, lifejacket of flub hanging over your belt loop. A place wher...

"GRRRRR!!!"

I lapsed in my tracks, shocked to hear the growl again. When I turned around, I

could make out the outline of the Pitt Bull, sitting on the other side of the fence, crayoned over by the darkened links. I thought that I had walked the length of a football field, yet the fence was still only about thirty feet away. Maybe I had gotten confused, and walked parallel to it without realizing it. Even though I knew that it was impossible for the canine to clear that wall, the sound still startled me. Especially, since it was a strange, garbled growl, not like a dog at all but more like ... a fake sound. Like someone or *something* trying to imitate a dog. I stared at it for several seconds, waiting to hear the growl again, realizing that I needed to hear that growl again. But no bark started from its stoic and silent head. I picked up a branch and flung it towards the animal, hoping to incite it to sound off. The spinning stick landed a little short and slightly to the left of the dog's local, but still close enough so that it should have been startled. Yet it did not flinch one centimeter. I walked around looking at the ground for a few seconds, until I found a concrete rock. Breaking into a 'Rick Sutcliffe', baseball pitcher's windup, I fired the chunk at the fence. It banged heavily off the links, intercepting a trajectory that would have surely smashed the animal's face in. Still, it did not move. I could not even hear it breathing or panting. It was as motionless as a taxidermy trophy.

(Fuck This!!!) Not wanting to think about the dog, or anything else anymore, I began jogging away at a brisk pace, leaving the chain link fence and the Pitt Bull behind. I refused to look back, although I could feel its eyes on my back like the shine of an infrared laser. Much in the same way that I had felt the truck's passengers leering after me earlier. I stumbled over something which nearly turned my ankle. When I slowed to inspect it, I found that it was a fragmented piece of concrete, which had probably been abandoned by some, long bankrupt, construction crew. Still, after studying the junked piece, I could not stop my gaze from returning to the fence, which was somehow no more than twenty feet away. The dog was still sitting right there, of course. *(She mopped on the purple lipstick and pulled on the fishnets, because she knew that he would see her sitting in the first row.)* I began walking backwards, unable to look away, when suddenly, the dog flinched. I heard a noise coming from its head. Almost like ... Almost like a yawn, except that I couldn't tell whether or not its mouth had opened. Its back arched slightly, yet the powerful shoulder muscles did not move. But something else did, like a large velvety spider was squirming on its shoulder. But that wasn't it either, it was

more like ... almost like ... the membranous webbing of a wing.

I violently vomited onto the briars as my stress and fear reached an incomprehensible level. Then just as quickly, the ruination turned to rage and I roared at my tormenter: "I BEAT YOU!!! YOU COULDN'T CATCH ME!!! " (*But you couldn't catch the rainbow girl!*) I took off again. This time running all out. Sprinting as fast as my legs would spin. I came to another chain link almost immediately. I slammed aboard and cleared the complicated summit in all of four seconds. It can't clear the fences, it's just not possi... (*She lay her yellow and purple pompoms beside the quarterback's bed.*) The cold air hurt my sore throat. Another chain link. I didn't remember seeing all these fucking fences out here. McDonald's should have been right past the mall. I just want a fuckin' Quarter Pounder. (*She had memorised all the latest, greatest cheers.*) I crested the fence easily, tirelessly fueled by the terror. Running again on the shining grass almost before I hit the ground. (*But after the game(s) were over, he pretended like he didn't even know her.*) Field after fence after field after fence after field fence field fence field fence field fence field fence field fence field fence

I don't know what it was that I stepped on. That, which caused me to lose my balance and hurdle down the grade, as helpless as a tumbleweed. It felt as if someone had stuck out their leg, intentionally causing me to trip. A hollow sound rang out, like my calf had been whacked by an aluminum baseball bat. I fell endlessly down a high hill, even though there were no hills on the famously flat-as-a-tortilla-pancake, Texas landscape. I felt my knee bang off of something solid, causing it to shift or maybe dislocate inside the skin. A green pain blazed from my thick doorknob ankles all the way up to my oily groin. I finally came to rest at the bottom of the slope, scratching up against yet another chain link fence. Although when I looked up through muddy eyes, I could see only flat prairie.

I dug my arms out from underneath my collapsed body, my limbs now shining like the wet grass. I hugged my throbbing knee in an effort to hold it into place, but nail-shaped slivers of agony continued to glow within the injured ligaments. I slowly turned my head back, to stare across the brown chessboard of that flat hill. The fog had lifted somewhat, and the stars had chased the sun behind the rim of the horizon. Yet still, at about fifty yards from where I was felled, I could see the unmistakable outline of a Pitt

Bull canine. No fence separated us and I could see none of the barriers which I had so desperately lunged over. I expected the beast to charge at any second. But it only sat quiescently, as if this entire contest had never really been in doubt.

I wrapped my numb fingers around the octagon shapes of the frozen links and tried to pull myself up. But my knee wouldn't bend at all, having rapidly stiffened until it felt like there was a barbell where the joint should be. The injury was obviously more serious than I'd first considered. When I tried to put my weight on it, a siren-like agony ensued and I slumped back down onto the drenched turf, the aluminum links still clutched in my chilled digits. The toll from the frenzied fear and the frantic climbing had finally caught up to me, and the exhaustion was holding me on the ground, with some help from the thumb of the wind.

Defenseless against the fence, tears of hopelessness and heartbreak sizzled down my cheeks like boiled oil. After a few seconds, I heard a fluttering sound behind me in the dark sky. Like an unfurled tarp flapping in a hail storm, then, something landed softly and skillfully on the sod beside me. (*You knew it all along.*) For a second I was afraid to look up, choosing to keep my frigid features pressed against the sopping ground. But when I felt something licking at my neck, something with a cold muzzle and a hot tongue, I knew that the time had come to turn and face my barren fate.

I could see how someone would have mistaken it for a dog, especially during dusk's caffeinated light. It had four limbs alright, but the front two were curved dramatically, deformed, like tiny Tyrannosaurus Rex legs. There were large human hands, with stubby fingers covered in plush brown fur attached to their ends. The back legs were longer, with exaggerated horse ankles which were closed off by hard shell, farm animal hooves, which it was crouched on, as had been its custom through this entire dusk-mare.

One thing which could not be fully appreciated when simply viewing its drab silhouette were the ghastly details of its horrendous features. The ears were pricked up, like a wolf or a Husky's, and once again it was easy to see how I could have come up with the bogus conclusion that I was being stalked by a dog. The hairs on its head did appear canine in nature, but they stopped short of trespassing onto a bare and hideous imitation of a human face. The eyes were an oval, translucent and solid brown through

and through, without a hint of whites at any angle. There was no nose to speak of, but rather three flat, snot slathered nostrils, which were arranged like thumb holes in a bowling ball. At first glance, the mouth appeared to be like that of a normal human being, until suddenly, a hidden dog's snout shot out from within the man mouth, and a slobbering tongue quickly cleaned both sets of teeth before disappearing back inside the head. It wore a matted, tangled beard underneath an oddly octagon chin, which weaved its way into connecting hairs on a puffed out and muscular chest. The hairs were braided until they exposed bare spots, and the bare spots helped the twine shape letters which formed foreign words. Incantations and spells from some ancient and evil nation which had long ago been destroyed by the wrath of God.

I sat there stunned for the better part of five seconds, hypnotized by this obscenity. I was not frozen in place and I was no longer afraid to move, I was merely resigned to the fact that moving would lend me no favor. Because, for all my complaints and alleged disparities, my sins were many: greed, gluttony, cynicism, hate, sloth, jealousy, envy, self pity, loathing and spite. I had called this monster to task at my shadow with my own psychic dog whistle; the trepidation in my tired heart beating like a buoyant beacon on a black ocean, drawing this unholy creature to my wretched scent.

It didn't really resemble a satyr, or any of the other creatures of Greek mythology. I could see how the Goths could have tabbed it for a gargoyle. Perhaps that's what it was. I guess that I could still refer to it as the Pit Bull, since it had been commanded by its master to bull withered souls, which had already been burnt down to the embers, around the endless yet cramped Pits of Hades.

I heard the flapping sound again, and two rancid, furry wings flexed out from its back, blocking out what was left of the sky, their purple veins transparent even in the limited light. One of the horrible hot hands extended and locked roughly onto my helpless wrist, nearly drawing blood. Then, we took to the orange sky, outdistancing the drizzle and fog, my strength fading; my arm nearly breaking from the surprise of supporting the whole of my body weight; my cap flying off and vanishing into the dark wind. The wings were mighty, and they effortlessly pulled us higher, leaving the plains and this plain behind forever.

I don't know why, but I had assumed that it was dumb, like an actual dog or some

other animal. It looked down at me, the eyes changing to red pupils with bloody whites. Its brow furrowed a tender like a rug squelched by a door, and then, it spoke. With a gruff voice which stopped at intervals, like it was used to speaking a language of grunts, it said:

“...Don...t... worry... / ...There... ..will.. ..be... ..no... ..more... ..bright... ..colors.”

Used Cakes

Their speeding car was as battered as the buildings: bleached a worn, weathered green and accented by chimney brick red climbs of rust which slithered up the dented fenders like vines or teeth marks. The model of the vehicle had long been rendered indecipherable as the car's name-tags, which had been written in cursive onto silver plaques, had lost their back supports and fallen off. When the front rim banged down into yet another pothole, the last remaining hub cap spun off before circling to a stop like a dropped and spinning quarter dollar.

"Jesus," Johnny said, "aren't they ever going to fix these damn potholes?"

"The city doesn't have any more money darling," Jane said, "turn here."

