

PART TWO

“You have always been what you will be and you will always be what you have been.”

-My father figure

Coincidence

One cool overcast spring afternoon rain threatened an otherwise blissful day for a then six-year old-Henry. Henry's dad, Paul, was taking him to the park since he had extended his vacation as a precaution for the storm that had just past. They decided to go to the park along Brian's Lake dubbed "Oakwood Park" as opposed to the newly constructed "Lakeside Park" that was actually encompassed by cookie cutter condo complexes and oak trees. Lakeside Park was nearly a kilometer from any body of water and even then it wasn't specified which lake it was supposed to be beside.

The walk to the park alone had taken the better part of an hour. Along this journey scattered black, grey and white clouds eventually blocked out any traces of blue from the sky. Henry didn't care considering he had the undivided attention of his dad. Sam was over at a birthday party for Pamela, a classmate from his second grade class. Henry and Sam always fought for Paul's attention. As a testimony to his character Paul never played favorites.

The destination of the endeavour, as far as Henry was concerned, was a children's playground that would be the envy of any child's escapist fantasies. It had drawn eager kids from hundreds of miles away for over seventy years. It had been completely reconstructed four times, but each time in the mirror image of the original design. This simple error of the contracted carpenters who first created the playground was even copied in the sake of authenticity.

The sandbox that formed the ground of the play area was undeniably a 20 by 50 foot toy itself. Alongside the perimeter of the rectangle, a flat piece of oak, roughly a foot wide, served effectively as 140 feet of weatherproofed bench for parents who were intimidated by the thought of sandy shoes.

Although there were eight swings (two sets of four swings parallel to each other along the width of the rectangle) and two independent metal slides, the oak playhouse was uncontested as the centerpiece of the playground. This was likely, partly, as it was in the center of the playground.

The playhouse stood 20 feet high at its highest and was fashioned to resemble a castle. There were three different levels, or floors if you'd prefer, to the castle in total.

The castle had three metal slides attached to it, two decorative cast iron cannons and a metal poll for sliding down.

The playground was called "The Sand Castle".

The Sand Castle was Henry's favorite place. It appeared empty then. The clouds had scared off less determined children. Henry walked towards it with a huge smile on his face. He ran around, jumped up and down and suddenly stopped sharply.

Paul was content to sit down and gaze southwards towards the lake and ponder the small troubles of his tiny bookstore. By a strange coincidence, a woman twenty feet away was seated woefully wondering over projections of the coming quarterly while listening to an audiotape she had bought at Paul's bookstore. She was the manager of the local branch of a major bank.

Little drops of rain, the sound of thunder, and distant lightning bothered Paul and the woman both.

Henry was worried by the sound of a child crying. He lay down on the oak floorboard and peered through a hole that separated two such floorboards. He could see through the peephole a little girl, in a white dress, clutching her left arm with her right.

To Henry she looked like a princess.

"Hi," said Henry.

The little girl saw Henry in his blue jeans and red t-shirt and found him horribly derivative.

"Hi," said the little girl as she cried.

"What's wrong?" asked Henry.

"I hurt my arm," answered the little girl.

Henry climbed off of the playhouse to a crawlspace under the first level that was roughly four feet tall. The crawlspace was mostly closed off but had a three-foot-long opening along both sides of The Sand Castle. The little girl was obviously in a lot of pain. Henry thought she was beautiful.

"My name's Henry. I'll go get your mommy or daddy," said Henry. Henry turned and began to run.

"Henry," called out the little girl.

Henry turned around and stopped briefly.

"My name's Jaclyn," informed Jack. She offered the best smile she could.

The Grim Reaper was motionless outside Jack's window.

Jack huddled close to Henry. Henry's cigarette had burnt to the filter but he hadn't noticed. As heat reached his fingers and the smell of burning fiberglass flared, he flung the filter out his half open window.

"I do not wish to harm you. You must come with me," said the Grim Reaper. His voice was hollow and deep.

Henry appeared calm and strong. He thought he had to protect Jack. The events of his drive were eating him from the inside out. "What do you—what do you want from us?" demanded Henry sternly.

"You must be brought before the pearly gates and await the judgment of God," matter-of-factly answered the Grim Reaper.

Henry, dumbfounded, covertly shifted into drive. He was non-compliant. Jack was expressionless. She felt akin to a phone number that had been dialed and not in service. She asked, "I'm sorry did you just say await the judgment of God?"

"You must come with me," ordered the Grim Reaper. Neither his voice nor his being ever betrayed emotion. He hadn't made any threatening motions. Still he was not the sort of bloke one would like to run into half-drunk late night in an alleyway.

Henry slammed on the gas.

Henry and Jack sped off. They searched the road desperately for any sign of help.

The Grim Reaper followed on foot.

Henry visited Jack at a hospital.

The hospital was built in the early 20th Century. It was called something along the lines of The Royal Children's General Hospital of Central Western Ontario.

Henry was bored.

It was a fairly long drive to the emergency room from the Sand Castle, roughly 45 minutes as it was three towns over, but the hospital specialized in treating childhood injuries and ailments.

It's still there to this day. It's filled with kind-hearted doctors and nurses fixing tiny broken bones, curing diseases and helping out in various other capacities.

Henry cared squat about physician's intentions, they were the needle wielders.

Jack's room was typical of a private hospital room.

It was white, bright, quiet, clean, cluttered with machinery (most of it entirely unnecessary), and utterly dull for six year olds.

Jack lay on the hospital bed. Her arm was in a fiberglass cast. She was dressed in a tiny hospital gown and covered in baby blue blankets. She was watching children's programming and secretly plotting her plan to change the channel to the sitcom of the six people who inexplicably wind up in the same situation weekly as soon as "Nurse Deadpan" (as Jack had dubbed her nurse Jill Sanchez) finished her next rounds. Jack just wanted to watch the dumb one,

the crazy one, the creepy one, the pretty but worst one, the even dumber one and the normal but inexplicably single one.

Jack also wanted to be outside. It was sunny out.

Henry walked through the door.

"Hi," Henry said with a smile.

Jack turned off the TV via a huge rudimentary grey remote that was chained to her bed. "Hi," she giggled.

Henry sat down on a fluffy cream coloured faux leather armchair next to Jack's bed. He had an orange backpack with him. He put it down next to the chair.

"I wanted to make sure you were alright. Your mommy said I could come visit. My dad's just outside," explained Henry bashfully.

Shyly and with the volume of a mouse Jack whispered, "My arm has to be in a cast for a whole six weeks but the doctor said it was good that I got here so fast."

"I, uh, I brought you some crayons and paper. I remember when I had the chicken pox I got really bored," revealed Henry. He went through his backpack and grabbed crayons, pencil crayons and a notebook. He handed them to Jack. He also handed her a children's book entitled "The Thinking Thimble". The words read...

