

If you asked me him about my his father then - the years he his father lived in a doorway, in a shelter, in an ATM - I Nick would say, Dead, I he would say, Missing, I he would say, “I do not know where he is.” I he would say whatever I he felt like saying, and it would all be true. “I don’t know him,” I he would say, my his mother left him shortly after I he was born, or just before. But this story did not hold still for long. It wavered.

Even before he became homeless I Nick had heard whispers, sensed he his father was circling close, that we they were circling each other, like planets unmoored. I Nick knew he drove a cab, maybe my his mother told me him that, though she said almost nothing about him his father, except that it was better he wasn’t around. I Nick even knew what kind, a Town Taxi, a black and white. In my his early twenties, after I he dropped out of college and moved to Boston, I he would involuntarily check the driver of each that passed, uncertain what it would mean, what I he would do, if it was my his father behind the wheel. I Nick knew he his father lived in a rooming house on Beacon Hill, I he had heard about it a couple years before they evicted him, before he moved into his cab, leasing it twenty four hours at a stretch, before he blacked out on a vodka jag, hit someone or something, before they took his license away. The day he was evicted was the first face to face I Nick had with him as an adult, the second time in my his life I he can remember meeting him - he his father called on the phone, told me him to get over to his room with my his truck. It was the first time I Nick had heard his voice on the phone. Two months later he appeared at the shelter where I Nick worked and demanded a bed.

The Pine Street Inn was and still is the largest homeless shelter in Boston. State of the art. When my his father arrived I Nick had already been working there for three years, first as a counselor, then as a caseworker. He his father wasn’t homeless when I Nick first started - marginal, sure, but not homeless. I Nick remember remembers the day he arrived the nights could still be cold. He raised his arms to enter, because every “guest” has to be frisked - no bottles, no weapons. This is the first rule.

Ask me Nick about him his father now and I he will say, Housed. Twelve years. Subsidized. A Section 8. A disability. I Nick will thank you for paying his rent, unless you’re also a Section 8. Unless by the time you read this he has been evicted again. Ask now and I Nick will say he is a goddamned tree stump, it’ll take dynamite to get rid of that motherfucker.

Before he his father lost his room I Nick could have met him, if I he had chosen to, at any time. He was never difficult to find. No one is, really. Even the months he was barred from the shelter I Nick knew the three or four spots outside where he slept, each one burned into my Nick’s internal map of the city. Nowadays I he can look at a calendar and roughly pinpoint his location. I he have has seen the inside of his apartment, I he know knows his routine. The first of the month he gets his check, and from this he (hopefully) pays his rent, then buys a gallon or three of vodka. If it is near the first he will be in his room drinking. Easy to find near the first. If it is later in the month he will have to venture out, to soup kitchens for meals, and then he will be

harder to track down, at least at midday. **He** has no phone. If **I Nick want wants** to see **him I he have has** to go to **his** apartment building and ring **his** bell, the bell with **my Nick's** last name taped to it. It will take about a minute for **him his father** to buzz **me him** in, **his** finger stuttering on the button. Or else **his** apartment will be empty and **I Nick** will not be buzzed inside. **I Nick** will then either wander down Commonwealth Avenue looking for **him** or sit in the local Dunkin' Donuts and wait for **him** to appear.

If **I Nick** could distill those years into a television game show **I he** would call it The Apologist. Today's show: "Fathers Left Outside to Rot." And there **I Nick** would sit in an ill fitting suit, one of three or four contestants, looking contrite or defiant or inscrutable under the life draining lights. At some point, after **I he tell tells** an abridged version of **my his** story, the host will parade **my his** father out, and **we they** will have a reunion of sorts, on national tv, as the camera pans the reactions of the studio audience. Before **we they** go to a commercial break a caption will appear under **my Nick's** face - "He wished his father dead".

The abridged story:

**I Nick** worked with the homeless from 1984 until 1990. In 1987 **my his** father became homeless, and remained homeless for nearly five years.

If it snowed **I Nick** would turn up the heat in **my his** loft in the Combat Zone, a whole floor of a building above an abandoned strip joint, look out the window at Boston's so called "adult entertainment district."

The sign of the Naked Eye, a woman's neon legs opening and closing on an enormous flashing eye. The Glass Slipper. Playland.

