

Part I  
June

*You might as well say 'I breathe when I sleep' is the same thing as 'I sleep when I breathe'!*

*It is the Same With You.*

Damage. It's just another insignificant word right after dama and just before Daman in the dictionary. It's another word with another feeling, tagmarked somewhere in the spaghetti of neurons in your head. It's a heavy word. Even now the dendrites in your brain are abuzz, getting hit by a hundred electrical impulses a second, gathering data on that word. Hell, dama hardly even got your attention:

**Da • ma** n. : fallow deer.

There you go. But listen cautiously to the meaning of such simple syllables in a word like damage. The way the 'm' rolls under the crest of the 'd', the way 'age' takes a part in the morality of it all. Damage. It is cruelly symmetric to the shape of being human a strangled old dirty alley cat one of those things that's there just because it is, not because anyone wants it and strangely, because no one has the heart to put it out of its misery. And yet if you do not handle it with care, it leaves behind a dirty asymmetric residue. "Oh, I am better," says Life. "Oh, I have done worse." But there is Damage playing tricks in the back of Life's mind. "I *have* done worse, haven't I? Right?" And He will leave the first chance you give him. He will find new friends, and upon them He will wearily rest a burden of the damage He has done, the damage He has received. He's America, this damage. He's Georgia in kudzu covered forests and carven, broken, red clay washes. A state that has inspired more songs about homecoming and pain than any other. He's a small music box of a town, sending a song out into space even as the stars reply only with a vanishing in the sky. He's a feeling that can't be shook; when you've been awake all night and it's five o'clock in the morning there is a sensed presence in the room. He is Travis Fleeting in his lonesome, dreaming state, right there in front of you, cuddled up in front of the television. He is, in part, his glorious friends. He is love found along the way. He is a strange reminder, constant only for himself in his lonesome dreaming state, his dream now static on the television screen flickering dizzily with the word "mute" spelled out in green, blocky, awkward digital letters in the lower left corner.

Travis's bloodshot eyes are open but not focused as he lay fetal position in a beat

up, corrugated, blue armchair. Bands, fields, blurs of colored shapes wash across the television nonsensically. Now and then a phantom face or object seems to form out of the scrambled noise only to flicker and disappear. Tired but too disturbed by the dream to sleep, Travis stares at some point halfway between himself and the television; a halfway point of consciousness where dreams turn to a mist instead of bothering us their corporeal viscosity stolen from them by the undeniable and unmutable view of reality. There was a carousel. There were spinning, painted horses breathing horses with metal shafts through their middles, their innards. They would bray and kick and scream, their brilliant green and yellow and orange painted skin matched by frantic wide white eyes and teeth and blood coming from their wounds. Among them, a pale white horse almost grey from soot or slush ground into its hair does nothing but get thumped by the hoofs and torn by the gnashing, burly teeth of the prettier horses. Chewed and ripped and born of hope, the white horse stays to comfort the others, to be with them in their round and round terror, to free them if he can. Still he hopes that one day he might stumble upon a herd of painted horses in Montana, and see them running free through open fields. The vision is his dream's dream and Montana is called the "Big Sky State". It makes sense to him.

When Travis has the dream he dies, only to awaken in his own bed, shocked not to have four feet and hooves. Television and a sleepless night in that soft, familiar armchair usually follow, the warmth of the corrugated velvet cradling him. The high pitched chattering of channel ninety nine is muted but its scrambled signal still graces him with a randomness to contemplate. *Planet Earth? Planet Earth? Are you receiving our signal?* Travis smiles lazily. "I am receiving you, Admiral Zerdo." Fifteen minutes before, the channel had been clear enough to make out naked, heaving bodies through the static. Now the picture isn't clear enough to make out anything. Travis, despite his roommates' accusations, actually turned the channel on for the sake of the vegetating color bars. Waves and tides of odd bands of resonance fight their way across the screen, and Travis enjoys lapsing into a hypnotized state in a valiant attempt to comprehend the dream and the hole it left somewhere in the middle of him.

"You still up?" asks a tired voice from the kitchen door.

Travis rolls over onto his back, kicking his legs up over the arm rests. "Yeah."

"Eh. I can't sleep either." The figure steps from out of the shadows of the darkened kitchen into the flickering bands of the unattentive television, sitting himself on the couch wearily. It is John, and he casually wipes sleep from his eyes, and then wipes the optic goo off his hand on the arm of the couch. He smiles and looks at Travis, his teeth almost a wonderland purple in the television's light. "I'm pissed off."

Travis smiles knowingly, his grin half buried beneath the seat cushion. "Sorry, lover, I just couldn't get it up tonight it wasn't you "

"Fuck you."

Travis laughs to himself, and then says more seriously, "Rachel?"

"I can't sleep when I'm pissed off," John complains.

"Le'me have a cigarette."

"I don't have any."

Digging into the seat of the armchair, Travis pulls out an empty cigarette pack and checks it for the third time since sitting down to rest. It is still empty. "Ah, my sweet, little friends. I knew ye well."

"Let me get some clothes on. We'll go get some."

"Right on." Travis sits up in the armchair again, the springs squeaking gleefully.

John stands and shuffles back into his room, turning lights on as he passes. "God damn it!" he yells from his bedroom at the back of the apartment.

Standing and stretching, Travis reaches out for the television set and starts flipping through the channels. John was fun when he was mad mostly because he was never actually mad. He just acted like it. That or he was really angry and liked it. It was always hard to tell.

"I can't sleep when I'm pissed off!" John yells at the top of his lungs.

Travis calls back, "I think the TV's broken, man!"

"Really?" comes the reply, floating through the kitchen, bouncing off dirty metal appliances.

Watching the channels flip by, too quickly to discern their content, Travis absently hollers, "Yeah! There's nothin' but crap on!" He pauses momentarily to watch a news anchorman ramble on about some newsworthy event in silence. Travis rolls over a bit in discomfort even in the silence. The lack of a practiced monotone voice flowing from the image leaves Travis amused. "Today," Travis begins alone in a serious tone, "more crap happened. Some things fell apart due to a complete lack of foresight, and a number of people you've never heard of or met died pointlessly. My wife left me because of my toupee and I'm quite sad about that."

Stumbling back into the room wearing the same jeans from the day before, John replies, "That's right, Travis." Holding his hand up to his ear pressing a nonexistent earpiece, John continues the on location report. "After thirteen terror stricken hours, rescue searchers are still finding corpses. Luckily for the American public, we're here to jam our cameras in the rescue workers ass cracks and catch a glimpse of the gore." He slides a wrinkled white t shirt over his torso.

"That's amazing, John. Stay tuned. More after this reality break," Travis turns the television off with some effort, and darkness encompasses the room. Only a dim flare of blue light filters in from the parking lot to set a glow to everything in the room before John turns the phosphorescent lights on. Travis winces, shutting his eyes.

"Sorry," John says.

"That's all right."

"Where's Nick?"

"He never came in."

John raises his eyebrows, looking surprised. "I thought he didn't really like what's her face?" He sits back down on the couch and pulls his leather loafers out from

underneath it, putting them on without socks.

"So. You can have sex with people you don't like." Travis grabs a pair of black engineer's boots next to the armchair and pulls them on.

John looks at his friend, shaking his head like a kindergarten teacher scolding a child, "You're not supposed to."

"Tell me about it," Travis complains, throwing his arms limply in the air. "I've pissed off *more* people that way."

John looks thoughtful for a moment, rolling his bottom lip outward, as he pulls the heel of his shoe up over his foot with a pronounced effort. "*I'm* pissed off."

"You're not pissed off at *me*, and besides: I don't like you *and* wouldn't have sex with you. There's a subtle difference there."

"I don't see why."

Travis just sits and stares as the dream lingers his head painted horses on a circular journey. He's not ready to go, but he's not ready *not* to go either. The indecision is a lack of melody. It is a song inside his singer head that demands recognition, but guilt keeps it from coming out. Still, decision seems a necessary inconvenience, and judging from some completely arbitrary internal clock or just guessing really Travis figures it to be three thirty in the morning. At this point he is running on pure, unadulterated stupidity, and he stares blankly at John who has begun to ponder his gut, sitting on the couch. "I think I gained weight while I was sleeping," remarks John.

"Only you could do that."

John pretends not to hear Travis as he sticks his stomach out, stretching it into a sphere, stroking it lovingly. Looking at Travis after a moment, he smiles brightly. "It's so beautiful," he says, sounding truly awed.

Travis just stares in a three thirty in the morning way.

"Touch it." John rubs his hands across his middle seductively.

"No."

"Come over here and touch it."

"Burn in hell. Let's go," Travis says, though not impatiently. He doesn't care enough about anything at that moment to be at all impatient.

"Not until you touch it." John grins like a panting cat.

Travis stands up, steps to the front door, opens it, steps out and shuts it with a thump. The early morning air is wet and cool, but still evidence, even at night, that it is June. There is no escaping the feeling of a Georgia summer night. The air was dropping in temperature from a ridiculously high degree, lingering absentmindedly around seventy eight or so because it had nothing better to do the boredom of humidity. It isn't sticky like it is during the day, just soft and wet a damp blanket, protection from the fire. Travis stands watching all the silent parked cars in front of the apartments and thinks about all the people sleeping trying to imagine his neighbors' faces as they lay comfortably in their beds. They will be getting up to begin their days as he goes to bed at last, too exhausted to dream anymore. The front door opens behind him and John steps out, turning to lock the

bolt. "Maybe I should leave it open for Nick."

Travis looks confused for a moment, turning to face John. "He lives here. He's got a key."

"But what if he lost it?"

Still confused, Travis has no reply.

"It'll be easier for him to get in anyway."

"It'll be easier for a burglar to get in, too."

John shrugs, "So?" implying that they had nothing for anyone to steal which wasn't entirely true. They had their equipment, guitars, amplifiers, effects pedals and such. They just feigned being Brahm's poor musicians for the sake of talent that might come through proximity to legend as though they might jinx their musical progress by admitting or having comfort. But then, Travis knew John was arguing for the sake of arguing just kidding around and John locks the door as Travis meanders off toward the Thunderchicken. They both get in the car a black thunderbird; a wide, low slung, two door machine built in the late eighties. It had a V engine that John was fond of abusing.

If you've ever sat in a Thunderbird, you know what it is to sit within the interior of a vehicle that swallows you whole. There is a distance between the beginning and end; a familiar and safe shell. Driving it isn't just fun, it's a matter of confrontation with the road, a challenge to the asphalt with the wheels so widely spread. Go where you please, because God will protect you. Only he, that master of the elements and the universe creates chariots of such sport. There is little doubt that the GM plans for the car came from high on the mount. He will protect you as if he drove a thunderbird, too. Like the first sip of a cool, amber beer on a Friday night, Travis would sink into the passenger seat of the Thunderchicken, settling into foam stained with the smell of ash, knowing that this ride would not be like the last. John's car was no nine to five car no machine for commuting. For Travis, the journeys made in the Thunderchicken always carried a certain import. There was never anyway to go the ride *was* home. A huge window to the right of him revealed the distant panorama of fields where something ran free, somewhere beneath early morning June stars. "Bring your dreams," the Thunderchicken requested as the engine purred to life, "I will carry you along, on my sturdy shock absorbers, smoothly over waves of discontent." Drive her like she deserved to be driven and she could protect you.

So, John slams his foot on the gas, as if aware of the imagined charm. He backs the car out of the parking spot at twenty five miles an hour, and swings the Thunderchicken around in a tight arc that makes Travis lean, catch himself, and struggle to reach for his seatbelt. Shifting the automatic transmission from reverse to overdrive, John guns the engine a second time and the car peels out of the parking lot. "It's three thirty," Travis says matter of factly, checking his arbitrary standard of time against the digital clock on the dashboard noting that he is only ten minutes off. John replies by rolling down his window and screaming into the parking lot, "I hate you all, pigfuckers!" Laughing in spite of himself, Travis rolls down his own window to let in some of the moist, cool night air.

"Give me a cigarette," John says, swinging the car around a corner fast enough to

make it fishtail.

"In a minute," Travis offers grabbing the "oh shit" handle with his left hand.

A silent moment passes as the pair pull out onto Baxter Street the road almost empty. Silent gas stations, convenience stores and strip malls sit along its length. In the distance, a pair of headlights shows faintly five hundred yards off.

"Gi'me a cigarette," John whines like an addict.

"In a minute."

"Gi'me a cigarette."

"In a *minute*."

"Now."

"Shut up. You're fat."

John starts looking around the dash and groping under the driver's seat, searching for his tape player. The dash stereo is broken and has a bad habit of consuming tapes, but John has a tape player adapter for his portable CD player which is also broken plugged into a walkman. He finds the walkman, hits play, and Pink Floyd's "Wish You Were Here" washes through the car's speakers like liquid Valium through a faucet. The music seems to calm the beast of John's driving style, and the car hums with an easy motion.

*So, so you think you can tell*

"It's not that bad, is it?" Travis asks.

*Heaven from Hell,*

Concentrating on the road, John's light demeanor grows just a tad heavier. *Blue skies from pain.* "Rachel?" he asks, his teeth chopping her name off short.

*Can you tell a green field*

"You're not gonna' break up or anything?"

*From a cold steel rail?*

John shrugs and kept his eyes on the road.

*A smile from a veil?*

"C'mon. How bad could it be?"

*Do you think you can tell?*

"I'm pissed off."

Travis observes his friend for a moment John's light, brown eyes staring intensely at the road and seeing something else. *And did they get you to trade...* "You really are pissed off." *Your heroes for ghosts?*

John shrugs again, keeps driving. "I'm just sick of it."

*Hot ashes for trees?*

"So. Dump her."

*Hot air for a cool breeze?*

John's eyes search right towards Travis, streetlights passing rhythmically over his face. He is aware of the possibility loves it as the lights pass over him, despises it in the interim darkness.

*Cold comfort for change?*

"I know, I know," Travis concedes. "I know."

The car hums as the pair sit quietly.

*And did you exchange*

*A walk on part in the war*

*For a lead role in a cage?*

"Well, you're still having sex..."

"Very... angry... sex." John tightens his bottom lip, jutting his chin out. It was how he let his friends know that what he was saying was a joke, no matter how angry he sounded. It was a kind of deadpan, an expression to fall back on when all other expressions were too real.

*How I wish... how I wish you were here.*

Travis laughs, sitting up in his seat for a moment. The joke must go on. "Yeah?" he asked psychologically.

*We're just two lost souls*

"Bang her like the whore she is."

*Swimming in a fish bowl,*

"Well... what do you want? Sensitivity?" Travis pantomimes sarcastic scarequotes around the last word.

*Year after year,*

John's bottom lip tightens a little more and begins to tremble as he pretends to try to hold back tears. "I'm a very sensitive guy."

*Running over the same old ground.*

"Sensitive my ass," Travis scoffs.

*What have we found?*

*The same old fears.*

*Wish you were here.*

"You're the lucky one..." John sniffs.

"Why? 'Cause I'm an insensitive bastard?"

"No."

"Well, what then?"

"Cause you're gay," John points out, as though it were obvious.

"I'm not gay."

"That's not what The Fat Man said!" Waving his finger, John shames Travis from the driver's seat.

"What would Nick know? He's gay."

"He said he caught you in the bathroom with the plunger up your ass."

Travis puts his face in his hands. The joke must stop. "Dude, that's too much."

John starts bouncing in his seat rhythmically. "Mr. Clean! Oh, Mr. Clean! Oh my God, you give it... so... good!"

"Dude, shut up!"

Suddenly very serious, John takes his eyes off the road for a moment to regard his

friend. "You... are a homosexual."

"You're fat."

"At least I'm not banging guys in the shit shoot!" John declares, regaining his edgy excitability, sitting up to the steering wheel. He's glad to have a mental stick to poke Travis with. It caused no harm and kept his mind off more serious matters.

"Shut up."

Pulling up to the twenty four hour grocery store down the street from their apartment complex, John drives the Thunderchicken across an almost entirely empty parking lot, directly into the first handicap spot he sees. Travis knows better than to engage in another argument John is provoking for his own amusement. The answer to Travis's protest would inevitably be something like: "Now those legless bastards can park in a regular spot like the rest of us. They wouldn't be so crippled if they got up and walked every once in a while!" Really, there was no arguing about it anyway. John wasn't going to move the car. Nonetheless, when they stepped out into the parking lot Travis has to prod, "What're you gonna' do if a cop shows up?"

"Kick his ass and take his money," John says plainly.

"Why does getting smokes have to be so difficult?" Travis whines.

They approach electric doors, which grind open to release cool, dry air and a dangerously plucky song—a television theme song gone horribly wrong and transmitted through the tinny grocery store intercom. John performs a dance like a gypsy and sings, "If you weren't so oh addicted you'd be oh less afflicted."

"No, you don't understand," Travis explains patiently, "I have a rare disorder. If I don't smoke cigarettes, I'll die."

"You'll die if you smoke them."

"No, I will *die* if I *don't* smoke—that's what I'm telling you. It's a mutation of some sort—some kind of genetic adaptation to pollution."

"You're gonna' die anyway."

Travis smiles. Checkmate. "Exactly. I will die *if* I *don't* smoke."

"Very clever."

Of the sixteen registers in the supermarket, only the express lane is open. An older woman, forty or so, is at the register with a security guard hovering near the end of the counter, trying his best not to look nervous. John smiles and waves politely to the woman. She knows both John and Travis from their irregular but numerous visits at this hour. She waves back. The two walk to the cigarette racks and take their usuals while Travis muses, "They should make ultra, ultra lights and just not put any tobacco in them."

"So what... you just smoke the paper?"

"Probably the filter too, at that point."

"The filter tastes nasty as hell," John points out as they approached the counter.

Travis smiles at the register woman. He knew her name was Margaret by her name tag, and he usually called her that, even though they'd never formally been introduced. At three in the morning, everyone was friends. "Can you believe he smokes



the filters, Margaret?”

Margaret just makes a face, lightly jiggling her beehive hairdo from left to right.

“I lit the wrong end once,” John says defensively.

“See. That means your stupid,” Travis explains with exaggerated patience.

John and Travis always put on their best show for Margaret. Neither saw her job as being very entertaining and figured she appreciated the attention and humor. She usually smiled, sometimes laughed, but never said anything except, “You boys have a good night,” or “Drive safely,” when she thought they might be drunk. Either John or Travis would reply, “See ya’ tomorrow, Margaret,” though they wouldn’t be back for a week or so. Sure enough, everything goes as planned. Each purchase their cigarettes with a smile and a polite thank you. Turning to leave and nodding curtly to the security guard who was still trying not to look nervous they both head for the door.

“Have a nice mornin’, boys,” Margaret says as they turn.

Half turning back, John waves with his cigarette pack in hand. “See ya’ tomorrow.”

Margaret turns to the security guard and explains, “They don’t never come in every day only every once in a while. They’re very nice boys.”

The security guard just nods and watches the electric doors close like temple doors, his muscles relaxing just slightly. He was new, and he and Margaret might work together for another three hours without saying more than a word or two inside the vast expanse of the grocery store

. *Come, We Shall Have Some Fun Now!*

“We’re taking the long way home,” John declares, opening the driver’s side door and hitting the electric lock switch to let Travis in.

“Yeah, right on.”

“What’s with this ‘right on’ thing? Where’d you pick that up?”

Travis shrugs and lowers himself into his seat.

“It’s sounds stupid. You sound like damn hippie.” John says when they’re seated.

“Right on.”

The “long way home” meant actually driving the perimeter of town, roughly using the distance from the apartment to the grocery store as a kind of radius. When they got to the opposite side of town from the grocery store, having traveled half the circumference of the city, they would head back to the apartment through town, down Lexington, along Broad, turning onto Lumpkin and then Baxter. It was a good way to waste time in the early morning, a good way to think about things, a good way to listen to music, a good way to relax but mostly a good way to waste time.

The first ten minutes of the drive pass quietly as each of the boys contemplatively smoke their first cigarette and Pink Floyd drones on in the background, blaring in competition with the hum of rubber on asphalt and wind rushing through the open windows. As they approach the perimeter of town, strip malls and townhouses fade to pastures and farms. The light from the city withdraws and Travis watches out of the corner of his eye as the red orange dot from John’s cigarette swells and shrinks with each drag.

“You could always kill her,” Travis offers, nodding reassuringly.

“I’ve considered the possibility.”

“Killing’s messy, though. I think I would prefer to ruin someone’s life.”

“How so?” John asks, as though he were inquiring about an academic matter or a reusable product of some kind.

“Oh, I don’t know.... say you amputated her legs.”

John gives Travis a critical look, “How the hell is that less messy than just offing her?”

“Good point.” Travis thinks about it a little more. “I don’t know. See, I’m just not very good at this sort of thing. I always kill my ex girlfriends.”

“You should explore your options.”

“Well, now, that’s what I’m trying to do here, see? I mean, fundamentally, I suppose, there are better ways of breaking up with women than killing them.”

“What about women who break up with you.”

"I kill them too."

John shrugs. "Might not be very clever, but at least you're consistent."

"Consistency, see. That's my strong point. Eventually, I kill everyone I know."

John gives Travis a warning look. "A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds."

"Oh, I'll kill you too. I just still have a use for you as of now."

John muses, "It's always a comfort to know that I play a pertinent role in someone's twisted plot. Where exactly do I fit in?"

"You amuse me," Travis says, condescendingly.

"What? Do I amuse you?" John asks in a thick Brooklyn accent. "Am I some little clown here for amusement?"

"Precisely." Travis pauses to light a second cigarette off the first.

Smiling maniacally, in his own special way, John looks to Travis in the low light. "I'm just glad to be here."

Nodding, Travis replies, "That's what Ringo said."

"That he did."

"But you know what? He's not there anymore."

"No. No, he's not."

"She didn't cheat on you or something crazy like that, did she?"

John shrugs. "I don't want to talk about it."

"All right."

"She didn't cheat on me, no."

"Good."

They drove on for a while, eventually turning on to Lexington, carrying them back from out of the farms and stables. Both of them were trying to think of something better to talk about, but it was June, and there really was nothing to talk about. Admittedly, both John and Travis felt like they had better things to do than school music namely but you couldn't do that all day or talk about it all day, no matter how dedicated you were. You had to have "naptime", that period of creative rest in which cigarettes are smoked, talk is had, and the mind wanders endlessly in search of discarded truths, and anemic melodies that may someday grow into a hit tune. John and Travis, Nick and Ian all of them the Fat Kid were either battling the muses or having naptime. At least when school was in session, there were all manner of stupid, trivial things to talk and complain and bitch about. But then, when school was out, life became remarkably simpler, though perhaps less conversational. It was a trade off.

"What have you got scheduled for tomorrow?" John asks.

Travis thinks about it. "Let's see... I need to lie in bed for about an hour and cry because I woke up again. That'll be at about one thirty in the afternoon right now the way things are going I'm behind schedule on all the putzing I was *supposed* to do yesterday. And then, after breakfast, I need to stare at a wall until the sun goes down maybe I might drink myself into a stupor..."

John smiles, "I have some errands to run money stuff. I figured we could get that hundred watt amp of yours fixed."

"Money? What's that?"

"The cause of all sin."

"Right okay..." pretending to think about it for a while, Travis starts again, "That'd be cool. I've been meaning to get that fixed for a while."

"Yeah, you mentioned it the other day."

"I did? When?"

"I believe you said, 'John, you asshole, why won't you help me get my amp fixed? I hate you.' I think that's what you said."

Travis nods. "Now that you mention it, I seem to recall saying something like that."

"No you don't."

"You're right. I'm lying don't remember a damn thing."

"What's your name!" John yells suddenly like a Nazi.

Travis just sits in his seat and starts quivering.

"What's your name, damn you!"

Travis scratches at the passenger door and begins quietly whimpering.

"What's your *name*!" John yells again, growing more intense.

Breaking down, Travis covers his head and screams into his lap. "I don't know! All right? I don't know! Leave me alone!"

Suddenly stopping in the middle of Broad street in the emptiness of downtown, John stops the car. "Get out."

Travis hesitates for a moment. He could never be sure of the conviction John had to a joke. He always believed that someday he would push the joke too far, and the true wrath of John would descend upon him.

"Get out," John repeated seriously, while the innocent glister in his eyes told Travis *Let's play a game*.

Still whimpering, Travis miserably opens the door and slides himself out of the car. John drives off, his rear lights glaring red in the middle of the empty downtown street.

Standing in the middle of the road, Travis calmly takes his cigarettes out of his pockets, lights one and watches John's receding lights. *You're a wanted man now*. Travis thinks to himself, *if I aimed ta' kill a man, then I guess I would, but I'm innocent, ya' see*. He pulls the cigarette out of his mouth with his index finger and thumb, looking as menacing as he can. Slowly, he crosses the street, watching as John streaks down to the next intersection, executes a u turn, and comes flying back. Standing by the side of the road now, Travis carelessly watches as the car approaches him and stops again. It was just one of John's games after all. Leaning over John calls out the passenger window, "Hey pal! Need a ride?"

Travis looks up the empty street, and looks back down the other way complacently, and then finally back to John who is still smiling like a nymphomaniac with five prostitutes in his back seat. "I reckon I do," he admits with a shrug, and gets back in the car. And he

almost falls back out as John stomps on the gas peddle and brings the Thunderchicken around one hundred and eighty degrees to face the direction they had been heading. The engine roars menacingly as the car charges through three yellow lights in a blast. John poignantly kisses his hand and pats the ceiling of the car as tradition demands of close calls with yellow lights. Pink Floyd is still screaming about running like hell as they drive through the empty night.

Hunching up over the steering wheel, his cigarette sticking defiantly straight up from his bottom lip, John intones in his deep and scratchy perverted old uncle voice, "It doesn't get any better than this."

Travis laughs and rolls his eyes, especially because it didn't.

Turning left onto Lumpkin Street for a few blocks and then right again back onto Baxter, the pair begin their final stretch home. Settling back into his seat, John returns to his normal driving sensibilities, as a cool instrumental hymn from the tape player saps the cabin of energy. John lights a new cigarette as Travis contemplates his current one with new vigor. A few blocks more and John pulls in the parking lot of their apartment complex, driving all the way down to the horseshoe corner where they lived in building D, apartment though more often than not, they referred to it as "living in D". Getting out of the car in almost theatrical unison, Travis and John spot Nick sitting out front of the apartment, his lean and tall form gathered in a huddle on the stoop. "I'll be damned," Travis said. "He did lose his key."

As they approach the apartment, they both observe Nick's demeanor. He looks tired, but anything beyond that is speculation.

"Hey," Travis says simply, coming to stand in front of him.

John walks past the two to go inside.

"Gi'me a cigarette," Nick demands.

Looking at Nick seriously, Travis just says, "Do you know what we went through to get these? There were cops, natives... the bridge was out... oh my God I'm not even going to get into what happened with the dinosaur." Travis shakes his head in sincere disbelief.

"Shut up," Nick replies as Travis gets out two cigarettes, handing one to his friend. Sitting down on the stoop, Travis lights his own cigarette and regards Nick for a moment who is still and staring at some nothing. Travis leans over takes the cigarette out of Nick's hand, puts it in Nick's mouth, lights it, and watches as Nick begins passively smoking. "I really gotta' quit doin' this," Nick says, his cigarette hanging pathetically, sticking to his dry bottom lip.

"Nah," Travis intones, sounding like a public service announcement, "you just need a new perspective on how special and important a person you are."

John comes out of the front door again with three bottles of beer. He gives one each to Nick and Travis and sits down on the staircase leading to the apartments above them.

"You have a deep and sincere respect for yourself and for your personal worth to

others,” Travis continues.

“I can’t stand her. I really can’t.”

“Didja’ sleep with her?” Jon interjects.

“You recognize the friendship that others offer you for you truly deserve it.”

“I *really* can’t stand her.”

“That’s just the sobriety talking,” John muses.

“It is easy for you to except the help and cooperation others offer you because you see their help to you as an expression of friendship and mutual understanding.”

With sudden vibrance, Nick pulls the cigarette out of his mouth, tearing his bottom lip, and says, “That’s it exactly! I’m serious! That’s it. Every fucking time I get drunk with her... God. I fucking hate myself.”

“You realize that giving and receiving are two sides of the same coin.” Travis stops and pauses for a moment as though he were coming out of hypnosis. “Look, man, there’s nothin’ you can do about it now,” he offers.

“Shit, I cut my lip.”

“I hate it when that happens.”

“I know. Geez. But I mean... God damn it,” Nick protests.

Travis pauses. He isn’t sure which conversation he’s following. “I meant the girl,” he says.

“I meant the cigarette,” Nick says.

“Well, there you go,” Travis says.

“What the hell does that mean?” John asks.

Travis shrugs. “It’s karma.”

“Knock it off with that hippy crap,” John replies.

“I cut my lip so now I don’t have to feel guilty?”

“Instant karma is going to get you?”

John growls and Nick holds up a hand, “Now just a minute there could be something to this...”

The three boys sit in their tight circle as the light from the city begins to mate with the turquoise light of a sun an hour still from rising. The birds all chirp gleefully, dispersed throughout the few scraggly trees in the parking lot. There is a surreal orchestration arranged between the birds’ singing and the boys’ sipping.

“What’ve you guys been up to?” Nick asks, changing the subject so Travis and John won’t worry about what they should be saying to sympathize.

“Ah nothing. We just went out to get cigarettes and took the long way home,” John answers.

“Shit I would rather have been doing that.”

Travis shrugs. “I’m sure we’ll bein’ doin’ it again tomorrow.”

*. Just What I Was Going to Remark Myself*

John is sitting in a meditative pose, cross legged in the middle of the living room when Travis stumbles in, wiping sleep from his eyes. It is three thirty in the afternoon. "That's a first," Travis says, commenting cynically on the fact that John is awake before him.

John has his eyes closed. "I was contemplating my penis."

"That's fascinating," Travis says, crossing the room to the kitchen. The television is on, turned to channel ninety nine and muted. "I see what you guys were doing after I crashed," he says, passing into the kitchen.

"Do you know that I have the world's most aesthetically pleasing penis?" John calls out after him.

Fishing through the cabinets for a bowl and his cereal, Travis replies, "I was unaware of that fact." Opening the refrigerator, he pulls out a carton of milk, opens it, sniffs it, makes a face, and puts it back on the shelf. The only other possibilities besides the soured milk were salsa, a cucumber, something in a tupperware container and a pitcher of lemonade. Standing and staring at his cereal, Travis hypothetically constructs the taste of Cheerios and lemonade, and then decides against it, shutting the door. He pours Cheerios into the bowl and returns to the living room. He sits down in the armchair and picks up the remote to flip through channels, stopping when he comes to one with cartoons. "What the hell are you doing?" he says, talking to the television, shoving a handful of dry cereal into his mouth.

"I told you. I'm contemplating my penis."

Half rotating in the chair and half turning his head, Travis strains to look over his shoulder at John. "Seriously, what are you doing?"

Opening his eyes, John looks at Travis. "Cabalistic meditation."

"Cool," Travis says, stuffing another handful of cereal into his mouth and turning back to the television just in time to see one of the cartoon characters get smashed by an anvil. "I love that part!" he declares, a few Cheerios falling from his mouth into his lap.

John stands up and sits down on one of the couches along the wall, beneath three of Nick's strange and colorful four foot by four foot pastel renderings of bar scenes. The characters in the paintings are grossly twisted and faceless as they bend and melt over the bar and each other against a dizzying and meandering background. Striking, they never failed to catch the attention of any guest who entered the apartment. "Unmute it," John says.

Fetching the remote, Travis unmutes the television in time to hear one of the

animated characters scream in terror. The two sit mesmerized by the classic cell animation. "Where's Nick?" Travis asks. He and Nick's rooms were next to one another on one side of the apartment, and Travis had heard him leave earlier.

"He said he had to get some supplies or something. You still wanna' get that amp fixed?"

"Yeah, you bet."

"We should head out soon then. I think the shop closes at five."