The Thinking Thimble

There once was a thinking thimble.

All day and all night he protected against

Tiny pin pricks for illegal immigrants.

He was very, very, VERY humble.

He would think about different thread.

If someone asked he'd say

"All colours, all beautiful, all day."

I hope you can get what he said.

That was two ounces of steel,

Who knew so much about how to feel.

Enter the belligerent talking sewing pen with sheet.

Every single second of the day he ranted,

While he coughed, and stammered and panted,

How he hated to do a red thread pleet.

It didn't really make sense at first,

But then he started spreading lies.

He said red thread attracted flies.

Later things got a lot worse.

On purpose he was hard to thread with red.

More than once, the immigrants bled.

Thinking thimbles are governed by talking sewing pins,

This makes for a violent world,

Maybe if this perspective twirled,
The sewing pins would pay for their sins against skin.

Jack hadn't read it before.

Nor had many others. Paul had written it and done the illustrations himself. It was never published; as with most of his books it had been rejected on the grounds that it tackled subjects considered inappropriate for preschoolers.

However, parent death and terrifying worlds where anthropomorphic animals are racialized or divided through social stratification seemed just fine and dandy to the publishers.

Jack Smiled.

She said, "Thanks." She put the colored pencils, the crayons, and everything else down on the particleboard bedside table to her right.

"Green's my favourite... my favourite colour," said Henry.

"Mines black," said Jack.

Jack stared for a second at the first page of the notebook. She picked it up. "What's this?" she asked. In the picture a boy and a girl played on "The Sand Castle."

"I drew you a picture on my way over here," Henry answered as he walked around the bed to point at the picture. "That's me, and that's you, and we're playing at the park and your arm is all better," laughed Henry.

They drove on.

Jack was motionless and quiet. The overhead light was still on. Still they were coated in an artificial canary yellow.

Henry, squinting, searched for something on the road except for vegetation and death. "God you were a cute kid," admitted Henry.

Henry had forgotten how freckled faced Jack used to be.

"So were you," said Jack.

Jack had forgotten how small and fragile Henry once was.

"Did you also just remember when we met and the hospital?" asked Henry.

"Yah," responded Jack with a raised brow.

"That's kinda odd," said Henry.

Jack pointed out, "Stranger things have happened tonight."

"Huh," said Henry.

"What?" Jack asked.

"Well it's just... it's just pretty cliché isn't it?" wondered Henry.

Education

Education is important. Unfortunately, high schools in North America are often more interested in societal conditioning. One person barking orders while a group follows them conjures images of: fascism, cults, corporations, monarchies, churches, and jails. Sociologists have written volumes on totalizing institutions.

Did you enjoy high school?

What you learn in high school sticks with you your whole life.

You learn to complete projects at command. You learn not to challenge the status quo. You learn that it is in your best interest for the teacher to like you or you fail. You learn strange is punished. You learn friends are the most important THINGS in life. You have a boss and you aren't even getting paid.

As great a person as your teacher was, as passionate about education as they may have been, they were being paid to pacify you. Teachers are the critics of children. They are being paid to separate the future business leaders

from the fry cooks of tomorrow. They try to section off the cogs from the hobos.

In high school good sheep herd themselves.

I just want to open your eyes. As an outsider, perhaps even an intruder, I can see that you've settled for pre-existing institutions. Teachers should be working for children and not against them. The failure of student's reflects their teacher's failure. Teachers should be more accountable to their students.

There is a growing trend towards standardization in North American schools. Many embrace this trend as a step towards equality and uniformity. Do you really want your sons and daughters to be the same as your neighbours? All children should receive an education of equal quality, but shouldn't that education be tailored to their individual talents, skills, interests, and functionality? The next Shakespeare shouldn't be written off as deficient because he bombed his calculus examination or even his almighty SAT. Standardized education turns children into characterless robots. A's, B's and C's personified. The funny thing is that later, in university, the focus of institutional education does an 180 degree turn towards specialization. I can't make sense of this.

Propaganda is being taught in classrooms across the world right now. Everything, at bare minimum, has a spin. You should always remember that history is a story (his, none the less). You should remember that history, and science for that matter, changes. Don't worry, propaganda has always been taught in classrooms. Creationism didn't just spring up.

At one point it was taught in North American high schools that students should be afraid of the big bad Reds. That sounds like a wolf's propaganda to me. They managed to convince children that somehow their wobbly desk would shelter them from an atomic bomb. You can't blame the wolves. They need to eat too.

Remember duck and cover.

Remember banned books. Odds are you have no clue what Dresden was, or why it must never happen again.

Remember book burnings? Wall-sized televisions and closing public libraries foreshadow the coming darkness.

Look at Socrates. When he put things as they were he was charged for corrupting the minds of the youth of Athens and sentenced to drink hemlock. He pointed out that the wisest man realizes he's unwise.

I guess my point is, eat, drink, breath, birth and fuck. Those are your true responsibilities. Believe me, the differences between you and your political authority, or your religious leader, or a warlord, a humanitarian, or a celebrity are nothing compared to your similarities.

You are an animal. You are not special. You are only astonishingly lucky.

You were all, in part, Olympic quality sperm once. You were all the best of the best of a few inches of pussy.

We're all lottery winners when we're born, hatched, conceived, or whatever. We all have the winning ticket: existence. What you do with life is how you spend your fortune. You should spend that vast wealth expressing what little individuality you have and helping, not hindering, others in expressing theirs.

What are you doing with your gift?

I don't understand why anyone would settle for the pyramid structure of your class system, your corporations and your political system. There is too much wealth on that world for the rich people of your present to be allowed to hoard it.

Corporations are simply make-believe. They are intangible. Why do you allow them to thrive while poor children in Africa die? Tear down the treadmill of production. The world, your world as it stands, exists because of a consensus that can be broken. Cease the spreading of the contagion that is

American cultural imperialism. Allow others to be different and separate from you. Accept difference, don't just tolerate it.

In America, right now, there are two types of people, those who talk about money because they are rich and those that talk about money because they are poor. Is this really what you think life is all about?

Say no. Rise up. Cut apart your credit cards. Take your money out of banks. Try to buy only out of necessity. Don't work for an unethical company or boss: work and suffer with your neighbours, domestically and abroad, for a future that doesn't require oxygen masks and hazmat suits. I don't advocate communism, but I do advocate a shift towards increased cosmopolitanism AND local community. Although I believe in meritocracies I think those at the top on Earth should have less than they do and those on the bottom need more. Why can't the spectrum of personal wealth simply be further condensed?

