

TAKING THE PLUNGE AND OTHER STORIES

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To Nicci:
We've been together longer than we've been apart.
I'm your Huckleberry, and you're my Lovie Dove.
Put that in your book.

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ABSTRACT

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This project consists of four short stories. They were planned, written, and revised over the course of three years for the purpose of demonstrating mastery in the area of creative writing. Each piece explores a different genre of fiction while demonstrating growth and development in the craft of writing. This thesis was undertaken with the understanding that producing quality works of fiction requires creative ideas, thorough planning, multiple revisions, and professional input. Each story contains carefully crafted characters, dialogue, narration, and plot development. As a result, this collection demonstrates that mastery of all facets of creative composition are necessary to produce quality products.

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INTRODUCTION

This thesis consists of four stories: “Taking the Plunge,” “Lookie Loo,” “Two Hundred and Thirty-Seven Miles Is Never Enough,” and “The Radioman.” Each story is meant to explore a different perspective on the experiences of life and relationships through the eyes of wary protagonists. My goals were to create believable characters, expose them to the realities of life, and watch them sink or swim. Each story represents a different genre, and in all cases, I attempted to improve my skills of narration, dialogue, and description.

“Taking the Plunge” is a story of forbidden love between two teens from different backgrounds. It is set in the distant future when the world is recovering from a catastrophic breakdown of society. Though the cause of the breakdown is not clearly identified, the perception is that weakened familial roles and disorganized community involvement undermined the fabric of civilization. In this modern world, youths are specifically targeted as dangers, and there is little given to them by way of individual power or control. They are expected to adhere to firm rules until adulthood, and any deviation from these rules is strictly prohibited and punished.

Nadia and Jake have feelings for one another, but they do not know how to describe or deal with them. Having been brought up to fear peer contact, the two must cautiously interact without attracting the attention of their parents or local authorities. The initial spark between them is tantamount to love at first sight. Nadia is unhappy that she is expected to follow a formulaic plan for her future, while Jake is content to occupy the important, albeit menial, role of field laborer. Nadia sees him for the first time as the representation of freedom and simplicity, while Jake recognizes her desire for him at a time when most of society doesn’t care about him.

The two cautiously explore their feelings until they are convinced that the life mandated by the world they inhabit is not the type of life they wish to live. Forced to flee, they become even closer as they run for the hills from the ever present sounds of footsteps in the bushes. When it becomes apparent that there is no refuge from the expectations of their people, they leap from a cliff and die at the peak of their happiness. Their death is precipitated by Nadia's wistful mother who, it turns out, was the beater in the bushes urging them on toward their fate.

The original plan that I had for "Taking the Plunge" began with the thought that we are most happy as human beings when we are in the early stages of love. Once we fit that love into the real world though, everything is dulled. Love is chaotic, and life is meant to be structured.

I envisioned a short tale of a young girl developing feelings for a boy and then struggling to identify what was taking place inside of her mind. She would hear her friends talk of love and crushes, but she would be confused by the wide range of emotions and feelings welling up inside. After all, how does one know what love is?

I knew that I always wanted a scene where a daughter naively asks her mother what it means to be in love, and her mother's attempt would ultimately sound like the description of plunging to one's death. When the lovers finally decided to fully embrace their passion, they would hold hands and happily jump off a cliff, knowing they were going to die, just to experience what they believed was true love.

As the story development evolved, I decided that while children would experience true love, most grownups would long for it, and then despise others who can experience it. Madeline, as an adult, lacks the vocabulary to describe love to her daughter because life has drained her of the passion. All she has left is the memory of how great it felt. Her remorse for losing it allows

her to drive her daughter to the edge because she would much rather have her go out happy than slowly fade away.

The future society with its strict rules and punishment is then a metaphor for the perception of what we are all to become if we are to be successful. The cliff, with its cool misty unknown, is then the leap we all must take in our lives if we are to be truly happy. Our stomach must periodically be left behind, and our eyes must be blind to what comes next. The fact that the couple dies though is representative of the consequences that sometimes accompany leaps of faith.

“Lookie Loo,” is about a middle-aged, high school English teacher floundering through life after coming to the conclusion that his reflection in the mirror is not meeting his expectations. He feels small and meek, and he carries a grudge for a world filled with opportunities that seem to be available to everyone but him. He fears the children he teaches, yet he secretly envies their youth and future possibilities.

As the story begins, Jimmy Baur is once again late to work. He has squandered another evening with booze and perversion on the internet, and though he’s ashamed, it’s clear that he will do it again. While stuck in traffic, he hears a disturbing report on the radio that Facebook has activated a new feature that allows its members to identify every “creeper” that has visited his or her profile, along with every click and intrusion that’s been made. This causes immediate panic for Jimmy because he has spent countless hours exploring the racy photos of women he knows and female students from his high school.

Unable to destroy the evidence, Jimmy suffers the public indignity of being exposed as a pervert in front of his first hour class of students, several of whom he had ogled the night before. He flees the building of accusatory faces and drives toward northern Michigan with a mind for

escape. As with every other grand plan in his life, however, he loses interest. At the north side of the Mackinac Bridge, he contemplates suicide; he turns around instead. He knows that he's going to be in trouble, but he's so used to getting by that he returns home numb.

Jimmy and his wife are equal in their disdain for the life they've built. Alcohol is a shared solution, and his wife is drunk and upset when he arrives home. While Jimmy has used Facebook to fantasize about his lost days of youth and beauty, Jennifer has been hoping it will somehow reaffirm that she's still got it. When she realizes that no one is interested in her, even her husband, she goes off to bed beaten and depressed.

As the story closes, Jimmy gets drunk while confirming the number of people that have come to his page. None of his friends are named; there are no secret admirers. He has been found out by many of his students and their parents. That is all. He can't even begin to formulate a plan to deal with the trouble coming his way. He deletes his profile to stem the destruction to his reputation, but he still suspects it's too late. He passes out with no hope for his future.

The original idea behind "Lookie Loo" was to explore the dangers of social media for relationships both healthy and perverse. Jimmy was in a healthy relationship when he was younger, but age has taken away the feelings he once had. He knows that he is older and diminished, and it doesn't help that his career is to prepare teenagers for a promising future while he remains frozen in mediocrity. The title is very deliberate. A lookie loo is a person who window shops with no intention of buying. Jimmy is looking at attractive youth with no intention or desire to touch. His sexual gratification is coming from the memory of what pleased him in the past. He isn't so naïve as to think he could reclaim that physical interaction, but the fantasy is enough to provide temporary fulfillment.

His wife is on the opposite side of the transaction. She desperately wants someone to interact with her as Jimmy once did, but she is surrounded by lookie loos. No one wants what she is selling anymore. She hopes to reignite Jimmy's interest, as he is the only one capable of appreciating her, but the sad fact is that she reminds him of the passage of time.

There is no solution to age, there is only acceptance. Jimmy and Jennifer are not able to reach that point. In the end, Jennifer goes to bed with her lure still cast into the ocean of social media, while Jimmy must delete his page, closing the only door that gives him access to what he wants most.

In "Two Hundred and Thirty-Seven Miles Is Never Enough," Alan and Jill Parsons attempt to escape their busy lives of work and parenting the only way they can. They take a surrealistic vacation to northern Michigan with all of their personal baggage packed firmly into the back of their minivan.

From the beginning of their trip, they're blissfully happy to be far from home and ready to explore their physical passion for one another. What quickly becomes clear though is that they are incapable of escaping their obligations to work, family, and friends. Once the couple checks into the room that "could fit a carnival," they return to their car to collect their belongings. Those belongings pour out in the form of a boss, children, bills, laundry, friends, and countless complications.

Like any married couple tackling the challenges of life, they show no surprise and offer no protest to the farcical parade of characters and distractions. The chaotic pieces are carefully stacked onto the luggage cart with practiced hands, and the necessary time and attention that each piece will require is scheduled alongside the extracurricular activities Alan is so desperately preparing for.

With the best of intentions, Jill and Alan seek enjoyment anyway they can. Sex is not immediately possible when hunger takes precedence, so the flexible pair caravans to the roof-top restaurant. Their children dart about as casual distractions, Alan's boss constantly evaluates his behavior, and Jill's mother interjects her opinion whenever she can. Their spirits cannot be dampened though, and they end up in bed together despite it all. Their objective accomplished, they drift off to sleep and soak up the only rest they can get when a cat pukes, children start fires, and a mother-in-law hovers.

The idea for this ridiculous story comes from the fact that my wife and I frequently long for the types of vacations we used to take before we had two children. On the few occasions we've been lucky enough to find babysitters for multiple days, we end up missing our children more than we enjoy the break. It's comically tragic. We love them because of who they've made us as a couple, but we hate them because they murdered the couple we once were.

I set out to write a humorous piece of absurdity that spoke to every couple, especially those with children. The original draft began as a piece of realism; Jill and Alan enjoyed inside jokes with one another and behaved normally during their drive. There was no mention of the baggage in the back because they were working hard to forget about it. The title of the story is the distance from Royal Oak to Traverse City, and it's the distance they hoped was great enough to lose the burdens chasing them. Unfortunately, when they arrived at the resort, they let their guard down, and they found themselves unpacking items that were better left in the van.

During revisions, I was advised to eliminate any sense of realism from the beginning and focus on the absurdity. The final piece is stronger as a result. I think the humor comes from their resigned acceptance of life's complications. The complications are always present; their lives are always absurd.

“The Radioman” is about a twenty something construction worker wasting away at his job, when an act of terrorism interrupts his plans. During the global crisis, he discovers a unique ability that almost saves the world. When it’s clear that the world doesn’t really care, he hides his ability and reverts to a simple existence.

The story begins while Craig is working in Detroit when cyber terrorists on the other side of the planet cause the power go out across the world. Craig begins to feel and think differently during the blackout; he becomes hyper and desperate for stimulation. When his truck breaks down, he surprises himself and his co-worker by diagnosing and then fixing the problem.

Later that night, he notices how acute his senses have become, and he no longer hears the ringing in his ears that has been present since childhood. He also begins to absorb information at a frightening pace. He reads through and understands every book in his home, exhausting all printed material before sunrise.

Craig ends up driving around to large libraries in an attempt to quell his hyperactivity, but his appetite only grows more voracious. He reads books two at a time, and he formulates theories and solutions to many of the world’s problems. Once the lights begin to come back on though, he notices the ringing in his ears is returning; his attention becomes dulled, and his thinking slows.

He realizes that he is literally hearing the sound of radio waves as communities switch on their broadcasts. It is only now that he understands his brain has had the ability to receive radio frequency waves his entire life. He can’t decode them, but his mind has devoured them in abundance and grown stronger due to the increased use of RF radiation in the world.

When the RF signals disappeared, the receptive portion of his brain required immediate and gluttonous compensation. He becomes a genius long enough to realize it’s too much trouble

to fix the world. Everyone who's come before him has tried and failed. The records of their attempts are rotting on the shelves of the world's libraries.

Craig gives up in the end and moves himself closer to the very signals that his mind needs. The rivers of gibberish pour into him, satiating his hunger. He has no real problems, and he certainly has no desire to improve the world. He's truly happy.

This story was born from the observation that technology and information overload are creating a white noise that numbs the senses and makes the once extreme seem standard. Craig, as all people do, has the ability to affect change, but it is so much easier to find something else for an occupation.

I had several inspirations for this story. The most notable is "Flowers for Algernon." The protagonist gets a taste of perfection before he is returned to mediocrity. The difference in this story is that Craig relishes it. I was also inspired by *1984* and *Fahrenheit 451*. Distraction, both deliberate and accidental, can serve as a pacifier. This is both good and bad, which is why I have Craig living happily in the end without worries. The civilized Detroit is a mess, but there are still soft, dry places to sleep, and perfect, little gardens to feed him. I felt that it was a fitting end to this thesis for my protagonist to end up carefree and happy. No one was hurt, and every time there is a power outage, a hero comes through the darkness to lend a hand in small doses.

Throughout each of these four pieces, I feel I have created realistic dialogue that is balanced and enhanced with their body language as they interact. I have learned to recognize, through constant revision, the need for careful narration. This is especially true for stories like "Taking the Plunge," with its dystopian structure and "The Radioman," with its science fiction principles. I feel that I have effectively kept the audience informed without evoking disbelief.

I would like to continue to expand “Taking the Plunge” and “The Radioman” now that I have created the worlds. “Taking the Plunge” is missing the perspective of the authoritative body. Without the input from the scary police officers, I feel that the necessity for their suicide is a little cloudy. If this were a full novel, I would begin the tale at their first meeting in the yard, and I would walk the reader through several interactions with the danger. Madeline’s willingness to let her daughter die can be misunderstood because we don’t have her perspective on the world she’s raising her daughter for. Those are two important points of view missing.

“The Radioman” is too linear in its current form. If I were to expand this piece, I would like to more specifically identify the solutions he’s proposing for certain problems. As it is now, I feel that I’m stealing a page for Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* when she breezes through the steps for creating the monster. In the 1820s she wouldn’t have known what to write, so she simply says it would be irresponsible to share. In my case, I don’t go into detail, because the story is told from the future, and Craig has simply forgotten the steps now that he is back to normal. If I revealed the real struggles that Craig would be facing, the stubbornness of the people he’s trying to help, his quitting the role of hero would be more understandable.

TAKING THE PLUNGE

Sitting on her neatly made-up bed, Nadia was unable to get the flutter in her chest to subside. It was more than just a question of nerves; Nadia felt on the verge of an irreversible change, a change she wasn't sure she wanted. It was all she could do to stop biting on her thumb nails, pressed up to her mouth from clenched fists, to look out the window at the day that was only two hours old. It was late spring, warm enough for thoughts of picnics by the hay field and swimming in the creek, and already the morning cool was giving way to the stifling humidity that would dominate in the afternoon.

Nadia had been waiting for the end of the week with a great deal of anticipation, and, now that it was upon her, she wasn't sure if she would have the guts to go through with her plans. Today was the day that she was going to test Jake's feelings for her. The two had been speaking pleasantly to one another for months now, and, though she didn't completely understand her own emotions, she felt a strong connection forming between them. The world that she lived in didn't allow for young people to have connections, though.

There were strict consequences for people entering relationships not approved by the local community, and girls her age were not permitted to be in relationships at all. It was a system that had been in place for hundreds of years, and taught rigorously in school and church. Nadia and her classmates had heard of people who went against these rules, but she had never met any of them. The offenders were swiftly removed from society, and their memory was forcibly erased through fear and shame. Families would strike them from conversations and move on. The school yard whispered consequences for youths that went too far spoke of exile and death.

If anyone found out that she was even thinking of discussing the matter with anyone other than her parents, there would be quite a stir. That was why she had to be certain of Jake's feelings. If she was mistaken, if in fact his smiling dimples and soft pleasant eyes were meant for everyone, then she would be ruined. He was so nice though; he made her feel special. He had to feel the same for her.

Unwilling to get up from her bed until she regained a semblance of calm, she combed her damp brown hair forward over her face, but the little hiding spot she created for herself behind the thick cataracts of her bangs only soothed her warm temples and cheeks without soothing her worries.

"Why am I being so foolish?" she thought to herself. "I don't have to do this." She finished her complaint by sinking farther into her lap with a pleading moan. "Forget it, I will know once and for all," she said, and, with a renewed determination to stop her anxiety, Nadia thrust her full curtain of hair back over her bare neck and shoulders. The sudden cold slap was a shock to her glowing skin, and she arched her back as the natural little shiver ran its course toward her tailbone. She jumped into her clothes like a determined soldier readying for a march, and checked her appearance in the mirror. "I look sick," she told herself.

Nadia took one last look around her bedroom before going off down the stairs for breakfast with her mother. Her room was cleaner than it normally was. She was generally very messy. She didn't like that about herself, but, then again, it's not as though she was a bad person because of the clutter. She always meant to pick up her room each day, but it was too easy for her to find other distractions. Her mother told her that she was too impulsive for her own good. Last night, though, without even realizing it, she walked back and forth across her floor, picking things up and putting them in their proper place. She admittedly was lost in heavy thoughts about

her future, and, before she realized what she was doing, her clothes had all been restored to their hooks in the closet or the drawers of her chest. Her pictures were all realigned, and her jewelry was polished and stored. She also found that, because she didn't really have as many toys as she had in the past, her living arrangements were actually quite spacious. Her mother would be pleasantly surprised later in the evening when she came up to open her windows to let the fragrant heat of the valley out. Nadia pulled her door almost completely closed and walked into the cool shade of the hallway that led down the stairs to the kitchen.

The breakfast room was on the south side of the house, and it was already taking in the heat and sunshine of the early morning hours. It was used almost more as a greenhouse than a room for eating, but it served a perfect purpose for both. It was attached to the solid wall of the kitchen by a small door that was capable of being locked with a dead bolt. The room itself, though covered with a proper roof of slate tiles, was encased in single paned glass windows with dark green copper slats holding them in place. There were water stains on the rippling surfaces of the glass where the humidity condensed each day and captured with it the dust and pollen of the inhabitants both plant and animal. Nadia's mother was sitting at the only table in the room. It was a tall dark wood affair that required tall chairs to reach the surface. Madeline, a name which Nadia would never use to her face, was peeling an apple for her own breakfast, next to a plate of fruit that had been set aside for her daughter.

"You're up and about early today, Dee," said her mother. "I figured I would have to get the brass section out to wake you today what with all that pacing I heard in your room late last night." She obviously had heard what Nadia, at the time, was oblivious to.

"Oh, yeah," she paused looking for an answer that would suit her behavior. "I couldn't sleep. I guess I was just looking forward to the weekend."

“You’re not fooling me, you little Miss,” said her mother with a faint smirk of expectancy. “I took a peak into your room this morning while you were in the shower. Let’s have it, then; I know that you wouldn’t clean your room without me asking.” Her voice changed to that of a monarch mockingly bestowing favors. “What is it that you wish to request of me this morning? I suppose you have some place that you would like to go. Do you want friends over?” Her mother waited for the response to prove that she was indeed capable of reading her daughter’s mind and heart.

“I don’t need anything. I guess I was just occupied last night, and cleaning my room seemed to suit my mood.” Nadia was surprised at her response because it was the truth without her even intending it. “I’m sorry that I don’t clean it more often. I just don’t always feel like it.”

“Are you feeling alright?” Her mother asked. She maintained a half smile, but her lips separated a bit and her brows rose with concern. Madeline had maintained a vague concern for months over Nadia, because her daughter was growing up so quickly, while her skills as a parent seemed to remain the same. Love wasn’t the problem, but communication and explanation were tools she lacked. Her own mother had died when she was younger than Nadia, and her grandmother had raised her with a stern hand all too common in their little town.

“I’m okay, mom.” She didn’t dare say any more by way of an explanation, because she knew she wasn’t all right, and she didn’t know how she was going to explain herself.

