

FLOTSAM

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ABSTRACT

FLOTSAM

by Mick McGrath

Brian Hurley is, at 25, a critically and commercially successful author who lives with his fiancée, Rannah, in a northern Ontario cottage. One day, the septic tanks leaks. As Brian tries to unearth the septic tank so that he can cap the embarrassing spill, a .357 magnum surfaces on the front lawn. After confronting Brian about the gun, a disturbed Rannah leaves her famous fiancée and flees to the nearest motel. As Brian continues to clean the mess from the broken septic tank, he revisits his past: His parents' divorce; moving with his mother and sister, Carroll, to the home of his renowned fiction-writer step-father; attending the prestigious Fencely Preparatory School; and the murder that he manages to get away with. Themes to this novel include divorce, and the effect that it has on today's youth. Brian feels very abandoned by his divorced parents. His father moves to the United States; and, later, his mother is diagnosed with cancer and dies quickly thereafter. The novel is, at times, totally hyperbolic. For example, all of the precocious preteen boys at The Fencely Preparatory School are sophisticates and have published several novels and books of literary criticism. Also, Carroll's perennial "mourning sickness" is totally melodramatic, even for a young girl who's just lost her mother. These hyperboles give relief to the tragedies and provide balance to the novel.

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INTRODUCTION

Genesis

I first envisioned this novel when I watched Noah Baumbauch's *The Squid and the Whale*. Bernard, played expertly, I thought, by Jeff Daniels, reminded me of my father – his extreme frugality, the way he forced us to eat soggy pizza that had fallen into a sink full of water and dishes (I will never forget that). When I wrote the first 30 pages of *Flotsam*, it was really just a delineation of *The Squid and the Whale*. The young protagonist's father had been sort of abusive, and he was faced with his parents' divorce. For a long time, that was going to be it! That was going to be my novel – an illustration of my father, and of my parents' divorce. But, soon, the novel had metamorphosed into something else, entirely.

As the novel progressed, it felt more like a memoir, really. I was writing about a character named Brian Hurley, but what I was really writing was an autobiography. James Hurley became a pseudonym for Jim McGrath – my father. Sean and Patrick are the actual names of my older brothers. Sandra Chevalier is my mother. My parents are divorced. I grew up, mostly, in Sarnia, Ontario.

I watched an interview with William Burroughs, once. During that interview, he said that every fiction writer writes autobiographically – at least to some extent. That interview really freed me to use my own personal experiences. With that being said, a lot of *Flotsam* is based on my own life.

It's become sort of a cliché, I think; but I must say that writing fiction, to me, is a process of discovery. If the author uses his or her real skeleton – something that is true about him or her – the meat that the author adds to that skeleton, though fictive, will bring about an actual

discovery. For example, the most basic elemental premise of *Flotsam* – a young man struggles with his parents’ divorce – is real; that was, or is, my life. But the “meat” that I added was fictive – although I did move in with my step-father, I did not attend a prestigious preparatory school, was not a genius, and did not watch my mother as she died of cancer (my mother is alive and well!). The skeleton was real, but the meat was imagined. That meat, however – the flesh and blood and skin and hair – brought about many discoveries. Thus, writing this novel has been incredibly therapeutic; without being too specific, I discovered that I do have anger toward certain people in my life, and that I don’t agree with certain things that happened to me as a kid.

The Title

First of all, I just like the word *flotsam*. It’s very rich in sounds, but also very simple and phonetic. If I were trying to publish this book, however, I might think of something more marketable. I wonder if most people even know what *flotsam* means; and, therefore, I wonder if people would pick up this novel and start reading it based, solely, on that word.

It occurred to me that the word *flotsam* could be used as a metaphor for memories. *Flotsam* is the wreckage of a ship; it’s what we’re left with after a great shipwreck (or tragedy). Memories are also what we’re left with at the end of our lives (and “the end” is a tragedy {a figurative shipwreck} in itself). In many ways, our memories are – like debris floating in the water – what we cling to. If someone dies, we hold on to our memories of that person; that person survives, in a sense, so long as our memory sustains.

The novel follows what I think is the typical biographic formula: my protagonist, Brian Hurley, is looking back at his life. At the beginning of the novel, he experiences a tragedy – his

fiancée leaves him when she discovers certain aspects of his past. This is where the metaphor comes in (although it is not explicitly stated); his memories – the wreckage of the great “shipwreck” he’s just experienced – suddenly come surging forward. (Much of the novel takes place near water – Lake Huron, Fairy Lake, etc. – and so I used nautical terms when I could, but refrained from doing so if I thought that it hindered clarity or meaning).

I thought about “shuffling” these memories; in other words, I thought about making the story non-linear because that’s the way our memory works, after all. I’m still chewing on this idea. To be perfectly frank, I don’t know if I’m going to pursue this option because it would require a *tremendous* amount of revising. I don’t know that I could do it! To be honest, I wonder if I lack the organizational skills, or just the kind of intense thinking, that it would require to “shuffle” everything and then make it all error-free. It does occur to me, however, that my current novel is lacking somewhat – the linear movement, the perfectly straight line, is not as realistic (and, perhaps, not as artful) as it could or should be. One more thing: “shuffled” memories complement the title. Wreckage is, of course, not organized after a shipwreck; it’s all just floating around, arbitrarily.

My only valid defense in keeping the story linear is Brian’s superior intelligence. If Brian is such a genius, then perhaps he can remember everything in order.

A Departure from the Absurd

Initially, my novel was meant to be totally absurd; but, lately, I’ve decided that the novel isn’t as absurd as it is just ridiculous, exaggerated, or hyperbolic in many places. It is not a conflict between a search for meaning and the inability to find meaning. Rather, meaning, I think, is

abundantly clear in many of these hyperboles. Therefore, I don't think *absurd* is the right word for my novel, after all.

After his parents' divorce, and moving in with his renowned fiction-writer step-father, Brian Hurley attends the prestigious Fencely Preparatory School where he encounters a handful of overly-intelligent English students – sophisticates who've published several books of literary criticism at the ripe old age of 13 (contemporary fiction and historical criticism classes at Central Michigan University informed much of this writing). These overly-intelligent youngsters were employed for a reason (unlike Absurdism, the message is, at least somewhat, clear, or perhaps I should say *clearer*): they are a collective commentary on today's youth – children living adult lives – the death of childhood in the conventional sense. Some of the young men in *Flotsam* even have houses, mortgages, and jobs teaching acclamatory college classes. They drink and use drugs. They have sex. They go on book tours, and give interviews on *Charlie Rose*. These “hyperboles,” especially, have a clear function; and it is, therefore, not an example of Absurdism. Of course, Absurdism, too, has a function, I think. But the “bridge” between meaning and all of the silly happenings is much more apparent in my novel. Here, you don't have to search for meaning for very long before finding it. This is not a criticism of my novel, nor is it meant to disparage Absurdism; rather, it is strictly an observation; it is a characterization.

The Character of Brian Hurley

When people ask questions about Brian Hurley (I've shown the novel to a few friends and family members), I always hide behind: “Brian is a very complex character.” This is, of course, an evasion; and yet, I've decided, in thinking endlessly about my book, that Brian *is* a complex

character – a wonderfully complex person. He is a walking contradiction on many fronts: he wants people to treat him with respect, and yet he is, at times, snobbish and rude; he hates robotic people, and yet he slowly becomes an automaton (more of a hypocrisy, this one); he’s altruistic, but ends up killing two people (toward the end – *not* in this selection).

One thing that, I hope, readers can settle on is Brian’s pessimism. Brian is overly pessimistic (and yet, at one point, he makes the case that he’s an optimist – another contradiction). On page 74, he says: “the world {is} truly bad and not worth saving” (74).

It is almost futile to characterize Brian because he is so many things (he’s emotional, snobbish, moral, misanthropic, misogynistic, damaged, intelligent, sexual, etc. – his characteristics, I think, are so numerous that they obscure each other). Also, it’s futile because, after all, Brian makes an incredible journey, goes from being an infant to a 25-year-old sort of middle-aged man; and, of course, in this journey, he digests countless experiences, has innumerable thoughts and opinions. Notice that, at one point, he expresses disbelief in the institution of marriage, and then – much later in the novel, and also much later in his life – he is engaged to be married. This seeming discrepancy represents one of many “trips” that Brian takes.

Again, Brian is many things; the constant is his pessimism. His negative attitude is perhaps the one thing that whatever readers come my way, if any, will agree with.

Changes

Recently, I made what I thought was a drastic decision not to surprise the reader. I rewrote the beginning of the novel, and this time I gave everything away in the first 10 or 12 pages. Now,

there aren't any twists or turns. Instead of being surprised by the ending, I hope the reader is surprised by the way in which it unfolds. Instead of being surprised by Brian's actions, I hope readers are surprised by the way in which he arrives at his decisions. I also hope that readers are surprised with the language. That, to me, is much more important.

Influences

My drug of choice, while writing this novel, has been Philip Roth. I launched myself into his work last year, after reading his 2008 novel, *Indignation*. Since then, I've read *American Pastoral*, *Portnoy's Complaint*, and *The Humbling*. I must confess that I love his sprawling and elaborate sentences.

Final Thought

I don't really want to communicate any message with this novel. Instead, I just want to tell a story. Ultimately, I consider myself a storyteller – not a moralist, or a philosopher. The novel doesn't have to be summarized in one bite-sized sentence or expression. In fact, I hope it can't be!

CHAPTER I
RESURFACED

I guess the cultural development I'm living through – at 25, in 2010 – has got to be the technological revolution. Today's zeitgeist, I think, is neutral, sort of "here-are-the-facts." People will no longer deviate from explicitness and directness in a stride toward politeness. That's why I moved here – escaped, I hope – to Huntsville, an old-fashioned town in northern Ontario. The people, here, are nice; the crime rates incredibly low – almost non-existent, really. Those who frequent the library (where I do much of my writing) are happy and friendly. The check-out girl at the grocery store, just the other day, said: "There's one rule here in Huntsville: You must have a nice day," to which I said: "That's the only rule?" to which she said: "Of course, there are lots of rules; but people, here, outside of you, don't usually need reminding of them." Huntsville has been filled with people like this – respectable people, *kind*. Old women play bridge, and their husbands fish – have become fisherman artists, really. It's a nice place – a place where you go to get away from the city bustle; it is where you go when you are old, and want to get older in peace. There are, of course, some especially old men and women who, I'm told, have locked their windows and doors in a panic – having seen Death, lurking in the yard.

But it isn't a sense of death that you have while gazing at the rich green of the coniferous trees. Rather, it's an overwhelming sense of life, and of nascence. The beauty, here, is arresting. If you mean to escape science and technology, this is where you escape to. Anywhere else, and it wouldn't *be* an escape; it would only be perpetuated anhedonia, perpetuated lifelessness: more catatonic people engrossed by their cell phones and laptops, more people with flat expressions – stupefied by the ubiquitous technology.

Here, in Huntsville, we are the survivors of an apocalypse – quarantined from the spread of electronics and emotion-less people, from rampant homicide and other heinous crimes. Here, the telephone booths have not yet been gutted. People write science-fiction books about dystopia, but that’s what our current world is, in my opinion. I must confess, however, that I can be found, most afternoons (in the Huntsville Library, or in my study), swallowed by own computer screen, typing frantically on my own QWERTY keyboard. Of course, what I’m doing (what I’m writing) will be a very emotion-filled and, hopefully, a very catharsis-inducing product. I’ve been given a huge advance to complete my third novel, which is currently entitled: *My Roaring Twenties* – a novel about the lives of down-on-their-luck twenty-something-year-old girls who strike oil “entertaining” Sheiks in Dubai. One of my earlier novels was called: “a wild and unpredictable outburst.” Another book of mine was called: “A book that reveals its quality with the first line and with every page thereafter.” But my favorite is this: “Brian Hurley’s new book is a picturesque novel that should, and might very well, cause the figurative death of *all* great writers.” Other critics accuse me of writing: “self-congratulating sentences.” I try not to swell these niggling remarks into blasphemy as I’ve done in the past; but I’ve developed such a novelist’s ego, and I find it quite difficult to avoid, mentally, these little jabs.

My study overlooks Fairy Lake, which is quite nice to look at. It’s been oddly devoid of boaters lately, and I wonder if all those “fishermen artists” I mentioned are like me – not quick to get themselves out on the lake, but quick to look at and admire the flatness and calm of it from their second-floor studies, admiring God’s work, not wanting to molest it just yet with the gasoline from their little outboard motor boats.

My cottage was devalued by the recession, and I was able to buy it cheaply. I've been living here for three years. These Canadian winters are rough, and I've given up trying to plough the driveway. But (in the summertime) I'm sure to cut the grass. Of course, the day I choose to cut it depends, largely, on whether or not it's rained throughout the week (the grass is much fuller and heavier and needs cutting right away if it's rained, lest it rain again). I've developed a little game that I play with myself; I time myself while cutting the grass, and each week I try to beat my record. Lately, this has been increasingly difficult. My current record is an hour and 37 minutes, and last week it was an hour and 35 minutes (I have to cut both back and front, of course). Cutting the grass is grueling because, at least in the front yard where there isn't an on-shore breeze, it is quite humid; the sun – a big golden loony in the sky – beats down on my neck. Also, bees and mosquitoes buzz and hover around my ear, usually; and when I swat them away, the buzzing and humming only seems to intensify, as if all bees and mosquitoes, everywhere, are ganging up on me, forming an insurrection.

After Rannah left, I found myself spending more and more time alone, until finally I became more comfortable with a monologue than I ever was with a dialogue. These days, I writhe at the idea of exchanging my solitude for company.

My looks have left me; the color in my hair and skin – it's all gone, now. It's all over, for me. My fiancée, Rannah, left; and prospects of another relationship – *interests* in another relationship, really – have shriveled, where my stomach has expanded. My Tower of Babel, my North Tower, whatever you call it, my prosciutto, kielbasa, salami, chorizo, pastrami, sausage – all pushed over by the ever-rising wave of belly. I am no longer erect – not even in the mornings.

I've gained almost 100 pounds since my teenage years; and most of that weight has found me, here, in Huntsville. My clothes no longer fit; my ass has become unreachable (and, therefore, unwipe-able); hemorrhoids have grown up along the fringes of my asshole. My gut has become imposing, has hidden my penis and testicles from me like an older brother who hides my toys, has made my cock and balls difficult to keep fresh, awkward to try and clean. My pubic hair has grown wild (I've held mirrors down there to inspect) where, once, I kept it trimmed and tidy. Sweat, between scrotum and thighs, has survived showers; furious itching, though difficult to conduct, has occurred. Smegma has built up. Smells – new repugnant odors! – are on me now (as if my body is decaying). Breasts (full, and caress-able) have, meanwhile, popped up, and hang, somewhat, from my chest; have filled my t-shirts, and are poking through for everyone to see – indictments, exhibits A and B, of heavy drinking and bad dieting. Bending over, in the morning, on the porch, picking up the *Huntsville Forester*, “exhibits A and B” hang like udders. Ascending the stairs, up to my study, has become a chore. Walking from kitchen to living room leaves me sweating and wheezing. I have always been a short man (short, but well-groomed, well-dressed, and handsome, I think); Huntsville women saw me – Brian Hurley, “the famous writer who lives, here, in town!” – walking along sidewalks, passing storefronts, through the quaint little village, and into the grocery store or library; and they did their best to look seductive. Now, they smile strictly out of cordiality – they are no longer sexy for me; they no longer try to impress me. I am no longer coveted, am thought of fondly perhaps, but only because “they,” here, are friendly. Oh, how I am obese! How did I get to the bottom of this well? What horrible wrong turn did I make?

I have metamorphosed, have transformed, was once young and virile, was quick and strong, but am now slow and tired, heavy and hard to carry around; and yet, somehow, I feel frail, withered, etc. I have saddle bags under my eyes. My face is haggard. My hair has, somehow, broken into white – long white hair, thinned out (bearing small patches of the scalp), no longer blondish. I am big and full, though delicate – I exhaust, easily. Installing sprinkler systems, shoveling the driveway, building a deck out back, gutting and renovating the basement (all things that I have done) have nearly killed me. Oh, how I am old! I read, once, in the *Canadian Medical Association Journal* that men begin to lose their testosterone in their 50s. Mine, however, has seemingly been depleted at 25. I cry, now, incessantly. I cry watching NBC commercials – little wake-up calls to the world – at women smoking through trachea-holes, at the unlearned or illiterate children from third-world countries with malnourished bellies and flies on their lips and eyeballs. I cry at pictures of kids with cleft lips. I cry when I think of Rannah. *Where is she?* I wonder. *Has she found somebody new?* I cry when I go to bed, and find that I must take an Ambien. I cry when I think of the past; though it was painful, I find myself nostalgic. I cry when I read a good novel or poem. I cry at the beauty of it, and at the lack of beauty. I cry when I think about victims of tsunamis, because I feel deep genuine sadness for them; but also, because I apply it to my own life – imagine Rannah swept away by water. I cry because I am alone. It's become something of a problem – this time alone. I can feel myself becoming one of those writers – like J.D. Salinger, or someone. Totally hermetic!

Rannah (that cunt!) left because she discovered my past. The septic tank had leaked, badly, and a powerful brown spout had emerged from the ground. I had spent the entire day (a Tuesday, in early Autumn) digging up our front lawn – trying desperately to unearth the septic

tank so that I could cap the embarrassing spill, trying ultimately to keep my shit from rising to the surface and getting splayed out for my fiancée and our neighbors to see. It had rained that day, and outside was very gray and grainy. The summer, though, had been wonderful – a real blast! I remember one day, in particular: Rannah and I had gone hiking, had found a cliff overlooking the lake. From up there, we could see (not only the lake, but also...) downtown Huntsville, the bosomy land stretched into the horizon, the forests surrounding Fairy Lake, and our little two-story cottage right on the edge of it. I had uncorked a bottle of wine, and we had used it to celebrate 10 cancer-free years – Rannah had suffered from Hodgkin’s as a preteen, but had beaten it, had survived, had been seemingly out of the woods since 15. Making love to her that day was fantastic! She was from Algeria, originally; had been a Muslim girl, but had long ago abandoned her religion, and had always made boisterous love to *me* – a Catholic. On this particular day, she’d been healthy for a decade, had a clear margin – a clear margin and a good reason to celebrate; had always been sort of leery, unable to exhale, but was now (she felt) *truly* safe. It was official! She was going to live, had her entire life ahead of her. She was, while making love that day, truly happy – or at least seemed it – and was more uninhibited than usual, was saying dirty disgusting things, like: “Put your hands on me, Brian!” and: “All over me, Brian; put your hands on every part of me!” and: “Go all over me, Brian! Bust all over me!” It was like she was changing into a werewolf! At one point, she ordered me to cum *inside* of her, something I had not done before, but I couldn’t – at least, not yet.