You should be searching for corporate accountability and transparency. You should not only worry about you and yours. How can you be content with how crappy cable television is?

Quite frankly there should be revolution on your world. This is real, it's TV that's fake. Fair trade coffee isn't real. Buying green-washed products does not exonerate you from global socio-economical responsibilities. CAPITALISM IS NOT A SOLUTION TO END SOCIAL STRATIFICATION. Marx's surplus value exists alongside surplus suffering.

I suppose you could argue all's fair in love and war.

If one person can't make a difference, then make friends. There is always a bias. There are no absolute truths except change continues.

Do you think that your greed is stronger than your will to be better than you are? Are you that weak?

Do you really think that some must suffer in order for others to thrive? It's not childish to think otherwise. It's childish to grab the ball away from others and shout, "MINE!"

But I digress...

High School

In his teens, and afterwards, Henry was not a fan of school. He loved to read and lived to draw but could never stand criticism. It was at the point when he decided he could write better than his English teacher and draw better than his Art teacher that he deemed his efforts to be wasted on conforming to established rubrics and attending to trivial assignments.

He was destined to be a dysfunctional “D” student because of lack of will and not, as was often attributed to him, lack of skill. Very fancy, formal looking, pieces of paper, with gold stickers on them (which demanded only effort and not conviction of belief), withheld his passage to more challenging faculties of academia.

Henry lacked the foresight for societal necessities and would pay for it time and time again. When Sam died it was hard for Henry to even convince himself to go to school let alone attend to every meaningless project. When your brother’s just died, just committed suicide rather, an essay concerning who your favourite Victorian novelist is, and why, seems nonsense, no matter the weight of it. Henry quoted Dickens almost daily, but that’s not the point. He attended half his senior classes baked out of his skull. The other half he didn’t attend at all. He kept reiterating that eventually he would make it on his own. He barely graduated high school.

Jack knew what she needed to get out of school. Sure, she realized that it was mundane, mismanaged and melodramatic, but it was her gateway drug to a career in journalism. With minimal effort she was able to graduate near the head of her class.

Jack’s biggest challenge in high school was the amount of time she spent in movie theatres, or drunk, or high, when Henry convinced her to “skip off.” Incidentally this was also Jack’s biggest challenge with relationships at that time of her life. To most of their classmates, the friendship between the very different Henry and Jack, was an anomaly to be gawked at, gossiped about and discouraged.

Everyone totally thought they were doing the nasty.

Both Henry and Jack were convinced they were dead.

Henry continued to drive. He paid the road less attention. He noticed clouds ahead. In the distance he could make out a light. It was bright enough that he switched to low beams and turned off the overhead light. He was well aware that he was driving towards the light.

Jack turned to him and looked like she was going to say something, but she stopped at the thought that the overhead light was probably, or at least partially, responsible for the doomed afterlife before them.

They thought that luminosity had killed them even though if not for the supernova of high mass stars they would never have existed. Cursing light makes as much sense as yelling against your voice. Not that making sense is important. Some of you still think the Earth is less than 10,000 years old, which is a hell of a lot younger than me. Some of you, therefore, must think God can travel faster than the speed of light, even though that's scientifically impossible.

Those of you who look up at the stars and think of magic and God should probably purchase a textbook on introductory astronomy.

For flat Earthers I suggest an airplane ticket.

Jack's palms were sweaty.

This was not only because of the road or the fact that she thought she was very probably worm food.

Henry was mildly angry.

Henry was very rarely angry. He had some choice words revolving in his brain for whatever, or whomever, he may encounter once they reached the end of the road.

I instantly remembered a bar I had never been to.

Snow fell outside a lively pub, painted entirely brown, in which people entered ambitiously and left sedated. Colourful signs made from thin fluorescent tubes lined its windows offering a variety of forms of cheap domestic beer. I had the weirdest feeling that I had been there a hundred times.

I recollected one of those times with particular clarity. Momentarily I realized that it was one of Henry's memories. For me, the distinction between my mind and his was dissolving at an alarming speed. Jack's thought process was significantly different from mine: it was an "other" experience, entirely.

Inside there were fake road signs and Christmas lights. A mounted warthog's head hung over the bar. Next to the warthog's head hung a mannequin's head that was sculpted and painted to look like the then current and unpopular President of the United States. Over a hundred bottles of liquor hung behind the counter. There was everything from 12-year-old scotch to peach schnapps. One bottle of illegal verte absinth, the grand wormwood-enabled good stuff, was hidden at the bottom of a large wooden box otherwise full of peanuts.

The tables, chairs and stalls, all bright red and small seeming, looked like they were stolen directly from a diner. The bar was once actually a children's restaurant called...

The Land of Munchkins

The Land of Munchkins was established in 1951 and closed controversially in 1987. It was decorated with imagined scenery, costumes and

house decor from The Wizard of Oz and other works of fantasy featuring little people.

Everything was designed for those of short stature and would feel cramped, or unfulfilling, for an adult of normal height. If you were tall you were uncomfortable.

The owners, a former grade school teacher named Herb and his wife Sally, had dreamed of opening the eatery since reading the Wizard of Oz in early August of 1939. They read it to each other at a diner whilst eating pie, late at night. It was their first date. As quaint as it was, Sally's mother called her a whore when she eventually came home. Her parents had debated phoning the police, and were only dissuaded upon phoning the diner.

When Herb went to war, that night was why he fought.

Waitresses at the diner dressed like Dorothy and waiters were costumed as the cowardly lion, the scarecrow or the tin man. The garments were all hand stitched by Sally.

At the drive-through window sat the Wizard of Oz. His face and hands were always, when he was working, painted green. The Wizard was also the manager.

The food served was miniature traditional diner food. Children's favourites included the eighth pound cheeseburger and potato skins, popcorn shrimp, wolf chops (pork chops), grilled cheese sand-witches, bacon-and-tobiko breakfast and BBQ baby corn on the cob.

The eatery bore a striking similarity with the "Land of Munchkins" or "Munchkin Country" from the Oz books by Frank L. Baum.

The building itself was shaped like the Emerald City. The lettering on the building spelt "The Land of Munchkins" with every character a different colour. The path leading from the parking lot to the restaurant was constructed from yellow brick.

For a very long time the diner was the most popular restaurant for children in the whole region.

Enter Little Shifty Eyes

If you've heard of Little Shifty Eyes, forget what you've heard. The Shifty Eyes concerned here did not have his own syndicated children's television show. The Shifty Eyes described here was not one of the largest donors to Children Without Doctors. He was not the wine connoisseur he is today. He didn't own any stables or satellites. He had not yet founded a multinational corporation. He was not knighted. He was not high society.