“Come to think of it, your father told me that you didn’t hardly touch your supper last night. Problems at school?”

“Why do you assume that just because I do something unexpected there is something wrong in my life?”

“Well, because there usually is.”

Nadia thought for a few moments as she picked through her breakfast for the pineapple, her favorite. “But not always,” she said with a smile. “Actually, everything is going rather well these days.”

“Oh, do tell,” cooed Madeline, happy at the thought of a chance to talk about something positive.

“Mom, it’s not as if there is anything to talk about,” she said, the whole time afraid that she would give herself away. “I’m just happy that’s all.”

“Well, I guess I’ll have to settle for that, then, and be satisfied.” Madeline took a bite of her apple, convinced that she would get something out of her daughter in order to feel like she’d had a normal conversation for once.

Nadia, her stomach too excited to consume any food, picked up her bowl and headed for the kitchen.

“Wait a minute, you didn’t eat anything,” chastised her mother.

“I’ll take a muffin with me. I really want to get going.” Nadia had been reading the worried glances on her mother’s face for weeks, and she’d mistakenly interpreted them as suspicion. This had caused the great divide between them, because, while Madeline was unsure of how to comfort and relate to her daughter, Nadia was afraid that she was being judged and condemned. So, with her mother coming, she quickly grabbed her bag and tossed her dish into the sink as she ran out the back screen door. She could hear her mother’s voice from the entry way to the kitchen, but she pretended otherwise.

“Hello, Jake.” She was standing at the end of the front walk to his home. Jake had obviously been expecting her, because he was dressed in a blue shirt and light grey slacks. He

knew that she loved that look on him because she smiled more brightly than when he wore his brown school slacks and white cotton shirt.

“Oh, hello, Nadia,” he said calmly. She was immediately concerned. Generally he lit up with happy energy whenever they were alone. “My mother and I were just talking about your family.” Nadia was startled at her own carelessness as she realized Jake’s mother was sitting on the porch swing. She would need to be more careful, she thought. She quickly recovered and tucked her emotions into her chest.

“Why would you be talking about us?”

Jake’s mother Olivia responded. “Do your parents still have those wild strawberries in the back yard? I have wanted to make a jam for a while now, and I remembered that house having strawberries when I was younger.”

“Oh... no. My father tore them out a few years ago, because he said they were out of control. We always had rodents and stuff making noise in there. Plus the bees were always swarming around in the bushes.”

“What a shame,” she said with little emotion. “I don’t know why, but I have been thinking about those strawberries for weeks now.” Her feet barely reached far enough to touch the wood of the porch, so she began to swing her legs back and forth to rock the swing. “When I was younger, my mother and I used to make the best jams and jellies.” Olivia’s countenance was foreign to Nadia; it was saturated with a faraway look and lugubrious hunger. “I haven’t had anything but store bought jam in twenty years. Did your mom ever make anything like that before your father tore them out?”

“Not that I recall. We make our own bread, though. My dad says he loves the smell of fresh bread in the house.” Nadia did, too. “We have to buy the ingredients, though. It comes in little packets my mom makes.”

“Yeah, that’s a great smell,” and her eyes steered across the street to the distant cornfield and woods. “Well, tell your mother I said hello.” Olivia continued to rock, but now her arms were stretched out, clenching the chains of the swing as though she were on a playground. The heavy pendulum creaked through the air with enough momentum to move her hair into her face.

“I will,” Nadia replied, but she didn’t think that she was heard. Nadia studied Jake’s mom a moment longer unsure of what was going on with her. She glided through the air a few more times before she finally placed her feet back on the porch.

“I’m sure that she’s getting ready for your Introduction,” said Olivia as she returned from her mental sojourn. The Introduction was the name given to the ceremony that every sixteen year old went through when he or she was ready to enter the adult world. There were mental and physical tests to pass, as well as interviews and character evaluations. The entire event was handled by her teachers at the end of the year. Nadia had pushed the thought of the event to the back of her mind, because the idea that she was expected to begin a journey toward a single career and family was terrifying. The fact that it was completely out of her control made it all the more impossible to deal with.

“Yeah, she is.” Nadia was trying not to think about it, but her Introduction was only two weeks away.

“Well, you be sure to let her know I can help her if she needs it. I’ve already had two, as you well know.” She was referring to Jake’s two older sisters. “I’ve already got Jake’s party ready to go, so I can give her help if she needs it.”

“Thanks, I will tell her,” Nadia replied with appropriate politeness. “Jake, I will see you perhaps on Monday at school,” she said.

By now, Olivia was looking intently at her with furrowed brows. Nadia was startled, because, a moment ago, the distant trees consumed her full attention, but now the weight of her gaze blazed a path through Nadia’s eyes and into the pit of her stomach. Nadia broke away first, while avoiding any glances toward Jake and headed off toward town.

Nadia walked off alone at a slow clip, just in case he was able to break away from his home and pursue her. It worked. After a short distance he came jogging out of a different side street and feigned surprise at seeing her. It was obvious from his breathing though that he must have taken a long run around the block to not arouse suspicion.

“I’m glad that you were able to catch me,” she said. It was a statement that clearly laid out her intentions. “I was worried that your mother might wonder why I walked by in the first place.”

“Don’t worry,” he said. “I did my best to let her know how much I don’t like you.” Nadia slapped his arm, but quickly stepped back unless someone would see her actions as playful flirting. Jake went stiff with fear for a brief moment at the surprising drop of her guard.

“I better be careful. I’m too old to get away with that.” At this, they both began to walk apart from one another down the street, but, after a few steps, they realized they looked ridiculously conspicuous, because they were marching in parallel file with the same stiff measured cadence. “Meet me in the woods at 10:30, okay?” she asked.

“I can’t wait. We have a lot to talk about.”

What began as a warm day was quickly turning into a record setting heat wave for spring. The air was getting too wet and hot for comfort when Nadia arrived at the library next to the park. She not only needed to kill time, but she needed to have a reason for being in town. During the evening cleaning, she had come up with the perfect excuse. No one would be able to claim she wasn't buried in stacks of books, so she decided she would quickly check out a book and then meet Jake in the woods. Her hurried steps carried her to the trades section, where she glanced at row upon row of manuals detailing the sciences. She had been forced to read many of them in her life skills management class, and they had ripped the passion right out of her chest. She knew, though, that a book from this section would raise the fewest questions, and her mother would actually be pleased to see that she was evaluating her future choices at her Introduction ceremony. A book on husbandry jumped out at her, and she grabbed it without even opening the cover.

When she arrived near the brook, she knew that it must have only been about nine in the morning. She found a comfortable rock formation covered in soft leaves and moss, and sat down to await her nervous rendezvous. If Jake was fooling her, she was in a great deal of trouble. It's not that she had done anything yet to bring a conviction, but her feelings had run roughshod over her beliefs, and she had no idea what world she would return to if she couldn't have him on her side for life. Though Jake returned her warm smiles and soft touches, he had never allowed their conversations to turn toward the creation of a relationship. She hoped that his avoidance of this issue was due to the same confusion she was experiencing, but she knew they couldn't continue as just secret friends. Nadia was tired of the inner guilt as if she were cavorting with a criminal in the night.

Nadia knew of a few girls that had crossed some sort of boundary within the community, and they had been sent away for several months. Their return had always been a hushed affair with passing comments about how “this” girl had made a mistake and “that” girl had learned her lesson, but Nadia was never able to know of what it was they were accused. Most of those girls were married now to men from different communities, or single with laborious careers. All of them had left town, though. Nadia didn’t know if their leaving was voluntary, but she was correct in assuming that their silence was encouraged to promote order among the teenagers following in their footsteps.

She looked for the first time at the book she had brought with her. The cover had a lithograph of a young woman clenching her arms close to her body with her head and shoulders braced tight as if attempting to prepare for a blow from above. Her eyes were closed in contemplation or reflection and a determined look of tranquility was the clear focus on her face. The source of light seemed to come either from behind her or from out of her. Blocky, rectangular yellow beams radiated in a full circle, indicating they decreased in intensity as they left her or intensified as they made contact with her skin.

Nadia turned to the table of contents. The introduction was listed with the subtitle, “Emotions are the enemy.” The first chapter, “Learning what they are,” was followed by “Early Dangers.” She wasn’t completely ignorant when it came to her emotions, but, because her friends and family didn’t discuss them, she struggled to control herself or anticipate them before they got the better of her. And because the relationships of young people were supposed to be so closely controlled, Nadia was always unsure of how to interact with others. Strategic conditioning had been used to create a sense of fear and nausea in teens whenever they were thrust into social situations outside of strict control. Young people were supposed to mistrust

their own peers unless they were under the watchful eyes of responsible adults. Nadia, however, found that she was always curious with the feelings and goings-on of other people her age. The roles handed down never made sense to her, but no one was ever able to explain why.

She didn't think the book in her hands would enlighten her, but she thumbed through the chapters until she came to a passage with a stern looking man in police clothes; she could tell the pages were worn more than the rest, indicating the curious eyes before her. Selecting a new paragraph after a natural break, she began reading:

Sara's parents never overcame her downfall. They were forced to leave the community and live out their days as outcasts. The failure was theirs, you see, because they didn't recognize the poisonous disorder soon enough. They had been too busy to complete their civic duty by attending parenting management classes, and the preventable chaos that ensued ended its broken trail at their feet. They lost the balance that we must all strive for each day. There were, of course, questions about their match after their dismissal. Corrections were made. Thankfully, the community wasn't torn apart by the lax behavior of a few. Strands of civility were tied back together, and Sara's peer group experienced a real-life example of what happens when social harmony is not maintained. Her disappearance was soon forgotten, and we now have her behavior as a lesson to guide our meticulous plans for a better tomorrow.

Nadia felt a little burning return to her stomach. She got the feeling that her name could appear in another edition of this book as a pariah to be shunned. Would her parents hate her? Would they forget her? She turned to the back of the book, a section entitled "Together we stay focused."

It's only with careful planning that society can continue on the path to progress. Classes and programs are in place to provide proper instruction in emotion management. Relationship algorithms continue to be fine-tuned to ensure perfect harmony. Family is everything that leads to productivity, and families must be closely connected to the local committee matriarch in all areas of planning and implementation.

Nadia closed the book and trembled. She was definitely acting impulsively outside of her family, and that would have been true for weeks. Her connection was hanging by a thread, and

Jake was going to cut it one way or the other. During many of their secret times together, he had talked about how nice it was to be with her. He'd thanked her for her companionship, expressed his appreciation for her friendship. They had also shared silent moments without speaking, where both of them would just sit. The sound of his breathing would always tell her his mood. If he was exhausted, he had slow deep breaths. If he was frustrated over something at home or school, there was an erratic pacing that almost begged her to ask about his day. She always did, too, because that's what her own mother did when her father came home tired from work. Jake responded differently than her father, though.

She had once heard her parents argue after Madeline begged her husband to take them on a holiday. "We need to get out of here." She had said. "Even if it's just a little while, so that you can relax for once and remember what it means to be alive."

"That's enough of that talk," he replied with stern devotion to his work. "I'll get a break when we've finished the project. I'm not quitting now." He was so robotic, so cold to Nadia's ears.

When Jake was frustrated, he would discuss the cause with Nadia, and the two of them almost became a team working together to solve the problem.

Nadia had been holding back, though, when it came to discussing the rules of relationships. The topic never came up, but it seemed to her like they were both dancing around it through an unspoken understanding. Jake wanted to leave the town and go off on his own, and Nadia wanted to accompany him. Neither of them knew what they were doing, but it just seemed right to do it together.

He never asked about her feelings for him, and she was too afraid to mention any idea that they were good together. She was even too scared to mention the small chance that they

would be paired together by the committee, since their opinions on the matter were unquestioningly accurate. Nadia felt they were a good match, and perhaps everyone would see that too, she felt.

She was beginning to wonder if she was actually the guilty party for playing with his emotions when a crackle in the nearby bushes startled her. Jake emerged from the brambles with a knife in one hand and a carved up piece of wood in the other.

“Hello,” she said, surprising Jake from his attentions on the sliver of cherry. “You’re early; it’s only 9:30.”

“Oh! You scared me,” he said. “I didn’t think you’d be here yet.” He sheepishly attempted to pocket the wooden carving before discarding it in the grass when he realized it wouldn’t fit. “I felt like carving. I’m still trying to come up with a project for my presentation day.”

“That’s funny. I was reading about our emotions, and how we’re supposed to behave.” She was briefly surprised at her own bold statement, but immediately calmed when Jake’s lips twisted into a complicit smirk.

“Oh,” he said. His posture loosened, and he dropped himself down next to her with a relieved sigh. It was a great cause of security when she realized that he was coming down from the same wave of anxiety. His embarrassment was evident by the fact that he couldn’t bring his eyes up to hers. He studied his own fingers clenching the moss, attempting to slough their perspiration before settling on the book in Nadia’s lap.

“You really are studying?” he asked with a twinge of confusion.

“Don’t worry,” she calmed him. “I needed an excuse to be out of the house for so long, so I checked this book out to show my mom.”

“Oh, thank goodness. You scared me half to death. I thought I was a fool.” With this, Jake’s posture assumed the casual confidence that Nadia relied upon so often. Her stomach and chest warmed and her cheeks burned with the effort of holding her smile.

“Well, you just set my mind at ease. I was wondering if I was going home tonight or to a center for troubled minds. I’m still unsure about the home part, but I guess you won’t be the reason for my institutionalization.”

“Never,” he said. “If I am, I’ll either be dead or in the room next to you.”

“Don’t be silly,” she said. “They would never let us both live.” The truth of what her words entailed caused them both to lose their smiles, and Nadia felt the heat of the day fade with the chill cascading down her spine. “I mean...”

“I know what you meant. I guess we’re there, then, aren’t we?”

“We are.”

“Whatever we decide, we had better be prepared for the consequences if we’re caught.”

“To tell you the truth, I’m scared. I have no idea what to do.”

“Well... I have an idea. First, I want to see you.”

“What do you mean? You’re looking right at me.”

“I don’t mean that,” he said. Putting more emphasis on the word, he repeated the comment. “I want to see you.”

“Oh,” she breathed, not quite understanding what he was doing.

Jake stepped closer to her and put both of his hands up even with his chest, palms out in surrender. Nadia, finally understanding after a moment of hesitation, placed her hands in his, and their fingers interlocked. He didn’t move any closer, but he focused on her eyes.

“Do you remember when we first met?” he asked.

“I saw you first,” she said. “You were so calm in that yard.”

“Maybe on the outside. I was upset to be back at school, though, until I saw you in the crowd.”

“Imagine if we hadn’t locked eyes?”

“I can’t imagine ever not getting to look into your eyes,” he said.

It had been six months ago in the early days of autumn. The whole town smelled of burning leaves and boiling apples. The orchards had been picked clean, and the fields had been sown with winter wheat. The green shoots were already climbing out of the moist fall soil, blanketing the surrounding hills with soft emerald radiance, a stark contrast to the reds and browns of the dying forests. Jake had finished his obligatory service with the harvest crews, and he was ready to return to school. Nadia, not part of the working class, had just finished her summer exams, and she was preparing for her new line of classes. Her examination results indicated that she was indeed ready for her introduction to the adult world. All that remained was an assignment to a civic committee for internship and evaluation.

Nadia was sitting in the front courtyard of the high school with her friends when she saw a rough, somewhat dirty boy walk through the main gate. He wasn’t dirty in the sense that he wallowed in filth; he was instead a fresh-looking boy who had clearly labored in earth earlier in the morning. His stride was firm and purposeful. His eyes were moving about his surroundings with full alertness, not in paranoia, but rather in observance of all that transpired around him. His gaze pervaded a deep intelligence. He had a closed mouth on top of a firm jaw line that seemed to indicate he was careful with his thoughts and words. His heavily washed blue denim shirt was proudly wearing its age with small frayed holes on the cuff and collar edges, yet the light tan trousers encasing his powerful legs were obviously new. Nadia liked him immediately. The

practical reality of his carriage created the impression that he was kind and wholesome; his energetic countenance, with a small swipe of dirt on his cheek, betrayed his longing for the life he left in the grass at the entrance to the school.

During this covert observation, Jake was surveying the congregation in the courtyard for any sign of recognition. He had just spent two whole months in the fields and orchards collecting and cleaning produce, and the thought of returning to the classroom was weighing more heavily on his shoulders than any bushel of corn. It was his path, though. He had one year of instruction remaining before he presented his abilities to the Board of Graduation. His wavering acceptance of this fate was undetectable to all but the girl in the flowery dress, a dress that Nadia wore in an attempt to cling to the long gone days of summer. It was this youth and promise of better days that caused them to find one another in the general crowd of well-made plans and organized futures. Jake saw her in the midst of her friends, and he slowed his stride to prolong his view. There was a connection of unexplainable understanding--two entirely different, incompatible teenagers sharing a common arrhythmia of the soul.

Of all the overtures toward one another in the past six months, Jake always remembered the first sighting. She was resting on her knees and left hip with her flowing skirt spread out on the carpet of wilted clover and sparse weed grass. The images of red flowers and twisted, green stems sewn into the cloth stood out from the white base fabric. She was smiling, but her eyes directed a concern toward Jake. His first thought was that she was looking down on him as he entered the school yard. It wouldn't have been the first time he was judged for being a laborer. When he slowed his pace to study her more closely, though, he could see the nervous fidgeting of her hands on the folds of her dress. She was unhappy.

It was a lucky encounter between two young people looking around them for answers to questions generally handled by strict rules and social manipulation. Had Jake been a few steps too slow, Nadia would have been casting her searching eyes in a different direction, and they wouldn't have connected. Now, half a year later in the heat of the blazing spring sun, his breath was cooling to her lips and the smell of peppermint caused her to smile. "You were eating candy before you came here," she said. This brought them back from their reverie, and a grin cracked his stern cheeks.

"I was."

"Did you save me any?" she asked.

"I did."

"Can I have it?"

"You can," he said his grin now a full-on childish smile.

The simple questions were enough to pull them back to the proximity of the brook, but it was also enough to carry them from the village forever. Sitting facing one another with legs folded while eating soft chewy candy, they hatched the final plan of their youth. They were to flee that night and meet up once again with only enough clothing and food to get them far away from the village. They would run like two wild animals and live as much life as they could away from the organized cell of their people. The wilderness would serve as their home until they could get far enough away to avoid fear of recapture.

"This isn't going to work," Nadia finally said, once she had a moment to ponder the inevitable bleak situation they would encounter in the wild. "How are we going to eat?"

"There are other places out there. You know that," said Jake with a mature certainty. "My father used to trade with several farmers from down river. There are scattered towns."

“But those are all hostile toward us, you know that. If they find out where we’re from, we’re going to be cast out.”

“I’m not so sure they are hostile. Besides, what’s the alternative?” he asked.