She had only a thin blanket beneath her – just a thin layer separating her dark fleshy body from the ground. My legs and knees were being scraped; but still, I plunged myself into her. “Come on!” she growled. “Harder, Brian! Fruck me!” The way Rannah kept saying my name – it

was wonderful! – enunciating every letter, really punching out that B sound. I was so close to “busting,” to doing what she’d wanted; and yet I was distracted by my legs, which looked as though beaten with sticks. “Brian!” she kept saying. “Brian!” and then, finally: BLAST OFF!!!, a great shot, too; not inside of her the way she’d wanted, but right into her mouth, straight into her stomach, perhaps. For a moment, I felt guilty, hadn’t been “ordered” or even asked to feed her that way; and yet, she had seemed to want it, had seemed voracious; wanted, it seemed, to taste *everything*; realized, it seemed, how precious things were; didn’t want to waste a drop of what life had given her a second chance to enjoy.

Later, as the sun was setting, I asked her to marry me. I’d been creative my entire life – had even thought about hiring a plane to fly very low over the cliff, scaring us at first, but then, dropping a little velvety ring box that would float down to us, slowed by a tiny parachute that said: “Will you marry me?” in big honest letters – had always been called “imaginative” by my teachers; but, when the time came, was not imaginative at all, was in love and was nervous and could only plant one scarred old knee into the rocky cliff (such a cliché), could only take her by her little hand, and – lips trembling – say: “Rannah, I don’t want anyone else to be with you; I want to be with you. Will you please marry me?” to which she replied: “Yes.”

I love thinking about that day; it has always been a very special memory, to me. Although Rannah and I would make love many more times, we would not go hiking again; would plan for, but would not have a wedding; would not uncork another wine bottle; and would not celebrate an *11th* cancer-free year together. We would not do these things because, just a few weeks later (just a few weeks ago), the septic tank busted open and spilled my shit all over the lawn.

I had taken a break from digging and had gone inside. After showering, I stood gazing at the front lawn through the kitchen windows, wondering how to stop that shitty leak – the shitty leak, which became like an allegation: bad house-keeping, perhaps. And yet, the real indictment was not my steaming smelling front lawn; but was – although I did not recognize it, at first – the gun in my fiancée’s hand.

Rannah had let the screen-door swing shut with a loud awakening slap, and was now charging through the kitchen, bringing forth what became conclusive evidence. “Look at what I found,” she said, almost shouting. Rannah’s voice had been meek, once; but now, after years of intimacy, she had become truly comfortable, and had let her voice bellow. What she had found was a .357 magnum – a bulky, chunky, stainless-steel gun (which might as well have been smoking) with three copper hollow points in a five steel chamber. It had been unearthed by my shovel, although – somehow – I hadn’t noticed it while digging. “I found it outside,” said Rannah. It was sort of old looking, with rust and what smelled like feces in its cracks. She put it down, very gently, on our dining room table; and yet, it managed to go down with a thud. “Should we give it to the police?” said Rannah. “I don’t think it will do them any good,” I said. “What are you talking about?” said Rannah, outraged. “Maybe there was a shooting here, or even a homicide – years ago, before we moved in – that they have since been unable to solve.” (Rannah always said things the way things ought to be said; never used contractions, and was never the least bit grammatically incorrect, even though English was not her first language. Whomever she spoke with understood her perfectly; I had – since meeting her, in fact – not once asked Rannah to repeat herself.) “A homicide in Huntsville?” I said. “No way! Anyway, the

police won't extract any fingerprints, is what I meant {I had made sure of this}"; "Well, what are we going to do with a gun, Brian?" "I'm not suggesting we keep it, Rannah."

But, of course, we did keep it, left it sitting there on the dining room table. Initially, we didn't think much of Rannah's discovery; and yet, we were keeping it, it seemed. Our plan was to just discard it (Oh God, how I wish I could go back and discard it! How I wish had recognized the damn thing! But I had buried it there three years ago, and did not remember, right away, where the gun had come from); but, for now, we were tired and wanted only to hop in the car and go to the Huntsville Library (Huntsville, of all places, has a great library), as we had planned to do, where we'd trade the slutty DVD that we'd rented for another one (we'd been renting classics – had rented *A Place in the Sun* with Elizabeth Taylor and Montgomery Clift – and would rent, on this particular day, Hitchcock's *Suspicion* with Cary Grant). We had agreed to stay in that night, would often drive into Huntsville for drinks at one of the pubs. But now I was exhausted from digging; and cuddling in front of the television – *Suspicion*, and a fire in the nearby fireplace – sounded nicer to us both; was, in fact, our favorite thing to do.

After *Suspicion*, we went to the master bedroom. I waited, in our California-king-sized bed, as Rannah brushed her curly (sort of kinky) Algerian hair in the master-bathroom – hair that she usually kept down and "relaxed." "No planning tonight," she was saying, walking into the bedroom. "Really?" I said. (We always talked about the wedding before bedtime.) "That gun," she said. She looked disturbed, haunted. "I noticed something about it," she said. "On the butt, it's monogrammed. It says: 'D.W.'"; "I wonder what that means," I said; but then, suddenly, I remembered exactly what it meant, remembered exactly where the gun had come from, and how it had gotten there. Surely, Rannah knew it, also. Surely, she was just toying with me, testing me,

had given me almost a full day to confess. If I did, then maybe she wouldn't take me to the police. *Maybe she'll even stay with me*, I thought. *Maybe we'll still get married.*

I didn't sleep at all that night. *Tomorrow, she'll confront me*, I kept thinking. *She knows. Surely, she does. Should I come clean?* I thought. *Should I tell her everything – all of my dirty disgusting secrets? After all, maybe she doesn't know. Maybe, in confessing these reprehensible acts, I'll only be shooting myself.*

But marriages, I had long ago discovered, cannot live without honesty; and yet, I could not help but think: *surely, that does not apply, here.* For once, the truth-will-set-you-free theory was not applicable. Indeed, the truth, here, would have the opposite effect.

KEEP YOUR MOUTH SHUT, I told myself.

But the conversation – which, I began to realize, was a great, necessary, inevitable thing – did occur later that week. In the days leading up to it, I watched as Rannah pieced it together, watched as she became all too curious, and then: distant, emotionally absent. Once, while she was in the shower, I snooped around her office, and found a hand-written note that she had, seemingly, addressed to herself (it had been written in French {this had been done with purpose, I thought, so that I couldn't understand it. As a young man growing up and attending school in Canada, I studied French, but can only read signs or labels, now – *Arret*, I think, means *Stop*; *Pour Homme* means *For Men*}). The note caught my eye because, often times, when she and I were bored, Rannah would give me acclamatory French lessons (I loved hearing her speak French). For example, she taught me that *police* translates to *de police*, and that the words *dear*, *lovely*, and *sweet* were *cher*, *belle*, and *douce*, respectively. Anyway, I took the note, scanned it with my scanner, and returned it to Rannah's office where I'd found it. Later, I was compelled to

send the note, electronically, to an old friend who was fluent in French, who'd started a literary journal, in fact, of French literature translated into English; but I thought: *Wait! This note could be incriminating*; and it's a good thing I didn't send it, electronically, to that old friend of mine, because the next day, I went to the Huntsville Library (having said: "Just going to the library, Dear!" and having been replied to, thusly: "All right! Stay out of a trouble!" {an odd farewell, I thought}), went to the reference section and pulled down the *English-French and French-English Dictionary*, and discovered that the note my fiancée had written was, indeed, incriminating.

Here's what it said:

These are the facts: I found a gun buried in our yard. My fiancée claims that he did not notice it while digging up the septic tank. My fiancée also claims that he has never seen this gun before.

There are three bullets in this gun. It is able to have five.

I once knew a D.W., which is strange because the gun has those very initials engraved into its surface. My D.W. was a mutual friend of ours. He was, also, a lover of mine. He was shot twice and killed. They never found his killer.

I have thought of going to the police with these facts, but I do not want to incriminate my Brian, my dear, lovely, sweet Brian. He has asked me to marry him, and I want to marry him, am looking forward to marrying him, to spending my life with him, my sweet, sweet Brian.

I had become totally flummoxed, drove home from the library that day consumed by thoughts of how to approach this. *What am I going to do?* I thought.

Often, Rannah said: “Who the hell is D.W.?” as if showing me the bear-trap with my foot caught in it, as if showing me how she’d unearthed my secrets. *Why doesn’t she just come out and say it?* I wondered. *Why torture me?*

I had paid to have the septic tank fixed, and had cleaned the front lawn. But the flow of shit had not totally ceased, had lessened, thankfully, but had not stopped, had only been reduced to little squirts – skeletal logs that flew up every now and again and landed on the lawn with a repulsive splat. Meantime, Rannah’s seemingly-arbitrary statements and questions, which had once been sporadic, were now becoming frequent, were growing into something bigger – a direct accusation. Like the “niggling remarks” attached to a book I’d written, the monogrammed gun tortured Rannah, infatuated her, and gave birth to smaller engravings: Rannah’s repeated observations that reached inside me and carved themselves into my brain, observations that sunk, like massive talons, into my every thought. “You know, Brian, that gun has only three bullets, which means that there are two missing,” she’d say, etching every word onto my skull. “I wonder where the other two went.” These were like pieces to a jigsaw puzzle, cells accumulating at lightning speed, forming a kind of incriminating fetus – a fast-developing baby that would rise to the surface, looking just like me (fat with brown eyes and white hair), thereby convicting me of some terrible infidelity. The paranoia began to consume me. *She knows*, I’d tell myself, chewing my fingernails back.

I became stressed – lost a few pounds, even. Thoughts of what I looked like or what I ate were replaced by: *Will she tell the police? Does she, in fact, know what I’ve done?* Blotches appeared on my cheeks and forehead, and when I stood at the bathroom vanity and squeezed them with my fingers, white shit erupted and splattered all over the mirror. Pimples like these

appeared daily. Some were harder to pop, and I'd stand there squeezing until my skin broke, until blood seeped, until ugly blackened scabs remained. I became hideous – covered in scabs and gnarled skin. I didn't sleep very well during that week; my eyes became dark. I became tired – jittery, irritable. I continued to chew my nails back – made my way down to the cuticles. My nails became ingrown; my fingers infected. Pus oozed out of my fingertips when gripping doorknobs or drawer-handles. My skin drooped. My eyelids became crusty. I had commenced work on *My Roaring Twenties* (again, this was only a few weeks ago), but now the writing had stopped; the stream of ideas had ceased, became a river of worry and neurosis. I was a mess – an oily, slimy, ugly, creature; a monster. Sex (like the writing) stopped, although not because of how repulsive I'd become; Rannah, in fact, hadn't noticed it, was too immersed in the mystery of the .357 (although, something told me that it was no longer a mystery – she knew exactly where the gun had come from; knew exactly how it had gotten there, and was only toying with me, was willing me to confess, was hoping that I would come clean, hoping that I'd be honest with her so that she wouldn't have to accuse me, outright).

Oh God, I thought. *God fucking damnit!* (A terrible thing to say, I know; and yet, this situation, I think, warranted a *God fucking damnit*. {I seldom swear, really! I'll say a few shits and cunts here and there, but the "F-word" really bothers me.}) *What will become of me?* I thought. Rannah is going to tell everyone; everyone will know. *These are the facts*, she'll say, as if making her opening statements. *I found this gun buried in our yard* (here, she'll actually produce it from the Prada handbag I bought her). *My fiancée, Brian Hurley, the writer, claims that he did not notice it while digging up the septic tank, but it is – as you can see – big and chunky and bulky and stainless-steel, and we had a mutual friend – a lover of mine – with these*

initials (here, pointing to the monogram), *and he is dead now – shot twice* (here, she'll put emphasis on the word *twice*) – *and they did not find his killer, and do you not think it is curious that there are two bullets missing?* Someone will, no doubt, call the police. I'll be arrested. I'll tell them I didn't do anything. They'll, perhaps, be unable to prove it; but, at the very least, it'll be all over the news, scrolling across the bottom of television screens – “Famous Writer Really Famous Murderer?” Scott Peterson, Chris Benoit, O.J. Simpson, Brian Hurley. I'll join the Wikipedia list of infamous killers. I'll go to trial. Perhaps, I'll be acquitted. But then what? I'll become a pariah – Quasimodo, Anne Hutchinson. Grocery shopping, standing at the gas-pump – I'll receive dirty looks from the town-folk. I'll be ostracized, shunned, banished, etc. *Persona non grata! Back to “The Fringes,”* they'll say. *Back to the wastelands to be steam-rolled by the spread of cruelty and anhedonia!* No more pleasantries. No more friendly faces at the library. They'll chase me out of town, out of my home. My career, of course, will be ruined. *Oh God, I thought. She knows! She knows! She knows! She's going to tell everyone! What am I going to do?*

Each day, I'd go downstairs, into the kitchen to find that the accusation had grown an arm, fingers, fingernails, etc. Each day, it became more developed, more defined; each morning, I woke to see that it had acquired another day's growth, was another day older. “Of course, I'm sure, Brian, that they could significantly narrow the number of victims associated with this property,” she'd say. Often, she said this – or, at least, some variation of this – while scrubbing dishes, or cutting vegetables with kitchen knives. “And if the police can find the other two bullets,” she'd say. “I bet they could decide whether or not those bullets were fired by this kind of gun, Brian.” (The way she kept saying my name – it was horrible!) Each day, the accusation

became bigger, weightier, more damaging – more solidified. Each day, it congealed more and more. “In fact, I bet this gun has a serial number on it somewhere,” she’d say, plunging the kitchen knife, suddenly, into the cutting board, then going over to where we kept it, and really scouring the weapon, scratching what looked like hardened feces from the stainless-steel – essentially, digging through my shit. “I bet they can find who it was registered to,” she’d say. “Maybe it just got lost,” I’d say. “Oh, no,” she’d say. “This gun has been buried!”

By mid-Sunday, Rannah’s accusation had become whole.

“Did you kill someone?” she said.

Suddenly, there was a mild tremor.

“Uh,” I said, distracted.

My voice shook; the tremor became increasingly violent – culminating.

“D.W.” she said. “Is that who I *think* it is?”

The cottage shook – plates and tea cups rattled in the china cabinet. Silverware, too, rattled in the kitchen drawer. Picture frames became skewed on the wall.

“Are you feeling this?” I said.

“Answer the question!” said Rannah.

And then, finally: BLAST OFF! I looked through the kitchen windows. Like a volcanic eruption, there’d been another large burst from the septic tank.

“Shit!” I said.

“I knew it,” said Rannah. “I knew it! I knew it!”

I grabbed the gun, and raced outside. Another brown spout – this time, much heavier – was flying through the air, and was splattering all over the front lawn. I raced to the edge of the

grass where I'd been keeping a wheel barrel, brought it over, and chased my shit around like a catcher getting under a series of foul balls. At times, it sputtered out like an old machine gun. At other times, it flowed like an oil spill. Sometimes, it came out in spurts – little clumps, turds the size of baseballs, launching themselves what seemed like 50 feet into the air, and then smacking down into the wheel barrel, exploding like grapefruits. I tried to keep my distance from the splatter, kept my mouth and eyes clenched, of course; but took “shrapnel” in the face and chest.

Soon, I was covered in shit, was gagging and vomiting onto the lawn. I abandoned the wheel barrel, which had overflowed, and tried to conceive another plan. The shit had been evenly distributed across the lawn. The green of the grass was no longer visible; the lawn had become suffocated, became brown and black – caked in feces. In some places, massive heaps had begun to form. At one point, I looked around and realized: *it's literally raining shit!*

Everything I had done, all the crap I had pumped into the world – it was all falling down around me. Behind me, a few feet away, another wet one crashed and splattered everywhere (I could feel residuals hitting my ankles) – a dirty filthy book I'd written about a young womanizer who beds and abandons a woman of every race, a book overflowing (like the wheel barrel) with shit: gratuitous sex and sleaze. Moments later: a book I'd written about post-modernism. Then: the coming-of-age story. Next: a shitty memoir. Finally: a collection of short stories, and a totally self-indulgent, totally highfalutin how-to book. All the shitty books I'd written, all of my shitty achievements – books that had done well commercially and critically, but, to me, had bombed, books that, no matter how glowing the review, no matter how high the praise, could never fully assuage my guilt. All the people I'd shit on, all the pessimism and hatred and venom that I'd spewed was now spewing right back at me, haunting me. It was all falling down around me.

Rannah, meanwhile, had packed a suitcase – which she threw, quickly, into the car. There wasn't much of a conversation with her, after all; the “sit-down” that I had planned to have with her had occurred, I realized, in installments throughout the week.

It was sort of sad. Suddenly, the woman I had loved – the woman who had crept her way into all of my writing – couldn't wait to get away from me. At first, she wouldn't tell me where she was going; but then I handed her the gun, and looked at her, lovingly, which seemed to convince her that I would not kill, or even harm, *her*. She confiscated my weapon, got into the car, and looked at me: a shit-covered, pathetic, old man, standing alone on the front lawn of the cottage I'd hoped to share, the cottage that – three years ago – I'd spent countless hours searching for, the cottage that revealed itself only after hours and hours of sifting through other cottages, cottages that I'd rejected, thinking: *Rannah won't like this; it's too out-of-the-way, or: this is beautiful, but it's not on the lake, and Rannah loves the water*. Yes, it was quite sad! The one woman who'd been willing to spend the rest of her life with me was leaving this lake-front (albeit covered-in-shit) property for a stuffy room at the local motel. It didn't matter anymore that I had scoured for cottages; it didn't matter that I had kept in mind her tastes or her idiosyncrasies; the cottage, after all, had become ugly – layered with feces. I, too, had become ugly, a monster – zitty, scabby, obese, and homicidal.

“Are you going to tell the police?” I said.

“I don't know,” she said.

“Well,” I said. “Take care of yourself.”

She left me to, once again, unearth the septic tank – the septic tank, which was still gushing shit, my shit, up into the air and onto the lawn, where it would, or at least could, be seen

by hundreds of people: passers-by, passengers aboard a plane, whatever. My shit – all that I had consumed, all that I had achieved, all of my education, all the emotions visited (then left behind in my perpetual movement forward), the feelings of abandonment, the jealousy, the contempt, the love (though sparse, in comparison), all the people I had accused of being emotionally vacant, all the people I had met, all the reasons for the pain I'd felt, and the reasons (understandable or not) for everything I'd done – all of it was surging forward; it was all there, either flying through the air or splattered on the ground. I began, suddenly, to remember my father who had picked up and moved to Michigan, then to Switzerland; my long-lost brothers who traveled with him; my sister, who spent much of her life with two parallel rivers gushing from her eyes; my parents' divorce; my deceitful stepfather (my alcoholic and very abusive stepfather); my mother's cancer and her subsequent death; my days at the prestigious Fencely Preparatory School; a best friend with whom I'd been so close, a best friend with whom I'd almost had a sort of unconsummated gay marriage; and of course, my writing career; and, of course, my very first look at Rannah – the love of my life (that cunt!) who'd just, moments ago, sped backward into the street, and who'd driven away, who'd left me to have a long hard look at my life, which was suddenly flashing before my eyes (as if I were dying), my life, which had suddenly piled back for my analysis, my life – a tunnel, a continuum, a life accumulating on the lawn, a big regrettable mound that I'd been forced to look at, to ponder, to clean.

All of my shit had resurfaced!

CHAPTER II
SPEAK, MEMORY

In the hours that immediately followed school, the house was ablaze with laughter. My older brothers would tie white towels around their necks and pretend to be Jedi knights. I would always watch with jealousy. Then, my mother would take me into her kitchen where my older sister and I would help with dinner.