She pointed at a wider thoroughfare in between the crumbling structures. As they rounded the corner Johnny caught a glimpse of his face in the rear view mirror; his cheeks laden with pockmarks and scars. Looking past his crass reflection he also saw what looked like a solo caboose which had a fire spitting wire attached to its roof. Sparks shot out from the rectangular connector.

"Oh look," Jane began, "they've made the trolley car into a diner. I heard they have a 99 cent menu."

"Yeah," Johnny lamented, "some of these restaurants around here ain't worth 99 cents."

Jane nodded.

"Ya ever hear what they do to some of those chickens?" he began, "They alter them somehow, genetically or something. Poor things live their whole lives inside a cage about as big as your fist. They don't have any eyes or feet. Them goddamn scientists have bred em so that all they are is just a living piece of meat; white meat mind ya, a growing torso."

"Well that's nice dear," she said, "but did you ever eat one of those birds? Mmmmmmm. Soooo good. Besides honey, I don't think they have a head. If they don't have a brain then they're really nothing more than a growth. I mean how can something without a brain feel any pain?" She snickered, and there was something annoying about

the silliness of her voice's notes; the soup of simple subjects which her painted mouth wasted her brain's time on. He wanted to tell her that every third word out of her head was idiotic, but instead he only shook his head and said, "Gives me the willies."

As they drove on the auld tenement houses rose around them, rough and rectangular against a sickly beige sky like chipped teeth; their edifices grimy and tainted by smog and soot. The sidewalks were pocked and pitted like Johnny's damaged skin. There was a hole in the nearest walkway the width of a bomb blast. Someone had covered the void over with a flaking and chipped white door which had cardboard colored bare spots showing through here and there. A downtrodden man in a tattered gray work suit shuffled across it as if it were a well constructed bridge. He did not pause or look up at them as they passed. Their junker shot on.

Around the next corner they encountered an X-rated theater. The cinema had once been a respectable establishment. The faded white, imitation marble pillars had yellowed over the decades. A huge glowing marquee announced the semi-indecent titles of the films. The box office sat in a snug booth near the triangular center of the entrance. A greasy looking fat man with wire rimmed glasses, who looked like someone who may be interested in seeing those types of movies himself, awaited the next ticket purchase. The comely face of a scantily clad girl, her deep black hair framing a forehead which was as white as frosted glass, gazed out coquettishly from the movie poster.

"Some of the positions they use in those films are not very realistic" said Johnny, "I can't picture an actual girl or woman posing for something like that. And if you can't picture it... how do they expect that you should be titillated by it?"

"They supply the pictures for you darling. And you shouldn't be watching those movies. Turn here," instructed Jane.

As they turned the next corner a phone booth came into view. Its aluminum frame was badly scratched in spots and some of the Plexiglas panes had either been broken or shot out. A dim bulb obscured by a plastic shield weakly sputtered onto an archaic rotary phone.

Johnny turned towards her. "Do you need to make any calls?" he asked.

"No darling."

"It's a long time from 58th street up to 62nd," he said. "Are you sure?"

She raised her eyebrows.

“What I mean to say is: four years can be an awful long time,” he began. “If a doctor told someone that they had four years to live, then they’d probably cry around and act like that was no time at all. On the other finger, if you sentenced someone to a four year prison sentence, well, then they’d act like it was an eternity. Take that phone booth as a for instance or an example: if the same old bastard who complained that four years wasn’t enough time to live had to stand in that phone booth for four years, from the age of 58 to the age of 62 say, well they’d complain like that was ten lifetimes.

“I’m sure you’re right darling,” she answered, “but couldn’t you go a little faster?”

“Not with these potholes around,” he said and as if on cue the front passenger rim of the junker banged into another gouge in the auld asphalt. Rain water shot up after the impact, soaking a trio of bedraggled bums near a corner. A Mexican who had been pushing a hot dog cart shook his fist at them. But a closer look revealed that the silver side panels were missing and that there were flattened and rusted tin cans piled up where the burner had once been. The condiment trays were empty except for tattered pieces of paper and assorted garbage.

“It’s alright love,” she said. “Three more blocks.”

Squeezed between the crumbling brick fronts of two abandoned, squalid, turn of the century, three stories sat the store: its display windows were cloudy and yellowed and dead flies snuggled up against the bottom of the panes. A row of naked white mannequins postured for passersby. Above this uninspired fashion show, on a plain plywood sheet was the simple moniker: ‘MART’ spelled out in haphazard letters of various plastic, wooden and galvanized fonts like a pieced together kidnapper’s note.

“Here darling, here darling.”

She forced him to parallel park between two dilapidated cars which sat up on blocks since their wheels and tires had been removed. Their rusted pads were sawn off, and orange brake dust stained the ground; only jagged shards remained where their batted out windshields had once been. She watched his progress closely in the rear view as he backed up until their trunk was mere inches from the car behind them. Although she was very pretty there was something about her side profile that suddenly offended

him; he could make out the shape of a cranium underneath her smooth forehead; a skull that was flawed at the jaw and almost anthropological in its crudeness.

As they walked through the revolving door a weak goat's bell up top jingled tiredly as it was tickled by the spinning contraption. There did not seem to be a salesman or any attendants on duty behind the old key punch register. A counter, which looked more like a jewelry display case, sat off to their left. A magnifying loupe for examining gems sat on the desk top like a shot glass, although there were no trinkets on the rotating trays to scrutinize; not even the cheap rings and gaudy necklaces of the costume variety.

Out in the middle of a chilly concrete floor were row after row of rods and hangers which supported thousands of pieces of clothing: army jackets and wedding dresses, marbled jeans and frilly blazers, T-shirts and collared polos, communion gowns and cowboy shirts, cotton sun dresses and legionnaire's uniforms, a white milk man's shirt and pants covered on the same hanger by a leather jacket, bikinis and brown delivery uniforms, football jerseys and ballerina tights, American colored sweaters for small dogs and nurse's skirts with comfortable white tennis shoes tied by their laces to the wire hangers.

She bypassed the collection of clothes and they were soon perusing past several work tables. Dissected engines and the rusty shafts of severed pumps lay in waste on their surfaces, along with disconnected carburetors and detached gas tanks, sliced radiator hoses and love joys, lawnmower blades and cleaved weed trimmer shafts. When this section ended they wandered into a tall, library like aisle which held removable slats of long gun metal green shelves. Huge generators and other unidentifiable pieces of hardware, plus gutted pressure washers, blowers and paint stained airless machines were held up by these supports.

The first set of fish tanks were empty. Or some only had campy props inside them, like a turtle rock or one of those pirate skeletons that sits up once the water line gets up past a certain point, plus a Great White with a mechanized mouth which opened and closed as if it were gasping or chasing schools of grouper or cod. A little bit further down the way living frogs began to appear. They sat inside their glass homes as unhappy as old married women in lonely living rooms. Some of the amphibians were odd colors

like purple or red and they looked blotchy like they'd been burned or as if they were from some distant desert climate. Jane did not see any of the snakes, scorpions or monstrous tropical spiders that she'd expected to find in this section. Fish were conspicuously absent as the tanks were dry and their floors were coated with dust.

Finally the couple located the area for which they'd been searching:

"Ah," Jane said, "here we are."

There were several hundred cakes lining the shelves. There were round cakes, square cakes, rectangular cakes, that were from birthday, anniversary, wedding, graduation, baby shower and all manner of other parties, along with Christmas, Easter, Halloween, New Year's, Valentine's Day and other holiday dates celebrated; even Lincoln's birthday which was the copper head of a penny atop a handsome vanilla face. They were pink, sunshine yellow, pumpkin orange, cheesecake beige, biker black, shamrock green, feminine purple, tangerine, ghost white, tangy sharp garnet and a lot more colors than on any rainbow. Some were on flat cardboard covered over by plastic lids. Others were in baking pans. Some were simply standing out on their own or on hard, cheap, china which might be found in any Midwestern kitchen. Some had been cut into, with various pieces taken away. Others were preserved as if they'd just come out of the baker's oven. Still others were stale and hardened as cemetery slabs. On some, clearly legible congratulations or birthday wishes could be read. On others, indecipherable and smudged letters had blistered into the damaged frosting. Some held little ceramic figures on their tops which were perched upon frosting caked stands; football players and ballerinas, dogs and cartoon characters, pets and princesses. One even held an elaborate playground whereas, upon cocking the spring and setting it into motion, a plastic boy would slide down a slide. On yet another, an impressive golden girl looked ready to launch her baton into the air.

"I used to wonder if I was smart enough," Johnny said suddenly.

"Oh look," Jane said while grabbing one of the cakes and holding it up for him to see the writing.

"I mean how does a person decide whether they are smart or stupid?"

The cake was round and simple: white with kelly green piping. It was still pretty well preserved and the letters spelled out: HAPPY BIRTHDAY S.... with the rest of the name wiped away.

“I wish I knew what the name was?” she wondered.

“No,” he said, “I have to assume that if someone doesn’t know that they’re smart then they must be dumb.”

“This is the one,” she said, “I’ll take it.”

*

“Oh, I hope it doesn’t rain,” she said. They were back riding inside the junker and the cake was sitting on her lap. After only a few blocks the auld auto overheated and steam shot out from the radiator. He turned his neck up and angled the car over to the sidewalk. “Damn,” he muttered.

When she started raving he blocked it out, like a hung over snoozer returning to slumber despite the chirping of the dawn birds. He got out, wrapped a flimsy napkin around his fingers and, while absorbing some minor pain from slight burns, removed the radiator cap. The white steam rose up past his forehead like all the humidity of August condensed.

“No,” he said, “It’s alright it just needs a little water.”