Cars skidding slightly, footprints filling in. Tiny lights bouncing off whitened streets. **I Nick** knew precisely the risks involved.

Many, most of the homeless die, sooner or later, turn up dead, in the most unimaginable, in the most ordinary ways. Robert Kuneman propped upright against a wall in the South End, seemingly waiting for a bus, frozen solid. **Fergus Woods** sleeping in a cardboard box in **his** sister's garage, trying to keep warm with a can of sterno, sets it, and **himself**, on fire.

In the summer **I Nick** would hear about someone found face down near the railyard and wonder if the body was **my his** father's. A reflex. White male, fifties, sixties, could be anyone.

Sometimes **I he** could see **my his** father, walking past **my his** building on **his** way to another nowhere. **I Nick** could have given **him** a key, offered a piece of **my his** floor. A futon. A

bed. But I he never did. If I he let him his father inside I he would become him, the line between us them would blur, my his own slow-motion car wreck would speed up. The slogan on the side of a moving company truck read TOGETHER WE ARE GOING PLACES - modified by a vandal or a disgruntled employee to read TOGETHER WE ARE GOING DOWN. If I he went to the drowning man the drowning man would pull me him under. I Nick could not be his life raft.

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(1971) Travis, just back from Vietnam, is renovating the house next door. The war's an unending muddle. My Nick's mother bakes a blueberry pie, puts it in the window to cool, invites him Travis over for a piece. Thirty one, divorced ten years now, she makes a good pie. Travis is twenty one and still looks like a Marine - his USMC tattoo, his fatigues - albeit freaky, bright-eyed, his hair going wild. Not a hippie, but drifting toward hippiedom. Trigger hippie, you might call him, as he is armed to the teeth, having smuggled out his M 16 and various sidearms. They begin seeing each other and, as per usual, he begins renovating our their house. My Nick's mother likes a man who is good with his hands. Skipping school one day, I Nick am is lingering around the house alone when he Travis pulls into the driveway, lets himself in to work on a dead outlet. I Nick hide hides in my his closet, hear hears him talk to my Nick's dog as he works, and what he says sounds insane. He tells my Nick's dog that in 'Nam he ate better-looking dogs, that over there a dog would never get so fat, that all dogs knew enough to run the other way from him instead of rolling on their backs, waiting for the knife to slip in. He tells my Nick's dog about the villages he burned and the people he killed and that not all of them were soldiers. About bulldozing a tunnel and later finding out it was filled with kids. Through the cracked closet door I Nick can see him Travis holding my his dog's ears and crying and I he do does not dare breathe. A few months later my his mother stands me him in the kitchen to tell me him she is going to marry him Travis. That's a mistake, I Nick say says. She nods that she knows but says she'll marry him just the same, and she does, and they're happy, for a while. He is fun to have around, in a frenzied sort of way. If we they want to go fishing he takes us them down to the Harbor, tells us them to wait on the loading dock and goes off to hot wire someone else's boat. We they go out for the afternoon, catch a few fish, and he drops us them off again. We they knew the boat was stolen, even though he said it was a friend. We they knew there'd be trouble if we they were caught but we they went anyway. His Travis' impunity thrills me Nick, I he mistake mistakes it for fearlessness, though years later he will admit to being afraid all the time. When he Travis decides to put an addition on our their house he takes me Nick down to the lumberyard and I Nick see sees how he pays for a couple sheets of plywood and a few two by fours, how he takes the slip out to the yard and backs up to a stack of plywood and has me Nick get on the other side of it so we they can load the whole pile onto his truck, until the springs sag. We they jump in the cab and he Travis slams it into drive and with the first jerk forward all the plywood slides out onto the ground. We they get out and reload it, his Travis' entire body now coiled energy, waving off an offer of help from the guy who works there. That

weekend we they double the size of my his mother's cottage, the second and last house she'd buy, all of us them and a few of his friends furiously hammering, desperate to finish quickly because Travis never bothered to get a permit. The last thing we they do that Sunday night is paint the whole thing yellow, so it will blend in with the rest of the house. It will take two years to get around to shingling it, and only then when the yellow is peeling off in sheets.