But when my father came home from work, the laughter stopped. He, James Hurley – who I nicknamed Saddam in my teenage years – had told my brothers, my sister, and I, several times, to put our shoes in the closet where he wouldn't trip on them; but, of course, we somehow managed to forget. My father would trip on our shoes, pick them up, and would throw them violently against the screen door.

At supper, he would complain about the food. Then, my sister – who had helped with dinner – would cry, and my mother would have to console her. My father would complain, too, that the house was a mess.

Saddam, who had been a computer science and mathematics major, always helped my brothers with their math homework; but, instead of being patient with them, tried to drill it into their heads, tried to inject it direct to the blood; and when it didn't take as naturally as he expected, he became very frustrated. A similar frustration was aroused in him by conversations with my mother, although I couldn't understand why. My eldest brother, Sean, would grow up only to say that he was a “monster” in those years.

Whenever James and Sandy had a fight, which was often, Sean – who used words like *rad* and *wicked* and who seemed to fantasize of winning BMX races – took off on his bike and

didn't return for several hours. My brother, Patrick, played Super Mario Brothers in the basement – something he was forbidden to do until his last hour before bedtime. My sister and I – who were less experienced with the whole mess – would sit at the top of the stairs in our pajamas and weep.

In 1989, my mother was summoned to my school for a “parent-teacher conference.” She walked into the classroom where she stood amazed at the four-foot-tall Eiffel Tower that I had built from Lego blocks. It was late in the afternoon, and all the other kids had gone home for the day. My kindergarten teacher, Mr. Carr – a slight man with a small bald head and pale skin – took the Madre into his office as I put the finishing touches on my Eiffel Tower.

“Mrs. Hurley,” he said. “I want to talk with you about Brian.”

Mom wanted his office left slightly ajar, and I was able to hear much of what they were saying to each other.

“First, he’s quite saucy,” said Mr. Carr. “Insists on calling me by my Christian name, instead of Mr. Carr; but, also, learns quickly; remembers things easily, loves puzzles and mazes. He’s loquacious and inquisitive. As a teacher, I’d be seriously hindering Brian if I didn’t tell you this.”

“Tell me what?” said my mother.

“I think you should consider taking him somewhere else,” said Mr. Carr. “I mean, I never saw anything like it – a five-year-old boy speaking that way?”

“Speaking what way?” said my mother.

Mr. Carr was referring to earlier, when I had tried to unpack *Winnie the Pooh* to him and to some of my classmates. I liked *Winnie the Pooh*, but not because he was “round” and “fuzzy,” or because he was cuddly, or because he had a “big tummy,” – certainly, I liked those things, too – but because I found it interesting to explore possible post-colonialist hermeneutics of the book.

“It’s an allegory,” I had said, snot-faced and toothless, looking up – from the floor – at Mr. Carr, and at my little classmates who had fallen asleep around me. “Like Spencer’s *The Fairie Queene*, or George Orwell’s *Animal Farm* – it’s an allegory. I just can’t decide {scratching the back of my neck, here} whether the imperialist is Pooh or Christopher Robin. After all, they’re best friends; and Christopher Robin’s imagination is the catalyst of all this; it’s *his* toys that once sat idly in his bedroom that have now become an anthropomorphic teddy bear and some anthropomorphic farm animals. Is Pooh Bear truly responsible for subjecting the subaltern, or is this mental backwoods just an arena where one very twisted little boy can manifest his imperialistic values?”

“You see, today, I was reading *Winnie the Pooh* to them,” said Mr. Carr – my mother sitting across from him. “In one chapter, Pooh, camouflages himself – paints himself black – then climbs a tree and steals honey from a bee hive. All of a sudden, Brian, picking his nose – I’m sorry, Mrs. Hurley, but that’s what he was doing – started talking about imperialism and a native-inhabitant uprising – how this particular effort of Pooh’s is actually an infiltration. He says that, because Pooh must *blacken* himself, we can infer that the bees are black, and that the story has therefore just mirrored British colonialism in Africa.”

“Wait a minute,” said my mother, laughing somewhat. “My son doesn’t know any of those words.”

“I assure you, he does,” said Mr. Carr, assertively.

I had done the same thing with *Curious George*, had discussed ways in which I thought the book was an allegory – this time, for African slavery. For example, the man in the yellow hat went to Africa and captured George, then brought him back on a ship. While aboard the ship – a ship, which might have been called *The Amistad* – George saw a group of birds flying through the sky, wanted desperately to be free like the birds, tried to simulate the birds, but wound up nearly drowning.

“It’s the African’s suicide from the perspective of their masters,” I had said. “It’s the Africans throwing themselves overboard. Remember that the Puritans thought Africans were animals, monkeys – morally and biologically inferior, incapable of governing themselves – thought of them as property, cargo. Had one of those ships sunk – and, of course, some of them did – the Africans aboard it would have been considered flotsam.”

“But how could my son have learned these ideas?” said my mother. “He’s only five.”

“Well,” said Mr. Carr. “That’s, partially, what I wanted to talk with you about. Do you or your husband read a lot of history books, books on literary theory, perhaps?”

My mother struggled for a moment, sifted – mentally – through the library of books we had at home.

“I do have those kinds of books,” she said. “But I don’t just have them lying around; they’re from when I was in college, and they’re currently in a box somewhere in the garage, I think.”

“Does Brian watch a lot of television?” said Mr. Carr. “Any Tom Snyder, for example?”

“No,” said my mother. “I don’t permit him to watch very much television – only an hour a day, really.”

“Well,” said Mr. Carr. “I don’t know how, but from somewhere, or from someone, your five-year-old boy has learned all about the British Empire, colonialism, history, etc. I mean, I couldn’t believe my ears, today! Really, Mrs. Hurley, I don’t know how this has happened, but I don’t think it matters, anymore. Your son is an outsider; he doesn’t fit in well with these students. I think you should seriously consider taking Brian somewhere more stimulating.”

“More stimulating?” said my mother.

“Yes!” said Mr. Carr. “His full potential will not be reached, otherwise. He will not be challenged. Think of the difficulties that will lie ahead, Mrs. Hurley. When he gets to grade school, for example, his classmates will not understand him; they’ll be intimidated by him. My God, think of when he gets to high school! Sarnia, as you know, is full of ‘Hockey Pucks’ – immature and careless boys {he seemed sort of angered, here}, but with a man’s strength, refrigerator-sized boys infatuated with hockey, a bunch of retarded apes who chum around with other retarded apes, charged up on adrenaline, steroids even, with chewing tobacco and foul language going in and out of their mouths, obsessed with hitting and checking people, encouraged to play hockey and to be violent by their retarded-ape fathers and their retarded-ape mothers. Young men such as your son, small boys with arms like Twizzlers – no offence, Mrs. Hurley – have a difficult time in Sarnia. But, more importantly, their minds go to waste. Perhaps, Brian will find *someone* to be his friend, but what then? That beautiful capable mind of his will be infiltrated with thoughts of becoming a process operator. My God, a process operator! Think

of it! You've got to get him away from this place, Mrs. Hurley; take him somewhere more stimulating."

He was right! Somewhere "more stimulating" would have done me well. Sarnia was rough, filled with carpenters, framers, roofers, welders, electricians – street-bred, Jameson-drinking, hockey-playing, cold Canadian *men*; men who used the word *cunt*; men who liked hard facts, and not fiction; who studied rules and laws, ignoring theories; who liked things solid and firm – not intangible or elusive; men who were ashamed of any son of theirs who spent his money on books or water colors; men who did not, however, cower all the way from academics, but studied, in fact, to become process operators. These men didn't *feel* anything about their jobs, nor did they define themselves by their jobs; they just did them. It was difficult to be intelligent in Sarnia, surrounded by young men who's muscles swelled and who's height increased while mine were stunted in the pursuit of other interests; "retarded ages," as Mrs. Carr had referred to them, who "othered" themselves against smaller boys such as myself, used us to feel more powerful, to exercise their brand new muscles.

It was also quite difficult to be artsy in a town that was so completely artless. The parking lots had been gouged with pot holes, and no one was coming to fix them; the brick of the shopping plazas and the siding of the houses were ugly; were chosen, perhaps, because they were affordable. No one had bothered to make these buildings beautiful. The world in which I lived was frugal; builders had chosen practical before pleasurable, settled on dull industrial colors because that's what their budget had afforded them. *Why can't I live in Rome or Paris?* I often thought. Here, in the West, Grecian architecture had been used, but was a thing of the past, or was now just exclusive to Europe, it seemed. In Paris, for example, architects conceived gothic

buildings with flying buttresses and texture in every brick, with stone cherubs that sit on either side of each window, and stone lions that guard each door. But here, the architecture was – for the most part – substandard and second-rate. Men in this blue-collar town wore white t-shirts smeared with oil and grease; farmers from just outside of Sarnia wore overalls smeared with manure; and I couldn't help knowing that, in Paris, men wore double-breasted suits and patent-leather shoes.

A few days after the “parent-teacher conference” with Mr. Carr, my Madre and Padre announced their divorce. She was granted custody of my sister and me, and my brothers stayed with Saddam.

My mother's new house was a nice white colonial with black shutters, but we didn't have a lot of money. We bought food like it was furniture; one trip to the grocery store would produce canned soup, eggs, milk, cheese, and a lot of bread and pasta with marinara sauce. Then, as money was made, we were able to buy ground beef, steaks, bacon, bags of potato chips, and things like that. We could hear mice and squirrels downstairs, and our basement was dotted with mouse traps. No one went down there. We used the heater sparingly and warmed ourselves, mainly, with hot tea and fires that we would make in the living room fireplace. We wore big sweatshirts and thermal socks, took short showers, and washed our clothes every two weeks at the Laundromat up the street. We lived in a good neighborhood within walking distance of convenience stores, markets, and shopping plazas; and we used our station wagon seldom; we didn't waste money on gas; we didn't take trips, didn't get oil changes, didn't risk a breakdown, or a flat tire. There was something beautiful about the way we lived. At the Laundromat, for

example, my mummy would sometimes find five-dollar bills that she'd forgotten in her pockets, and tears of joy would stretch down her face.

In the summer, while my mother was at work, Carroll and I would be handed off to babysitters; and we'd go with them into to their houses where we'd watch *Donahue*. A couple of summers later, my sister – old enough, now – would take charge of us.

There was seldom a fight between us – my sister and I; and, if there was one, it was usually over the television. I wanted to watch *The Joy of Painting* or reruns of *Family Ties* (I loved Alex. P. Keaton), but my sister demanded that we watch *Ricky Lake*. One day, we bought a Nintendo at a garage sale; and, while trying to hook it up, I dropped the television from the entertainment center onto the floor. My mother could not afford a new one (at least, not right away); and so, we spent several months withdrawing from our beloved *Saved by the Bell*. It was here, in this deprivation and search for stimulus, that I developed a love of reading. My favorite books were *I Am the Cheese*, by Robert Cormier; and *Towards a Better Life*, by Kenneth Burke. I went through my typical Agatha Christie phase (read *And Then There Were None*, and *Murder on the Orient Express*); and then I went through this weird phase where I read every book referenced in *The Catcher in the Rye* (*Of Human Bondage*, *The Great Gatsby*, *A Farewell to Arms*, etc. Salinger proved to be the perfect acclamatory novel). The school library was small and dissatisfying; and I, therefore, spent hours at the public library. If I wanted to purchase a book and keep it forever (with vague intentions of someday revisiting it, I guess), then I would buy them for 25 cents at thrift stores, or not at all. I was able to purchase stacks of books, had book towers, really – book cities on my bedroom floor, books stacked crookedly, leaning into other stacks. Sometimes, my sister and I would scatter pillows – “lily pads” – in the yard; and

then, we'd jump from one lily pad to the next, careful not to touch the "water," which we convinced ourselves was certain death. We always loved this game, even developed a kind of Winter Olympics version of it, would go inside and jump from sofa to coffee table, from coffee table to love seat, from love seat to sofa, until one of us would inevitably ruin a center-piece or break a vase, in which case we'd rummage through kitchen drawers, frantic for tape or bottles of glue.

Carroll and I would see Dad on weekends. He allowed us only one can of Pepsi a week, and it was to remain in the kitchen; we would take sips from it during commercial breaks. I will always remember the fear I had of spilling Pepsi on the living room carpet.

Saddam was quite frugal – so frugal, in fact, that he told us early in our lives that Santa Claus did not exist, wanted, it seemed, for us to appreciate the money he'd spent on Christmas presents.

On Friday nights, Saddam would cook pizzas for my sister and I, but would often leave them for too long in the oven. He'd hurry into the kitchen, and remove the pizza, quickly, with his bare hands. Often, it came out looking like a sewer cover, with a mass of dense smoke that billowed throughout the kitchen; it would scald Saddam's unsheathed hands. Often times, he'd drop it in a sink full of soapy water and dishes. "It's still good," he'd say, taking the soggy pizza out of the sink. "Do we have to eat it?" my sister, Carroll, would say. "I don't see why not?" Saddam would say. "It looks burnt," Carroll would say. "It was five dollars," Saddam would say. "The least you could do is try it." My sister and I would each take a bite. *Maybe, this time, it's not so bad*, I often thought. "It's repulsive," I'd say, chewing – gagging, really – on spongy

pizza. “It’s not repulsive,” Saddam would say. “It’s disgusting,” I’d say. “It is not,” Saddam would say. “I hate it,” I’d say. “You don’t hate it. We’ve done this before. It’s no big deal. It’s just water. Now, don’t give me any of your shit, tonight, Brian. I had a long day at work”; “I want to go home,” I’d say (pouting, really). “You are home. This is your home”; “No it’s not,” I’d say. “I live with my mummy, and we have several Matisse prints, and a Persian rug. You have fake plants and Escher woodcuts. I hate them. They’re tacky. I want to go home!”

Though Saddam never hit us, the potential to be hit (like a boarding school, or a labor camp) loomed in the background. When I refused to go to sleep, for example, big bulging veins would emerge on Saddam’s temple, and his eyes would widen; he’d grind his teeth together, and he’d chase me up the stairs – with his belt or a spatula, or whatever was handy – and into my bedroom where I’d lock the door, quickly, behind me.

And yet, it was so strange because my father could be quite sweet; Saturday mornings, for example, were reserved for what he called “Cartooner Looners.” He would read the *Sarnia Observer* in his big red chair as we sat on the living room floor – open-mouthed and amazed by the television screen.

My sister and I would watch *Curious George*; and, of course, my little brain would be busy stirring up post-colonialist interpretations – interpretations that I kept to myself, of course. I remember one episode in which the man in the yellow hat puts George to work making dinner for him and his guests – dilettantes from the local museum. At one point, the monkey conceives a series of wheels that enable him to prepare countless deserts like an assembly line. The cartoon was not a direct delineation of African slavery, but the important thing to note, I thought, was that *Curious George* only exacerbated the idea of slavery spurring the white man’s economy

(which it did). More broadly was the assertion that, throughout history, one man's success had always been at the expense of another man.

For lunch, Saddam would cook us turkey a la king – a recipe that he knew well. Then, in the afternoon, he would drag me by the tips of my fingers into the foyer where he'd lace my shoes and push me out the door.

“Where are we going?” I'd ask.

My questions, I guess, did not warrant a response.

He'd put me in the car and would drive aimlessly around Sarnia for a while. I was always smaller than I should have been (quite small, really – puny. Christ, if I weighed 50 pounds, then I was *drenched* – not in water, but in something heavier, like alfredo sauce, or gelatin, perhaps), and I could never see over the dash board, could never see where we were going.

But when I heard the sound of his tires driving over the gravel, I knew exactly what parking lot we had entered.

“No way!” I'd scream.

My hatred for going to the hardware store was, however, assuaged – at least somewhat – by a small bag of popcorn that Saddam would buy to keep me from complaining while he looked at crown molding or light fixtures (he had gutted and was “re-doing” the basement).

One Saturday night, my mother came over to see my brothers. When Saddam heard her voice in the foyer, he pushed her out of the house and slammed the door in her face so loudly that it made my sister and I cover our ears.

Later, Sean went downstairs into the unfinished basement where Saddam was watching *Hockey Night in Canada*.

“How could you do that to Mom?” he asked.

Even the big questions usually went unanswered.

“Come on!” my brother screamed, holding up his little dukes.

Saddam gazed up at his eldest son from the couch and started giggling like a preteen schoolgirl. Embarrassed, Sean lowered his fists, ran back up the stairs and into the garage where he took his BMX, and disappeared until the following night.

On Sundays, Saddam would line the four of us up like little ducks, and together we’d walk to St. Peter’s church. Though he was short, Saddam was burly and strong, and he could put more fear into you than the Lord himself. He had a certain authority in my life (which is more than I could say for God).

After church, we’d meet my mother in the parking lot. “Where’s my money?” she’d say. “What?”; “My money”; “What are you talking about?”; “Every month, you write me a check...”; “Shit! I forgot”; “Obviously”; “It’s no big deal. I’ll put it in the mail”; “Well, I just live down the street...”; “I’ll put it in the mail”; “Fine, James”; “How much caffeine are you giving these kids?”; “One Coke each day”; “Brian’s developing poor sleeping habits”; “Don’t do this, James”; “Don’t do what?”; “This. I’m not going to fight with you in the church parking lot again”; “Are they doing their homework, at least?”; “They’re seven and five, James. They don’t really have homework”; “Will you tell your son that he doesn’t know everything?”; “Brian, you don’t know everything.” Mom, then, would take my sister and I by our little hands, say au revoir

to my brothers, and would bring us home – home, where life, finally, was getting better. My mother had taken a job as a bank teller; and, in one year, ascended to the role of assistant manager. We finally got a television, and I was able to watch *Charlie Rose* on PBS. Martin Amis said, during one episode, that: “As you get older...um...you want to know what you lived through. *What was the big cultural/political development of your time?* For our grandparents, it would have been the movement of people from the land to the cities; for our parents...it would have been the war. For us, I think, {the Sexual Revolution} was the great change – a reinvention of how men and women behaved toward each other {something I wish I had lived through, really}.” During one particular episode, Kermit the Frog stopped by the minimalist set to promote *Kermit, Unpigged* – Muppet renditions of smash hits over the years, the crème de la crème of which, I thought, was “She Drives me Crazy” performed by Miss Piggy. During another episode, Dave Waller – suddenly, Canada’s most famous, most commercially and most critically successful author, who I read had just moved into a house 45 minutes away (in Wyoming) – talked with Charlie about what he called “the Struggle to Resist Clichés” – a fight against “moldy phrases” like: “she rummaged through her purse” or “the heat was stifling,” a fight against phrases that he called: “heard-thinking.”

“This fight has got to be won!” said Waller.

Waller had just written – and was there, on *Charlie Rose*, promoting it – a novel called *Disheveled Assassin*, which was doing incredibly well among critics; was being called: “a novel that, while exploring, never ceases to touch and enlighten – proof that post-modernist fiction (with all of its oh-so symbolic dental charts, mammograms, and in some cases, fractal-like structure) can enhance, rather than forget, emotional power.” One esteemed *New York Times*

reviewer wrote: “*Disheveled Assassin* made me cum in my pants. Although this is only Waller’s sophomore novel, I cannot imagine a better Waller book; and so, I say with confidence that this is his masterpiece.”