“We stay here, and you forget I ever existed,” Nadia mumbled.

He placed both hands on her shoulders as comfort, but felt awkward. He finally wrapped the full length of his embrace around her torso and breathed into her ear, “I can’t do that. Not now.”

“I can’t either,” and she turned until her lips met his. They shared their first quiet kiss that just barely measured above the whispered rambles of the brook. Nothing more was said between them for almost an hour as they continued to explore their passionate embrace. It wasn’t until the audible rumble of hunger from Nadia’s stomach interrupted them that they realized the passage of time.

Collecting their belongings, Jake dusted off the book and placed it in Nadia’s hands. “So, we’ll meet here again tonight at 10:30,” he said.

“That’s right, so 9:30 then?” She replied with a smile.

“You can count on it.”

The afternoon sun was full over their heads when they emerged from different parts of the forest. Nadia walked through a potato field on her way back to the house. The freshly-tilled soil made its way into her nose, reminding her that spring was raging to a close and the crops were climbing out of the earth to meet the light. The soft ground was a comfort to her feet, and she walked slowly, not hurrying to home and the required concealment of her happiness. Her passage was not unnoticed, though. A farmer surveyed her progress through his furrowed ground, and he didn’t fail to miss the abnormally happy progress she made over his green

sprouting shoots. He looked after her with a troubled frown, and spit his tobacco into the dusty fringe of his field.

“Mom, what made you fall in love with dad?” asked Nadia over her bowl of soup at dinner that evening. Madeline was surprised at such a blatant question, and froze as she looked up from her own meal.

“What do you mean fall in love?” Madeline asked. Nadia suddenly realized what she had done. She knew full well that her mother and father were paired up after their Introduction and Presentation Day ceremonies.

“Well, I know that you were matched together because of your characteristics, but the two of you really seem to like each other. Was it like that from the start? Did you even know him?” Her mother appeared relieved that her daughter was taking an interest in her future husband.

“Well, when you spend enough time with someone, and you go through enough life together, you just start to depend on each other.”

“But what was it that made you love him?”

“Honey, I don’t know if that’s the word I would use for your father.”

“So, you don’t love him anymore?”

“I can’t say that I ever did,” she said contemplatively. Nadia’s perplexed look caused an immediate response. “I’m sure that he would say the same about me.” Madeline, unwilling to express the emotion for her husband, looked lovingly at her daughter. “Is this about your Introduction? I’ve been hoping to have a talk with you about it for some time.”

“I guess it is,” Nadia lied. “I was just wondering about how it all happens. I mean... you and dad seem perfect for each other, yet you never met before you were placed with one another.”

“Well, I’m glad that you feel your father and I are perfect for each other. We didn’t start out that way.” Madeline sipped her wine and thought back to the first days she spent with her husband. “I mean it wasn’t bad, and it’s pretty normal to go through a warming period. We had many quiet weeks in this house before we began to open up. It was good, though.” By now, Nadia was completely ignoring her dinner and focusing completely on her mother’s countenance as she discussed her marriage. Nadia knew that her mother cared about her father, but there was no actual love projected across the table.

“What do you like about dad?” she finally asked. She was imagining the moment in the woods with Jake. Their hands locked together, their eyes and mouths exploring, their breath intermingling. The soft warm feeling of his touch was still making its impression on her temple where he had brushed a strand of her bangs out of her eyes.

“Well, that’s easy. He works hard, and he’s very efficient. In the whole time that I have known him, he has been incredibly economical with his time. Do you know that he is the most productive employee at the office? He once worked three whole weeks without taking a day off – just to show his staff that he could do it. That was early on, and it’s the reason why we were able to buy this house. He was well rewarded. Do you remember what this place used to look like?

“Sort of. Didn’t it have a shed in the back?”

“Yes, and there was also a dirt path leading through the yard connecting the front road with the back lane; we always had dirt in the house, and the roof leaked in the back bathroom.”

“Oh, yeah, I remember that. At night when it rained I used to love the sound of the water hitting the bathtub,” Nadia said. She couldn’t help but smile at the milk hazy memories of her younger days. In the mornings after those rainstorms, she used to run to the breakfast nook, devour her fresh fruit, letting the juices coat her chin and cheeks, then go into the bathroom to wash her hands in the cold rain water collected in the tub. She would then splash it on her face and tell her mom, “I’m all clean!” before going outside to play in the muddy back yard.

“Did you really? It drove your father crazy. Other than the fact that it meant the roof could cave in, he hated the sound. He said we were living like a bunch of savages.”

“Where is dad’s sense of simplicity?” Nadia asked. It was a strange question for her to ask, and Madeline cradled her wine glass in both hands before her lips, looking seriously over the rim at her daughter. The placement of her hands meant that Nadia couldn’t detect her mother’s sad wistful smile.

“Your father is pretty simple, Nadia. He works, and he provides.” It sounded almost like a scold until she added, “But I do wish he would be a little more spontaneous.”

“I’m spontaneous,” Nadia said.

“I’m beginning to see that. There’s something good about that Nadia.” Her mother was suddenly so serious and Nadia was uncomfortable with the conversation. She decided to change the subject.

“Oh, Jake’s mom said hello today.”

“Oh, yeah? I haven’t spoken to her in a while; I need to give her a call. Where did you run into her?”

“I was walking by their house this morning on my way to the library, and I happened to run into Jake out in the yard. I stopped to say hello, because we have the same science class, and his mother was sitting on the porch.”

“Their house isn’t on the way to the library,” was her mother’s cool reply. Nadia’s heart immediately jumped a beat, and she feared that her face would turn too red to avoid detection.

“Yeah, I know, but I went that way first, because I wanted to see what they were doing downtown with that old burned down house. I heard they were cleaning it up, and I was interested.” She was amazed with her own quick cover-up. If her mother detected anything, she couldn’t tell. “Anyway, she wanted me to let you know that she would be glad to help you with any plans for my big day. She has the two older daughters, you know.”

“Well, that was nice of her. They had nice parties after their Introductions. Do you remember them? You were probably too young. “

“I remember Lacy’s. It was at the meeting hall right? Didn’t she have to perform on stage in that skin tight black body suit?”

“Yeah, she got a good match after that. Tom was his name, and they live near the capital now. He’s an electrical engineer like your father, real high up on the government. The first Introduction she put together was for Elizabeth, their first daughter. She was a little strange, it seemed to me – always sitting alone in the yard. She even missed school a couple of times when she was about your age.”

“Did she really?” Nadia asked. She could never have imagined missing school, as the consequences today were harsh. They even had sick rooms in the building to allow a student to show up and receive instruction from a comfy bed.

“Yeah, there were truancy officials at their house a couple of times. I remember Olivia and her husband had to go to special classes for a while to learn how to control her. They got into a little trouble, but that was a long time ago. They’ve done a great job since. Elizabeth ended up marrying a police officer. It became a joke for a while amongst the ladies.”

“I couldn’t imagine being married to a police officer.” Nadia felt a shiver run up her spine.

“I think that’s more than a little ironic. Perhaps he’s the only one able to control her. Who knows how these matches work. I’m just glad that we got it right the first time with you. We thought about having more children, but you were such a dream that we didn’t want to push our luck.”

With a smile, Nadia replied, “And don’t you forget it.”

The conversation drifted to Nadia’s own Introduction Day and what she was going to have to do to show her talents. The more they discussed it, the more she knew she was making the right decision to leave that night with Jake. The future her mother painted for her was devoid of dimensions. She would marry a perfect match and work one career for the foreseeable future. All the while, though, Nadia felt as if her mother was testing her, baiting her into hating the idea.

“You’ll feel safe and secure,” Madeline said. Her teeth almost seemed clenched behind a thin smile. “There will be no surprises, nothing to worry about.”

“To be honest with you, mom...” Nadia had to choose her words carefully. “I don’t think I want that. It seems too permanent.” To her surprise, Madeline didn’t chastise her.

“It’s your choice, Nadia,” she said.

“I don’t have a choice.” It was the first time Nadia had ever spoken to an adult in such a way, and, even though it was her mother, she knew that a line had been crossed. Madeline surprised her, though, by nodding in agreement.

“No, Nadia, under my roof, you don’t have a choice.”

“I won’t be under your roof much longer, mom.”

“I know, sweetie.” Bittersweet tears caused a brief glisten in Madeline’s eyes until she blinked them away.

The reality of Nadia’s imminent departure from the home caused a gloom to fall over the two inhabitants of the breakfast room. All talk ceased, and both became lost in contemplation. Nadia thought of her upcoming flight, while her mother thought of what she would do without her daughter in her home each day.

Once dinner was over, Nadia excused herself while her mother cleaned the kitchen and dining area. Her father wasn’t home from work, and he probably wouldn’t be all night, so she said goodnight and went upstairs to feign sleep. With the lights off, and her packed backpack hidden behind the window curtain, she heard a strange noise from the kitchen. Nadia opened her bedroom door and heard for the first time in her life her mother quietly singing in the kitchen. The words sounded soft and sweet like a lullaby meant for a cooing baby.

*Up in the mountains where life begins anew
I once heard a gentle voice whisper, “I love you.
You should sing like a wild thing; dance in the earth.
Live for a wild dream; fill your heart with mirth.
The sun will give you life as the moon lights your dreams;
The river in the valley it comes from fresh-flowin’ springs.”*

*Up in the mountains where life begins anew
There was a different voice –*

Before the song could be completed, though, there was a knock at the door. Nadia was alarmed, as it was after 8:00 and any visitors could delay her mother's going to bed. On further contemplation, she panicked that she had been found out; perhaps Jake had been spotted in the woods early. She rushed to the window and scanned the driveway and street for any sign of official looking vehicles. What she saw instead was a pickup truck with dirty shovels and buckets in the well-used bed. She crept back to the door and listened down the stairs as her mother answered for the stranger. Their voices were muffled, but she could make out some of their introductions.

"May I help you?" asked Madeline.

"Yes, do you have a daughter, about this tall with blonde hair? She'd have been wearing a red shirt today and carrying a black backpack?" Nadia couldn't hear her mother's reply or the conversation that followed. Her mother invited the man into the office to talk and it was too risky to sneak down to listen. Several minutes went by while they were out of ear shot before, suddenly, she heard the man say as he was approaching the door, "Well, I just wanted to let you know. It could be nothing, but you never can be too safe, I always say. I had a son that tried to get himself into trouble years ago, and we got that out of him real quick."

"Well, I appreciate your concern. I really do. I will be sure to have a conversation with my husband tomorrow when he returns, and we will get to the bottom of this," she replied. Nadia couldn't breathe. She was found out. She had to be. She was doomed.

"Well, like I said, it could be nothing." The door shut, and the man's boots carried him off of the porch onto the lawn. His truck door creaked open, and, after the slam, came the loud cranking of the engine as it roared to life. As he backed out of the driveway, Nadia heard soft steps on the carpeted stairs outside her room. With primitive terror, she cut through the darkness

and slipped into bed, closing her eyes while the door slowly opened. The padded steps continued across the room and came to a stop beside her head; Nadia couldn't move from fear. She was sure her mother could hear her heart beating like a caged animal. Instead, she felt a gentle breath on her cheek and a pair of soft lips on her brow near her left eye. "I love you" was whispered into her ear, and her mother turned to walk from the room.

With surprising swiftness, her mother shut down the lights in the house and retired to her room down the hall. Quiet settled over the home, so Nadia calmed her nerves and made for the stairs. She couldn't help but think this was some kind of a trap. Was her mother aware of what she might be doing? Before she could take the first step with her back down to the front hall, she paused for a long time, listening for any sign that her mother crouched waiting in the shadows. During this long wait, Nadia thought of her mother's face at dinner. She had seen the same look on Olivia's face earlier in the day. It was a mixture of happy reminiscence and sadness.

Nadia decided it was safe to depart, so she continued her flight down the stairs through to the kitchen. She filled her bag with two baguettes, an assortment of dried sausages and fruit, and slinked out the back door toward the woods and her future. She had enough clothes and food for a week, and she hoped she would be given at least that much time on the run. The sudden thought of capture stopped her in her tracks. What would her father do when he got home? He would send people after her, for sure. What would he do when he realized it was Jake she ran off with? They would know that it was him, because he too would be missing. What would happen to his mother? With guilt, she pushed all ideas out of her head and ran silently through the shadows toward the woods.

They met in the grove as planned. Jake looked just as scared as Nadia – even more so after she explained the strange encounter at her home that night. He cinched up his bag filled with an equal amount of food and clothing. He then tightened the sleeping bags and pads in place with straps.

“We’ve got nothing to lose,” he said. “They’re onto us either way. We best head straight for the river and follow the old path as long as it takes us.”

“Won’t they know to look for us there first?” she questioned.

“Yeah, but we’ll be able to put a lot of hours between us and them before the sun comes up. The trail, I have heard, ends eventually, so we can lose anyone after us there. It’s best to take the trail, though, because, if we get stuck in the woods, they could pass us and then cut us off.”

Nadia was terrified by the imagined sight of the police in dark clothing materializing out of the shadows between the trees to claim them and take them home.

“You’re right. That makes the most sense. Which way is the –” Her words were cut short by a rustling noise in the distant bush. The two dropped down out of the moon light and held their breath. “What was that?” Nadia whispered.

“I don’t know. It’s stopped, though. It may have been an animal. Let’s just go. We’re wasting time either way.”

The two dashed off quickly, Jake in the front and Nadia darting after like a scared fawn. Whenever they stopped, she was sure that she heard a moment of noise behind them in the distance. She tried to convince herself that it was just an echo, but her legs carried her far beyond fatigue, knowing full well that an echo would come from all around, not just from behind them in their wake. The path came to an end, just as Jake had predicted, and their escape became an up

and down jaunt through broken down logging trails and old disused fields. There was evidence that people lived along the river in small pockets, but their impact on the foliage seemed slight.

“I think it’s been a long time since anyone’s been here,” said Jake. “There must be farms out here somewhere. We’ll look for wagon tracks in the morning. Let’s just stick to the river for now.”

“I like that idea.” Nadia was almost clinging to Jake each time they stopped.

After what seemed like never-ending hours of darkness and flight, Nadia crashed down onto the ground within sight of the river. In her panting, she observed an old beaten-down house in the shadows. There were no lights, and the front porch told her it was abandoned with its decrepit railing and sagging, broken awning. Her legs began to tell her to relax and get rest, while her heart and the little hairs on her neck were telling her to run faster. Jake, after looking over the shack thoroughly, sat down with more control next to her. Neither of them said anything for quite some time. Finally, the silence was broken when breath returned to their lungs.

“How are we going to get by?” asked Nadia. “This is crazy; we don’t have anything for this. What are we going to find to eat?”

“We’ll be fine. We could fish, for starters. We’ll be following the river for several days. I bet we’ll find several old farms along the way, too. We could hide out in barns. Does it really matter? We can’t go back. The sun will be up, and they’ll know we are gone, if they don’t already.” His allusion to the strange noises they kept hearing during the night caused her more panic.

“Fish. We’ll live on fish. Why didn’t I bring mor-” Her statement was cut short by a wispy old man’s voice from over their heads.

“Honest trade, fishing.”

“Who’s there?” shouted Jake in a panicked excitement. The two lovers turned to look at the old house behind them, sure that they were looking toward their imminent doom somewhere in the rubble.

Instead of their parents, instead of the black-clothed police officers, instead of the rapidly spreading cloud of fear, they saw a chameleon of a man sitting in an old wooden rocking chair. His clothing, his skin, his very shell blended perfectly into the color of the dilapidated building and porch he sat upon.

“My grandfather’s brother fancied himself a fisherman,” continued the old man. He ignored the fact that his sudden appearance startled the two teens. “My granddad says his brother Walt could be found most days with a fishing pole in one hand and a bait bucket in the other.”

“Who are you? What do you want?” Jake asked as Nadia grabbed ahold of his backpack and attempted to hide from view.

“Who am I?” was the gentle reply. “That’s a good question I should direct at you. Why are you in my yard in the middle of the night?” He never raised his voice above a friendly whisper. Silence ensued as the old man returned to rocking in his chair and the two lovers looked at one another, nonverbally gauging the other’s intentions for flight.

As a sense of safety began to settle in, Jake thought of the man’s cryptic introduction. “Your uncle was a fisherman?” asked Jake. He was stalling, trying to make sense of his new surroundings and the stranger in the dark. “Where did he fish?”

“My GREAT uncle,” the old man started, with emphasis on the missed relationship, “fished all up and down this river. He also fished the other one that joins it farther down that little path.” He leaned back in his chair and looked off into the distance, as if he were attempting to follow the flow down around the next bend.

The two were unable to make sense of his appearance out of nowhere, and his remark about fishing. “Why are you telling us this?”

“I’m letting you know that it is possible to survive along this river on your own. You can keep running for now.

“What makes you think we’re running anywhere?” Jake asked.

“I may be old, but I’m not stupid. Besides, you think you’re the first to come running past my door? I had a feeling tonight would be a good night for a show. Good full moon to see by, good warm summer air to stir up the hormones and shoot you on up the river looking for answers... an escape... or both. Not often I get two of you, though. I suppose you’re in love.” His last remark carried an incredulous disdain.

“We’re friends,” Jake insisted. He didn’t know any other way to describe her. “We’re getting away,” said Jake. The confidence in his voice carried over into Nadia, and she stepped out from behind him and clasped his hand as she took her place beside him.

“Well, how nice for you.” Some of the edge in his voice seemed to die when he saw Nadia. She held Jake’s hand firmly with her right hand, while her left closed around his forearm. The old man’s eyes drooped a little in pity when he recognized the fear that hunched her shoulders and caused her to dart her eyes in and out of every shadow for danger.

Without waiting for Jake to ask, the old man said, “As to where you are--I don’t rightly know what to call it. We’re about three day’s walk to the great falls, but you’ll have to take the

upstream fork around the bend. And you're about 15 days walk or more down to the big ocean. I know what I used to call it, but I've been away from you people for so long that I have no idea what your name would be."

"Is the trip to the falls easy?" asked Jake. He was intrigued by the idea of taking the fork, because he had never heard of the falls. It was common knowledge that there was a small town at the end of the river near the ocean that often sent boats up with fish and other trade goods. He didn't want to get too close to that place any time soon, because it seemed the most likely place to get captured.

"Well, I suppose if the falls were easy to get to they would be settled by now, don't you think?" the old man answered.

"Yeah, I guess you're right." His face revealed his dejection at such a simple plan of escape.

"Well, cheer up. You're young; you've got a body on you, yet. What's stopping you from going? Besides, I've seen more people get away when they head to the falls."

"You mean you've seen people get caught before?" asked Nadia. She cinched up the straps of her bag subconsciously, ready to run at any moment.

"Oh, sure, I would say I've had several people rush past my house only to be dragged back a week or two later by the police." The news didn't change the indifferent expression on the old man's face. "But don't worry. You've got a head start."