Little Shifty Eyes was, to anyone that knew him then, a horrible good-for-nothing drunk. He hit prostitutes even though they were the only women who would touch him. He would pick fights with children. His only friend was a runt beagle that he beat repeatedly. He was a Junior High drop out.

Across town it was common knowledge that Little Shifty Eyes was responsible for, and proud of, impregnating a 13-year-old girl.

All of his hardships, according to him, stemmed from him being too damn short. That's why, he thought, he was poor, and a drunk, and a smoker, and unmarried, and a bastard. No matter why people actually didn't like him, Shifty Eyes would blame it on heightism. Little Shifty Eyes blamed his mom's height for why he never met his dad.

Little Shifty Eyes, halfway into a 500ml bottle of spearmint flavoured mouthwash, wandered along the Trans-Canada highway looking for something to do. He was particularly depressed on account of being banned from his shelter due to thievery. He thought that day would be his last. He had 20 dollars to his name and even that was only because he had finally done what he swore he wouldn't: Little Shifty Eyes had sold his dog Buck to a farmer for enough money for cigs, mouthwash and a couple cheap meals. He couldn't even beg, as nobody pitied him as much as they disliked him.

The billionaire you know, this was his last \$20. You want proof there is no God, enter Little Shifty Eyes.

When Little Shifty Eyes saw the sign for The Land of Munchkins he laughed.

Before that day Shifty Eyes had always avoided the restaurant. He hated children. He hated the term, "Munchkin," as he had been labeled one his whole life.

Shifty Eyes was not mentally stunted, he just made bad decisions and had a 'one against the world' attitude.

Nearly everyone who talked to Shifty Eyes talked to him slowly on account that he was small. It's as if they thought it would take time for the sound to travel down to his level. Worse than that though was that people who were young enough to be his kids would talk to him in a paternal tone.

That day Shifty Eyes was through running. Shifty Eyes wanted to peruse his kingdom. He walked up the yellow brick road. He stared up at the emerald city and gasped at the size of it. Shifty Eyes, who had never left town, had never seen a taller building.

When Shifty Eyes arrived at the door he was taken aback because the knob was at his level. It almost brought a tear to him. That small thing was enough to make him feel more human.

He pushed the door open and felt like he left his black and white world.

He was awestruck. A Dorothy, who was very courteous and pretty, helped him to a table. The booth was only slightly too big, but he had never fit one so well. The Dorothy brought him a mini coffee and a few tiny sugar-coated donuts. She said, "On the house of course." Shifty Eyes started to cry.

This was the real Land of Munchkins, not the one from the papers.

Little Shifty Eyes was not the first dwarf to visit the diner. The Land of Munchkins, or Munchkin County as it was often referred to, was a popular tourist attraction for little people across Canada. Since business was swell, and servings were small, the owners decided to honour the contributions of little people to the arts by allowing all adults shorter than four feet tall free meals forever. There were no exceptions and no conditions.

If this was political incorrectness it was the right form of it. This did come out in the trial but it only made things worse. The testimony of hundreds of little people would not change anything, either. Shifty Eyes's lawyers made it out that the Lancasters gave away free meals to dwarfs in order to create a kind of zoo.

They would argue the Lancasters were running a freak show.

Shifty Eyes just cried and cried and cried. Herb, who happened to be at a nearby booth, was concerned. He walked over to Shifty Eyes and asked, "Is everything alright?"

"Is this some kind of gag?" Shifty Eyes questioned.

"No sir. It looks like you've been through a lot. Your meal is on us, and any other meals you eat here."

Shifty Eyes couldn't believe it. He had probably never been called sir before in his life, except sarcastically, by the law, a telemarketer, or through a smirk. He recognized Herb from the TV commercials for Munchkin County on the local channel. He asked, "What's wrong with you?"

Herb just laughed. He had a strong jolly belly laugh, just like Santa Claus is supposed to have. He said, "Well I guess I never learned to be cruel." Then any trace of humour vacated his face. He explained, "I just don't think it's very Christian the way you little people are treated. I'm just doing what I can about it."

Shifty Eyes, full of tears, mumbled, "Thank you."

Herb grinned, "Now what can I get you, sir?"

Shifty Eyes, without even hesitating, answered, "A job."

Herb didn't know what to say.

Shifty Eyes was dirty, he was wearing stained and smelly clothes, he otherwise smelled strongly of mouthwash, and he had a horrible reputation. Herb didn't even need any more staff.

"I won't let you down. I'll never be late. I'll show up clean and I'll be mannerly. I swear on my mother's grave I'll do good by you."

Herb objected, "Well, I don't know."

Shifty Eyes told Herb his biased version of his life. He, of course, left out the 13-year-old girl.

Herb whispered, "That's a sad story, son."

"Please, sir, please. If you don't help me I'm dead. I have twenty dollars to my name and a long list of enemies. I never really had a chance. I sold my dog today, sir, for twenty dollars. Please sir."

The problem is that Herb was too good a man for his own good. He was one of those rare Christians who got the message. He of course would suffer for it.

"I'll start you off three times a week, four hour shifts. You can sleep in one of the unused rooms upstairs. I'll get my wife Sally to bring you by some clothes," instructed Herb.

This was Little Shifty Eyes' chance.

This is why you never trust a midget with shifty eyes.

Shifty Eyes was given the choice of what he wanted to dress like and HE chose a munchkin. He showed up on his first day of work sober, clean, cheery, and early. He worked hard. He learned fast. He tolerated the kids and

even enjoyed himself. It was the first solid day of work he had ever done. This was when the picture of him in his munchkin costume, the one famously shown in court and on so many newspaper front pages, originated.

For two whole weeks Shifty Eyes was a productive member of society. His peculiar smells vanished and his attitude slowly improved. It was like a fog lifted from Shifty Eyes' thoughts: he was doing math in his head for the first time in years and at times was overcome with spells of happiness. What Shifty Eyes was feeling was his first instance of normalcy.

It didn't last. One Friday Herb handed him an envelope with his real name, Ron, on it. The sour look on Shifty Eyes' face betrayed that he had already resigned himself to having been fired. Herb said, "Oh no son, it's good news." Little Shifty Eyes had received his first paycheck. It amounted to two hundred and forty three dollars and fifty-seven cents.

Shifty Eyes had been living in relative luxury on tip money and couldn't believe that he was due a windfall of two hundred and forty three dollars and fifty-seven cents. After he cashed his check he had the most money in his pocket that he had had since his mom died. Little Shifty Eyes didn't know what to do with so much money. He got Buck back. He bought a whole carton of cigarettes and smoked like a chimney. He bought a 1.12 litre bottle of triple distilled vodka and drank like a fish. He spent some time with a cheap prostitute and screwed like a Robinson screwdriver. This is the man who is now married to a 22-year-old bulimic Scandinavian supermodel.