I absorbed everything that Waller said during the *Charlie Rose* interview – *fascinating*, I remember thinking – began to scour for clichés in the literature I read; did not, however, realize that Mr. Waller would change my life (for better or for worse, I’m not sure yet, but *drastically*, I think, is a word that I can settle upon {for worse, I’d say, if you really twisted my arm}).

I continued to impress my teachers, continued to correct everyone – adults, even. In the mornings, I’d go to school; and, when I got there, I’d rearrange the seating plan before my teacher entered the classroom.

“This is all wrong,” I’d say, dragging desks from one place to another, scratching the floors while doing so.

I’d have Rubik’s Cubes solved in minutes; I’d wipe the floor with adults at chess – would say: “You can run, but you can’t hide!” and “There goes your rook!” and “There goes your queen!” – and I’d correct their grammar as they lamented. At six years old, I was reading George Orwell and Edmund Spender; and at seven, I struggled with, but successfully digested, Shakespeare (*Hamlet*, and *The Sonnets*, in particular). At parent-teacher conferences, my teachers would urge my mother to enroll me in a better school. “His potential is not being reached,” they’d say. “His mind is going to waste!” My mother told them that soon she would find the money to take their advice, but “for now” she couldn’t.

It wasn’t until she met Dave...

CHAPTER III

RAISON D'ETRE

On one weekend, in the fall of 1995, my mother, sister, and I drove for 45 minutes on roads cluttered with red-and-yellow leaves and surrounded by forest. We drove to Wyoming – the fringes of Lambton County – and there on Lakeshore Road was a long and narrow driveway with a sign to the right of it that said: “Waller Grounds.”

What appeared to be hundreds of meters from the road were rooftops shrouded by leaves and branches. It was a tiny cluster of buildings: Dave’s house, a staff house, and a big red barn.

Wyoming was a peaceful town – a town where not much happened, a town where 9-1-1 operators would probably say: “oh dear!” if ever they responded to a shooting or a murder.

Dave had everything: He lived on the lake, and as we drove up his driveway, we saw beautiful black horses running through green fields between white fences.

My mother held our hands as we walked from the car to the front porch of Dave’s plantation-style home. Once there, she released our hands and collapsed into Dave’s arms. She seemed relieved, as though she had held her breath for six years and was finally able to exhale, as if she had carried us for that time and was only now able to put us down safely.

Dave’s butler, Miles, stood tall and completely still on the front porch as though he was one of the five columns. Miles was an old man, but he was quite robust looking. He wore gray suit pants and a checkered shirt under a green cardigan. He had sharp blue eyes that looked very hard – as though you could pinch them with your fingers, squeeze them with your fists, or pierce them with needles, and not a single tear would spill from them. His face was lined with wrinkles, but his hair was still very black with only a touch of gray.

Dave took our bags and brought us into the foyer and up the stairs where he showed us our rooms for the weekend. My room was very typical – not much bigger than my room on Norman Street where Saddam lived. My sister, Carroll, hated the idea of staying in Dave’s house, and so she was assuaged with a much bigger and nicer room with huge windows overlooking the horse-dotted fields.

“A television,” said Carroll. “And satin comforters.”

“And look at the view,” said Dave, ripping open the curtains. “You can see all the horses from up here.”

His anxiety was evidenced by his clumsy movements around the bedroom, the sweat rolling down his temple, and his unwillingness to let go of Carroll’s suitcase now that he had carried it to her room.

“Brian?” said my mother. “What do you think?”

“I’m sorry I gave your sister the bigger room,” said Dave.

“Don’t you want to see your room?” I asked my mother.

“Oh,” she said, blushing. “I’ve seen it many times.”

“Yuck!” said Carroll.

“I thought you said you’ve never been here,” I said.

“Mom was just saying that,” said Carroll. “To make you feel more comfortable.”

I suddenly knew where my mother had gone on those nights that she left us with babysitters. It was here that she came. *But what was here?* I thought. Who was this man in front of me and my sister? And – aside from his new book, aside from the fascinating interview he

gave on *Charlie Rose*, aside from success, fame, and his apparent wealth – what was so great about Dave Waller?

The exterior of the house was a kind of Georgia colonial. It was almost Grecian with the bulky columns stretching up to the roof. But, going inside, it became this rambling Frank-Lloyd-Wright-type of house. Each room led into another. Everything was open and flowing, and it was hard to make distinctions between rooms. In the foyer, there was a tall staircase leading up to a long corridor that connected four bedrooms and a bathroom. Then, there was an office to the left of the foyer, a kitchen down the hall, and a living room and dining room occupying the entire right side of the house. Each room was quite luxurious making it a big house altogether.

After supper, Dave and Miles brought the dogs and I outside where Dave's rifles were polished and waiting. It had been a grey afternoon, and now it was becoming black. The opaque fence of the trees at the edge of Dave's property was becoming less and less visible. We were outside to practice shooting a rifle, but the targets that Dave had set up were hard to see let alone hit with a bullet from hundreds of meters away.

"It'll be hard," said Dave. "Might have to practice on something else."

Dave was very good-looking. He had a nice set of blue eyes behind black thick-ridged Wayfarer glasses, and long blonde hair that he kept down and tucked behind his ears. Later, I learned that Dave had been in the Vietnam War as a young man, which was surprising to me because he looked youthful and was energetic (the War in Vietnam, to me, was something heaped onto by lots of time and change). But, alas, he was my mother's age – in his early fifties, I think, I think. I must admit that I liked Dave, at first. (Of course, Carroll hated him right away.)

Dave squeezed the trigger of his rifle, and the center of a round target about a hundred meters off flew apart.

“You’re a good shot, Mr. Waller,” I said.

“Call me Dave,” he said.

He had been sort of nervous before – as he showed us our rooms – but now, he seemed more relaxed.

“Your mother won’t let you shoot a rifle,” said Dave. “She has certain rules for you that I intend to break.”

I smiled.

“In fact, we’re going to be doing a lot of hunting together. So, you’d better learn to shoot well.”

My father would’ve agreed with this. Years later, I would learn that my mother and Saddam didn’t get along, partially, because they had different rules for us kids. My father put a line *under* certain things where my mother put a line *through* them. They saw things, differently, I guess. For example, learning to shoot a rifle, learning to hunt in case it becomes necessary to hunt, vs. shooting a rifle simply to impose one’s phallus, killing innocent creatures for sport, possibly hurting someone, or perhaps yourself (these words would be crossed out {I’m not going to actually cross them out; I’m not that exhibitionistic}). Another conflict (this one, more likely to have occurred): watching television, watching cartoons, being kids, having fun, “remember fun? – harmless rarified fun, which kids are supposed to have now because they won’t – will *not* – find it later” vs. watching television, wasting time, but more importantly, becoming brainwashed – just another slave, a pious worshipper of money and things, not being able to

think for yourself – the loss of one’s freedom (again, these would be crossed out. {They always disagreed, is the point.}).

“Now, what about this father of yours?” said Dave.

“What about him?” I said.

“He doesn’t want anything to do with you,” said Dave.

I couldn’t understand how this could be told to me so coarsely. Looking back now, across so many years, I can see with great clarity the reasons for that kind of insensitivity: When people realize they’re in the presence of such high intelligence, they pair it with an ability to suppress emotions; they become fearful that treating such a person delicately will somehow leave them vulnerable. Back then, people always handled me like I was a machine. A machine is not treated delicately, or with kindness.

“Miles!” said Dave. “Fetch me that box.”

The old butler had been a fifth column on the porch, and now he resembled a robot as he marched to the side of the house – having been ordered to do so – and picked up a box labeled: “Brian’s toys.”

“Hey!” I said, outraged. “What’s my stuff doing here?”

“Can’t stay young forever,” said Dave.

Miles brought the box to where Dave and I were standing. Dave reached into the box and pulled out one of my old action figures. Then, he threw it as hard as he could into the air, cocked his hammer, and shot it to smithereens. He did this several more times – picked out actions figures, threw them into the air, and shot them like they were nothing to me. He did this for what seemed like an eternity – shot Rubik’s Cubes, science kits, and Teddy Ruxpins; shot apart my

old pram rattle (it was a “special” pram rattle with rotating and rattling Shakespeares and Harold Blooms, and other important literary figures). Of course, I hadn’t played with Ruxpin or my pram rattle in years; but, I suppose, it was just the blatant disregard for my emotions that annoyed me.

Miles went back to the side of the house where several boxes had been waiting. The second box that he brought over was filled with my mother’s china. Dave took one plate and threw it into the air like a Frisbee. Quickly, he cocked his hammer back, took aim, and shot it. My mother’s plate exploded like fireworks.

I had trouble sleeping that night. Before long, I snuck downstairs and into the living room. There was a tall fire burning in the fireplace, and my mother sat on the living room sofa next to it with a burning cigarette and a cup of steaming coffee.

“Do you like it here?” she said.

“Dave shot some of my stuff,” I said.

“You didn’t like those old toys, anyway,” she said. “You’re too smart for that stuff.”

“He shot your china collection,” I said.

“That’s okay,” she said. “It was your father’s. Dave didn’t let you shoot that rifle, did he?”

“No,” I said.

“Good,” said my mother.

She smoked her cigarette.

“When are we leaving?” I said.

That's when my mother gave me a brochure with a picture on it of a large red-brick building with green vines clinging to its right side. This was the administration building of Fencely Preparatory School, or at least that's what the brochure seemed to indicate in big letters across the top.

My mother put down her cigarette, got up from the sofa, and knelt before me.

"Brian," she said with her hands on my shoulders. "I sent in an application on your behalf. Your teachers sent in letters attesting to your intellectual abilities. Your grades were more than enough to get you in."

"They accepted me?"

"That's right," said my mother.

"And you want me to go?"

"This is one of the best schools in Canada," she said. "You're a fool if you don't."

My mother looked tired and relieved, as if she'd just finished running a marathon, as if everything she had done since divorcing my father was for the sake of this conversation.

"It's where you belong," she said. "All your life, people have told me that."

"How will you afford it?" I said.

"Don't worry about that," she said.

I flipped through the brochure, and looked at pictures of students – Asian kids, black kids, Hispanic kids – all of them smiling in their blue Fencely blazers with the Fencely code of arms sewn to their left breasts, and blue ties tucked into their grey suit pants. "Come and play with us, Brian!" they were saying. "We'll study discourse pragmatics, semiotics, semantics, and argumentation!" The campus was composed of three giant buildings surrounding a court yard. In

the middle of the courtyard, there was a large fountain with tall angelic statues protruding from it – playing flutes and spitting water into the basin around them. The blue Fencely blazers weren't exactly blue – more of a sharky color. I went back to the first page and read it, quickly.

“It's in Wyoming,” I said.

“That's the problem,” said my mother. “It's here, in Wyoming, and we live in Sarnia. So, what do we do?”

This was it! Our visit to Waller Grounds was basically over, and now my mother was asking me to live there. I could sense that she was happier with Dave. It seemed that she was in love for the first time in years – Dave was rich, tall, and easy to get along with.

“What about Carroll,” I said. “She's gonna hate this!”

“Let me worry about Carroll,” said my mother.

“I don't know if I like it here,” I said.

My mother had a determined look on her face.

“You'll grow to like it,” she said.

Early the next morning, I went outside and watched as the gate was closed and the horses freed from their stable for the day. They sped across the grass toward the tall white fence that caged them. *So beautiful*, I thought. I wondered what they would look like if they were freed, if they ran happily instead of contemptuously, which I was sure is what they were doing. I wondered what it would be like to see them keep running, over the tall white fence and into the wild. It was sad to watch them run up against the fence – like water splashing against the levees and rolling back.

Three months passed before we were able to sell our house in Sarnia. My mother needed us to be okay, and so I kept my head down and my mouth shut while we packed our suitcases and put them in the station wagon headed for Dave's house. Carroll, on the other hand, pouted for the first half of the drive; and, as our destination grew closer, cried so hard that my mother and I couldn't understand what she was saying (could, however, understand the following: "I'm going to burn his fucking house down!") My mother just kept driving – her eyes glued to the road. She had that same determined look on her face, as if she were staring down the road and into the future – at future versions of ourselves with big smiles on our faces as we waved us over.

My mother didn't see a point in taking our furniture. Dave had the finest of credenzas, kitchen tables, coffee tables and bookshelves, the most comfortable sofas, and the most stylish paintings. Everything that my mother had struggled to own – and therefore cherished – was considered second-best by Dave's standards.

It wasn't until a few weeks after we moved in with Dave that we realized he was a heavy drinker. Even on school nights, he and some of his friends (his accountant, his lawyer, and our closest neighbor – a surgeon with a mansion and a pool) would stay up late drinking rye-and-okes and blaring music throughout the house. Then, Carroll would march downstairs and yell at them. To my surprise, Dave would actually obey my sister. He'd turn his music all the way down, and Carroll and I would sleep like babies.

Several times, my mother got drunk with Dave and his buddies and told us, in her drunkenness, that he had a cock the size of Wilt Chamberlain's, told us that he fucks "like a pump jack, and has struck oil many times."

Dave didn't really work hard like my father did. Saddam would wake up each morning at 5:30, get out of bed, and would go to work only to return in the evening and continue work on a number of projects. Whether it was putting up drywall in the basement, painting bedrooms, or building a deck in the back, my father was always working on something. There was something nice about that. Though my siblings and I often thought he was a monster, we looked up to my father, thought he could fix anything, felt safe with him, thought he was the strongest man in the universe. I couldn't imagine any youngster thinking that way about Dave. Each morning, at 10:00, Dave would wake up, nurse his hangover, and would fall asleep again – this time on the beach (which left him tan and sort of leathery). In the winter, he'd sit in bed and drink his coffee for the first few hours of daylight; and in the afternoon, he'd type away in his office. Sometimes, he'd have meetings with people about his next book.

One day, I put my hand on the office door; and I would have opened it had it not been for Miles who swatted my hand away and told me: “never interrupt Mr. Waller between the hours of two and four.”

Moving from Sarnia to Wyoming in the middle of the school year was difficult for us both, but it was especially difficult for my sister. We were both expected to change schools, but she would have to watch as I advanced to Fencely. *Jealousy*, I thought, *will surely play a part in her adjustment.*

One day, before we left for Wyoming, I went into Carroll's bedroom and asked her what she thought of the move. She told me that she was, in fact, jealous; told me that she hated the idea of me getting all of this positive attention while she struggled to make new friends. I told

her that I would struggle to make new friends as well, told her that my struggle had every right to be just as difficult. Still, this did little to assuage her concerns.

That's when we decided that if we were going to cooperate with the move, we would have at least one stipulation: For Carroll's sake, we would demand to finish the year at the school we were in. We were very firm about this. Different changes were happening all around us, and we needed to have at least one constant. In hindsight, my mother could have denied our request, and ultimately, we would have caved in, would have moved with her to Waller Grounds – although, less willingly. But she did not deny us; each day, for a good six months, before the school year finally ended, she made the 45-minute commute to Sarnia.

School became difficult after the move. Sarnia was a small city, and everyone knew Dave – the famous author who lived just 45 minutes north of town. They knew of his affair with my mother, which was progressing into a serious loving relationship. Information was passed down to the few friends that I had, and they became resentful – knew that I would abandon them for a better life.

My brothers never came to visit us at the lake, and on the weekends, when I went to see Saddam, they were always out with their friends. Passing either one of my brothers in the school halls, therefore, became like passing a stranger.

One Friday, my mother took me to Saddam's house. She pulled Dave's Beemer into the driveway. Saddam had been standing there, waiting.

My mother rolled down the window to speak with him. "You owe me money," she said. "Whose car is this?" said Saddam. "It's none of your business, James!"; "Brian, get in the house.

I want to speak with your mother”; “Brian, stay in the car”; “Sandy, I’ve got some things to talk with you about, and I don’t think that Brian should hear them. Brian, get in the fucking house!”; “I don’t want him near you when you’re like this”; “Like what, Sandy? What’s the problem?”; “I’ll bring him back later.” But before my mother could put the car in reverse, Saddam opened the driver’s-side door, reached into the car, and grabbed her by the hair. For a moment, she screamed. Then – thinking more clearly, perhaps – she put the car in reverse, sped backward into the street, and drove away. “Jesus Christ!” she said, lighting a cigarette – driving, nervously, through our old neighborhood (fighting tears, it seemed). “Did you see him grabbing my hair like that?” For a moment, there was silence; and then: “I told you not to use this car,” I said.

Dave insisted that I refer to Waller Grounds as my home. I had difficulty doing this, but I tried my best to appease him.

Walking slowly along the upstairs corridor one morning, I kept my hand against the smooth taupe surfaces of the walls, and noticed places where they failed to line up; and if you looked closely enough, you could see cracks in them – some starting at the baseboard and reaching up to the ceiling.

At the end of the hall, there hung a small painting next to the double doors of the master bedroom. It was a portrait of a man holding the hand of a woman who appeared to be his pregnant lover. He held his other hand up as if he was taking an oath. The man and woman appeared to be getting married.

I walked closer to the painting and noticed a circular mirror on the wall behind the couple. In the mirror was the reflection of a priest and two witnesses to the marriage. Then,

surrounding the mirror, were several smaller mirrors; and in these were the Stations of the Cross. *Such amazing detail*, I thought.

“Do you like that painting?” said a voice from behind me.

I turned and saw that the voice was Dave’s.

“Yes,” I said. “Is it a diptych?”

“No,” he said. “A diptych is two paintings paired together to form one.”

I noticed, then, that he was wearing his blue bathrobe and his glasses. He was holding a cigarette in one hand and an ashtray in the other.

“Brian,” he said, clearing his throat. “I think you should transfer to Fencely now – immediately.”

“It will help my sister a lot if I wait,” I said.

There was a moment of silence.

“Fine,” said Dave, angered, it seemed. “What’s another semester? You can wait until next year, I guess. Anyway, we’ve already deferred your enrollment. Just remember that I’m paying your tuition.”

“I meant to speak with you about that,” I said.

“Don’t thank me,” said Dave. “Anyway, why aren’t you in bed?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I don’t sleep much, I guess.”

“You don’t need to,” said Dave.

“I guess not.”

“You’re very precocious,” he said.

He smoked his cigarette.

“Your mother tells me that you’re upset about things.”

“I’m confused,” I said.

“I understand,” said Dave. “Things are moving quickly.”

“That’s right,” I said.

Again, he smoked his cigarette.

“I love this painting,” said Dave, blowing smoke from his mouth and blotting his cigarette into the ashtray. “People say it’s a legal document – a kind of marriage certificate.”

It suddenly occurred to me that I didn’t know how Dave had met my mother. I was watching *Charlie Rose* one day, and there he was – he had simply appeared – in our living room.

I asked Dave where they had met.

“At one of my readings,” he said. “She came up to me after it, and said that my writing touched her. She was so beautiful that I invited her out for a drink. She was the only one at the bar, that night, who I could have a good conversation with.”

“Are you going to marry her?” I asked.

“Yes,” said Dave. “I think so.”

I looked back at the painting. I began to feel small and ineffectual – like a product being moved through an assembly line by tall machines.