"I can't say that's reassuring," said Nadia. She rewrapped her hair with bands and rolled up her sleeves with renewed energy for the chase.

"If you want, you can set up your beds over there under the big oak and rest 'til morning. I can fix us up some breakfast, and you can be on your way early."

“We’d really appreciate it,” Jake said as he dropped his pack onto the soft grass of the yard. He turned to Nadia and knew that he would need to reassure her that they were safe.

“Nadia, we’re exhausted. We need to sleep.”

She was almost in tears, but she was able to stifle her quivering lip enough to say, “Okay Jake. If you think it’ll be safe, I’ll stay the night.”

“It’s safe for a little bit,” the old man interjected. “It’s better to have rest before you get to the falls.”

It didn’t take long for the two to settle in and fall into a deep sleep. The air remained comfortable, and the river in the distance provided a soothing soundtrack for their slumber. With the sun still down, though, and the moon fading into the horizon, Nadia awoke from her sleep by a gentle breeze on her cheek. Her panic made her eyes bolt open, but her fear made her lay still. She heard no sound, so she rolled over in her bag and looked into the distance. She could see nothing but shadows and glimmering light through the trees as it reflected off of the river surface through the cracks.

“Hello?” she whispered, but there was no reply.

She could hear the soft breathing from Jake, and the gentle ripple of water from the river, but there was nothing else. Her pulse lessened, and she was prepared to lie back down when she saw it. On the far side of the yard, she made out through the murky darkness a face. She once again panicked and remained motionless. She studied the apparition without blinking for quite some time, locked in a gaze, sure that they were making eye contact. Finally she blinked and tried to clear the sleep from her eyes. When she refocused, the face was still there, but it had changed. The shadows under the eyes grew darker, as if the face was leaning forward, ready for

action. The visage wore a squint with pushed in brows, and it signaled to Nadia that she needed to be cautious. When she blinked again, whatever it was had vanished.

With a faint smile on her lips, she drifted off back to sleep under the protection of the stars and the memory of her mother's love. When she woke up in the morning, she wasn't sure where her dreams had ended and where her reality began. She only knew that her fear had not subsided. She was resigned to stand by Jake's side, though. Together they would make the correct decisions

After breakfast, the two travelers were able to obtain a general idea of what lay ahead of them from the old man's wisdom. He also provided them with some provisions and a machete to carve out their path.

"You'll most likely be followed," he said. "It's been my experience that your people don't like it when you get away. I would move quickly."

The first quarter of the day was spent twisting and creeping through vines and thick underbrush. When they arrived at the fork of the river, there was a rotted wooden bridge that would have allowed them to cross and head toward the ocean. The rapid cool water racing from the distant mountains roared under the bridge and joined the larger current that flowed from their home town.

"I still say the falls, Nadia." Jake dragged the back of his hand across his forehead and left a trail of dark silt and a smear of blood from several small scratches he earned in the bushes.

"Whatever you say, Jake. I think we can make it." It was the first positive statement she'd made all morning. "I think that we should cross the bridge and try to destroy it." It was an idea that he hadn't considered, but a quick study of the rotted planks gave him a better plan.

“What if we make it look like we fell in the water?”

“How would we do that?” she asked.

Jake worked it out in greater detail before responding. “I’ll push over that railing to make it look like one of us slipped. Then, we can leave one of our bags on the bank to make them think the other one jumped in to chase.”

“That’s perfect,” Nadia declared. She wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him for the first time since the brook. All of her feelings for him were in full bloom, and she was overjoyed at how well they worked together.

They transferred most of their food to the remaining bag and left behind a jacket and their machete. “Just to be safe. They’ve got to buy this,” said Jake.

It was Nadia’s idea to walk up the river through the shallow water for at least an hour to avoid leaving foot prints in the soil, and Jake thanked her with a kiss of his own. Once the bridge was over ten hours behind them, their spirits soared and they stopped for a late dinner to feed their excitement.

“We’re going to do this,” Nadia beamed.

“You know I can’t say I wasn’t scared back there,” Jake admitted “but I think that you’re right. We have a good chance.” It made Nadia feel better to hear him admit he had uncertain feelings at times. It was a sign of trust, and she now trusted him more than ever. She held his face in her hands and used the river dampened end of her shirt to clean his face. When it was clean enough to recognize the farm boy she had watched enter the school yard six months ago, she fell into his arms and pushed him back into the grass.

They spent the night in that spot. Both seemed unwilling to move their naked bodies out from under the sleeping bag hastily drawn over them as they lay on a bed of dry leaves and sand.

The moon was still mostly full, which gave a soft natural light to their awkward beginnings. Despite their fatigue, they remained awake until the night sky was finally tinged violet with the coming sun. They were so deep in love and sleep that they didn't hear the lone set of soft footsteps dart up to the edge of the clearing before setting behind a thick oak trunk to wait out the dark.

In the early morning hours, Jake was jolted awake with cold panic in his throat. There was a distant sound of legs splashing through the water, and it was coming closer. He lunged for Nadia, but she was already on her feet pulling her clothes on over frigid skin.

"I thought it was an animal," she said at first. "I didn't want to wake you, but whatever it is just began to move closer."

Without the need for a response, Jake dressed quickly, grabbed the remaining food, and stuffed it into their bag. "There's no time for the sleeping bag. We may be able to come back."

Nadia didn't argue, she grabbed his hand and allowed herself to be pulled through the brush. With no bulky bags between them, the two covered a lot of ground. Their pace began as a sprint for the first several hundred yards, until they had left the splashing water behind. When they stopped to quell the burning of their lungs and limbs, Jake fought through the sound of his own rapid breathing in an attempt to detect any sign of pursuers.

"I think we've outrun who ever that was, but we need to keep going."

"I can run. It's... okay," said Nadia between gulps of air.

The lovers followed the river for the majority of the day. Jake broke the trail, and pushed aside obstacles almost subconsciously. Though he led, he matched the pace that Nadia was able to maintain.

“You can go a little farther, Nadia,” he would say when he noticed the limpness of her legs and the exhaustion in her eyes.

“I know Jake; just help me,” she said at one point when her stamina was gone, and the path was turning into a rocky maze with tangled vines and prickly succulents.

Following the river was becoming more difficult, because the width of the water was shrinking and the foliage was increasing with each hour they jogged. Eventually, their progress was slowed by the constant tangles of branches and jagged, house-sized rocks that had fallen off of the cliff walls surrounding them in every direction. Finally, as the sun was setting on the third day of the flight from their homes, Jake called a halt to their march and ordered Nadia to eat before resting for the night.

“We can’t do any more tonight. It’s dark, and we’re beat,” he said while making a bed of leaves and grass for Nadia to recline. “I haven’t heard anyone chasing us. I think we’re okay for now.” He untied her shoes and rolled up her dingy pant legs. The fabric was torn in several places, and Jake checked her for scratches and other signs of injury.

“I’m okay,” she said, wincing when he moved her legs to climb into the brush with her. “I just need some rest, and I’ll be ready to go again.”

There was no kissing as they cradled one another to sleep. The warm embrace of their tired arms served as covers, and eventually, they lost the sensation of where their own arms ended and the other arms began. Sleep came to them quickly, and, once again, their senses failed to detect the light gait on the edge of their bivouac. The feet stirred for a quick moment behind a rock, and then they were silent.

The two were awoken once again at dawn by strange noises just out in the brush. Their sleep had lessened some of the ache in their muscles, but the lingering fatigue prevented them from lurching forward into action.

“They’re on us again,” Nadia declared. She climbed to her feet and helped Jake sling his pack over his shoulders.

“We can’t be far from the falls,” reassured Jake. “Let’s just get there. The old man said people are seldom caught once they make it there.”

Nadia, needing extra encouragement, buried her face into his shoulder and sobbed without tears. “I just want this to be over.”

The rustling increased in intensity again, so they set their determined sights on the branches in front of them and pushed their way farther upstream. They never reached a run during their flight, for they didn’t have the energy, and the foliage was too thick, besides.

“I’m hungry,” Nadia finally said after holding her silence as long as her stomach would allow.

“Do you hear that?” Jake asked. “I think we’ve made it.”

“I hope so, Jake.”

A thin white waterfall awaited the young couple once they broke through the last of the thick green creepers into a bowl-shaped valley. The swift vein leapt off a ledge far above their heads and didn’t touch the earth again until it broke on the rocks in the distance of the clearing they had entered. Jake put his tattered bag down and grabbed Nadia by the waist to pull her left hip into his right. No words were said at first; there was only the simple contemplative stare at the cataract. The power was immense, even from such a great distance. The noise, though loud, was soothing. The roar made by the water crashing into the rocks vibrated through into their

cheeks and down into the pits of their empty stomachs. The muted silence was willingly continued by both travelers, because they each knew the beauty of what they were seeing; its power was obvious and awesome. The valley they had entered was fed by the cool water that came from higher up in the mountains. Untold volumes of purified rainwater rushed through the drinking roots of infinite plants and shrubs all around them, and it fed the craggy tangled supports of surrounding trees tall enough to equal the height of the valley walls.

The force of the fall pushed cool air and moisture down the basin along the river. As this moisture made contact with their skin, it peeled away the layers of fatigue, and all of their troubles immediately dripped off of their chins with the water that had formed on their faces. The light of the clearing, sound from the falls, and the smell of the living foliage – possible only in a place such as this –met them at once and soaked their clothes in mist.

“What do you think?” he finally asked. It was a flawed question, for what does one think of such a sight in a moment such as this? The truth was that Nadia was, for the moment, unable to put her thoughts into words even in her mind. She was tuned in to her senses, and her body was experiencing the full force of their reception. The cooling hiss of the mist removed her fatigue; the sound of the water, smashing into the rocks, overpowered the rapid beating of her heart until it gave up and resumed a normal pace. The sight provided her with every color in the world, and the smell reminded her of early days playing as a child in the yard. There were flowers and grasses, pollen and molds, but there was also a smell of cleanliness. It was how she felt when she dipped her juice-covered hands in the rain-soaked bath as a child.

“This is the best I have ever felt in my entire life,” she finally said. Jake didn’t need to say anything. He was in the same encompassing fold of emotion. Nadia bent her head to Jake’s shoulder, and their embrace continued as they each drank their fill of the immense, wild garden.

“Do you think we’ll be safe if we make it to the top of that cliff?” Nadia finally asked.

“I was wondering the same thing. I see trees up there, but who knows what else?” Jake began walking forward, pulling her by the hand. “It’s a big cliff, but it’s completely covered in plants. I think there may be a way to climb.”

At the edge of the pool formed by the tumbling cascade, the pair studied the green wall separating them from freedom.

“There are plenty of vines to hold on to,” claimed Jake as he clenched and unclenched his hands. “We can rest on several of those rock juts too if we get tired.”

“I trust you,” said Nadia as she bent to tighten her shoe laces. “Shall we go?” she finally asked.

“Yes, let’s,” he replied with refreshed vigor.

The climb, though difficult, was accomplished in under an hour. There were plenty of foot and hand holds and twice as many places to rest. Jake was the first to pull himself up over the edge, and, just as he had done throughout the climb, he turned to pull Nadia to safety.

“It’s a lake,” said Jake when he was able to take stock of their surroundings. The strip of land they currently occupied was on the edge of a large placid body of water that reflected the green and grey mountains on the opposite side. The tops of the mountains reflected on the water, identical twins of the peaks days away and thousands of feet high, stretching their expanse almost to the feet of the exhausted climbers. There were flourishing subtropical plants and trees growing nearby with larger timber off in the distance. It was more beautiful than the valley they had just left. Their perch was cut off on both sides by two torrents of water gushing over the edge. The waterfall that they had climbed next to was actually the smaller of two. The larger

waterfall poured into an adjacent valley, but the view was almost completely obscured by the fountain of mist that blew up from the cavernous floor below.

“This place is...” Nadia was once again without words.

“It’s like a little nest,” Jake finished for her. “We’re perched up high, and we can see forever up here.”

They both studied the valley they had just left. It was partially shrouded in mist, but the sliver of the river they had followed could easily be traced off into the distance until it met the main branch near the home of the old man.

“Our town is over there somewhere,” Nadia pointed. “We’re closer than I realized.” Jake searched for something to say as a form of encouragement, because they were both wondering if they were far enough away to prevent their pursuers from finding them.

“You know, it could be that we weren’t being chased at all. What if we were just hearing animals, and we rushed through the woods for nothing.”

“As long as we’re safe, I don’t care what we heard.”

“Then this will be our wedding nest,” said Jake.

“Our wedding nest?” she asked with modest alarm. She had heard the term used before to describe a newlywed couple’s home.

“Yes. It looks comfortable, don’t you think? Well rest up here and gather some food and deal with whatever comes next.” Jake pulled her close in for a kiss before she could say anything more, and they ended up in a heap on a flat dry rock formation for the better part of an hour.

As noon approached, they made a small fire with some matches Jake had in his bag, and, by the middle of the day, they were fed, rested, and clean. A shallow pool that drew from the

lake nearby served as their bath as the water was somewhat warmed by the sun. The late-afternoon heat and the fire removed any remaining chill they had when they were finished. Jake conspicuously looked over his shoulder the entire day--each time he was afraid that he would see a party of black-clothed shadows trudging through the valley below. He made several attempts to study the depths of the adjacent valley, but the mist was too thick. The wind rushed at him and brought with it white hazy fog. There were rare occasions when the mist would clear, and he could detect traces of green forests far below, but he was left with the impression that the new territory was vast.

They spent the night sleeping around the smoldering fire, and, once again, their ears failed to detect the intruder in their camp. The dark shadow hovered on the edge of the fire before disappearing into the small thicket of trees near the edge of the lake.

When Nadia awoke it was to the alarmed jostling of Jake.

“Nadia, wake up. We’re in trouble,” he said as he shook her. “Nadia, wake up.”

Having been lulled into a real sense of peace from the night before, it took several attempts to bring her to full consciousness. “What’s going on?” she finally asked.

“They’re here, Nadia. They’re on their way here. The police.” It was a statement that would have normally sent slivers of terror into her chest, but, after their turbulent flight, she realized that she already expected it.

“How do you know?” she asked after she sat up. She had expected to see them with outstretched hands ready to pounce, but their little nest was still undisturbed.

“I was woken up this morning by a noise, and I looked over the wall and saw them coming. There’s ten of them.” Nadia began to walk over to the cliff to investigate for herself, and Jake added, “They’re already beginning to climb. They’ll be here soon.”

Looking over the edge, she could clearly see the partially obscured head and shoulders of several men scattered along the wall. “They’ll never stop will they?” she asked. “We just can’t be left alone.” By now, Jake was holding her hand tightly. He was afraid. Looking down at the climbers, he came to a realization.

“We’re trapped here, Nadia. The other waterfall is too steep to climb down.”

Not fully grasping what he was attempting to get through to her, she asked, “So they’re going to catch us. After all we went through, they’ll still get us.”

Jake turned her toward him, and he locked eyes. “The old man said that there were very few people brought back from these falls. I think I know why.” It wasn’t until his gaze moved over her shoulder toward the tower of mist that rose steadily from the unseen depths that she knew what he was talking about.

“I’m not going back with them, Jake,” she whispered as he brought his mouth down close to her ear.

“And I’m not leaving you,” he said.

“We only have one choice, then.”

“I have a feeling now that we’ve only ever had that choice.”

With little time to spare, they hugged and cried. “We’ve only just started,” said Nadia. “It’s not fair.”

Jake held her for several moments longer, and he pondered the veracity of her sad claim. “But we made it here, Nadia,” he said as he pulled back from their embrace and gripped her face in his hands. “We’ve made it here.”

Nadia, letting her tears drip freely down her cheeks, looked at the wondrous heights around them. The distant mountains were free of all clouds, and the pure blue backdrop of the

sky enabled the vivid towers to stand dominant over every craggy rock and tree. Only the column of mist seemed to move, its hiss rising forever into the sky, diminishing into nothing after an arduous climb from the depth of the valley.

“We’ve made it, Jake,” Nadia affirmed. “What else is there after that?”

They kissed again and found comfort in the heat created between their two bodies.

As they approached the edge of their wedding nest, Nadia’s emotions began to overwhelm her. Suddenly, the distance between her and the edge of the milky void seemed to grow. Her steps slowed. Each breath took effort. The impulses from her brain to her limbs involved severe concentration. She fought to keep her anxiety down, but it was a losing battle. She was closer to backing out with each step she took toward the edge.

Jake suddenly embraced her from behind. He had been watching her struggle as he walked by her side, and it reassured him he was justified in his own feelings of fear. He could detect the peace as it came to her, she relaxed in his arms, and he gained his own strength.

A soft kiss to the back of her neck was all he could think of.

“Are you afraid?” she asked him.

“I’m terrified,” he said through the strands of her hair.

“I love you, Jake,” she said.

“Nadia. I think these last six months have made me happier than I ever could have been had we never met.”

“Me, too, Jake,” and with that she turned to kiss him one last passionate time.

Their lips pulled apart, but the tips of their noses remained together.

“Do you think that we’re the lucky ones?” Nadia asked. “Could we ever be any happier than this?” Jake didn’t want to answer the question. His thoughts were captured by the sounds coming from the edge of the cliff. The police were almost on them.

“Are you ready?” he lovingly asked.

“I’m ready,” was the overly assured reply. Her muscles were tight, and her smiling face revealed all her teeth along with the truth that she was fighting a battle with her nerves. Their hesitation seemed endless. The sounds of the plunging water and its seeming infinite fall through the clean white fog was powerful enough finally to wash all ideas out of their minds. Their meditation involved only the surge forward and the natural winds pushing up from the unseen depths below.

Without communicating it, Jake and Nadia both stepped forward. One last glance showed them what the immediate future would bring. White grey shapes of air and moisture rose rapidly to meet them. It was little effort to take the final step to investigate the fall. The pits of their stomachs were left behind as the remainder of their fiber dropped from the great height into the unknown mass. There was no sound save for the rushing--the rushing of the water and the wind as it passed their ears in both directions.

Nadia could only feel her smile and the cold tears running backwards as the force of the wind pushed them aside. Before she closed them, she heard a faint but audible voice penetrate the beautiful chaos around her. She faintly picked out “I love you” in a soft bittersweet tone.

A female shadow on top of the cliff observed the two lovers slice through the bright translucent fog before they disappeared after a short distance of flight. The woman came forth just a bit from the foliage and soaked for a moment in the sounds and smells around the altar to

love, made all the more potent by the most recent sacrifice. The increasing sunlight burned away the darkness of the understory and created a chorus of greens and yellows, reds and pinks that offset the frothy white torrent of the river as it propelled itself from the perch near the cliff. Falling to her knees on the edge, the woman gently convulsed with a sob. Her daughter was gone. As the officers neared the top, they were started to hear the opening chorus of an old children's song. "*Up in the mountains where life begins anew I once heard a gentle voice whisper "I love you...."*" When they got to the top, however, they discovered the outcrop was empty.