Little Shifty Eyes began showing up to work late and hung over. At first Herb let it slide, but it lasted a whole week. One day Little Shifty Eyes showed up still drunk, barely able to walk and with bloodshot eyes. He smelled of cologne and cognac. He of course was called into the manager's office.

As soon as the fireproof steel door, with employee safety sheets taped on it, was closed there was animosity written on the Wizard's green face. His real name was Nick Armstrong according to his bronze nameplate: he was young and professional-seeming. Herb's look was worse: his was one of disappointment. Before Shifty Eyes knew it he was fired. Nick had never liked him. One last paycheck was all he got.

The words, "This is a family restaurant. We can't have people like you around here," reverberated in Shifty Eyes' brain and warped until their context changed, from just vilification of Shifty Eyes' behaviour, into blatant prejudice against his short stature.

That's when Shifty Eyes went straight for the nearest lawyer's office. The rest, as you say, is history. The trial was never fairly represented in the media.

Nobody listened when Herb informed everyone that in the Oz books there were munchkins of all heights.

Shifty Eyes later founded a crooked association which supposedly represented people of minority groups who were discriminated against. The association was never fully exposed for the unethical tactics it encouraged, and it still exists to this day.

His success at the markets, which was rumored to be due to insider trading, was never proven to be more than luck.

The townspeople knew the truth. Where they are "pulling a Shifty Eyes," now means betraying your benefactor for increased profit. Shifty Eyes was Judas incarnate save that he earned considerably more than thirty pieces of silver.

Herb lost everything because he tried to be a good Christian. As you say, no good deed goes unpunished. At no point during this ordeal would Herb seem to question his faith. The poor dumb bastard.

The clouds covered them.

The road was the same as always.

The overhead light was off.

The engine roared on.

The truck only shot out low beams.

The dice made snake eyes.

Jack asked, "Do you want to know my deepest darkest secret?"

Henry joked, "I'll tell you mine if you tell me yours."

Jack whispered, "I can trust you right? It's really dark. I only found out a few years ago, myself. You aren't going to judge me, are you? Don't smile. Nobody knows this, and it isn't flattering."

Henry assumed Jack was overreacting as usual. This was the sort of lead-in that Jack would typically employ before explaining she couldn't snap her fingers. Henry answered, "I'll always be by your side Sancho. Nothing will change that. Apparently not even death."

Jack shot Henry a grave look. This was serious. Henry said, "Jack, it's me."

Jack trusted Henry more than anyone. They were best friends. They were closer than family. Jack decided to trust Henry with the family secret.

Jack's eyes watered. She cupped her hands and held them in front of her mouth.

"Little Shifty Eyes is my biological father and my older sister Tammy is my biological mother."

Henry was surprised. He questioned, "Really?"

"Yeah. Tammy was the 13-year-old girl that Shifty Eyes raped at knifepoint and impregnated. By the time Tammy came forward there was no hard evidence to prosecute that dwarf dildo-monger, considering he told the police it never happened and this was 1986. She chose to have the baby. I'm the baby."

At one point Little Shifty Eyes literally owned, amongst a thousand other pieces of real estate, a factory in Mumbai that made sex toys out of low grade plastic. Shifty Eyes was likely responsible for thousands of cases of cervical cancer. If you have any sympathy for Shifty Eyes consider this: he exploited a workforce that had, due to malnutrition, never grown as tall as they should have.

Henry reached over and grabbed Jack's hand. "That's just genetics though," said Henry. He added, "I can't imagine what Tammy's gone through."

Jack had been raised by her grandmother, with Tammy for a sister to avoid scandal.

Jack said, "It just sucks to know I'm related to that bastard. I'm worthy of a tabloid article or daytime television." The episode would probably have been titled, "My midget billionaire father raped my teenage mother at knifepoint and now wants a paternity test." In reality Shifty Eyes was likely unaware he had a daughter.

"I'm of the mind that what happens to us and the choices we consciously make determine who we become."

Jack sighed, "You probably think I'm a freak."

Henry said, "You know I'm not that shallow."

"Your turn, What's your secret?"

Henry didn't actually have a dark secret; or rather he had several, but she already knew them. He reluctantly blurted out, "It's not the same kind of secret. I mean you know about Paul and Bret. You know about Sam. You, you know I see a therapist about all that. It's more, something that you don't know. Something I recently told myself I'd never tell you."

"Ok, so what is it?"

"I haven't had sex in over a year."

Jack complained, "But that doesn't make any sense."

"I've dated since then but it never went far. Often girls wanting to pad their resumes would suggest we were more than we were and I didn't want to call them on it. Small town girls want to seem attainable so that they can find a fellow to settle down with. Who can blame them since the small-minded people around here will only hire them as waitresses or for retail positions? Also, I didn't want people to call me gay just because I chose not to sleep with girls I went on a date with. I wanted to come clean, but it just grew and grew... I mean as more time past. I decided to just keep the secret. We're probably dead now, so I figured it wouldn't matter if I told you."

Jack was very upset. She yelled, "You lied to me."

Henry didn't understand why Jack was so enraged. "I didn't. I only omitted information. Truth is it just always felt like the wrong girl." And then an awkward silence fell upon them both.

In the bar.

There were eight bar stools, three pool tables and seven different vintage coin-ops. The sound system was quite impressive when it wanted to be which was whenever requested. Of the three barely legal waitresses that worked that night Henry had dated two.

Few people considered Henry a man-slut or a casanova, but some did talk about his love life behind his back: it was just a small town where he was one of the few bachelors his age, and there was nothing to do but speculate on who had slept with whom. Henry could count the number of women he had slept with on one hand. He was only twenty-one then. If Henry wanted to count the amount of girls he had kissed on one hand he would have needed a magic marker or a calculator.

Henry's reserved demeanour and mysterious mind proved invaluable assets when trying to get a date on a Friday night. Some girls go for the brooding type. His reserved demeanor and mysterious mind also explained why he had never been in a serious relationship.

Henry and Jack had never kissed.

Many people just thought he was shy. Henry considered himself more neurotic than shy. From my vantage point he just seemed the quiet and damaged sort. The nervousness was symptomatic of his pain. Of course I was seeing his life through his vantage and the human mind has a way of warping everything.

The Wiz

The bartender and owner, Nick Armstrong, was dubbed "The Wiz," as he was the very same Nick who once served as the manager of The Land of Munchkins and as its makeup-adorned drive-through attendant.

The Wiz called the waitresses his wiz-kid witches. He only employed college girls. The only problem he found with his hiring strategy was that the girls were smart enough to ignore him. They soon found out he was a big softy at heart, despite his tattoo-covered arms and ripped physique.