But all trace of her former festive mood had deadpanned and she was hanging out the passenger window cursing and dredging up all of his past failures. He fetched an empty milk jug from the backseat and walked over to an abandoned row house. The paint on its face was peeling and all the windows had been boarded up. There was a small octagon handled faucet on the alley side. He twisted the lever and a jet of water, which by some miraculous anomaly had not been shut off, came streaming out. Once he’d filled the milk jug, he poured that refreshment down the junker’s throat. But when he got back behind the wheel and twisted the ignition he discovered that the battery was now dead. Evidently taxed by the ordeal of overheating.

He banged the steering wheel and started to curse as she began to cry. This section of town had not yet been targeted for gentrification. So of course there were no

workmen, or anybody else who may have jumper cables around. Clouds in the somersaulting sky were darker yet and there didn't seem to be a soul in sight.

"C'mon, let's go," he said and got out again. She gingerly did likewise, still puling and holding the cake. Keeping the imaginary width of the old car between them, even as they left it at the curb, they slowly walked away from the pale green automobile.

"Put THAT GODDAMN cake DOWN!" he snapped.

She sat it next to the sidewalk. There was a miniature brook running through the concrete gutter which had been created by people who had washed old trucks, thrown out bath or piss water or left rusty hoses running. The pristine cake looked very beautiful contrasted against the gray city and she wept harder as they put some distance between themselves and the giant pastry.

It did start to rain after all; a hard, mean avenging rain which threatened to cleanse even these streets. Her mascara ran in blackened trails down her cheeks and damned up thick as glue underneath her big eyes. He felt guilty, dreadful and callous, as if there were cockaburrs jamming up the directions of his blood. But as the water from the unbridled storm dripped off of their chins they could only think about the cake; about its birthday colors melting and running down, mixing in with the brown oils which were being exorcised from the asphalt.

Red Widow

The telephone rang three times that evening. As the first call pierced the silence, none of the spiders moved. Mike Circle barely twitched himself and didn't even rouse to answer until sometime around the fourth ring. As he reached for the receiver, the nearest spider, which was sitting on the kitchen counter next to a bright yellow listings book, didn't even flinch. It was two toned in color: mauve and sanskrit with the crude design of a clumsy violin blazing across its grainy, sandpaper textured abdomen. It had to be at least the size of a large saucer and its tiny white eyes studied Mike as he put the ear piece up to his head.

“Hello?”

It was Julia, the landlord.

“Oh, hello Julia.”

Julia explained that Mike had made a mistake by painting the front door. The rules of the association were very clear: no painting or perceived improvements made to the outside of the building without their expressed, written and seldom granted permission. Doors were particularly problematic since they were color coded; that color being a drab and unimaginative purple. Julia did not go on to explain why all the doors had to match or what any of it meant.

“Oh, I'm very sorry Julia. Normally, I wouldn't do anything to the outside. But Susan Theresa thought it might look nice if we painted it red for the holidays.”

“Susan Theresa?” Julia said perplexed.

“Yes,” Mike Circle said and for a healthy collection of seconds there was a silence on the other end of the line which Mike finally broke: “Anyway, no matter: I have to paint the baby's room this weekend. I'll simply go back over it then. I believe that there's some of that purple still in the basement.”

Julia asked Mike Circle what color he was planning on painting the bedroom.

“Oh ya know, just the same beige that you have on there now. Why Julia? Don't you want us doing any more painting up there?”

Julia explained that the current lease would be up after sixteen months. The

association had a rule against tenants residing any longer than that set time frame. She also said that she didn't want the *new tenants* to have to be bothered painting over a bunch of bright, difficult to cover, shades. She also mentioned something about not changing any of the light fixtures.

"I see. Are you saying that we'll have to move out at the end of November Julia?"

Julia was afraid so.

After she was off the line Mike Circle's stomach began to growl. He sallied over to the toaster while still mulling over the troubling conversation in his clouded mind. If he could only twist off the top of his head and scrub the inside of his temples until the white dish rag checkered red with blood; like polishing the underside rim of a toilet bowl. He sighed and sank two pieces of Roman Meal down inside the mirrored toaster. There was an arctic white spider reflected in the appliance's silvery surface which was perhaps the size of a small cat. It did not spook as the toaster heated up and the bread browned within. Once the pieces popped, however, it retreated back inside a large bread box where its six eyes stared out from the darkness like the red numbers on a digital clock.

Mike didn't even have time to get his bread buttered before the phone rang again. This time the racket chased the desert hued spider which had been sitting next to the listings book up under the overhang on the bottom of the counter. Once hidden it curled itself upside down into a disheveled ball. It looked like the tip of a stream of brown water coming apart underneath a microscope.

"Hello Mikey." It was Mike Circle's brother Tony Circle.

"Hey Tone," Mike said as he took a bite of toast.

"What are you doin' over there?"

"Oh, me and the baby's just waitin' for mama."

Tony didn't answer. The baby started crying right then and Mike went over to the bassinet and picked her up, while still nestling the phone in between his neck and ear. Once she had been hoisted up the baby stopped bawling and looked around, nosey and alert. In the bottom half of the bassinet, a space usually reserved for packages of diapers and wipes, there was a large black spider the size of a basketball; its long thin legs tucked up underneath its prickly body. Although it could not be seen at the moment, Mike knew that there was an hour glass the size of a Coke can depicted on its bristly

belly.

“When ya gonna come off a this bullshit Mike?”

“What bullshit?” He chomped another mouthful of toast.

“There is no mama and she’s not coming home,” Tony said bluntly.

Mike grimaced, swallowed the toast and sat the baby back down onto the floor. She began playing with a variety of small kitten siblings; they were mostly white with different variations of gray patches. The spider under the crib stayed as still as if it were dead. Mike raged into the phone, swinging his arms around as he shouted.

“Ya know Tony I shoulda figured that you’d be in with them; you’ve always been jealous of me and jealous of what me and Sarah Theresa have together!”

Tony scoffed. “You’re amazing Mike. I’m tryin’ to do you a favor. Don’t you know what everyone’s been saying about you? You better lay off a this shit man.”

“EVERYONE?” Mike screamed. “Is this the same everyone that’s been tellin’ all those lies about Sarah Theresa? I bet it’s you Tony; it’s you that’s been makin’ all this shit up.”

There was a heating vent on the floor not too far from where the baby and the kittens were playing. In a tenth of a second a trap door spider leapt out and snatched one of the kittens and was gone back down into its hiding place. There was no way to describe this spider since it simply was not above ground long enough to record any details. The baby whirled around with its top half once the kitten vanished, dazzled to confusion by the arachnid’s quickness.

“Mikey...”

“Look Tony, I’m sorry OK – I know that you’d never make up anything like that. But I know what you’re thinkin’... and Sarah has not been hangin’ out down by those basketball courts.”

“Why would I make anything up Mike...? I’m the only one left who’s trying to help you.”

“I know you think that she’s been down there, watchin’ that friggin’ nigger shoot hoops or whatever it is they do.”

“Mike, I’m hangin’ up Mike.”

“No Tone DON’T HANG UP!,” Mike shouted and then, in a much lower voice,

“I’m sorry Tone, it’s not the blacks, it’s not the blacks, but you should see this guy: the Black Mamba or whatever it is he calls himself. I mean how could any self-respecting woman, white or black...? I gotta have some coffee Tone, you want some coffee?” He set the receiver on the counter and stepped over to the cupboard. Tony’s voice could be heard calling out from the abandoned receiver. “Mike? Mike?” He took out a silver coffee can with a stripped-off label. As he pulled a white paper filter out of the can, which was filled with grinds and crushed beans, a thousand miniscule baby spiders which had been hiding inside the coffee grains leapt out. They rained down over the kitchen floor shooting out hundreds of invisible webs like microscopic parachutists. They landed on the tiles no bigger than specs of pepper and scabbled away in all directions. Mike put the coffee on and picked the phone back up.

“But I don’t really want to talk about this on our anniversary. Frankly Tony, I think you’re really showing bad taste by bringing this up on our special day.”

“Oh really? Your special day. The last thing you need is more coffee Mike!”

“This coffee’s the only thing keepin’ me sane.”

“Mike, I want you to listen to me very closely. That guy is her husband, you are not. That guy is one of the best people in the whole neighborhood, black, white, green or purple. He spends all his free time helping out troubled kids down at the Black Hawk Boys and Girls Club...”

“That’s right,” Mike Circle interrupted, “that Goddamn basketball court!”

“SHUT UP MIKE, AND JUST YOU LISTEN!”

“Our special day... our special day...”

... and the waiter asked Sarah Theresa what she would like to drink and she told him that she would prefer a Margarita on the rocks with salt around the rim and I remember that that made all the blood rush to my tingling phallus and her hair was black and lively like water rushing through a narrow underground passage and her lips were exotic and extinct as some red, otherworldly, nocturnal fruit which had been cultivated somewhere dark; where the moon had never been introduced and her eyes like tintured rust growing inside drops of water: brown as boson and unalloyed in the restaurant’s strained atmospheric light, gleaming like an alien poison, krausened until it was a toxic elixir and the drinks arrived. “Oh, none for me thanks,” and she drank

without a straw as uncouth as a longshoremen sitting on a skid row barstool and the salt dotted up on her lips like diamonds on dark maroon velvet and her body had the curves of an apple underneath her baby green dress and the salads were placed on the white tablecloth as fresh as unpolluted rain and the laughter meshed easily, harmlessly, and when the waiter returned in his smart Christmas red jacket holding the dome which covered the main course; a meal sealed as if to be presented to an emperor and a small blue explosion from the next table distracted me: a teal flame erupting, an extravagant method of presenting cheese and I looked back as Sarah Theresa gasped for our waiter had removed the top pan. "Dinner is served ladies and gentlemen," and so it was: for there in the middle of the serving tray the size of a stuffed turkey with vegetables displayed all around it in a careful octagon arrangement and an apple in between its two sharp pinchers was a grotesque black garden spider looking as if sunny yellow paint had been splashed across the bloated ball of its back where it soaked in its own sanguinary sauces...