In Vietnam he Travis had been a mine sweeper, the guy who cleared the path, made it safe to put your foot down. Usually he was good at it, but sometimes he'd screw up, and when he did someone was blown to pieces. After being in country for a year he signed on for another hitch, but caught some shrapnel a few months into it and was shipped home. In the States he became a color guard in Washington, standing at white gloved attention at high level events. But he'd landed back in the "world" with a short fuse, and when a car full of hippies honked at him at a traffic light that had turned from red to green Travis got out and pistol whipped the driver, pulled him right through the car's window. Half an hour later, when the police found him, he was in a fast food joint eating a burger, having forgotten what he'd done. He got off, but then Kent State happened and they ordered him into the basement of the Pentagon, "full combat gear, the whole nine yards." He refused. He knew he'd be sent to college campuses, and was terrified that he'd have to kill more kids. They locked him up in Bethesda for six months, shot him full of thiorazine, gave him an honorable discharge, cut him loose. A few months later he was at our Nick and his mom's dinner table.

I Nick liked to play what were called "practical jokes." I he had a spoon with a hinge, a dribble glass, a severed rubber hand. I he would leave booby traps around our their house, usually a piece of thread strung across a doorway as a tripwire, one end tied to a broom or the racks from the oven, anything that would fall and make a racket. I do not think I he knew that Travis had spent his time in Vietnam checking for trip wires - I do not know if knowing would have stopped me him. I he would set the trap and maybe it would catch someone and maybe it wouldn't. One night Travis took the racks and tucked them between my Nick's bottom sheet and the mattress. I Nick came in later that night and crawled into bed. Why I he did not notice the racks right off I can not say, but hours later I he awoke from dreams of torture.

Mid-afternoon one Saturday Travis comes home after digging sea clams with a buddy. Leaning on pitchforks knee deep at low tide, they'd each managed to kill a case of beer before noon. He dumps the clams in the sink and tells my Nick's brother and me Nick to circle around, he wants to show us them his photo album. For the first few pages he is a teenager, cocky beside hot rods, girls sitting on the hoods, one with her arm draped over his shoulders. The next page shows him at boot camp, Parris Island - crewcut, sudden adult. The next shows Vietnamese women dancing topless on tables, and on the next page a village is on fire. Corpses next, pages of corpses, bodies along a dirt road, a face with no eyes. As the stories of what he'd done unreel from inside him, my Nick's brother stands up and walks into his room, back to his wall of science fiction. I Nick

look **looks** at the photos, at **Travis**, look **looks** in **his** eyes as **he** speaks, somehow I **he** had learned to do that, like a tree learns to swallow barbed wire.

Years later, when I **he track tracks him Travis** down, **he** shows **me Nick** another photo, one I **he** had not seen or **do does** not remember - **him** on a dusty road outside Da Nang, a peace sign dangling from **his** neck. The reason **he** signed up for a second hitch, **he Travis** tells **me him**, was so that **he** could go into villages ahead of **his** unit, ostensibly to check for landmines and booby traps, but once there **he**'d warn the villagers to run, because if they didn't **he** knew there was a good chance they'd be killed by **his** advancing soldiers. Then **he**'d set off a couple rounds of C 4, radio in that it was still hot, smoke a joint, watch the villagers flee.

The night **he** showed **us them his** photo album, after the house went quiet, I **Nick** crept into the kitchen for a glass of water, the sink still full of sea clams, forgotten. Under the fluorescent hum they'd opened their shells and were waving their feet, each as thick and long as **my his** forearm. A box of snakes, some draped onto the countertop, some trying to pull themselves out.

(1972) I **Nick get gets** drunk for the first time when I **he am is** twelve, at a place called Dreamworld. This baptism in beer takes place outdoors, in daylight, at an Octoberfest. **My his** preteen friends and I **he find finds** unattended pitchers and **we they** empty them. Then **we they** find more. Dreamworld is the fantasy village built by **Scituate's most famous son**, a man named Lawson, the "Copper King," a turn of the century robber baron, long dead, the estate broken up into private homes and institutions. I **Nick** went to kindergarten in one of Dreamworld's outbuildings. There still exists somewhere a photograph of **me him** walking through Dreamworld with a book on **my his** head for a class in "posture."