When Nick bought The Land of Munchkins he altered the exterior only by taking down the pre-existing sign, painting the building brown and raising the doorknob a foot. The end result was that "The Shithole" looked as if it was an explosion of fecal matter being expelled by the Earth itself. The term "going to get shit-faced" was uniquely specific in that town.

Henry and Jack were seated at a booth. They always sat at the same booth whenever possible.

Jack was eyeing three photographs behind the bar. One was of Shifty Eyes. Above it was written in white, "Denied drinks." The other two photos were of Herb and Sally. Above those were written, "Always free."

If a stranger were walking into the bar, and turned to look at the pictures, it would be perfectly reasonable for them to assume that the owner gave away drinks to all seniors and barred any small person's admittance.

This happened with annoying regularity and started a number of brawls.

Sometimes people would mistake Shifty Eyes for a small child and were shocked that such instructions were necessary that close to the city.

Henry stared up at the President's maniacal head.

Minds off on a tangent

When I finished writing my story, I reread it and came across the sentence I wrote about the booth they sat on. I meant to say that the booth they sat at was generally the same booth but that they always sat together. That just didn't seem clear. Sometimes I have problems with your spelling, words and grammar. I am very thankful for spell check. Sometimes I create ambiguous sentences in the sake of flow. The flow of words is very important where I'm from and I realize when comparing my writing to most of your current novelists that flow is not very important in English, or thought of as something different altogether.

When I compared my spelling, word usage, and grammar with many of your contemporary writers I found that spelling, word usage, and grammar are not very important either. Sometimes this is a conscious effort from a brilliant writer. Sometimes instead this is a result of the conveyor belt approach to writing employed by many romance, horror and young adult authors.

In many of your textbooks on writing I came across passages which suggested that flaws and characteristics are important to style.

On earth most things revolve around how they are done instead of why they are done.

Think of the importance put on the format of academic papers.

Think of big haul trucks lined up and jumped by motorcycles.

Think of deep fried Turducken.

To best capitalize on this I decided to implant my story in the mind of some poor very flawed shmuck who was a wannabe writer.

At the point when he first wrote this page the poor young shmuck had been struggling to write a novella for eight months, after failing to raise the finances to make the film he had been planning on making for the past four years (when he was a wannabe filmmaker), entitled *The End of The Road*.

The screenplay he wrote had nothing to do with him being my pawn and all things considered he felt pretty sore about the whole endeavor.

I just thought it would be interesting to offer mankind a relatively unbiased non-fictitious or omniscient first person narration that could refer to and state blankly the inner workings of third person characters' minds. Where I'm from this is all very done and boring. This story needed to be told.

The shmuck's name was David Dennison. He was a horribly inexperienced novelist. Hopefully my story has character and flaws and made Dave lots of money so he wouldn't have to go through anything like this ever again.

The Basic Law of Time Travel

The Basic Law of Time and its Alteration (L of T&A for short) states that before one should travel through time he/she should first determine whether or not he/she already has travelled through time.

Alteration of Spatial Solidarity Agony (ASS Agony), an offence punished by slow torture, castration, a light breakfast, and then death, all while dressed like a bonsai tree (or known commonly as Slow Torturous

Death (STD)) consists of knowingly breaking the L of T&A: making a change to time that has never been made before.

The Agency of Individuals Dealing Solidarity (AIDS) is what kills those who commit ASS Agony. AIDS is very deadly. After hiding from AIDS for 20-25 Earth years almost everyone who is guilty of ASS Agony offences die at AIDS' hands.

Dying of an STD is a horrible way to go.

Only in English are these acronyms considered potentially offensive and it is suspected that English has been itself shaped by an ASS Agony offender so that somebody will finally do something about the ruthlessness of AIDS.

Most beings seem to feel that the problem of AIDS is the problem of those who commit ASS Agony and fail to realize that each year hundreds of millions of beings across the universe innocent of ASS Agony die at the hand of AIDS' men and women.

AIDS is no laughing matter.

I would like to point out, before anyone gets in a huff, that an agency responsible for slow torture, castration, a light breakfast, and death, all while dressed like a bonsai tree should hardly be compared to an earthling sexually transmitted disease, which was probably created by the same ASS Agony offending being who shaped English to slander the good name of an agency dedicated to preventing the use of BLACKHOLES.

In all honesty, in all my heart's sincerity, no man, woman, or child should ever have to suffer because of the earthling disease of AIDS. I hope they find a cure.

There are numerous differences between the two forms of AIDS.

The most major difference between the organization of AIDS and the

disease of AIDS is that the organization supposedly intends to prevent catastrophes whereas the disease is a catastrophe in and of itself.

BLACKHOLES

One of the causes of BLACKHOLES is PARADOXES!. It is a universal law that whenever a BLACKHOLE is mentioned in any language it must always be emphasized, (This doesn't normally apply to humans as the law only governs an interplanetary koiné or an interplanetary traveler speaking in an aboriginal tongue.) Another universal law is that PARADOXES! demand even more attention than BLACKHOLES, for the sake of addressing cause instead of symptom. PARADOXES! exist when an object or being from the future travels back in time and breaks the L of T&A by successfully altering spatial solidarity.

BLACKHOLES are generally believed to be a universal failsafe mechanism. Instead of the Universe simply vanishing, or rather being afflicted with whatever a PARADOX! may deal out, a hole erupts through which the PARADOXICAL planet or vessel of any kind sinks into a dimension that has already ceased to exist or contains too many left-handers.

Little is known about what would happen to the planet or vessel. It is illegal to report on a past PARADOX'S! happenings. I don't even know how these BLACKHOLES pop up, or more accurately, in. I've already said too much. This is the sort of thing that old men in a corner pub talk about, late at night, on pan-galactic space stations.

More beings have passed through BLACKHOLES than have died smoking cigarettes. It really is that serious.

I know simply that this sort of BLACKHOLE is not the same as a BLACKHOLE created by a high mass star collapsing beyond the capacity for neutron degeneracy pressure to overcome gravity. Basically what happens there is that gravity, which is moving near the speed of light, overcomes the highest density possible of neutrons and continues to collapse indefinitely. I can't make it any simpler than that. Didn't you learn this in kindergarten?

Instead the sort of BLACKHOLE we are actually concerned with is the result of the firing of a weapon developed by the Universal Solitude Army.

The Universal Solitude Army

The Universal Solidarity Army created the failsafe mechanism of BLACKHOLES (supposedly first firing the weapon upon the discovery of a PARADOX WORLD!!) in order to help preserve democracy. The Universal Solidarity Army is one of the richest organizations in the known universe and consists of a coalition of the wealthiest and most willing planets. Any spectators, who raise questions as to why the Universal Solidarity Army should have the largest battle fleet, space fleet, invasion fleet and/or merchant and entertainer fleet while they are starving, generally disappear at light speed.