When Mike woke up he was lying on the kitchen floor. Several hours had passed and now darkness leaked in through the kitchen windows. The coffee had percolated so long that it was as black as oil and smelled like soot. He got up and put the receiver back into its cradle, killing that incessant buzzing noise which a phone makes once it's been left off the hook. He lowered his face down close to the sink and ran some water over his eyes and cheeks. As he toweled off, he glanced over the bar and saw that all of the kittens were now dead, save for one petrified tabby which stood frozen in the corner as still as a ceramic animal.

The large black spider with the purple/red hour glass on its stomach had wrapped its legs around the baby. The spindly appendages dug into the toddler's stomach as sharp and thin as long black construction nails. There were tiny dabs of blood at their triangular tips where they had penetrated the quarry's skin. Its pinchers were lodged in the back of her tiny neck and it was difficult to tell where the spider's furry fangs began and the child's skin ended. She was as white as her diaper and one got the impression that you could look at the interlocked pair for hours and they would not move a sliver of a hair, especially not the bleached white baby. Mike slowly walked over to the couch and sat down across from them.

“It’s OK baby,” he said. “Mama’s got to come home sometime.”

He rose and looked out the window as headlights searched across the wall, illuminating all manner of spiders throughout the room. Some of the arachnids flinched or scurried since they much preferred the darkness. Mike Circle set back down again as the beams disappeared down some alternate lane. A monstrous spider the size of a truck tire walked up to him. It was a valentine red with touches of black at the tips of its pinchers and a black hour glass on its stomach: the rare *Red Widow*. Its legs were the size and shape of shattered pool cues. Mike Circle picked up the board which was used to anchor the sliding glass door and stuck the wooden beam in between the monster’s pinchers and into its mouth. The spider put up no reaction as Mike moved the stick around inside the blood red contours of its venomous jaws.

“They only want a love song from someone who could never write a love song,” he said as he watched a spider which was as big as a softball spinning a web in between the front door and the banister. It was two toned also with a browned herring boned pattern on the upper surface of its back. Or maybe the web had already been there... maybe it had already been there for days, he couldn’t remember anymore. The phone began to ring for the final time that evening, but Mike paid no attention to it and the noise soon stopped. And the room beat like a blood filled heart and the spiders were deadly still as Mike Circle watched the windows breathing darkness until the hands of the clock worshipped midnight.

little creature

1.

Shock was better than forgetting. It was more like never knowing. A great natural defense mechanism; the mind's way of turning off the projector, canceling any image – benign or malignant, which could cause the flickering brain pain. All tragedies muffled in the hum of a vacuum. His oblivious sphincter tightened and eased until his was like the soul of a tiny fetus curled up sleeping inside the abandoned, crustacean shell of a full grown, yet absent man.

There was no getting away from it, of course. He had to come around at some point. Yet it was June inside the cocoon; a warm uterus filled with comfortable wine colored water. But no... not red water... yes – red water, green and then red ... green water? And there it was: a vague shrug tugging at his subconscious, dragging his memory back towards that cataclysmic day. A little at a time like a pink tropical bird eating bread crumbs off of a sand trail with its hard curved beak. Tiny rays of sharp, penetrating pain from a hurtful and depressing sun crackling through the loving gloom and sheltering darkness, until the unstoppable dynasty of his loss lay twitching at his mud caked feet.

Sometimes he could even sense the approaching dread, as if he were a tired passenger on a dark ocean liner, cruising at a steady pace towards the hidden vortex of a nighttime hurricane. NO! He would will himself to turn the wheel starboard, like a fisherman in a rubber coat twisting away from a wall of waves; snatching and grabbing at the slippery rocks until he was back deep inside himself. Away from the beaming face of his beautiful daughter, her honey hair fidgeting on the palm raked wind. So beautiful before the shocking terror, before a great dark monolith, which had survived tens of millions of years of prehistoric evolution, rose up to claim her.

2.

There wasn't anything wrong with his sight, at least nothing that the doctor's could diagnose as a physical ailment. Still, he had been blind for the first twenty four hours; squirming around in the circling blackness like a crab, happily oblivious to egregious recent events; an instant addict to the calming sedatives which the nurses flooded his cracked heart with.

On the second day he could see again, albeit rather blurred, like looking through the hull of one of those tourist trap glass bottom boats. Lying on his back in the hospital bed, staring at the roof as if it were the calm surface of a fresh water lake, he tried to fend off the ascending madness within the dawning recollection. He rubbed his forehead and for a second the trepidation took flight, like a pack of mosquitoes that you shoo away only to watch them land back in the same spot an instant later.

After a while of this agony he heard a soft shuffling in the hallway, prompting him to turn his head slightly. He could barely make out the long, fuzzy coat of the doctor – Dr. Burke, he thought it was.

“Dan? There's someone here to see you.”

Accompanying him was a second shape: a uniformed form with garb the same color the swamp had been. Dan did not have the strength to sit up in bed and it was difficult to focus on the figures from his back. When he squinted at them they honed down until they were a horizontal line. Like images on a maladjusted television screen. He forced his eyelids to open wider and the people popped back up and he could see the men better. That's when the doctor said,

“Don't take too long, he's suffered a severe trauma.”

The other man nodded. He was holding a cap in his hand which was the same color as the uniform and it occurred to Dan that he might be a police officer. Dan ran through a list of paranoid non-offenses in his mind, trying to figure out what he might have done in order to get himself arrested.

“Hello Mr. Glass,” the man said through a heavy Cuban accent. “My name is Ranger Soto.” Dan looked at the man dumbly and when he opened his mouth to answer found that he could not.

“I know it isn't much consolation to you,” the ranger continued, “but we got 'em.”

Dan could only stare, no comprehension of the words registering in his psyche. “Whatever the charge is officer,” he said, “I’m sure I’m guilty.”

“No sir,” the ranger said. “I’m sure you don’t understand. I’m not here to arrest you. There aren’t any charges filed and furthermore,” he concluded politely, “I’m not a policeman.”

The ranger stood there as if he expected some sort of response to this, but when Dan didn’t move or react in any way he finally said, “I just felt that you’d want to know: we got ‘em. I mean, we destroyed it.”

Dan seemed to lose comprehension of not only the situation, but also of consciousness itself. A line of spittle ran from the corner of his mouth as he sighed into a sudden sleep. Still the ranger continued talking as if to himself or no one. “Bout a twelve footer I’d say. You see, sometimes during the rainy seasons, the swamps overflow into the ponds. That’s how they get in.” The ranger paused, as if he didn’t know if he were saying too much. “We keep tellin’ people, over and over again, all the time, don’t feed ‘em.” The white coat drifted into view again, the color of foam.

“Perhaps it would be better if he rested now.” The doctor said, seeming to confirm that perhaps the ranger had said too much. The stern voice of the physician nudged Dan back awake.

“Of course.” The ranger nodded graciously at Dan and, as he turned to leave, the patch on the shoulder of his uniform could be viewed clearly. Dan’s mind came back from whatever island it had been on and his bloodshot eyes focused on the moniker; he studied the design whether he wanted to or not: it was a cypress bush turned up like a southern belle’s fan. Building an umbrella over white letters with green piping: EVERGLADES NATIONAL PARK. And just like that it all came cascading back over him; not just bits and pieces, but all of it, like a full fishnet being sliced open and its slimy contents spilling out onto a deck. A flash bulb flood of fear and searing light forced Dan to turn away as the water from the swamp crested his eyes and ran down his cheeks

After the funeral, she sat on the fuchsia colored couch. Dan had never much liked the color, but the vote around their house was always the same: 1 to nothing.

She shivered over the coffee table where an ashtray sat dangling over the edge. It was still filled with stubbed out cigarettes. Usually she chain smoked, one Virginia Slim lighting the next, but she had not had a drag in several days, nor had she eaten, drank or slept. Well, she did writhe serpentine in the bed until all the covers lay on the floor like a rumpled and discarded dress. Her red eyes visible even in total coal mine darkness.

Dan walked into the kitchen and loosened the Winsor knot on his black tie. Now that he could see again he longed for blackness. He had read somewhere that the eels of the Atlantic Ocean gathered each year near Bermuda where they would mate in the Sargasso Sea. Yes, that sounded real good to him: he wished to be a non-electric eel squirming and side winding down, down into the infinite depths.

He poured himself a glass of water and, in almost the same motion, tried to gulp it down, but his dry throat closed around the first swallow and a fit of coughing commenced.

He stumbled slowly back out to the living room. She was still sitting there like a dog shaking on a rainy doorstep; her nicotine yellowed fingers still gripping a conspicuously absent cigarette. He did not sit down, or attempt to put his arm around her, or try to comfort her in any way. Instead he walked over to the window and surveyed the blockaded panorama of the drawn blinds.

“Why weren’t you watching her, Dan?” she asked pointedly while still shaking and staring down at the ashtray, her arms folded under hunched shoulders.

Dan felt as if he were shaking his head no but, unbeknownst to him, his neck was not moving.

“Coyote,” he began, “he was havin’ a fit, ya know, he... kept barking and all.” It was at that very instant that Dan first realized why the dog was barking – and what at. “I just couldn’t... I couldn’t get the door of his cage open.” He felt Novocain numb, empty after filling buckets with his tears.

“You were going to let him out?” she asked.

“Yeah.”

“Jesus Dan!” She got up and started pacing. “Didn’t you know you were in the Everglades ... The *Florida* Everglades!”