That December, just before Christmas, **Travis** tells **me him** to go out and warm up the truck. It's midnight, a school night. **We they** drive down to the Harbor, coast to a stop beside the chain link fence around St. Mary's field, kill the headlights. Town is asleep, snow falls. A dim light shines from within the trailer guarding the trees the Knights of Columbus sell. **Travis** tells **me him** to wait, vaults the fence, leaves black footprints straight to the trees. A car slows, passes. Within minutes **he** is bounding back, dragging two perfect spruces behind. **He** tosses them over the fence, I **Nick wrestle wrestles** one into the back of the truck while **he Travis** one arms the other. Twenty bucks is too much for a tree, **he Travis** mutters, then laughs as **we they** pull away. As a kid **we they**'d go into the woods with an ax, **he** snorts, take whatever **we they** wanted. **He** cracks open a beer, and for the first time offers **me Nick** one.

(1984) Christmas. I **Nick have has** been working at the shelter for five months - it has begun to enter **my his** bloodstream. Volunteers wrap donated gifts - hats, gloves, socks, cigarettes - to be handed out to the guests on Christmas Eve. **Parker's** gift, a pair of red pajamas, delight **him**, though they pose a dilemma - to take a bed all are required to trade their clothes for a flimsy white johnny, but as the line of men snakes up the staircase, one is now in red. How do you tell a

homeless man that he can not use the gift you have just given him? We they might as well have wrapped up a toaster for him, or a gift certificate to have his carpets cleaned. Parker wears the red pajamas every night for two weeks, and he wears them all day as well, under his clothes, as long johns. Until the night I Nick notice notices a small envelope in his top pocket, and it turns out to have ten joints inside. I Nick confiscate confiscates the pajamas, give gives him back his street clothes, send sends him out into the cold night. But I he let lets him keep the marijuana. How I he came to this punishment I he can not now say. Some would have barred him for the drugs, some might have ignored it. Almost all would have taken the pajamas, though, as they had begun to smell.

That spring Phil and I Nick decide to move the boat to Provincetown, a village of artists, fishermen and sexual outlaws at the tip of Cape Cod, a hundred and twenty miles overland from Boston, a fuck you finger of sand sticking into the Atlantic. Emily's parents have a summer house there, which we Phil and Nick can crash in occasionally if the harbor gets too rough. After two years in Fort Point Channel we they want to float in water we they can swim in. Besides, as real estate along the Boston waterfront continues to heat up, our their "landlord" has turned ugly. Boats cut loose, gunplay at midnight. We they vanish one May morning before sunup, drop anchor in Provincetown Harbor three hours later, a quarter mile offshore. Phil returns to Boston, to his job, his girlfriend. I Nick drive drives to the city every other week, to work a night or two at Pine Street, to see Emily.

In Provincetown I Nick row rows a tin skiff each morning to shore, row back out at night. If the tide is low I he drag drags the rowboat out over the flats, pants rolled up around my his calves, shoes left on the dock. I he do does not know what my his feet are touching and I he grow grows to not care. At high tide it's easy - the skiff's floating above the eelgrass and tiny crabs and muck, I he just step steps in and push pushes off, aim aims the bow toward where I he know knows the boat awaits, pull pulls at the oars. A few times a day I he row rows back and forth, unless I he spend spends the whole day on the boat, which I he often do does, if I he have has enough food, if I he have has nowhere to be. And if the next day's also empty I he will not go to shore then either, until days pass without setting foot on land. Emily's parents can watch me him with binoculars, if they choose, and if I he smoke smokes enough pot I he can almost see them in their picture window, bringing me him into focus.

The days I he go goes into Boston I Nick leave leaves Richard, a new pal to keep an eye on things - to see if the waterline is sitting heavy, if the pump is working. Richard, a sculptor, landed in Provincetown from New York a few months earlier to escape a heroin habit that had gotten out of hand, sick as a dog when we they met. We they both work at the Moors Restaurant - a "garbage job," as Richard puts it. Richard, part of New York's downtown club scene, claims to have made Keith Haring sleep on his couch, spurning his advances. He still has a loft in the shadows of the World Trade Center, and we they will eventually go there for weekends sometimes.



Before **we they** become tight **Richard** will swim out to the boat after midnight, after the bars close, to work off some excess energy, too shy to pull **himself** on board, shivering in the dinghy until **he** catches **his** breath or gets too cold, and then **he**'ll head back shoreward. The next day **he** mentions it - "I swam out to your boat last night. You should have come aboard", **I Nick say says**. **He** swims out with a waterproof plastic case from Marine Specialties dangling from **his** neck, a dry cigarette and a lighter inside. By August **Richard** is leaving cigarettes on board, and sometimes staying over. On an August night **we they** dive from the top deck and as **we they** enter the ocean **our their** bodies are completely lit up by phosphorescence, like underwater superheroes.