Sometimes they're just labeled interplanetary terrorists and brought to a prison world. Any claims of offenses under intergalactic regulatory agreements disappear thanks to the Universal Solitude Army's P.R. firm. Since the development of the doomsday weapon no world has willingly gone to war with the Universal Solitude Army.

Although on record the Universal Solitude Army insists that they do not support torture in their current wars (or, rather, 'interplanetary police actions,' torture is probably their primary function).

Insurgents run rampant against the Universal Solitude Army and insist that democracy was never supposed to equate fascism.

In total the Universal Solitude Army controls 52 resource worlds and 3 prison worlds. Most of their resource worlds, which were not acquired through trade, were found shortly after their population left, or assimilated into the Universal Solitude Army, or assimilated into the Universal Solitude Army's willing planets, or disappeared completely.

Large portions of the Universal Solitude Army often would vanish inexplicably before the resource world became vacant and reappeared directly after the resource world was colonized. Later these same tactics emerged in

more distant quadrants of space. Any major planets that found these coincidences fishy would often be the subject of a potential PARADOX! and risk vanishing completely into a BLACKHOLE. Sometimes instead these major planets would become prison worlds for the Universal Solitude Army.

For the most part the Universal Solitude Army was backed by public opinion. The aboriginals who occupied foreign resource worlds were considered primitive by the public and treated with no more respect than your average American would grant a hamburger, an Afghani they encounter at the airport, crude oil, or soft wood lumber.

The Universal Solitude Army further enslaved many worlds and peoples through its controlling shares in Multi-planetary corporations. This trend continues to develop and has caused some critics to remark "Even the Universal Solitude Army doesn't know the scope of companies in its pocket." These critics were impossible to reach for further comment.

Increasingly, as the Universal Solitude Army expanded, it found outright ownership and administration of primitive worlds less cost effective and efficient than simply controlling the planets' inhabitants' behavioral patterns.

They still conducted interstellar highway starship speed checks, vessel checks, weapons check and inebriation checks but found it unnecessary to set up a permanent base on every obscure third universe "jungle sphere." It was much easier to convince the planets' creatures of brand supremacy and to simply buy the pre-existing political power. Instead of sending military powers they sent miners, manufacturers and other resource exploiters. They also conduct random raids with information they buy from local informants.

The new paradigm is that: markets rule the customers, small governments own the markets, large companies own small governments, and a handful of creatures at the top own more than everyone else combined.

None of the planets consumed by the Universal Solitude Army's BLACKHOLES were recognized by AIDS as being afflicted with actual PARADOXES!

Henry thought about his world.

Henry stared up at the then current American President's grinning head.

He thought about how Western political administrations' puppet media often controlled their populous using a lot of the same propaganda tricks employed by Nazi filmmaker's Josef Goebbels, Leni Riefenstahl and Fritz Hippler. Henry thought about how some of the speeches he saw through News outlets were similar fear mongering rants to Hitler's if you just substituted "terrorists" for "Jews."

Henry thought of how governments would use buzzwords like "terrorism," "terrorist," "democracy" and "government intelligence" in a hypocritical fashion or in bold face lies.

Thomas Jefferson said, "falsehood will travel over the country while truth is putting on its boots."

For the record they never did find WMDs in Iraq.

Henry could not fathom how the American populous would allow it's hatred of Osama Bin Laden to segue a war between two radically different nations because of relative geographical proximity, a similarity in skin tone and the hate slogan "terrorist" touted from an oil tycoon with obvious interests.

Firemen will tell you fighting fire with fire doesn't work.

There are no evil men, only men who commit evils.

"One man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter."

Henry was Canadian, White and Male so he felt free enough to think that. Henry was also smart enough to realize that generally war and killing will only create more war and killing.

"Oh Canada"

Canada is so cold that in winter your nads attempt to recede back into your body and so boring that comparatively New Jersey is exciting.

Canada is renowned for strong beer, resources, hockey, potent pot, maple syrup, independent films, beavers (shaven and unshaven), comedians, calling something that isn't bacon bacon and always apologizing. In Canada it is legal to marry your first cousin.

Yet, somehow, Canada is still unnervingly boring.

Henry thought, "If Osama had been caught earlier we wouldn't be so afraid of him."

He thought further the fear of Osama would not be so easily exchanged for the fear of Saddam if they could not create the conception of a coalition of Middle Eastern gun swingin' terrorists at large. Confederate flag wavers in turbans. They hid the fact that some of the people with guns were just farmers worried about their land and families. That probably wouldn't poll well.

Atrocities beget atrocities. Death is death: a capitalist democracy is not justified when forced at the end of a bayonet, a land mine, drones, machine guns, pistols, planes, tanks or bombs. That isn't democracy. So Americans have the right to rifles in case the King of England tries to enter their houses but Afghanis and Iraqis don't have the right to defend their land?

He thought "Death may bring freedom, but who are Americans to be the judge, jury and executioner of waning foreign freedoms in an age of the patriot act, racially biased airport searches, spy satellites, secret torture camps, war, an abysmal minimum wage, celebrities who are famous FOR BEING CELEBRITIES and GPS on our cellular phones."

This was even before American airports started taking pictures of peoples' melons and noodles.

War shouldn't exist for any reason let alone luxuries proclaimed necessities. Nobody needs a fifth car. Everyone is justified in defending themselves. Try explaining to a dying child that it was for the greater good. Henry didn't blame the soldiers in the slightest; in fact he thought they were victims also. If there were jobs in construction, and no jobs in killing, these men and women would be building. Even as things stand many soldiers should be commended, as builders first.

Henry was distracted from the comical representation of the President of the United States of America by Jack gulping down her third pint.

Jack was an ultra-lightweight. She only drank heavily when she was unhappy. She only drank heavily around Henry. She only drank heavily around Henry when she wanted to talk about why she was unhappy. She smiled and signaled the closest witch for another pitcher of impossibly cheap ale.

Jack saw that Henry had been staring at the head. She knew how much Henry hated war. Jack knew Henry's dad had stories about war. Jack could feel the pain in the room when the subject of war came up around Henry's family dinner. Jack heard the punch connect from Bret's three-fingered fist to Sam's face when Sam jokingly mentioned that if all else failed he could always join the army.

Jack was unhappy, but so was Henry, and she knew it.

Jack was studying Henry's face.

Henry was determined to get to the end of the road. He could feel Jack's eyes on him.

Jack just wanted to finish what she had started.