“I better get ready for school,” I said.

I walked down the corridor and back into my bedroom.

A month later, I learned that Saddam got a corporate relocation to Michigan. Even though my father was a jerk at times, I remember being relieved for him. Living in Sarnia with my mother's new romance on the tip of everyone's tongue must have been unbearable for him.

On the day Saddam left for Michigan, he took my sister and me out for dinner. Carroll could not stop crying, and several times she had to remove herself from the table and go sobbing into the bathroom.

"Why are you leaving?" I asked.

"I have to do what's best for my career," said Saddam. "And for you."

"Carroll's been having a tough time," I said.

"She'll be all right," said Saddam.

Carroll came out of the bathroom, and Saddam paid the bill. Then, we went outside and said our goodbyes in the parking lot where my mother had been waiting in Dave's Beemer.

There is nothing harder than seeing a burly old guy fight tears. That's the worst! Seeing these tough old-timers cry is harder, I think, than seeing a baby cry. Anyway, that was my father on the day that he left us. The whole thing was just very emotional.

My father saw that Carroll was trying to compose herself.

"It's all right," he said. "It's hard not to cry."

He gave us each a few bucks and told us to spend it on whatever we wanted.

"I tried to get all of you," he said. "Paid thousands of dollars in legal fees."

He took off his wristwatch and put it in my hand. Then, he got into his car and drove away without saying another word.

My mother received her own corporate relocation, and was now a bank manager in Wyoming. Each day, she drove 45 minutes to pick us up from school (drove 45 minutes to drop us off, too). The cars and buses would drive away, the kids who lived within walking distance of the school would disperse, and my sister and I would still have a half hour of waiting before my mother would arrive.

By the time we got home, dinner was always waiting. Before moving in with Dave, I didn't quite understand butlers. *The stereotypical butler*, I thought, *is refined and seems educated, but settles for the work of a servant*. Miles fit this description, although not perfectly. He was from Canada, originally, but had spent time in Leeds, and had been educated at Oxford – became a very successful attorney and made millions of dollars. Miles married, moved to Sarnia, and had a boy named, Sean. When he was 24, Sean got drunk with some friends, stole his father's power boat, and drowned in Lake Huron after they'd had an accident. When his wife died at 50 from colon cancer, Miles became an alcoholic. A few years ago, he met Dave; and – seeking to live a modest life surrounded by nature – became his butler, moved into Waller Grounds: six acres of fields and nothing else but forest for miles – forest and Lake Huron, his son's grave (they never did find the body).

Miles was an excellent cook, would prepare four-star meals for us that would – in any restaurant – sell for hundreds of dollars, and would have them ready for us even before we realized we were hungry. "That's what a good butler does," Dave would say. "A good butler knows our habits, our idiosyncrasies. He knows what we want and need before we do."

I had not expressed a desire to play with guns, but Dave was adamant about teaching me to shoot. After supper, one evening, he took me outside and put an old bolt-action rifle in my hands. *What is his plan? I thought. If he wants to build rapport with me, why does he laugh when I fail to hit a target 500 meters away?*

Later, he let me in on his little prank – told me that the old rifle was first produced during World War I, and was withdrawn from artillery due to unreliability. He called it a “popper,” a rifle that fires a .303-inch projectile 300 meters if you’re lucky. “This rifle,” he said. “Belongs in a museum.”

Dave walked across his property to where his targets had been placed. I must confess that, as he walked away from me, I had ideas of shooting him in the back. I even put the rifle against my shoulder and took aim; but thought: *surely, I’ll miss*. Even if I pulled the trigger, the old bullet would have fallen short or something, and Dave would have suffered nothing more than piss-stained underwear, would have brought me to a juvenile corrections facility or a psychiatric hospital where I’d suffer electric shock treatment.

I lowered the rifle fearing that Miles – or someone – might see me from a window. Dave moved the target closer. When he came back to where I was standing, he snatched the rifle from my hands. (I think it was then that he realized I was still a stranger to him.) He’d been drinking throughout the day; and, at that moment, he seemed to sober up.

Dave kept staring down at me. For a moment, I thought he had seen me pointing the rifle at him. But he just chuckled, stupidly, and said: “If I show you something, will you promise not to tell your mother?”

He brought me through the gate, into the barn, and past a line of horses whose heads I touched briefly with my fingertips along the way.

“Where did you get all these horses?” I said.

“I bought them,” he said. “From a breeder when I published my first novel.”

At first, I thought that Dave was lucky; only a handful of people had made serious money from their writing. But from the size of his estate, and with the knowledge of everything on it – his house, his horses, his art and rifle collection, the beach, etc. – I had to accept that Dave was a hard worker. In other words, I couldn’t imagine anyone getting that lucky.

His first novel had been a homerun. I had not read it yet, but was told, by my mother, that it was quite good, was told that he had sold 1.5 million copies of it in 15 different languages; and that, in the United States, he’d won the National Book Award.

Dave had worked as a ninth-grade English teacher, but he had abandoned his students long ago, and now it seemed that he would spend the rest of his life writing. Standing there in the barn, it occurred to me to ask why he had bought his horses; it also occurred to me, however, that Dave had more money than he knew what to do with; and that, I realized, was the answer. *When you make a lot of money, I thought, you find things to spend it on whether they interest you or not.*

Dave took me to the end of the barn, reached into his pocket, and took out a small key that he used to open a locked door.

“You should feel very privileged,” he said. “I don’t let anyone in here.”

How nauseating, I thought.

He opened the door and turned on a light. There, sitting above a mantle in a small stuffy room with no windows, was a black glossy rifle. I suddenly became very alarmed, knew that many hunters collected rifles like the one Dave had let me shoot earlier; but could see, too, that this was not a bolt-action rifle from the early 20th century. This, Dave told me, was a Steyr Scout Tactical Elite – 8 lbs unloaded, 570 mm in barrel length, with a tactical scope, and a fully-adjustable bi-pod. “This,” Dave told me. “Is not for killing deer. This thing can put a bullet through a keyhole from 10 football fields away.”

“Why do you have it?” I said.

“I like to collect rifles,” said Dave.

Pause.

“Small, isn’t it? Like you,” said Dave. “You know, Brian, a person’s size has nothing to do with what they’re capable of doing. Same goes for rifles.”

Dave could see that I was a little suspicious.

“Listen,” he said. “It’s not like I have an Uzi that fires 600 rounds per second. This gun, after all, is used for hunting – among other things.”

He snickered.

“Would you like to fire this weapon?” he said.

“I don’t know,” I said.

“Come on,” he said. “Don’t be a little faggot.”

“I’m not a faggot,” I said.

“Then say you’ll shoot this thing.”

“I’ll learn how,” I said.

“And you won’t tell mommy about this either. Right?”

“I won’t tell anyone,” I said.

“Smart,” said Dave. “There is no one, Brian, who gets more respect than a man holding a repeating rifle.”

I spent that night in the living room – watching James Bond movies with my mother and Dave, who were drinking cocktails. Carroll was upstairs in her bedroom. I kept an eye on my mother and Dave throughout the evening; they were cuddling – my mother had a big smile on her face – on the sofa next to me. I wondered if telling her about the gun in Dave’s barn would mean leaving Waller Grounds forever, and I knew that would have made my sister very happy. But it also meant that my mother’s love affair would come to a screeching halt, and I wanted her to be happy most of all. Carroll and I were too young to take a stake in things. We’d get over it. I wanted things to be good for my mother. I wanted her to have a meaningful relationship, with no fighting – no booming voices permeating the house. I had recollections of living with Saddam – glimpses of my mother crying in the passenger’s seat of our station wagon, with us in the back, and my father bullying her from the driver’s seat. I couldn’t put her through something like that again.

Later, my mother and Dave snuck into his office where they listened to “Abracadabra” by the Steve Miller Band and French kissed (how nauseating!); I know this because – after sitting, alone, for a while in the living room, watching Odd Job throw hats at Bond – I, too, snuck up to the office and peered inside.

It had been two months since we had moved into Waller Grounds. I came out of my bedroom, one morning, to find the bathroom door locked. I could hear the shower running, and I knocked on the door, loudly. “What do you want?” said Carroll. “I need to use the bathroom,” I said. “Fuck off!” said Carroll.

After 10 minutes, she emerged. I noticed that she was crying; so, I refrained from giving her any sauce. “What’s wrong?” I said. “It’s my birthday,” she said. “Happy birthday!” I said. “Yeah,” she said. Usually, on Carroll’s birthday, my mother woke her up (this had been a tradition) with breakfast in bed – eggs mixed with vegetables (onions, green peppers, and diced tomatoes); bacon on the side; toast smeared with butter – pulled her out of school for the day, and took her shopping in London (London was where the good shopping was) – for clothes, and in earlier years: porcelain dolls, or what have you. Then, the three of us went out for dinner, and Carroll ordered cheesecake for dessert. *What had happened this year? I thought. Where was Carroll’s breakfast? Where were the arrangements?*

I watched as Carroll sobbed her way into her bedroom. I went into the bathroom, brushed my teeth, and took a shower. My sister had used up all the hot water, but I would not complain.

Another day, I thought, stepping out of the shower.

“You can do it,” I whispered.

I looked into the mirror – at my long blonde hair, my brown eyes, and my slightly-tanned skin.

“You can do it,” I told myself. “After all, you’re better than everyone! You the man! You are omnipotent. No one is as good as you. All others are inferior, and are undeserving of your attention {a bit self-aggrandizing, here – megalomania. But certain youngsters need this, I think,

to some extent. Otherwise, there'll be trouble, and by 'trouble' I mean the opposite of self-aggrandizement – self-loathing, self-deprecation, sadness, depression, etc.}.”

I realized, while looking at myself in the mirror, that I looked more like Dave than my own father. Saddam had pale skin and thick black hair that he kept short and tidy. He was burly and short with a very masculine face. He looked like a real Irishman – with a big square jaw and hard green eyes.

Hair and eye color can change, I thought. Bones and muscles grow. I didn't quite have Saddam's features yet, but something about the way I looked told me they would come soon – perhaps by the time I was a teenager.

Jesus! I thought. *What were my feelings for Saddam? Was I beginning to miss him?*

I combed my hair back so that it looked really slick. I brushed my teeth, again – my permanent teeth, which were coming in nicely (straight and together).

I went into my bedroom and put on my school clothes. It was November, and the weather report, on the television, told me that it would be cold outside. I, therefore, decided on a cream cable-knit sweater and tan khakis with blue thermal socks and loafers. *At this time next year, I thought, I'll be putting on a tie and a blue blazer with a Fencely patch on it. I'll be waking up an hour earlier each day and getting home an hour later. Carroll will transfer to Wyoming Elementary, and my mother will not have to drive 45 minutes through the snow and rain.*

I came out of my room and heard my mother and sister talking in my sister's room. My mother had forgotten her birthday, had overslept, and was now apologizing.

After breakfast, I went outside and waited for my mother to bring Carroll and me to school. The weather report was right; it was cold outside – another grey day.

Carroll's 13th birthday was spent at home that year instead of at some restaurant. Dave could be quite incongruent – at times: malicious, and at other times: gracious. At Carroll's birthday dinner, he exhibited the latter by presenting an enormous cheesecake, which Miles cut and served to each of us. Carroll said: "thank you" in a small voice. Shortly after the cheesecake was served, Dave gave the birthday girl a large present wrapped in pink paper and a bow. "Thank you," said Carroll. She opened the present to see that it was a 7.1 surround-sound system – a very generous (and surprisingly hip, I might add) birthday gift for a preteen. "Now you can play your music as loudly as you'd like," said Dave. "What do you say?" said my mother. "When will I use this?" said Carroll. "The corridor between our bedrooms is long," said Dave. "So, you can take full advantage of it every night if you want to"; "Well, maybe not *full* advantage," said my mother. "Full advantage!" said Dave. "And when we're gone on weekends, out with our friends, you can use it then, too." It had been something of a battle to get Dave to lower his music, and to keep it lowered; now, I cringed – wondering if my sister would keep me up, instead. "Has my father called?" said Carroll, removing the napkin from her lap. "No," said my mother. For a long time, there was silence. Then: "Why not?" said Carroll. "Where is that cock sucker?"; "Watch your language," said my mother. "Could she be ragging?" said Dave. Suddenly, Carroll began to have one of her fits (it was more of that heavy crying that I'd seen during the car ride up – crying and carrying on so messy, sloppy, and melodramatic that we couldn't make out what she was saying). "All right," said Dave. "Why don't you go to your room now?"; "Don't tell me what to do," Carroll sobbed. "I'm not telling you what to do," said Dave. "Whatever," said Carroll. "Don't tell me what to do"; "Oh really?" said Dave, annoyed,

this time. “This is my house!” My mother looked at Dave, who was becoming increasingly angry. “Carroll,” she snapped. “Apologize to Dave, immediately”; “Sorry,” said Carroll (Attrition, here).

My sister, suddenly, pushed her chair back, got up from the table, and threw her napkin down, angrily. Dave stood up, quickly. “What are you doing?” said my mother. “What’s wrong?” “Sandy, don’t try to stop me,” said Dave. “She apologized,” said my mother. “By God,” said Dave, staggering (somewhat drunk) the length of the dinner table to where my sister was standing. “I’m going to put that girl in the oven!” My sister, suddenly, became afraid – ran out of the dining room, and up the stairs. My mother called after Dave, who jerked back like a chained dog. “She’s being a little bee with an itch!” said Dave, reaching for his cigarettes. “I’ve been nothing but nice to her”; “I’m sorry,” said my mother. “I’ve been nothing but nice to her,” Dave repeated. “I’m sorry,” said my mother. Dave sat down, again, and tried to catch his breath.

After a while, my sister’s hatred for Dave became more and more intense. She initiated a series of attacks and counter-attacks that even I recognized as infantile. Dave got drunk one night and refused to turn his music down when my sister complained of a history exam the next day. Then, Carroll – tip-toeing up to the barn in the middle of the night, dressed in black (I had been awakened, snuck into my sister’s vacant bedroom, and watched all of this through one of her tall bedroom windows) – walked one of Dave’s horses out of the barn, and slapped it on its fleshy rear-end (and then I saw what it was like, and was thrilled, to see the horse, freed from enslavement, running into the wild).

Dave grounded my sister for several weeks; Carroll – tip toeing, again, into the kitchen, late one night, while everyone slept – poured his whiskey down the drain. Dave got drunk one day, went barging into Carroll’s bedroom, ripped down her posters, and told her not to put up new ones, told her that any new posters would be taken down just the same. He took the 7.1 surround-sound system back, and told my sister that she would never again watch her television under his roof. To confirm this, he cut the television cord with a pair of scissors. My mother was considered judge during this quarrel, and was often sought out for justice between exhibits of increasingly childish behavior; but, ultimately, my mother left it for them to settle, and so the quarrel continued. When Dave received news of a big date that my sister had with an older boy from school, he made sure that he was good and drunk when the young man came to pick her up. “Stephen is your name?”; “Yes, Sir.” I don’t quite remember what he looked like; and I suppose that’s because I never saw him again – not after that night, not after his little run-in with our step-father. I do remember, however, that he was tall and slender, with a chinless face and an ass-less body, and I do remember that he was reverent and incredibly shy, although he did manage to say: “I’ve read all your books, Sir.” We were all standing in the foyer. I remember: he had his head down – could not make eye contact with any of us. “Let me just say, Sir, that I loved your new book, Sir”; “Forget about that,” said Dave. “I’m sorry, Sir. I’m nervous, Sir”; “Don’t be too nervous, boy. She’s not *my* daughter”; “Right, Sir”; “And, as far as I’m concerned, you can spoil her hollows all you want”; “Dave!” said my mother. “I’m just saying: she’s not my daughter. Stephen shouldn’t feel nervous. I feel no overwhelming urge to protect her. All that ‘daddy’s little girl...your body is a temple’ stuff doesn’t really apply, here. Does it? Anyway, Stephen’s spending his hard-earned money...buying her dinner, I’m sure. He should have some fun,

tonight. I have no dog in this fight. I'm just another man, to her; and she's made that abundantly clear. She'll look to me for no advice. Anyway, where is her father? Gone, is where! I'm just saying {here, he looked at Stephen} that if she comes home pregnant, I promise not to show up, armed, at your doorstep"; "Please, Dave," said my mother. "Behave yourself"; "I'm sorry she's so blotchy," said Dave. "Oh, come on!" said my mother. "You should have seen her, earlier," said Dave. "Make him stop!" Carroll cried. "Weeping," said Dave. "Because she couldn't have her 7.1 surround-sound system...with a string of mucous and tears so thick you'd need a chainsaw to sever it"; "Gross!" said Stephen. "Indeed," said Dave. "Stop this!" said my mother. "Look at her, now," said Dave. "Crying, again. How nauseating! Thanks for taking her out, Stephen. We really appreciate it. Darling {here, he looked at Carroll, who'd become speechless}, don't talk too much. Remember that no one likes a tease. Give it your all, or don't even bother – no guy wants a slouch in the boudoir. Remember {here, he recited a poem he'd written}: A lady at the table / but a pig in the sack / that's how you keep 'em coming back. All right, now. Have a good time, you two."

That night, Dave dropped an atomic bomb on my sister. Not only did he embarrass the hell out of her (traumatized her, really); but also, he teased her when the horse that she had freed returned, and was walked, safely, back into the barn.

The following week, my mother attended a parent-teacher conference at my school where she was informed that: I'd been quite saucy, had been restless during class, had been "redirected" many times for speaking during lectures, and once for rearranging the class seating plan without permission. It was also relayed to my mother that I'd been verbally abusive (had been racist,

anti-Semitic) toward classmates, had called Moses Mesner (or whatever his name was) “a hook-nosed Jew,” had called Shannon Leung “a table faced gook,” had called Joyce Washington (a black girl) “antique farm equipment” (though, I swear I’m not a bigot, and have never been). These kids had gone to my teacher (Shannon had cried), and had expressed distaste for me a result of my incessant name-calling. I had become a bully, had terrorized the playground. Of course, I was guilty of all indictments.

My mother was also informed, however, that my grades were stellar; and that, while many times I was disruptive during class, in many instances, I was the first to raise my hand, and had several intelligent questions. Although my mother was angry, she seemed to think of it as some kind of affirmation that applying to Fencely on my behalf was right of her. When she got back to Wyoming, she gave me a series of punishments including a temporary loss of rifle privileges. (I was actually beginning to enjoy the rifle, and this punishment was quite damaging to my spirit.) I tried to resent my mother for this, but she was quick to remind me that it was a *consequence* to my actions and not a punishment. “You have only yourself to blame,” she told me.

CHAPTER IV

THE FENCELY PREPARATORY SCHOOL

Like all pretentious schools, Fencely stood on a hill isolated from society; stood, defensively, behind walls and iron gates as though quarantining itself from the world's architectural advancements. The buildings themselves had that clever, modernized, colonial look with red brick, white shutters, and columns stretching up to a flat roof.