He answered the sarcasm submerged pitch as if it were just an ordinary literal question.

“Yeah, yeah,” he said. “I knew that.” He didn’t blame her for blaming him. Not really. Under the circumstances, he thought that she was holding up especially well.

“The Everglades, the *Everglades*,” she kept repeating, as if trying to experiment with different ways of sounding the syllables.

“Do you know what those monsters do Dan?” she began as she plopped back down onto the fuchsia couch. “They take their prey to the bottom,” her words cracked and she began to cry and come apart yet again. “They ... t-t-take the prey to the ... bottom to d-drown them.” He imagined her limbs falling off of her body from sheer grief; her arms and legs flailing and disjointed on the carpet. He shuffled out into the foyer, glad to be away from her.

4.

They trudged up the manure driveway in the cold bruise of a Wisconsin dawn, until the massive heads and huge faces of the cattle stared out at them from the open end of the half shed. The scent of liquefied waste hung high and sweet in the chilled air like butane gas. Outside, near a pile of blackened, pushed aside snow, lay the lifeless body of a dead calf; a silver dollar sized circle of blood-tainted snot dried inside its leathery nostril; eyes like a taxidermy trophy. The other side of its ruined face sucked down into the abundant mud.

“Is it dead, daddy?” the little boy asked.

The father shook his head yes and adjusted his orange hunter’s cap. The little boy turned his attention from the expired animal to the line of cows who were nonchalantly chewing crud.

“What happened to it?” the little boy wondered aloud as a cold wind tugged at his ear flaps.

“Wasn’t born right once.” The father shook his head as if searching for reasons himself. “Just God’s way of ... correctin’ his own mistake.”

The little boy continued to stare at the herd. They were licking hay from a long wooden bunk with their grainy tongues. Their movements were slow and stupid enough, but not altogether random; big black eyes like wet tiles.

“But isn’t one of the cows that baby’s mother?”

“Yes,” the father answered. “That one right there. No. 23.”

The little boy searched out the matriarch. A yellow tag with red numerals was stapled onto its ear ‘23’. It was chewing a mouthful of golden silage and, although it was resting on its knees, did not appear any more upset than the others.

“But isn’t it sad? T-t-to see its baby lying there dead, all covered in mud?” As the little boy asked this a loud stream of urine shot out from in between the black and white buttocks of one of the Holsteins.

“No!” the father said flatly. “That thing’s brain is no bigger than a lima bean. There’s no way it can comprehend somethin’ like that.” He then rephrased the statement, choosing words that may be easier for a child to grasp. “It’s not smart enough.” The little boy considered this for a moment.

“I don’t believe that,” he said after a pause. “I don’t believe that it’s not smart enough to know that its own baby’s dead.”

The father tried to move on. “Well that’s the way it is,” he said. “Now we got ta take care a these chores. Let’s go.” He started to walk away, but the child would not follow. Instead he walked over to the partly buried calf, his rubber boots squishing through the bile and his eyes wide like two boiled eggs floating in a pot. He put his hand on the furry, ice glazed carcass, pulled his cap over his brow and began to weep softly.

5.

“Sit down baby. We’ll be at Granny’s soon,” Dan said. “Hello Granny down in old Miami,” he sung to himself.

But Allison would not sit down. She continued to buck and kick against the constraints of her car seat.

“Sit down back there!” Dan tried to instruct her from behind the wheel, but the four year old would not listen.

“I gotta go pee pee,” she said.

“All right,” Dan said casually, almost musically. “Alright.”

EVERGLADES NATIONAL PARK – REST AREA – NEXT RIGHT.

Allison started crying.

“OK, it’s OK baby, were pullin’ off right now.”

Coyote wasn’t acting much better. He’d been barking pretty regular throughout the trip and sticking his wet nose in between the tiny openings in the links. Dan thought that it was pretty cruel trick to stick a Jack Russell Terrier inside a car cage for the duration of a trip from Bradenton to Miami, but the alternative was to have the animal roaming around free inside the cab, chewing up the mini-van’s upholstery or maybe even relieving itself on the floor.

Dan curled off of the exit ramp, parked, and got the baby out of her car seat. For the moment he left Coyote bound up in the cage. “Don’t worry buddy, you’re next,” he promised before walking with his child into a humid restroom with black block walls. “Jesus, these things ought to have air conditioning,” he complained out loud and wondered why in the world his wife had dressed the child in a skin tight body suit. It was such pain in the ass to get it pulled down.

By the time they got back outside and opened the mini-van’s door, Coyote was biting at the wires of the cage. Dan sat Allison down on the sun faded sod. “Okay Pooch,” he said as he turned his attention towards the latch.

“LOOK DADDY!” Allison cried out and pointed at some exceedingly colorful tropical flowers which sprouted from ankle-deep water at the edge of the rest area’s man made pond. Moss-covered swamp trees surrounded it. She ran down to the shore, where several off-brown logs covered in green slime and draped with kudza were partly submerged.

“Allison!” Dan shouted after her. “Get away from that water!” His instinct told him to go after her, but she stopped short of the shore, her tiny sandaled feet still on the singed grass. He thought that she would come back towards him or else he would definitely have enough time to retrieve her once he’d freed the dog to do its business.

But the latch was ... it was ... stuck or something. The pooch had pushed it out or bent it somehow. Coyote continued to howl as if flames were licking the dog carrier; as if a thousand obnoxious rabbits thumbed their paws across their noses in his field of vision. “Alright!” Dan screamed at the dog and jiggled the latch but it would not give.

“Allison!”

“It’s OK daddy,” she said calmly, taking two small steps back towards him. He would remember these as her last words. She didn’t even have time to scream. The only sound Dan recalled later was the sloshing of the water. The latch finally separated and Coyote rushed out the side door, his short legs skittering across the brown ground towards Allison but he too was too late.

As Dan turned to walk to his child, who was innocently beholding a swatch of flowers at the foot of the tea colored pond, one of the logs leapt to life. Before he could even bat an eyelash the log latched onto his daughter and dragged her into the shallows. Too stunned to even scream, Dan stumbled towards the pond with Coyote barking and yelping at his side. But by now the predator and its prey were already twenty five feet out. The alligator went into its death roll, a flash of the little girl’s pink body suit tragically out of place in the grays and oak greens of the dreary scenery. The child’s innocent blood shone brown on the garnet surface like spilled oil.

Dan waded in, panic driving his limbs. He saw the gator’s underbelly freckled in beige; the long moon-colored rows of teeth with his baby ensnared, the grotesque midget short legs, the bumps with knife slits which worked as eyes, the thick shield of the scales, and horror sung to his bones and vibrated throughout his skeleton.

The tail spiked up like a serpent as the monster and his daughter continued to twirl with the violence of a tumble dryer. Then they were gone, vanished beneath the dirty surface. Dan held his breath and dove – held his breath and dove, but he could make nothing out in the sightless murk, could hear nothing aside from Coyote’s frenzied barking back on shore. He dove again and the hot water flooded his nose and ears, like a submerged bucket filling up with filthy liquid. Weeps of seaweed reached for him and chopped blades of palms prodded his ribs. Helplessness drove him on like a man looking for a diamond in a city of shattered glass.

NO! he raged, NO! and swam even harder, plunged even deeper, until he could

see nothing, hear nothing; not even the canine or the cars on the highway. He swam until there was a kind of comfort in it. For she was here, somewhere in this pond. He didn't have to leave here ever. No one could make him. And he swam so fast that the dark green swirled into a blonde light, yellow like the sun through a tattered green blanket, his clothes heavy with the swamp and his eyes searching and searching for his perfect preciousness. His sense of direction tipped askew in his own whirlpool, until the bottom of the pond was the heavens and that sky was black.

The Adversary

I

“Thanks for coming, Mason,” Kathleen Marie said.

“Oh well ya know,” Mason shrugged and tried not to look at her face, his eyes dropping to the front of her frost white wedding dress instead; it glimmered like sculpted salt. “I wouldn’t miss it.” He nervously fingered his tie.

A blurry song ached out from the recreation hall’s tired speakers and some of the older guests shuffled into an uninspired slow dance. Even the tortured music couldn’t drown out the sound of clinking ice. The bar where the noise was coming from was a rectangular window which led into a glowing kitchen. Inside on the floor there were several tubs of ice which held beer cans and bottles of clear and brown liquor.

Most of the male guests were clambering towards the opening, holding out tens and twenties. Mason imagined the diluted liquid passing over their cigarette browned tongues and disinfecting the fissures in their halitosis afflicted teeth.

The wives sat out in the darkened dining room; their slim, ring adorned fingers twiddling on the white table clothes. Some of the boy children had dinner napkins covering their cummerbunds in anticipation of the waiters; those who would soon file out in their Christmas red jackets dealing freshly buttered rolls and pale green salads.

“Don’t look like that Mason,” Kathleen Marie said, “now you know that this is what’s best for both of us.” Mason sighed. He had promised himself that he wasn’t going to lose his temper and turn into a raving monster. “Both of us?” He tilted his head to one side in doubt.

He was having a hard time figuring out why she looked so pained? Beautiful, of course, but why so pained? He was sure that she not upset over his predicament. After all, she was the one who was causing it. For a breathless second his lungs felt poised to choke, but he quickly suppressed the cough and no trace of mist made it to his eyes. He found her glance finally and her eyes were breathtaking: a heartless, time stopping brown, sparkling like muddy ice. Someone had spent a lot of time applying her make-up

for the grandiose occasion, and, as good a job as it were, Mason still had to admit that her face was too pretty for cosmetics. Some girls needed to be shielded from their own complexion, but not his Kathleen Marie, or Kimmie as she was sometimes called by a select group of friends. She was what God had intended his most virile sons to see, and feel themselves pressed against, as they woke each morning.