The boat will be anchored in Provincetown Harbor for the next seven summers. Some years **I Nick** will live on her alone, some years with a friend. For long stretches it is **my his** only real home, which fuels **my his** desperation to keep it afloat. "The ocean is always looking for a way into your boat," a Coast Guard pamphlet warns. With other boaters you exchange stories of breachings and near sinkings and total losses. You tell about storms and how they'd been fought or ridden out or succumbed to. **I he know knows one** whose boat sprung a plank while being towed, and while jamming some towels into the breach **his** hand passed clean through the hull, pinning **his** arm, the ocean rushing in. **He** had to time the roll of the waves to pull free. **I Nick know knows** fishermen who rode out hurricanes with their bow to the storm, the wind sandblasting their eyes until all their blood vessels burst. When they tell the story the no longer whites of their eyes shine crimson. **I Nick walk walks** the streets studying the tops of trees to measure the wind; **I he know knows** the tides without looking; **I he dive dives** on **my his** anchors every other day and **reset resets** them in the sand; **I he see sees** the cabins need paint and **try tries** to make more time. All of it fills **me him** so **I he do does** not have to dwell on what is really in **my his** brain - a palmfull of pills, a gunshot wound, a splintered chair. A nightgown left heavy with blood.

**I he drag drags myself himself** back from Morocco, finally, and **make makes my his** way back to America. **Emily**'s now seeing someone else, and **I he have has** no place to live. **I he go goes** back to work at the shelter, because **I he miss misses** it, because **I he need needs** a job. **A newcomer, a woman who works the Cage**, tells **me him she** is leaving **her** apartment in the North End, and maybe **I he** can move in. Incredibly small but ridiculously cheap - two hundred and fifty dollars a month allows you to lie in bed and contemplate the refrigerator. It is May, the boat is on land in Provincetown, and **I he agree agrees** to let **Emily** fix her up and live on her for the summer. By now **Phil** has given up on living on the water, and **I Nick decide decides** to spend most of **my his** time in Boston, working. Slowly, over the course of the next few months, warily, **Emily** and **I Nick** move back toward each other.

**The landlord of the North End apartment** is an elegant Italian named Luca, and the day **he** hands **me Nick** the key, as **he** is passing it into **my his** hand, **he** tells **me him**, slowly and deliberately, "And you know ... this is the North End ... and that means ... no blacks." **I Nick**

am **is** touching the key to my **his** new apartment, and I **he** do **does** not have any place else to live, but my **his** hand jerks back as if burnt.

Well, that's no good, I **he** say **says**.

“ I know, I know, it's a terrible thing ”, **he** **the landlord** back pedals, “ but it's not me, it's the neighborhood. ”

I **Nick** take **takes** the key, a devil's bargain. I **he** will be gone within six months.

A few days later **Luca** tells me **him** about some clothes **he** has in **his** basement, clothes **he**'d like to donate to the homeless. Work with the homeless for any length of time and you learn that everyone has a trashbag of old clothes they would like to donate to the cause. Many will call you “ noble ” for the way you are “ sacrificing. ” They will thank you, say that they couldn't do it but are glad you can. Even the mayor will show up, always just before Christmas, and declare that the work you are doing is the hardest and the most important in the city. **Luca** knows I **Nick** have **has** a pickup, **he** wonders if I **Nick** can go down into **his** basement with **him** someday, **we** **they** can load the clothes together. Sure, I **Nick** say **says**, but it will take me **him** nearly two years to get back to **him**. It's not high on my **his** list, another trashbag full of moldy cast offs. When **he** **Luca** tells me **him** about the clothes **he** also asks my **his** opinion about the homeless, about the reasons, why there seems to be more and more. This is another conversation I **Nick** will often have with people, for I **he** am **is** now an expert. They're all drunks, right? If you give money to panhandlers they're just going to drink more, right? These people don't want to live inside, they don't want to work, this is the life they prefer, right? It becomes clear to me **Nick** that I **he** am **is** supposed to console those asking these questions, that they need me **him** to say something that will make them feel better, confirm that there's nothing for them to do, that the problem is as inscrutable as Africa. Or perhaps they are afraid that homelessness seems more and more to be a fluid state, and they would prefer it to be something one is born into, like India and their Untouchables. Sometimes I **he** point **points** out that eighty percent of the homeless are invisible, like the proverbial iceberg, that when I **he** walk **walks** through the city now every other person I **he** see **sees** is someone I **he** know **knows** from the shelter, but if you didn't know you'd think they were on their lunch break, enjoying a little sun. Who is your favorite bum? **one girl** asks, when **she** hears I **he** work **works** at Pine Street. I **Nick** find **finds** her and her friend on Boston Common, chatting with **Warren**, another of the friends I **he** got drunk with at Dreamworld all those years ago, the same **Warren** I **he** wrote sci fi with a few years later. **He Warren** blew into Boston a few weeks earlier, appeared at my **Nick's** door penniless and needing a place to crash, as **he** will every four years or so for my **his** entire life. **These two girls** see the same guys every day around Kenmore Square, and **they** go back and forth as to which is **their** favorite. “ Do you know Karl ”, **she** asks me **Nick**, “ the one with the broken guitar? ” Even **this girl** has a bag of old clothes, asks if I **he** can come by sometime.