My first day of school was not my first time walking through the gates of Fencely Prep. My mother had brought me there two months prior to meet with Ms. Chevalier – the guidance counselor who asked me dozens of questions about my professional aspirations. “I don't know any of that,” I told her. “I'm only 11.” Ms. Chevalier's office was on the second floor of the administrative building. It was nicely decorated, I thought, with book shelves (filled with early childhood education books), and a Persian rug that stretched out and met all four corners of the room. “Surely, you know what you want to be when you grow up,” said Ms. Chevalier. “I mean, you must have thought about it by now, at least once.” She was right! Every man's got to have a trade, and I had wondered what mine would be. Unfortunately, as of that point, nothing had seemed interesting. “Nothing seems interesting,” I said. I couldn't even be frightened or intimidated into making a decision, which is what Ms. Chevalier seemed to be doing. “Well,” she said. “I'm afraid you'll have a hard time fitting in here.” For a minute, it sounded like I wouldn't be attending Fencely, after all. My mother was waiting outside. *Oh, how angry, I thought. How angry and sad she's going to be.* “Not only are Fencely students sure of what they want,” said Ms. Chevalier. “But also, they're pretty well assured of how to get it. In fact, some of our English majors have already published several books of literary criticism.” I sat across her

desk, in a chair that was too big and too tall for me. “I don’t know, Annick...” (On the shingle, outside of her office, it said:

Annick Chevalier
Guidance Counselor

Annick is a French name. It’s pronounced Ann-Nique.) “Brian,” said Ms. Chevalier, soberly. “I’d really love it if you didn’t use my Christian name”; “Sorry,” I said. “What I mean, Ms. Chevalier {very careful, here}, is that every mother wants her child to be a doctor or a lawyer; and I guess both of these are of interest to me, but I’ve researched the cost of medical school, and the cost of law school, and the work that goes into both – the complete lack of social life that one must possess to go through either. Many people tell me {swinging my legs, here} that my early years – my early twenties, I mean – will be the best years of my life. If that’s true...well...then...to give up whatever experiences I’m liable to have seems like a waste. Also, I don’t agree with going to work five days a week only to enjoy two days off. That doesn’t make any sense, to me! {Here, she laughed.} It has never made sense! 12 hours a day doing this in exchange for 2 hours a day doing that! Fuck that! 14 hours a day doing that, is what I want! With that being said, Annick – I mean, Ms. Chevalier, sorry, so sorry – with that being said, many, *many* occupations have been swiftly dashed, for me.” (More laughter, here.) “I am, however, interested in literature,” I said. “I watch *Charlie Rose* all the time”; “*Charlie Rose*?” said Ms. Chevalier. “Isn’t that a political show?” “It’s also very literary,” I said. “Well, that’s a start,” said Ms. Chevalier. “Want to be like your father?” “He’s not my father,” I said. “I mean, your step-father?” said Ms. Chevalier. “I haven’t read any of his books, yet,” I said. “But you like books,” said Ms. Chevalier. “Immensely,” I said. “Did you see your step-father?” said Ms. Chevalier. “When he was on *Charlie Rose*?” “Yes,” I said. “He was talking about the Struggle to Resist

Clichés”; “I thought that was so funny,” said Ms. Chevalier. “So did I,” I said. “That was before we moved in with him.” (Laughter.) “Anyway, I do like books,” I said. “That’s all I can tell you, really. That, and I don’t want to be a doctor or a lawyer.”

Because Ms. Chevalier and I were unable to extract from me any professional aspirations, we worked together to, more or less arbitrarily, select four electives and two requirements. The bill for these was made available to my parents, and Dave kindly, wrote the school a check. On Monday, September 7, 1996, I began coursework at The Fencely Preparatory School.

French and math were my two required courses for the semester. Music and physical education were two of my electives. For the other two, we (Ms. Chevalier and I) chose Chaucer and British Literature – Renaissance. One day, I came home and compared my school work to the stuff that Carroll brought home from Wyoming Elementary (papier-mâché volcanoes and stuff). My work was, of course, more abundant and more challenging. *Poor Carroll*, I thought. Her younger brother was taking more advanced classes. She was embarrassed – visibly embarrassed, I’d say.

I once thought that Dorian Welles was a figment of my imagination, the other side of me who took over when I couldn’t do certain things myself. For example, when I was confronted by a bully, Dorian would tell him to fuck off if he didn’t want to end up decapitated at the bottom of some river. If an exam or presentation made me nervous, Dorian would force whiskey down my throat, and everything would go fine. If there was a girl I wanted desperately to speak with, Dorian would fire some anonymous pill down my throat, and my insecurity would suddenly

breed confidence. I sometimes wondered: *was Dorian the other side of me, or was I the other side to him?*

At first, he bullied me a bit. In fact, I probably wouldn't have met Dorian had he not snuck up behind me – during lunch, one day – and put a napkin full of ketchup in my face. I ran out of the cafeteria and into the bathroom where I washed my face off. I looked into the mirror (I looked like a prize fighter), at my face, which oozed ketchup. Dorian walked into the bathroom after me. “Stay back,” I said, ketchup gushing from my nostrils. “Relax,” said Dorian. “Stay back,” I said – angrily this time. “I didn't know you were new,” said Dorian, smiling. “I just thought you were some kid I'd never seen before. I never would have done that, otherwise”; “I've been going here for two months,” I said, slamming a handful of ketchup-filled tissues into the garbage. I looked at my disheveled attacker. His faded blue blazer was not the one Fencely had issued him, and it did not have the mandatory coat of arms on the chest. Instead of the mandatory white shirt, my assailant wore a pale-blue pajama top that he kept unbuttoned at the neck, and slightly untucked. For me, there was no concept of not wearing a tie. *That*, I thought, *means immediate disciplinary action*. Everything about Dorian screamed insubordination, and I estimated that his seemingly rebellious nature was responsible for his missing tie.

He pulled a cigarette out from a gold case and started smoking. “What grade are you in?” he said. “Six,” I told him. “What about you?” “Seven,” he said. We exchanged names. “Sorry for putting a condiment up your nose,” he said. “Whatever,” I said, throwing out another wad of red tissues. “Why don't you come to the dugouts after third period?” said Dorian. “I'll make it up to you. Do you know where the dugouts are?” “Of course,” I said. “I've been going here for two months. Remember?” “Right,” said Dorian. “Then I'll see you there.” He took one last drag from

his cigarette before flushing it down the toilet. Smiling, he put his hands in his pockets and headed for the door, as if he'd read my mind and knew that I had already agreed to meet him. I had always felt like an outsider. The Fencely Preparatory School was supposed to take that feeling of isolation away, but it hadn't yet. The kids were accustomed to each other, had formed their circles, had drawn their lines in the sand, or whatever; and couldn't be bothered to include me. I felt even more alone than I did when I attended public school. That's why, after gym class, I changed as quickly as I could and sprinted outside to meet the kid who had smeared ketchup on my face.

I was surprised to see him sitting alone on the bench in the dugouts. I expected him to be with a group of his friends. He had a copy of Noam Chomsky's *Manufacturing Consent* on his lap, and he was using it as a sort of platform; was using a pair of scissors to cut bright green buds into tiny pieces. I had seen pictures of marijuana once in the newspaper (a man had been caught trying to smuggle 500 pounds of it into the U.S. – this wasn't even a major headline). Canada was liberal with its marijuana policies. The stuff was everywhere – ubiquitous, really! Still, I was young and had not tried it yet. “Is that marijuana?” I said. “Straight from B.C.,” said Dorian. “I got it at Whistler over Thanksgiving holiday.” His tortoise-shell glasses layered his black eyes. Most Fencely boys were cutting their hair short and gelling it forward, but Dorian had not followed that trend. His black well-condition hair was a big curly mess. “You can't smoke weed at school,” I said. “Oh, really?” said Dorian. “My father makes serious pecuniary donations to this school every year.” (He sounded like a dictionary.) “Trust me,” he said. “I've got these people wrapped around my finger. I bet Ms. Chevalier and Principal Monday are looking at me right now – fucking philistines – watching me break this weed up”; “Don't say that,” I said. “Say

what?” said Dorian. “The F-word,” I said. There was a pause, here. “Fuck you!” said Dorian, finally. “Do you want to smoke this shit, or not?” That was an interesting question – one (similar to what Ms. Chevalier had asked me) that I hadn’t really asked myself. Despite the divorce and the alcoholic step-father, I thought that my life had been somewhat sheltered. Danger was out there, I knew! It was literally floating in the air, and I wanted to expose myself to some of it. The answer was undoubtedly *yes*. “Wave,” said Dorian. “Wave to your new principal and guidance counselor! Hell, I’ll give ‘em a wave. They don’t do anything to me.” The administrative building wasn’t far away – just a hundred meters or so. A baseball diamond and the outfield were the only things separating us from the first of the three buildings that made up Fencely, and I wondered if someone was really watching Dorian as he waved both arms in the air like he was landing a plane. “I’m kidding,” said Dorian, taking a paper out from his gold case and quickly rolling a joint. “I come out here all the time. Believe me, they can’t see us”; “All right,” I said. “But listen: we only have ten minutes before next period.” At this, Dorian laughed.

I think it was at a university seminar that Hunter S. Thompson said, in so many words, that drugs had actually *helped* him through life. Dorian must have been a creature like Thompson because, later, I learned: He was the first in his class, had taken his debate team to the National Debate Championship, and was the star player of the undefeated Fencely middle school basketball team. What he said was true: Dorian had the Fencely staff literally wrapped around his finger. I would soon learn that: Whatever disruption he would cause by skipping or being late for class, he would make up for by dazzling his teachers with his athletic and academic performances. (The monetary contributions from his father didn’t hurt, either.) Upon knowing Dorian further, I understood that he had published three books of literary criticism, was an active

member of the Fencely literary scene, and worked as editor-in-chief for *Purge* – the middle school literary journal. “Go ahead,” said Dorian, handing me the joint (and a lighter to go with it). “Life is meant to be enjoyed.”

My first toke was rough (and yes, I know to call it a toke by now). I put the joint in my mouth and held the flame under it for several seconds until smoke flooded my lungs. Then, I felt a burning. I let the smoke retreat, slowly, back into the world. Dorian laughed.

My second hit was slightly less amateurish. This time, I kept the smoke inside of me. I started coughing. “Drink this,” said Dorian, handing me a silver flask with his initials, D.W., engraved into its surface.

I could smell the whiskey from a mile away. I had lived with Dave for a year, had become too familiar with that smell. “That won’t help,” I told Dorian. “It’s not meant to help the pain,” he said, correcting his tortoise-shell glasses, which had been sitting lopsidedly on his face. “It’ll balance things out. This way, you won’t get too high before class.” I took a swig from the flask. Again, I coughed. “All right,” I said, firmly. “I have to get to class, now”; “Didn’t I make it up to ya?” said Dorian. “Sure you did,” I said. “Thanks.”

I felt wonderful and cozy – like I was waking up on a Saturday morning. Suddenly, everything stressful in life really wasn’t important, after all. The years behind me, and the years to come before life got serious were like two sides of a warm blanket that folded over me and wrapped me up. I wanted to feel that way for the rest of my life. “Aren’t you going to class?” I asked Dorian. “No thanks,” he said. “I’m going to stay out here for a while. It was good to meet you, though”; “Yeah,” I said. “Same time tomorrow?” said Dorian. “Yeah,” I said, smiling.

The watch that my father had given me said 12:59. I still had a minute before the bell would ring. This watch was old and rusted, though; and it would, often, stop dead in its tracks for a brief bit before continuing. I attributed this mostly to the rust, but another explanation could have been that it was programmed to correct itself when it was no longer representing time accurately. I sometimes wished that I were this watch, that I had this trait, that I could stop time whenever I felt it was slipping away from me.

As I hurried across the baseball diamond toward the school, I started to get paranoid. *Had my watch stopped at any point today? Had the bell gone off without my knowing it?* I went into the school and saw that the halls were empty. As I removed my music books from my locker, the bell finally sounded. This was the second time this semester that I would be late for class. (The first time didn't count as an official tardy, I was told. It was on the first day of school; and, because I was new, I had difficulties finding my homeroom.)

I sprinted to the music room, and walked into class at 1:01. I had strange suspicions that everyone in the classroom, including my teacher, Mrs. Delorme – who was staring at me like I had invented cancer – knew that I was high; but no one said a word to me. I walked over to my music stand and picked up my violin. (That day, I played a movement from Vivaldi's "Four Seasons" more beautifully than ever before.)

The next day, my new "friend" and I snuck off to the dugouts during lunch hour and smoked hydroponic pot, which Dorian said was from Northern California.

Dorian had been up and down the west coast giving readings and signing copies of his new book, *Acclimating to Deconstruction*. He'd been skiing in Whistler, had been to Europe, had

also skied in the Swiss Alps, above the clouds. His parents were tenured professors – his father taught African American literature at the University of Western Ontario, and his mother conducted poetry workshops at Brock University. They were old money – heirs of fortunes made long ago. But Dorian wasn't a snob, didn't take his wealth for granted. "Privileged kids can still be poor, and often are," he once told me.

Most Fencely students had a 1 – 2 hour car ride from places like Toronto and Hamilton. Fencely did, however, accommodate these students, provided student housing in consideration of their parents who lived so far away (Doyle and Roberson Hall were the names of these dormitories), but to live on campus was expensive; and to live there, in Wyoming, was not – although you'd be on the lake – coveted.

Dorian was not one of these students. His parents had a sprawling Wyoming property like Dave's. (I had read in *Maclean's Magazine* – a popular Canadian periodical – that Lambton County was one of the most affluent counties in Ontario, and that Wyoming's access to the lake made it that way.)

A watery Canadian province, Ontario has many lakeshores; and, therefore, many beachfront properties; and, subsequently, many of the rich! Ontario is *filled* with rich people trekking up and down docks in their boat shoes. It's filled with doctors and lawyers and their getaway homes – summer lake houses in cities like Huntsville and Bayfield. There are, unfortunately, thousands of the Hurt in Ontario (the Hurt are everywhere, I know). The Hurt are, often times, parents who wrestle with memories of their teenaged sons and daughters who got drunk on their boats and drowned in the lake some years back. Summers, here, are like Morlocks

that come around and snatch one or two of the Eloi. If you respect the water, then the water will be accommodating. If not, then you will see how the water can terrorize the land.

Dorian was wearing the same pajama top under his makeshift Fencely blazer. It was a windy afternoon, and his hair was especially crazy. After our “session” in the dugouts, he and I ran across the baseball diamond; ran between Roberson and Primeau Hall; ran across the courtyard – the angelic statues towering over us, judging us. “Where are we going?” I asked him. “Just come on,” said Dorian. I looked at my father’s watch. In seconds, we had jumped over the iron gates of Fencely Prep, and had entered the faculty parking lot. “What are we doing, here?” I said. Dorian didn’t answer. Instead, he took out a key ring loaded with keys, key fobs, and karabiners. Also, there was a keyless entry system with a big red button on it (the kind that begs to be pushed, if you’re little – say, 4 or 5). Dorian pushed it; and, a moment later, a black Beemer at the edge of the parking lot sounded off. “Come on!” said Dorian. I followed him as he trotted over to the Beemer. “This is Mr. Preston’s,” he explained. “After my English class, he stopped me and told me how wonderfully I did on my paper about John Winthrop. His keys were sitting there on his desk, and when he turned to get my paper from his bag, I snatched them”; “You’re kidding me,” I said. I didn’t quite know what to think, or how to feel.

On the brochure, Fencely Prep had boasted about their nutritious and delicious lunches. The cafeteria had different stations preparing different things: Goulash, macaroni and cheese, etc. There were turkey-and-swiss sandwiches sitting under heating lamps. The salads were dry and made with bad dressing. The hamburgers were synthetic tasting. If it weren’t for the Poutine (French Fries smothered in brown gravy), which I enjoyed tremendously, it might have been even easier to persuade me to steal Mr. Preston’s Beemer. “We’ll go to one of the restaurants

downtown,” said Dorian, as if he’d read my mind again. “Don’t you want a good meal for once?” “I’m not sure,” I said. “I am,” said Dorian. “What if we get into trouble?” I said. “What if we get into an accident?” At this, Dorian appeared outraged. “You know,” he said. “What if the separatists had asked that question? What if Columbus had worried about sea squalls swallowing up his little sea ship? Huh? And *he* was sailing across the Atlantic, Brian! He was sailing into the vanishing point! Into the great unknown – a big old cataract, for all he knew! This is just a little car ride”; “All right,” I said. “I mean, Christ!” said Dorian. “All right!” I said, again. Deep down, I was somewhat thrilled to be doing something illegal. The most irreverent thing I had ever done was interrupt class lectures, be perhaps too loquacious, or too inquisitive.

Like many adolescences, mine was filled with firsts. The previous day, I had smoked my first joint, and now I was stealing my first car.

I followed Dorian into the Beemer, and laid my body on the cold leather interior of the passenger’s seat. We struggled, at first, to operate the car. “What’s R?” I said. “Hmmm,” said Dorian. “Real fast, I think”; “No,” I said. “I think it means *reverse*”; “Well, why’d you ask me, then?” said Dorian. He drove us out of the faculty parking lot and down the long country road – away from Fencely. “Where’s the radio?” said Dorian. In seconds, the heat kicked on and was warming my feet. I was high, and I felt cozy again – like I had returned to my bed, and was all wrapped up in blankets.

My first attempt at rolling a joint produced what resembled a white cocoon. I took it apart and tried again. My second attempt was even worse. Finally, I rolled a perfectly cylindrical marijuana cigarette, which Dorian – the veteran pothead – was proud to smoke, and had started doing so by the time we hit Main Street. “After all,” he was saying. “This car belongs to us as

much as it belongs to Mr. Preston.” Smoke was spewing from his mouth, and was rising through his slightly-cracked window. The wind ran through his curly black hair. “We’re not really students,” he said. “We’re more consumers; our education is a product, ya know.” I felt paranoid; we were submerged in downtown Wyoming, and the bank where my mother worked was near. My mother was used to packing her lunch in a brown paper bag each morning, but it wasn’t completely unreasonable that we might bump into her at a restaurant or on the street. How horrified she would be to see me smoking weed in a stolen car. And yet, Dorian was beginning to persuade me that it *wasn’t* stolen. “This car doesn’t belong to Mr. Preston,” he said. “It belongs to us.” I tried to convince myself of that, tried to think of anything but my fear. “Fucking teachers,” said Dorian, angrily. “My writing didn’t even get me into this place. Can you believe that? My vitae, my publications, books of literary criticism, simple *knowledge* of my work – that’s what got me accepted! You believe it? These people haven’t the time, or the intellectual capacity, to generate their own assessments of my writing; they rely, instead, on resumes, and what other people have to say about you – pre-existing opinions.” I wasn’t really listening to my new friend’s rambling. (“Fucking teachers,” he kept saying.) Instead, I focused on downtown Wyoming, on the people, on the buildings, the barber shop, the market, the hardware store, etc. I studied the people going in and out of the Italian restaurants, thought about their Penne Arrabbiata, thought about the menus at the Irish pubs, drooled over thoughts of their Shepherd’s Pie. I studied the people pumping gas at the gas station. I studied the post office, and of course, my mother’s bank. I mistook many women – in pencil skirts with designer handbags and short brown hair – for my mother.