She stared back at him unabashed, as if he had done it all to himself. Like he was just some high school nerd with a crush and she was an innocent beauty queen who had had no hand in it.

“Are you going to be all right?” She came across as so sincere that Mason softened some. No longer wanting to be a prick about it he smiled shyly and answered kindly. “Look,” he said, sticking his hands deeper into his pockets in an effort to prevent himself from waving a finger in front of her face. (*Monster!*)

“I’m not tryin’ to ruin anything for ya here.”

Before they could say anything else, a handsome young man appeared behind Kathleen Marie’s shoulder, the same young man who had met her at the end of the aisle at St. Theresa’s earlier that day. He wasn’t overly tall but still much taller than Mason. He stood straight up and wore a tuxedo the color of light blue toilet water. “Allen,” Kimmie said, “this is Mason. He was my next store neighbor when I (WE! Mason thought she should have said) was growing up back in Cloverdale.”

Mason stuck out his hand and tried to fake it, but he was unsure whether or not the expression on his face got the job done.

Allen shook his hand alright, but it felt ice laden to Mason, as if he had just reached into the current of a cold spring. As their arms pumped, Allen’s face hatched a cautious and unmanly grin. Mason thought that he looked like some sort of outdated disco dancer with his blonde hair tumbling onto his forehead styled as carefully as a woman’s.

“Ah yes,” Allen said woodenly through suspicious frown lines. “Hello.”

“Hello,” Mason shot back, trying not to seem like a jilted book worm; failing at the job and playing the role of the monster after all. Kathleen Marie turned to Allen and then to Mason, then back to Allen again. For a few rugged and silent seconds no one said anything. At a nearby table a husband in a sonic loud purple suit bounced drunkenly up

to his wife. She was seated demurely in an understated yet lovely white dress. For what seemed to Mason like no reason at all, she kissed her obnoxious man on the cheek.

“Well,” Mason said finally breaking the pause, “good luck to you both.”

“Thank you,” Allen said as they shook hands again. Kathleen Marie only looked on sadly. (Although not sadly enough for Mason’s tastes.) With that, Mason turned tail and walked away.

For all the things he’d wanted to say to her, all the practiced recitals endlessly rehearsed in his maudlin thoughts, all the visions of her projected in his mind, illuminated as a never-ending slide show, he had ended up mouthing only a few meaningless words.

He skirted the makeshift bar, smoke drifting up past his exhausted eyes like the scentless flatulence of ghosts. He needed a drink badly, but the men were stuck on the window like pups on a bitch’s tit. He tried not to punch the push lever as he found the exit door. (*Monster!*) The air outside was so cold that instead of refreshing him it choked his lungs. He doubled over on the glittering asphalt and coughed out nothingness. Once he righted himself he caught a glimpse of a stately old elm tree past the edge of the parking lot. It was naked from too many cold showers. Without thinking he shuffled towards it. Once he reached the trunk he noticed a collection of large bugs marching in a line northward up the bark. He thought this odd since the air temperature was near zero.

Out past the hairless old elm there was a manmade pond which had frozen over solid. Earlier at dusk, hockey players had bladed across its grey surface. Now the ice was deserted and the struggling waves lapped underneath the solid sheet. He sat down on a mound of plowed-aside snow with an audible crunch. He lowered his chapped face into his hands and began to heave into powerful sobs. When his sizzling eyes closed he could see his Kimmie; the great American girl next door digging in her mother’s amateur garden, her slender fingers hatcheting up chunks of square brown dirt as solid as fudge; the knuckles streaked as if with liquid chocolate. A face as pale as vanilla and gaunt as the white roses she was busy treating. He hadn’t dropped anything or made any sudden moves yet somehow she sensed him staring at her from the window of his father’s house. For a moment they were in each other’s eyes and his heart leapt as if he had been

driving terribly fast and crested a sudden hill. Then she turned away with a volatile glare as brown as boson, and strode back into the rear garage door of her mother's house.

"Such a struggle," – a voice spoke to him from nowhere, popping the balloon of his reverie. This caused him to start and scan his limited field of vision. There was someone addressing him from out on the ice. "Hello?" he called out tentatively.

There was no answer but he could vaguely see something jogging towards him; something about the height of a small dog. He heard a noise out in the darkness like two pigs fighting or the mewling of a disfigured cat. What he realized next set pins of caterpillar like apprehension curdling up his spine. It was the body of a dog alright; some sloppy side winding mutt of a bulldog perhaps. But then a face came into focus: a face which shocked the light as much as it was shocked by it, a face like a mummy's, tanned and stretched like a preserved cadaver, superimposed onto the dog's small body. It was toothless with wet pieces of what looked like soft bread or tissue hanging from its mangled and dried lips. The powdered face of a demon.

Mason jumped up and stumbled backwards, his dress shoes sliding on the frozen puddles. He sprinted back towards the cars. He slipped on the ice glazed asphalt and fell, banging his hip hard on a truck fender. He was up in a blink and scuttling back towards the reception hall. As he reached the door he risked a glance behind him and was relieved to see that the thing was not following. He forced himself to slow down after entering the hall.

No one seemed to notice his frantic entrance. Kathleen Marie glanced at him briefly, a trickle of fear flashing in her eyes as if she thought he might pull a gun out. But she was a long way off and soon looked away. Her and Allen were cutting the cake, the layers rising up like the tower of Babel. As both sides of the family laughed and sighed, Mason sat down at one of the semi-empty tables. Most of the guests had filtered towards the raised stage, where the long matrimonial table set, to catch a glimpse of the ecstatic couple. An elderly gentlemen across the way nodded at Mason and smiled. Mason discovered a shot of Crown Royal which someone had abandoned and quickly drained it.

As Mason lay in his bed gazing at the ceiling, the dots of drywall turned into the snowflakes which had fallen onto the frozen pond. He tried to dismiss the horror of what he'd seen from his rattled thoughts. Although his body was covered by two heavy blankets, he could still feel the chill out beyond the walls; a chill he doubted very much that Allen was feeling in his distant honeymoon suite. Since the effeminate new husband's body would no doubt be covered over by Kathleen Marie's taut frame at this late hour. He found these thoughts no more comforting than conjecturing about the abomination which had approached him on the ice blanketed shore. His beleaguered mind kept jumping back and forth between the two horrid scenarios like a fox continually leaping onto each side of a snow fence, over and over: the fox and the face by the lake, Kimmie and Allen's sanguinary sheets on a queen sized bed, the face, the fox, Kimmie's naked breasts mauled by a slender, almost womanly hand. (Had the face been on a fox's body?) Suddenly he was positive that he had not imagined the episode by the lake. As much as he would have liked to believe he was crazy, or even welcomed the perceived freedom of insanity, he knew that he was not.

Yet, the light over the paused pond had been limited. Surely some drunken sot with a left-over Halloween mask could have been out there searching for someone to frighten. Although – there were a couple of flaws in this axiom which bothered him: first, whomever it was had been very low to the ice. For one thing, someone with a mask on would have had to been slithering on their belly to get that far down.

He looked over at the telephone. Could he somehow cause it to ring with just the force of his desperation? If only he could hear Kimmie's voice on the line, telling him that it had all been a mistake: that she had rejected the pretty Allen in favor of her devoted Mason, that she wanted to move back to the old neighborhood and eat all her meals with him: that she wanted to reinvigorate the garden which had overgrown with prickly weeds after his father died: that she loved him as she never had.

His eyes closed and opened again and it was like seeing his crummy apartment for the first time: the green screened TV which was connected only to basic cable. His favorite books in a cheap dollar store bookcase, never mind that his depression would not let him concentrate long enough to read any of them. The grime laden adjacent

kitchen, which he no longer had the strength to clean. The kicked, scuffed and pock marked walls. The light fixtures which were a cradle for countless dead insects. The black rimmed bathroom sink and lager yellowed toilet. No wonder that Kimmie hadn't chosen a winner like him.

He closed his eyes again as she re-entered his thoughts like a needle through the brain. He could picture her sipping Champaign in a freshly painted honeymoon suite, her svelte fingers picking lint off the front of Allen's tux. Her pretty nails as bright as a ruptured cervix. Her brown eyes smitten and spinning like a swirl in a wind whipped river. Then they would kiss: like chrome on chrome or sparks from a fast car accident.

Then Allen fits into her and it's flawless: like a key turning inside the lock of its industrially forged mate.

III

"Kimmie?" Few people knew that she was called by this nickname and there was a pause on the other end of the phone.

"Who's calling please?" But when he heard the coldness in her voice he knew that she had identified him as the caller.

"It's your old next door neighbor."

Silence.

"It's Mason."

A pause and then, "Hello Mason, how's your father?"

"Well, I'm afraid he passed away."

"That's terrible Mason; he was a nice man."

"Yes, well, what can you do? Anyway how've you been?" Then, before she had a chance to answer, "You know I'm coming back to Cloverdale for a few..." But before he could allude to his question she spoke over him:

"I'm not living there anymore." Then after a slight pause, "how did you get this number?"

He ignored her question and pitched his own, "oh, where are you staying now?"

Instead of answering his question she made a statement: “You probably haven’t heard Mason, being as we’ve both been away, but... I’m engaged now.” As she finished this sentence the connection became strained and he could only hear part of what she’d said.

“Oh well, if you’re tied up this weekend, I’m sure I could...”

“No Mason, I’m engaged to be married.”

“Engaged to be... what! To who?”

“Listen Mason, I really don’t want to have this conversation right now.”

“I guess not, you lying...”

“Mason don’t please...”

“You lying fucking bitch cu...”

Dial tone.