Most of the people I **he hang hangs** with at this point work in the shelter. I **he am is** also killing time with **Ivan**, a poet in **his** late thirties, though **he** hasn't published much, if anything, and I **Nick have has** never read a word. Dark skinned, tight dreads, solid, **Ivan** weighs in at over two hundred pounds. I **Nick** will have **him** over to **my his** apartment in the North End often, and **we they**'ll get high, and when **we they** emerge into the hallway **Luca** will always be there, changing a lightbulb, though I **Nick** never **see sees him** any other time, except when the rent is due. Someone in the neighborhood made an emergency call - Black man loose in your building! **Ivan** and I **Nick** float down the stairs, **Luca** looks at **us them** wide eyed, unable to comprehend how life has gotten so out of control. **Ivan** and I **Nick** are negotiating with **another landlord** to rent an entire building in the Combat Zone, an abandoned strip joint that **Ivan** tracked down the owner of, and **we they** all meet regularly to hammer out an agreement. **We they** know **this new landlord** is Mafia, **we they** read about **him** in the papers, but **he** treats **us them** all right, and the building is perfect. This strip joint, Good Times, was shut down maybe ten years before by the FBI. The prostitutes literally dragged johns out of their cars as they cruised past. They found that Harvard student in the doorway one morning, stabbed dead. After I **Nick am is** living there a year or so, **Liam**, **my his** mother's gangster boyfriend, tells **me him** that it was the bar **he** and **his** boys would frequent when in Boston. **He** even took **my his** mother there a few times. When **we they** first go inside there are still drink glasses lined up, gold lamé hanging from the walls, a list of the girls who'd be performing that night - Crystal, Amber, Cindi - taped to the dressing room door. Good Times - the sign still hanging above the gate when **Ivan** and I **Nick** move in. **Ivan** takes the top floor, **Richard** and I **Nick** take the one below, and **we they** will find tenants for the other two. Just before **we they** move in **Richard** is diagnosed HIV positive, **he** shows **me Nick** the test results in **my his** truck, parked in the North End. I **Nick am is** devastated but (lord help **me him**) I **he** also **feel feels** self-conscious - "two men crying in a pickup".

By this point **my his** brother and I **Nick** have sold the house **we they** grew up in, which is just as well, as I **Nick** never spent another night there, was never able to, after **my his** mother died. Even to this day driving into Scituate takes some effort, a willful distancing from **myself himself**. **My his** body pushes itself away from the steering wheel as I **he drive drives**, as if it wants to crawl into the backseat and curl up forever. I **he go goes** to Scituate now only to see **my his** grandfather, and before night falls I **he am is** back in **my his** car. **We they** had a yard sale, paid off the mortgage, and put whatever furniture was left into storage, where it will stay for years, sixty dollars a month split between **my his** brother and I **him**, until **he his brother** moves all **he** wants out and I **Nick keep keeps** paying. **Both grandmothers**, **my his** mother's mother and **her** father's second wife, die within three years of **my his** mother. Only men are left - **my his** brother, **my his** grandfather and **me him**. **My his** brother has become an artist, a painter, supporting **himself** with carpentry. **He** lives alone in Somerville in a building **he** and a hundred other artists bought and converted into live work studios. The three of **us them** begin having lunch together in the North End once a month. I **Nick have has** some money in the bank now but I **he do does** not know what to do with it. "Blood money," I **he call calls** it, and it just sits there.