Dorian turned left on Cemetery Street and drove away from downtown. We rolled up a steep hill with grass and grave yard on either side of us. “Here’s my plan,” said Dorian, pulling slowly into the grave yard. “I’m going to get my Ph.D. in English, publish a couple of novels, and teach creative writing at McGill. Then, I’ll get a black Beemer just like this one. I’ll publish my masterpiece at 19, and I’ll ascend to the chair of the English department quickly thereafter. Then, I’ll have an affair with my brightest student, and my employment will be terminated. I’ll publish another couple of novels, and I’ll move to Montana, or Manitoba, or maybe Kansas, or some place like that – I can buy farmland and receive government subsidies. Or maybe my property taxes will be minimal cuz I’ll raise bees. Albert Einstein says ‘when the bees go, we go.’ Maybe I’ll build a house on the edge of the Atlantic Ocean. Are you West or East Coast, Brian?” “East, I think”; “Me too,” said Dorian. “Although, I haven’t really been to the Eastern states, or even the Eastern provinces, for that matter. Anyway, I can get a house on the ocean, and I can get flood insurance, and it will be paid for by tax payers. Maybe I’ll just move to Montana or some other desolate place where I’ll blow my brains out at 25”; “25 is young,” I said. “Yeah,” said Dorian. “But I’m only 13. It’ll be a short life, I know; but a full one, nevertheless – a miniature one. I’ll do everything that old-timers have done, experience everything they’ve experienced, but I’ll do it quickly”; “Jesus!” I said. “Where’s the fire?” “No fire,” said Dorian. “But life is excruciating, don’t ya think? And it’s already been such a long life, with so many chapters and places. Of course, UWO {the University of Western Ontario – one of the finest universities in Canada, to some} offered me a full scholarship to study theory and literature there”; “Well,” I said. “That would be a great stride toward your plan”; “Right,” said Dorian. “But I wouldn’t have my vitae tarnished by a degree from UWO.”

I was feeling less paranoid now that we were away from my mother's bank. What Dorian had said was true; life is excruciating! But then I thought about the writing, and about the feelings that the elderly must have – how impossible they are to know, much less predict at my age. I thought about all the things to write about, all the feelings to document. For someone so apparently brilliant, Dorian was sounding naïve. "They'll find my unfinished manuscript on my desk," he said. "My own *Finnegan's Wake* drenched in blood." I laughed. "They'll find me with a big beard on my face, and a Herringbone blazer on my back, and a shit ton of empty whiskey bottles on the floor, and one in my hand, too. Writers kill themselves, Brian. That's what writers do, ya know. Look at Mark Hennessey; he's tried to kill himself 36 times, for Christ's sake"; "Who's Mark Hennessey?" I said. "He's a writer," said Dorian. "Here, at Fencely. He's not a very good writer, but I suppose he's a writer, nonetheless"; "My mother's boyfriend is a writer," I said. "I know," said Dorian. "I read *Disheveled Assassin*. I don't know why it got such heavy feminist scrutiny; it's his finest book, if you ask me. How old is your step-father, anyway?" "Not sure," I said. "45, I think." Dorian cringed. "15 years left," he said. "Huh?" I said. "Just saying, maybe he'll be like Hemingway"; "What do you mean?" I said. "Maybe he'll kill himself," said Dorian. He parked the car and started rolling our second joint. (He used the same copy of *Manufacturing Consent* that I'd seen on his lap the previous day.)

I looked at the grave yard – at all the people who had pushed off, who had believed in God, had pushed their way through life and died, only to end up here, rotting in the earth, their skulls filled with maggots. In the distance, there was an old man standing over a grave. I had heard that you can have a relationship with people after they've died, and I wondered if that was true, wondered what the old man was doing there. I looked at the deep lines on his face.

Suddenly, I felt terrified. I imagined standing at a river, and looking at myself across the way, at some future version of myself. The river was wide, and I couldn't quite make myself out. I had so many questions. *What kind of man will I become, anyway? Will I be happy? Will I live in a storage unit? Will I live in a mansion somewhere?*

When the old man came closer, I recognized his blue eyes and his dark hair. It was Miles; but why? What was he doing here?

“Shit!” I said.

“What’s the matter?” said Dorian.

The geriatric butler shuffled our way in his grey suit pants and his camel-hair top coat with his red scarf and blue winter hat.

“That’s Miles!,” I said. “Dave’s Butler! I can’t have him see me like this – weed smoke spewing out of our stolen Beemer!”

“I told you,” said Dorian. “It’s not stolen!”

“Whatever!” I said. “We’ve got to get out of here, and quickly!”

Dorian transplanted *Manufacturing Consent* from his lap to mine. Our second joint hadn't quite been rolled, and tiny bits of marijuana were smeared across a picture of Chomsky. We sped backward out of the grave yard, back down the hill, and back into the cluster of buildings (more anxiety, here). We drove past the Italian restaurants and Irish pubs, past the gas station, past the post office, the bank, the hardware store, and everything else that made up downtown Wyoming. We drove past a million farms, a couple of churches, and back into the faculty parking lot of Fencely Prep. I don't know how Dorian spent the rest of his day, but I'd

been scared straight! I ran into Primeau Hall and into the locker room where I quickly changed for gym class. I didn't even eat lunch.

Things went along like that for a while. Dorian liked me because I was the only one bored enough to smoke weed with him everyday. I didn't fall in love with that curly mess of a hairdo, though gradually I did come to admit to myself that Dorian was handsome. Rather, I fell in love with his lifestyle: the way he smoked his cigarettes – one hand poised the way high-class ladies hold small porcelain cups of tea; the way he dressed; his objection to rules and regulations. It was weird: He was one part Harold Bloom, and two parts Jim Morrison. He was both dangerously intelligent and incredibly dumb. He was both adult and his age. He read Nietzsche, and he picked his nose. He was both the Dionysian and the Apollonian. He staggered through the Fencely halls drunk and high most of the time, and he always had this contemptuous look on his face, like he was John Lennon during a Dick Cavett interview, like he didn't give a shit about anything (although I suppose John Lennon *did* give a shit about several things). "I drink and do drugs," Dorian once told me. "So that I can talk with assholes." It wasn't just this that I fell in love with. It was his friends, too – the whole *Purge* thing, the whole Fencely scene: ambitious little children – rich kids modeling adult lives.

By the end of the semester, I had earned straight A's, and my mother and Dave showered me with Christmas presents. These were both Christmas Presents and job-well-done-type stuff – an American Fender Stratocaster with double humbuckers, (this was annoying; I had quit the guitar years ago, and no one had noticed), an Encyclopedia on CD-ROM (Hurray!), and a word-

of-the-day calendar rolled up and shoved into a stocking. I was proud of myself for having earned such stellar grades, but I felt tremendous guilt for what had developed into a serious habit.

Many times, I even smuggled weed into the house. One day, after school, I rolled a joint in my bedroom – I had become an expert at rolling joints, had learned the entire weed lexicon, had even chosen my favorite papers to work with (Zig-Zags – white) – walked slowly down the stairs, through the house, and into the backyard.

The beach was at the bottom of a hill so steep that there was the habit of calling it a cliff. If you could get down that hill, there was warm sand that stretched 50 feet or so down to a series of temperate waves.

In the summer, Lake Huron was terrain for Dave's 29-foot sailboat. We'd slip on our boat shoes, our shorts, and our thin sweaters; and we'd drive to the Sarnia Yacht Club – where Dave kept his boat. Sailing along the Sarnia coastline steadily built up our appetites; we'd open the cooler and eat our sandwiches. Lake Huron was the park in which we'd have our picnics.

Carroll was incorrigible during many of these trips. "I don't want ham!" she'd say. "What about tuna?" my mother would say. "No!" she'd say. "What is wrong with you, Carroll?" my mother would say. "You've become so difficult!" Dave and I would stand at the bow, trying not to hear my mother and Carroll screaming from the quarterdeck; the wind would race past me, and I'd just about hope for it to carry them overboard. There was a time where I would side with Carroll on these matters, but now I wondered if it was possible that she could be more pliable, more adaptable; I wondered why she had to be such an unreasonable pain-in-the-ass; anyway, Saddam was hardly keeping in touch those days; I had felt him drifting from us for some time. It's as if he were aboard a ship that took him south while Dave slowly took us north; we could

still see Saddam, and if we wanted to, we could wave to him; but he was slowly disappearing into the vanishing point, and it would not make sense to wave for much longer. Also, my mother was falling more and more in love with Dave. *Better to appease her*, I thought. *Dave isn't going anywhere. We're stuck here. Better to just get along.*

A ride on Dave's sailboat was, for me, like a pacifier (not that I needed one). I loved standing on the bow and feeling the wind racing through my long blonde hair.

But I often wondered if the skeleton of Miles' son was somewhere below us – eels slithering through its eye sockets, zig zagging between its ribs, resting in the small valley of its clean pelvic girdle. I tried to remove this image from my head – tried desperately to think of anything but dying on the lake.

The long grassy embankment that continued north, stretching out past Wyoming – this, and the backyards of million-dollar houses, was our scenery. In January, however, the lake – covered in snow – was unused and unwanted – just a sheet of ice looming in the background. For one of us waking up in the middle of the night and going to drink a glass of water, the lake – that ominous white – was just something to look at through the tall kitchen windows.

The backyard of Waller Grounds was a sprawling expanse flanked by rows of trees – one of which I hid behind when I saw Miles standing on the hill speaking with his dead son. Miles! He and his family – his wife buried in soil, his son buried in lake – were becoming a problem; his relationship with the dead was an obstacle whenever I tried to smoke weed.

But this was one of those cold-as-life days in January, and I knew that Miles couldn't stand out there for long; so I stayed hidden behind the tree for a few minutes, poking my head past it, occasionally, to see if the old butler had gone.

“Oh Sean,” I heard him say. “Oh, my sweet beautiful boy.” I could no longer wait for him. I lit the joint and started smoking it quickly. “Why’d you do it?” said Miles. “Why?” It became a race – an effort to finish my task before Miles finished his. “All this money,” said Miles. “And what good is it?” I began to understand that life was comparable to this joint withering away between my lips. I began to compare life with anything that begins and ends: a video game, a movie, (a marriage). There’s a certain thrill when it’s just beginning. You have the whole thing ahead of you to enjoy. And there’s sadness (or delight) when the thing has ended. I began to think weird thoughts, began to see that the planet was a brilliant display of engineering, a rock that stretched its lands apart so that we might be divided and therefore different. I could see that humans were carefully built as well. *Our fists and our hearts are somewhat indistinguishable*, I realized. *For what we love, there must be a fight. For peace, you must plan for war.*

I heard less and less from Saddam in those months; and by January of 1997, my memories of him had faded, slightly. The few conversations that we had over the phone felt contrived. We had, however, met Saddam on Boxing Day at a diner in Sarnia. His short black hair and his big square jaw were like home to me. *My life was weird*, I decided, *like some old movie in which one of the main characters was rarely heard from or seen.*

Later, my sister and I opened presents in the back of his new Cherokee. Saddam got me a djembe, a pretty poster of a Sierpinsky Gasket, a nativity scene, Trivial Pursuit, and a kit for fixing glasses (I had told him over the phone that my beloved tortoise shell aviator sunglasses had been broken). The nativity scene, I thought, was a weird choice; I hadn’t expressed to him

any spiritual beliefs. It's hard to remember what I thought of God in those days. I suppose I knew that God could come in handy down the road; and I suppose I wanted to believe in God, but couldn't. I hate to use clichés, but I think I just felt that providing some sign of his existence wasn't a lot to ask. If God can't do a menial task to convince me of his presence, he must not be there to begin with.

As I trudged through the ice and snow some mornings on my way to the bus stop, I felt that cold slush crawl into my shoe and eke through my sock, dampening my foot; and I thought: *surely, there is no God*. Malnourished children begged for their lives, asked for "10 pennies a day" while my step-father spent guiltlessly, drank, and abused. Begged, I thought: *surely, there is no God*.

In May of 1997, I went with my mother and Carroll to see my Aunt Linda who was dying in some shitty hospice); and it was during this trip that I looked through the passenger-side window of my mother's station wagon, and thought: *surely, there is no God*. I was reading Philip Roth's latest novel, *American Pastoral*, when suddenly I became convinced that the world was truly bad and not worth saving. And yet, wasn't it Philip Roth who said: "The enemy is behind the gates"?

Behind the gates!

A few days before visiting Linda, I had seen something on the Nature Channel about lions and cheetahs. These wildlife experts were driving fast through some plain in Africa, and these damn cheetahs were running right alongside them. I felt terrified of nature. I was terrified of a lot of things. The Mujahideen or the Hizballah or whatever were strapping bombs to their

chests and blowing themselves up. How do you defend against that? People didn't even fear death. What kind of world was it now that people no longer feared death?

It was, perhaps, things like these combined with my habitual weed-smoking that brought me to this sudden, and constant, state of anxiety about the world. Yet people like were jaded because we mistakenly assumed that the world could get better; and so we were optimists – not pessimists. Children in Calcutta, for example, had been born from prostitutes and lived in dire poverty. They flew their kites from rooftops while their mothers conducted business below them. They knew – perhaps due to their inherited religious beliefs – to accept that the world was full of pain; and so they were the true pessimists.

I was the opposite. Despite my circumstances, I had been raised to believe that everything was inherently good; and so, was shocked and therefore slipped into something of a depression when I learned that the world was ugly at best. North America had been founded by Puritans on a covenant with God – a seeming mission to convert all indigenous peoples to Christianity. Africans had been kidnapped from their home and brought over to the New World. It was a violent childhood that had made this land violent in its maturity. African Americans had lost their identities centuries ago, and now they were the subject of every socioeconomic joke. People were killing each other. War was everywhere. Fearless warriors were valued more than upright politicians. In everything I saw that wasn't overtly negative, there was something negative to extract. My only consolation became knowing that for many men – not just for me – but for many men, there is so much pain. *Lutte, lotta, lucha* – every country has a word for *struggle*.

CHAPTER V

THE DEFINITION CONTEST

The kids of Fencely Prep were chauffeured from colonials in London and lake houses in Hamilton. The cities from which they came were far away; but that wasn't enough. A 1996 article in *Maclean's Magazine* explored the best secondary schools of Canada; Fencely Prep was among the top 10. Time, gas, whatever – it would not be enough to dissuade parents from arming their children with a world-class education.

Some cars would arrive at the Grecian columns from penthouses in Toronto – a two-hour drive. Dust was kicked up by Cadillacs and Bentleys unloading children and then shrinking as they drove back through the tall Canadian wheat fields.

On May 28, 1997, as I prepared for a definition contest that Mr. Preston would host after school, I read the *Maclean's* article and glanced over another article about serial killer, Paul Bernardo. (It was weird. I had discovered that I could do both things, not back-to-back, but simultaneously – reading dense articles from *Maclean's Magazine* while studying text books, or in this case, a word-of-the-day calendar.) I had taken the recent periodical from a pile of magazines and books stacked up at the foot of Dave's bedside. Bernardo had raped a total of 18 women, I read – half of them he had tortured and killed. Most of this was in the Scarborough area – a few hours northwest of my new home in Wyoming. He had been convicted and sentenced in '95, and now – because we didn't believe in the death penalty – he was waiting for the slow, lingering, natural death.

But some bodies had only now surfaced. Elizabeth Bain's body was one of them. Bernardo had to be questioned – hence the article.

I had read books about Bundy and Manson, and I had been reading articles like this one. This is what I'm talking about when I write that the world is truly bad and not worth saving. This was part of the thing that woke me up in the night: sharing the country with serial killers and rapists whether they're locked up or not.

Dorian's friends were impressive; they were posh, politically engaged, and intellectual – like characters in a Woody Allen film. Mark Hennessey was one of them. Mark – that little shit – had published three novels and a memoir, and had taught literature at Lambton College before turning 13. He and Dorian were good friends – friends who worked together, but always competing friends. *Purge*, the Fencely literary journal, was a victory belonging to Dorian: he was the chief editor while Mark was only one of several assistant editors. But Dorian hadn't published any of *his* novels. Publishing companies like Random House, Grove, and Hyperion, along with all the rest of the heavy-hitting houses in New York, had rejected him, had called him “a patzer of writing”; and his books of literary criticism, while giving birth to a cult following, went largely unnoticed. It was impressive work for a middle school student, but it was mostly ineffectual.

Meanwhile, Mark Hennessey – with his tucked-in shirts, and his short and tidy hair – had not only published his novels, but had made money from them, had become one of a handful of writers, which included my step-father, who made serious money from their writing. He had become a famous person, gave interviews on *Charlie Rose*; *The Hour with George Stroumboulopoulos*; gave interviews to CBC radio host, Jian Ghomeshi; and to Larry King. He was always taunting Dorian. “I'd rather be the one to do the actual writing,” said Mark. “Than

the person who drools on its pages afterwards”; “No one drools over your work,” said Dorian. That wasn’t true; people almost literally drooled over Mark’s books. Critics wrote stellar reviews, and people lined up along the streets and avenues of New York City that surrounded Borders or Barnes and Noble or wherever Mark Hennessey, the wonder boy, would give readings and sign autographs. Dorian was jealous. He read not only the novels, but also the reviews that came shortly thereafter, read those melodramatic praises (“Hennessey’s latest novel does many things; but mostly, it announces the almost-messianic arrival of the novel’s savoir – salvation from the allure of technological advancements – and of what is, perhaps, the second coming of Shakespeare {sic}”; “I call Mark Hennessey the greatest living author because I think he is {sic}. I do not call him a poet because he’s never written a poem; he even dislikes poetry, I think. But everything he has written is a poem in the best and broadest sense of the word”) read those melodramatic praises, and crumpled them up while grinding his teeth.

Dorian, Mark, and I – along with several others – were all standing against the chalkboard in one of the cleared-out classrooms on the third floor of Primeau Hall. It was after hours; the student body had gone back to their penthouses and beach getaways. The sun had been consistently visible throughout the day; but now it was mingled with the lake, which we could see clearly across the fields and over a patch of forest.

Every school has got some aging hipster teaching English. Every school has got some laid-back, likeable, sandal-wearing, doobie-rolling, big bearded artist who lets his students say the “F-word” during class when they’re pissed off about politics. At Fencely, Mr. Preston clearly filled that position. On the day of the definition contest, he wore dark jeans, and a light, stone-

washed, chambray shirt unbuttoned toward the neck. He reminded me of Dave in a way, with his long hair tucked behind his ears, swaying at the sides, brushing, at times, against his beard.

The contest was on; Mr. Preston was judge. Someone was asked to define *proliferate*, got it wrong, and sat down at one of the desks, quietly, as if he (or was it a she?) didn't care. Another boy was asked for the definition of *jetsam*, got it wrong, and was out. Another boy got *dross*, defined it correctly, and moved to the back of the line. We were respectful. We clapped hard for the ones walking proudly to the back of the line, and we clapped even harder for the ones walking, shamefully, to their desks. *Tremulous*, *doldrums*, and *lackadaisical* – these were tough words; but Dorian and I had been drinking diluted Amaretto from his flask all afternoon, and we'd become “super-duper confident” – a couple of calm drunks just waiting in line.