"That's cool. I didn't think about that." He pauses for a moment, tearing himself away from the bright colors of exaggerated tragedy on the screen. "Let's get the Fat Kid to go with us."

"He probably won't be back for a while."

"No, the other Fat Kid."

"Ian?"

Travis nods.

"I haven't seen him in a couple of days."

Glancing to the television and back, Travis asks surprised, "Were you already up when Nick left?"

John rubs his eyes with the heels of his hands. "I didn't really go to sleep."

Turning back to the TV, Travis just says, "That Cosmoblastic meditation must be fun."

"Cabalistic," John corrects him.

"Noooo!" Travis hollers at the television in cathartic relief.

"What'd'ya think he's been up to?" asks John.

"Well, he's probably not dead. I don't remember how this one ends," Travis says, referring to the character on the screen, "but cartoon characters never die. I think that's a rule or something."

"Ian, dumbass what'd'ya think Ian's been up to," John says, sitting back on the couch.

Stuffing another large handful of Cheerios into his mouth, Travis mumbles, "Fa tr i tee sh tuffles."

"Do you think he's been drinking?" John asks sarcastically.

Muting the commercial, Travis turns the arm chair to face John with a squeaky zeal, but keeps turning a full three hundred and sixty degrees in a circle. "I can't believe how drunk I got last night," he says, riding the chair around and giving it another push with his toes.

John growls in his perverted uncle voice, "That's Schlitz, baby!"

"My tolerance must be something awful these days. Seven or eight and I can barely *drive*."

Patently placing his hands together in a priestly fashion, John intones, "It takes practice, my son."

"Did you finish that whole bottle of Cuervo?"



"No. There's still about half left if you want some."

"I wonder if tequila tastes good with Cheerios?" Travis contemplates his bowl. They both knew it was a rhetorical question. "Let me take a shower and put on some clothes and we'll go."

"Good. I'm not taking you anywhere smelling like that."

Sniffing under his arm, Travis looks hurt. "It's not that bad."

Ian lived in a fraternity house on Milledge avenue up the street from D. He was the expatriate of the foursome, a photographer among the natives. He had first met Travis when the two lived in the dorms together their freshman year. Nothing much had happened then in that first year, but in their sophomore year, the two figured out that they had a common thread: the criminal element. After a long discussion at a coffeehouse one night, they had decided that between the two of them, they could make fake driver's licences at quite a profit Travis doubly so because he could increase the number of people at his shows. A friendship was born. There was more at stake, of course. It wasn't long before Travis as a musician came to know and appreciate the nuances of photography, and Ian came to know Travis's music. As artists of different mediums, they still related.

Rather than move in with Nick, John, and Travis, though, Ian had opted to live at his other fraternity's house: Tau Kappa Epsilon the Teke's, as they were known. They had smart guys, big guys, little guys, fast guys. Guys that weren't geniuses but were good at heart and guys that were brutish but clever. There were a few good ol' boys thrown in the kind that you can't not like to spice up the stew. The Teke's were anything but typical. They partied like all the other frats on the row, but they had a number of assets that set them apart. Ian was one of them at least in the minds of John and Travis, who'd both been offered spots in the fraternity. Probably, they were asked to pledge for no other reason than they were at the house as much as some of the older brothers hanging out with Ian, generally wasting time and graciously partaking of the fraternity's alcohol supply. Both of them had to refuse membership for a lack of funds though.

Walking in the back door of the house, John and Travis thread their way through an aftermath of some monstrous hive creature called a kegger. They shuffle past an empty ice machine and beer cans strewn across the floor, into the main television room, looking for occupants. Apparently no one was up yet. Despite the house's exterior, that of a southern antebellum plantation home, the late twentieth century had been the interior decorator, filling rooms with seventies deco furniture, televisions, a VCR and a pool table. Most of the house was as crumbling and peculiarly decorated as the vast majority of apartments in town. Travis and John make their way up the front steps, a staircase that at one time or another had probably been quite regal. Now the paint was peeling and the wide stairs made untrusting squeaks. At the top of the stairs was a small foyer containing a couch and four entrances to bedrooms. They approach the back corner door and knocked hesitantly, Travis pushing the door open to peer inside.

"Hey, Fat Kid," Travis calls. "You in here?"

The room itself was a virtual jungle of four by four posts spread around the room to support a loft that, in itself was another room. The front half of the spacious room, not covered by the loft, had three giant windows that looked out to the pillars of the front porch and Milledge Ave. There was a couch under the windows, and another one situated opposite of the first. From this second couch emerges a head, crowned by tattered black hair and bejeweled by two blue swollen eyes. "Oh," says Ian.

"Come on, Pirata," says Travis in a Spanish accent, coming around the front of the couch. "We are going eento town."

"Wake up!" John chides, sitting on the couch under the windows. He pushes aside two empty whiskey bottles on the coffee table and puts his feet up.

Ian had sat up, rubbing his eyes. He is shirtless and wearing jeans. "Man, what time is it?"

"Bout four," replies Travis, sitting down on the couch next to him.

"Shit."

"Have a good time?" asks John.

"It was nuts."

"Where's Bubble boy?" asks Travis, referring to Ian's overly allergic, sickly roommate.

Ian laughs at hearing the name. "We ran him off I guess. He's staying with his girlfriend for a while and then going home for the summer." Standing up, Ian orients himself toward the bathroom, looking to be a bit off kilter still. "God, she's revolting." He takes two steps before stopping to think about where he was off to. Turning, he says, "Le'me get a shower and I'll go with you."

"Cool. We'll stop and get you some coffee after we drop off my amp."

Passing through the door to the bathroom, Ian shuts it after himself, and after a few minutes John and Traivs can hear the sound of running water. John had picked up a photo magazine from off the coffee table and was thumbing through it, lounging on the couch. Sitting opposite John, Travis absentmindedly picks up a half full bottle of gin, sniffs it, smiles and cradles the bottle to his chest. Surveying the room, Travis looks at all the posters, bottles, and the occasional eight by tens that Ian had snapped and developed. There were two street signs and a stop sign nailed to the wall. There were clothes strewn everywhere, hanging from every imaginable precipice. Bored with the magazine, John sets it back down on the table and looks at Travis blankly, who looks blankly back, and then raises his eyebrows as if to say "I don' know."

They both look around the room for a minute more before John remarks, "I have a very small, distracting house."

Travis nods quickly in feigned understanding.

"It's in the middle of the street."

Looking at John and closing one eye, Travis replies with the perverted uncle's voice, "I got your small, distracting house right here in my pants." Leaning back on the

couch, he inserts his free hand into the waist of his jeans, letting the gin bottle hang limp from the other.

“What’d’ya think’s wrong with your amp?”

“Probably just blew a fuse or somethin’ it won’t cost too much.”

“Have you just been using your other one?”

“Actually,” Travis laughs at the thought before continuing, “I haven’t really practiced in about a week.”

Rolling his eyes, John sympathizes. “Me neither.”

“I’ll get back on the ball once I get this amp fixed.”

John nods. “I think I’m gonna’ get a mixer.”

“You got that much?”

“Just a small one.”

Looking at the gin bottle, holding it loosely by the throat, Travis just says, “I got your mixer right here in my pants.”

There was another stint of silence as Travis and John get out their cigarettes. They lay quietly on the couches and look about the room for sources of entertainment.

“Hello!” Travis calls across the room energetically, as though seeing John for the first time.

John looks on, perplexed.

“Hello!” Travis calls again, this time rounding his lips out and letting the “o” linger on.

“Hello,” John replies plainly, smiling a little.

“What do you think he would do if we just barged in there and started dancing around or something?” Travis proposes.

“I told you you were gay.”

“I’m not gay. I’m just bored.”

“That’s how people become gay,” John states.

“What? They get bored?”

“Yup.”

“That’s stupid.”

“It’s true. First you go gay, and then you start fucking animals.”

“Whatever. Who told you that?”

John shrugs.

“Gay people don’t fuck animals.”

“Not in the beginning they don’t.”

“Do you really think I’m gay?”

John nodded seriously.

“Maybe I am...” Travis pauses to contemplate the thought. “Would you still love me if I was gay?”

“No.”

Travis looks on for a moment. “Seriously, would you still be my friend if I was gay?”

"You're not gay."

"*You're* avoiding the question now."

"There's no sense in answering stupid questions."

"C'mon just answer the question."

John shrugs again. "I'd make fun of you."

Nodding approvingly, Travis lets the conversation end there.

Ian bursts out of the bathroom, his small frame wrapped with a towel, his face completely transformed. His hair is straight, more vividly black, and hung comfortably his blue eyes lit up like dayglo denim. He looks more like his normal energetic self though energetic wasn't quite the word for it. Ian was usually more than energetic. The average person thought he was on speed if they didn't know him better. And the strange thing was that most people universally agreed that Ian's demeanor rubbed off like a virus. The moment he walked into a room, it seemed that the party had arrived. Nick often referred to the effect as his "daily dose of Ian." Searching the room through piles of clothes, Ian looks for something tolerably dirty or tolerably clean depending on how you look at . "I made about twenty sales last night," he announces to Travis.

"Really?" Travis seems genuinely surprised the summer was always slow.

"Yep." He speaks in his mile a minute style. "We had a bunch of people over here last night. I told a couple people that I could hook 'em up, and before I knew it I was talking to a whole crowd."

"Word spreads."

"Yep."

"You didn't tell 'em it was you, right?" Travis asks, a little wary.

"No, no, course not, dude. I'm in the *know*. I *know* a guy. That's all, Vaquero." Ian takes his clothes into the bathroom.

"Cool. Hey! You mind if I get a beer?" Travis calls into the bathroom.

"They're in the refrigerator help yourselves," Ian calls back.

"Fakes?" John asks.

"Huh?" asks Travis moving over to the mini refrigerator by the couch.

"Is that what he was selling?"

Travis just nods as he opens the refrigerator door. Setting the gin bottle on the top, he peers inside. Sure enough, the miracle cube is packed full of magic silver cans. Travis pulls out a beer and offers it to John who waves it off, then shutting the door he opens his can, doing some math in his head. Twenty times approximately fifty divided in two. "Twenty should set me straight for the month, dude," he hollers at the bathroom door.

Coming back into the room in a red, blue and yellow Spanish soccer jersey and a pair of meticulously unkempt jeans, Ian remarks, "Yeah, and I could use it."

John didn't need false I.D. he was older than Ian and Travis by about two years but says, "I might have some people who'd buy off you."

"Cool," says Ian.

"Can I get a cut?"  
"Of course, dude. Totally."  
"Don't tell 'em who we are," adds Travis.  
John just makes his "duh" face.  
"I just wanna' be sure," Travis says, sipping from his beer. "I got a right to be paranoid."  
"Say, does Rachel still have hers?" Ian asks.  
"Yep. She uses it everywhere."  
"It's everywhere you wanna' be," Travis adds, resounding a television commercial with a big thumb's up to Ian.  
"We ready to go?" Ian asks.  
"Nah. Le'me finish this," Travis replies, sipping from his beer.  
Ian nods and regards the refrigerator. "Four o'clock? That's late enough to start," he finishes, reaching for the door and pulling out two beers. Sitting down next to John, Ian hands him one. John regards it for a second, questioning whether he wants it, and then opens it. Almost on cue, all three pull out cigarettes and pass John's silver zippo around. "Did you see Rachel last night?" Ian asks.  
John just rolls his eyes and takes a swig of his beer.  
"He's pissed off," Travis offers.  
Ian smiles and looks at John, "Is she cheating on you or anything?"  
"No," John answers, annoyed.  
Ian nods.  
Looking around the room at Ian and Travis with that mischievous grin, John sticks his stomach out, swelling it almost into a ball, and begins stroking it. Travis immediately starts laughing. This time he was in on the joke.  
"What?" asks Ian. He could tell something was up, that he was out of the loop.  
"Touch it," John says.  
Smiling Ian looks to Travis for some clue as to what this is about, but Travis just smiles idly in return.  
"Touch it," John urges more seriously.  
Reaching out warily and laughing from nervousness, Ian moves to put his hand on John's stomach, but as soon as he was within a hair's reach, John sucks it back in and throws his arms out, screaming maniacally. Ian jerks his hand back and leaps in his seat while Travis howls in the background. "What the fuck?" Ian asks laughing.  
John just shrugs.  
"Did Rachel call you fat or something?"  
"No."  
"You're not fat, dude. You're... stout..." Ian struggles with the words, trying to be honest, but not hurt his friend's feelings.  
"Thanks," John replies curtly.  
"What?" Ian asks.

John just drinks his beer, looking away and pretending to be hurt.

"C'mon man, what?"

Pushing his bottom lip out, John continues pouting.

Turning to Travis, Ian asks, "What's up tonight?"

Travis sits up in his seat, suddenly excited, "You mean something's actually going to happen tonight?"

Ian shrugs. "They're havin' another keg tonight," he says, meaning the fraternity.

"Cool."

"We could grab some free beer and then head downtown."

"Let's go to Lowrie's."

Ian and John both make faces.

"C'mon. It's nickel night."

Raising his eyebrows, Ian thinks about it. Nickel night usually proved to be fun. Lowrie's was a dive bar. They catered held a monopoly on, actually the meat market in town. It was a kind of joke, too. When some poor soul who didn't know his way around asked for directions to the nearest "happenin' place," they always got directions to Lowrie's. Still though, on Thursday nights Lowrie's sold everything for a nickel with a five dollar cover charge. The basic object of nickel night from the point of view of the attendant at any rate was to drink enough to make up for the cover, and then drink like a fish to see how good a deal you could get. The place usually packed it in on Thursday nights, especially when school was in session. The drinks were a nickel, but it took a half an hour to get one. Summer was different. If you got a table, or a booth preferably, the crowds of easy lays were tolerable.

"C'mon, we haven't done that in a while." Travis enjoyed it the most of anyone in the pack. Of course, he was single, and though the women at Lowrie's weren't his type, it was fun to flirt and leer, or be leered at. John and Nick never felt quite the same. Ian could sympathize.

"Let's see what we all feel like later," Ian offers in compromise.

"All right," Travis says, leaning back. It was compromise enough to get them to think about it, and really he didn't have his heart set on it anyway.

Looking at his empty can, John holds it up and looks to the other two. They'd finished smoking. "Ready?" he asks.

Travis and Ian reply by chugging the last of theirs and getting up to go. "Head 'em up and move 'em out," Travis calls as the three of them shuffle out of the room. There was a trail to be blazed.

*. Having Tea*

Clayton street shoots through downtown Athens, Georgia like an clogged artery, bringing into central downtown both the oxygen of consumers and the more primordial plasma of wares to be sold, but always doing so in a congested manner. There are bars, clothing stores, a few restaurants, music stores and more bars. Clayton street alone has fourteen bars, and most of them are packed on Thursday, Friday, and Saturday nights.

Thursday nights exist as a kind of strained extension of the weekend, probably due to the fact that liquor and beer cannot be sold on Sundays in the state of Georgia. It has been this way for hundreds of years. In the old black and white pictures of downtown hidden in the Spaghetti Store or Rocky's one can see the kegs lined up in stacks on horse drawn carts before Prohibition.

The Clayton channel is different from the veins and arteries in a body though, because it accomplishes both tasks of push and pull. On any given afternoon, an onlooker can find the push of at least two beer trucks and a UPS van parked along its five block stretch. By five, the business men and women filter out of town, dispersing from the banks and shops, sometimes stopping in for happy hour somewhere before being pushed into the suburbs. There is a moment of calm before the storm then. A quiet afternoon requiem settles in around the dogwoods, oaks and old brick buildings before Clayton adjusts its flow and a sucking sound starts. Around seven, the push of the streets becomes a pull, and the drinkers and smokers and partyers of the evening begin to trickle in. By ten or eleven o' clock, the downpour has begun. All parking in the city vanishes. The lights go down and the fun begins. The bars fill up and spill out onto the street as twenty somethings in flocks of friends, gaggles of smartly dressed girls, and herds of late night gentleman thrillseekers, migrate from favored hang out to favored hang out.

At a little after four o' clock, the June sun is still vibrant, flexing its solar flare biceps and drenching the asphalt with humidity. The Thunderchicken blasts down Clayton like a smuggler's ship through a blockade, as John looks anxiously from one side of the street to the other for a parking spot. Ian is turned halfway in the passenger seat, with a cigarette in his mouth discussing "business" with Travis who is lounging in the center of the backseat, mafia style. The bluesy rock and roll sounds of John's band Simple Symbolism blare through the speakers at Ian and Travis's request.

"We'll chill out tonight and tomorrow night, kick back, have some fun, until we get the information; and then get the shit out this weekend. We'll have it done in two days."

"Well..." Travis considers it for a moment. "Three," he says, skeptically.

"Nah, dude, don't worry about it. We'll get it done."

"Are you getting all twenty in a bunch?" Travis asks. What they needed were passport photos and index cards with information on height and weight and such. Plus, they usually demanded the money up front a price which fluctuated wholly dependently on how well they knew who they were dealing with.

"I'll get most of the stuff by tomorrow, I'm sure."

"Right on."

"Stop discussing your criminal delinquency in my vehicle!" John cries out as he pulls into a spot in front of Flannagan's Irish Pub. They all get out of the car, fetch Travis's amp and hit the sidewalk.

"I gotta' run down to the bank make a deposit. I'll catch up with you guys at the store," Ian says, darting off down the sidewalk in the opposite direction.

Travis and John head up the street toward the Musician's Warehouse. "You know what kind of mixer you're getting?"

"Yeah. I came down here a couple of of days ago to check them out. One of the guys said he'd cut me a good deal."

"Very cool."

"Yeah. I think it's just because we've bought a lot of our shit from them."

"The band?"

"Yeah."

They open the door to the store and amble inside. "You're playin' this weekend, right?" Travis asks.

"At the Watt."

Travis makes his way to the counter while John wanders aimlessly through stacks of amps and percussion equipment over to several racks of guitars. Lazily lifting a blue American Stratocaster from the rack, he sits down on a stool and unconsciously walks through a few blues riffs high on the fret board. A lot of guys came into the store and used the opportunity to test drive a guitar as a way to show off their stuff. John, on the other hand, just liked to hear the sound of a well made guitar. He quietly picks at the strings with his eyes closed and listens to the personality of the instrument the subtle differences between one guitar and another that only those who played the instrument could hear.

Travis stands waiting at the counter until a store clerk approaches him. "Can I help you?"

"You certainly can," replies Travis. "I think this little guy's blown a fuse."

"We'll take a look at it," the clerk offers. He is in his late thirties and sports a beard. Looking back up at Travis over reading glasses he says, "We won't be able to get to it today, though."

"That's fine. Let me just leave my number and you guys can call me whenever. I'm in no rush."

The clerk gets out a receipt form and copies down Travis's name and number and address, and tapes it to the top of the amplifier. "No show this weekend?"



"Nope." Travis thinks about it for a minute and then asks, "Are you just askin' or have you seen me play before?"

"I saw you do a bit at Allen's one weekend I think."

"Oh yeah?"

"Good stuff."

"Thanks. I was just wonderin'. I'm sure every other guy that comes in here is in a band."

"Yeah, that's true. If it's just the fuse, we'll have it ready by tomorrow."

"Very cool," Travis replies nonchalantly.

"Just in case you get a gig." The clerk winks.

Smiling genuinely, Travis replies, "That'd be nice."

The clerk hauls the amp off the counter and began his way to the back of the store. Looking around, Travis spots John dealing with another clerk at the other side of the store, out across a small hill of amplifiers and percussion equipment. They are handling a couple of small plastic boxes with levers and buttons all over them, comparing. Travis makes his way over to them, and catches the last of something the store clerk is saying: "gonna' do well."

John turns to Travis. "All done?"

"Square as Pythagoras."

"Nerd."

"Jackass."

John turns back to the clerk, "Yeah. I'll go with this one," he says politely.

"Let me get one out of the back for ya'," the clerk says, laughing at the pair as he heads back to the storeroom.

Turning to Travis excitedly, John holds the board up again. "New toy!" He puts the floor model back on the shelf, and he and Travis make there way back over to the register to meet the second clerk at the counter.

"How nice," Travis says as they reach the counter. "Now you'll have some incentive to become a decent guitarist."

"You bet," John agrees.

"Provided you ever get to a point where you can carry a melody."

John pauses, looks at Travis angrily. "Do you want me to beat you?"

Travis cocks his hand up by his face and speaks with a lisp, "Mmm, would you please, Honey?"

"Bitch."

The clerk comes from the storeroom with John's mixer. "I think you'll find that this unit is very good for the price good quality of recording and its got a real warm ambience."

John nods as he gets out his checkbook, and starts filling it out. He finishes with a signature that Picasso would have thought was sloppy, hands the check over with his ID, gets his receipt and the box, and heads for the door with Travis in tow. They get back out

in the heat on the sidewalk and start heading in the direction of the car. "Goody!" John bounces up and down.

"You're gonna' have some fun with that," Travis says enviously, though he knew John would let him use it if he was so inclined.

John nods enthusiastically as they make their way down the street where Ian is coming at them at his usual cheetah's pace.

"Can I play?" asks Travis.

Hugging the box to his chest, John just yells, "Mine!"

"Le'me see! Le'me see!" Travis yells in reply, dancing around John.

They get to Ian and stop. "What'd'ya get?" Ian asks John.

Travis jumps in first though, "He got a new toy and he won't let me play!"

"You always break all my stuff!"

Suddenly twenty again, Travis replies, "I do not."

"I know."

"Let's go get a couple of beers and soak up some of this sun," Ian suggests, stretching his arms and taking a deep breath.

"Yeah, sounds good," Travis agrees.

John, however, still clutching the mixer box just looks down at it and whines, "I wanna' play with my new toy."

"Ah c'mon," Ian says, waving his hand in dismissal. "I'll buy you yours."

John smiles brightly, but Travis just says, "What about me?"

"You can buy me a beer if you want," Ian replies.

"Where do you wanna' go?" asks Travis.

Pointing down the street, "Flannagan's? They got a patio."

"Sounds good to me," offers Travis.

Flanagan's Irish Pub – an old Athen's fire station – doesn't look like it sounds. Outside, green wood paneling and old clay brick drape the front, the name of the pub running along the top in carved gold letters. The inside resembles a church more closely than an Irish pub, square and long, the altar of the bar running along the length of the east side of the room, opposite draped windows facing Jackson Street. There are hardwood floors, hardwood walls and polished Mahogany tables that sit placidly around the room and on the balcony in the back. In one corner, towards the front of the bar, a video blackjack game sits and blinks yellow and orange.

Travis met the owner of Flannagan's once – a man named Kelly Flynn – curious to find out why a man of at least sixty years was hanging out at a well established frat crashpad. To his surprise, Flannagan's Irish Pub was actually an Irish pub, in so much as it was owned by an Irishman. Kelly was from east Ireland, near a town called Cork. Why he'd built a bar in Athens, Georgia, Travis never managed to get out of Kelly. The old man just talked about how he loved to see the young people come out and have fun – that it was never like that in his day, that he wished it had been.

Walking down to the pub, Travis remarks, "And if we accidentally get plastered,

it'll be that much easier to walk to the car since its right in front!"

"Actually," John announces, still clutching his precious mixing board, "let me put this in the trunk."

"We'll meet you inside," Ian calls, opening the door to the bar for Travis.

It is early afternoon, but the interior of the bar seems drastically dark by comparison. Most of the sunlight doesn't filter in through the tinted windows that run the length of the west wall. The mahogany wood and buzzing neon signs seem to suck up any ambient light for themselves. The cool air makes the room darker still, the moisture of the shadows feeling like a pleasant crypt. Travis and Ian both take a moment to let their eyes adjust to the change as the bouncer approaches them. Most of the bars in town that had just opened for the day and wouldn't normally check identification, but Flannagan's was one of the more strict bars that always carded. A young man approaches Travis and Ian from one of the tables. He'd been sitting reading a paper. Ian and Travis present their IDs. The young man takes Ian's first, giving it only a perfunctory glance. He takes Travis's and holds on to it for a moment, searching for the birthdate. The license claimed to be from Montana that always threw people off. Travis always felt that fact was to his advantage, and in his own mind, it was where he was from anyway or where he was going. Handing the license back to Travis, the young man heads back to his newspaper.

As always, even though it was midafternoon, there is something quietly mischevious about their entrance that brings smartass smiles to their faces. Vaquero and Pirata had outfoxed the Man again.

"Ya' see, that's the thing," Ian remarks, keeping his voice low. "It's all about presentation how you show the God damned thing."

"Yep." Travis is in complete agreement.

"We should give lessons in confidence when we give these things to people." Ian lowers his voice and lets it drop as the bartender approaches them.

"What can I get you fella's?" he asks.

"A Guinness."

"Make that two," adds Travis.

Looking back to the door for a second, Ian looks back to the bartender and says, "Three actually."

"Right," the bartender replies, taking off to get them.

Turning their backs to the bar, Ian and Travis sit down and examine the emptiness of the room. There was no one but the pair and the bouncer a pair of king's and a joker... or a pair of joker's and a king. Taking in a deep breath, Ian says, "I love these... *calm* little moments before the storm." Looking around he thinks out loud, "I should really do some shoots in the afternoon here. The light's almost tangible."

John approaches from outside, a silhouette against the wide glass windows at the front of the bar. "The parking meter witch tried to bite me."

Ian and Travis nod in knowing agreement. "I hate it when that happens," Ian replies, shaking his head.

“She caught me putting more coins in the meter.”  
 “Did she make you move the car?” Travis asked.  
 “No. She gave me a ticket.”  
 “What’d you do with the car,” Ian asks.  
 “I told that if she didn’t ticket me, I’d move the car. But if she did ticket me then I was just going to leave it there.”  
 Ian laughed. He could already figure the result. “What’s she say?”  
 “Suit yourself,” John said, imitating the woman with a high pitched whine.  
 “And she didn’t even tell you to move the car?” Travis asks.  
 “No.”  
 “See, *I* would have ticketed you and *then* told you to move the car,” Travis explains.  
 “Would you really?” John asks, sounding upset.  
 “Yes.”  
 “You’re an asshole.”  
 Travis weighs the insult in his head. “Yeah. But I’m *not* a ticket bitch.”  
 “True.”  
 “That’s what a step above primordial goo?” Ian asks.  
 “And John,” Travis adds, jerking his head toward his companion who just grins in reply.  
 The bartender comes back with the first two beers and looks to John for his order. Ian interrupts though, “I’ve got him.” Nodding, the bartender moves to go get the third Guinness.  
 “You don’t have to do that, man. I was just kidding about not coming.”  
 “No, don’t worry about it. You’re playin’ this weekend, aren’t you?”  
 “Yeah.”  
 “Consider it a celebratory drink then.”  
 John smiles, genuinely.  
 “Who’re you guys opening for?” Travis asks.  
 “Homespun Noose.”  
 “I think I saw them play at the Shoebox a while back,” Travis says.  
 “Yeah, you did. I was there too,” Ian adds.  
 “I was at that show too, dummy,” John adds.  
 Travis shrugs.  
 “They’re not bad,” Ian says.  
 John keeps his opinion to himself. He was a musician, not a critic.  
 The bartender returns with the third beer, Ian and Travis pay him, and all three of the boys stroll out onto the patio, squinting in the late afternoon sunlight. “Do you think you’ll get a good crowd?” Ian asks.  
 “First weekend of summer I’d expect a few people.”  
 “Forty or fifty,” Travis offers.  
 They all sit down around a black wrought iron table near the sidewalk. John lights

a cigarette and thinks about it out loud. "Homespun has a pretty good following. Some of their people'll show up halfway through our set... and we're starting to get a bit of a crowd. Forty's about right."

"That's good for summer."

Peering down Clayton street, John makes a dismissive face. The numbers weren't what really mattered to him but it mattered if the band wanted to keep playing big venues.

"I can't wait," says Ian, sitting back, putting his feet up on another chair. "I missed your last two shows - couldn't make the one in Atlanta."

"That was a blast," Travis notes.

"Yeah?" John asks.

"Dude, that whole thing with the cape and " he turns to Ian, "They sang the theme song to Greatest American Hero acapello."

"What, the old TV show?"

"Yeah, remember?"

"That'd be pretty funny."

John laughs. He wasn't sure how he'd been talked into that.

"It was hilarious," Travis says.

John smiles. "That was great of all you guys to come down and see us. It was a Tuesday, wasn't it?"

"Wouldn't have missed it for the world," Travis replies. "Besides now I got dibs on that old 'I remember when' phrase for when you guys are famous."

John just smiles modestly. "I was fucking nervous at that show."

"Oh, you could tell," Travis agrees, "but the energy was just that much better for it. You guys were solid."

"Are guys gonna' start playing Atlanta more?" Ian asks.

"Lee and Eric really want to. I think we should wait until we've headlined at the Watt."

"That'd make sense."

Gradually the light from the afternoon turns a darker shade of blue, the sun reflecting off the west faces of the taller downtown buildings. Further up Jackson Street, running perpendicular to Clayton, the sounds of the sirens of the downtown fire department wail and fade off in an unknown direction. The group suddenly notices a tall, lean figure across the street wearing a gas station attendant's jacket and waving frantically at them. They all laugh and hold up their beers as Nick the Fat Kid and a very attractive, young woman cross the street.

"Look who I found lurking around," she says of Nick to the crowd.

A chorus of hellos and how are yous emanate from the gathering, before Ian stands up and says, "You must be Victoria," and extends his hand.

Taking it, and smiling pleasantly, she replies, "Just Vicky."

"Why don't you guys join us?"

Putting her hands together and bending at the knees a little, Victoria replies, "Oh,

I would *love* to, but I can't. I've *got* to meet my roommate for dinner."

"I'll join ya'," Nick declares, the relief in his voice not entirely undetectable to the boys.

Reaching across the patio railing, Victoria rubs Travis's shaved head. "I haven't seen you in a while, Little One."

Putting his hands up helplessly, Travis just smiles and shrugs.

"I know," Vicky replies. "I've been so busy lately. But we have to have dinner sometime soon."

"Sure. Gi'me a call."

"Okay." Turning to Nick, she takes his collar in her hands and leans in, "I'll call *you* later."

Smiling nervously Nick replies, "Okay."

"Bye guys. It was nice meeting you, Ian," she finishes and then sets off back across the street.

The group all sit and watch her strut for a moment, until John speaks up, under his breath, "I would grudge fuck her."

Everyone laughs as Nick puts his bag of art supplies on an empty chair. "Le'me get a beer. I'll be right back," he says before heading inside.

"What's with him?" asks Ian.

Travis smiles. "Don't ask."

"What, man? She's hot."

"Oh yeah she is. Don't get me wrong, but she can be a little..." Travis left the description to Ian's imagination.

"You didn't date her did you?" Ian asks.

Sitting up and setting his beer on the table, Travis replies, "I did not have that priveledge, no."

"You guys seem..." Ian squints and looks at Travis to fill in the blank.

"Just friends."

"I would cause her pain," John adds.

Nodding, Ian replies, "I kinda' got that."

"It's weird. She can talk the talk, hang out and all, but she still comes across as a little self centered not conceited or anything. But it tends to be her way or the highway."

"So why's he with her?" Ian asks, meaning Nick.

Travis just gives Ian a knowing "wouldn't you?" look with his eyebrows.

Nodding, his lips still tightened, John adds, "She'd be screaming like a dolphin in a tuna net."

"She tends to be a little overdramatic when it comes to animal rights and all that, too" Travis adds.

"Tree hugger?" Ian asks.

"God damn hippies," growls John.

Nick comes through the door. “*Man* am I glad to see *you* guys.”

“You just run into her?” asks Travis, sadistically enjoying his friend’s discomfort.

“About thirty minutes ago. Blah blah blah! She never shuts *up*.”

“Are you guys goin’ out?” Ian asks.

“Not really...” Nick says, knowing that Vicky thinks differently.

“You just slept with her?”

Nick sips his beer. “We got really wasted last night, and it was cool.” After a quick sigh, Nick continues, “She was in a really good mood or somethin’. I took her home totally was just gonna’ drop her off...” The rest of the story seems too obvious to explain to three men in their twenties.