Working the Brown Lobby I Nick notice notices a young guy who starts showing up for dinner, standing just on the edge of everything, holding his plate in one hand, eating and eyeing the room. He doesn't look like he belongs, mostly because of his shoes, very high end. The leather has been cut away to reveal two steel toes. A reporter, I Nick think thinks, doing a lousy job of being undercover. I Nick try tries to draw him out. Nice shoes, I he say says. "I just bought them today ", he replies. I Nick want wants to encourage him not to get used to the food, to warn him that a shelter is a form of quicksand, but the conversation goes nowhere. The next few times I he see sees him the man I he leave leaves him alone. He doesn't sleep upstairs, he only eats and then goes.

A year later one floor is still vacant in the Good Times building. A couple guys come by to look at it - Jasper and Sean - drove out from Indiana together the year before. A few months earlier Richard, Ivan and I Nick had a party, a blowout on all five floors, a couple bands, dim lighting, and the Indiana boys had come. I Nick have has been trying to get my his friends to move in but the building is still very raw and everyone's afraid of the Combat Zone. Young and full of energy, Jasper and Sean are trying to be artists, taking classes. They bring dope, we they hit it off. We Nick and his friends have them come back a few times, just to get a sense of them, and on the third visit I Nick notice notices the shoes. Jasper is the guy from the shelter.

"I know you ", I Nick say says, " you eat at Pine Street. "

" Yeah, sometimes ", he says with a shrug, " when I am out of money. "

" Those shoes. You bought them the day I met you. "

" Cost me a hundred and sixty bucks ", Jasper says, " my entire unemployment check. I was broke for a while after that. "

Damn nice shoes. A few months later Jasper will sell them to me Nick for forty dollars to help him pay the rent.

It'll take me him a couple years to get back to Luca and his trashbags of clothes. I he have has passed the apartment on to Warren, so I he am is still over there fairly regularly, and I he see sees Luca now and then. I he make makes a date to come by the next Sunday with the truck. Jasper comes with me him. Luca leads us them into the basement, to several racks of suits and women's dresses, wrapped in clear plastic, with the tags still pinned to them. Luca, turns out, had been a tailor in the fifties and early sixties, and these were the clothes that people hadn't picked up. Beautiful, from my Nick's favorite era of men's fashion, sleek and tapered. Jasper and I Nick load them all into the truck, along with the racks, and bring them to the building,

deciding along the way that **we they** should really each take a suit for **ourselves themselves**, since **we they**’ve never owned one, and maybe give one to each of **our their** friends.

Gowns for the women, and even a couple furs. Back in the loft **we they** set up the racks and try on the suits, settling on a subtle plaid for **me Nick**, a gray sharkskin for **Jasper**. **Richard** takes the vicuna. **We they** get high, and spend that afternoon, and it turns into the entire summer, walking around the Combat Zone in **our their** suits, and all **our their** friends are in suits, **we they** walk into Foley’s like a gang of Mods, in **our their** beautiful vintage suits.

(1987) **I Nick** **have has** been working at the shelter for three years at this point, an old timer, working less or not at all during the summers when living on the boat. Three years is a lifetime at the shelter. The Cage became Housing became the Floor. Now full time, a counselor, sometimes even the supervisor - **I he have has** risen to the top. **I he am is** not thinking of **my his** father much at this point. **I he get gets** a letter occasionally but sometimes **I he do does** not open it for weeks.