“Who is it? Who is it you fuckin’ whore?”

IV

He sat abruptly upright in bed, throwing heavy beads of sweat onto the foot board. For a few seconds, until his eyes adjusted to the parched light, he did not even notice the figure sitting in the bedside lounge chair. He did a double take and now the unmistakable form of a man narrowed into focus.

“Are you ready to be with her Mason?” the form said. Mason thought about the abomination which had side winded off of the ice earlier. He knew this was the same creature, although the face was not the same. Even in the shrouded bedroom he could tell that this visitor’s face was nearly flawless: stately and proud with manly whiskers sharpened on clear cheeks. He could not see the eyes but he could feel their intensity; as if they were giving off a silent steam.

Mason didn’t answer, he thought instead of his 45 Wembly, cozy in its holster on the top shelf of his suit closet, a closet which was unfortunately on the other side of the strange visitor. Instead of trying to muscle his way to the weapon, Mason grabbed his ceramic bedside lamp and in one motion shattered it across the intruder’s face. The

form didn't flinch. It sat stoically surveying him. Mason had planned to run after launching the lamp, but there was something about the relaxed and congenial posture of the visitor which made him stay put.

"Are you ready to be with her?" the form said again, unfazed by the flying furniture.

"Be with who?" Mason wasn't sure why he was answering or if he was even awake.

"Why, Kathleen Marie of course."

"Who are you?" Mason asked, puzzled.

The form got up slowly from the lounge chair and strolled leisurely over to Mason's phony electronic fireplace. It rested one arm on the imitation banister. "Let's just say I'm someone who has taken an interest in you; someone who would very much like to see you achieve your goal: a goal which, until moments ago was not only unachievable but unfortunately forgone."

"Who are you?" Mason asked again as he scooted towards the edge of the bed. He didn't feel self conscious at all in just his boxer shorts.

"You can call me the adversary."

"The adversary?"

"That's right?"

"But how could you help me, and why would you want to?"

"Look," the adversary began, "I'm going to make this as easy for you as possible. Perhaps you shouldn't be asking yourself why I want help you. Instead... I will beg you to consider that I don't really have to. Furthermore, if you refuse this once-in-a-lifetime gift, if I am forced to leave here tonight without you having accepted this gracious offer, then said offer is off the table forever. That is my deadline."

Mason's eyes were adjusting to the sparse light, but the man only seemed more handsome. "I guess I just don't understand what that offer is."

"My offer is this: I shall use my substantial powers so that you may lie with Kathleen Marie."

"And Allen?"

"Out of the picture."

“Yeah, well, I want him dead.”

“By all means.”

“OK.” They sat in the half darkness for several seconds without speaking. “Do you want me to sign a contract or something?” Mason finally asked.

“Whatever for?” The adversary answered.

“When can we start?”

“Right now.”

V

There had once been an underhanded raccoon which lived in a short sliver of woods in between the rows of houses in the old neighborhood. Once night fell, it would saunter out from its hideaway, tipping over garbage cans, munching on rubbish and causing other general mischief. That is until ‘One Dollar Bill’, who was the local transplanted Arkansas redneck, vowed to stop the raids. One night he surprised the wide eyed coon with the firecracker-like bang of his Winchester 101 field grade shotgun, foiling its attempt to breach yet another bright silver can.

Although the initial hail of gunfire missed, the coon was badly startled and quickly fled. The raccoon was eventually cornered in a young, fifteen foot high, elm tree. A clay pigeon could not have been positioned any better as far as Bill was concerned. As he reloaded, wearing his tattered robe and ‘Razorback’ slippers, a gathering gang of pre-teens, including the eleven year old Mason, smirked, hooted and pointed at the zoned animal.

One bold kid even tried to claim the hide for himself; stating that it would be excellent material for a Daniel Boone type cap.

Bill quieted such declarations however, and proclaimed that only he, as the animal’s rightful executioner, should be allowed to wave such a prize. With this he leveled the Winchester, whet the end of the site with his thumb and forefinger, and squeezed the trigger.

It was nothing like seeing something get shot in the movies. There wasn’t very

much impact and even less blood. (Although in some sappy movies, the eleven year old Mason thought, there wasn't any blood at all: just some lame actor jumping back as if he'd absorbed a bullet.) In this reality, only the sound of the gunpowder exploding betrayed the illusion that it was not an illusion. Then the wounded creature began to scurry in place.

Scuffling against the bark, the branches and the burn of the steel invader which had punctured its innards. Mason did have some dim conception of the terror which spread from the critter's lima bean sized brain and animated its panicking limbs. But his eleven year old sensibilities came up short of identifying the black hole of trepidation which was being constructed in its miniature soul.

After several seconds of clawing at nothing and running to nowhere, the raccoon fell from the tree, looking curiously snakelike as it writhed on the asphalt. 'One Dollar Bill' fired again but appeared to miss as a spark kicked off the concrete side walk. The fatally wounded coon recovered enough to right itself and dart into the patch of woods, leaving a trail of oil colored blood droplets in its wake and robbing the redneck of his prize. It could not rob the reaper, however, and long after Bill had passed out drunk and awoke hung-over, long after the rest of the neighborhood kids had dispersed and coughed their way to school the next morning, (including, of course, Mason's nine year old Kathleen Marie who would never be a party to such a heartless and gruesome spectacle) Mason, who had skipped school that morning due to an allergy caused by coming in contact with a copper belt buckle, followed his nose to a stash of trash underneath the tress, the noon sun reflecting off the recycled papers. Here he saw what was left of the raccoon curled up to sleep forever on a half eaten bag of thirteen ounce Doritos, maggots walking the tight rope of its whiskers. The stench increased the closer he came to the decaying beast and invaded his nostrils; a stench like someone had mixed rubber with feces and burned it in a skillet on a leaky old gas stove.

VI

That's the same smell which invaded his nostrils now: the brain melting stench of a

decomposing animal. Mason felt as if he had a fever; nauseous with chills and dizziness. He was lying flat on his stomach, black air undulating in front of him like waves of heat on an asphalt road. After the ripples cleared he realized that he was in total, bottom of the coal mine darkness.

He gingerly reached out and felt something soft and plush, perhaps velvet. The velvet pressed against each shoulder as he surmised that he was in a very small compartment. It was not smooth under his body however as he was lying on something jagged and lumpy. Almost sharp: like broken dishes covered over by a blanket. He also felt two loose spikes in front of him, like plastic or leather. As he began shivering uncontrollably he remembered the cigarette lighter in his pocket. In these cramped quarters it would be no small task to dig it out.

As though trying to escape from a straight jacket, he wiggled his left hand down in between the soft yet hard wall and his rotund body. The stench was severe, but if he vomited his face would be inches from the spew with no escape. Making a focused effort to calm his shakes, he pushed his fingers into his pocket and located the lighter. He tugged it out roughly and as he brought it up to his head it flew out of his hand. There wasn't very much space in front of him and after a couple seconds of fumbling around, he relocated it. He could see the silver switch in his mind and he twisted the lighter around to thumb it. It was here that he paused; he had no idea what sort of space he was in or if flicking the lighter would ignite a pocket of gas or cause an explosion. He sniffed but could not smell anything besides the death stench. After a few seconds of considering this he decided that there was little choice.

As the weak blue flame attacked the gloom the first thing that he saw was Kathleen Marie's shoes; they were those glittering blue flats which put him in the mind of a Sinbad movie; he had seen his Kimmie wear them on several occasions many years ago. There appeared to be two long grey sticks running down into the shoes. He did not begin to panic until he realized that these were what was left of Kathleen Marie's legs.

He was lying face down on top of her body, staring at her skinless calve bones inside the plush red contours of her casket.

Terror exploded in his chest and spread like a Roman candle in a black sky blazing up to his brain. He dropped the stop-n-go pocket lighter and began to writhe

uncontrollably. As he stomped his feet they kicked off of something roughly round: like an imperfect grapefruit or coconut. Whatever the object, was it rolled up his back as he continued to struggle, as if on a straight path, first up his spine, then on the small of his back and across his shoulder blades. Finally dumping itself into his blind line of sight. Reeled in by a bleak fascination he ceased kicking.

Not being able to see the object without the help of the lighter he felt at its surface with his fingers. (The pointer on his left hand slightly singed from the flame.) It felt smooth in parts; almost as smooth as a bowling ball. But then there were jagged areas with indentations and also what felt like long stringy threads springing out from what he perceived were cracks.

Dropping the dome-shaped enigma he felt around for the lighter once again. Not really wanting to, he spurred the device and the blue light illuminated Kathleen Marie's skeletal head: the black eye sockets like snake holes in a salt cave: the feminine teeth as long as fingers without their skin below two exaggerated nose holes like an upside down spade and the long grey hair still combed straight down the skull.

Weakness subdued his fingers again and the light failed.

VII

And as they rode back from the concert: the crisp notes of piano still wringing in their ears, all the boys and girls had passed out and now slept in haphazard positions in the back seat. The roadside flashers kept the driver awake, clipping along like yellow beads in front of the knee-chopped corn stalks. Kathleen Marie was the lone soul left awake aside from the driver. She fiddled with the knobs or dials; her slender fingers washed by the weak white light of the radio. After finding nothing enticing to listen to, she yawned. It was an adorable gesture: as if acted out by a small and cute animal.

The driver said nothing; for once he did not feel like there was any rush to talk and he was glad for the absence of that frenzied, flustered feeling which had always pushed him to stutter something so foolishly wrong. And when a song that she was satisfied with finally reassembled from over the air waves, she turned it down low, her

face flawless in the headlights passing in the opposite direction, her blue Sinbad shoes glittering on feet which were as petite as a Chinese woman's.