LOOKIE LOO

Jimmy was late for work. It was a pretty normal occurrence, but, since the start of school had been pushed up by five minutes this year, he was in danger of not making it to the beginning of his first hour class again. While jerking through Friday morning traffic, he began to picture the tired, stern face of his new principal unlocking the door to his classroom; it would be the third time in two weeks that he wasn't there to greet his students.

“Come on!” he screamed while throwing his hands in the air. “Make the turn already, you fucking moron. What the hell are you waiting for?” Jimmy turned to his left after he yelled and realized that he was being observed by a car full of high school students. He pretended not to see the boy in the back of the car with all the piercings pantomiming his tantrum, and he focused his eyes ahead. As they advanced forward he could hear their laughter through the cracked back window. “What an asshole,” was exclaimed loud enough for his benefit.

He hated children like that. He had fantasies of tripping them in the hall or pushing them down the stairs in the lunch room. His imagined assaults always included him walking away as if the falling student didn't mean anything to anyone, and his action was merely a normal part of walking the halls. “Get out of my way, worthless,” he would say. After all, what did they know?

In the real world, Jimmy was afraid of almost all students. He had panic attacks when he thought of how the youth of America no longer included him. They were moving on while he languished in his mediocre position, a perch he claimed before he realized there were such great heights beyond his reach. Their lecture-despising faces carried judgment that found him weird and outdated. Jimmy was thirty-seven. Jimmy was a child of the eighties. Jimmy didn't understand the children of the new millennium, and, rather than feel superior to their naïve intelligence, he gave them power. That's why he had to pretend he hadn't seen or heard the

obnoxious students in the adjacent car; he figured that they were probably correct in their assessment of his behavior.

The traffic light was mistimed again, and, of the thirty or so cars in front of him, only four or five were making it through the intersection each cycle. It was common practice for him to express self-criticism to the face in the rearview mirror. “Way to go, jackass. You were up early, but you piddled around all morning until you made yourself late again.” Jimmy’s best mornings were those in which he made the final turn onto the school grounds and simply repeated the word fuck in as many different tones and inflections as he could before he came to rest in his parking spot with a drawn-out, baritone “You!”

Waiting at the light was not helping to slow the anxious beating of his heart, and his guts were feeling mushy from the six imperial stouts he’d had the night before. He was supposed to have been grading papers, but he had opened his first beer at 5 o’clock while changing the water filter in the basement, and he drained his last one after *The Tonight Show*. The essays on *Candide* were still in his bag in the backseat where they’d been for three weeks. The thought of the excuse he would have to muster to his students accentuated the dull ache behind his eyes, and he knew it was dehydration. He didn’t bother taking acetaminophen anymore because it just inflamed his heartburn. He drank three glasses of water before he left the house, and he winced down his coffee. He generally felt better halfway through first hour.

With another red light and only two cars making the turn, Jimmy sang the word “Assholes” in a beautiful falsetto and switched on NPR to calm his nerves.

“... the startling revelation has the world in chaos today, and several celebrity and political personalities are already stepping up to challenge the legality of the social network’s actions. With more on the story we go to Dr. Oswald McCalister, in San Francisco. Dr.

McCalister is an expert on social media and the impacts on personal relationships. Thank you for joining us.

“It’s my pleasure.”

“So, what’s the word? Has the eccentric billionaire finally gone off his rocker? Is this move going to destroy the world?”

“Well, the release of such sensitive information is certainly perceived as a violation of the public trust between Facebook and their users, and I feel quite certain that this is going to ruin some lives, but, unfortunately, they have not overstepped their rights as far as the law is concerned. Users agree, when they log on, to allow the company to track all sorts of activities, with every intention of making the public space better through formulaic manipulation. These formulas include untold numbers of matrices that compile data and paint pictures of users that don’t generally make it to the light of day.

“So, you mean they have traditionally tracked many different actions of their users, and, though they don’t publicly graph those actions for all to see, they use that information to improve the quality of their pages?”

“Exactly. So, for example, in this case, since they have now opened up to their users that they’ve been recording the names of all visitors to personal profiles and all clicks those users have made on those pages, it would seem there was an attempt at divining the general habits and interests of each individual user. This has to be important information for procuring advertisers.”

“You mean because advertisers will be able to create clickable links that users are known to use.”

“Exactly.”

“Well, that makes sense, but what is the advantage for releasing this type of information to their users? There are obviously pretty embarrassed people in the world today.

“Absolutely. Most of us have heard of the term “Creeper” as it relates to stalking people on social media, but it has always been acceptable in the sense that creeps were anonymous, and they could only view content shared publicly by the user, anyway. The fact that all of the curtains have been drawn back, though, and the creeps revealed, well they’ll have a lot to answer for in the weeks to come.

“Yes, there are a lot of startled raccoons in the garbage cans out there today, I’m sure. Does it sound like this is the result of hackers, or is it a ploy to punish the world after their stock dropped over 85% in six months? Some have even said this could be a conspiracy in light of the government data collection programs that have remained so controversial.”

“It’s not clear at this point why the information was released, but it did come from the home office in Palo Alto. There’s no indication that this is a rogue group doing this, so, at the moment, it’s anyone’s guess. At this point, though, the social community is certainly wondering if revealing everyone’s “creeping” habits is going to birth a mountain of lawsuits and possibly even criminal complaints depending on the type of creeping taking place and the people spying. At the moment, people appear to be fleeing their profiles in droves. This seems to actually delete the creepers from the system, and it takes their names off of other users’ pages.”

“So, if you’re listening this morning, and you’re a creeper, then there’s still a chance to delete your tracks.”

“That’s correct.”

“Well, we’ll return for more on this story in a moment with comments from several who feel they know why this move was made. In any event, it’s a brand new day for social interaction on the planet, and there may be a lot of explaining to do by all of us.”

The segment broke to cover refugees in Kenya, so Jimmy began to nervously search for other stations that were covering the story. “Holy shit! This can’t be happening.” Jimmy, who had already been tense, was rapidly escalating into a rabid panic. “I’m fucked. I am so fucked.”

Jimmy was in trouble, because he had spent the morning, and most of the previous evening, drinking, watching TV and viewing profiles of women and students. It wasn’t the first evening spent in such activity, either. A flurry of scantily clad young women on spring break or at pool parties began flooding through his thoughts. “I’m fucked! Please, no, it can’t be what they’re saying.” Most stations were playing music or covering sports, so he clicked back to NPR.

The light turned green, and Jimmy willed the five cars in front of him to make the turn in record time. It wasn’t even close, but he never let off the gas as he raced way too late through the intersection with a solid red. The roar of the engine matched the volume of his internal scream as he made his way up the driveway toward the staff lot. He reached into the inner pocket of his jacket to retrieve his smart phone, but it wasn’t there. “No!” It was still on the charger at his house.

“What am I going to do?” He had his laptop, but there was no way to access social media on the school’s wireless network.

“I have students in first hour... I was looking at them last night.”

Jimmy threw his car into a parking spot and put his head back into the head rest. “What can they know by now?” He asked himself. “How much do they know?” It was terrifying for him

to picture all of his subjects opening up their accounts and following his perverted clicks to the evidence. He was getting sick.

“I can’t go in there. I can’t do this.” It was a whisper

He thought for a serious moment about driving home and deleting his account, but he knew that he could potentially lose his job, and it would certainly make the situation seem worse. If it were true that his spying was already discovered, he could find a way to explain it. “I was innocently looking into the lives of my students. I was getting to know them,” he thought. He comforted himself with the fact that he hadn’t looked at anything that anyone else around the world couldn’t see. The notion that he could explain it away calmed him enough to shut the car off and get out.

“There’s got to be a way to log in from the building. I can fix this.”

Jimmy made the decision to make a break for his first hour and try to access the page on his staff computer.

The halls were quiet, because the bell had rung and most were in their classes. Jimmy made the last turn into his wing of the building expecting to see his students amassed outside his locked door or at least his supervisor impatiently waiting for his arrival. It appeared, though, that his room was already open and occupied, which he considered a blessing, because there was no one there to stare at him from the end of the long hallway where his room was located. There was no sign of his principal or other authorities, so he paused for a moment in the doorway just out of sight of his students. Something was wrong. The din of their voices was not appropriate for a normal day in the classroom. Hushed whispers were interrupted by the occasional female student elevating her muffled, indignant comments above the incredulous tones of others.

“Oh, shit. I’m screwed,” he said.

Jimmy wasted no more time and barged into the room with too much thought to keeping an air of normalcy in his countenance and gait. He could feel the guilt projecting from his downcast eyes, and he avoided looking at anyone. Instead, he marched directly to his computer and pushed the power button. His mind was occupied with what he was refusing to look at, and this caused him to assume that his students were all on their phones, looking over the full measure of his crimes. His goose bumps raised his hairs like receivers to capture the 4G activity in the room.

“You’re late, Mr. Baur.” It was an obnoxious boy, Braden, from the back near the shelves of markers and colored paper.

“Yep, sorry guys. I was late getting out of the house today.” Jimmy felt the computer was taking a very long time to load, but it was working at its normal rate. His world was just slowing down to exaggerate the terror he felt creeping just over his shoulder in the form of real adults that wouldn’t understand his behavior and obsessions. “I’m screwed,” he said again in his mind.

“Mr. Baur, I need to go see my counselor.” It was Camilla Rhodes’ voice. She was sitting in the front row next to the computer, and Jimmy couldn’t bring himself to look at her for fear he would ruin his attempt at normalcy. Jimmy had seen her last night as she was drinking shots in Cancun, Mexico with several other students from the high school. The thought that they were under twenty-one hadn’t been enough to dispel his fantasy that they were living on an MTV spring break set, ready to make bad decisions and forget all about them in the morning.

“Camilla, give me a minute to take attendance, okay?”

“I’m sorry, but I need to go now,” she said with an air of disrespect.

“What?” Jimmy forced himself to make eye contact with her until she averted her eyes. She had never spoken to him like that, and his immediate conclusion was that she was reacting to

the truth of what he had done. Her phone was in her clenching hands, and she turned her whole body toward the door. When she spoke, it was as if she were addressing someone in the hall.

“I need to go see my counselor right now.” Jimmy had been teaching high school long enough to know when a teenaged girl was about to cry.

“Okay. You can go.” By now he was almost unable to utter the words. A panic attack was fighting a battle between his diaphragm and heart. It was a common campaign for Jimmy, and he knew that if he could survive the initial assault, he could regain control of his emotions.

The computer was now loaded up, so he used the opportunity to avoid her departure. It still took several minutes to log in, but it was all valuable time needed to calm down. While the start-up programs finished opening, he turned the monitor on an angle to prevent students from spying on his activities.

“Mr. Baur, did you hear the news today?” It was the same student from the back. Braden had a tendency to bait him into conversations to stall the class progress, but, given the question and the circumstances, Jimmy was certain that he was being malicious. He didn’t answer right away; instead, he organized the clutter that was tangling the cord of his mouse.

“No, I didn’t get a chance to read the paper this morning,” he said, pausing for effect. “I was obviously running late today, and now I’m a little flustered, as you can tell.” It was a pretty clever camouflage for the truth behind his manic appearance, he felt.

“The whole cafeteria was up in arms this morning, because there’s a new app available for all of our Facebook pages.” Braden was being slow with his humiliation.

“Oh, yeah?” Jimmy was able to open the web browser, and began typing in the address to his page. He was going to delete the evidence of his creeping, regardless of the accusations about to be made. He slammed down the enter key, but it was no use. The school’s web-filter was

against him, too. It prevented him from accessing what Braden was undoubtedly about to hang him with.

“There’s a new app that we can all download now that allows people to record complete statistics of what everyone has been doing on our social media pages. Even if people delete their tracks, their actions are recorded.”

“Oh, yeah? That’s interesting.” Jimmy was, in fact, morbidly interested at this point. The epinephrine rush was subsiding, and he became the resigned criminal preparing to accept his doom. He allowed Braden to continue.

“Well, yeah, you heard that we can see the names of everyone that’s spied on us, right?” asked Braden as if Jimmy had been part of the student body conversation all along. “Well, there was a way to delete that until this morning. It’s recordable now.” He was boasting, and Jimmy wanted to strangle him in slow fashion. Jimmy knew that he was ruined. There was no saving the situation. Braden went in for the kill. “I noticed that you didn’t visit my page, Mr. Baur.” There was no breathing in the room. The jury was waiting to hear his response.

“No, Braden, I didn’t.”

“Must be because I don’t wear enough bathing suits, right?” He was hoping for a reaction, but the boiling point was long since reached. Jimmy wasn’t able to create panic in his chest anymore, because his neurotransmitters were now bathed in endorphins. He was feeling tired and ashamed, and his head hurt worse than it did in the car. Looking around at the faces of the other students, he became aware of what he must have looked like from the outside. He looked guilty. Margaret, a polite studious young girl was disgusted in her disbelief. Jimmy figured that her look of betrayal would remain in his thoughts forever. He had been so self-conscious about whether or not his students disrespected him behind his back, and now he was

seeing it first-hand. He had their full and undivided attention for the first time, and he wanted nothing more from them than to put their heads down and fall asleep.

“I’ll be back,” he said. It was an automated claim, and he wasn’t at all sure that he would be back. He half-expected to meet an angry mob of parents on their way through the halls to carry him into the town park two blocks away to face a public shaming. The halls were still empty, though.

His internal voice, consumed with rage, asked only one question over and over, “What the hell am I going to do?” The total destruction of his professional reputation as a normal adult was stumbling through every lobe of his brain. The shock was actually lessening the throbbing pulse of his headache, and he was feeling slightly numb.

He sought refuge in the staff bathroom; cool water on his face did not bring relief. Ensuring the door lock was fixed tight, he built a paper nest on the toilet seat and purged himself of the digested sins from the night before. Having rushed through his morning shower, he could smell his stale flesh; it didn’t take long for the small room to become totally awash in his stink.

“There’s no way to overcome this. I’ve thrown my whole career away. This will never go away.” Jimmy buried his forehead on his palms.

“You fucking asshole! You fucking pervert.”

“Go home and fucking shoot yourself, you stupid piece of shit.”

There was a knock at the door that brought him back from the edge and into the real world of bathroom etiquette and work rules.

“Someone’s in here.”

Silence ensued, during which Jimmy was too overwhelmed to form a complete thought. He found momentary comfort in the sound of his breathing and the rise and fall his respiration

gave to his head as it continued to rest in his hands. He finally cleaned up and readied himself to leave the bathroom.

The back of the door had a full length mirror, and he sidled over to face his profile. His mint green dress shirt was old and showing signs of fraying at the cuffs and collar tips. The adjustable elastic on his pants protruded from behind his belt, revealing how fat he was becoming. His clothing was functional rather than expressive of any unique style. His hair was uncut, while his face showed two days growth of stubble. He looked poor. He looked tired and tousled by life and responsibility.

“I’m going home sick... because that’s what I am; I’m sick of all of this shit.”

The phone call to the main office secretary was actually easier to make than he expected. He had been ill in the bathroom he said, and he would need someone to cover his classes for the rest of the day.

“Okay, James, we can get someone else down there right away.” She didn’t tell him to feel better, or get some rest. He didn’t think that he was imagining the revulsion in her voice. They probably wanted him out of the building right away. Jimmy knew that there was every chance the office hadn’t heard anything about his personal downfall, but he also knew that Braden’s remarks had been fueled by open discussion before his arrival. The students would undoubtedly see that he was burned soon.

He filled his laptop bag with the few personal items he had left on his desk. The pictures of his wife and friends on the wall were left behind along with his now worthless diploma. He couldn’t muster the courage to remove them with thirty-one sets of eyes burning a hole in his back. He didn’t look at his first hour class again. He didn’t really see the halls during his exit either. It wasn’t until he was safely in his car that he began to breathe properly again. A wistful

look around the other staff vehicles didn't help. He had hoped to see his fellow refugees fleeing his or her defamation, but he was alone.

The next twelve hours of his life were spent behind the wheel. His first instinct was to drive home and get on the computer, but he suspected that it didn't matter. It would only make it worse, anyway. Instead he sped onto I-696 West toward the I-75 interchange. He got it into his head that he wanted to drive north. There was no destination in mind, just the appeal of moving north, far away from his problems.

"Perhaps this is the career change that I have been looking for," he thought. "I can finally do something else." Jimmy didn't have any idea what he would be doing aside from teaching, though.

Music became a soothing distraction for a time, and the rest was occupied by rolling down the windows and leaning his face out into the wind. He made it as far as the Mackinac Bridge, but, once he crossed to the other side, he lost all desire to continue through the long roads into the woods.

While stopped for something to eat at the Burger King in St. Ignace, he wondered for a time about whether or not he should kill himself. He didn't have an overwhelming desire to do so, and the only method he really had at his disposal was the bridge. Flight was something he always wanted to experience, but the thought of drowning or breaking his legs was too much for him. The sharpness of his panic and despair was already blunting. He wasn't going to prison for looking at pictures. There was even a chance that he could keep his job.

"I don't think I even want it anymore." As he said it, tears and the accompanying bittersweet burn gave him pause. "I just want to go home." He had time, but if he stayed lost too

long, Jenny would worry about him. The potential havoc it would create within their network of friends and family didn't seem worth it.

Without a phone, Jimmy wasn't sure if his wife was aware of anything. She had undoubtedly called, as she did each day around the time school was dismissed, but she would have heard his phone ringing in the kitchen and stopped. If she did know anything, he couldn't even be sure that she would feel betrayed. Jimmy was too tired to think of an excuse for his actions, and the best escape plan his imagination could muster was a plane ride to Tahiti.

He framed a faint idea of the steps that would be required to drain the savings account while avoiding extradition once his wife tracked him down, but he could go no further in his mind. There was no place to hide; the internet had handed him that deceptively sharp nugget of truth, he thought. He resigned himself to the fact that she was going to find out, eventually, and any avoidance on his part would be perceived as greater guilt. He made the drive home in silence.

His headlights cast cold beams on the driveway that had not been sealed in many years because he could never get around to it. Though it was already mid-May, the hibernating grass had yet to recover from the winter, and the brown turf combined with the weathered appearance of the blacktop to create a landscape much better suited to winter. Jimmy could see the living room light on through the window, but the rest of the house was dark. The light was in fact the only sign of life in any of the homes within his view.

"You're home," Jenny said from the living room.

"Yeah, sorry. I would have called, but obviously I left my phone here."

"I saw that." Jimmy pulled his phone from the charger and saw that there were no missed calls.

“How was your day?” she asked.

“It was okay.”

Jennifer (Montgomery) Baur was sitting alone on the couch with her back toward the kitchen and her husband. He could clearly see that she was navigating her personal profile on her laptop, and she made no attempt to hide what she was viewing when he approached.