"Sorry," apologized Henry out of the blue. He began to seem very upset. His eyes watered and his face became flushed.

"What for?" enquired Jack.

Henry laughed a hysterical laugh and replied, "For getting you killed."

"Henry as far as I'm concerned that hitchhiker was responsible. He was either too drunk or stupid to just walk out of the way of the truck. Natural selection doesn't just apply to beetles in the Galapagos."

Jack wrongly attributed the hitchhiker's reaction to Darwinism instead of to a fear that fate may actually exist.

The pitcher was left in the middle of the table.

Henry poured two pints; one had entirely too much head; he took it for himself. He gave the perfectly poured pint to Jack.

"So how have you been really? I haven't talked to you in nearly a month," said Henry.

"Alright," answered Jack. She sipped her beer.

"Well how's the boyfriend treating you? How's the freedom of getting out of this one horse town?"

Jack took a big gulp from her glass. "Look can we not talk about me?" she requested. She brushed away hair from her eyes. "My life's boring. I wanted to talk about you. How's the truck doing? What are you doing these days? When am I going to get a chance to read these literary masterpieces I keep hearing of?" asked Jack. She took another giant gulp.

Henry's gift wasn't painting or writing.

Henry's talent was daydreaming. Henry's fine motor skills botched the realization of his mind's eye. When Henry received compliments on one of his sketches, or a short story he wrote, he would invariably think them sarcasm.

He meticulously composed pieces and would agonize over minuscule imperfections which plagued his canvases and pages. Everything was just a little different in his head.

Artists and writers are communicators. Henry was still learning how to express himself.

Henry was a visionary. He was a medium who hadn't mastered any medium.

Henry had recently written three short stories.

The first was entitled "The Private I" and the second was tentatively called "The Maniac and His Toaster." The third was "The Lemonade Stand".

"I wouldn't call them masterpieces. Just your—your average run of the mill misunderstood scribbling," stammered Henry.

Jack took a sip from her beer and already it was half empty or half full depending on your point of view.

"Jack are you sure you're alright: I can't remember you ever drinking this much or this fast."

With a slight slur to her speech Jack said, "I'm enjoying myself Henry, shooting back the beers with you here. I'm having some fun. I'm just trying to reminisce about the good ol' times. Now, let's drink to that."

Henry and Jack clinked glasses together. They said, "Cheers." Henry downed his pint. Jack spilled a bit as she downed the rest of hers. They both laughed.

"I apologize, but I'm going to be an ass and have yet another smoke, Jack," said Henry. He grabbed his pack of cigarettes from the table and pulled one out. He lit it.

Jack poured two more pints from the pitcher. The pitcher was then nearly empty. Jack questioned, "And you're worried about me?"

At that time smoking was illegal in bars in Ontario. Inspectors were bribed easily enough in towns that small and only came around rarely. For the most part nobody cared.

Want vs. Need

Need a smoke? Need the list of health problems that come alongside it?

Need something to drink? Not if it's a diet soft drink. That yummy sugar substitute today may mean 5 lbs. off in a month or 5 years off your lifespan.

Need that new SUV? Not if you develop breathing problems thanks to smog.

What you truly need is responsibility. What you really want is to avoid it. You missed the legal print that says your actions have consequences.

You need some sun? Some skin cancer?

New computer? Your old one is better than the mechanized brick at seven-year old Ronald Job's community center in Detroit. That one serves 100. There are fights over who gets to use it. People have died. Ronald Job's dad joked his son was the newest Job in Detroit.

You aren't satisfied? Why should you be?

In America everyone has the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Not happiness itself! The damn fine print is at it again.

Many of you go to work in order to afford to go to work tomorrow. All I can say in condolence to you is that the rich assholes who take for granted all those things they were given in adolescence, that you don't have, will be treated by the carbon cycle as your equal in the end. Animals treated as animals. There's no escape. "Ashes to ashes. Dust to dust."

Wants are temporary while needs are inescapable. You may want to transcend nature, but nature needs you to fail.

Jack rested her head once more against the side of the headrest closest to Henry.

Henry continued to drive.

Jack passionately said, "He's going to come back for us. He's not going to stop. He blames us for the hitchhiker. He doesn't look like heaven's welcoming committee." She looked over at Henry with puppy dog eyes. Jack questioned, "What are we going to do?" She then receded into the fetal position. Jack wished she had worn magical slippers instead of ordinary heels.

"We're not going to hell. Look at me Jack," said Henry.

She did: Jack looked up at Henry. Her bone char black hair covered her eyes. Her 8-bit green mascara bled everywhere. She had been crying once more.

Henry brushed the hair away from Jack's face. He grabbed a bottle of water from the cab behind him and then the box of tissues that was next to it. He moistened the tissue with a bottle of water in one of the cup holders and washed where the mascara had run on Jack's face. Henry couldn't help being rendered mute for a moment, he was defenseless: Henry was captivated in the primal forest of Jack's pained green eyes.

"We're not going to hell. We're not bad people. We'll get through this. I'm not going to let anything more happen to you," said Henry.

Change is unstoppable.

Contrary to all evidence before them Jack could not help but believe him, at least for a while. "I want you to know Henry. You have to know; I love you," confessed Jack.

Jack had finished what she had started. She had deliberately chosen that road to work up some nerve. She hadn't spent four hours getting ready for some party. Tears streamed down her cheeks. Her mascara continued to bleed. She hid her face in shame.

Henry was speechless.

Back at the bar heads did spin, stomachs jumped and speeches ran.

The latest pitcher was empty, poured into two fifth-full pint glasses rented by Jack and Henry respectively.

Jack took a sip from her blonde ale. She asked, "Henry when we were kids why did you call me Jack? Why do you still?"

Henry paused. He downed his beer. He said, "I guess, I guess I've always liked having my own name for you. Over the years it's just, Jack, you're Jack, more so than any guy I've ever known, on your merit alone, you're the quintessential Jack."

Jack quoted Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*, ""Jack?... No there is very little music in the name Jack, if any at all, indeed. It produces absolutely no vibrations."" Jack's eyes widened. She squeezed Henry's hand firmly. She said, "It's a guy's name. I mean, I think about it a lot, you'd be surprised. Why not Lynn? Why Jack?"

"Lynn is a weak little girl's name. Jack is a powerful name: Jack and the beanstalk, Jack the Giant Killer, Jack Frost, Jack London, J. F. K., his nickname was Jack," explained Henry. He paused for a second. He finished his thought by admitting, "I guess I've just always seen strength in you. You're not some ordinary girl to me. You're special."

Henry called to the bartender, "Can we get a shot for Jack. You know which one."

Jack's heart throbbed. Kaboom, Kaboom, Kaboom.

Continue to Part Three