“You accidentally fell into her vagina,” John finishes for him.

Everyone laughs and Nick shrugs exaggeratedly.

Laughing, Travis adds, “Don’t worry, I’ve had that happen.” Leaning over, he pats Nick on the shoulder sympathetically.

“That happens to you about every two weeks!” Nick retorts.

Travis shakes his head and mumbles, more to himself than anyone else, “Lately.”

“Speaking of I meant to ask you if you ever called what’s her face. Weren’t you suppose to be out with her last night?”

Travis doesn’t care to have to focus suddenly turned to him. He looks across the street to where the meter maid is working now. Looking back to Nick, he just stares compacently.

“Did you call her?”

Rolling his eyes, Travis waits for a subject change.

“Dude,” Ian adds, “what? The red head? What’s the matter with her?”

“I don’t know.”

“When was the last time you talked to her?” Nick asks.

“Bout a week ago.”

“Dude, that’s not cool,” remarks Ian.

“I don’t know. I guess I just don’t feel like calling somebody up to tell them I don’t like them. So sue me.”

“That’s no reason to blow ‘em off,” says Nick.

“They do it to us all the time,” Travis said, trying to defend himself an impossible task in his *own* mind.

Nick rolls his eyes. “*That’s* true.”

“And you’re no saint either, Fatty.”

“You are soooo fat...” Nick starts.

Ian put his hands up to his face and declares in a high pitched, feminine voice, “Oh! Dinner? I uh I have to wash my fish.”

Pointing, Nick laughs and adds, “I have to air out my terrarium.”

In his perverted uncle’s voice, John just says, “Dames.”

“Can’t live with ‘em, can’t kill ‘em,” Travis laments.

“Where’s Lisa been,?” Nick asks Ian.  
 “She went home for a couple of weeks.”  
 “Yeah?”  
 “Yeah. It’s been nice though.” Ian flaps his elbows a bit. “Got some space.”  
 “You weren’t too happy a couple of weeks ago.” Travis says leaning heavily on the table.  
 “No, she was grating on my nerves pretty bad.”  
 “You too busy?” Travis asks.  
 “Well, that, and she always gets kind of pissy around exam time. But we’re fine now.”  
 “Fine until she tells you about me and her gettin’ it on the other night,” Nick jokes.  
 Ian looks to Nick, a dead pan expression on his face, as though he wouldn’t care even if the story *were* true.  
 Still sitting in deep concentration with his lips tightened, John says, “I would hurt that girl too.”  
 “What’s up with you?” Nick asks, playfully hitting John’s shoulder.  
 “I’m a very angry man,” John says with a spooky, calm too calm tone.  
 Turning to Travis, Nick says, “You shoulda’ *heard* him last night while we were watching TV. It was hilarious.”  
 John smiles.  
 “What did you say about that one chick? The Noxema girl?”  
 Putting on his angry face again, John closes one eye and repeats, “I’d put my dick in her eye.”  
 There is a chorus of moans and laughs around the table. Travis sits back, “I swear to God, if women knew what we were joking about, they would never stop hitting us.”  
 “I tell Rachel what I really think,” John argues.  
 “I don’t see how she puts up with you,” Ian says.  
 “If she doesn’t, I beat her.”  
 This time Nick intones the perverted uncle voice. “Get me my bottle, Bitch.”  
 Sitting around, they all laugh as the sun falls out of the sky shedding the weight of colors for night. The banal frustrations of relationships or lack thereof escape freely through the jokes and beer until it is time to move on; until the calm before the storm dissipates. Travis looks out across Clayton Street while the others talk and sees a vacant field in its place. There is a chance for contentment there in the calm; before everything was different soon, slightly heavier after another night of debauchery and poor drunken judgment. He quietly wishes to himself that the world might again be a surprise or seem a dream.



*. Crowded Together at One Corner*

Finishing a few phrases in a beat up composition notebook, Travis shuts it and looks toward the entrance of the Engine Room where Nick and John are making there way toward him. "ER" as the boys call it, is about like it sounds. There is an emergency room sign hanging on the back wall for no good reason. The whole place is lit with the bare minimum illumination required for human vision and is filled to the brim with knicknacks and show posters of most of the bands from Athens everything from R.E.M. and the B's to a few flyers from John's band and Travis's shows. Despite the atmosphere of the place black walls built around a barroom brawl waiting to happen the conversation tends toward art and the meaning of life. Generally speaking, the Engine Room is simply a place that will surprise you.

Nick stops off at the bar to order a drink, while John walks up to Travis's table and sets his hand on it. "Mr. Fleeting," he says mysteriously.

"Mr. Michaels," Travis retorts.

"We have received several disturbing reports concerning your behavior as of late." John is looking around the bar suspiciously.

Travis checks the bar as well, but nervously. "Are you from the commission?"

John nods.

"Look, you tell them that I was drunk four out of seven nights last week. I mean, what do they want from me?"

"I'm afraid I'm going to have to..." and John leans in for emphasis, "buy you a drink."

"No."

John just wrinkles his nose and nods his head. "I'm afraid so."

"You bastard!" Travis hollers as John walks away, smiling after the words leave him. He was in that mood his own voice didn't bother him. A few people in the bar look to see what the commotion is, but Travis just smiles at them too, and their glances go back to their tables and companions.

Trading places with Nick at the bar, John steps up to order as Nick moves to the booth with a Jack and Coke in hand. "Hey. Been here long?" he asks Travis.

"Maybe an hour. You guys should help me finish my pitcher first."

"Nope. Liquor only. Doctor's orders."

"Oh really?"

Patting his side, Nick replies, "It's my liver."

"What? You have one?"

"Naw. I'm trying to lose a few pounds. I figure I can rot my liver from the inside

out.”

“You *do* need to lose some weight. My God!”

“See?” Nick says, talking to an imaginary presence next to him, “You left yourself wide open for that.”

“Well,” Travis replies, “A porous liver is a light liver is what I always say.”

“Though not a useful liver,” Nick adds.

“Useful? What’s useful? Bah. What’s a liver good for anyway?”

Nick holds up his hands in ignorance, shrugging innocently.

“Nothin’,” Travis finishes.

“Not’in’,” Nick adds in a Brooklyn parody baritone.

Approaching the table, John sets a pint glass of beer in front of Travis and sits down next to Nick with his own. “What?” he asks, hearing the last of the conversation.

“You could settle this, John,” Travis says. “You don’t need a liver, do you?”

“I haven’t had one for three years,” John replies with a codgerly nod.

Nodding methodically, Nick pretends to think before he asks, “Did you have it removed?”

“No. I ate MacDonald’s for three days straight and shit it out.”

Travis almost loses his mouthful of beer through his nose as the other two laugh hard. Choking his drink down, Travis coughs a few times and manages to get out, “Man.”

Nick patiently stretches his long arm across the table, and points to Travis’ cigarettes. “Breathe those,” and then he points to the beer, “drink that. Don’t try it the other way.”

“I’ll work on that.” Nodding quickly, Travis adds, “You know there must be a better way of losing weight.” Nick and John are in agreement. “You should try standing up every once in a while. That might help.”

“Woah.” Nick put his hands up. “Slow down there. Don’t talk crazy.”

“You gotta’ work your way up to that kind of stuff,” offers John.

“Well, when you’re the Fat Kid, you do.”

“You are so fat, every time you turn around it’s your birthday.”

Travis laughs, “I haven’t heard that one.”

“Vicky told me that one last night, believe it or not.”

“Man, don’t *ever* tell her she’s fat.”

Nick shakes his head frantically.

“Can’t take it?” John asks.

“No,” Nick and Travis both answer in emphatic unison. “She’ll *try* to take it, you know,” Travis explains, “try to sit there and be cool about it, but she’ll just kind of quiver.”

Nick demonstrates in his best Vicky voice, “Oh *my* God. They think I’m *fat*.”

“What were you working on there?” John asks, gesturing to Travis’ notebook.

“Some lyrics,” Travis replies.

“Any good?”

In good modesty, Travis shrugs. “You wanna’ hear ‘em?”

“Sure.”

Opening the notebook, Travis says, “They go along with that riff I was fooling around with ‘bout a week ago. That D sharp...” Travis hums the riff, “You remember?”

John nods.

“I’m not gonna’ sing ‘em though.”

John and Nick both nod, and Travis, taking a breath, begins:

“Where these lies burden me  
like dim halos above my head  
only human, I am blinded by the  
riding to a promised land  
I have lost my steed and bed  
and though my hands are too dirty  
to enter into it  
they are better tools  
for the peace I seek  
which slips from me  
seeping through rock and stone  
below the freedom in the flight  
over flat and treaded land  
with wings I’ve not yet made”

Nick and John both nod quietly when Travis finishes.

“I like that ‘dirty hands’ part,” Nick says. “Nice image.”

Travis thanks him with quick bob of his head.

“What inspired that?” John asks.

Travis shrugs and looks around the bar for some particular piece of the feeling it was more epervescent than that though, and more internal.

Ian comes up to the table with a beer in hand. “Hey, jerkies,” he said with a Brooklyn accent.

Everyone at the table salutes in their own fashion as Ian sat down next to Travis to a chorus of fatties and assholes. “I got your message. You guys didn’t feel like doin’ the house thing?”

“I was just in the mood to see Daphne and Kristin. I couldn’t convince them to come with us to the house.” Looking at his notebook, Travis adds, “I needed to get some stuff done, too.”

“Are they coming here?”

“No. They’re primping and going to dinner. We’re suppose to meet them at Mean Mike’s in thirty minutes or so.”

“An hour,” Nick corrects.

“Well... yeah, probably,” Travis concedes. The girls would be a little late.

"Anybody up for darts?" Nick asks.

"I gotta' concentrate on this," Travis said, pointing at his half full pitcher.

"Nah," says Ian.

"I'm game," John says, getting his beer and standing up. Nick slides out of the booth and they both walk off to the back end of the bar. Ian switches from his seat to the other side of the booth to face Travis.

"What were you reading there when I came in?" Ian asks.

"Some lyrics. You wanna' read 'em?"

"Yeah, sure."

Travis opens the notebook to the spot and passes it over to Ian. Sitting, quietly sipping his beer, Travis just watches the bartender while Ian concentrates. His friend's face is unusually serious as he reads and nods at this or that point. Ian had a way of unconsciously pointing at things on a page that caught his attention, and Travis always liked it when he managed to get that reaction.

"Yeah," Ian says, looking up.

"Groovy?" Travis asks.

"Well, no. I wouldn't say it was groovy. But I know what you're saying."

"Right on." Travis takes the notebook and slides it under his helmet on the bench.

"Bring Mary Jane out tonight?" Ian asks.

Travis nods. "This weather is *perfect* at night."

"Man. I wanna' get a bike."

"You should get one."

"I should at least get my license." Thinking about it for a second, he asks, "Would you let me borrow her for the test?"

"Well, you have to go up to Gainesville or Toccoa to take the road test, so I'd have to drive up there with you. But yeah, other than that that'd be cool."

"Cool. I should do that this summer, while I've got some time."

"You'd have to make a new fake," Travis says, joking.

"Oh no, I put motorcycle class on mine already."

"Really?"

"Hell, I put everything on there. I can drive an eighteen wheeler."

Travis laughs. "I didn't even think about that when we were doin' 'em."

"Ju got to tink about deez tings main," says Ian in a Mexican accent.

Travis just nods.

"That bartender is killer," Ian starts after a moment, leaning into the booth in confidentiality.

"She's *fine*."

"I like the way she doesn't take shit from anybody. She looks tough, you know what I mean?"

"She made me say please for my pitcher."

"You should ask her out."

"No. You can't ask bartenders out. Bad news."

"Why?"

"Oh man, I mean, that's gotta' be a rule or somethin'. Think about it: you know how many people probably hit on her in a night? You'd have to be a helluva guy to even get her attention. Besides, I think she has a boyfriend."

"Really?"

"I've seen her with a guy."

"So?"

"They were doin' couple stuff you know, ogling over each other."

"Oh." Ian sips his beer. "Still though. Be good for practice."

"Ah, but not the ego, Iansan," Travis said with a polite bow.

"I gotta' get me some," Ian says, absentmindedly.

"Lisa not cutting it?"

Ian thinks seriously on the matter for a moment and then sighs. "No. No, things are fine. Dude, I just want a little *action*, you know?"

"You wanna' flirt a little bit," Travis offers.

"Not flirt."

"You wanna' carouse."

"Yeah."

Travis looks around the room for potential targets. "Nobody's stoppin' ya' buddy."

Ian looks around the room. "Yeah," he says disappointedly, "yeah they are," and then laughs.

"What? Go hit on the bartender. You said you dug her."

"Nah. Not my type."

"What about that one?" Travis asks casually, tilting his head backwards.

Ian leans over, not enough to be noticed. "The one by the pool table?" he asks out of the side of his mouth.

"Yeah."

Ian leans back into the booth and makes an appraising nod. "She's a cutey."

"Go tell her," Travis says jerking his head.

"No that's too much work, dude."

"You *said* you wanted some hustle," Travis replies exasperated.

"Yeah, but I wanna' be at a party, you know. I don't wanna pull the old you know," Ian raises one eyebrow and smiles out of the other side of his face. "Hey there," he pantomimes, licking his teeth.

"Okay," Travis replies, "if you're gonna' do it that way, I definitely advise against hitting on *anything* with two legs."

"You know what I mean," Ian says. "Just some casual conversation with the feminine perspective."

"Well, yeah. I understand *that*. But that's not *carousing*."

"It's not?"

“No. That’s being a geek.”  
 “Oh.” Ian nods, reassured. “And you...”  
 “Also fall into that category.” Travis sips directly from his pitcher and offers a toast. “Here’s to being a geek.”  
 “Cheers.”  
 John and Nick return, sitting on either side of the booth.  
 “What’s the occasion?” Nick asks regarding the toast.  
 “Ian finally had sex!” Travis offers.  
 Nick guffaws.  
 “That was pointless,” John huffs.  
 “Trounce you?” Ian asks.  
 “Beat the crap out of me. I only marked out two before he was done.”  
 Nick just sits, smiling smugly.  
 “He’s good,” Travis agrees.  
 “I’ve had practice,” Nick says, being modest.  
 “Your bosses?” Travis asks.  
 Nick nods. “Greg is fucking unbelievable.”  
 “That figures. It’s not like they have anything better to do at that gallery.”  
 Laughing knowingly, Nick agrees.  
 “Did you not have to go in today?” Travis asks.  
 “No. The gallery had to cut back on hours. I only have to go in a few days a week.”  
 “What, every other day or somethin’?”  
 “Whenever I feel like it really,” Nick offers, chuckling.  
 Everyone at the table scoffs.  
 “They’re gonna’ let me do a mural on one of the workshop walls.”  
 “Badass,” chirps Ian.  
 “I did a couple of sketches. It’s gonna’ be ‘Prometheus Stealing Time and Tools, Being Pursued Three Lazy Muses Who Fear Employment’.”  
 “That sounds good,” Travis remarks.  
 “That’s funny man,” agrees John.  
 “I’m actually gonna’ do it around the clock on the wall, so Prometheus will have the wall clock up under his arm.”  
 “Cool,” says John.  
 “It’s gonna’ *take* me a month.”  
 “How’s that other painting of yours coming along?” asks Ian.  
 “Which one?”  
 “Uh... the black and white one... Jacob...”  
 “‘Jacob Wrestling the Angel?’”  
 Snapping his fingers, Ian says, “Yeah, that’s the one.”  
 Nick makes a face though. “I don’t know about that one.”

"Dude, I totally loved what you had going on with that the last time I saw it."

"Yeah. I don't know what the hell to do with the background though."

"Time to battle the muses," Travis says, nodding to John.

"We haven't done that in a while," Nick replies.

"That shit's crazy," Ian says, "the war paint and everything. I should photograph you guys doin' that some time."

Drawing out his words to sound like a stoned hippie, Travis says, "Add to the vibe, maaannn."

"It's usually pretty spur of the moment, though," Nick says.

"Yeah. We should all get a place together next year," Ian agrees.

"That'd be cool."

"Hey guys," Travis jumps in, acting overly excited, "If we owned our own bar, we could, like, hang out and drink together *forever!*"

Nick raises his hands over his head and yells drunkenly, "We're goin' to Florida!"

*. You Should Learn Not to Make Personal Remarks; it's Very Rude*

The walk up Washington Street, to Lumpkin, and left again on to Clayton was a short three block stroll. Ian, John, Nick and Travis pair off and talk among themselves, passing and waving to acquaintances on the sidewalk, and smoking on their way to meet the girls. "I haven't seen Daphne in a while," Nick says as they all walk through a bank parking lot to cut over to Clayton.

"I saw her last weekend. She was out with that Vic guy," Travis replies.

"There's something about him I don't like."

"Yeah. Tell me about it."

"What is it?" Nick asks seriously.

"I don't know. He's a little flashy, don't ya' think."

"I guess."

"Like, whenever Dizzy's around, he acts real friendly. But then, a couple of weeks ago I ran into him at a barbeque a friend of mine was having, and he just blew me off. Didn't talk to me for two minutes." Travis takes a drag off his cigarette and thinks about it.

"You know, Daphne hasn't been real receptive to my presence lately," Nick says.

"Well, you guys weren't even *talkin'* there for a while," Travis offers.

"Yeah but we worked all that out back in January."

Coming to a short wall along the parking lot's edge, Travis jumps up on it and starts balancing his way alongside Nick. "Maybe if you lost a little weight, she would like you."

"Shut up, Fatty."

"You're so fat, you're blood type is Ragu."

Nick starts laughing, and Ian and John stop to turn around. "What?" asks John curiously.

"He said, 'You're so fat you're blood type is Ragu'," Nick explains.

John and Ian both laugh before moving on up the street.

"Mmm..." Nick says, pulling the corners of his lips down like an angry samurai.

"Me must get money from a tee em. Much money for good drink."

"Hai," Travis replies with a bow and jumps down off the wall.

The group make their way through the crowd in front of the Georgia Theater, looking at all the people waiting on show tickets as they go. Nick leans over conspiratorially to Travis as they made their way. "Over at the ticket booth. She's buying one."

"What?" Travis asks and looks. There was a particularly unattractive girl at the booth window.

"*Yours*," Nick said casually out of the side of his mouth.



"Sonuvabitch," Travis curses under his breath. "I'll get you for that."

As they pass out of the crowd into the intersection of Lumpkin and Clayton, Travis and Nick raise their voices again. "Oh my God! She was *awful*." Nick hits Travis playfully in the shoulder. "Did you see the hair bagel on that one."

Travis doesn't reply. Retaliation would have to wait. When someone called "yours" everyone was alert and paying attention to the game. You couldn't get someone then unless you were good. You had to wait until no one was paying attention again.

The basic premise of the game was simple, and had evolved out of a game that Nick and Travis had originally developed their freshman year. The original game had been invented for the purpose of commenting on the attractiveness of a woman while in close proximity. The player would spot a target, turn to the other and inquire, "What time is it?" The second player would ask, "Where?" and the first player would proceed to name a city that was North, South, East or West of the players' location. Once the "target" was spotted by the second player through inference concerning direction a time between one and ten o'clock was given as a rating.

By the time they'd gotten adept at the game, Travis and Nick had invented twenty or so sayings to follow the time as coded comments, like "I think you're shoelaces are untied," which was meant to be interpreted as "She's too young/illegal for you." One summer afternoon at an amusement park, Nick and Travis had been debating over a certain young woman's attractiveness when Travis said, "She's your girlfriend."

"What's that supposed to mean?" asked Nick, thinking he had forgotten one of their secret phrases.

"She's ugly and you can have her," Travis replied.

It stuck. Of course, both games evolved over time. Once John, Ian, Dizzy and Kristin were introduced to the "Watch" game, a rule of averages had to be developed. If more than two people were present and playing, each would say what time he/she thought it was, and an average would be calculated. "Yours" developed some obscure rules over the years, too. A player could never lie to get another player to look at the target could never claim that the target was pretty/handsome if they weren't. And the peculiar rule of three came into being, meaning that if you were given a boyfriend/girlfriend three times in a row in three different locales, they were yours for life.

It was all terribly shallow. Nick and Travis knew it, recognized the fact. But really, they prided themselves on being shallow. It gave them more time if they didn't have to worry about trivial matters like manners, politeness, or being at all conscious of their own appearances. Not that the boys were homely. Nick and Ian were extremely handsome by all relative standards. John and Travis were right behind them. But none of the four ever wanted to give a damn about it.

When they got to the corner opposite of the Georgia Theater, Nick said, "I'll meet you guys up there. I gotta' get moony."

Ian and John wave and keep walking up the street, discussing John's upcoming show. Ian had decided to photograph it. Travis follows Nick into the ATM booth for no reason at

all.

"Did you call Victoria back?" Travis asks. He'd left a message on Nick's door that afternoon before leaving for the Engine Room.

"Yeah," Nick replies, punching buttons on the ATM. "I told her I was gonna' hang out with you guys."

Travis smiles. "What'd she say?"

Turning around for a moment while the machine processes his transaction, Nick imitates Vicky in a huff. "Fine. *I* didn't want to go out tonight *anyway*."

"*Sure* she didn't," Travis replies sarcastically.

Nick got his money, his receipt and card out of the machine. "Have you seen Cordova in a while?"

"Jason?" Travis asks. "Yeah. I run into him on North Campus now and then."

The pair headed out of the ATM booth. "Vicky keeps talkin' about him."

"To you?"

"Yeah. She's just trying to get sympathy."

"You know, the more I talk to him, the less I sympathize with her."

"Really?"

"He's a pretty genuine guy, and she made him out to be such an asshole. I think maybe she was making up some of the things she said happened between them."

"Maybe."

"Did you ever hang out with them when they were dating?"

"No."

"Damn. If he even *talked* to another girl, she'd get all upset. Even if he wasn't flirting with them or anything. I don't know how he put up with it."

"Well, he *is* a player."

"He's a flirt. But *I* certainly can't hold that against him."

"Nope."

"That's why I always liked Meryl," Travis continues as he opens the door to Mean Mike's for Nick. They both enter and nod to the bouncer. Being regulars, they never got carded anymore. Raising his voice over the crowd and the music, Travis continues, "She always took it as an indirect compliment if a girl flirted with me."

Looking around for John and Ian, Dizzy and Kristin, Nick replies, "Yeah. Karen was always the same way."

"Meryl always knew I was going home with her," Travis says.

Making their way through the crowd to the back stairs, Nick stops to shake hands with a curly haired fellow. "What's goin' on?" he asks.

"Not much," the fellow replies. "Thursday night, you know?"

"Yeah, yeah," Nick agrees moving on through the crowd.

When they got a few feet away, Travis inquires, "Somebody you know?"

"Apparently," Nick says, chuckling a bit.

Travis laughs to himself. In a town of thirty thousand kids, people were bound to

forget names and faces. It just happened in the peculiar currents and divergences of friendships and acquaintances.

The pair make their way upstairs, and spot Dizzy sitting at the top near the railing in a light blue dress. She is talking to a guy but stops when she sees Nick and Travis. She gets up to hug them both. Leaning in to Travis, she says in a low tone with a laugh, "Save me."

Travis smiles and looks at her, keeping one arm around her waist protectively. "Well, where are Ian and John and Kristin?"

"Over there," she says, pointing to a booth a few tables away.

"Well, come and sit with us then, baby," Travis replies.

"Okay. Let me get my drink."

Leaning over, she takes her whiskey sour from a stool next to where she had been sitting. "Allen," she says to the young man she'd been with, "I'm gonna' go talk to my friends for a bit. I'll see you later, though."

Allen smiles seductively and points his finger at her, cocked like a gun with a wink.

Daphne and Travis walk over to the booth where the others are at, both trying to keep from laughing, and Travis pulls up two chairs for them. Nick and John are discussing some facet of sex in the perverted uncle's voice. Ian is talking at a fast pace about traveling, while Kristin just staring at him, mesmerized. They are both madly in love with each other, but neither in a position to do anything about it. Both of them benefit/suffer from qualities that made them faithful to their lovers.

"Did you see that?" Dizzy asks Travis as they sit down.

"That was pretty fuckin' cheesy," Travis replies.

"I can't believe that," Dizzy says, covering her mouth as she laughs out loud.

When they sit down, Travis asks Nick, "I'm going to the bar do you want anything?"

"Yeah. Get me a Jack and Coke, will ya?"

"You want anything?" Travis asks Daphne.

She holds her half full drink up in response. Seeing that everyone else is adequately full, Travis sets out for the bar. There are two, one upstairs and one downstairs. Spotting a space at the bar downstairs from the top of the landing, though, Travis heads down. Besides, Phil worked the downstairs bar and made a better gin and tonic than anyone else or anywhere in town for that matter. Reaching the bar, Travis pulls out a twenty and fits into the space at the bar like a puzzle piece, snug between a pair of talkative girls and a young couple. Putting his bill out where the bartenders can see it, he waits while listening in to the surrounding conversation.

"Oh my God," the girl to Travis's left says. "I *can't* believe that."

"Seriously, though," the girl's friend responds, "isn't that *so* disgusting?"

"Oh my God. I *can't* believe that she is such a slut."

Rolling his eyes, Travis shifts to his other leg, leaning imperceptibly towards the couple.

"It's not a bad deal," the boyfriend says.

"I think you should go with the other one, though," his girlfriend replies.

"Really?" he asks.

"Definitely. You'll probably get a lot further in the long run."

Travis isn't paying attention when Phil walks up to him. *The long run of what?*

"Hey!" Phil calls across the bar. "What'd'ya' want?"

"Sorry, man," Travis hollers, shaking himself out of a daze and turning to look at Phil. "How 'bout a gin and tonic and a Jack and Coke?"

Phil heads off to get them, hollering over his shoulder, "Six dollars!" Travis already knows this of course. One of the other benefits of being a regular was getting a discount for drinking too much. *What a shame*, Travis thinks, not sure if he's sarcastic or not. For some reason he is always paranoid he might fall out of good standing with the bar for some obscure reason. Believing himself to have a forgettable face, it is always a relief to hear the discount price.

Phil comes back in no time at all with the drinks. Travis gives him the twenty and waits for his change. When Phil returns, he asks, "Been good?"

"Yeah," replies Travis, slipping a one into a green vase on the bar. Phil thanks him with a discrete nod as Travis finishes, "Summer's my favorite time of year."

"Good to hear it," Phil says, before moving on down the bar.

Travis slips his change into his pocket, bumps the girl on his left, excuses himself, and gets his drinks. Heading back to the stairs, Travis turns to look at the two girls he'd stood next to. They were both attractive though overdressed for a place like Mean Mike's. He could never stand it when anyone talked like the two had sincerely. Daphne and Kristin did it all the time as a joke, and it was hilarious, but it was a joke. Travis wondered how anyone could say anything real talking like that: in a high pitched falsetto, a million miles a minute. He tried to imagine one of them talking about their dead father. "And, oh my God. He was, like, all *dead* and stuff. I was *so* distraught." Probably, he thought, they didn't talk like that when they were trying to be serious. How could you?

On his way up the stairs, Travis passes Allen Daphne's new friend and smiles to him. The guy looks off like he doesn't see Travis. Smug, Travis laughs it off, but it's rude nonetheless, so he hurries back to his friends. Coming back to the table again, Travis sets Nick's drink down and sits down in his chair.

"What's the damage?" Nick asks.

"Ah," Travis replies, dismissing the request. "You just go next time."

Turning to Daphne, Travis asks, "So, who was that guy?"

Daphne just shrugs. "One of Rick's friends."

Travis and Daphne both imitate the guy and point at each other, laughing.

"You sound happy," Travis comments.

Dizzy makes her I'm frustrated face and declares, "I am!" before hitting him on the shoulder. "Ow!" she yells.

"Mom!" Travis yells at Kristin. "Dizzy's hitting me again!"

Kristin turns slightly in her seat and points alternately to Daphne and Travis.  
“Stop it now you two or no more booze.”

Daphne and Travis both look down, pouting for a moment, trying to behave, before Travis points at Daphne again, winking. “Hey there, baby,” he said in mocking seduction.

Dizzy just rolls her eyes and finishes her drink, slamming it down on the table, much to everyone’s surprise. “I want more!” she yells, and in her best redneck accent, hollers, “Woo hoo!”

Turning around again, Kristin says, “Will you get me a vodka cranberry?” and holds out a five dollar bill. Daphne gets up and struts over to the upstairs bar like she owns the place. To some extent, she does she started everyone in the group going and is friends with everyone that works there. Travis watches her walk and marvels at her desert like beauty; cream colored skin, strawberry hair, and eyes like blueberries. He turns his attention from her to the rest of the upstairs: the dartboards and pinball machines tucked away in corners. He watches for a second and then turns to Nick, leaning in a little without looking at him. “Don’t look now, but those two chicks playin’ darts over there are givin’ us the old eyeball.”

“Really?” Nick asks seriously. He waits a couple of seconds before subtly leaning back in his seat in the booth. Waiting a few moments, he glances in the direction of the dartboards.

Waiting for just the right moment of recognition, Travis blurts out, “Yours,” laughing and takes a drink.

“Damn it,” Nick says, leaning back onto the table.

John pokes Nick on the shoulder and says with a sly smile and redneck accent, “Why don’t you mosey on over there and ask her what her sign is?”

“Shut up,” Nick replies. “I don’t have to put up with this crap.”

“What’re you gonna’ do, Fatty? Hang out with all your *other* friends?”

“You’re right,” Nick laments, collapsing onto the table, “I haven’t got any friends!” He pretends to sob, and Kristin pats him pitfully on the head.

Daphne comes back to the table and set her’s and Kristin’s drinks down before seating herself. “So, where you guy’s been?” she asks Travis and Nick.

“Right *here*,” Travis replies, pointing at his drink. “You know how the beginning of summer is.”

“Yeah,” Daphne agrees. “I went home for a while. Mimi asked about you.”

“For real? I can’t believe she even remembers me.”

Dizzy puckered her lips and exaggerated, “She *loves* you.”

“That’s sweet,” Travis says, thinking that it really was. Mimi was Dizzy’s grandmother.

“I think I’m gonna’ get a job,” Dizzy adds.

Travis and Nick both look around in unison, as though they were confused. “A what?” Travis asks.

“A job,” Dizzy explains.

"No, seriously," Nick adds. "I've been having trouble with my hearing. I thought you said you were getting 'a job'." He and Travis laugh obnoxiously together unable to bare the thought of anyone working.

Dizzy rolls her eyes.

"Seriously," Travis says, "Why would you do that? You don't have to."

Daphne shrugs. "It'd be nice to have something to do and the extra money."

Leaning forward, Nick adds, "Don't mind him he's a bum."

"Hey, I work," Travis replies defensively.

Nick just rolls his eyes and sits back again.

"Don't *even*," Travis retorts, "Like you could legitimately call what *you* do work."

Smiling mischievously, Nick shushes Travis to keep the secret.

"Yeah, what *do* you do at the gallery?" Daphne asks, genuinely curious.

"Well," Nick replied, "*When* we do stuff, we usually build cabinets and pedestals for sculpture, hang pieces and light them, inventory the gallery's collection. I mean, we *work* when a show is coming in or out it's just that in the interim, there's not much to do."

"Are you ever gonna' put anything up?"

Nick shook his head. "You have to be pretty well established more than me. I was thinking about doing a show at Joe's or Blue Sky though." two of the local coffeehouses.

"You should do that," Daphne urges.

"Yeah. We'll see. Getting shit framed is pretty expensive."

Ian leans in from the other side of the booth and says, "Hey, I meant to tell you: I found a guy in Atlanta that'll do it for pretty cheap. He's an artist and does it in his spare time for the extra cash."

"See," Nick replies, "That's what I'd really like to do, learn to do it myself."

"Is it that hard?" Daphne asks.

"It's hard to do it well. But workin' at the gallery's taught me a lot."