“I suppose you heard the crazy news today about Facebook?” she asked over her shoulder. Her hand quickly lurched for the large glass of red wine on the table, and she gulped several mouthfuls before Jimmy could respond.

Not sure if he was being set up, he answered cautiously, “Yeah. Crazy isn’t it.”

“I came home after work today all excited. It was weird, but I was hoping that I was going to have all sorts of hits.” She put her glass down after a more cautious sip. “I was actually scared in the car that no one would have been looking at me.”

Jennifer was beautiful. In her college days she was pretty, but age had rounded her features and produced the alluring curves that made her smolder with sensuality. There were days when Jimmy was mad for her, but, as with most things familiar, his interests often switched to the new and unexplored. This fact of their marriage had precipitated Jennifer’s recent habit of drinking full bottles of wine during one sitting and smoking casually on the back deck, which detracted even more from her appeal to her husband. In this moment, though, Jimmy wanted nothing more than to fall into her lap and erase the events of the day in her embrace.

However, she was far away from him now, and the tone of her voice, friendly and formal, revealed that she was speaking to an acquaintance rather than a lover.

“What’s wrong, Jenny?” was all that he could think to ask.

“It’s been a rough day is all, and I was hoping that it would have been different when I got home.”

“I don’t understand. What are you talking about?” he asked in an attempt to buy time.

Jennifer put the laptop down on the couch and turned to face him while bringing her legs up under her butt. She had changed from her formal work skirt and blouse into nice looking jeans and form fitting top. He wondered briefly why she wasn’t dressed more comfortably.

“Jimmy, we need to talk,” she said. Her voice was fatigued and slightly annoyed.

He was so startled by her statement that he blurted out, “I can explain.”

Jennifer was surprised with his rushed response. “Explain what?”

Trying to backpedal, he asked, “Wait, what do you mean?”

“I think that you should tell me what you meant first.”

He was convinced that she already knew about his transgressions and that she was just waiting for him to confess. He didn’t want to reveal the truth, though; he was hoping that she would just yell at him while he retreated into a shell. “Look, I may be in a little trouble at work.”

“What kind of trouble? What did you do?”

He struggled to say the words, so he pointed toward her computer and finally muttered, “What do you think I did? Fucking Facebook.” Too late, he watched Jennifer’s face take on the appearance of sudden understanding, and he knew that she’d had no idea up until his accidental outburst that he had done wrong. She wouldn’t have had access to his page, so she would have had no idea who he’d been spying on.

Her mouth fully open, upper lip snarled, she asked, “Have you been messing around with kids?” It was a painful question for him to hear, and it drove a sickening point into his stomach.

“No! I didn’t mess around with anybody. I’ve just been looking at students for a while,

and they found out today.” The living room wasn’t a good place for him to be, so he fled from her eyes into the kitchen. The admission was actually a little anticlimactic, better than he expected. Opening the freezer door to put a physical barrier between their faces helped.

“Wait, you’ve been looking at students? Like minors? Please tell me it wasn’t little boys.” Her words were a little slurred from drinking, which emboldened Jimmy in his defense.

“Jesus, Jenny. I’m not a fucking pedophile. No, I’ve been looking at a few of my high school students. Girls for Christ’s sake! Fucking girls.” He had hoped the clarification would sound better, but his own ears were hung up on the word girls.

“But they’re students, right? You’re looking at minors?”

“Sort of, I guess, yeah. I was looking at all sorts of people on the internet.” He shut the freezer, but avoided her gaze. He could tell from the corner of his vision that she was staring directly at him, though. There was no understanding in her voice.

“What is wrong with you? And you didn’t delete your page, either. I saw it tonight. They can still see that. You’re going to get arrested.”

“I didn’t rape anyone. I was just looking.”

“Oh my god; what the hell is going on?” By now, she had resumed her original position on the couch. She slapped her palms to her thighs and propped up her torso by firmly straightening her arms and arching her back. She looked determined and ready for action. Her eyes were glossy with alcohol, though.

Jimmy wanted to gain some control over the situation now that there was nothing left to confess. He was relieved it was in the open, and he could work on his recovery.

“Jenny, I’m sorry. I don’t know why I did it,” he lied. “I was curious, I guess.” He knew what attracted him to the pictures, but it was too shameful to admit.

Still firmly entrenched in anger, but slipping toward indifference, she replied, "I'm not interested anymore, James." There was nothing he could immediately say to counter her. He had been emotionally exhausted all day, and he understood what she meant. "I was hoping that you were interested in me. I rushed home today and..." She knew why she had rushed home, but she didn't know how to explain herself. "I don't know any more what I expected."

"Jenny," he began, but he was cut off by his wife who still refused to look at him.

"I felt... dirty. I felt like your eyes had been all over me, and we were going to have a good night..."

"Jenny..."

"But you didn't once check in on me." She was embarrassed that she had to say it. "I had put pictures on there from three years ago when we went to Hawaii over Christmas. Remember that trip?"

A remembered scent invaded his nostrils. Her hair had smelled of coconut suntan lotion and pineapple daiquiris. "That was a great trip, Jenny."

"It was," she said.

Hawaii had been a surprise for their five year anniversary. He took her to the airport, backpacks loaded down with beach clothes. He hadn't told her where they were going, only that it was warm. Her ecstatic joy at the Detroit ticket counter when they received their seats to Honolulu was recreated on his face later in their hotel room with a view of the ocean. They had made love multiple times a day for a week. They had become explorers in a new world with no expectations, no disappointments. It was the greatest moment of their marriage, but they assumed a temporary identity they could never seem to relive since.

"Jimmy, that was the last good time we had," she said.

“That’s not true, Jen...” he tried to protest, but he was being ignored.

“I’ve been trying, and you can’t even blame work. You’ve been distant for years.”

“That’s not true,” he repeated with more authority, but he couldn’t even believe himself.

The fact that he didn’t rush out of the kitchen to hold her or even touch her was far too telling to both of them.

“Yes, it is,” she said, and the room fell quiet. Jimmy felt emasculated standing in the kitchen with his hands on his hips. It was a posture he never maintained, but he didn’t know how else to stand at such a serious moment.

Jenny picked up her laptop and began the process of powering it down. “Do you remember how good we were on that trip? We were rock solid, Jimmy.”

“We could be that way again, you know.”

“Do you really think either of us really wants to anymore?” There was so much chilling finality in her voice that he felt as if a sentence of death had been handed down. He was panicked and filled with sorrow. One thing he knew for sure in that moment, though, was that he did want to fix things.

“Look, I’m sorry about the Facebook thing. I don’t know what I was thinking.” He was almost pleading for forgiveness, but Jenny was dismissive. Her computer case was already packed. “Jenny, I think we can fix this. I want to fix this.” He wanted to add that they would wait until she was sober, but he knew that wouldn’t help the immediate situation.

“I am through talking about this tonight. I just need to go to bed and sleep this day off.” As if in defiance, she tipped the rest of her wine down her throat and slammed the glass onto the table.

“Jen, I want to work on us. You’re completely right, and I’ve been an idiot.” He was grateful that she stopped her retreat long enough to hear what he had to say. Her lips were puckered up though from the bitter red wine, and he briefly wondered how much she was really hearing him. “I may be in trouble at work, but this could be a good opportunity for us. We can get out of this rut.”

“Jimmy. I’m not in a rut,” she said. She stumbled a bit getting to her feet, and her statement would have been ridiculous had her husband not focused completely on the soft round curves of her hips. He was attracted to her despite the absurdity.

There was nothing more he could think to say. Jennifer didn’t bother with goodnight; she made her way down the dark hallway toward the bedroom.

“What the fuck is happening?” he asked the empty room. “This day is…” but he couldn’t finish. He turned back into the kitchen and leaned over the sink with a sigh. He looked out the filmy window, but all he could really focus on was his own reflection, since the sun had long ago set and cloaked the yard in darkness. Just as before in the day, he looked tired and sick. He was in no kind of shape to be admired. He was middle-aged. “Goddammit,” he said in his mind. “What a pair of drunks.”

In ten minutes’ time, Jimmy had two beers in his belly and his third was open and ready on the end table. The guilt and depression were not new feelings for him, but the utter sense of hopelessness and inevitable change was not easy to mold into a rational inner plan. Jimmy was being dragged along by the minute hand at this point, and his only companion was someone he despised.

With nothing else to do, he loaded his Facebook page and prepared himself for the crime scene. “I should have come home and deleted this. What a stupid idea,” he thought.

The first change that he noticed was a popup message that explained how to investigate the actions of everyone visiting his profile. It was described as a new way to design an interesting experience for friends and co-workers. It took him ten clicks on the “next” button to get through the directions for the application before he was free to navigate his online life. He’d had over ninety different visitors in the last eighteen hours, and he recognized most of their faces as students from his classes. The rest were adults with last names he knew as belonging to the same students.

“Oh, sure, I bet you hate me, but you’re the ones with naked teenagers on the internet.” By now he was feeling the buzz of his third empty beer. He went to the refrigerator and brought back four more bottles.

It didn’t take long to figure out how to review the actions of his visitors. He clicked on his profile picture and realized that it had been viewed sixty-seven times. Sarah Winkowski was the most recent. She was in his 7th hour senior composition class. It was obvious that he had been very popular with the students throughout the day, but it looked like several adults had begun to troll through his site shortly before dinner time. No one had made any public comments on his page, and that was reassuring.

One name in particular made a prominent appearance throughout his site, though. Mr. Michael Rhodes, Camilla’s father, had ravaged Jimmie’s profile. His prints were on every picture and every discussion that Jimmy had ever had. “That’s pretty obsessive, buddy. I just looked at your daughter,” he thought.

He was about to delete his page when he recognized the face of Dr. Judith Barnes. She was the superintendent of his school district, and she had stopped by to investigate, too. Her profile picture had the appearance of a mother staring ashamedly at him. “Well, I’m in for it now,” he said. He poured a full bottle of beer down his throat, and cleared his mind of everything except the hum of the cooling fan in his laptop. “I’m in for it now.”

He found the personal settings menu and clicked the appropriate steps to delete his page. The evidence was gone for the immediate future, and Jimmy hoped that the passion of the moment would die down for everyone involved. “I’m on autopilot,” he slurred, “and Monday’s going to suck.”

Jimmy made a personal resolution to try harder when he awoke in the morning without any actual hope that he would. He closed the lid of his computer with blurry eyes, and he traced his wife’s stumbling footsteps down the hall. She was already asleep, curled up in the fetal position on the corner of her bed. The room was filled with her breath, and he knew that he would be adding his own to the mix once he passed out.

“Where the hell do we go from here?” It wasn’t the first time he had asked himself that question. As always, with no answer readily available, he closed his eyes and welcomed the deep dreamless sleep.

TWO HUNDRED AND THIRTY-SEVEN MILES IS NEVER ENOUGH

Arriving at a resort in Northern Michigan, Alan and Jill Parsons beamed like fools from ear to ear at the thought of a weekend getaway. Their lives were hectic, but they had carved out a time to release the tensions of the past month, and they were prepared to squeeze every ounce of pleasure from the amenities the hotel had to offer.

“Hello there,” said Alan at the reception desk. “We’re here to check in.” He spoke more to his wife than the girl behind the counter. “It’s under Parsons... Alan Parsons.”

“You’re such a dork,” said Jill. She didn’t bother to roll her eyes.

The receptionist smiled and began typing away. After a few moments, she found what she was looking for. “Okay, great. We’ve got you on the seventh floor with two queen beds, for two nights.”

“Yep, that’s it.” Alan paused for a moment for effect. “I really hope the room is nice,” he replied. “We’re sort of looking forward to stretching out and relaxing, and we’ve heard that some of your rooms can be a bit small.”

“Oh, well, sir, that may have been true in the past, but we’ve renovated almost all of our rooms, and I’ve heard nothing but good things. Our guests have consistently complimented the improved dimensions for maximum comfort, regardless of family size. Why I’m pretty sure you could fit a carnival into some of our top floor suite rooms.”

Alan saw his opening, and he jumped, “Perhaps you could switch us into one of those. My wife and I will need all the space that you can give us. It’s going to be a long weekend with lots to do.”

“Sure, let me check.” If it was a request she received a lot, she didn’t let it show. “You know what, we can put you one floor from the top with a bay view and a king bed. How would that be?”

“That would be amazing, but how much more is that?”

“Oh, it’ll be complimentary; you’re here out of season, and we want you to have a good stay.”

Alan looked at her nametag and beamed. “Sara, you’re the best. This is going to be awesome.”

“Well, good, let me get you checked in. I’ll send a man out for your luggage, too.”

“I hope he’s strong,” said Jill. We didn’t pack light.

“Mr. Parsons, the vast majority of our guests come with heavy baggage, so we only hire the strongest bell boys and the smartest psychiatrists.”

“I knew this place was going to be great, honey,” said Jill as she hugged Adam close.

Key cards in hand, Alan and Jill walked back to their car to get their luggage; the good start to their vacation was evident in their energetic gait.

When Jill hooked her arm through her husband’s, he said, “I hope you remembered to pack a little somethin’-somethin’ in your bag.”

“Oh, I’ve got a few surprises,” she replied.

“Alright! I can’t believe we finally got away.”

Alan double-clicked the button that opened the back door of the minivan. The soft purr of the locking motor was replaced by the hiss of air entering the shocks that raised the door and

supported its full weight. Scanning the layers of items in the back of the car, his eyes settled on a stern-looking man in a black suit.

“Oh, good, you remembered to pack my boss,” exclaimed Alan.

“Yeah, I remembered that you said you didn’t get to finish your conversation with him yesterday, so I thought that you could work on that tonight after dinner. I also brought the bills you had stacked on the desk and our tax forms.”

“Oh, that’s a good idea. I can take a look at one pile after we fool around and one before we go to dinner.”

“That’s what I figured,” agreed Jill as she pulled several shoulder-strapped bags from the car and hung them around her neck. You could also look at all of your unanswered emails before we get busy, if that would make you feel better.”

Alan seriously considered the idea before answering, “No I don’t think I should do that at all.” He then led his boss over to the luggage cart and sat him down with his back against the gold bars.

“Would you mind holding these for me, Mr. Warden?” asked Alan as he handed over his briefcase filled with bills and government documents.

“Oh, sure, no problem, Alan.” Mr. Warden drew up his legs and hugged the papers to his chest.

“Thanks. And can you save room for my kids? Honey, I brought the kids too. I knew you would be wondering all weekend what they were doing, and Val has that dance routine to learn before Friday. You can work on that while I pay the bills.” Two little blonde girls tumbled out of the van, followed by an even smaller brunette boy.

“Daddy!” said the youngest girl named Faye.

“Yes, dear?”

“Did you know that an alligator moves his jaws like this?” Her arms extended into the reptilian mandibles, and she roared the sound, “Mrumm, Mrrumm, Mmrrumm,” as she opened and closed the trap.

“Jill, you may need to start working on this, right now,” said Alan as he picked little Faye up by the waist and deposited her on the cart. She was joined by the statuesque Valerie, who gracefully mounted the cart in her leotard, and his son, Max, who looked at Mr. Warden for any source of empathy. Finding none, he yelled out, “I want to watch a MOVIE!”

The happy couple ignored this request and continued to pile their baggage. There was laundry from the bathroom floor, a safety recall notice for the truck, a half-finished manuscript that was actually just a bunch of random notes for brewing beer at home, and a mirror from the master bathroom that Alan hadn’t had a chance to hang yet. Valerie took great pleasure in gazing at her beautiful hair while practicing her pirouettes.

“Careful, honey,” said Alan. “You’ll tip the cart over.”

Jill’s best friend from college, Bianca, had made the trip along with three novels that needed to be returned to their rightful owners. A fat tabby cat named Hank that spent nights puking on the floor when he wasn’t warming Jill’s feet at the foot of the bed took a swat at Mr. Warden before settling down in his lap. The last item to be placed precariously in top of the cart was a small bag containing the surprise that Alan was looking forward to.

“I think we’ve got everything. We’ll save the rest for tomorrow morning before we drive around the wineries.”

With the acceptance of a conditioned soldier, Alan said, “Yeah, that sounds like a plan. This thing’s too heavy, anyway.”

As the herculean bell boy pulled the cart up the slight incline into the resort, Alan gave the button on his keys a quick push. With practiced stealth, a ninja bearing a stark resemblance to his mother-in-law scurried out of the van undetected and climbed onto the back of the rack behind the rest of the baggage. A quick wink at her daughter, and they were away.

After unpacking, it was decided that dinner took precedence over everything else. Jill was getting cranky, and Alan, upon discovering his stowaway, was ready to drink the work week away. He wasn't too upset; he had long ago discovered that Jill was a package deal, and her mother was actually a saintly woman whose only flaw was her habit of being the woman who had birthed his wife.

"It's fine, honey. Let's just get the weekend started and commence to getting' wild," he said. With an agreement that they were going to do just that, they led their menagerie to the top floor for dinner and drinks.

The restaurant dated from the late eighties, and most of the tables were empty, but the staff was gracious enough, concealing most of their desire to be anywhere else in the world. Alan was going to be sure to tip them well. The kids, meanwhile, went right into running around the restaurant, which included several trips to the bathroom.

"Dad, this bathroom has a couch in it. Faye fell off and hurt her knee," reported Max. "Some lady said we needed to be watched better."

"I don't doubt that you do, Max," replied Alan.

Mr. Warden spent the cocktail hour questioning the prices on the dinner menu. Alan was also pretty sure he was being watched closely for a drinking problem. By his second glass of wine, he didn't care, though. He was prepared to go down in a blaze of Australian grapes. Bianca

had met an unrealistically good-looking man at the bar, and she was on her way down the elevator to take a ride in his Porsche. If Jill was jealous, it didn't show in her smile. She was used to the crazy adventures of her old friend.

In between diaper changes and conference calls, Jill and Alan passionately necked and groped one another in romantic thirty second bursts. At one point, Jill was able to demonstrate a stupendous knack for multitasking by massaging Alan's back and sharing a passive aggressive glare to her mother while teaching Valerie to twirl a baton.

By the time the meal was over and the bill was paid, an amount that caused the high school-aged waitress to look down at Alan as if he shouldn't get too big for his britches, the sun had set over the distant dunes. Alan held Jill's hand with a renewed passion for her warmth while she ironed the remaining shirts from the hamper. Her efforts were hastened by the soft tempo acoustic lounge act finishing their concluding set with the Parson's Children Trio singing backup. A trio featuring the unique talents of Max "the Destroyer" Parsons on percussion.

"I'm getting sleepy," said Jill. "If you're going to get lucky, you better finish that glass of wine." Alan hadn't originally heard her, due to his scheduled fifteen minute power nap, but Mr. Warden was kind enough to send him a scathing memo entitled, "The Ins and Outs of Love Making." In it he detailed the historically constant first quarter gains in their production sector followed by the inevitable decline of third quarter profitability and overly optimistic forecasts in the fourth quarter.