Until one day, out of nowhere, **my his** father telephones - “ Get over here with your truck ”. The first time **I he have has** heard **his** voice on the phone, the first time **I he have has** ever spoken to **him**, really, beyond that “ Hi ” when **I Nick** was eight. “ I’m sitting behind my door with a shotgun ”, **he** now says, “ waiting for the knob to turn. ”

**I Nick** go **goes** to the address **he his father** gave, **bring brings** **my his** truck. **I he ask asks** **Emily** and **Doug** to come with **me him**, as witnesses, as backup, as support. **I he** did not know when **he his father** said shotgun if there would be a shotgun. **I Nick** took **him** at **his** word. “ I want you to have everything ”, **he** said. All **my his** life **I Nick have has** been what is known as accident prone - broken nose, broken arm, broken knees, broken spleen, broken teeth, broken fingers, broken cheekbone, broken ribs. While doing construction - drilling concrete, cutting pipe - three times steel slivers became lodged in **my his** eyes, and three times removed. “ Your eyes are covered with scars ”, the doctor said, “ any more and you will not be able to see. ” In context what was a drunk sitting behind a door with a shotgun? But when **we they** get to **his** building **I Nick go goes** in alone, because if there is a shotgun **I he do does** not want a crowd of **us them** in the hallway. **I he knock knocks** on **his** door, but from the side, as **I he** had seen tv cops do. **I he do does** not touch the knob until **he his father** barks, “ Who is it? ” and **I Nick identify identifies** myself **himself**.

**I he find finds** **him his father** sitting naked in a galvanized tin tub in the center of **his** room, bathing and drinking straight vodka from a silver chalice, like some demented king from in the Middle Ages. As **I Nick push pushes** the door open wider, still standing off to one side, still thinking of the shotgun, **he his father** rises from **his** bath and stands before **me him**, naked. **His** breasts sag, suds funnel off **his** cock. “ Thanks for coming ”, **he** says, “ I’ll be with you in a minute. ” **I Nick try tries** to look **him** only in the face as **I he stagger staggers** backward and

out into the dim hallway. “ Take your time ”, I **he** mumble **mumbles**, my **his** brain racing. Why was **he** naked? Why had **he** risen as I **Nick** opened the door? Why had I **Nick** come when **he** called?

Water can be a symbol of purification, to stand naked before someone a sign of truth, of nothing to hide. A chalice can hold a sacrament, a chalice can hold poison. Nakedness can be both a threat and an offering. **Archimedes** lowered **himself** into a tub and formulated the laws of mass and density. Eureka! Water is the universal solvent! But water also drowns, rivers rise and breach their banks, fields become mud, family photo albums fatten, teacups float from cupboards. Why had I **he** come? The years my **his** father was in prison I **Nick** could imagine **his** room - the thick walls, the bars, a slit of blue sky high above **his** head. Sometimes I **he** imagined a cage, stacked on top of other cages, each with its own man inside. Or a hole in a basement with bars for a ceiling, a screw pacing above, twirling a nightstick. I **Nick** could place **him** in a prison, **he who had been unplaceable**. But that had been ten years earlier, when the letters had started. Ten years of a father built entirely of **his** own crazy words. When **he** called I **Nick** did not think of not going. If I **he** did not go to **him** I **he** would always wonder, if not about **him** then about **his** room, this room **he** was now losing, just to picture it, to hold it in my **his** mind.

When my **his** father calls me **him** back in **he** is half dressed, buttoning a shirt. “ Pleasure to see you, Nicholas. ” Aside from the circumstances. I **Nick** look **looks** into **his** face, try **tries** to see myself **himself**. I **he** listen **listens** briefly as he **his father** rants about the new owners, then I **he** go **goes** outside and call **calls** in **Emily** and **Doug**. My **his** father smirks at **Emily**, never having seen the two of us **them** together, asks about **her** folks. “ How are Steady Ray and Clare de Lune? ” **He** begins to tell **Doug** of being forced to listen to the faggots going at it, night and day, but **Doug** cuts **him** off. I **Nick** glance **glances** around **his** room, crammed with old magazines and what appears to be worthless junk. In the newspaper that morning I **he** had read that computers can now simulate what can not be seen, the shape of “ nothing, ” the structure that holds this nothing together - its representation looked like a gaping mouth. “ Anything you want, kid, I’m serious. ” I **Nick** glance **glances** at a painting, all spatters and drips. “ That is a real Pollock, kid, he was a friend. Worth a fortune now. It is yours. ”

Half an hour later I **Nick** give **gives** him **his father** a few hundred dollars to put **his** stuff in storage or to find another place, ask **asks** only that **he** not appear at the shelter, that **he** not fuck up my **his** job. He **his father** tells me **him** not to worry. I **Nick** take **takes** the painting, along with a copy of Orwell’s Down and Out in Paris and London. A few days later my **his** brother will point out that **Pollock** had misspelled **his** name when **he** signed the painting. There was no shotgun.