Finishing his drink, Travis gets up to go to the bathroom and get another. He makes his way through the tables and chairs and people, rubbing up against backs and other errant body parts, excusing himself as best he can as he goes. No one minds a gentle push if someone else has to get by, and as he walks through the crowd, Travis takes note of the fact that everyone at the bar seems to be in good spirits. Getting to the one unisex bathroom upstairs there were larger ones down below Travis knocks on the door and hesitantly turns the knob when he doesn't hear anything. There is no one inside, and he steps into the darkness and closes the door behind him, shutting out the light and noise.

Turning on the light, Travis steps up to the toilet and reads the graffiti on the walls. Most of it is trite or cryptic. People had scribbled names and dates or declared their undying love for someone else. In a spot by the window, someone had written: "Reality is for people who can't handle drugs." Travis smiles and reads the phrase directly next to it: "Linoleum is for people who can't handle carpet." It is clever enough to get a good laugh out of him as he finishes, and zips up his jeans. Stepping up to the mirror and sink, Travis

leans in close and stares into his own dark, brown eyes. Lightly, he taps his nose with his hand. He was tipsy, and he smiles to himself, enjoying the feeling. No matter how many times he'd been warned that alcohol held no answers, he found himself disagreeing. There might be no concrete answers in the bottle, but there *was* an escape. There was no denying it. That was the real danger—the truly addictive property of alcohol—the abandonment of everything.

Travis opens the door to step out, and has to make way for a hurried young woman who looks like she is going to be sick. As the door slams behind him, Travis makes his way to the edge of the bar. Just as Travis gets there, Chip steps up to him, wiping his hands off on a towel and says, "Gin and tonic?"

It was mildly pathetic, but Travis enjoyed being known by such a fact. His guilt didn't quite enjoy it, but he usually got over guilt with one gin and tonic. The second one was for enjoying. He smiled and replied, "Actually, let me get one of those and six shots of tequila. And let me get somethin' to carry it all on if you could."

"Comin' up," Chip says. He lines the shot glasses up on a small tray in front of Travis and pours them all, throws a handful of limes down, sets a salt shaker on the tray, and goes to mix the gin and tonic. "Eighteen even," he says when he's done.

Travis fishes through his pocket, a mass of small bills and quarters at this point, makes out twenty four dollars and hands it over. "Thanks. Keep the change." No, he doesn't have to say that, but it's cool. He picks up the tray carefully and starts making his way through the crowd. With the tray, it was difficult, but relying on his old skills as a waiter, Travis manages to get back without spilling anything. Setting the tray down on the table, he just says, "All right, let's go. Pass 'em around."

"What is it?" Kristin asks skeptically.

"To kill ya'."

"Oh God, I hate tequilla," Kristin replies.

Taking his, Ian coaxes her, "C'mon."

"*Everybody's* doin' it," Travis insists, sounding like a bad actor in a public service announcement on peer pressure.

"I'll take yours," Nick offers, reaching for his own.

"No," Kristin answers warily. "I'll do it. I just won't like it."

Travis hands John his, who thanks him with a nod, and then he passes one to Daphne who just makes a face but takes it. "You're gonna' do it?" Travis asks, half surprised, half curious.

Dizzy just sighs and nods.

"Okay," Travis says, "put 'em out." Everyone licks their hands and passes the salt shaker around. "You know the drill. Lick, drink, suck." Holding his shot glass out over the table, he says, "Here's to bein' wreckless."

"Woo hoo," Dizzy hollers as everyone drinks and reaches out for the limes with various faces. Travis laughs as he sees the range from complete satisfaction to utter illness. Everyone either drinks to wash the taste down or smokes to savor it.

“Hey,” Ian says, “Why don’t we all head back to the house after this see what’s goin’ on.”

Everyone nods in agreement.

Checking her watch, Kristin says, “I can’t believe it’s only midnight.”

Nick replies, taking a long drag off his cigarette, “We got all the time in the world.”



*. There's Plenty of Room!*

When the gang stumbles into the Teke house through the side door at about twenty after one in the a.m., there are still thirty or so people milling about, drinking, playing pool and watching movies. Collin, one of Ian's fraternity brothers comes over to meet them. "Hey! Look who it is," he said with a strong southern Georgia accent not grating like Alabama or verbose like Texas just enough to let you know he was southern. "Ian Yankee-fuck and his magic traveling circus! What's goin' on?"

The boys all say their hellos, and Ian steps up and introduces Kristin and Daphne. Collin shakes hands with both of them, commenting that he knows Kristin from Mean Mike's. "Nice ta meetcha," he says to Daphne.

"And do you know Nick?" asks Ian.

"Yeah," Collin says, shaking Nick's hand. "You did those fucked up paintings, right?"

Nick nods.

"I saw 'em at a party at your place once. I love those, man."

"Thanks."

"Everything's all bent up and shit. You musta' been high when you did those."

"No. But that's what everybody thinks."

"Well, c'mon in ya'll. They're still playin' Baghdad in the basement. Grab some beers."

Everyone makes their way to the basement in a crowd. Collin turns to Travis, "Hey man, I didn't get to tell ya', like, I dug your show."

"Yeah," Travis replies. "I saw you. I meant to thank you for comin'."

"Me and Jamie had to go meet some people right before you were done. We scooted out pretty fast."

"That's cool."

"When're you playin' again?"

"I don't know yet, actually."

"Well, let me know. I'll be there."

"Thanks, man. I really appreciate that."

"Yeah. I tol' Jamie I thought you sounded like Bruce Springsteen or somethin'."

Travis raises his eyebrows in disbelief. It was a hell of a compliment for him.

"Thanks," he says, a little breathlessly.

"But like, you need ta chill out. take your time. You seemed like you were in a hurry."

"I was pretty nervous for some reason," Travis agrees.

"That wasn't your first show, was it?"

"No. But every now and then it just hits me new material maybe."

"You jus' need ta drink some beer before you go on," Collin says, laughing and patting Travis on the back.

"Yeah like a six pack or somethin'," Travis says, rubbing the back of his neck, remembering just how jittery he was that night.

They all get to the basement and pass around beers from out of a cooler. Fraternity brothers, and their dates, and a few other party goers are spread out all through the basement, centered around three ping pong tables. The tables are covered with paper cups filled with beer. As the opponents sink ping pong balls into each other's cups, the defeated has to drink whatever is hit.

Everyone is settled into a small crowd with their beers, and a tall, thin man with large eyes walks up to Ian and Travis with a huge plastic cup in his hand. In a light Australian accent, he pronounces, "Don't drink that shit."

"Hey, Steve, what's goin' on?" Ian replies.

"You got somethin' better, I take it?" Travis asks.

"C'mon," Steve says, indicating with a jerk of his head for them both to follow.

Turning to check on everyone, Travis looks over to his friends. Dizzy and Kristin are laughing at Collin's antics. He is an incredible flirt good ol' boy charm mixed with a sharp wit that catches people off guard. Nick and John are discussing something. Turning back around, Travis catches up to Ian and Steve who are already making their way across the basement to the back hall stairs. Walking up the flight of stairs they all chuckle as they pass one of the younger brothers who is passed out on the landing. "He's 'ad too much," Steve said flatly, his accent making the statement all the more hilarious. When they get to the top of the stairs, Steve asks Ian and Travis, "Why ar' American bea' and 'aving sex in a canoe the same?"

Ian and Travis just shrug, following Steve down the hall at the top of the stairs.

"They're both too fuckin' close to wata'," he said with a smile in his eyes, and a flat grin.

They walk all the way down the back hall to a community bathroom at the end, where Steve has a cooler full of some mysterious purple liquid perched up on one of the sinks. Passing Ian and Travis two cups, Steve says courteously, "Elp yu'self ta some of Steve's Jungle Juice."

Ian and Travis look at each other with a laugh, before dipping their cups in the cooler. Each tastes their drink in unison, making sure the other isn't copping out.

"Damn that's smooth," says Ian, licking his lips.

"What's in it?" Travis asks.

"Buncha' stuff," Steve replies cryptically. "It'll getya' drunk," he says, refilling his own glass.

The threesome make their way back down the hall and down the stairs to the basement. When they get back to the group, Nick asks indignantly, "Where'd you get

that?"

"You know wher' the bathroom on the back 'all is?" Steve asks.

"Nope."

"Go up those back stai's, and all the way down the 'all at the top to the bathroom. It's in a cooler on the sink. 'Elp yu'self there's a ton."

"Cool," Nick replies. Turning to John, he asks, "You want some?"

John shakes his head. "I'm fine."

"C'mon," Ian says to everyone as Nick walks off to the back hall, "let's go up to my room and blast some tunes."

Daphne replies, "Actually, I need to get going."

"Aw," Ian replies, disappointed. "You all right to drive?"

"Yeah, I'm fine." Turning to Kristin, she asks, "You want a ride?"

"Yeah. I better go too."

Kristin and Daphne hug Ian and Travis in turns.

"Good night," Dizzy says to Travis.

"Drive safe, darlin'," Travis replies.

"Hey," Ian calls after them, "come to John's show tomorrow."

"What time?" Kristin asked.

"Ten thirty."

"Okay."

"G'night ya'll," Dizzy says again as she and Kristin leave.

Collin, Travis, Steve, Ian, and John make their way out the side door of the basement, and up the stairs to Ian's room. Collin elbows Ian on the way up.

"What?" Ian asks.

"What?" Collin mocks. "You know what."

"Kristin?"

"See. I tol' ya' you knew," Collin says with a smile.

"She's cute as hell, isn't she?"

"Does Lisa know?" Collin asks.

"Oh, dude, there's nothin' to worry about. Kristin and I are totally plutonic."

"I'm sure Lisa believes you, too."

"Yeah, well," Ian says, rolling his eyes. "What're you guys doin' tomorrow?" he asks Collin and Steve, changing the subject as they get to the top of the stairs.

They both shrug.

"Come to John's band's show tomorrow night."

"Right on." Collin says. "Who're you playin' with?"

"Homespun Noose," John replies.

"Cool."

Steve interjects, "You should play at the 'ouse."

"Yeah?" John asks.

"Hell, we'll pay ya'," Collin offers.

"Damn. I think we can work that," John replies.  
 Collin playfully hits John in the chest, "That, and give you all the liquor you can drink."  
 John just laughs.  
 "You too," Collin says to Travis as he comes to the top of the stairs.  
 "What?" Travis asks.  
 They all walk into Ian's room and sit down as Travis opens up all the windows.  
 "Play at the house," Collin offers.  
 "Ah," Travis says, dismissing it. "It's not house party stuff."  
 "So?" Collin replies. "Just chill out and play in the front room. Shit, no one'll mind if it's not loud."  
 Shrugging, Travis replies, "All right."  
 "And it wouldn't kill you to play some rock covers," Collin adds.  
 "Yeah."  
 Sitting in an arm chair between the couches, opposite the door, Ian says, "You guys really should. It'd be a great way to get your names around town."  
 John and Travis both nod.  
 "You guys play and Ian'll, like, take photos and shit, and Nick can paint somethin' weird. I'll just sit there and point and laugh or somethin'. I can't do shit."  
 "That's not true," Travis argues.  
 "Naw. Like, someday I'll write a book about all this shit. It'll be fucked up like Vonndegut or somethin'."  
 "You like Vonndegut?" John asks.  
 "Dude, his shit's hilarious. Have you ever read *Breakfast of Champions*?"  
 John shakes his head.  
 "Like, there's this part where the main guy is tryin' to explain what an asshole is, and there's just this star on the page that he drew, and it says, like, 'this is an asshole'."  
 "I remember that part," says Travis, chuckling.  
 "Have you read it?" Collin asks.  
 "A while ago. I'm not big on Vonndegit, though."  
 "Fuck you. You're like all intellectual and shit. Your songs are all, like, deep and shit," Collin says, smiling.  
 Travis laughs in agreement, drinking his Jungle Juice.  
 "Naw," Collin continues, "it was good. I jus' didn't get it. I had to get Jamie to explain it to me."  
 Travis just laughs again. He knew Collin was kidding. Chances were, Collin was as or more literate than anyone in the room, but he liked to play it off like he wasn't.  
 "You need to get some girls," Steve says to John, meaning John's band. "You got any groupies, yet?"  
 "Just my girlfriend and Eric's and mine's not really that good of a groupie," John says, laughing at the thought of screaming teenyboppers.

"You guys play and we'll invite the DZ's over or somethin'. They'll be fuckin' you on stage and shit," Collin added. "Buncha' whores."

"Really?" Travis asks, not entirely surprised, but curious. The DZ's lived in the house next door.

"Dude," Ian says, sitting up, "I was drivin' up here, and a bunch of 'em were yelling out the window at me and Derek. What's up with that?"

"Aw, like, Noles and Copper were out on the beach a week ago, throwin' shit at their house and yellin' at 'em," Collin replies. "The Beach" was the south porch roof on the house, facing the DZ's house.

"Damn, man, they were yellin' some lewd shit at us," Ian says, "I wonder what the hell Noles and Copper said?"

"Who knows," Collin replies, snorting. "Prob'ly called 'em whores. They gotta' get all upset like they ain't what they are."

Everybody laughs at this.

"Are they really that bad?" Travis asks.

"Not ta' us," Collin replies. "They just hate us, but I've heard shit."

"Yeah," Ian says, some of my friends over in Sigma Delta said they get raunchy at some of their socials."

"What a horrible, horrible thing," Travis says, feigning indignance.

"Oh, I don't give a shit what they do," answers Collin, "They just need ta be doin' it ta us."

"That's the crux," adds Ian.

Just then, Nick wanders into Ian's room. "What the fuck?" he asks. "You guys, like, totally vanished on me."

"Shit," Collin says, "he found us."

Sitting on the couch next to Steve, Nick says, "It's not that it's just, like, I went to get a drink, and there's some guy passed out on the stairs, and then I come back and you guys are gone." Nick laughs, a little exasperated.

"Where you been?" asks Travis. "It couldn't've taken you that long to find us here."

"Oh, no, I was hangin' out with... uh you know Beetlejuice."

"Jackson," says Ian.

"Yeah. Jackson," Nick agrees.

"Ian, le'me have a beer," Collin says.

Ian just gives Collin a look like, "What're you gonna' do about it?"

Getting up to go to the refridgerator, Collin asks, "Anybody else?"

"Yeah," John says, and Collin tosses him one.

"I'm actually feelin' just fine," Travis says, dragging out "fine".

"I tol' ya', right?" Steve says.

"Shit, man, this stuff is righteous," Nick adds. "You should bottle it and sell it."

"I still wanna' know what the hell's in this," Travis says, but Steve just shakes his

head, smiling flatly.

"We should do somethin' stupid," Collin says, sitting down again.

"Stoopid," Nick adds in a Brooklyn accent.

"Stoopid," Travis echoes, and they both laugh.

Collin looks at them for a moment, and then says, "What?" He doesn't get the joke, but it doesn't matter; it's just an old joke between Nick and Travis.

"What do you mean?" Ian asks Collin.

"I don' know. Stupid. You can't think of shit, you jus' always end up doin' it."

"Stoopid," Nick says again.

"Stoopid," Travis repeats.

"What the fuck?" Collin asks.

"Were you out with us for my birthday, when it snowed?" Nick asked seriously.

"No."

That was hilarious. Everybody was sledding on Clayton and making snow angel's in the middle of the road. It started around one and there was inches on the ground when everybody came out after last call."

"I remember that. Me and John were watchin' people wreck their cars on Baxter."

John starts laughing at the memory.

"Hey, yeah!" Nick says, "Why the hell weren't you out with us on my birthday?"

Travis shrugs. "Didn't have the magic card then."

"Oh, right."

"You remember that, though?" Travis asks John, who just rubs his eyes and smiles.

"You know that hill, right by the dorms?" Travis asks Collin.

"Yeah."

"Me and John were on the Blue Monkey's porch, just standin' there watchin' while people came over that hill at, like, forty five miles an hour. There were, like, five cars in row smashed into each other right there in right lane in front of us. And the owners were just standin' there on the sidewalk screamin' at whoever came over the hill and smashed into their cars."

"Shit," Collin snorts.

"It was ridiculous," Travis agreed.

"People here don't know how to drive in the snow," Ian says.

"Ya'll don't know how to drive, period," replies Collin reminding Ian politely that he's a Yankee.

Everyone in the room seems to agree with these two points. People down South drove obliviously, and people up North drove rudely. Big difference, of course.

"See, that's what I mean, though," Collin says, shaking his head.

"What?" Ian asks.

"Jus' stupid shit."

"Stoopid," Nick says.

"Stoopid," Travis repeats.

“Stoopid,” Collin says.

. *A Dormouse Between Them*

The bright light of a noonday sun wakes Travis from a dead slumber, its heat warming his already warm face. Disoriented, he opens his eyes to discover that he is not where his mind suspected he should be. Pieces of recognition slip into place as his dried up eyes wander over walls, photos, road signs and posters, eventually falling on a coffee table running perpendicular to his vision, littered with beer bottles and plastic cups. Shutting his eyes for a moment, Travis can imagine where he is, sleeping on the couch in Ian's room. Across from him in fact, Ian sleeps soundly, precisely where Travis and his roommates had found their errant friend the day before. Travis laughs quietly to himself in disbelief as a cool wind blows in through the still open windows.

As soon as he lifts his head to check his surroundings, he regrets it. The small muscular movement required for him to lift his head up sends shockwaves of pain through his skull and set off a throbbing a familiar pounding. He immediately sets his head back down, and opens his mouth for the first time, only to discover that it is virtually stuck shut by a cottony slime and an evil taste; like he'd licked an ashtray and washed it down with melted styrofoam. Rolling his head to one side, Travis watches Ian sleep, his arms wrapped around his small frame, peaceful like an angelic symbol of the unconscious. In his friend's current posture, there is no evidence of the dervish nature that normally consumed him.

Someone else was asleep in the armchair, but Travis can make out no more than a pair of legs without moving his head. Unfortunately, the identity of this mystery character, capable of sleeping upright, isn't inspiration enough for Travis to tease the pain. Gradually, he just falls back into a pleasant half asleep state, from which vantage point he can watch the painted horses spin and kick.



*. Half past One, Time for Dinner!*

The second time Travis wakes up, the light of the day has faded, along with his miserable state. Ian is standing over him smiling, the dervish nature returned from twelve hours rest. "Here," he says, handing Travis a shot, as Travis sits up and reignites the pounding in his head, although it has been lessened substantially by four hours of unconsciousness. Looking at the shot for a moment, Travis sniffs it, detecting a hint of something like peppermint schnops or Jagermeister or both. Thinking about it for a moment, Travis rationalizes that it be would something like brushing his teeth; and God knew whatever it tasted like, it was better than the current putrid occupant. He swings his head back and lets the thick sugary fluid wash down his throat, taking with it most of the dryness as the glands in his mouth attempt to put out the fire wrought by the shot.

Ian hands Travis a glass of water and two Aspirin. "Thanks, man," Travis says before drinking the water.

"Whatever the hell was in that Jungle Juice was beating me up when I got up, too."

"What the hell happened?" Travis asks an all too familiar question generally accompanying that all too familiar pain.

"You passed *out*," Ian laughs as he moved around the room picking up trash. "We all hooked up with Jackson and went out to the back house. You guys smoked a bowl and then you were gone."

"I kinda' remember that," Travis says, rubbing the back of his neck.

"We were all standing outside for while you hadn't said anything you and Nick. And then you mumbled somethin' like, 'I got 'g fo' m'self pl's' and wandered off." Ian imitates Travis, stumbling around the room with his arms limp and bumping into things.

"And never the twain shall mix," Travis responds. "I'm tellin' ya', if I'm drunk, I *cannot* smoke weed. It just fucks me up. I get sucked into Travisworld, and there's no gettin' out."

"I know, dude," Ian says, still chuckling. "I'm the same way. It's one or the other never both."

"It's stupid anyway. It's not like I can enjoy the experience once I'm at that point."

"I guess you got here all right. You were passed out on the couch when I came back. I even tried to get you to go up in one of the beds, but I couldn't wake you up."

Travis laughs and nods. "What's the deal with you? You got a bed."

Ian just shrugs. "I usually just put on a movie and end up falling asleep."

"What happened to Nick and John?"

“Nick was as gone as you were, but he wanted to go home, so John took him.”  
Travis stretches his forehead up, raising his eyebrows as far as they would go, to relax.

“You all right?”

“Oh yeah,” Travis replies. “I’m fine now.” He takes a deep breath and sighs.

“That shot actually helped, I think.”

“It’s liquid cocaine.”

“What?” Travis asks.

“I learned how to make it out in Spain. It’s got schnops, Jager, . It just gets you going lot of sugar and I guess the liquor helps with the hangover too.”

“Best cure.”

“You wanna’ get some food?” Ian asks.

“That sounds good right about now. Let’s call Nick and John.”

Ian tosses Travis the portable. “I’ll be right back,” he says and leaves the room with a bag full of refuse.

Dialing the number, Travis sits on the couch with the phone tucked between his chin and shoulder. Holding his right hand stretched out in front of him, he watches his fingers shake like and epileptic’s. “Geez,” he mumbles to himself with a sigh as the phone rings a second time.

“Hello,” comes a very gruff voice over the line.

“Hey, it’s Travis.”

The voice on the other end of the line moans loudly and the party hangs up.

Travis laughs and hits redial.

The other party answers again. “Go away.” It’s Nick.

“C’mon, get your shit together and let’s go get breakfast.”

Nick just moans again.

“C’mon,” Travis says. “Bluebird. *German apple pancakes*,” Travis drags the entree’s name out seductively.

There is a pause on the other end of the line. “Mm. That does sound good.”

“We’ll have a big ol’ breakfast, and a nice little quesadilla,” Travis says, laughing. Quesadilla had been a running joke between them since Mardi Gras the year before.

“It’s siesta, you moron.”

“So, you’re coming?” Travis asks, picking up a bottle of white out from off the coffee table.

“Yeah, yeah keep your pants on. How ‘bout if you give me thirty minutes or so to get showered. I feel like ass.”

“No problem we’ll meet you guys there,” Travis says, tossing and catching the white out absent mindedly.

“Right oh wait.” There is some movement and no sound for a second, and then, “Some guy called for you this morning said you would really want to call him back at . He woke me up.”

"Terribly sorry. People calling for me at four in the afternoon should know better than to do that," Travis responds sarcastically as he scrounges over the coffee table for something to write on. Setting the white out down, he picks up a pen and an index card. The Spanish word "mano" was written on one side, "hand" written on the other.

"Yeah! He should! And you tell him I'll kick his ass if he does it again."

"Tell me that number again," Travis says.

"Uh... . David Spindler was the guy's name."

"Okay, thanks."

"And you tell him I'm comin'," Nick warns through foam, brushing his teeth.

"Bla bla bla. Just get dressed and meet us at Bluebird."

Nick mumbles something like, "Okay," and hangs up.

Travis hangs up the phone and picks up the index card. Thinking about the name for a second, he dials the number as Ian walks back into the room. Ian gives a perplexed look. Holding his hand over the mouthpiece for a moment, Travis says, "They're gonna' meet us there in thirty minutes give or take."

Nodding, Ian starts picking up more trash.

"Uh, Yes," Travis says into the phone, "I got a call from this number. I'm looking for David Spindler." Ian sits down on the opposite couch and gets out his cigarettes. Travis waves and put two fingers to his mouth. Ian tosses him one. "Yes, that's right." Lighting his own cigarette, Ian leans out over the coffee table with the lighter and Travis leans over too. "Really? No, That's not too short a notice." They both take drags off the cigarettes, making enough smoke to filter the sunlight pouring into the room. "All right, I'll come by then." Travis looks at Ian, who is waiting to hear what the deal is, and raises his eyebrows. "Thanks a lot. Bye."

"So?" Ian asks, getting up to turn the stereo on.

"So, somebody left a spot open next Friday night at Washington Street Tavern the guy got my name from his bartender said he saw my last show at DT's."

"Very cool."

"Somethin' to do," Travis agrees.

"Think they'll pay you much?"

"I don't know. That's why he wanted me to come down. I imagine he'll say somethin' like, because I' not a normal Friday act, they can't pay me the same."

Ian nods.

"It'll probably be fifty bucks plus cover."

"That's not bad."

"No, it's not drinkin' money." Travis agrees.

"We'll just have to get everyone we know to go to show."

"That'll be six bucks right there."

Ian laughs. "I think we can do better than that."

"I got a better idea: how 'bout if I don't play and you and everbody just give me the money."

"What would we be paying you for?"  
 "The priveledge of being my friend."  
 Ian sniffs. "I wouldn't pay to be your friend."  
 "I'd pay you," Travis says defensively.  
 "Yeah, right."  
 "Well," Travis concedes, sitting back, "not a lot."  
 Ian laughs.  
 "Here ya' go, sonny," Travis says, making his voice shake like an old man's. "Here's a nice shiny quarter."  
 Ian just laughs again.  
 "Why, in my day," Travis continues, keeping up the act, "A quarter would buy you a whole bunch friends. 'Course, after the war, you could only get dead ones."  
 "I don't know about paying to get friends," Ian says, stretching out on the couch, but I'd pay a shitload to make some people go away."  
 "Who?" Travis asks, surprised, and wondering who Ian could mean.  
 "No one around here, I guess."  
 "Me neither. Actually, I don't suppose there's anybody at all." Travis thinks about it. "Hell, if I had enough money to do that, I'd probably just rather spend it on my friends."  
 "That'd be great. Walk into a bar, slam a fifty down and buy everybody drinks."  
 "Yeah, like, if I won the lottery, I don't think I'd tell anyone. I'd just surprise people with shit and not explain it. I'd be real clandestine about it."  
 "I'd buy myself some shit."  
 "Sure, sure. I'd do that too."  
 "We could do some real criminal damage with a nice scanner, a twenty inch monitor, software out the ass..."  
 "You know, that's my favorite part of Christmas: giving presents. I don't really care if I get anything. I really don't." Travis takes a drag off his cigarette, puts it out and pictures a scene in his head. "I love to see the expression on someone else's face when they open a present and you got them something they really wanted. Or even better, something they didn't know they wanted."  
 "You want another?" Ian says, sitting up, offering Travis a cigarette.  
 "You see?" Travis asks. "That's why your my friend. I didn't even realize I wanted a cigarette until you asked me." Travis starts getting weepy after taking the cigarette and picks up a pack of matches off the coffee table. "You're my best friend," he blubbers. Somewhere behind the joke, Travis does feel a sense of despair leftover from the alcohol.  
 Ian takes a drag off his cigarette and looks around the room. "I like that," he agrees. "It is pretty cool when you get somebody something they really wanted."  
 "That's what I miss about Meryl."  
 "What's that?"  
 "The little shit we'd do for each other. Like, she'd leave me these notes everywhere *everywhere*. I'd come back to Mary Jane after class, and there'd be a little

note jammed in the seat cushions Meryl tellin' me she was happy or it was a beautiful day or that she loved me or somethin'. And I'd write her poems. Hell, she's one of the only girls I ever went out with that took my poems seriously."

"Really? That seems odd."

"Why?"

"I thought women totally dug that shit," Ian says, quietly observing his room. It had just occurred to him that he didn't have any pictures of Lisa anywhere.

"You know, I don't get it either. They all act like that's what they want, but the minute you try to get romantic, they laugh at you."

"Eh. You'll find somebody else like that."

"I imagine I will."

"I should get you to write poetry for Lisa in the meantime."

"Cyrano de Bergurac?"

"Yeah. I can't write poetry not seriously anyway."

"I prefer to write songs. That really embarrasses 'em."

"You ever serenaded anyone?"

"Yeah," Travis says shortly.

"Didn't go over well?"

"No."

Ian leans forward. Travis was rarely short on words, and when he was, you could bet there was something worth digging for most of the time. "What happened?" Ian prods.

"I don't know, dude," Travis shakes his head. "She just wouldn't stop laughing. It was annoying as fuck."

"She was probably just nervous."

"Yeah, but why would you be nervous? I understand that you might laugh a little, from the surprise but I mean... we're talking hysterics."

"Really?"

"Yeah, I'm serious. It was freakish."

"She was laughing *at* you?"

"She was cackling, dude. I couldn't even finish the fucking song."

"Okay," Ian agrees, leaning back in his seat, "That, actually, would be a bit much to take." He leans forward again, "Did you dump her?"

Travis scratches his head. Part of his peachfuzz was flattened the wrong way, and hurt to scratch it; except that the hurt was a good kind, that Travis liked like poking your tongue around a sore in your mouth he really couldn't help but do it. "Not right away." Travis keeps scratching his head, as Ian thinks about the photograph issue. "You know what, though?"

"What?"

"The older I get, the less of those romantic people I find. They're either young and and romactic but annoyingly naive, or old and cynical. It doesn't seem like there's anyone that's old and romantic."

"Are you?"  
 "I used to be. I don't know. After Meryl and I broke up..."  
 "Ah," Ian dismisses Travis's pessimism. "Hang in there."  
 "Nah."  
 "No?"  
 "I'm through lookin' for a while." Leaning over, Travis picks up Ian's roommate's guitar and begin fiddling with it. "It's just gonna' be me, a gee tar and Mary Jane."  
 "Vaquero," Ian says approvingly.  
 "Yee doggy."  
 "Well," Ian offers, "You always got us."  
 "Shit. You know how miserable life would be without you guys?" Travis says, strumming a few chords to a new song. Playing them in repeated succession he sings, "I am pathetic / my friends are pedantic / what a merry band we make."  
 Ian laughs and waves his hand.  
 "Just think about having no one to hang out with except Lisa."  
 "No!" Ian says. He puts his hands to his face and looks like a horror movie victim, "The estrogen.... the estrogen... can't... take... it."  
 Travis starts shaking like he was going into shock. "The sensitivity... overwhelming. Must... think... crass... thoughts."  
 "You know I love her to death, but sometimes, I just wish the girl would *relax*."  
 "I know."  
 They both sit there for a moment, Ian just nodding to himself. That's all it was, he thinks. If she could just relax not worry about small things. That was all that had to happen.  
 "You know," Travis offers. "We can go ahead and go. They won't care if we go ahead and get some coffee and a table."  
 "Ye ah," Ian says, mid yawn. "Yeah. Let's go ahead and go."  
 They both get up. Travis sets Bubble Boy's guitar down back next to the couch in its rack. Ian stops and looks at it for a second, then picks it up and moves it to the other side of the room without saying anything.  
 "What'd'ya do that for?" Travis asks.  
 Shrugging Ian just replies, "He hates it when I move his shit around."  
 Travis laughs, turns the stereo off, and they walk out the door, Ian closing it behind them. "That's really cool about you getting a gig," Ian says as they headed down the front stairs.  
 "I'm a little worried about it, to be honest."  
 "Why's that?" Ian asks, "It's not like you haven't done it before."  
 "Well, for starters, I haven't played jack shit in a week."  
 "You sounded fine just then, dude."  
 "You see, that's the thing. It's not like anyone else can tell the difference. *I* can tell the difference though. And it bugs me."

"You know," Ian offers, "it's the same thing with the camera. I just know when it feels right and when it doesn't."

The two walk out of the Teke house into the parking lot over toward Ian's car, a small, red Volkswagon Jetta with a bike rack and sun roof. Ian gets in first and moves a backpack, some papers and CD cases out of the passenger seat into the back. "I gotta' clean this thing," he mumbles as he moves his stuff around.

"God," Travis says in false exasperation. "You are such a slob." Everybody's car looked like Ian's John's, Nick's. Travis knew his would if he had one. His motorcycle didn't really have that capacity, a quality he liked a great deal. But he had owned cars before, and they had gathered crap like everybody else's. Travis slumped into the seat and shut the door. "I have got to wake *up*. I just feel out of it."

"Me too," Ian agrees as he starts the car. "Some food'll help though."

They drove downtown in a kind of lumbering silence, heading up Milledge, right on Broad and left again on Hancock a little ways down... or was it Hull? Travis watches all the people who had been awake since the morning and wonders what it was like to live a "normal" life a life where you ate your cereal, kissed your wife goodbye, and listened to the morning radio shows while stuck in rush hour traffic when a day in summer was just another day. There were a lot of joggers on Milledge mostly girls from the sororities, patiently maintaining the images they were brought up to be. At five o'clock, the heat and humidity was tapering off a bit. Travis rolled down the windows to let a wind into the car. It had been sitting in the sun most of the day; and all of the interior was almost painfully hot to the touch.