"I'm ready," Alan said. He was referring not only to the planned trip to their room but also his mother-in-law's desire to live in a modest assisted living center when she was older.

“Mr. Warden said he’d watch the kids for a little bit and look out for Bianca. Now’s our chance,” said Jill. Arm in arm, they made their way from the lounge and took the stairs down one floor to their room.

Thirty-five minutes after fooling around, Alan was asleep, cradling an empty bottle of Shiraz, and Jill was in the bathroom combing her hair and preparing for bed. The children had since come back and fallen asleep in various places throughout the room, but not before hiding their toys in shadows throughout the room to serve as Punji stick traps for moonlight travelers to the bathroom. Alan’s boss had taken off his jacket with a flourish before settling his whisky-stewed behind down in the desk chair and passing out, and Bianca was years away, going a hundred miles an hour to nowhere.

“Goodnight, mom,” said Jill to her mother, who was sitting on the back of the toilet tank, reading an old *Inquirer*.

“Goodnight, Jill. See you tomorrow. Don’t forget to –” but she didn’t get to finish, because Jill shut off the lights and climbed into bed next to Alan. She let out one final breath and drifted peacefully to sleep.

A solid six hours later, Alan was startled awake by a heaving noise from down the hall.

“Wha-what was that?” slurred Alan as he jerked on his pillow.

Jill, nuzzling closer to her husband said, “It’s just Hank, puking on the floor next to our little alligator.”

“Oh...” said Alan from his slumber. “I hate that cat.”

“I know.” Jill had heard this affirmation too many times to be concerned. She heard the noise again and lifted her head, this time more awake. She admired the faint predawn light

coming through the crack between the curtains, and relished the temporary respite. The suite was a disaster, but for the moment it was quiet. The fire marshal had been kind enough to hang the do-not-disturb sign on the door when he left after the second smoke alarm call, and the children were sleeping or occupying themselves with the contents of Jill's purse. She had already removed the surprise that Alan had been hoping for. He was wearing the soft purple earplugs at that very moment, and he was drifting back to sleep, unable to hear anything that sounded like a child breathing gently during sleep. That was the only noise they blocked out. A sigh accompanied Jill's cheek into the pillow. She would be going back to bed for as much sleep as she could get. "I needed this; we should do this again soon."

THE RADIOMAN

It was a particularly hot summer day in Detroit, made all the more intolerable by the hot smells from the city incinerator and the road construction strangling every artery to a halt. Craig Mathews and his co-worker, Edgar “Eddie” O’Neil, had just finished cleaning up the newly renovated Detroit Academy of Promise, and they were on their way back to their Eastpointe shop before they began to notice a problem in the community around them. It was Eddie who first detected the change as they rolled noisily down Six Mile. His long, lanky frame was wedged into the far corner of the bench seat, resting shamelessly after seven hours of sweeping and vacuuming, and he was peering through the tangles of his long dirty hair with partially closed eyes. The neighborhood houses were completely buttoned up, each one they passed, but the inhabitants seemed to be adventuring out cautiously onto decks and front yards en masse. He could tell by the way people were congregating and speaking that something must have happened. Their truck was moving slowly, and he studied the side streets, the sky, and the mirrors for evidence of an accident or a fire.

“Why the hell is everyone out on their porches? Don’t these people have jobs?” he asked with lazy disdain.

“It’s past seven, most people are probably home already,” said Craig before adding, “But, no, I don’t think they have jobs.”

“Lucky bastards,” he said as he leaned his head back into the seatbelt bracket.

“Lucky indeed,” sighed Eddie.

Craig began playing with the accelerator and the clutch, shifting up and down in an attempt to isolate a noise. “I think there’s something wrong with the truck. Do you hear that?”

Craig had been detecting a sucking sound coming from the engine, and he was losing power each time he tried to accelerate from a stop.

“Hear what?” he asked. “This piece of shit sounds like a train wreck rolling down the road.” It was an accurate description, due to the squeaking brakes, rattling suspension, and hissing exhaust. The Ford was well beyond its prime, and Craig was quite frankly the only employee capable of babying it to job sites.

“I think we’ve got an issue with the carburetor. We’re sucking in air. Listen, and you can hear the high-pitched scream.”

“Dude, the only scream I can hear is the truck begging for one of us to put it out of its misery.”

Ignoring his joke, Craig approached a traffic light with no sign of a functioning bulb. He treated it as a four way stop, but he kept the wheels rolling in case the engine tried to cut out. He shifted into 2nd gear and hammered the gas when he realized the intersection was clear.

“It’s still there. It’s getting worse, too.”

The prospect of becoming stuck south of eight mile was enough to capture Eddie’s attention. “I don’t hear it. What do you think it is?”

“Like I said, I think it’s a blown seal above the floats on the carburetor. It’s not running rich....” He listened a little longer while alternating the throttle. “It’s not getting enough fuel on the combustion stroke. It’s fine while coasting or idling, because it isn’t demanding as much fuel. It’s just whistling.” Craig knew a little about cars from working on old Jeeps with his uncle, but he was as equally surprised as Eddie for making such a specific diagnosis.

“What in the hell are you talking about? I just smell smoke and ass coming from this truck,” Eddie said with exaggerated criticism.

“The smoke is from the three holes in the header, and the smell is the food wrappers under the seat. The actual ass smell is left over from the dirty people sitting on the truck seat for the last twenty years.”

“Whatever, man, just get us out of this fucking city. I’m not spending the night here.”

Craig nursed the Ford to another non-functioning traffic light, and he was forced to come to a complete stop as a Chevy Silverado blew through the intersection. The truck ran okay while idling, so Craig didn’t feel the need to rush into the accelerator. This allowed him time to investigate his surroundings more closely.

“Eddie, did you notice that everyone is out on their porch?” he asked.

“What the hell did I just say back there?”

“I think the power must be out on the whole block. Look down there.” Craig pointed to the right, and they both made out at least three different traffic lights that were not working.

“Those lights are all out down there, too.”

“What the hell, this city is a pile of shit, man.” Eddie turned up his nose and stamped his dirty feet into the dashboard as he leaned back into his seat. “I suppose none of the restaurants are open. I’m starving, too.”

Craig rolled slowly through the intersection to get a good view around the tall grass growing on the four corners. “How could anyone live like this? It looks like the whole area is powerless.”

“That sucks, man. This city just can’t keep the lights on,” said Eddie.

Craig was inching along while riding the clutch between two parked cars when a little boy on his bike careened out of the service alley and into the road. He popped the clutch and

slammed on the brake with both feet to avoid hitting the red blur of a baseball cap on wheels. The engine lurched to a jerky stop, and the stall came with a loud backfire.

“Shit,” Craig exclaimed. “I almost killed that kid.” Eddie was too startled to say anything, which allowed both of them to hear a man’s voice from a distance as he laughed at their predicament.

“Look at those fools. They can’t drive a truck.”

An eerie silence ensued as Craig collected himself from the jostling stop in the middle of the road. He checked his mirrors to be sure that there were no cars coming from any direction, and he turned the key to the off position to prepare for a restart. “I hope she fires back up. I have a feeling we just lost it.

“Aww, man, come on baby, give us a break,” pleaded Eddie. He found his water bottle and took a swig to wash the dust that had been stirred by the trauma to the cab out of his mouth.

There was no hope. Several attempts to get the engine running again were pointless, and soon the two were looking under the enormous hood at a machine covered in years of oil and abuse. Eddie had no way of verifying Craig’s suspicion that the throttle body was in fact porous, but he didn’t attempt to stop him when he pulled out some wrenches from the back and began an immediate dissection.

“I’m going to see what I can do, but call Bob and let him know that we may need a tow.”

“Alright. I hope you can fix it, though. There’s no way we’ll get a tow in this neighborhood anytime soon. Son-of-a-bitch truck.” Eddie retrieved the cellphone from the floor where it had fallen and held it up over his head. “It says we don’t have service. Are you shitting me? We’re in the middle of a major city. How do we not have service here?” His question carried a tone of acceptance for their situation.

It was surprising to both of them when Craig removed the entire carburetor of the truck in the middle of the road in a matter of moments. He felt like a trained veteran under the hood, his confidence and understanding growing with each moment. Eddie retreated to the sidewalk and continued his attempts to call for help on his phone, but it was no use.

“I think the power outage is affecting the cell towers, or something. There’s no signal at all.” He looked more closely at what Craig was doing and offered a protest. “Dude, what the hell are you doing? You can’t take an engine apart in the middle of the road.”

“I think I can fix it. I just need to fix the seal on the upper part of the carburetor.”

“Are you kidding me? How the hell are you going to do that? That thing is dead.”

“I don’t think so. I have an idea,” said Craig.

He used the sidewalk as a workbench, and he disassembled the piece with a practiced hand. He arranged the small screws and washers on a clipboard until finally he reached the degraded paper seal above the bowl that held the fuel. “See? This is the problem. We’re sucking in air.” Eddie could only watch in silent amazement as a new seal was cut from a piece of cardboard bolt box and affixed to the unit. In record time, the whole body was back together and cleaned to perfection.

“You’ve got to be kidding me. If that thing works, I’ll buy you a case of beer.”

“I think it will work better, to be honest with you. I bent the floats to allow more fuel in the bowls, and I cleaned the jets, so they should deliver better fuel volume.”

“Who are you? This shit is crazy, man. Do you know anything about these engines? Bob is going to be pissed if you owe him a new carburetor.”

“Just trust me.”

The truck turned over for several cranks as the air was purged from the line until it fired back to life with renewed vigor and power.

“Yes!” Craig exclaimed. “I knew that was the problem.” Both men were smiling proudly at the rebirth of their old work truck.

Eddie remembered his disdain for the smell and the noise and he kicked the underside of the dashboard before adding, “When we get back to the shop, can you break it again? I hate this truck.” Despite his criticism, Eddie was ecstatic.

“Aww, come on, she’s a good ol’ ride.”

“Well, at the moment, she’s doing better than the city of Detroit,” said Eddie. “I bet someone just didn’t pay the electric bill.”

“You know, I would say that’s ridiculous if we weren’t talking about THIS city.”

What they didn’t realize at the time was that the entire power grid of The United States was switched off. It would take months for the world to know that it had been caused by a group of computer hacking hobbyists out of China as a joke that went too far. The event had only been planned as an experiment, but it had succeeded beyond all projections. At the moment Craig was bring life back into the old Ford, fifteen Chinese men and four American expatriates were smashing their servers to bits, fearing the repercussions of their actions.

The hackers had been working for months in their Shanghai high-rise apartment attempting to infiltrate most of the major communication, transportation, and power producing systems in the western hemisphere. The goal had been to set a record by having access to the greatest number of systems at once without detection. When discussions turned to establishing proof of their deeds, they simply decided to hit the off button on everything they controlled. As

the Americas began to go dark, with satellites falling out of orbit, other developed nations shut everything down to avoid damage to their infrastructure.

Mankind was without power for the first time in over a century. Communication and internet were dead, while transportation was limited to slow individual crawls. There would have been a greater panic if there had actually been any news, but few communities harbored amateur radio operators, and those that did had little means to disseminate the global chatter. It was an international snow day, as many called it later—a term derived from the static produced on virtually every television screen in the world before it turned blue.

It took Craig and Eddie more than three hours to make it out of Detroit due to the chaos bred from the blackout event, and it was almost midnight by the time they secured their tools at their vacant garage facility. Even without radio or cell communication, it was obvious to them that there was a wide-spread power outage throughout the entire area. Craig eventually found a note on the time clock from his boss. It read, “The power went out at noon, I waited for you guys to return until seven, but I’m going to make an attempt to get home before it gets too dark. I’m sorry that I couldn’t contact you, but I hope you make it back safe. Please just write down your time and be careful driving home. If the power is still off in the morning, have a great weekend, and we’ll see you both Monday. Bob”

“Well, that was awfully nice of him,” said Eddie sarcastically. “At least I only live a few minutes away. Are you going to be okay getting home?”

“I should be fine,” said Craig. “The roads should be mostly empty by now. I’ll just take the back roads to avoid all of the lights.”

As they both walked out to the pitch black parking lot, they couldn't help but look around at the night sky saturated with stars. Even the wind was resting to avoid intruding on the perfect silence.

Eddie was the first to break it by saying, "I can't believe how many stars we can see."

"Do you realize there are no planes in the sky? I haven't seen one blinking light."

"Holy shit, man. This is crazy," said Eddie.

"You know what else I am noticing? It is completely silent. I'm not even hearing the ringing in my ears."

"You're right. I guess all the background noise is gone."

For as long as Craig could remember, he had heard a loud buzzing and whistling sound in his head. He used to lie in bed at night, clenching his jaw while squinting in order to distort his face enough to change the pitch. His assumption at the time was that his hearing was damaged, but the cool dark sky blanketing the parking lot gave him pause.

"I can hear everything, but I can't hear the noise in my head."

"It's amazing how much background noise there is in our everyday lives, isn't it? All the shit's off, and nothing's buzzing. It's like being out in the woods right now." No sooner had Eddie finished speaking than a car horn blasted through the silence, and wheels spun on the blacktop. It brought a smile to his face. "Well, almost like being in the woods, just more assholes here."

Craig didn't add anything to the conversation other than to say goodnight. He was feeling very anxious to go, and he couldn't quite understand what was happening in his head. A check of the airwaves confirmed for him that there were absolutely no broadcasts on any band. His phone

was still devoid of a signal, and there were very few lights on in any buildings. Even the people owning generators had long since shut them off to go to bed.

When he got home to his rural neighborhood, he noticed the dying embers of a bonfire at in his next-door neighbor's backyard, and he walked through the dew covered grass to investigate.

"Hey, Mike, are you back there?"

"Hey, Craig, yeah, I'm here. I sent the kids to bed a few hours ago, but I can't get enough of this sky."

"Crazy, isn't it?" Craig walked up to the fire ring and warmed his cooling hands over the coals.

"Were you at work all this time?" Mike asked.

"Yeah, I was in Detroit, and it took this long to get back."

"It's everywhere, eh? I've never seen it like this before. Even that last big power outage forever ago wasn't like this."

"We worked right through it today. The city's so crappy that we didn't even know the power was out until we tried to drive home."

"Yeah, it's been out since noon."

"That's what my boss told me," Craig said and then he proceeded to detail his experience of the day. He told of the peaceful quiet on the roads and the absence of activity everywhere he had been. When the topic of the dead radios came up, Mike shared his disbelief.

"This is something big. If those radios aren't up soon, then this place is going to blow up."

“I was thinking that, too,” said Craig. “How could this happen?”

Mike shrugged his shoulders and said, “The absence of all radio signals is not possible. Erik, down the road, has a police band radio and that works, but they’re not saying much. His battery is almost dead, and the range is limited too. No one knows what’s going on, though.”

The two men sat close to the faint red glow and continued to stare into the sky. Craig soon became agitated, though, and got to his feet. “I can’t sit still,” he said. “I’ve never felt this awake before and ready for action.”

“Really? I’m exhausted,” Mike said. “I’ve been dragging water up from the lake all day just to flush toilets.”

“Well, I’m going to get inside and unplug everything; I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Yeah, I guess I better go, too.”

Once inside and secure, Craig was in no mood to sit down, let alone sleep. He paced through his empty home with a flashlight and organized months of clutter. He read through his mail and old magazines at a quick pace and discarded them in the trash. By three in the morning, he was breaking down boxes in his basement filled with old photos and textbooks from his father’s days in college. He was desperate for stimulation, and he read every document he could get his hands on. After he had pored through seven volumes on electrical engineering and his great uncle’s medical books, he came out of the basement as the sun was just peaking up over the horizon. He was wide awake and rabid for more.

“What is going on with me?” he asked himself. “I’m hyper for god’s sake.”

He ate breakfast ravenously in the form of Cheerios and warming milk from the refrigerator before going out into the garage to search for more to do. By 9 AM, his Jeep engine was tuned, and all of the fluids were replaced. He checked the radio periodically, but it was dead.

Making a decision to drive to town to gather more information, he sought out Mike for companionship. Together, they ended up outside of the police station with an anxious crowd listening to Sherriff Peterson's attempts to establish calm.

He told them that they were maintaining sporadic communication with the state and that all indications were that power would be fully restored in a few days. "It is our understanding that there has been some sort of cyber-attack and all measures to fix the problem are being taken at this time. The Monroe plant, for example, was brought back this morning around six, but they felt the attack may have been continuing, so the plant was again shutdown out of an abundance of caution. There are couriers like the old pony express days delivering messages, and our short wave radios are allowing us some opportunities to direct emergency efforts. At this time, everyone should return home and wait it out. We do have generators operating now at several grocery stores and pharmacies, so your immediate needs for food should still be met without panic."

Craig had heard enough, and he and Mike returned home after purchasing two carts full of dry goods and propane. "I guess we better start cooking up all that meat in our freezer," Mike said. "You're welcome to come over for lunch, if you're hungry. Otherwise it will all go to waste."

"Thanks, but I think I'll just grab a quick bite and head to the library while there's still light."

"The library?" Mike asked. "What the hell do you need a library for?" Craig knew that he wasn't considered the studious type, but he had a good reason to go.

"Last night I walked around my house and read every book I own. I'm going to see if I can get more for tonight."

“Well, good luck. It makes me wonder what people used to do for entertainment before electricity.”

Speaking from recent experience, Craig replied, “I suspect people went crazy.”

Craig’s nervous energy was at a fever pitch, so he loaded up a bag for the day with peanut butter and bread, and he was off. Realizing how small his community library would be for his new found curiosity, he settled on the local university with its larger collection of material. His suspicions that the campus would be a flurry of activity with excited students was correct, and he found a spot on the fourth floor of the library’s memorial wing at a large oak table where he began to pile books twenty and thirty high. His appetite was diverse and insatiable. He gleaned immediate understanding simply by looking at a page, and he memorized and integrated all new stimuli, including the content of conversations around him. For example, the history and practice of anesthesia flowed into him along with the relationship status of a nearby undergrad named Alex. Greek fire and the fall of the British East India Tea Company took a place in his thoughts, too, along with a full comprehension of Karl Marx’s writings.

Craig was never a terrible student, but he was well aware of the fact that his current ability to absorb and digest information was well beyond abnormal. He felt like he was flexing a new found muscle, and he couldn’t stop pushing the limits of his new found ability. Around dinner time, he tried to put an organic chemistry book down without finishing it, but his mind was racing much too quickly through the pages to stop. He covered all thirteen hundred pages in fewer than eight minutes before he finally slammed the back cover closed and thrust the book across the table off the other side.

He brought both of his hands up to his face and pulled them down over his mouth, stretching his skin tight down to his chin.