The contest went on for hours. *Stalwart*, *temerity* – these were words that I had never heard before, but somehow knew the meaning of. Seats were filled. The line dissipated. Dorian stood always behind me, wearing always an expression of boredom. At one point, he successfully defined *insouciance*, and laughed while doing so, saying: “How appropriate for me.”

“Insouciance?” said Mark. “Can't you give him something more cognitive?”

“More cognitive?” said Dorian.

“Well,” said Mark. “I'd like it, that's all, if you could define something that isn't in the *Children's Illustrated Dictionary*.”

Dorian looked at his competitor, ferociously.

“That's enough!” said Mr. Preston, angrily.

“Why are we doing this, anyway?” said Dorian.

“Practice!” said Mr. Preston. “For the verbal exam.”

“Right,” said Dorian. “But words can, and often do, mean different things to different people.”

Mr. Preston had no counter-attack. It was often that these preternatural students outsmarted these faculty members.

Dorian – once poised between the imaginary pulpit where we all defined things, and the back of the line – finally joined me; leaned against the chalk board, and crossed his arms.

“What’s his problem?” he said, pretending that he and Mark weren’t equally competitive.

They continued to ridicule each other throughout the contest. Little jabs flew left and right. Several times, Mark stepped up to the “imaginary pulpit” where he defined words like *erudite*, and *dilettante*. Again, I had not heard of this last one; but I somehow knew that a dilettante was an appreciator of the arts, a person who takes up an art purely for the amusement of it. I thought it was curious that Mark and Dorian were asked to define words that described their very nature – words that in some way represented them. As the contest progressed, more and more of this occurred. *Belletristic*, *bohemian*. If Dave were a contestant, would he have been asked to define *latifundium*? Would my mother have been asked to define *coddle*?

Standing in line – waiting for my turn to define some obscure word that would, ironically, turn you into an idiot if you used it in everyday conversation like our teachers encouraged us to – I became immersed in my own train of thought. I started to think about *effrontery*, *impassive*, and *vim* – words that I had been charged with the responsibility of defining; words that I struggled with for a moment, but defined accurately (and not snobbishly, which is what Mark and Dorian were doing); words that, collectively, mean – or at least

contribute to a meaning of – *strong*, or *bold*. *The contest is communicating to me*, I thought; *or perhaps God* (although I didn't believe in him) *is speaking to me in some Emersonian fashion, telling me that I am strong, or that I will need to be strong in the future*. In life, you've got to mine your own plot of ground, I decided, until you find the hardest part of you; then you've got to put that big hard thing right out in front for everyone to see; and you've got to do it early in life. Early! Otherwise, your first battle, and every battle thereafter, will be with increasingly challenging opponents.

It became me; Dorian; Mark; some Jewish kid in a wheelchair; and Fencely's only black kid, who Dorian referred to as: "The Invalid." I was asked to define *impudence*, defined it quickly and assertively, and moved to the back of the line. Dorian was asked to define *paradigm*. He felt insulted; became visibly upset; defined it; said: "This is such bullshit"; and followed me to the back of the line – without being told, mind you, whether or not he'd defined it correctly.

Mark defined *pastiche*. The Jew in the wheelchair was asked to define *kiln*, deliberated to himself for a moment, and produced the correct answer amidst Dorian's laughter. *So much for being respectful*, I thought.

Fencely's only black kid defined *gingham*. I defined *tenacious*. Then came *Bagatelle* – a word my competitors could not define. *Bagatelle* is a French table game, like billiards, but with pins as obstacles; or it's a small musical piece typically written for the piano. The definition just came to me, like before. I stood against the chalkboard, waiting respectfully as all four of my opponents struck out.

"All right, Brian," said Mr. Preston, his eyes widened. "If you can define this, you'll be our winner."

There was a look of surprise on Dorian's face, and on each of my peers when I won the contest. Then there was half-impassioned clapping, clapping all around me, from all the contestants sitting in their seats, all the failed contestants like dead people clapping from their graves; then there was the certificate that Mr. Preston had made for me, or for the winner of the contest, I suppose. It had been put into a beautiful golden frame, and it said *congratulations* in big honest letters across the top.

I wish I could lose these memories. I read somewhere that memories are like flotsam bouncing in the water after the great shipwreck; and the shipwreck is that final push into old age. Your ship, your vessel, the thing that carries you is broken – cracked and sinking. All alone, in the middle of a vast sea, you cannot remember each day of your life; you can only remember some days – your first time making love, your wedding day, whatever. It is only a matter of time before you run out of gas, stop treading water; before you, too, submerge. But until then, there is all this debris, flotsam, wreckage – what's left of your life. I wish that memories were like jetsam, wish that *jetsam* were the metaphor; but, alas, you cannot throw memories overboard.

CHAPTER VI
SHIPWRECKED

As the century died a slow lingering death, it became apparent that John, Paul, George, and Ringo were no longer the most widely recognized icons. There had been civil rights; there had been Charlie Parker; there had been the beat poets bashing their heads in protesting the war in Vietnam; there had been politically-engaged university students (not completely dissimilar to Fencely kids) burning their draft cards. There had been rock n' roll, psychedelic drugs, the sexual revolution, cool, weird, war, and peace; there had been *Jaws*; there had been hair bands, rap, and grunge. Now there would be five female singers with five marketable personas, the commercial breakthrough of teen pop; now there would be the Spice Girls. The most widely recognized faces now belonged to them.

Change occurred at home, too. One day, I kind of freaked out, went into the barn where I'd seen some red paint, and splashed it all over my bedroom walls. For a moment, the room looked like a crime scene – like there'd been a triple homicide, there. Then I took out a brush and started spreading the paint, evenly. By the time I had finished, my room was like a womb, or like the inside of a heart. “You don't consult me before doing this?” said my mother. “You don't consult Dave?” Of course, Dave walked into my room wearing his blue bathrobe, and just shrugged his shoulders. “Looks good, actually,” he said. “Like Matisse's Red Studio.” He, then, continued smoking his cigarette down the stairs and back into his office. “I think it looks like hell,” said my mother. “Then you'd better get out,” I said.

There, in my bedroom, I sat at my desk reading all the landmark books that I'd had intentions of reading, but was too consumed for; all the novels that Mr. Preston encouraged me

to read; all the erotic books that were once banned in American libraries; all the literary achievements of men who'd either done hard drugs, or committed suicide, or both. *On the Road*, *The Sun Also Rises*, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, *The Confederacy of Dunces*, *Tropic of Cancer*, *The Ginger Man*, *Catcher in the Rye*, and *American Psycho*. I located my favorites, was totally subdued by Donleavy; hated Joyce, couldn't be bothered with Joyce, thought he was snobbish – too pretentious.

At night, I lay in my “womb” rubbing my cock and watching as it became erect. My cock had always been, to me, a “penis,” or a “peter”; but now it was becoming a nicely-defined *cock*. One night, in particular, I was spitting on and rubbing my cock when, suddenly, I realized that I didn't need any more saliva, realized that I'd somehow produced my own lubricant. I didn't stay curious for long. I knew exactly what I'd done, had read about it in books, had watched sex tapes at Dorian's while his parents attended literary conferences out of town.

Change had become the only thing a man could count on, the only thing that wouldn't let him down; and yet, in a way, there hadn't been change. I had read *Portnoy's Complaint* (Roth had become another favorite, though he hadn't engaged me as well as the others had with their depression and chemical dependence). Young boys, as far as I could tell, had always been chronic masturbators; had always prayed that their parents would “step out” for a minute, go grocery shopping, go out for dinner; had always spent hours in locked bathrooms and bedrooms beating off, laboriously. Young boys had always spoiled the freshness and sanctity of their mother's brand new hand towels. Young men had always done these things, had always been this way; and as long as young boys continue to masturbate, continue to pour their hearts into poetry

and contemplate sending it to young girls, I suppose there will not be change. I suppose there will be at least one constant.

In 1997, my mother was diagnosed with and died from colorectal cancer. She was 55. I tried to remain calm throughout the whole thing. I tried to remember that I wasn't alone. *Au revoir; adios; hasta la vista* – every country has a word for *goodbye*.

Colorectal cancer kills 600,000 people a year. It's the fourth most common cancer in North America, and the second leading cause of cancer-related deaths in the Western world. It's a bitch because there are almost no external symptoms. For my mother, it started with anemia – a deficiency of red blood cells; no oxygen to the organs; minor external symptoms such as shortness of breath, general weakness, and fatigue. Then there was constant diarrhea, abdominal pain, and blood in the stool. Do you remember what I wrote earlier? When you're precocious, people tell you things; adults let you in on their strange little secrets. But what had happened here? Why wasn't I told about her bloody stool? On some meaningless day, just like any other day, in 1996, before I'd met Dorian (before I'd met anyone, really), I sat in the Fencely library reading articles about colon cancer in the *Canadian Medical Association Journal*. If only I'd known about my mother's symptoms. I would have made her see the doctor (although I guess she did that herself); would have made her get “a low-sensitivity guaiac fecal occult blood test”; “a fecal immunochemical test”; or “a colonoscopy”. But it wasn't until her bright red stool turned into black tar-like stool that I was informed of the situation; it wasn't until she'd found mucous in her stool; it wasn't until she had gone to the hospital and was actually diagnosed...

She didn't fight for very long; she was diagnosed in the summer, and she died during a blizzard in December. On a Thursday (I don't remember which), Dave, Carroll, and I went to see her in the London hospice where she'd been staying for a month. (Dave's Beemer almost didn't make it through the snow.)

When we got there, each of us had some "alone-time." Her room was nice, I decided. She had a gas fireplace, an extra bed for guests to sleep in, and a bathroom the size of my bedroom. Tim Horton's had made several monetary donations to the hospice, and had provided patients and their families with lunch; I ate a bagel and some hot chilly. I was pretty stable throughout the whole thing, but my mother was totally spun. She kept going on about nurses and doctors trying to kill her. At one point, the nurse came in and pumped her arm full of drugs. I hated needles; so I turned away as the nurse stuck her and pushed down on the plunger. I looked back at my mother, and she was out.

Later, she woke up and was totally coherent. So, I sat and cried with her for a short time before finally saying goodbye. I asked her about the pain, and she told me there wasn't any.

"At least not anymore," she said.

I didn't know what to say. I wanted to spend the night with her; but she told not to, told me to go home and study. Mrs. Chevalier – my guidance counselor – had, however, excused me from finals, had already demanded that my teachers give me my projected grades.

"You must promise me something," said my mother. "You must promise to continue your education at Fencely."

"Where will I live?" I said.

I was sitting in a chair at her bedside.

“With Dave,” she said. “I have asked him to take care of you, and he said that he would. Anyway, you haven’t seen your father in over a year. Your father wants nothing to do with you, or Carroll.”

“That’s fine,” I said.

“It’s going to be a wonderful life, Brian.”

She began to smile.

“I used to love film, you know. Fellini, Godard, Hitchcock, Kubrick. I used to watch movies the way you read literature. The characters in them were empty. They’d say: ‘I’m empty.’ And I’d think: *Jesus! What does that mean...to be empty?* But then I got older. You see, getting older is figuring out what they meant. Getting older is understanding – understanding the world around you.”

“I hate the world,” I said. “I think it’s a terrible terrible place.”

“You won’t, always,” she said. “One of these days, you’ll forgive your father and I for the crime of giving you life.”

Here, she was smiling again; as if telling me, in a sort of interlinear way, that she, too, had charged her parents once, but acquitted them long ago.

“Wait until you have kids,” she said. “Let them visit all the emotions. For example, I love you, Brian, and I want you to be horribly depressed. I want you to have problems; I hope you fail more than you succeed. But I hope, in the end, that you do succeed, Brian; and I hope that your achievements are made richer and more pleasurable by the pain leading up to them. And yet, it’s the little things that matter – not success. I know many people who are unsuccessful, who’ve given up on themselves; and yet, when I think of these people, holistically, I think of them in a

positive way, and with great affection. It's the little things, Brian – definitely not wealth or fame. If, at my age, you still enjoy a good walk, if birds and flowers, mountains and sea still inspire you, then you are a most-fortunate individual. Soon, you'll be content to just deplore everything; you'll stop trying to make things to your liking; you'll become humble, more aware of your limitations and of the limitations of your fellow man. It's the little things that you must surrender yourself to. Be grateful to live in Canada, for the freedom to sit on a bench and smoke, the freedom to enjoy a good meal. Stop condemning the world! No, Brian, God is not for idiots. No, the pursuit of happiness is not such a waste of time. You, for example, have made me *so* happy! But I stopped being able to teach you things a long time ago. Life is a greater school than I am, Brian; but death is a part of it. I know it's hard right now, but you'll realize this. You'll begin to understand, as I did; everything will come together. You'll get through this, Brian; and when you do, my boy, you'll see that the world is beautiful, and that the future is nothing to fear.”

As I put on my coat, an intolerable silence filled the room. My mother looked at me as though it were the last time that I would let her.

I left without saying goodbye; but, by imaginings, stood for a little longer; watched the door close behind me; heard my footsteps diminish in the hall; watched my mother look up at the ceiling; watched her die alone in that room.

On the ride home, Dave, Carroll, and I listened to the news on the radio: some junkie put his kid in the microwave; a massacre in Algeria – 117 dead or abducted by terrorists.

Instead of going to school the next day, I took a city bus to Sarnia where I saw *Titanic* – a film with an unprecedented \$200-million budget that had made an unprecedented \$36 million in its first weekend at the box office. I cried watching the film.

The house was inundated with callers and visitors – all of them reporters for various newspapers and magazines. I had suspected that these reporters would surface, had suspected that they would come to the house requesting an interview with Canada’s most talented writer, had suspected that newspapers – *The Sarnia Observer*, *The Toronto Sun*, *The Vancouver Courier*, etc. – would be wondering how Dave Waller, author of *Disheveled Assassin* (a popular book), was handling the death of his wife; and, of course, these suspicions were confirmed, not by a handful of reporters, but by several of them – all anxious to get a profile of my step-father.

There were more callers than there were visitors. Of course, I could not hear where these callers were calling from; could only hear Miles as he – standing in the doorway – quickly and assertively declined, on Dave’s behalf, to be interviewed. But I heard some of the visitors announce that they had come from Toronto – a two-hour drive. This, I thought was humorous. I had suspected, also, that these nosy men and women would have a hard time getting Miles or Dave on the phone (because Miles would often unplug it, and because Dave had seemingly become too distraught); and yet, had they been persistent, they might have saved themselves the terrible inconvenience of being turned away quickly and curtly by the robotic butler (a butler who, in addition to rejecting them, gave them nothing with his body language or his physical appearance) who – to what must have been their extreme dismay – answered the door instead of Dave.

In the midst of grieving, I sort of stopped and became interested in Dave for a moment. It really was quite interesting! I had, of course, realized that my step-father was a popular Canadian writer, but had failed to realize – understandably, I think – that a death in his family would

inspire so many headlines; had failed to realize that a death in his family would be such valuable news that reporters would – because they couldn't get it over the phone – drive two full hours for the terrible odds of getting it in person.

Life at Waller Grounds became increasingly difficult. Things fell apart. Initially, Carroll freaked out, quit school, stayed in her bed, and didn't say more than five words a day, not to anyone, not even to me; but soon, she began crying loudly, not for a moment, not for a few hours, but for all hours of the day. She began wailing, *continuously*. It didn't stop; she didn't take breaks. I thought it was devastating when the crying didn't cease for 24 hours, but when it continued for two days, when I looked at my calendar one day and realized that she'd been crying for well over a week, I started to think it was peculiar; started to think she was craving attention like a two-year-old; started to think she wasn't even sad anymore, but that there was something wrong with her brain. I wondered if there had been a record; wondered if *The Guinness Book of Records* had a record for continuous weeping; thought to myself: *surely, they do.*

I had to buy ear plugs so that I could sleep at night. In the morning, I sat in the kitchen in my blue Fencely blazer eating cereal with a cup of hot coffee and the latest edition of *Maclean's* (Dave's unused, suddenly uncared-for subscription had become my very well-liked and very appreciated subscription); but Carroll's wailing from upstairs often stopped me from enjoying my breakfast, often stopped me from enjoying anything. Initially, I thought the whole situation was quite sad. *This house is in shambles*, I thought. But, as Carroll's weeping persevered, I actually became annoyed, would often roll my eyes walking through the hallway from the

kitchen to the foyer and out to the bus stop. Several times, I felt tempted to race up there, grab her by the arms, and shake her violently, saying: “Stop this nonsense! Stop! She’s dead! She’s fucking dead! Get over it! Get on with your life!”

Dave did something similar; adopted this totally cloistered lifestyle; became totally reclusive; wrote, drank, and smoked constantly, didn’t shower or get dressed, not even when he went on *Charlie Rose* in New York to promote his new book, *The Wagon* (He looked like Julian Schnabel or like Jeff Bridges in *The Big Lebowski*). He stayed inside his office, only interfacing with Miles – Miles who was continuously robotic, a robot on lithium. Miles – whose own wife had died from colon cancer, and who I learned was depressed by the death of his 24-year-old son – became even more depressed. Although he’d been emotionally divorced from each of us when my mother was alive; he, too, was affected by her death. He, regretfully, hired a young man to take care of the horses, and I speedily became accustomed to seeing this young man every morning on my way down the driveway toward the bus stop. He was just a young guy – probably in his early twenties. He always wore faded black boots with cuffed jeans and a Henley shirt. His hair – covered most of the time with a dark driving cap – was a dull orange. I often noticed him smoking hands-free as he brought the horses out of the barn for the day; and several times, I hopped the white fence and asked him to bum me a cigarette. But I didn’t say anything more, didn’t get used to the young man; thought he was something temporary – just a temporary hand to look after the horses while Dave took “time off” to drink, write, and smoke, “time off” to grieve.

I did what my mother told me to do: continued with Fencely, used my head, tried my best to see light at the end of the tunnel, tried my best to know that it would get better. Still, some days were hard to get through.

But my teachers were incredibly supportive; if ever I woke up crying and found that I couldn't make it to school, they understood; didn't even require a phone call. In fact, when I did make it back to school, it'd be like nothing had happened. No one asked me for a doctor's note or anything like that. And, of course, when I was there, I could come and go as I pleased, wouldn't need some fucking hall-pass to go and cry in the bathroom; wouldn't need permission to just get up and leave for the day when I felt like my lungs had collapsed, when I felt terrified as I often did because, after all, I was down here, alone, with no mother, and no father (only an emotionally-absent step-father, and a sister who could not stop crying).

Jesus! What was I going to do? How would I get through this? Who would teach me to drive, to interview for a job, to tie a tie, to buy a car or a suit, to eat with my right hand, to comb my hair in a way that looks respectable, to send sympathy cards to people who'd just lost someone, to congratulate people who are getting married, and to respectfully pass on an invitation? Who would teach me these things? Who would tell me what fish I should keep and what fish I should let back into the water? Who would be my role-model? Of all the things to wonder and to worry about, one thing that I did worry about was growing up in a barn. *And this is nothing!* I thought. I hadn't experienced shit yet. There will always be problems, major and minor. There was still another parent to lose (although, I guess I'd lost him already). There was still a midlife crisis in the deck, and there was probably cancer to beat or die from. Then, in the

“back nine,” if I can make it that far, there’s desert, loneliness, pestilence: people start dropping like flies.