Silence can be a difficult thing between any two parties: diplomats, friends, parents and children. Often it only leads to the tension of things that need to be said. The tension trains the silence though, and it plods on. If one party is talking, then the other's silence goes unnoticed. Someone's talking, and the silence isn't obvious. Silence between Travis and Ian was just a thoughtful and necessary pause though an opportunity not to think about anything for thinking so much. Ian methodically shifts gears gas out, clutch in, gas in, clutch out. He doesn't read the street signs he knows so well, doesn't take notice of the other drivers. Everything on the road becomes a behavioral signal, an obstacle of equal importance, all something to merely be avoided.

Travis chews on his bottom lip and mounts a simple brown horse in his head. *Are you coming back?*, one of the sorority joggers asks him, dressed in the heavy clothes of a farmer's daughter. She looks up at him kindly, with a gentle love in her eyes, shaded by her bonnet. He'd known that love before, but looking off into the distance, somewhere in his heart he knew it was a love that could not keep him. Adjusting himself in the saddle, Travis just quietly says, *I don't know what I'm gonna' do, darlin'*. She weeps a single tear that runs down her pale white cheek and on... past the bicycle shop. "Where are you going?" Travis asks suddenly, sitting up in his seat.

Looking around, Ian looks disoriented for a moment and then sighs. He'd driven all the way down Hancock, completely missing the turn down Clayton to the Bluebird. "Sorry,

dude. I'm just out..." He lets the sentence linger though.

"That's all right," Travis says.

"God!" Ian declares, "I just feel stupid."

"Stoopid," Travis adds.

Ian opens his eyes wide and shakes his head, making a right onto Dougherty to correct the navigational error. Slapping himself with his right hand, Ian chides himself, "Wake up, damn it."

Travis just shrugs. "We'll get there all the same, Pirata."



*. You Should Say What You Mean*

“Hey,” Travis and Ian say, still sounding tired.

“Hey,” Nick says, pulling out a chair for himself.

“We just ordered,” Travis offers, “but she’ll be back in a sec’ with the coffee.”

“That’s cool,” Nick replies.

“How ya’ feelin’?”

Nick just shakes his head. “Uhhhh.”

“Yeah,” Ian agrees.

“You know that telegraph sound: deet dee dee dee deet? That’s all I can hear in my head when I’m not talking,” Travis says.

Ian laughs and Nick adds, “At least you got that much. I just got the network signoff tone: deeeeeeeeeeee.”

“Or the emergency broadcast system,” Ian says.

Laughing, Nick replies, “This is a test – a test of the emergency Nick system. Had this been an actual Nick, you would hear him speaking sensibly.”

“You know,” Travis says, leaning up onto the table, “I’ve always wanted to do a short film or somethin’ where you have two guys sitting in chairs real calm while that tone goes off. And then, a narrator’ll come in and say, ‘Had this been an actual emergency, the scene would have looked like this:’ and then the guys’ll get up and run around screamin’ and bump into each other.”

Ian chuckles a little, but Nick just says, “I think you have to see it.”

“You have to be in my head,” agrees Travis nonchalantly.

“Which, unfortunately,” Nick adds, “is someplace none of us want to go.”

Nodding in complete agreement, Travis picks up a sugar packet from out of a bowl on the table to toy with.

“Is John coming?” Ian asks, looking around.

“Not right now I expect, but I don’t think it’s really any of our business.” Ian doesn’t get the joke for a second, but then smiles. Nick continues, “No, the band was supposed to get together and do some stuff before soundcheck tonight.”

“Man, I bet he’s stoked,” Travis says, thumping the sugar packet.

“Yep.”

“I mean, think of all the people we’ve seen play the Watt. I never thought I’d see somebody I knew playing there.”

“Nope. It’s pretty wild.”

"Shit. Actually," Travis continues, thinking about it, "this is the *third* group I've seen at the Watt that I know personally."

Nick thinks about it, too. "Yeah, you're right." He adds, as an afterthought, "You'll be there one of these days."

"I guess. But in all honesty, that would be a tough space for me to fill."

"I've see a couple of solo artists there," Nick offers.

But Travis just shrugs. "To be honest, I like the intimacy of the smaller places I play. It keeps me from becoming too self conscious."

"I could see that," Nick says. And then, looking over at Ian, who is staring off into space, he waves a hand in from of Ian's eyes. "Hello?" he asks.

Ian shakes his stupor off and apologizes.

"Don't worry about it," Nick says. "Just tryin' to keep you with us."

"I need to eat, and then watch a movie or two; just vedge and then get tanked and see the show."

"It's gonna' be one of those days," Travis agrees.

"Actually, you guys wanna' catch a movie after this?"

"That'd be cool. There's some stuff out I'd really like to see," Nick says.

"Somethin' dumb though," Travis says.

"Yeah," Nick agrees. "Nothin' deep. Let's just go see an action flick and yell a lot."

The waitress comes up to the table with Ian and Travis's coffee, sets the cups down and asks Nick, "Can I get you somethin'?" She isn't too much older than the boys maybe twenty eight.

"Yeah," Nick says, turning the menu over, though he knows he doesn't have to look at it. "Le'me get a cup of coffee, a small o.j., and the German Apple Pancakes, please."

"Sure thing," she says, taking the menu and walking back toward the kitchen.

"I got all that beer in the fridge though," Ian says. "We could just rent something. Chill out on the couches."

"I could go for that, too," Travis agrees.

"Yeah," Nick agrees.

"Let's get to John's show early," Travis adds. "I'd like to see him before he goes on maybe hang out backstage in the green room."

"Oh yeah," Ian agrees. "I'm gonna' take my camera. I'd like to get some backstage pictures."

"You know," Travis says, staring into his upside down reflection in a spoon. "I think I'll hook up with Jackson and get some E or somethin'. If I get drunk, I'll just get tired. I'm feelin' pretty mellow. I don't really want ta' get drunk."

"E really?" asks Nick.

"Yeah."

"You know," Nick says thoughtfully, "I might join ya'. I've never done it before." He takes a big breath and lets it out, his cheeks puffing out. "Although," he adds

hesitantly, "I was pretty far gone last night."

"E's like Zen," Travis explains. "You don't get stupid."

"Really?"

"For me, anyway. I'm usually totally coherent. I guess a lot of people get real psyched."

"As long as it's not dumb."

"No. Last night was ridiculous."

"No pot," Nick says.

Holding up his hands, Travis agrees. "No pot."

"Last night was weird. It was like looking through a fisheye lens at everything."

"I could not get out of my head."

The waitress brings out Nick's coffee. "Ya'll's orders are just about ready," she says.

They all nod in response.

"And when John got me home which I have no idea how that happened I was sitting in front of those damn drawings in the armchair."

Travis makes a face. "Don't do that. Those things freak me out when I'm drunk. They look totally different, and not in a good way."

"It *was* wierd," Nick agrees. "It was like there was not outer edge to them. The whole room was like them, and they seem more real somehow. I just sat there laughing at myself."

"I don't understand how Jackson does it. He's always drunk or stoned."

"That boy is crazy," Ian says.

"But he's smart," Travis points out.

"Oh yeah. I'm not saying he's not."

"I remember, one time, he and I split a joint, and he... I don't know. I always talk in these big, vague generalities when I'm stoned, ya' know? What I say sounds real bright when I say it, but the next day it all seems pretty obvious. But Jackson can keep track of everything. It's like he only pays attention to details when he's stoned."

The waitress walks up to the table with a large tray and set it down on a portable stand. "Vegetable Quiche?" she asks.

"That's me," Travis replies, reaching out to take the plate.

The waitress dodges his arm, though. "This is still real hot, hon'," she says and just sets the plate on the table.

"German Apple Pancakes," she says, putting the second plate in front of Nick.

"And French Toast," she finishes, setting it in front of Ian. The friends all thank her and she replies, "Just let me know if you need anything," before leaving.

"Yes," Nick says, picking up his fork and knife. "This is *exactly* what I needed."

They all eat for a moment three bites maybe before Nick speaks up, purposefully stuffing a stack of bites into his mouth as he says, "There're no God damn holidays in June."

“What?” Travis asks, wrestling with his Quiche..  
 “There are no holidays in June.”  
 “So?”  
 “So, like...” Nick chews and swallows. “There’s no reason to have a big party.”  
 “What’s that all about?” Ian asks.  
 “What?” Nick asks.  
 “You don’t need a reason, dude.”  
 “No, no, no. That’s not what I’m sayin’. You don’t need a reason, but it just, like, helps a party out. You can get a bigger crowd, and you need a crowd to have a party.”  
 “You know what we should do then?” Travis asks.  
 “Do tell,” Ian replies.  
 “We should hire ourselves out as keg temps.”  
 Ian smiles.  
 “You know when you go to a party, and it’s kinda’ dead in the beginning, and no one will hang around because nobody’s there. It sucks, ‘cause you have to have, like, three waves of people before anyone will hang around ”  
 “There has to be a crowd,” Nick reiterates.  
 “Yeah. Exactly. So, we hire ourselves out to stand around and drink and make conversation with people until the party thickens out a bit.”  
 “Ha! The perfect job,” says Nick.  
 “You know what though?” Ian asks, chuckling to himself. “After awhile, people would start to recognize us.”  
 “There are those guys again,” Nick says, imitating the suspicion.  
 “It’d become taboo after a while they hired *keg temps*,” Ian says with contempt.  
 “You jus’ gotta’ ruin everything,” Travis laments.  
 “Yeah,” Nick agrees with Ian, laughing, “Let’s blow this joint buncha’ temps.”  
 “Okay,” Travis says, thinking while playing with the crust of his Quiche, “so we make it a nationwide program. We’ll keep people moving around.”  
 Nick checks his watch and makes his best business man face. “I gotta’ catch a flight to Milwaukee kegger out there for some girl’s birthday. And then I gotta’ hop a flight right after that for a wine tasting in L.A.” Nick makes an exasperated face. “I don’t know... it’s a lot of drinking to squeeze in.”  
 “Hi,” Ian says to Travis as though they’d never met. “We’re the keg temps you ordered.”  
 “Oh great,” Travis replies, “you’re just in time.” Scrutinizing Ian for second, Travis continues, “I’d hoped for someone taller, but you’ll have to do. Keg’s right over there, make yourself comfortable.”  
 Ian doesn’t miss the size joke and gives Travis a sarcastic “Oh, clever,” look.  
 “I still say it’s easier just to invent some kind of holiday,” Nick says.  
 “You know, actually,” Travis says, “we should find some obscure national holiday and throw a party.”

"National Breadbaking Day," Ian offers.

"Somethin' like that."

Nick points his knife at Travis's plate. "Eat," he commands. "I don't wanna' be here all day. You always take so damn long to eat."

"Sorry," Travis says, though not apologetically. "I'll try to stuff my face like you, Porko."

"Shut up," Nick snaps, his mouth full of hot apples. He swallows. "I can eat fast because all my food doesn't fall back out between the gaps in my teeth."

Ian laughs into his coffeecup. Travis smiles sheepishly. He had gapped teeth not horribly so but it was the Achilles heel of any confidence he had in his physical appearance. Everything is fair game, though. They all sit in silence for a few minutes, snickering, Travis trying to catch up.

Ian stops to light a cigarette. "You know, that *is* actually a good idea."

"What's that?" Travis asks.

"Hiring out party temps," Ian says, musing over the marginal costs and marketing factors through a haze. "I bet you could actually do that."

Travis shrugs. "You know, to tell you the truth, I think you could do it in someplace like L.A. Everything's so fake there anyway. Hell, for that matter ,"

"Eat," Nick grunts.

Travis just gives him a warning look, and Nick grins goofily back, his cheeks full of food like a chipmunk, baked apples squeezing into his grin. "For that matter," Travis begins again, "there's probably some business like that already out there."

"I don't know..." Ian replies.

"Think about it all those stars out there, throwin' money around on liposuction and cocaine they'd hire a bunch of people to move around and make their parties look fantastic."

"I think people would go to their parties regardless," Nick debates.

"That's true," Travis agrees. They ate for a while again, Nick and Ian finishing up. "Somebody might want to do just to look like a big star, you know."

"Dude," Ian agrees, "I bet L.A. is completely like that. They invite one executive producer and then pay everyone else to show up to the party."

"It doesn't matter. That's not the point," Nick says. "June still needs a holiday."

"Dude, you only need a holiday when you've got no other reason to celebrate. The weather in June is more than enough reason to have a party," Ian argues.

"That's why there aren't any real holidays in the summer," Travis adds.

Nick points at Travis. "Fourth of July."

"Yeah, whose bright idea was that? Let's run around during the hottest, driest month of the year and set shit on fire."

"Fireworks are fun!" Nick declares.

"Not around dried grass."

"Shut up. You're just mad 'cause I disproved your little there are no holidays in

summer theory.”

“There’re anomalies in every scientific theory,” Travis explains.

“Shut up. I win.”

“The point of a debate is not to win,” Travis continues. “The point of a debate is to explore the subject matter in a rational way.”

“The point of a debate is to completely humiliate your opponent.”

Travis closes his eyes exasperated and shakes his head. “You couldn’t humiliate the back side of a barn.”

The three sit in silence for a moment, thinking over what has just been said, until Nick pipes up. “*That* made absolutely *no* sense.”

“You’re right,” Travis agrees, rubbing his eyes. “That made no sense.”

“It’s the broadside of a barn in the first place, you moron.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah.”

“And humiliation isn’t something you well... it isn’t something you you don’t ”

“Aim,” Travis helped.

“Yeah!”

Ian is just laughing to himself, unable to comment.

“You know what time it is now?” Nick asks, imitating Travis and hitting Ian in the shoulder. “Time for a quesadilla,” Nick says, patting his stomach.

“I’m never gonna’ live that down,” Travis laments.

“You couldn’t live down the backside of a barn,” Nick replies.

Just then, the waitress approaches the table, picking up Ian and Nick’s plates. Travis is just finishing up. “You boys need anything.”

Ian leans back in his chair and replies, nonchalantly, “A trip to Europe.”

“A good, hearty woman to marry and cook for me,” Nick adds.

“I’d like a dollar,” Travis says hopefully.

“You guys should be on TV,” the waitress replies, laughing.

The boys all shrug and take the compliment with smiles.

Balancing Nick and Ian’s plates, the waitress digs through her apron looking for the check. “How ‘bout if I jus’ give ya’ll the bill.”

“No,” Nick says, waving his hand, “I’d rather not have that.” Ian and Travis shake their heads as well.

“Well,” the waitress says, kidding, “I’m afraid I’m gonna’ have ta’ give it to ya’.”

“Can we get it rung up separately? Ian asks.

“Yeah. Just take it over to the register when you’re ready.” She sets the bill on the table and takes Travis’s now empty plate.

“Well,” Ian asks, sitting up, “What do we wanna’ do? Get a movie? Meet back at my place?”

“Relax,” Travis says casually. “You’re always in such a hurry. Finish your coffee, smoke a bud. We got nowhere to be.” Taking on a Jewish mother’s voice, he adds, “Let your food settle. Oy vey!”

Nick joins in with the voice, "Slow down. Settle. Have some kids."  
 Ian laughs and lights a cigarette.  
 Travis muses, "I love having no need to know what day it is."  
 "Yeah," Nick adds, "I realized the other day that I didn't have any idea what the date was. I was gonna' check too, and then I was, like, 'fuck it'. What do I need ta' need know for?"  
 "It does feel pretty good just coasting," Ian agrees.  
 "No. I don't think *you* know what coasting is," Travis says accusingly.  
 Nick sits up and put his hand out for a handshake, "HellomynameisIan Nevins. It'snicetomeetyoubutIhave amillionandonethingstodobytomorrowso Ican'ttalkrightnow. I'llseeyoulaterBye."  
 Travis laughs loudly.  
 "Dude," Ian says, "I'm chillin'. I can chill." He leans back in his chair into a rapper pose. "I'm jus' col' kickin' it."  
 Nick shakes his head. "You, my friend, are no homey."  
 "I knew a homey," Travis interjects. "I knew a homey personally, and you, sir, are no homey." Travis turns to Nick. "Oh, I forgot to tell you: I just got another show."  
 "No way."  
 "Yeah. Next week at Washington Street Tavern."  
 "Awesome."  
 "I guess I'll have to get my shit together."  
 "You should play that rendition of 'Sweet Baby James'. I like that."  
 Travis nods.  
 "You ever think about makin' a t shirt?" Ian asks.  
 "John and I were talkin' about that. I don't know... I could see a band doin' it, but marketing myself seems a little strange."  
 "No, dude, it doesn't have to be just your name or anything."  
 "I'd do some artwork for ya'," Nick offers.  
 "That Jacob and the angel piece would rock on a black t shirt."  
 Nick rolls his eyes.  
 "Or not."  
 "No. The leg's all fucked up now. I can't get the line of posture right."  
 "It'd too heavy for a t shirt," Travis adds, "But somethin' else'd be cool."  
 "You should make it kinda' cryptic," Ian adds.  
 "Actually, I saw this band's t shirt one time... We could make one that just said 'I hate Travis Fleeting' on the front just in a plain font of some kind."  
 "No," Nick says, "something more enigmatic."  
 "Travis Fleeting is the walrus?" Travis offers.  
 "Travis Fleeting is people!" Nick declares in his best Charlton Heston voice, tugging at his hair.  
 "How about: 'Cause Travis says so," offers Ian.

Travis just shakes his head. "It's still weird the idea of advertising myself."

"Ya' gotta' market yourself."

"Ah," Nick dismisses his friend's concern. "Pretty soon, you'll be selling corporate stock in yourself."

"What, like Bowie?"

"Yeah."

"Nah, only he could do that."

"How about: Travis Fleeting is fat?" Nick asks.

"No. That would be lying."

"You're so fat, every time you go to the beach, Greenpeace keeps tryin' ta' drag you back in the water."

Ian breaks out laughing again.

"You're so fat," Travis replies, "The doctor diagnosed you with that flesh eating disease and gave you ... ten years to live."

Nick puts his hands over his heart, as though he'd suffered a mortal wound. And they were all laughing like Thursday now, sitting around a Wednesday table, before the Friday night storms rolled in, Saturday morning sitting like a black clad cackling secret agent in the corner, rubbing his hands and waiting to catch them.



*. Everything that begins with an M*

“So, we’ll meet back at our place?” Travis asks Ian outside of the Blue Bird.

“Yeah. You get the goods and I’ll get the movie,” Ian replies, moving on down the sidewalk.

Nick and Travis walk around the corner of Clayton and down North Thomas Street to one of the city parking lots on Washington. Entering the lot, they make their way over to a twenty year old, faded lime green Ford Montego. With a loving pat on the roof, Nick gets in and leans over across the long, plush velvet front seat and unlocks the door for Travis. Even though he is six foot five, it is still a stretch for Nick to reach the passenger door, the cabin’s width being what it was.

Travis gets in as Nick starts the car. The engine comes to life and Nick pats the dashboard sweetly. “That’s it, baby,” he says as he revs the engine a couple of times.

Bouncing in his seat a little, Travis smiles at Nick. “I haven’t ridden in Her Majesty in a while,” he says as Nick pulls out of the parking spot and heads toward the nearest convenience store.

Many years ago, longer now than most care to remember, Nick had been the recipient of this incredible automobile inheritance. His parents bestowed upon him ownership of the majestic Montego, a massive and powerful machine. A relic and an arc, a rambling tank, a lime o sine, gashog behemoth. So many words can be found to describe such a vehicle, for it was the only one of its kind and uniqueness assists the vocabulary.

For a long time, the car was a burden on Nick. It was old and crotchity and sometimes gave trouble when unwanted. It was pale in comparison to some of the newer, prettier cars that Nick’s schoolmates got to drive. He drove the Montego reluctantly, cursing every click, every jolt, dealing with the innards only when forced. And for the Montego, this was nothing new. At twenty years of age, ancient by any standard of the automobile industry, it had seen enough and been driven enough that driving down that last tunnel to the great country road in the sky didn’t seem too terrible a fate.

Then, something happened. As strangely as opposites attract, as peculiarly as romance that blooms from detest, Nick found himself driving the Montego with delight. It settled on him, in him, and him in it. He discovered the beauty of the faded color and rust spots, discovered practicality in the size of the backseat with a girlfriend, and knew there was power inherent in watching the gas guage drop when the accelerator pedal hit the floor.

By its twenty first birthday, the night that Travis and Nick poured a beer on its hood, the Montego had found new love. As the kiss of the hops washed over her metallic belly, she felt it soak her insides with new life and vigor. And as love sometimes does, Nick's concern for the vehicle seemed to reverse time's effects. The Montego grew younger. It pepped up, thinned up, became more solid then it had ever been. It went from car to the revered status of treasure, from junk to antique. It found it still had meaning; that it had shed its object nature and could take part in conversation. The Montego found that what had once been a generic model title was now a namesake, and that the word *it* no longer suited *her*.

"Twenty one years and the transmission's never been *touched*. How 'bout *that*!" Nick would declare to new riders, leaning coyly on the hood.

Even those who could not understand the transcendence of thing to soul came to know that Nick's love for the Montego was something to be jealous of. It was a feeling not meant for the hundreds of thousands mass produced vehicles infecting the road and its void of individualism. It was a feeling for the particular, for the singular, the unique. So, Nick brought the Montego with him to college without question. He embraced her fully and made her one of the first relics of his new life. She was to be with him everywhere he chose to ramble. She became the chariot of the gods of the ridiculous, a masterful addition to a pointless epic tale. She was the Hera to the Thunderchicken's Zeus. Most importantly of all, though she was *aware*.

One day, just before June, Nick had been considering the possibility of acquiring a new car not a mistake in itself. The Montego was old, it's days were numbered, that much could be granted. But one does not discuss coffin sizes in front of their mother. The mistake Nick made was to discuss the matter with Travis while driving the Montego, and she didn't take kindly to it. When Nick and Travis arrived home and went inside, they found John and Ian watching television and began discussing the details of the night's plans only Nick couldn't pay too much attention. A buzzing was ringing in his ear that left him feeling disoriented. Finally, the nagging tone forced him to check reality and ask, "Does anyone else hear that?"

The group quietly listened and agreed that a sound of some kind was emanating from outside the apartment. And when the group listened more closely they all realized that it was the sound of a car horn. Nick had gone to the door to see what kind of wreck or tragedy was producing the voluminous whine. When he opened the door, his eyes looked out across the rows of cars, and gradually his hearing honed in on the sound, and had centered on the Montego. "I'll be right back," he'd said to the gang, and began walking toward her. As he approached, and the dismal sound grew louder, a wave of worry washed over his stomach. Something was wrong. Was it trivial or was the horn merely an indicator of something more serious, something fatal even. The horn, blasting out into the parking lot, resounding off apartment building walls resembled more that of a lone howling wolf. It was not the tone of a scream, an irritated bark in a traffic jam after being cut off. It was sad. She was crying.

The boy's came to the door of D to see what the matter was. Neighbors stood by their windows to seek out what was disturbing the quiet afternoon, and all eyes watched as Nick placed his hand upon the door handle, and the howling ceased instantly vanished.

It was then that Nick realized his mistake, and he sat in the plush, velvet interior and hugged the steering wheel with a sincere apology and recognized that age is a simple matter of unavoidable consequence. No one asks to grow old and fall apart. Only rationalizing death is the opposite of feeling for souls affected by time against their will. Travis turned to John and Ian and smiled. "Let's give them some privacy," he said, walking in and shutting the door behind them.

She lingered, she waited, she drove, and she loved the boys. And if she couldn't sit with them in their midnight reveries, prattle with them philosophically in bars, or joke mischievously in coffeehouses, she *could* take them there and make sure they got home. And she did it with grace.

*. Have Some Wine*

When Travis, Ian, and Nick walk into the Watt, the place is empty. It resembles, at that point, a warehouse; concrete floor and a ceiling sixteen feet overhead, filled with steel rafters. To the right from the entrance there is a full bar stretching the length of the entire wall, while beyond them to the front lay the stage, four feet up off the ground. The other side of the club, to the left, is barely visible in the low light. There is a short wall with two bathroom doors, and a short bar next to that, set up on a platform a few feet off the ground. In the very back corner, opposite the front entrance is a dark portal that leads back into a game room.

"I don't think I've ever seen this place this empty," Nick comments as the threesome stroll into the middle of the dance floor. There is a mistake in the air like directions that don't read right. A place hallowed for its entertainment and thrills could never look so dull and be so quiet.

"You guys feelin' all right?" Ian asks.

Nick shrugs. "I think so. Do I not seem like it?"

"No, you seem fine."

Travis interjects, "It takes twenty or thirty minutes. You'll know."

"I'm not gonna' try to jump off a building or anything, am I?" Nick asks.

"It's not acid, man. Trust me. It's much more chill than that. You've done shrooms, right?"

"Yeah, once last summer."

"It's like shrooms except without the hallucinatory effects. It's like you have a lot of energy but there's a physical manifestation of it you *feel* a lot."

Nick just nods.

"You'll see," Travis repeats.

"Man," Ian says, fiddling with his camera bag on the floor, "Some friends of mine and I did shrooms my freshman year. That was amazing."

"Never done 'em," Travis says with a shrug.

"Well how do you know to compare them to this?" Nick asks incredulously.

"Just from what people have told me."

"You would definitely dig shrooms. They're totally positive. All I wanted to do was work on shit, and I totally had the capacity to do it. It was like being perfectly clear headed with just one thing to focus on."

"I just like being relaxed every now and then. E is just kind of like playing my

guitar, except I don't have to play anything it's a cheap way to meditate."

"I doubt it's like painting," Nick offers.

"Why?"

"Well," Nick thinks about it as the threesome head over to the bar. "I definitely lose myself in what I'm doing, but there's a lot of energy. I wouldn't call it relaxing."

"Well, it's like the difference between playing something hard core or, like, a folk song. I mean, I probably wouldn't be too relaxed playing a cover of 'Layla'." Travis sits the tripod he is carrying for Ian on the bar, and they all sit down, each looking around for a bartender. "Relaxing is not the right word. You're just at ease." The three sit and glance around at the empty surroundings, each remembering the pulse of the crowd they'd seen before here. "Alcohol's a depressant, right?"

"It always makes me feel good," Nick replies.

"Yeah, I know. But, it's like, pharmacuetically categorized as a depressant, right?"

"I think so," Ian says slowly, trying to recall the information from some obscure lesson in a health class somewhere.

"Dontcha' think it's weird that the most popular drug in the US is a depressant."

"Stress," Ian replies.

"What's that?" Travis asks, not quite hearing him.

"It calms the nerves like valium. Everyone in this country is so damn stressed."

"No, I don't think it has anything to do with that," Nick adds. "I don't think most people could tell you what alcohol does for them. It's just that it's the only legal drug."

"Yeah," Travis agrees.

"Things are really different over in Europe. A week of stress management classes doesn't even compare to a good glass of wine," Ian says.

"I guess I don't understand why everyone is always so stressed. I'm not stressed."

"You're an idiot," Nick says, pointing.

"Ignorance is bliss," Travis retorts.

"No, you're right," Nick says thoughtfully. "Everyone should just learn to be like us."

"Well," Travis replies, unsure, "I wasn't exactly recommending *that*."

"I wouldn't recommend that to anyone," Ian says matter of factly shaking his head.

"Actually," Travis says, "hanging out with you guys is really pretty irritating."

"If you weren't so damn annoying..." Nick says, rolling his eyes.

"Is there actually a bartender in this place?" Ian asks annoyed, looking around.

"I think we can just serve ourselves," Travis replies.

"Get *outta' the way*," Nick chuckles.

"I need another beer," Ian says.

"What?" Nick asks, "the seven you had before we got here wasn't enough?"

"Dude," Ian says, "I drank, like, *two*."

"Two packs?" Travis asks.

"Two dozen packs," Nick agrees.

"I don't know what you're talkin' about," Ian says, pretending to be frustrated. "You guys must be on drugs or somethin'."

"Hmm..." Nick thinks sarcastically. "That's funny. Because now that you mention it..."

"This is ridiculous." Ian gets up and walks around behind the bar.

Travis and Nick exchange unsure glances before Nick says to Ian, "What are you doing?"

"We'll pay for it when they get here."

"Uh, I don't think they're open yet, man," Travis adds.

Ian pulls three beers from out of the glass front fridge, opens two and hands them to Travis and Nick. Opening and taking a pull off his own, Ian looks at the other two from behind the bar and says, "They should lock the doors then," with a shrug.

Travis shrugs and drinks off his beer mischievously.

Nick checks over his shoulder for a moment, and then, "Oh well."

Ian glances around the back of the bar and leans casually on it. "You know, I've always loved tending bar."

"Is it cool back there?" Travis asks.

"Yeah." Ian looks around again. "I gotta' say, I always feel sorta' powerful."

"The almighty bartender," Nick says.

Ian comes from around the bar and takes his seat between Nick and Travis again. The three sit drinking their beer for a moment before a figure walks out of the dark from beyond the far end of the bar. As she approaches Travis sees it is Rachel and calls out, "Hey there, dollface."

"Where's the bathroom?" she replies.

"Love ya' too, babe," Travis says making a gun with his hand.

All of the boys turn around on their stools.

"Howya' doin', Rachel?" Nick asks.

She sighs. "I'm fine."

"Is everybody in the back?" Ian asks.

"No. Alex has turned up missing, and they're calling everywhere trying to find him. He went to go get a pack of smokes and hasn't come back." She turns her head to the side and smiles. "How are you?" she says acting energetic. It is evident she isn't feeling well.

"Getting drunk. You?" Ian replies.

Rachel puts her hand near her bladder. "I've had a lot."

"The bathroom's over there," Travis offers, pointing to the other side of the room.

"I know. I was just kidding. This is my fifth trip since seven o'clock."

"We haven't seen you in a while. You should come over," Nick says.

"Yeah. I guess John's been real busy with the band lately." There was a detectable amount of annoyance in the statement. Travis wonders to himself if that was the trouble that John and Rachel were having. "Okay," Rachel says, putting up her hands. "I really

have to go to the bathroom,” and she walks away in that direction.

The boys turn around on their stools again, where a bartender has materialized before them. She had been waiting for the last couple of minutes for their attention. Nick, not usually a jumpy person, just about falls off his stool. Travis smiles quietly to himself knowing the reason. He is also overly surprised by the bartender’s sudden appearance, but he’s used to the effect.

The young woman looks from beer to beer in the boys’ hands apathetically, but noticing nonetheless.

“We brought them in with us,” Ian answers quickly.

“That’s not allowed,” the bartender replies stoically.

“Yeah, well, we’re done anyway. Can I get a Budweiser?”

“Me too,” Travis adds unable to keep from laughing.

The bartender looks to Nick who is still stunned, and looking at the bar with a strange mix of confusion and realization. He looks up suddenly and says, “Uh... Jack and Coke... please.”

Once the bartender steps away, Travis leans over the bar and towards Nick. “Feelin’ a little somethin’?” Travis asks mischievously.

“That was weird,” Nick says slowly, still looking around at the bar and his lap.

Travis makes his patented crazy face, his mouth partly open, his teeth showing, and his eyes wide open. “Heh... heh... heh, heh.”

Nick shakes his head and put his hands flat on the bar. Ian looks on with intense curiosity, smiling. “What?” he asks Nick.

“I don’t know,” Nick says, shaking his head and staring at the bar. “It was like she was... *more* there than anything else.” He shakes his head quickly again, as though to physically shake the effects off.

Travis leans over behind Ian and taps Nick on the shoulder while he isn’t looking. Nick jumps again and stands up. “Don’t *do* that.”