“What the hell is happening to me?” he asked. There were several students remaining on the floor, and they had been watching him with cautious curiosity for several hours. He was beginning to take on a ragged appearance with each greasy hand stroke through his hair, and the mountain of books around him had been reaching epic proportions. As he looked around at their faces, several turned away to avoid his gaze. One girl in particular, though, allowed her concerned expression to remain within his field of vision long enough to catch his full attention. She was pretty, with kind eyes, and she placed both hands down calmly on her own book.

“Sir, it’s going to be okay. We’re safe. It’s just the power.”

He wasn’t sure how to respond at first, because she clearly didn’t understand what he was going through.

“Sir, I bet the power will be on again, soon,” she said, but all Craig could focus on was the fact that he was twenty-two years old, and she was calling him sir.

“I’m sorry. I’m just overwhelmed,” he finally said. “Big project on my plate, I guess.”

“I’m sure this power outage couldn’t have come at a worse time, hey?”

“I’ll be okay. I guess I better return some of these books to the rack before I get thrown out.”

She ended up helping him pile the heavy tomes onto different reshelving carts without offering any more by way of conversation. When his station was clear, she finally said, “The librarian said that they would run the generators all night and remain open for students who don’t have power in their dorms. You should get some rest and something to eat and come back after you’ve taken a break. Everything will still be here.”

“Thanks,” he said. “I’m almost finished.”

Craig left the library having read over fifteen hundred books. He actually turned over the true number in his mind as he pushed through the rotating doors out into the parking lot. “One thousand five hundred and forty-two books. Jesus, what’s going on with me?” He still wasn’t tired, so he made his way to his car and sat idling while he debated his next move. His mind raced over the history of coal futures and the downfall of the electric car. He formulated a solution to the spread of infectious diseases in Africa and slapped his thigh in excitement when he devised a plan to provide secure water supplies to communities in the Southwest.

“Oh, my god, I can’t stop.” He had started the day feeling cold, but now his head felt heavy with waves of heat emanating from his scalp. The air-conditioning was a welcome relief, and it helped an idea come to fruition in his mind as he recalled *The History of Michigan*, a book he had read after he had finished his fifth peanut butter and jelly sandwich.

“I should go to the Michigan Library in Lansing!” he exclaimed hysterically. “They have more books.” A check of his fuel level told him he could easily cover the 114 miles. He knew the exact mileage, because he had studied an atlas just before dinner.

Craig stopped off at his house to collect more food and bottled water and to fill his stomach for the long drive. He had no idea if the library would be open, but he needed to get out of his house. His neighbor, Mike, was foregoing the campfire, and his house was already silent and dark by 10 o’clock when he left.

As he feared, the library was closed for the night, and there was little sign of life on the nearby campus of MSU. He spent most of the night walking the streets of Lansing along the Grand River while thumbing through a textbook on advanced German Philosophy. It was written in German, but he had learned the language by reading a three-volume set in the library earlier in

the day. “I need to start with Japanese tomorrow, because I am dying to know about the shoguns,” he said to the soft ripples of water below him off of the walkway. “Then I’ll learn Russian. I want to read *War and Peace* as Tolstoy intended.” His proclamations continued all night to the point of absurd madness. It was the only way he could harness the tempest of activity spilling out of him. He had finally found the motivation to explore new things, and whatever was happening to him was giving him all sorts of ideas for changing the world, too. He achieved one moment of clarity when he finally settled on a bridge railing over a swift river current.

“Of all the distractions I’ve had in my life, now is the time to make amends. No more sweeping floors and cleaning up small messes.”

When the Library director reported for work the next day, she was surprised to find Craig sitting on the steps, filling a tattered notebook with furious scribbles. He saw her startled expression and reined in his energy, lest he scare her away.

“Good morning,” he said as calmly as he could. “I was hoping the library was going to be open today despite the power being out.”

The woman resumed her official duties like a practiced librarian once she realized Craig, though eccentric, wasn’t a threat. “We won’t be checking anything out today, but we’ll get the generators up in an hour or two, and you can use the building.”

“That’s great. I need something to keep me busy.”

She didn’t wait around him any longer, but she kept a close eye as she unlocked her office while he walked over to the magazine racks. Craig waited what he thought was an appropriate amount of time before he asked her where to find the foreign language section. She happily directed him to an area well away from her work station.

He spent the next ten hours much the same way he had spent the day before. There were other patrons present, so he kept a better handle on his outbursts and book stacking, so as not to draw too much attention. There were a few times, however, when he caught himself grinning like a hysterical maniac, especially after he had finished off an entire subject. It was most profound when he discovered he could read two books at once by turning the pages with both hands and flicking his eyes back and forth as if he were at a tennis match. He blasted through every biography and autobiography in the library in just under an hour.

“These people are amazing. Terrible and amazing,” he summarized. “I know that I have the gift of hindsight right now, but this world could be a much better place if only we listened to each other.” He had read about the philanthropy of several American families from the 1920s and 30s, and he became aware of how much more he could do for the general public.

“I can balance the budget if I put my mind to it. We have so much waste worldwide.” To people walking by in the library, he looked every bit unhinged and emotionally excited. Most people gave him a wide berth when they saw how his eyes darted about without blinking.

He stopped long enough to eat two sandwiches and a banana near the drinking fountain before he was off again to the mathematics and physics books. Each section held his attention for over two hours, until he finally forced himself to sit down, soaked in sweat. He was aware that he was drawing looks, but he did his best to ignore the polite smiles and curious peeks around shelves. Finally a boy with a slight build in plaid shorts and a white polo shirt approached him.

“Are you on a scavenger hunt or something?” he asked.

“Scavenger hunt?”

“Well, the way you’re tearing through those books, my friends and I wondered if you were looking for something. You know, like a clue or something.”

Craig almost told him the truth, but thought better of it. “I left my notes in a book I had used here months ago, and I’m trying to find them. It’s really stupid, and I’ll probably just end up doing the project over again, but I figured, since the power was out, I would use the day to explore.” He could tell immediately that his story was not completely bought.

“Wow, too bad you did it in this library, I couldn’t think of a worse place to have to look.”

“No kidding.”

“Unless you believe in osmosis or something. The way you were working those book over we thought you might be a savant or something.”

“If only, right?” Craig forced a silly smile in an attempt to continue playing the fool.

“Well, good luck, I hope you find your papers.”

“Thanks a lot. Me, too.”

Craig experienced numerous breakthroughs that day. And at night when the generators were shut off and the doors were locked, he snuck out of his hiding spot atop the shelves of Michigan Law and resumed reading until the sun finally set and blackened the building. He used a small flashlight from the custodial closet that slowed his pace until he created a head lamp holder out of folded paper, a project he stole from an origami book.

The knowledge he ingested from tens of thousands of books filled him with a level of motivation he’d never felt before. “I still can’t get over this,” he thought to himself. “Of all that I’ve read today, I still can’t explain this change that’s come over me.” Since he knew that

sunspots could disrupt power, he contemplated their role in the current outage and any impact they could have on him. “Perhaps it triggered my brain to speed up?” he thought. “In reality, everything I’m doing today is within the normal limits of the human body. I’m just functioning at a much higher capacity.”

“When the power is back on, I need to speak to someone.” Everything could change, he thought. He even went so far as to plan out his future contributions to the world at a healthy pace, so as not to be seen as a madman. He would start with county government and work his way up over the months and years to come until he was in the White House. “I’m being foolish,” he said with a sigh during one of his cooling off periods. He gulped water to replenish the sweat running down his face and formulated on paper a five year plan to correct the financial system of Michigan while improving the environment for generations to come.

As he approached the vast shelves of world history, he was started when the lights of the building burst to life with a florescent buzz. “The power is back!” he exclaimed while covering his eyes and face, as if the ceiling were going to crash down and bury him. A quick check of his watch revealed that it was only 3:45 in the morning. “I’ve got to hurry,” he said, but he didn’t really know why. He feared though that the reintroduction of power would somehow return him to his former self.

As he waded through the human experience from the expansion of the Roman Empire to the birth of industrialized England, he caught the faint whistling in his ears that had been so common for him only days before. “No, why now? What is that?”

And, suddenly, it all became clear. It was a radio transmission. Somewhere in Lansing, a large broadcast antenna was firing up to transmit its first signal in almost three days. It was a

long-wave AM signal, and it was wobbling out across the sky, penetrating the windows and walls of all the buildings within fifty miles. “I can detect that,” he said. “I can hear that.”

The small bones in Craig’s ears were not actually vibrating with the intrusion. It was an anomaly in the sensory receptors of his brain that received the garbled beam of radiation as they had been every day of his life until the lights went out. The gears that had been turning so quickly, processing information and churning out ideas, suddenly slowed as they took on the familiar stimuli. The faint whistle was the product. All that could be made of the cryptic information.

“No!” he screamed.

Craig rushed out through the emergency exit to his car, and searched through the frequencies until he found the station that was broadcasting.

“Good morning out there, Lansing. If you’re listening, then you know that we’re back up and running. Power was restored earlier this morning, and we were given the all clear by our technicians to resume our broadcast just a moment ago. It’s good to be back, and it’s even better to report that power is being restored all over the country. Already the entire northern half of Michigan is up, and we’re getting word that southeast Michigan will be following, just as soon as they can clear the Fermi plant as safe to resume duty.” Craig detected another pitch in his ears, and he changed the radio to FM and began to search.

“We’re back on the air, folks, and, boy, do we have a story for you. Walter and I have just been given the clear to go on the air, and we’re glad to be back...” The sentence wasn’t finished as Craig switched off the radio.

“That’s it. I’ve been hearing that all my life, and it’s the goddamn radio.” He was an expert on the subject of RF radiation now, but nothing he had encountered in the past two days

could explain his situation. The longer he sat in the parking lot and thought about it, the more he began to lose focus. His mind wandered and his sweating increased dramatically.

Knowing only that he needed to get south, he sped to the freeway and raced toward home. He drove through more screeching and buzzing, fighting desperately to maintain who he had become. The radio was filled with local news and world reports interspersed with pop songs and commercials, until he covered enough distance to escape their reach.

He was home as the sun finished its climb from behind the early morning fog in the distance, and he stripped his stinking clothes off in the kitchen down to his underwear. Pacing back and forth, he struggled for a solution. The machine in his mind which had developed an insatiable craving for input was once again tapping into the plentiful supply flowing freely from every metal tower in range, every satellite looking down.

“If I could build a lead bunker, I could continue to work...” He stopped all of his activity for a moment and fought for focus. “I could send out for food and supplies.”

In the distance, he could already hear several of Mike’s children screaming in the back yard as they ran around, celebrating the return of full power to their home. Craig couldn’t remain tuned to their voices; the whistling whine was revving up in volume. “I’ll need to be fast. It’s getting hard to concentrate.”

There was a knock on the door. “Hey, Craig, the power’s on, in case you couldn’t tell,” Mike yelled through the open window of the living room. He could clearly see Craig standing in the kitchen in his wrinkled boxer shorts.

“Hey, hold on Mike, thanks. One sec,” he yelled as he rushed to the back room to retrieve a pair of pants. Partially dressed he opened the door. “Yeah, I heard your kids and air-conditioning turn on. That’s good.”

“Sorry to interrupt. I just remembered that you said you were going to unplug everything, so I didn’t know if you were aware or not. I’ll leave you to it.”

“Hey, sure. Thanks. No problem at all. I appreciate it.”

Mike was about to leave, but he sensed that Craig was in trouble so he lingered on the porch a bit longer. “Are you okay?” he asked.

“I’m just tired, I guess,” he replied.

“Well, Barb was going to cook out again tonight, if you’re out of food ‘til morning. You’re welcome to join us, if you want. Breakfast, too.”

“Thanks a lot, Mike. I may need to take you up on that.” He caught his reflection in the storm door and realized how crazed he looked. He’d not showered since Thursday before work, and his patchy stubble and lingering body odor was a shock to his system.

“Okay. Well, we’ll...”

Craig cut him off mid-comment as a flash of his previous mental wrangling returned to the forefront. “Hey, Mike, do you know anyone that works with heavy metal to build structures?” He blurted it out before he realized how random it was.

“What do you mean? Like a pull barn or something?”

“No, like lead vaults for offices. The kind that would shield against radiation.”

Mike was obviously taken aback by the question, considering its out-of-the-blue nature, and he walked off of the wooden decking before he responded. “No, I can’t say that I do.” He backed up another step before asking, “Why are you looking to survive a nuclear winter or something?”

“No, I just thought I would ask.”

“Sorry, buddy. Anyway, breakfast should be ready in an hour, if you’re interested. Take a shower, and we’ll drink some warm beer.”

“Okay... Thanks, Mike.” The ringing in his ears built to a piercing blast that materialized as a wince on his face.

“Are you sure you’re alright, man? Maybe after we eat you should get some sleep.” He crossed both of his arms like a father figure and projected his best paternal concern. Over his shoulder, his daughter Jenna hollered from the open French doors of their deck.

“Daddy, the TV is back on!”

Craig, feeling every minute of his three day break from reality, nodded his assent and told him he would be over directly. It was an unintended lie, though. With every passing moment, the miracle that he had become was winding down. There was no grand finale to signal the end, only a diminishing desire to act, to formulate, and to create.

Back inside, Craig showered without shaving and dressed in a faded sweatshirt and jeans before filling an old backpack with some random cereal bars and jerky he found in his pantry.

“Those books have always been there,” he thought to himself. “All of my ideas have come from the minds of others, and yet none of those people have fixed anything.” The three full days without sleep were weighing heavily on his emotional state. “What is the point of any of it?”

Propping himself up behind the wheel of his Jeep, he set out in search of the real source of the noise in his head. Mike watched in confusion as his neighbor erratically backed out of the driveway and into the street without looking.

Five years later

It was a comfortable-looking mattress for a summer afternoon nap in the city, Craig thought, and it was surprisingly dry to the touch. It was a fortuitous find for him because a civic-minded blight team had recently swept through the area and dragged away truckloads of trash and abandoned furniture. The team had removed seven similar mattresses from the adjoining park and alley, but Craig's mattress had been overlooked due to its dangerous proximity to the sagging brick wall of the burned down Johnson Sewing Machine Factory. Craig didn't mind the risk. He never forgot that he was once capable of carrying the weight of the world on his back, and a tidal wave of bricks and mortar offered no sense of real terror to him.

Craig had been sleeping in the crumbling loading docks at the Michigan Central Rail Station since November, but the July heat was enhancing his displeasure with the constant noise and suspicious ravings from the other indigents, and the enclosed cement buildings were containing too much of the smell of unwashed bodies. His decision to stay there in the fall had been helped by the wafting smells of barbeque from the Cork district, but it was now summer, and the community's mood was becoming cantankerous, its behavior erratic.

Over a breakfast of discarded deli hotdogs and potato chips, Craig made his intentions known to the men around the burn barrel campfire. "I need a new home. This place is just not interesting anymore." There was no response from the shadows and heaps of dirty clothing; they were all in their own worlds.

So, he had set out early in the morning, like all the rest of the homeless men and women, by climbing under the fence that enclosed the rail depot. Fourteenth Street had gotten him north of I-75, and a cooling breeze at his back from the river encouraged him onward into uncharted territory. As he approached Magnolia, he heard the distant sounds of a horse neighing. It was

perfectly unexpected, and he couldn't help but chuckle. "Hi-Ho Silver," he said under his breath. "Away we go," and he changed direction toward the rural anomaly in the city.

His pace was slow, his gait hobbled, and anyone that spotted him would have mistaken him for a demented geriatric. His hair was grown long and matted, while his clothing was dirty with street living. Craig was only twenty-seven, though, and despite his diet of leftover snack foods, he was in perfect health. He could have walked faster and more deliberately, as he sometimes did when there was a meal in it for him, but he was enjoying a world without cares and responsibilities. There was nothing he wished to be deliberate about, and that kept him beyond contented.

The noise of the horse, he discovered, was coming from a farm complex attached to a school for girls stuck smack in the middle of a city block. It struck him immediately as ridiculous. A mirage he thought. There were chicken coops and raised garden boxes containing healthy crops of corn and squash. In a shaded area, leaf lettuce and greens sprouted proudly from hardy, well-turned soil.

"I did not expect this," he said to the horse staring suspiciously from her trampled pasture. "I'm the king of the world." If the horse understood his intentions for larceny, she didn't let on. She lazily ate her hay and watched the stranger at the gate.

Craig made a quick study of the street and realized there would be no safe refuge in the immediate vicinity to sleep. The community, perhaps emboldened by the beauty of the farm, had undoubtedly cleaned up the area in the hopes of creating further incentive for future developers to move in and push out the riffraff. It took him three blocks of walking to return to burned out and abandoned buildings where he found the dry mattress protected under the crumbling wall.

As he vigorously stretched out on his new bed, he purposely disturbed the secret aroma that all discarded mattresses must obviously possess to necessitate their disposal. The smell was part fried food and sour milk, and, when it mixed with the wild English daisies surrounding his new napping spot, he was reminded of his youth spent chasing girls at the summer fair near his childhood home.

“I could use some fries and vinegar right about now,” he said to no one in particular. Instead he retrieved a mushy apple from his backpack and devoured it to the core.

Craig nuzzled his face into a discarded stuffed elephant that had once sat on the corner of Humboldt and Poplar Street. It had been part of a roadside memorial for a boy named Jessie Williams. Craig had no idea who the boy was, but he felt it was obvious he was never coming to claim the makeshift pillow, so, tucking it into his backpack with the rest of his worldly possessions, he hurried away lest he should be observed by any relatives still holding vigil. With this soft creature now cradling his head, it didn't take long for him to fall asleep.

Craig had been living on the streets of Detroit for the whole five years since he abandoned his home and Vehicle. It wasn't all that difficult for him to do, thanks to the availability of abandoned homes and the network of soup kitchens. It was a perfect chaos for a simple minded man with no real purpose. Food, shelter, distraction—they were the only ingredients and the only requirements for a perfect life. Companionship was always nice, too, and he found no shortage of that in the different faces he encountered amongst the forgotten, damp corners of the city. Life was never difficult, as long as he had the distraction of the noise. There were certainly days that saw the lights flicker out, but never to the extent of that first snow

day. His appetite would temporarily crave a more robust adventure, and those were the times when he would appear out of nowhere to lend a helping hand to strangers.

But, as much as he could, he spent the rest of his time in a state of splendid ignorance. His best days were those when he could find a comfortable sofa on which to recline while munching stale potato chips. Each one he placed delicately into his mouth as he imagined the Romans would have done a grape. And, if a couch wasn't to be had, he knew he could always take great delight in closing his eyes to the plight of the world on any of the innumerable discarded mattress that had once cradled the unfathomable dreams of man. Dreams long abandoned to the ruins of civilization in favor of something better just around the bend where man sows and horses graze.