And then she lay her head on the driver's shoulder and slipped into a delicate sleep.

VIII

He did not awaken until he felt something scuttling down by his left foot. It felt perhaps as if a bug were crawling along his calve, until he realized that it would have to be much larger than any insect. Whatever it was had several legs, bristly skin and had now advanced onto his buttocks. Judging by the farthest points of where he estimated that each leg was landing, he figured that it must be about the size of a cat.

Impossible as it seemed, he realized that it was a spider.

Suddenly gripped by the rational fear that it would soon be approaching the back of his head, he was hit by another bolt of panic. He frantically arched his back in an effort to squash the ferocious arachnid against the inside of the coffin lid. But this monster, having much more girth than the average pest, was more difficult to crush. It did not want to go down easily and all eight legs began to scrabble for traction. Mason threw his body repeatedly against the roof. Like a private doing violent push-ups for a perturbed drill sergeant. That's when he felt the pinchers penetrated, followed by a yellow pain with a sickening and corresponding numbness. The venom soon paralyzed his left buttock. He thrashed and rubbed, squashing the creature's body against the walls over and over. It retaliated by stinging him over and over. Then at last the legs stopped trying and the spider was still; its hot fluids sliding and dripping down his back as sticky as semen. He could only guess as to what color the spider's mangled remains were.

Mason began to wail as his back stiffened, the venom spreading. He punched at the velvet walls in a fit of frustration until his hands felt sore. Then unexpectedly, one fist punched through the panel and a pile of dirt quickly hit him in the face. For several seconds, loose soot filtered in before the mini avalanche halted; the lighter was now

underneath that tiny landslide but he did not feel for it. He no longer wanted to see anything inside the casket. He continued to wail in a wordless and drastic appeal to the adversary to please remove him from the predicament that he himself had requested.

please... please... please... please...

IX

Cemetery slab gray sky rolling across a deserted wheat field. There is no structure or hills anywhere in sight; only the coarse outline of an overgrown road which has been laid with rough stones and spires of wheat shooting up through those rocks intermittently. When he tries to move, he notices that his hands are locked as if in a scaffold like a condemned man's. The effects of the venom seem to have evaporated but his body is pressed down underneath a great weight. There is a solid grey mass coming up to his neck like a collar and he understands that it is some form of crude concrete mix which looks to be speckled with glittering brown and blue stones. It is streaked and weathered as if it has had years to set. He has been stonemasoned into a wall. Aside from just the very ends of his hands and his head. He begins to understand that the wall is a ledge and the rest of his form is underneath a higher layer of dirt which sets about five feet above his field of vision. He is completely submerged in this ground as the claustrophobia starts to set in. Tears seep and singe out from his bloodshot eyes.

After a limited amount of time his hands begin to tingle and his left foot falls asleep. The tingle is subtle at first, but then it increases into fully-fledged pain and, after what seems like hours, it turns into a savagely excruciating torture: like boiling water being poured over a broken or severed bone. A cold wind charges past his chapped cheeks and he closes his boiling eyelids to protect his burning retinas. When he opens them again he sees nothing aside from the lead hued sky and the manic breeze sharing its excitement with the long grass.

Maybe he sleeps in spite of the hyper discomfort and maybe not. After another great length of time the ubiquitous sky finally begins to dim slightly and his vision can sparsely make out the barren silhouette of a thick figure wobbling up the weed covered

road. When the form gets closer he can ascertain that this figure is a person who is wearing a brown robe with a crude rope for a belt like a monk's garb.

For a cruel moment, Mason thinks that perhaps this is someone who will help him.

But when their gaze finally meets the stranger looks very serious and his jawbone is unnaturally large as if he were a different species of man. At this point, Mason addresses the man:

"Please sir please can you help me? You see I've..." He tries to classify his situation but cannot. Before he has a chance to finish though, the man speaks. What he says, however, is some sort of indecipherable babble and Mason realizes that he is speaking in some manner of language foreign to his own.

For a moment both parties ramble with neither having any clue what the other is saying. Then the man has an idea and he somehow produces what looks to be a gold coin even though the robe doesn't appear to have any pockets. The coin has a picture of a snake on the only side of it that Mason can see. The trapped man begins to nod.

"Yes, Yes, I have money!!" he pants, "Just help me, dig me out of here please!"

He does not remember how much money he has in his wallet or even if it is still in his pocket. He does not even know if the stranger will accept paper money, but he decides to cross that bridge when he jumps off of it with a noose around his neck – or rather, after he has been dug up. But the stranger does not seem to believe him, and worse yet, he suddenly seems agitated by their frustrating attempt at communication. With little warning he abruptly feeds Mason an overhand right fist to the jowls.

Followed in close succession by a second assault which collides with Mason's left eye. The impact of these blows is magnified since Mason's head cannot move in order to roll with the punches. Mason moans with helplessness as the stranger throws up his arms in apparent vexation and walks away raving in awkward circles down the barely visible road.

Mason pants as a sweat mixed with blood covers the trajectory of his vision with a pink film. The heat from the violence warms his face somewhat as the stranger disappears from view over the tip of the horizon. Soon after this total darkness settles over the fields. The winds lose their passion like a satisfied lover as the spare air drops

and calms like an electric fan being turned off. Sometime towards dawn an orange light grows like a fire in front of Mason's dried out head.

The fusion of color develops into a saga much too strong to be called a dream, yet much too weak to qualify as a vision:

X

Kathleen Marie and I were sitting on a couch. I was not holding her hand nor was she snuggling up against my shoulder.

On the television cardboard characters were screeching their way through a mindless sitcom. Kimmie's hair was done up in curlers and she was wearing a pajama dress which was no more flattering than a hospital gown. There were hints of purple circles under her eyes and some pouches of feminine fat on her biceps. She was perhaps twelve or fifteen years older than the last time I had seen her. She looked passable even if you could no longer label her as attractive. Although my loins did not feel charged in her presence, I still felt happy to be with her. Or was it all just pointless without the poodle smell underneath the lacy garments.

Were we all just dogs fighting for flowers in the thorn-strewn fields full of cooked grasses? Did the adversary win after all?

Now Kathleen Marie did put her head on my shoulder, even though I no longer wanted it there. But the chemicals leaked to the opposite side of my brain and I was suddenly touched by this evidence of love. Then the breakers flowed back like butter on a griddle and I switched again: the banality of everyday life had sucked all the love from me like a fat girl sucking all the cream out of a Twinkie. My suffering mind continued to swerve: love, resentment, perversion, attraction, revulsion, beauty, loathing, adoration and finally: Kathleen Marie was nothing more to me than just a cold hard basin to masturbate that tension into.

As we watched a new program began.

There was a Japanese woman wearing a seashell pink, one piece bathing suit. She was holding onto a silver rail that was shaped like a small dinner bell which hung from a

low roof like you sometimes see in a subway car. I thought that her skin was very lovely, although, on the video, it looked as white as face cream rather than the stereotypical yellow. She looked to seduce the camera and her eyes were as captivating as black stones. She spread her legs slightly and her svelte and decorated fingers found her triangle. She began rubbing herself through the fabric. Watching this X rated display made me very excited, although I didn't want Kimmie to know that I was aroused by the depraved scene. Despite my best effort to act casual I could soon sense that she was glaring at the side of my face. When I refused to look back at her she felt down through my pajama pants and easily located my torpedo of an erection. Instead of saying anything she got up off the couch.

Her bottom was much wider than I'd remembered or anticipated.

"I've seen this show before," she said and indeed she had: all women see the depravity of their husband's lust sooner or later. All desire is trapped in these condensed spaces and once released it vanishes into the atmosphere like aerosol. She was about to storm away when we both suddenly reacted to a sound outside: a rattling on the windows and a disturbance in the yard. Like a herd of wild horses changing direction on a full sprint. I went to the closet and knocked the shoe box off the top shelf. The 45 Wembly fell out onto the carpet. I turned to Kimmie, but as I fumbled the ammunition into the gun, she was already gone.

Once in the yard I turned my attention to a small stretch of woods which had long had all the adventure trampled out of it.

It sat out on the other side of the dirt road. I could see nothing but I could hear something moving briskly through the branches: something the size of a dinosaur. I knew that it was him and I began to look for an opening in the foliage where I would have a clear shot. The reptilian feet were getting closer and they strode with the gate of a giant. Even before I'd seen the white face (*You knew it all along*) I leveled the firearm.

When the leering grin came into view the features were not pure white anymore, but tainted and greasy like dirty pushed aside snow. The eyes were purple and seemed very friendly. I slowly checked my aim and squeezed the trigger.

XI

The first projectile hit Allen in the side of the head and a patch of gore flapped out which was the size of the sole of a shoe. Dark orange droplets of blood like chili grease speckled the front of Kathleen Marie's gown, the spectators and the wedding cake. Allen's eyes were dead even before his body reacted to the impact. They snowed over white like the retina of a lifetime cocaine addict as his invisible soul jumped from his form and his body crumpled to the raised stage like a kicked folding chair. Even before then, the second bullet had struck Kathleen Marie square between the breasts. Unlike her new husband she was not fortunate enough to be rendered dead, hence, Mason felt another shot was necessary to finish the job. Even before then, the congregation panicked and began to scatter. The last shot hit Kimmie in almost the identical spot, but the shell exploded and the front of her gown caught fire. She collapsed onto her derriere, air escaping from her hoop skirt like a mushroom imploding. People were knocking over chairs and pushing aside tables. Mason took three steps towards the stage, noted the carnage which he had created and made sure that the bride and groom were dead. With this fact affirmed, and Kimmie's white dress coughing brown flames and the lace turning black, he turned the 45 Wembly on himself and inserted one cartridge directly into his own brain.

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