The bartender comes back with the two beers and Nick’s drink, doles them out, and takes the boys’ money. Travis taps Nick on the shoulder again while the bartender is getting change. Nick jumps again and leans into the bar, whispering past Ian, “Knock it off.” The bartender gives them their change and then wanders off back to where she came from.

“Friendly girl,” Ian says sarcastically, making a discriminating frown and drinking from his beer.

Travis gets up off his stool and starts walking toward Nick, his arms outstretched as though he were going to tap Nick again. Standing up, Nick starts backing off. “Really,” he says, incapable of not smiling and holding his hands out, “Stop it.”

Travis straightens up. “You’re no fun,” and he walks back to his stool.

“No fun?” Nick asks incredulously. “You’re freakin’ me out.”

Ian looks Nick up and down, trying to detect anything different about his friend. “What is it, dude?”

“Everytime he taps me, it’s like somebody’s throwing a baseball at me.”

"What? Does it hurt?"

"No, no. It's just big, that's all." Nick seems genuinely shaken as he sits down on his stool again but he can't stop smiling. Travis is staring at some trivial something at the end of the bar, so Nick leans over past Ian and taps Travis on the shoulder. Travis just falls on the floor dramatically, and Ian and Nick start laughing.

"Ha ha," Travis says sarcastically from the floor. "Real funny." He doesn't get up.

"Get off the floor, man," Ian says. "Somebody's gonna' see you."

"So?" Travis asks lathargically.

Ian looks back to Nick who is now staring at the beer bottles in the cooler with great intensity. He laughs to himself and looks over his shoulder to see Rachel approaching them.

"What are you doing?" she asks. Obviously she has seen some of the antics from across the room.

Ian just shrugs and stands up to go meet her. He steps over Travis who is lying contendedly on his back. "We're just having some fun."

Travis watches the space above him, thoroughly amused as he sees Rachel and Ian's head appear high above his own. They are looking at him and seem entirely unreal like recordings of their former selves, a television point of view through his own eyes. The perspective is too much, and he picks himself up off the ground, while at the same time realizing how ridiculous he probably looked though he hadn't thought at all about the fact that he was on the floor. As he stands up, Rachel asks him out of curiosity, "Are you feeling all right?"

Travis stands up completely and straightens himself out. All he can hear in the question is an honest concern for his welfare. It bothers him for a moment before he looks into her eyes with a shit eating grin and says, "You may now call me Tecron the Wise."

Ian just laughs and pats Travis on the shoulder, "Okay, man."

"No. I'm just kidding," Travis answers, knowing he was just partly being silly. "I'm cool."

Rachel chuckles to herself and says, "Somebody wrote on the wall in the bathroom, 'Question everything,' and somebody wrote beneath that, 'Why?'" She and Ian and Travis laugh. Nick looks to be still mesmerized by the beer bottles.

Travis reaches over and just touches him on the shoulder, so as not to shock him again. Nick turns around, his eyes wide. "Let's go find John," he suggests and to Nick, the name John has all the effect of the words Dali Lama or the Pope.

"Man, this shit's cool!" Nick replies. He is smiling wider than the Cheshire Cat.

Ian pats him on the shoulder. "You sure you feel all right? You were staring over there for a minute or two."

"Was I really? Actually? That felt like an hour."

"Yeah?" Ian asks.

"I feel fine," Nick reassures his overly concerned drunken pal.

They all set off for the Green Room, drinks and equipment in hand. Nick steps up



with Travis and repeats, "Man, this shit's cool."

"Just wait," Travis says.

"What?" asks Nick.

"Just wait. You'll settle into it."

"I feel fine now though." Nick clumsily executes a couple of martial arts moves to prove his point.

"Like, relaxed?" Travis asks.

"No. It's like you said: zen."

"Yeah. This isn't quite like the last time I did it though," Travis says, trying to site a difference. "I still have that not tired, not awake effect."

Nick takes in a big breath and says, "Yeah. Totally cool." He let the air out of his lungs and laughs for no reason. His eyes open wide suddenly and he says, "Holy shit! I need a smoke!"

"Forgot that you did, didn't you?" Travis asks knowingly.

"Yeah. I forgot I ever did."

Travis looks at Nick and laughs, to which Nick laughs in return. Nick stands in place for a moment and then moves around like a robot, making industrial squeals and whirs out of the side of his mouth. Travis looks on, a blank look covering his face. Nick stops and looks around. They are standing inside a darkened hallway between the dance floor and backstage. It seems as though Rachel and Ian have vanished or were never there to begin with. Putting his hand over his mouth, Nick lets out an exaggerated high pitched giggle, "Hee hee hehehehe."

"Hee hee hehehehe," Travis imitates.

Taking two steps back into the shadows of the hallway, Nick says in a goofy, Swedish/German accent, "I yam hiding from yoo."

Travis takes three large, pronounced steps around in a circle while declaring, "I yam seeking yoo." It was a scene from one of their favorite cartoons. Like a kind of zen meditation, it was the thing they most often lapsed into when nothing was funny but they needed something to laugh at it. Travis reaches into his coat and produces a pack of cigarettes. "Here you go."

Nick smiles and laughs. "Man, you're the best."

"Hey," Travis says slowly, "We're like that."

Nick laughs, takes a cigarette and puts his arm around Travis. "We've been friends for a long time, man."

"We have," Travis says, lighting Nick's cigarette.

Nick stands next to Travis, his arm around his friend's shoulder and pulls off his cigarette. "Boy, that's nice."

"It's dry. Very tasty."

Nick begins to contemplate his cigarette heavily before Travis interjects, "Hey!" He turns slowly and brings Nick around to face an exit sign at the end of the hallway. "Look at the sign," he said slowly and mystically.

"It's the exit," Nick says reverently. Nick stares intensely for a moment and then relaxes. "Wow." Looking down at his hands, Nick examines them in the faint but seemingly intense light. "Wow," he says, without emotion.

"Just remember three things," Travis says. "No one can understand what you're saying, couches do not talk, and light is just light you can't eat it."

"You're just fuckin' with me."

"No wait." Travis thinks a moment. "It's light can't understand what you're saying, you can't understand anyone, and couches aren't edible."

"Quit it."

"I know," Travis replies. "I'm just kidding. It's not that bad, right? The first time I did it, I was *totally* coherent. It just makes you a little off center, you know."

Turning, they both walk into the Green Room, a small room at the back of the club, behind the stage. Into it are packed four couches, a coffee table and thirteen bodies: The four guys from Homespun Moose, the five members of Simple Symbolism, Eric the lead guitarist, his girlfriend Lauren, Rachel and Ian. Stumbling through the door, Nick and Travis make their way back to the hall to the stagedoor, where John, dressed in a full three piece suit, is currently leaning against a wall with a fifth of Cuervo in his hand. Everyone in the room regards Travis and Nick peculiarly as the two make their way to the back of the room without a word or looking at anyone. Ian just makes the universal sign for "drugged up" as Nick and Travis pass, and everyone in the room relaxes again. Half of them are only paranoid because they're stoned anyway. Now they're giggling to one another secretly.

Travis walks up to John, presents himself in military fashion and announces, "Hello, Admiral."

Looking at Travis suspiciously, and at Nick, who is normally several inches taller than Travis, but at this moment crouched down and hovering right behind Travis, hiding. John replies, slowly, "Hello there." He knows them both well enough to detect when they're up to something.

"We have come to bestow good luck upon you," Travis says.

"Thank you," John says simply, still watchful.

Letting the 'L' roll of his tongue slowly, Nick peeks up from behind Travis and half repeats the sentiment, "L l l luck." He hides behind Travis again.

"Yes," John says, mildly amused with the pair, and not sure at all if Nick's statement is merely a rhetorical one.

"Are you ready?" Travis asks, trying to regain some element of normalcy an element he is not entirely sure he has lost in the first place. He still sounds like he is talking about a space flight the way he asks the question.

"Ah," John says, relaxing, shrugging, "Ready as I'm gonna' be."

"And you're always gonna' *be*," Nick said, peering up from behind Travis and nodding. John laughs. "Is that right?"

"Nick here is the cap'n," Travis says, throwing his thumb over his shoulder.

Nick peers up again like periscope and looks surprised to hear this that or surprised to see Travis's thumb. John can't tell which. Leaning in, John just says mysteriously, "Are you the sultan, Trav?"

Travis thinks about this for a moment and then merrily agrees.

"I have bad news for ya', Trav," John says, shaking his head. "Bad news."

"Oh no," Travis says, "*You* can't do that to *me*. I'm the sultan."

"Oh yes I can, Trav," John says with an evil grin.

Nick, in the meantime, is pushing past both John and Travis to get to the stage door.

"No, John. See, when I'm on Mount Olympus see *then* you can sell me out. But I'm in Elysian Fields right now so you can't."

John thinks about this seriously for a moment. "E?"

Travis gives him the old thumb's up.

"What the hell's he talkin' about?" Nick hollers from down the hall.

Travis looks past John to where Nick is. He has seated himself on the floor in the corner of the hall by the door. Slowly, Travis makes his way over to where Nick is.

"Okay," he says, taking a big exasperated breath. "There are people everywhere, right?"

"Right," Nick agrees. He thinks about it again. "Okay."

"And everybody has a negative person like matter and antimatter. There are anti people."

"Sure," Nick says slowly.

"And see," Travis continues, "John sold me out once to the negative people once, when we were stoned. They can come and get me now."

"You're nuts," Nick responds from the floor, his arms wrapped around his knees.

"Yeah, yeah," Travis says, irritated. "I *know* that. But that's not the point."

"I think that's the point," Nick argues.

"The *point* is, that when we're stoned, John tries to make me paranoid which is a very easy thing to do. But I'm not stoned right now."

"What the hell does that have to do with Mount Olympus and Elysian Fields?"

"Code words," says John from behind Travis.

Travis jumps a little at hearing the voice so suddenly from behind him, and gives John an irritated look for sneaking up on him. John just beams back stupidly. Nick looks to John and then back to Travis. "Code words for what?"

"States of mind," Travis answers secretively.

"I don't get it."

"Think about it for a second."

"Shut up. I don't wanna' think about it."

"States of mind," Travis repeats, "like, M in Mount Olympus for Marijuana?"

"Oh. I get it," Nick agrees. "Elysian Fields: Ecstasy."

"Yeah. And they're all mystical places," Travis says.

"He got so paranoid about the whole deal, he wouldn't talk about anything until we

had code words for it all," John says.

"Did you come up with one for all of them?" Nick asks.

"I think so," Travis answers and looks to John for a prompt.

"Atlantis... Elysian Fields... Mount Olympus... Hades " John starts.

"No, no," Travis interrupts frantically. "You're giving the code away."

John looks at him funny and Nick says, "I can know the code."

"How do we know he's not one of *them*?" Travis asks so Nick can hear him.

"I'm not a negative person," Nick retorts.

"I guess Nick is a *positive* being," Travis said thoughtfully.

Nick laughs and tries to stand up. He fails, and then says from the ground, "That's so cheesy. I'm a positive person." He thinks about for a second and then relaxes again.

"Yeah, man, I *am* a positive person."

"You rock, dude," Travis agrees.

"Dude, you're awesome, too."

"You see," Travis says, as though he'd somehow proven a point, "on Mount Olympus you can detect equal levels of people and anti people, but in Elysian Fields, you can't detect the negative people at all, but you can *feel* your positivity in opposition to their presence."

Nick and John thinks about this John just pretending, Nick actually doing it .

"What about Atlantis?" Nick asks. "What about that?"

"The negative people rape you there," John says.

They all laugh as Ian approaches the group. He isn't quite walking right, but he isn't stumbling either. He makes his way down the hall in an investigative manner, past John and Travis, and approaches Nick. "You all right there, buddy?" he asks, bending over slightly putting his hands on his knees.

"Never better," Nick replies from the floor, putting his thumb up.

Ian stands up and points Nick out to John and Travis who just look on bemusedly.

"C'mon," Ian said, lightly kicking Nick, "Let's go out on the dance floor. I wanta' take some pictures."

"No, no," says Nick waving Ian off, "I'm feeling undefined."

"Are you all right?"

"Cripes," Travis says, throwing up his arms, "why don't ya' nanny the guy."

"Hey man," Ian says, standing up straight and meandering down to where Travis is, "I'm jus' wonderin'ing is all."

Travis puts on his "angry" face and stares at Ian. He can smell the ganja now.

"Well, why don't you wonder somewhere else ya' God damned wop."

Ian responds by putting his "angry" face on and leans in. "Don't tell me what ta' do ya' fuckin' mick," he says slowly.

Neither of them can hold the pose and they start laughing. Ian puts his arm around Travis's shoulder and said, "Vaquero!" with a thick Spanish accent.

"Pirata!" Travis says and pats Ian on the back.

Travis and Ian laugh for a minute before John looks them both up and down and says like a nine year old who can't get his friends in on a dare , "You guys are gay."

Nick laughs hard from the floor at the end of the hall.

"Shut up," Travis says, "you're just jealous that you can't show your feminine side."

John tugs his pants up around his waist and replies in a redneck accent, "C'mere. I'll show ya' how ta' hug a man."

"No way," Travis says, frightened. He starts backing down the hall to where Nick is still lying on the floor.

John smiles evilly and chants, "Daddy giveth and daddy taketh away."

Travis and Nick cower at the end of the hall, while Ian just looks on dumbfounded another apartment joke, apparently. John turns suddenly to Ian and said, "C'mon, let's go take those pictures." Ian and John walk off leaving Travis and Nick in the hall.

"I *hate* it when he does that," Nick says.

"Hey!" Travis hollers and hits Nick on the shoulder.

"Ow! What?"

"Let's got sit in a couple of those big ol' lounge chairs out off the dance floor just sit for a while."

"That sounds good," Nick agrees dreamily.

The pair make their way out of the green room, past a couple of laughing members of Homespun Noose and Eric and Lauren discussing something serious. The rest of the band is out in the hall waiting on Eric, and the front man, Lee is closest to the door when Nick and Travis come out. Lee turns to greet Travis, "Travis, right?"

"Yeah. Hey, Lee, how're you?"

"Pretty good, man, pretty good. You?"

"I'm just fine. You know Nick?"

"Yeah, yeah," says Lee, reaching out and shaking Nick's hand. "I think we talked for a second after our second or third show."

"Yeah, I remember," Nick agreed.

"Oh, and John says you have some paintings I need to see."

"Yeah... well..." says Nick modestly.

"He seems to really like your work," Lee adds. They all walk out onto the dance floor. There were a few more people milling about now. "Actually," Lee continues. "We're gonna' be hitting the studios in a few months. I guess we might need some artwork for an album. John seems to think you're the man."

"That would be cool." Nick turns around suddenly, looks around behind him for a few moments and then looks back as though nothing had happened. "Yeah," he says again, and then checks over his shoulder one more time. Travis laughs.

"You all right there?" Lee asks, trying to look behind Nick.

"Oh yeah," Nick answers vehemently.

"We're rollin'," Travis says, and Nick hits him in the shoulder. "What?" he asks Nick.

"No," Lee says to Nick, "don't worry, dude. I'm cool with that. You guys are gonna' *enjoy* the show."

Nick and Travis nod, Travis with a wink.

"All right," Lee says, "if you guys'll excuse me I think we're doin' a fo toe shoot here." Lee makes a face to show he doesn't want them to think he's being pretentious. Nick and Travis just smile though. Everyone kidded about being famous. It was what they all wanted though or was a consequence of what they really wanted.

Making their way over to a couple of comfortable armchairs, Nick and Travis seat themselves. Nick reaches out for one of the arms before actually sitting down and stops in his tracks, some sort of revelation holding him in place. He starts rubbing the arm of the chair briskly. "*Feel* this," he says to Travis.

Already seated, Travis leans over and feels the arm of the chair. "Oh yeah," he agrees.

Kneeling down on one knee, Nick begins running his hand up and down on the armchair. "Oh my God," he says, rubbing more vigorously. "This is amazing."

"Yep," Travis agrees. "But *sit* in it, dude."

Nick pulls himself up into the chair and sinks back, completely relaxed. He sits still for a few moments, looking around at nothing in particular. "I am not moving from this chair," he declares.

"It's great, isn't it?"

"I like this *way* too much."

"Yeah." Travis agrees, "Don't change a thing."

*. No room! No room!*

The door to D bursts open as two gangly shadowed figures clamour in, pushing and shoving, each trying to get ahead of the other. The door slams shut behind them and a giggle sounds out, followed by a loud and rumbling crash accompanied by Nick yelling, "Ah! Fuck!" Travis laughs out loud in the dark and then glances back to the still closed front door. Fear comes back into his heart, and he begins groping around in the dark for Nick's shoulders. "C'mon, man, get up!" Grabbing Nick by the collar of his jacket, he pulls and almost falls over himself.

Using Travis's pants leg for a hoist, Nick drags himself off the carpet and pushes past Travis. "Get out of the way!" Travis yells when he thinks he hears a noise behind him and runs into the dark hallway between his and Nick's bedrooms.

"Fuck!" Nick says again as he runs into his doorjam. Feeling his way through the dark, he reaches out for the door to the walk in closet that connects his and Travis's room. Entering, he thrusts himself to the floor and promptly began burying himself under dirty clothes, laughing hysterically the whole time. Travis follows suit, but instead of making for the closet, he falls to the floor and rolls under Nick's bed, carpet burning his left elbow. "Aw, shit!" He tries to shove himself as far back as he can, pushing dirty shoes, a hair dryer, some clothes and God knows what else out of his way. For a moment, he can hear Nick shifting around, and then, silence. Travis is so nervous, he hiccupps another giggle. "Shut up!" Nick whispers harshly from the closet. "He'll hear us." Travis tries to lay still, listening to his heart beat against the floor.

The front door's knob jingles and then the door creaks open and shuts again. Travis holds his breath and listens carefully with his head to the carpet. He waits for the dreaded footsteps in the hall, or a voice. But there is only silence. And then, after a moment, there is the sound of the bathroom door closing on the other side of the apartment.

"What's he doin'?" Travis whispers.

"Shut up!" Nick says again. And then after a moment of silence he whimpers, "I'm scared."

The door to John's bathroom opens with a shudder.

"Oh God," Nick whines.

"Shhh!"

Travis listens closely to the footsteps as they moved through the house. First, he can hear them on the kitchen tile, lightly. Then, the weak floorboard by the couch in the living room. The living room lights turn on and light from the ceiling fan lamps wash down

the hall outside Nick's bedroom. There is a horrific moment of silence broken only by a more horrific, splintering, maniacal laugh. Travis hears Nick in the closet scooting around, desperately trying to make himself disappear.

"Where are you?" John's voice calls out pleasantly as though he were looking for his kittens. "C'mere," he calls into Travis's room. Travis silently thanks the first mystical being he can think of for giving him the foresight to hide in Nick's room. "You know the rule," John says, sounding a little angry. "No hiding from Daddy!" he cheerfully cries.

Travis sucks back a giggle, covers his mouth and makes a sputtering noise pressing the air between his lips by accident. Now the hall light comes on, and Travis freezes, holding his breath. Travis watches in terror as John's loafers appear in the doorway and enter the room, bright light following him. "Where're you hiding?" John asks sweetly. Slowly, methodically, John's feet turn their toes toward the bed. John's voice is serious, calm. He sounds enraged, and yet perfectly content with the rage, happy to be so angry. "You're not hiding under the bed are you?" One at a time, John's hands appear before Travis, and then John's knees, and then... the horrible visage of John's face.

Travis can't suppress a yelp of horror as John peers beneath the bed. He can hear Nick yelling in response in the closet. John's face is sickly white freshly painted with skin so soft bath powder. Two baseball caps crown John's head, one over the other, each bill pointing directly out to the side. "Daddy giveth and Daddy taketh away," John begins to chant. "Daddy giveth and Daddy taketh away."

Travis bats at John's grappling arm and yells, "Help!" He smashes himself up against the wall underneath the bed.

John's voice grows menacing. "Daddy giveth and Daddy taketh away!" He gropes for Travis and laughs maniacally again.

A loud clatter from the closet catches both Travis and John's attention, as Nick struggles to free himself from the pile of clothes he'd been hiding in. Seeing that John was preoccupied with Travis, he saw it was his only chance to get away. But he stumbles. John hears him. Now it was over. John turns to confront Nick with a horrible grimace. "Where're you goin'!" Standing, John immediately blocks the door to the bedroom and smiles. Then, speaking in a ridiculously calm, collected voice, his lungs heaving from exertion, "Daddy giveth and Daddy taketh away."

Nick falls back and scoots into the corner of the closet, holding his index fingers in a cross as he tries to get away. John stalks the closet, though. "Daddy giveth and Daddy taketh away." He enters the closet and slowly shuts the door, laughing horribly, like a man three months in the desert coming upon water. Nick can only holler in response, "Run Travis! Run! Get away while you can!"

Seeing it is his only chance, Travis drags himself out from underneath the bed hurriedly, and makes a break for the door, falling over himself a couple of times. As he runs for the front door, and outside to get away from the madness, the only thing he can hear is the resounding howls of terror of his one friend and crazed laughter from the other.



*. Your Hair Wants Cutting*

“Our neighbors must hate us,” Travis says.

John is still breathing hard, sitting on the couch. He’s rinsed his face off, but some powder is still caught in his sideburns. He is sweating a little from having chased Travis around the parking lot. “You’re a couple of wimps,” he says meanly.

Nick is still feigning shock, sitting next to John on the couch. He has a bath powder cross on his face from where John had “baptized” him in some Godforsaken and unspoken religious ordeal. He is staring wide eyed at the far wall of the living room, quietly writhing and chanting “Daddy giveth and Daddy taketh away,” like a zombie.

“You’re a freak,” Travis retorts to John. “An a number one freak.” He is lounging on the other couch catty corner to Nick and John, beneath Nick’s vivid images.

John just smiles nicely in return, though. “You like me.”

Travis folds his arms and denies it childishly. “I do not.”

Holding his arms out, and puckering his lips John says, “Come give Daddy a kiss.”

“Fuck you,” Travis replies.

Slapping his forehead, Nick comes out of his voodoo trance. “I need a cigarette.”

“That sounds good,” Travis agrees.

The three of them get up and make their way to the front stoop, taking their usual places: John on the steps, Nick in front of the door, and Travis opposite him.

“Gooooood show,” Travis says, gritting his teeth before lighting a cigarette.

“Thanks,” John replies. His suit was mostly dismantled now. He’d discarded the jacket, loosened the tie and unbuttoned the collar of his sweat stained shirt – the natural evolution of “sensible” clothing toward the actually comfortable. John nods. “It was a good show. When did you guys wander off?”

“Right after the second song by Homsepun, I think,” Nick answers.

“We weren’t in the mood for that hippy crap,” Travis offers.

“Yeah,” John agrees. “We had to hang around – out of courtesy – but I wasn’t really in the mood either.”

“It’s good stuff,” Travis says.

“Yeah, they’re talented, but ya’ gotta’ be in the mood for something like that,” Nick concurs.

“We just went and walked around downtown,” Travis adds.

“It was pretty freaky,” says Nick

John chuckles. “You guys still rollin’?”

“Uh,” Nick looks around at some things.  
 “Pretty much,” Travis says, nodding. “This is pretty dirty stuff it lasts a while.”  
 Nick looks at Travis funny and says, “You know, I can’t really tell.”  
 “It’s hard to,” Travis replies.  
 “Nice that it lasts so long,” John says.  
 Nick rubs his eyes and stretches out his leg. “Eh. I’m about ready to be done.”  
 “Where’s your woman?” Travis asks John.  
 “She went home.”  
 “You’re not goin’ over there?”  
 “It’s a little late,” John says, checking his watch.  
 “A little *early*,” Nick corrects him, taking note of the birds beginning to chirp around them.  
 John looks at his cigarette, only half smoked, and puts it out on the stairs. “I’m hittin’ the hay.”  
 Travis looks to Nick who shakes his head and says, “I couldn’t sleep right now now matter how much.”  
 “How ‘bout breakfast then?” Travis asks.  
 Nick mulls it over as John gets up to go. “Goodnight,” John says.  
 “Goodnight,” Travis and Nick answer in unison. “*Gooooood morning*,” Nick intones.  
 The two leftovers sit staring at the railing, attempting to get some grasp on the state of their appetite and what the appetite was exactly, and whether such things meant anything at all in the great scheme of things, and how come if you eat you don’t use all of it, why wouldn’t the body adapt to using...  
 “I could go for some breakfast,” Nick says suddenly.  
 “Wafflé Haus?” Travis asks in a sorry French accent.  
 “Yeah,” Nick replies slow and long. “Let’s walk.”  
 “Oh yeah,” Travis agrees vehemently. “We’re walkin’.”  
 “Ain’t drivin’.”  
 “Might be flyin’.”  
 “Could be cryin’,” Nick laments with a fake sob.  
 “Sad to say I’m dyin’.”  
 “But I’m still tryin’.”  
 “Just say when,” Travis says, breaking the game.  
 “That didn’t rhyme,” Nick argues.  
 “I know. I wasn’t playing anymore.”  
 “Well, I’m buyin’.”  
 “Quit it,” Travis says, trying to be serious for a moment.  
 “Cause I’m a Mayan,” Nick says, nodding academically.  
 Travis puts his head in his hands and waits for the torment to end.  
 “But I *could* be lyin’.” Nick looks at Travis and wonders for a moment how much he can take. Then, with a quick smile and a pat on Travis’s back he says, “Are you sighin’?”

Travis lifts his head heavily and looks Nick in the eyes. "Are you going to be ready to go soon?"

Nick thinks carefully for a moment, rubbing his chin, and then answers, "Yes."

"All right then. Just say when."

"When."

"No. Say 'when' when you're ready to go," Travis explains.

"I just did."

They sat on the stoop for the next fifteen minutes before finally setting out once they remembered where they were going in the first place.

*. What Happens When You Come to the Beginning Again?*

A blue hue drenches the landscape in silvery glows and tones, saturating everything from aluminum to grass and making it all easy to see a light syrup coating of color. Travis takes a moment to look at the world around him and wonders why it can't be lit like this all the time why the harshness of the sun had to be what it was. Now, the asphalt of the parking lot, the cars, even the obnoxious yellow trim and sign of the Waffle House have taken on a certain tolerable softness. It is that early dawn light when the yellow of that nearest star has not yet pierced everything. It is light without a source, and it makes Travis feel clean and his skin soft almost as though he were swimming but didn't float. Travis smiles to himself as he walks along foot in front of foot, past broken glass and flattened cigarette butts.

Their feet are just touching the ground. As the rubber of their boots comes down to meet the sidewalk, they are just cradled by a thin padding of feeling. Their gait is long and synchronous as they slide along the world instead of bob. Travis and Nick feel as though gravity is less of a force and more of an attraction, when they are paying attention to being on the ground at all. For the most part they are just smiling at everything and enjoying the general feeling of total solace that they both possessed in the cool morning. In the background of their brains there is a mattress, unevenly laid, and cushioning every heavy thought with ease, turning it around to be a casual thought, or even a lovely one.

Nick looks up out of his own reverie to see what Travis has laughed about. He looks up the road and sees the sign appear before him in all black capital letters: Waffle House. "Food," he says, mesmerized by the radiation yellow building.

"Wow," Travis agrees.

"Are you comin' down yet?" Nick asks. He had his gas station attendant's jacket zipped all the way up and his collar turned up around his neck. A light wind had come up and was tossing Nick's thick brown hair.

Something about the whole scene made Travis feel like he was near the sea; the light, the air, the breeze, just the feeling of the proximity of water. He wonders for a moment what that feeling is the salt in the air or did the tides affect the weather by the shore? "Yeah," Travis replies thoughtfully. "For about the last hour really."

Nick takes a deep breath, letting it out through his nose. "Me too."

"Coming down off of E is cool though. I usually feel really relaxed for a couple of days afterward."

"Stupid?" Nick asks.

"No. Pretty clear headed really. Post zen"

They get to the front of the Waffle House and Nick opens the door for Travis.

"That *was* pretty wild."

Travis steps into the weather foyer of the restaurant and opens the inner door for Nick. "That was good stuff."

"How many times have you done it?"

"Just three," Travis replies. "And honestly, I think this will be the last time for a while anyway."

The warmth from the grill, the sizzling of grease, and a low country tune sweetly sings from the juke box greeting the boys, alongside a peppy southern waitress. "Mornin' boys." Both Nick and Travis nod politely as they head for a booth. The whole gleefully yellow room smells like bacon, and as Nick slides into a booth by the window looking out onto Milledge Avenue, he continues the conversation. "Why's that?"

Travis shakes his head. "I'm gettin' too old for this."

Nick just rolls his eyes.

"Naw, seriously. I don't know. I guess I don't want to push my luck. I've had some really fun times."

"Everything in moderation."

Travis makes a little bow of recognition with his hand, "Thank you Mr. Aristotle."

"Wasn't that Plato who first said that?"

Travis thinks about it, catching his reflection in the glass and surprising himself with his own face. "Socrates," he says nodding.

"Yep. Socrates," Nick agrees.

A waitress leaps to the boys' side a different one than the greeter an older matronly woman, maybe forty or so. She cocks her hip and stands on one leg as she writes furiously on her yellow pad, talking at the same time with a truck stop southern accent. "Whatch'all boys need?"

"Cup o' coffee, please," Nick says, letting some of his own repressed southern accent out.

Travis notices and laughs to himself. People did that sometimes. "Same for me," Travis says. Maybe it was for the familiarity.

"Ya'll need a minute to order?"

"Nah," Nick replies, "jus' give me a plain waffle and a side of toast."

When the waitress looks to Travis he says, "Bacon, egg, and cheese sandwich; side of grits."

"You want a fork with that?" the waitress says kiddingly, fairly sure that Travis was from the South. She recognizes both the boys from other visits. They were curious to her.

Travis just replies with a look like she should know better and a wave of the hand. "I would like some honey, though."

The waitress notes the honey on her pad and then finishes with, "I'll be back in a

sec' with the coffees."

Lighting a cigarette, Travis glances over at the breakfast counter where a short, bald man with glasses is prattling on about something in a frustrated fashion. The waitress, the young one that had greeted Travis and Nick, was smiling and laughing at whatever the man was saying. She looked tired to Travis, as though she'd just come in for her shift.

"How 'bout that?" Nick says, holding up a piece of paper he'd rediscovered in his pocket.

Travis looks back to Nick and at the scrap. It had a number and the name Scarlet scrawled on it. "Yep," he replies nonchalantly. "You done good boy."

"I don't really know how I got this," Nick says, examining the intricacies of the handwriting. He was a stickler for what handwriting indicated about a person. "I was bein' such a freak."

"Hey, man, she dug you what more do you need? You were just showing off one of your more interesting sides."

"One of my drugged sides."

Travis dismisses the comment. "I've seen other people on E. They don't do shit unless they already have a creative bone in them."

Nick shakes his head. "She must have seen something, 'cause I wasn't tryin' to impress at all."

"You know, that's one thing I like about E. How much more *you* you become. Boring people become more boring. Energized people get more energy."

Squinting his eyes, Nick intones the voice of some ancient Chinese instructor, "You must be you, and the wind must be the wind."

Travis plays along, looking around the room with newfound mystery. "It is all around us. Within us."

"The rock... the tree..."

"The grill... the bacon."

Nick laughs and nods.

"And you must always remember: the Buddha is hashbrowns at Waffle House."

Nick leans into Travis and whispers, holding up his hand to his face. "I'm the Buddha."

Feigning surprise, Travis sits back in his seat, a look of awe coming over him. "You *are* the Buddha."

Nick shushes Travis and looks around nervously.

"Wait a minute," Travis says in sudden disbelief, "If you're the Buddha, then tell me: is it or ?"

Nick shrugs as though the answer were obvious. " ."

But Travis just waves him off. "You're not the Buddha."

"I am too the Buddha!" Nick proclaims a little too loudly.

Old Foghorn looks over from his spot at the counter to the boys' booth with a curious expression, wondering if he'd heard what he thought he'd heard. Nick and Travis

just raise their eyebrows at each other as though the old man had no reason to think that anything out of the ordinary was occurring. Travis smiles at the old man as Nick says, "Steel belted radials. Nothin' else," with a decisive cutting motion of the hand.

Travis nods casually. "Yep. I could see that. Nothin' else, really not that time of year." He takes a pull on his cigarette.

"Put those on, and you'll be fine."

"Could be the carburator," Travis suggests.

The old man looks back to the breakfast counter and continues his conversation with the young waitress. Travis smiles. "Good save," he says, out of the side of his mouth.

Nick just nods. "I don't want anybody knowin' who the Buddha is, except me."

"And the Buddha is..." Travis says, reading some winner off an imaginary card.

"Steel belted radials."

"Cheesetoast," Travis replies.

"That too," Nick agrees, acting surprised at the truth of the matter. After a minute of toying with his spoon, Nick says, "It's all about a balogna sandwich."

Travis rasies his head slowly and agrees. "You can't have one."

"You *never* can," Nick says seriously.

"Actually," Travis said, musing over the matter, "I think Kant put it best when he said: 'it is the universal balogna sandwich that cannot know truth. These particulate balogna sandwiches are all the same.' You can't have *the* balogna sandwhich."

Nick looks annoyed. "I don't buy that transcendental crap. It's either the balogna sandwich or it's not."

Travis glances out the window to where the sky is growing steadily more blue, and some small clouds have taken on elegant pink fringes. They look like surreal loaves of bread baking in the sky he laughs with the balogna hanging over the edges. He speaks to the glass in a melancholy tone. "I am a transparent balogna sandwich left upon the infinte shores of wisdom; the tide slwoly ebbing away my bread."

Nick smiles genuinely and sits up as the waitress comes over to the table and sets their coffee down. She'd gotten busy. A crowd had begun to gather. "That's beautiful," Nick says as she sets his coffee down in front of him. "Did you think of that just now?" Turning to the waitress he says, "Thanks."

"Thanks," Travis says as he receives his cup, and then, to Nick, "Naw. I thought of that the other day."

"Can I use that?"

"Oh yeah."

Nick looks up, trying to recall the phrase in its entirety. "I am a balogna sandwich  
"

"Transparent " Travis adds.

"Yeah. transparent balogna sandwich left upon the shores of wisdom "

" infinite "

"Right infinite shores of wisdom, the tide slowly ebbing away my bread."

Travis nods, putting cream and sugar and cream in his coffee a lot of both.  
 “Something like that.”

Nick chuckles and sips his coffee in the early morning light gradually illuminating their table. “I tried to explain the balogna sandwich thing to Vicky the other day.”

“Did she get it?”

Nick rolls his eyes.

“Stupid question,” Travis replies.

“She kept rambling on about peanut butter and honey.”

“Philistine.”

“I think her whole idea of art is that if it’s not perfectly evident, then it’s stupid.”

“Stoopid.” Travis agrees.

Nick shakes his head.

“I don’t know. She’s not *that* bad,” Travis argues.

“No,” Nick says, “I really believe she doesn’t want to have to think about it.”

“Well,” Travis starts. He stops. *What do you say? What can you do?* “Well,” he says, clasp and unclasp his hands. Nick waits and Travis gives up thinking. “There ya’ go.”

“I like what Kazinsky said when someone asked him to explain one of his paintings: ‘You ask me to explain in five minutes what took me twenty years to understand.’”

Travis nods thoughtfully. “Very well put.”

“People ask you what your songs mean,” Nick offers.

Travis nods, “That they do.”

“What do *you* say?”

Travis just smiles for a few seconds, waiting for Nick to see what he was going to see, “They’re all about wanting ”

“A balogna sandwich,” the pair finishes in unison.

“Yep.” Nick sips his coffee for a moment and looked around, his brow furrowed in remembrance or an attempt to remember. “How’d we ever get on that?”

“It’s from that old Buddhist story. The student asks the teacher what the Buddha is and the teacher answers that the Buddha’s three pounds of flan.”

“Cause once you say what it is, it’s not that anymore.”

“Well, it’s more than just that, I think. It’s also just throwing someone off because the question was ridiculous.”

“No, no. The question’s not ridiculous any *answer* would be ridiculous.”

“Yeah,” Travis agrees.

The older waitress comes back to the table and lays their breakfasts in front of them. “Let me know if ya’ll’re needin’ anythin’ else.” She pulls a bill out her apron pocket and sets it on the table.

Nick digs into his food as Travis thinks for a moment, wanting to finish his cigarette before eating. “You remember that night we walked to IHOP from the dorms?”

“Yeah,” Nick says vehemently.

“I think we chipped away at the Buddha that night.”



Chewing his waffle, Nick thinks about it. "I don't really remember anything we said, but yeah. We did uncover somethin' that night."

Travis sets his cigarette in the ashtray, picks up half of his sandwich and bites into it. He makes a face and puts the sandwich down again. It doesn't taste like relaxation. It tastes like something else, crunchy and sharp. Suddenly, he isn't very hungry. "I'd love to know what was said precisely." He chews and swallows. "But you're right, it doesn't matter. That conversation was one that changed some part of my core. I don't guess I really need to know what it was that changed."

"Shut up and eat," Nick says, pointing his knife at Travis.

Laughing, Travis picks up his sandwich again and takes another bite. "You got anything to do today?" Travis asks.

"Man, I don't even know what day it *is*."

"Let's do somethin' then."

Nick thinks about it. "I don't know that I want to *do* anything not on purpose."

"I jus' don' wanna' end up watchin' TV."

Nick shrugs. "So don't."

"Well, I will if I don't have somethin' to do."

"That's stupid. You alway have somethin' to do."

Travis looks around. It was true he was never really bored. "And no booze."

"No booze," Nick says, nodding.

"At least not before six."

"Not before dark," Nick differs.

"Yeah. Not before dark."

Nick looks around. "I mean, maybe *one* in the afternoon."

"But just one."

"And then," Nick made a cutting motion with his hand, "none after that before dark."

"Before dark," Travis repeats.

"Right."

"Right." Travis thinks on the matter for a moment. "One *beer* or one *six pack*?"

"Now you cut that out," Nick scolds him.

"Sorry."

"Twelve pack we'll split it."

"I thought so."

They both sit for a few moments in silence, listening to Foghorn prattle on about how he didn't know what to do with his daughter. "Every dang time. She don't listen. And it's not as if she ain't already got to. I jus' wonder what ah'm gonna' do with her. Lock'er up, I s'pose."

Nick looks over to Travis with a grin and says, under his breath, *I know what he can do with her*.

Smiling demonically back, Travis agrees. "I got your solution right here in my

pants.”

The pair watch the waitress for a while, patiently listening to Grumpy as she dries dishes. She would laugh, then nod, laugh then nod, moving her towel in a circular motion.

“Let’s just go to Joe’s for a while. I feel like just sitting and sketching.”

Travis thinks about it. “All right. I could stand to do that read a good book maybe.”

Nick points his finger lazily in Travis’s direction. “You should write some good lyrics. All your lyrics suck.”

Pulling his lips in to punctuate his pretended thoughtfulness, Travis agrees. “That they do.”

“And they should all be about how pathetic you are.”

Travis nods.

“And your teeth.”

Travis nods again and then sincerely suggests, “I could write about how fat you are.”

“There might be a song there,” Nick says, taking a bite of his waffle and pointing a couple of times.

Travis looks over to the ashtray where his cigarette lay, half burned. Reaching over, he picks it up and puts it out, taking pains to break up all the bits of collected ash in the bottom. Those little miniature asteroids of carbon always annoyed him for some reason. “I wanna’ write a song about nothin’.”

“Yeah. I kinda’ feel like that. I just wanna’ doodle.”

“Doodle oodle... oodle,” Travis replies. “I feel really relaxed,” he says, looking up and opening his eyes wide.

“Oh man,” Nick intones and scratches his nose, “I feel great.”

“God. Do you realize what time it is?”

“It’s time for you to finish eating, fatty,” Nick says, pushing the last morsel of his waffle around in his syrup, and popping it into his mouth.

Travis looks down at the second half of his sandwich he’d managed to finish the first. “No. I’m done.”

“Really?” Nick asks. Travis ate slow sometimes, but he always ate.

“Yeah.” Travis pushes his plate out of the way and picks up his cigarette again.

Nick picks the bill up, looks at it, set it down and starts digging into his pockets. “Let me get this.”

“No, that’s all right,” Travis says, leaning back and going for his pocket.

“No. You got the E. I got this.”

Thinking about it for a moment, trying to get up the gumption to finish his sandwich, Travis shrugs. “All right.”

Getting up from the table, Nick strolls over to the counter as Travis gulps down the last of his coffee.

“You boys set?” the waitress asks coming over to the register. Foghorn sits quietly contemplating his coffee as Travis approaches the counter.

"All set," Nick replies politely, handing the waitress the bill.

"Is this together?"

"Yes ma'am. I got it."

Foghorn glances at Nick, looking a little suspicious, as the register jingles and whirs. "Eight seventy nine," the waitress says.

Nick gives her a ten, gets his change and nods as he turns to go.

"Ya'll have a nice day."

The boy's nod as Nick gets out his wallet a ludicrously thick packed affair. "Can you get the tip?" he asks, "so I still have some cash for coffee?"

"No problem," Travis replies, making his way over to the table. He pulls out two wadded dollar bills and lay them down. Then, after a moment of contemplating the act, he proceeds to straighten and flatten both of them. The bills are far too crinkled, and won't stay put, so he sets his coffee cup on them. Finished, he turns to follow Nick out the door. Nick steps into the glass foyer and stops for a moment to read the headlines in a newspaper machine. They are pretty much the same headlines as the one's that had been there the last time he looked a week or two ago it seemed. Who knew when that really was. He sniffs out his nose, and both he and Travis walk outside into the new day. The sun has just come over the treeline behind them as they start down Milledge toward home.

"Did you see that guy's eye?" Nick asks.

Thinking about it, Travis can't recall anything peculiar. The man had been wearing glasses. "Nope. What?"

Nick put his hand up to his face, near his eye and wiggles his fingers around. "The left one. It was all weird."

Shrugging, Travis replies, "Didn't notice."

*. Have you guessed the riddle yet?*

Hunched over, Travis sits on the edge of his bed, playing two chords on his cradled guitar, hums something quietly to himself and then scribbles in his composition notebook resting next to him on the bed. He repeats the process several times, playing, humming, and writing. As he is writing a line, he hears something in the kitchen, the floorboards settling or a precariously balanced spoon losing its equilibrium in the sink. He sits up for a moment and listens. "Hello?" he asks out loud after a moment. Sure that Nick and John were out for the afternoon, Travis is less worried about being attacked by a criminal than one of his roommates trying to scare the hell out of him. "Hello there?" he says again, lightly, trying to sound friendly as though an intruder might wish to sit and have tea instead of shoot him and take his belongings. He doesn't hear anything else, but after a moment of looking at the notebook, he's either lost his concentration or needs a break. Standing up, he sets his guitar by the end of the bed and walks to the kitchen to get a glass of water and settle the matter of the phantasm.

The apartment is eerie when Travis is home alone. Something about a lack of sound disturbed him. He preferred noise to cut through, rather than have to silence in which to drown. As he walks into the kitchen, he listens to his boots thumping on the linoleum with relief. The evidence of his own presence one often forgotten was pleasant at least. He grabs a glass from the dishrack by the sink, fills it with water and walks down the hall to peer into John's room just in case. When he gets there, all he can see are John's things, spread out around the room: his guitar, his amplifier, his new mixing board and a tape deck. There were clothes everywhere, books on Jewish mysticism, and cigarette packs. Travis stands in the door, checks each item, examining the evidence of his friend.

Finally, reluctantly, he walks back to his own room, and upon encountering it sees first a large red bucket of toys in the corner. He moves to it, and holding the glass of water in one hand, sifts through the pile of toys with his other hand. He pulls from the plastic container, a rubber dinosaur, a stuffed rabbit, a few spaceships and a helicopter, and then finally, a cartoonish green and white space man, one foot high and covered with levers and buttons. He sets his glass of water down on the dresser and holds the space man out in front of him bending the plastic limbs into various poses. He stretched the hands out and upward and bends one knee and then says in the best Elvis voice he can muster, "Thank you. Thankyouverymuch."

Reaching back down into the bucket he pulls more toys aside, until he finds the

one he is seeking, a rubber dart gun. It has two darts in it in a clip, and he takes the gun and the space man into the living room. Setting the dart gun down on the television, so he has both hands free to manipulate his futuristic companion, Travis begins to manipulate the plastic space man. Working with the legs to get the figure to stand on its own, he manages to get the astronaut to balance itself, and then bends the arms so that they hang akimbo, in a do or die stance. He picks up the dart gun and begins meandering back towards his bedroom without any determination. It was as if he were merely on a stroll through the living room, though he takes care to see that the dart gun is cocked and ready by his side.

*You're not gettin' away alive this time, Fleeting.*

Travis stops in his tracks, just by the door to hallway. He calmly lets the dart gun hang by his side, closes his eyes. With a sigh, he admits to himself that he doesn't want to do what he is about to be forced to do. "I didn't murder that deputy, sheriff," Travis speaks to the empty room. "I'm an innocent man."

*That's what they all say. We're all innocent. But that's for a jury to decide not you.*

"You know they'll hang me, sheriff."

*And I don't care*

"They were bounty hunters. I was defending myself."

*Look, Fleeting. I don't want any trouble. Just turn around real slow, and drop your gun.*

That's it then. Once again, he is left with no choice but to defend himself. Fate had not smiled upon him, and another grave would be dug for it. He needed his freedom without it he really was dead. He begins the turn slowly enough, carefully lining his muscles up so he can leap. Then, like a whirlwind he spins around, stepping quickly to the right, firing his gun. Too soon Travis knows he's overcompensated - leaned too hard, and the bullet misses. The sheriff fires and Travis lurches. He bangs into the doorjam, his left arm suddenly limp, but through the hot leaden agony, he manages to fire a second shot. This one hits the space man square in the chest, and the little man clatters down behind the television.

Travis takes a moment to sigh, to take in the scene and all the people looking on in silence - a moment to regret what he had to do. Then looking to his unwounded arm, he says, "Shit." Standing up straight, he draws the gun twice more, aiming more carefully this time. He turns his back and repeats the spin, this time bending at the knees a little. Straightening up, he examines the dart gun and then tosses it on the love seat, heading back to his room. Travis sits heavily on his bed and picks up his guitar, attempting to get back to where he had been before, though the ridiculousness of the space man's plastic blood resonated in the chords now.

Part II  
July

. *Be Quick About it or You'll be Asleep Again Before it's Done*

“ : ” appears before Travis in inch and a half high, red, digital annoyance. Even at eleven twenty in the morning, the “am” feels like a poke in the eye. The midsummer sun is crawling toward the peak of its arc, pissed off once again that the little orb Earth that had crept too close to it in an elleptical drift. Rolling over to face the wall Travis once again lingers over thoughts of beautiful horses trapped by bronze and wonders about the meaning of dizziness, before dreamlike visions begins to fade and the phone bill’s due date comes into focus, lying on the floor by the nightstand. Travis looks down toward the foot of his bed where his guitar leans, and shut his eyes.

Fifty minutes later it is after noon and Travis awakens again to rude red numbers screaming that his life is drifting away before his very eyes that today, like any other day, like his birthday or the anniversaries that he could never remember, *should* be different. It makes him angry for a moment angry at himself and at time and he wonders if maybe the only difference today is that he does not feel like getting up. Maybe life is better when he is asleep when he isn’t paying attention to his inattentiveness. So long as he is carefree, so long as he can leave painted horses behind him... he sighs, long and hard into the pillow.

He closes his eyes for a moment, opens them, and looks at the clock again. A minute has passes. Rolling over on his side, he sets his chin on the inside of his elbow and watches the numbers for a while. They seem to be moving along faster than normal. A minute seems to take only twenty seconds, and Travis wonders if it is him or the clock that is out of whack. What an annoying feeling it is, that time is passing that he is actually noticing time passing. It makes him want to get out of bed and at least go somewhere where he can ignore time for a while. He shoves his damp sheets aside, irritated, and sets his feet on the floor. Squinting at the clock, he smiles at himself before he swings his left hand out in a sweeping arc, knocking the clock to the floor with a crash. *So there.* And that feels better.

Putting on clean underwear, clean socks, dirty jeans and a dirty t shirt, Travis stands in the middle of his room running his hands through the fuzz on his head. He needs to shave. He needs to brush his teeth and eat something. He needs a shower and needs to do laundry. He needs a regular job, and to pay taxes and to find a purpose in life. He needs a nominal existence that fits him like his favorite gray t shirt, and he twists and tries to set the wrinkles under his arms and around his neck. Looking down for a moment, he realizes he’s put the shirt on backwards. Pulling his arms in through the sleeves, he twists the

shirt around in the other direction. In a brazen attempt to think nothing, Travis looks over to his acoustic sitting against the bed and thinks one last time about all the things he is supposed to do before picking up the guitar and heading out the bedroom door.

As Travis passes into the living room, he spies Nick sitting on the love seat, his feet propped up on a footstool, sketching in his book. As Travis walks by toward the front door, Nick calls out, "Good morning," without looking up.

"Yeah?" Travis says, reaching for the door.

"Whatch'ya' doin'?" Nick asks.

"I'm goin' for a walk."

"Oh don't kid yourself," Nick says quickly, shaking his head. He continues sketching.

Travis hesitates for a moment and then smiles and decides to take the bait, "What?"

"You'll never lose any weight that way," Nick offers.

"I'll be back."

"Whatever."

"I love you too, man."

"Mm hm."

Travis waits a moment more, and when Nick doesn't look up again, he laughs to himself and leaves.

The heat is already rising up from off the concrete and asphalt like flamenco dancers moaning and moving. As his shaved head comes up over the black line of the horizon, a city behind him, it bobs with the gait of an unconscious disguise. He is every other person walking down any heated street, but it is his mission that is hidden from view. At the top of Baxter, Travis marches right through the rigid wall of translucent waves without struggling much. His guitar is draped over his shoulder with its neck at the ground like an arrow, giving him the appearance of a killer hauling a body, and for sparse moments of time that is precisely the weight of the burden. One step and he is anxious and frustrated the next, he is smiling and laughing at private jokes and things his friends say, just little melodies and chords in the noise of a world. He is smiling in the gruesome heat, his black boots wrapped hot around his feet, the inside of his jeans slightly damp from sweat. He is glad to be so frustrated, because it is something other than sleep. All of it is still better than being dead, at any rate.

Two parts apathy and one part endurance keeps him from walking to any particular destination. He doesn't want to stop wandering a prairie dream on the edge of reality, but he spies a playground across the street, and something inside him suddenly feels the need to sit and rest for a while. Looking up and down Baxter, Travis checks to see if any cars are coming. There aren't and it's an odd sight. The peculiarly empty vista re-enforces the heat and seems to force him to stand and stare for a moment, out across the eastern stretch of

Athens. He takes a second to pretend that he is the only person left in the world. Some apocalypse has come and taken everyone but Travis Fleeting. He steps out into the road and walks to the middle to stop, bringing his guitar down off his shoulder and letting it rest on his steel covered toe. Looking at the formica gleaming in the asphalt, he takes a deep breath in and sighs.

His left shoe has a massive hole in it between the sole and toe and he studies it carefully in the middle of the road. It seems worn away by four years of walking, climbing, moving. Travis cocks his head and wonders how he made a hole in his shoes. Did he really do so much? Four years he had had these boots. Had four years gone by? It was too easy to be twenty and forget that four years was a fifth of his entire life a life he only shamefully remembered a small percentage of anyway. For all it was worth, the memories that wore a hole in his boot were all the memories he remembered with any great accuracy. And it was the only four years he ever cared to remember the only years his life had taken on its own... The guitar resting on his right foot testifies, and Travis squats down to finger the hole. It went straight through the left side of the left boot to his sock, ripping the leather apart from the side of his middle toe to his smallest. How big had that hole been when he'd met Nick or Ian or John? How much had it grown when he knew Meryl, lost Meryl? *It is a shame*, he thinks, that holes in shoes couldn't have rings like trees that you could count. He could look at each stitch and think *that is the first time I made love* or *that is the first time I smoked a cigarette*. He tugs the leather up, revealing his foot. *Here's the time I got so drunk, Ian carried me almost all the way up Broad Street. Or this one this is the time Nick asked me if he could see Daphne. This is the one where John and I drove to Atlanta to buy a six pack so we could watch the sun come up together.* The unraveling stitches come apart as his life goes by one day at a time. Would it all pass when the sole had fallen off? He looks back down the road again, squinting, with the sun angry on his back kneeling there, in the middle of the road.

July had a way of making people vanish, making people want to be inside and cool during the day behind their metal air conditioners. It had sent all the students home for the summer in Athens which cut the population in half it seemed. Travis just kept looking in awe at a familiar world empty of familiar people his familiar world, empty of people. For maybe ten minutes, ten full minutes in a world empty of people, Travis stands on the double yellow lines in the midst of four lanes on Baxter and feels a strange lifetime devoid of seasons and change as though his whole life had been hot, as though he'd always been the same in the heat, a candle whose mass remained the same though its integrity had melted away. A hot wind teased him and made the sweat on the back of his neck cool. The lonliness was a song he could never write because no one knew him knew to stand in the middle of a hot black road and just look around at the city like a desert.

*I told you not to come back here, Fleeting.*

Travis looks down the empty road and speaks softly, self consciously, as though there might be someone listening that he cannot see. "I just want my horse back is all. I don't mean any harm."



*You've done all the harm this town can handle, mister.*

Then, there comes a starlight twist of white reflection from far down Baxter, in the direction of his apartment. A car crests the hill near Rockspring, and the mere glint of motion is enough to shatter the image of solitude. He can hear the sound of the engine, hotter than the air or concrete, racing toward him. Looking to the playground again, Travis feels the need to move. He relishes that moment of complete solitude, dreads the arrival of a car, and sets off for a set of swings, hoping he can get there before the car might pass. Some irrelevant and meaningless reasoning tells him he would be safe from the noise and motion and companionship then.

He hefts his guitar to the sound of a harmonica in his head and walks across the other half of the road more aware of the hole in his boot now. When he steps up to the sidewalk and on to the grass he feels suddenly like he is passing out of his everyday existence. The view of the park is abnormal these days, and so nostalgic and a little sad. But the sadness quickly passes as Travis realizes that every day of his life, since he had left elementary school, he could have come here to play on the monkey bars and the teeter totters. It is no fault of life's that he hadn't. It is his own fault. And what's more, it isn't even his own fault because there is no fault in matters like that, he knows. Every day was an opportunity to play, and he played the things that mattered to him. If he had wanted to come, he would have. He had just forgotten to in the rush of things.

He makes his way to the swings, and sits down in one, bringing his guitar off his shoulder and setting it in his lap. Pushing off the ground a bit with his feet, he sets the swing in motion and begins to fiddle with the guitar's strings, not making a melody or music even, but just a light noise—light in pitch and light in his head and heart—something to counteract the oncoming rush of noise from the car. The doppler effect of the engine rattles the metal bars, even rattles the guitar, but Travis leans his head down pensively and eliminates everything but the notes from the strings. The car passes and Travis does not notice. Then, after a few minutes and a few delicate arcs of the swing, a melody travels down through Travis's sinewy conduit body and begins to play itself out in the middle of the park, trickling out his fingers, traveling out over the grass and through the humidity. Travis shuts his eyes and lets the song continue on its own. He listens to the way the strings of the guitar are affected by the evaporated water in the air. He listens to how the music more accurately describes his mood than words or smiles or people he knows. It is the music that always plays behind his smile. For a moment, as the song plays out and swirls in the hollow wooden body of the guitar, the music defines Travis. For a moment, he doesn't feel lost because he couldn't have been lost there in the calm melody and vague memories of horses he'd once touched, their skin and powerful muscles shivering lightly at the connection.

. *A Grin Without a Cat*

"How much have you got left?" Ian asks from where he is lying on the couch tossing a racquet ball.

Travis sits opposite his friend in the blue chair staring at nothing in particular. "Two hundred bucks or so."

"We need a real scam."

"Yeah," Travis agrees.

"I mean *bouco* bucks."

"Oh yeah," Travis agrees with exaggerated enthusiasm.

"What about if we robbed a bank, dude?"

Travis waves a dismissive hand. "No guns."

"No?"

"I can't be bothered with guns," Travis says, rubbing his forehead seriously. He couldn't see it, but the plastic space man's carcass still lay on the floor behind him.

"I don't know you get a gat in your hand." Ian sits up and points an imaginary gun at John who is falling in and out of sleep on the love seat. "Pow!" he tossed the racquetball lightly and it bounces off of John's shoulder.

"I'll kick your ass," John says sleepily, his eyes still closed, discretely letting the ball slide down behind his back on the couch.

"No," Ian agrees with Travis. "You're right. Guns get sloppy."

"What good is a scam if it lacks elegance?"

"Yeah. Style."

"There's no *style* in crime these days."

"It's not like the old days," Ian laments sarcastically.

"I want a scam," John complains from the couch.

"You can't have a scam," Travis replies.

"C'mon. I want a scam."

"No."

"Just a little one."

"No."

Ian smiles lazily and puts his head back on the couch back. "I'd rather con people than just take their shit."

"There's nothing wrong with taking advantage of stupid people," John agrees.

"You shut up. You're not a criminal," Travis retorts.

"Ah c'mon. Let me join the club."

"No."

"Please."

"No."

"I'll kick your ass."

"You're never gonna' get in the club with *that* attitude, mister."

"I'm sorry."

"Sorry don't cut it, fatso."

John growls and rolls over to face the wall.

"What if we faked some ATM cards, you know? If we could figure out the whole magnetic code thing."

"*You're* problem is," Travis says pointing at Ian, "*you're* afraid of a good honest day's work!"

Ian rolls over on his side. "Uh. Yeah. So?"

Travis shrugs. "So am I."

"Me too!" John hollers with his face still buried in the couch cushions.

"You shut up."

Ian sits up. "All right, where's Nick? Let's go ha cha."

Travis checks his wrist. There is no watch. "In a little bit."

John rolls over on the couch. "You need to get a watch, you slacker." He throws the racquetball at Travis who jumps nervously, flailing his right arm. Looking more like a pathetic breakdancer than a person defending himself, Travis misses the ball completely, as Ian looks on laughing.

"I don't need a watch," Travis says, picking the ball up off the floor by his feet where it had rolled off of his lap.

"That's why you're always late everywhere."

Travis gave John a very serious look. "Late to what?"

"Good point."

Setting the racquetball in his lap, Travis picks up the portable phone from off the floor and speaks into it casually. "Yeah, how about we meet anywhere downtown, sometime between four in the afternoon and midnight."

Ian laughs.

Travis sets the phone back down on the floor and gets up and walks to his room, tossing the racquetball at John as he goes. John jumps but catches the blue projectile at the last second. Travis leans into his room hanging on to the doorjamb and grabs his guitar from its place at the end of the bed. Strolling back into the living room, he sits himself back in the blue seat and picks a couple of strings checking the tuning. Ian begins to clap slowly and sarcastically. Holding up his picking hand, Travis just replies as though he were speaking to an overly enthusiastic crowd, "Oh stop it, please. You're embarrassing me."

John joins in with the slow arhythmic clapping. "Good. It's bad enough my head hurts, now my ears will be bleeding too."

As Travis continues to tune his guitar, he sticks his tongue out at John.

"We're just kiddin' ya' dude," Ian says lightly, sensing that his lack of enthusiasm might've discouraged Travis he never meant to discourage.

"Don't worry. If my ego's constitution were based solely on your opinions, I would've shot myself years ago."

"And you're fat, too," John adds delightedly.

Picking out a light Spanish melody, Travis sing speaks in his best Spanish accent, "Thees eez the story of *el grande* the fattest man in aaaaaaaaall o' Meheeco."

Ian laughs and adds a drunken, "Ariba!"

The door opens behind Travis, and Nick steps in looking particularly paranoid, clutching his courier bag in his arms.

"Hey dude," Ian says.

"Hey," Nick replies curtly, a little out of breath. He steps lightly over to the couch behind the armchair, sneaking on his toes, and sits down next to Ian, looking nervous still.

"What's up?" Travis asks, smiling at Nick.

"Yeah, what the hell's with you?" John asks.

"Nothin'." Nick answers too quickly.

Ian looks over at Nick and asks, tossing his head, "What's in the bag?"

"Nothin'." Nick cradles the bag closer.

Ian, Travis and John all lean their attention toward Nick. "Nothin' huh?" Ian asks.

Nick just nods, looking more nervous now that they are all paying attention to him. He tries to whistle for a moment, and gives John a polite wave from the wrist perfectly innocent, nothing to see here.

"Why don'cha open it up then " Travis asks.

"If there's nothin' in it..." Ian finishes for him.

"Okay," Nick replies, suddenly casual. Opening the bag, Nick sits watching it in awe. The others follow his gaze. For a moment nothing happens. Nick says, "C'mere," in a high pitched voice, precisely the way people talk to children and small animals. Travis, Ian and John all simultaneously wonder if they are being duped, brows furrowed in concentration, staring at Nick's bag. But after a moment, a tiny black head pokes out of the bag and mews.

"What the hell?" Travis asks.

Ian leans over on the couch and pets the kitten as it steps out from the confines of the bag. "Hey there," he says as he scratches the kitten's ears.

John looks on apprehensively as Nick picks the little kitten up and holds it out towards him. "See?"

"Are you planning on keeping that here?" John asks skeptically.

"Well... yeah."

"I'm allergic to cats, dumbass."

Nick looks surprised. "Really?"

John rolls his eyes.

"Shit." Nick looks at the kitten in his hands disappointedly. "I didn't know that."

"That's all right," John says.

"Well, how bad?" Nick asks.

"Eh. Just keep it out of my room. We'll see."

"Well, I could take him back or let my parents hang on to him for little while."

"No," John argues. "It's got short hair. I'll be all right."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah." And John seems genuine.

"Well, we'll keep it out of your room and vacuum a lot."

"Just be sure you keep the litter box clean."

"I'll keep it in my bathroom," Nick offers.

Travis reaches out and grabs the animal from Nick, pulling it back to the armchair with him, and holding the kitten close to his chest. It cuddled up to him almost immediately. "My kitty," he says childishly.

"You can *hold* it," Nick says, playing the father figure.

"*My kitty!*" Travis argues, sinking back further into the armchair. The kitten is visibly disinterested in being in such close proximity to anyone, and begins to squeeze itself from out of Travis's grasp. He lets it, and it begins exploring his lap, walking out to his cliff sized knees and shins to peer over the edge. All the boys are equally mesmerized by the animal; its faltering, young gait.

"What inspired you to go get a cat?"

Nick rubs his face. "I went over to Mark's to borrow his pasteboard, and they had found all these kittens living behind their garage." Nick shrugs. "He asks me if I wanted one." After a moment, Nick leans over and picks the cat up. "Don't *bog* him," he says. "Let John have a turn," he offers politely, shoving the kitten towards John.

"Get " John starts angrily.

Nick pulls the cat away and smiles, happy to have something to annoy John with.

John points menacingly in reply and whispers with his eyes squinted, "Daddy giveth and Daddy taketh away."

At this, Nick holds the kitten close to him and bolts out of the living room into his own bedroom, slamming the door loudly behind him.

Ian looks questioningly to Travis for an explanation.

Travis just shrugs. "You probably don't want to know," he says as the sound of things being thrown around in Nick's room emanate into the hall. From the living room, they could hear Nick yelling, "Ah! The voices! Make the voices stop!"

The door to Nick's room opens, and the kitten comes running through the living room at full speed, its yellow eyes wide, its ears flattened back against its head. Running between Ian and Travis, it dashes into the kitchen. Travis laughs out loud as Nick comes back into the room, looking haggard.

"Feel better?" John asks, smiling.

Nick sits down on the couch. "Where'd he go?"

Travis and Ian simultaneously point over their shoulders toward the kitchen.  
“Aw, poor guy. I didn’t mean to scare him.”  
John rubs his forehead, trying to wipe away a sleepy afternoon stupor before they all leave. “That cat’s going to have problems.”  
“What?” Nick asks innocently.  
“Having a kitten here is like raising a kid in a dysfunctional family times three,” Travis offers.  
“True,” Nick admits.  
“Get me my bottle, bitch,” John says in his perverted uncle’s voice.  
“Now, honey,” Nick says in a feminine southern accent, “I I think you’ve had enough tonight.”  
“Don’t tell me when I’ve had enough, woman!”  
“Hey, Dad,” Travis adds. “Why don’t you try getting a job instead of suckin’ on a whiskey bottle?”  
“You shut your mouth. If I get up off this couch ”  
“What?” Travis asks. “What’re you gonna’ do, you worthless shit?”  
“That’s it. Liza,” John says, speaking calmly to Nick, “get me my bat.”  
“I’ll take you on, old man,” Travis says, frightened but stern.  
“Boys, now,” Nick stutters, “just calm down this ain’t Christian.”  
“Shut up, bitch!”  
“Don’t tell her ta’ shut up again!” Travis yells.  
Ian nods wisely. “Oh yeah. That cat’ll be fine.”

. *Yet it was Certainly English*

The loud smack of newspaper on wood resounds out across the spacious, dark room that comprises the majority of Jittery Joe's coffeehouse; as a low gold toned jazz trumpet spills through the speaker system. Bad seventies decor and thick paint proliferate everywhere as ceiling fans turned uselessly, doing little to suppress the new July heat wave that is slowly creeping in from outside. Carefully Nick lifts his rolled up newspaper from the table and peers at the underside. Smiling devilishly, he looks to Travis across the table and says, "How many is that?"

Giving a cursory glance to a little note pad sitting near the corner of the table, Travis replies, "Twelve." He reaches over to the pad and places another tally mark next to a line of eleven by the letter N. Below that is the letter T, and seven tally marks.

"Woo woo," Nick says happily. He pulls the carcass of a fly off the paper by its wing and tosses it to the floor where it plops down beside the wreckage of its dead brethren. "Damn them all," he says through gritted teeth.

"Damn them all," Travis responds quietly, still in a trance, his concentration set upon a legal pad in front of him.

Nick looks around at the cafe's other occupants for the one hundredth time that afternoon. Little had changed in the three hours that he and Travis had been there, haunting the place, searching for some inspiration in the heat. There is a mildly attractive girl : pm at the table opposite he and Travis, and two younger boys playing cards at the table next to her. No one seemed particularly happy or pleased with Nick's so far victorious attempt at the genocide of houseflies. With a slow shake of his head, Nick looks down at the floor where his duct taped converse tennis shoe rest near all the flies' remains on the black, tile floor. "My God we're pathetic," he laments to no one in particular.

Travis points at Nick with his pen and without looking up. "*You're* pathetic," he corrects his compatriot.

"Shut up."

Continuing his scribbling, Travis ignores Nick who lounges back in his seat to recuperate for a moment. The humidity of the day is sapping everything of vitality, slowly exanguinating the boys, sucking all their salty water out through their pores. Even the very act of killing a fly is exhausting in the swampy, oppressive heat.

"Hey," Nick says kiddishly, sitting up in his chair. He pokes at Travis with his rolled up newspaper a couple of times. "Hey."

Scribbling, Travis waves off the paper with his left hand and hopes that Nick will

drop it: whatever inanity it is he hand on his mind.

“Hey,” Nick says, poking Travis again.

“Quit it,” Travis replies, moving his hand away from the pad for a moment, and returning it when Nick’s black and white print scepter is removed.

“Hey,” Nick persists. “Hey, hey.” He pokes Travis in the arm twice more.

Looking perturbed, Travis says slowly, “I am *trying* to write some lyrics.” He stares at Nick for a moment who stares blankly back, and then returns to scribbling, noting at the top of his page with an arrow pointing across the table at Nick, “*STUPID*”.

Setting his newspaper down, Nick picks up his small black, hardbound sketchbook off the table and flips through it for the tenth time in twenty minutes. He stops momentarily on the last page he’d drawn upon forty minutes previously. It is a convoluted image of an angel drifting over a ducking mortal, shedding feathers and assaulting the human with heaven shattering, wavy lines of body odor. “I’m bored,” Nick whines, examining the picture. For a moment his eyes become drenched in hatred and madness as he stares at a presence that had come to occupy the page. As he stares, sitting completely still, he slams the book shut with a vengeance and then cackles. “Moo hoo ha ha.” Travis mechanically moves his pen from the legal pad to the notepad and adds a thirteenth tally mark by the letter N. Opening his sketchbook to the page with the olfactorily offensive angel, Nick scrutinizes the addition to the picture a small black and mutilated splotch. “Perfect!” he declares contentedly.

Looking around the room again, he watches the girl at the opposite table work furiously on some sort of research. She is attending summer school, no doubt, and Nick takes a moment to count his blessings mixed though they are. Turning, he picks up his newspaper and takes to poking at Travis again. “Hey hey.”

Travis rolls his eyes exaggeratedly and speaks through clenched teeth. “*What?*”

“Entertain me, boy,” Nick requests dismissively.

Travis writes furiously on his paper, *I will kill Nick, I will kill Nick, I will kill Nick*. Looking up at Nick for a moment, he smiles threateningly.

“C’mon,” Nick requests. “Do somethin’ funny, Fat Kid.”

“Okay,” Travis relents, thinking seriously on the matter. “How’s this: Roses are red / Violets are blue / If you keep bugging me / I’ll kill you.”

Nick mulls over the instant poem for a moment in a scholarly pose before responding in an educated tone, “That sucked.”

Travis just replies with a you asks for it expression.

“I’m sorry, man,” Nick says, setting the paper down and running his hand through his hair. “My brain’s just fried.”

Travis stares desperately at his legal pad one last time and then tosses his pen down. “No,” he says, wiping the sweat from his own brow, “you’re not really buggin’ me. This is total crap.”

“What’ve you got?” Nick asks.

Travis looks over it for a moment and then lifts the legal pad and reads in a weary



voice:

I've a thin sliver  
of gratuitous mockery  
lodged between my teeth  
a kernel shell from words  
I have eaten  
it is bothering me and  
my insides  
I will kill Nick  
I will kill Nick  
I will kill Nick

"Gratuitous mockery?"

"Yeah. I know."

"That's not actually *that* bad, considering... 'cept for the last part," Nick responds.

"Really?" Travis asks sarcastically. "I like the last part for some reason." He makes a confused face as he looks over the lyrics, as though he were receiving a subliminal message. "I don't know why..." he says, enchanted.

A fly lands on the page of the tally pad. Slowly, Travis lifts his legal pad up, and brings it down on the unsuspecting insect with the force of a cartoon anvil. Unlike the characteristic elasticity of cartoon characters however, the fly proceeds to spill green innards on the note pad and dies.

"Now that's one *dumbass* fly," Nick says, pointing at the remains mockingly.

"You give 'em too much credit," Travis replies. Contemplating the smear on the tally pad for a second, Travis looks back up to Nick and says, "I s'pose there's not much point in tallying that one."

"Minions of hell," Nick seethes.

Thinking on the carcass again, Travis says, "You know, houseflies really are the only species on the planet that I want irradiated."

Leaning back and crossing his legs like a psychologist Nick just asks, "Mm hm and how does that make you feel?" He opens his sketchbook and begins to take notes.

Donning John's patented tight lipped face of hatred, Travis replies, "Very happy."

Nick thoughtfully scrawls a few notes on a blank page: *weirdo, freak, insane...* "What about you mother?"

Peering around the cafe in a paranoid fashion, Travis bites at his cuticles. "I have no mother. I am the by product of a top secret government experiment." Leaning across the table for emphasis, Travis laughs and whispers, "I *am* a fly!"

Nick drops his book with a look of shock spreading out across his face, and then freezes with fear.

"No, no," Travis says, bringing back his usual demeanor. "I'm just kidding, buddy."

He pats Nick's hand.

Nick leans back in his chair with a large sigh of relief. Holding his hair up above his forehead, he replies, "Don't *do* that, man. That's not funny."

Travis begins rubbing his hands together in a fly like fashion and rubs his eyes. "It's just a joke, Nick. Just a joke. I'm not really... a fly." Travis looks around.

Nick closes one eye and scrutinizes his friend. "Quit it."

Travis smiles and then rolls his eyes when Nick doesn't let up the act. In a moment of resignation, Travis haltingly recites, "Flies are the minions of Lucifer sent her to subvert us skillfully. Their little buzzings are the monotonous creed of horror and irritation that only *I* can hear." Finishing, Travis looks at Nick for approval.

Nick reaches out across the table and pat his pupil on the shoulder. "Very good, very good," he coaxes. "You'll make an excellent specimen student."

The truth be told and were flies capable of intelligent communication, the reputations of Nick and Travis would more than likely be known flyworldwide. In the comfort of their own home, Travis and Nick are often thrilled to find a fly who has accidentally slipped into their domicile. The pair might spend an hour or two attempting to capture one, trapping it behind blinds or in their closet in order to catch it alive.

The fate of those poor flysouls is equivalent only to that of the English crusader caught by the moors, or a traitor of the French Revolution; horrific, painful, and short. In the kitchen of D are perched several empty jelly jars of fly P.O.W.s. The pair had removed legs, wings, burned bodies, melting them with Nick's welding torch, sliced, diced and disintegrated them in vats of bathroom cleaning products. One particularly unlucky fly had even suffered crucifixion with a paper clip and two toothpicks. No horror could match the fear felt by innocent albeit diseased *Musca domestica* who realizes what hunting grounds they'd stumbled into. There is no science, no philosophy, no explanation for the heated madness. Even the origins of such irrational hate and prejudice are lost to the boys, having burned up upon their brows.

Travis sets his head into his hands and sighs. "This heat is *frying* my brain."

"You ready to go?" Nick asks.

Travis sighs, coming out of his feigned madness and replies, "Yeah. Let's go. I'm done."

"Actually," Nick says, as they stand up from the table, gathering their things, "let's go over to ER and play some darts before we head back."

"Right on," Travis agrees casually.

"Right on," Nick repeats, sounding like he is stoned.

"Shut up."

Nick leans over and half closes his eyes. "Right on, duuuuude. Crescent fresh."

"Knock it off. What's your problem?"

"I hate it when you say that. 'Right on'. I don't know it sounds I don't know."

"Right on," Travis says in sincere agreement, and then smiles when Nick makes an irritated face.

Depositing their coffee mugs in a bin by the front door, the pair depart out onto the sidewalk heat and stroll across Washington Street to the parking lot of the Athens First Bank and Trust Company where Nick generally parked. Approaching the Montego, Nick opens the driver's side door and tosses his suede courier's bag into the back seat. Stepping aside for Travis, who also tosses his belongings in the belly of the Princess, he shuts and locks the door, leaving the window slightly cracked.

"Ya' wanna' call John and Ian?" Travis asks.

Nick thinks about it. "They're probably still out. Let's just throw a couple of rounds real quick and meet them at home. We can still go out then if they want to."

"Twice in one day?" Travis asks in sarcastic disbelief. "I don't know if I can handle *that*."

Walking back across the hot asphalt of Washington Street, Nick looks suddenly perplexed and stopped in the middle of the road. Travis stops short and waits.

"Say," Nick says.

"What's that?" Travis asks, his eyes squinted shut, digging around in his pockets for his cigarettes.

"When did they move Athens to Tunisia?"

Knowing Nick is subtly complaining about the heat, Travis goads him on. "Earlier this month. Don't they do that every summer?" he asks innocently. Travis, himself, didn't mind the heat, but then, he also didn't mind hearing people complain about it cleverly.

Nick nods in recollection of the fact. "I think you're right." They set off across the street again and head over to the Engine Room, situated next door to Jittery Joe's. Upon entering, they find a cool cavern of sanctuary amidst the low light and seventies music. The air is cool and condensed between the dark concrete walls, wet because of the heat beyond the boundaries of the room.

"You wanna' jus' get a pitcher," Nick asks.

"Very economical thinking," Travis agrees.

"Wha'da' we want?"

"Whatever," Travis says, handing Nick three dollars and heading off toward the end of the bar to the bathroom. A stench of very old warm urine assaults Travis's nose as he enters. Sucking in a quick breath of air through his mouth, Travis holds his breath while he uses the urinal, absentmindedly going over the stickers and graffiti decorating the wall before him. Someone had written, "Jesus saves." But below it, someone else had scrawled, "at the Chase Manhattan bank." He bats the handle to flush the urinal and hurries out of the bathroom just as he is running out of air.

As soon as he is outside, he takes a breath and walks a few feet past the pinball machines to where Nick is standing at a table near the dartboards, pouring two beers from a plastic pitcher. Just finishing, Nick sets the last half of the pitcher on the table and takes down a good sized gulp. He let out a long satisfied sigh, and offers the darts to Travis.

"You wanna' throw some practice shots?"

"Yeah, sure," Travis replies, taking the darts from Nick. He lines up at the throw

line and aims for a second. Nick is walking over to the scoreboard to put up their names. "Do we hafta' play a *real* game?" Travis asks.

"Yep," Nick answers.

Travis throws a dart and manages to hit the twenty. "You know I'm gonna' lose," he says pathetically.

"Of course," Nick answers unsympathetically.

Travis throws his second dart and hits the fourteen. Nick steps across the line of fire to where the beers are sitting on the table. "You talked to Meryl?" Nick asks, perhaps a little unsure of whether he should ask the question.

Travis looks surprised for a moment before he throws, hitting the edge of the board. "No."

Nick nods and moves to the board to collect the darts.

"We pretty much agreed not to talk anymore," Travis adds.

"Yeah. I remember you sayin' that. But you never said why."

Travis shrugs and sips his beer. "A whole year... I don't know.... I think we both thought it'd be easier to just cut it off." Nick throws and scores a twenty. "I mean, I still love her. I'd love to talk to her, but..." Nick throws a second twenty and Travis rolls his eyes before continuing, "It's too much to bare to be around."

Nick throws again, misses this time, and then walks up to the scoreboard to cross off the two twenties while Travis retrieves the darts. "I can see what you mean," Nick replies.

Travis lines his foot up on the shot line, leaning back and forth to get his balance. He looks at the board and looks over at Nick. "You still think about Karen?"

Sighing Nick leans against the table and says, "I uh... not a lot. I don't think I'm in love with her anymore, though. Or at least it's a different kind of love than it is not romantic anymore." Travis throws twice in quick succession, making a twenty and a nineteen. "I want to see her do well" Nick continues, "there's no malice. But then we didn't really break up like you and Meryl we just sort of fizzled out."

Travis finishes his turn and posts his score. "Yeah. It's kind of funny... I think your break up with Karen was a real blow to my confidence in me and Meryl."

"Really?" Nick asks, aiming.

Travis laughs sardonically. "You guys were an institution. I mean you started dating our freshman year."

Throwing, Nick blows his cheeks out in disbelief. He and Karen *had* dated for a long time.

"I'm not tryin' ta' make ya' feel bad. You didn't break me and Meryl up." Travis says sincerely. "It was just weird suddenly being in the position of being the torch bearer. Ian had left Jennifer. John had just broken up with Meredith. You and Karen were kind of the last straw. I couldn't see the point in sticking with it."

Nick puts his score up on the chalkboard while Travis gets the darts. Travis had only thrown twice and already Nick had closed out two numbers. Travis just chuckles

appreciatively at Nick's skill.

"No, no," Nick says reassuringly, "I know where you're comin' from. We *were* a kind of institution. It's just funny... I never thought that other people put any faith in that."

Travis nods and closes his eyes for a moment, standing on the throwing line. In an attempt to throw the dart in a zen state, he let his muscles relax, thinks about horses and fields, takes a breath, opens his eyes, and throws a bullseye.

"Wow," Nick comments.

Travis shuts one eye and looks at his dart, steady in the middle of the board. "I might as well not throw the other two now." He throws an eight and a double six worth nothing. Retrieving the darts, he passes them to Nick, holding the points and marks his bullseye. "I don't know. I don't mean to say that my success is *dependent* on yours. That'd be pretty pitiful. It's jus' that with all the shit around these days... I don't see how anybody stays together. I was really sure that Meryl and I were perfect." Subtly the beer begins to eat at his stoicism on the matter. "I *loved* her, damn it."

"Nobody has it perfect," Nick says, taking his first throw.

"Fuck that," Travis says dismissively. Nick throws and Travis drinks. Putting his beer down, Travis gets out another cigarette and looks at Nick seriously. "I'm sick of being told that *nobody* has it perfect." Nick throws a seventeen, closing it out for himself. "Don'cha' think that maybe we've just hear that too much. That maybe that's not the case in reality. I mean, we've been taught to be cynical in a way. Maybe we can't *believe* in the ideal anymore even though it *is* there."

Nick doesn't reply but just shrugs and puts a cross and circle over the seventeen on his side of board.

"There's got to be someone out there who's perfect for me for just me," Travis says as he takes the darts from Nick. "Somebody gets it right."

"Yeah, and what did that comedian we saw say? 'She's probably in Tibet somewhere, making pottery over a dung fire',"

Travis laughs and takes his shot. He is keeping up with Nick, surprisingly enough, and if he could get another bull, he might even be able to outscore him. "That's funny," Travis admits, "but it's not true."

"I'm jus' saying that the odds of you meeting that someone are against you."

Travis takes another shot and turned to Nick. "Not really," he says, calculating some variable in his head. "If ya' figure that there are a lot of people in the world, but that only a set few will meet certain definite requirements. If you knew, right off the bat, that certain people did not have the potential to be a perfect mate then you've shrunk the odds. I mean, you're not going to bother with people who don't have some certain quality."

Travis reaches over to the table, takes a sip of his beer, and then takes another shot, closing out eighteen for himself. "I mean, someone who grew up in a communist, dictatorial regime is not likely to have the same ideals as me, and probably wouldn't make a good mate." Travis lines up, takes his final shot, and then takes a drag off his cigarette.

"Is someone having the same ideals as you really that important, though?" Nick

asks from the line.

Travis fetches the darts for Nick and handing off to him says, "Yeah. Yeah, it absolutely is. I could never really have a long lasting relationship with someone who didn't appreciate music the way I do. Or at least art of one kind or another."

"What if they really loved accounting or biology?"

Travis thinks about it for a moment wiping the sweat off his beer glass on his jeans. Nick takes his first two shots "Yeah. That too as long as they had a *drive* of some kind *some* kind of passion for life."

"Doesn't everybody?" Nick asks as he throws his last shot, and then thinks better of it. "No. You're right."

"They're plenty of people who don't have a passion in life. There's thousands of wasted talents that are only a waste for a lack of passion. Most, I think."

"Yeah," Nick agrees.

"Hell, that's probably the one thing that holds me back. I love music, but I'm distracted by life."

Nick smiles knowingly and looks at Travis. "I'm just glad to be here," he says, and then, poetically enough, throws a bullseye

Travis stares at the irony of the dartboard and chuckles. Nodding slowly, he agrees, "Exactly."

*. Two Days Wrong!*

Travis is lying on the short couch watching the television even though it is off. He is lying with his legs in a high road low road position; one leg sprawled lazily across the couch, the other sliding gradually to the floor. His arms are up around his head cradling his brain, which is currently in a kind of stasis mode, waiting for something to happen. In the meantime, daydream music lines play through his neurons. He'd just finished playing for a couple of hours, but even though he's set his guitar down, the music is not done with him.

Some muses are wary ones, approaching artists delicately, carefully, only when sure of inspiration. Some are romantic, desperate to be real and alive with their chosen watch and the inspiration is a constant. Others are lazy, tossing an artist morsels of treatment, just enough to drive them mad. Travis's muse is a fat nag, and it never shuts up. Like a migraine, a constant, incessant procession of melodies march and stomp their way across the crevasses of Travis's cerebellum. If he isn't talking or drinking, she is annoying him, sending tunes by the thousands and yelling after them, asking if they are wearing clean underwear. He plays and plays his heart out when he sits, struggling, sweating through catharsis after catharsis, and still she nags him. No matter how long he plays or hums, moans or taps, his muse will come barking when he stops, screaming in a high pitch, shrill voice, "Travis! I can't hear you playing! Are you playing? Why aren't you playing, Travis? You need to be playing, it's good for you you're gonna' die if you don't keep playing!" Travis can see his muse sitting just above his head, three hundred pounds over weight with curlers in her fiery red hair. She is eating hostess cakes whole, spilling crumbs down onto his neck where they make him itch. "That stinks! Play somethin' else!" she'll holler. And then she'll burp like a cow.

Travis rolls over on the couch and hides his face. He can't sustain the image without crying or laughing or both, so he shoves his nose into the beer stained cushions and concentrates on the darkness. He is tired of feeling, tired of trying, tired of any emotion at all. He wants complacency, apathy, disdain. Nick comes into the room as Travis turns over, and he takes the movement personally. "I didn't wanna' look at you either," he mumbles, his hair stuck up on one side and his clothes exhaustingly wrinkled. He'd taken a nap when they got home from ER, the beer and the heat rocking him gently, lightly into to bed and then clubbing him over the head. "I feel like *ass*," Nick laments as he passes through the living room looking like an archaeologist's find woke up from its tomb in the middle of the night. Travis rolls back over on the couch to watch as Nick teeters dangerously around the room, into the kitchen and back out. Nick stands by the

couch, staring at the floor for a moment and then walks in a circle around the blue armchair. Just for effect, he bumps into the front door a couple of times like a wind up toy.

"Feeling a little disoriented?" Travis asks.

Nick runs his hand through his hair and looks back to Travis. "Did I mention I feel like *ass*. I hate falling asleep during the day. Where's the phone?"

Travis shrugs.

Walking over to the phone base and bending over, Nick presses the signal button that will cause the handset to emit an irritating, high pitched beep until the handset can be located. It is a wonderfully clever way for the manufacturers to punish their most lethargic customers. The phone's base begins screaming as Travis covers his head with a seat cushion, and Nick looks around the room with a vacant expression. Suddenly, in epiphany, Nick stumbles over to the blue armchair and pulls the seat up, revealing phone, merrily beeping away. Nick picks the handset up and stops the noise, before collapsing into the chair and dialing.

Travis peers around the room out from under his protective cushion. Nick is facing the other direction with the back of the chair towards Travis. He spots a daily calendar on the floor of the living room – the kind that have a saying for every day. Currently, it is on May 1<sup>st</sup>, and Travis picks it up to amuse himself while Nick is still on the phone. He reads one, tears off the page and proceeds to throw the day at Nick. Most of the crumpled up paper balls bounced innocently off the back of the armchair, and Travis reads the next saying passively. Now and then, one of the paper grenades pleasantly arcs through the air and hits Nick in the head. After June 1<sup>st</sup> beams Travis's lanky compatriot squarely in the cranium, Nick spins around in the armchair and shakes his fist. Engrossed in one of the sayings, Travis pretends not to see Nick's miniature tantrum, and promptly throws the paper at Nick when he is done reading it. It misses and falls harmlessly to the floor – with about twenty others. Nick reaches down, picks one up and throws it back at Travis, hitting him in the arm. Travis proceeds to act out a miserably dramatic death as Nick finishes his conversation. "All right, we'll see you there." He hangs up the phone and looks complacently at Travis writhing on the floor. Picking up another piece of paper from the floor, Travis sits up and throws it at Nick.

"Quit it, quit it, quit it," Nick says with a Terret syndrome tick in his neck.

Travis throws another.

"You better cut it out!" Nick hollers in an overly dramatic feminine voice.

"My God!" Travis declares, sprawling out across the floor. "If you weren't so fat I might be able to breathe in here!"

"I'm not fat!" Nick yells like a deranged housewife. He gets up for a moment, covers his face with his hands, sobs, and then sits back down on the long couch.

"Who was that on the phone?" Travis asks from the floor.

Nick keeps sobbing and doesn't reply.

"I'm sorry. You're not *that* fat. You just need to lose a couple of hundred pounds for your *health's* sake."



"Well now, that's better."

Travis coaxes Nick, "Now be a good bitch and get me my bottle."

Nick looks up. "That was Karen. She's goin' to ER with Chris."

"Karen?"

Nick shrugs. "I felt like calling her after we talked about it."

"Well, that's cool." Travis picks up the calendar, reads another saying

June th

"Traveling in the company of those we love is home in motion."

Leigh Hunt

Then, tears it off and throws it to the floor.

"Hey! Don't do that!" Nick says.

"Why not?" Travis asks as he does it again.

June th

"The only true gift is a portion of yourself."

Ralph Waldo Emerson

"We won't know what day its!" Nick says, agitated.

Travis looks at his friend blankly and proceeds to tear another day off the calendar not even bothering to look at it. "No!" Nick yells, hysterically, as though he is watching the days of his own life vanish. He stands up from the couch and rushes Travis to grab the calendar. They rough house for a minute, Travis attempting to pull off as many days as he can in clumps before Nick wrests the calendar from him.

Staring at it in horror for a moment, Nick says, "Oh my God! It's August th. I missed my mother's birthday!"

Travis thinks on the matter stoically as he pulls himself up off the floor and back onto the couch. "I should call my brother. It's his birthday."

"What? Really?" Nick asks, trying to dissect pretend from reality not an easy task with his friend. "What's your brother's birthday?"

"Today," Travis replies thoughtfully.

"What date?"

"August th."

Nick sits down on the long couch again and begins reading the sayings, ripping them off and throwing them on the floor when he is done. "So, it's not *really* today?"

Looking up at the ceiling fan from the floor, Travis asks philosophically, "What is today really? Tomorrow? Next week? I do not understand these things."

Nick laughs at his own thought. "You *should* call your brother up and wish him a happy birthday, and then act totally baffled when he tells you its not."

"And when I see him on his real birthday I'll just act like it's September or

something.”

Holding the calendar up like a holy relic of some kind, Nick declares in a deep voice, “And so brought forth good Nicholaus of the Gideons the calendar showing all men and mortals what thy real date is.”

“That would suck if it was already August.”

“It *is* already August.”

Travis looks around the room as though he hadn’t heard Nick. “That would suck if it was already August.”

“I know. The whole summer’s already gone by so fast.”

“Well...” Travis thinks, “not *that* fast.”

“Yeah, it’s like it’s been going by fast, but since not much has been happening, it seems real slow.”

“Sure,” Travis says slowly, raising his eyebrows.

“Shut up.”

They sit for a moment, looking at all the days spread crumpled all across the floor.

“C’mon. Go to ER with me.”

“Where’s John and Ian?”

“They’re probably over at the house.”

“Does the band practice on Monday’s?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Well, let’s leave them a message on the machine so they can come find us.”

“All right.”

Just then the phone rings. “Hello?” Travis calls out to the room. Nick gets up and fetches the phone from the armchair.

“I’m dead if it’s for me,” Travis says, just as Nick turns the phone on.

“Hello?” Nick says. He listens for a moment. “No, I’m sorry. He’s dead.” He listens again. “Well,” he starts with some reserve, “I could check again, but, I mean, an hour ago he was dead.”

Travis looks at Nick and mouths silently, “Who is it?”

“Kristin,” Nick mouths back.

Travis nods affirmatively and waves for the phone.

“Oh my God!” Nick holles, “It’s a miracle! He’s alive! Here.” He hands the phone to Travis.

“Hello?”

“Hello, freak,” Kristin replies dryly.

“What’s up?”

“I wanted to see what you are doing tomorrow night.”

“Not goin’ anywhere with you,” Travis says sarcastically. Nick gets up to go to the bathroom, farting loudly as he passes Travis. Travis takes a swing at him as he dashes through the door.

“Shut up,” Kristin says, “Do you remember Eric Tufts?”

Travis thinks on it for a moment. "Yeah."

"You do not," Kristin says, sure that Travis doesn't.

"No, actually I do. We met up with him at Mardi Gras that first time, right? You met him on the love boat or something."

"It was just a cruise. I can't believe you actually remember that."

"Yeah, well, we got along pretty well. He can talk the talk."

"Well, anyway, he's coming in to town tomorrow. I want us all to hang out."

"Am I to assume that there will be drinking?"

"Uh, like, what else?" Kristin asks in her valley girl voice.

"No, I'm sorry. I'm strictly against drinking."

"Shut up. Will you come?"

"Yeah. It'd be great to see him again."

"Yeah. I though you guys got along last time, and it'll be more fun if there's more of us."

"Yup."

"Okay. Well, what are you doing tonight?"

"I think we're goin' to ER to meet Karen, and then I don't know what."

"Karen? Nick's Karen?" Kristin asks. There is a vague hint of jealousy in the question.

"Yeah."

"Why?"

"I don't know. Nick says he hadn't seen her in a while and thought it would be nice."

"Okay," Kristin says, feigning irritation. "Well, me and Daphne will be at Mean Mike's if ya' wanna' see us after that."

"I imagine we'll do that."

"Okay. We'll see you there."

"Yep," and Travis hangs up the phone. Getting up, he walks over the the phone base and replaces the handset. Then, he picks up the answering machine and hits the memo button. "John. You're an asshole. We're at the Engine Room." The machine chirps cheerfully and then begins blinking the number two on its display. Travis looks at the number questioningly and then plays the first message. A familiar voice is digitally reproduced. "Travis. This is Mom. Give me a call. I uh I just wanted to talk." Travis sticks his button lip out and frowns, then plays the message again, listening more closely to the tone of his mother's voice. Her voice could have been mistaken for a twenty year old's, and she almost always sounds happy. But Travis hears the distance in the pitch of her voice. She is missing him, and it makes him sad for a moment before Nick comes in, tightening his belt.

"Don't go in there!" Nick warns loudly.

"Man," Travis replies, irritated. "Someone should shove a scented suppository up your ass. I thought you were a vegetarian or somethin?"

"I am," Nick replies, perplexed. "What's that got to do with anything?"

"So, shouldn't that make your crap smell less?"

Nick shrugs. "I never really thought about it. I wouldn't think so." Travis is still standing with the answering machine in his hand. "Are you ready to go?" Nick asks.

"I'm not goin' *anywhere* with *you*," Travis says, setting the machine down and heading to the door.

"What did Kristin want?"

"Oh. An old friend of hers is coming in to town. She wanted us to all go out with him show him a good time, you know."

"Well, she didn't invite me." Nick cuts the lights out and he and Travis head out the door.

"You don't know the guy. I'm sure she wants you to come." Travis shuts the front door behind them and locks it.

"I hate getting invited by implication."

"Don't be a baby."

"Maybe I don't *wanna*' go," Nick says, pouting.

Travis points at Nick harshly and raised his voice. "You're gonna' go, you're gonna' drink, and you're gonna' *like* it."

Nick opens the door to the to the Montego and whines, "I suppose if I *have* to." He leans over and unlocks the door for Travis. Then, he pats the dashboard lovingly and says, "Good evenin', darlin'," before putting the key in the ignition and starting her up. They pull out and get on their way, rolling the windows down to enjoy the breeze from the relatively cool air relative to earlier that afternoon. The sun is just starting to go down on Baxter, a long black arrow pointing west.

"I decided that my muse is a fat nagging housewife."

"What?" Nick asks, not keeping up with the thought.

"Yeah. I was thinking about what kind of personality my muse would have that's what I came up with. She eats hostess cakes."

Nick laughs. "I could see that actually. Travis!" Nick intoned the voice of a woman. "Travis! What's that God awful noise? What're you *doing* in there? I'm going to get your father!"

"Go away! I'm busy," Travis says, playing along.

"You better not be playing with yourself! You'll go blind!"

They both laugh.

"Mine's probably a big black woman from one of those talk shows on TV," Nick says, laughing.

Travis jerked his head to the right and left. "Damn! I *know* you ain't paintin' that shit with *my* inspiration."

Holding his hand up flat in Travis's face, Nick remarked, "Don' be comin' 'round here tryin' to paint that shit wit' me aroun'," He stops to turn the radio on, chuckling.

"Speaking of muses," Nick starts.

"Speaking of pizza," Travis intones, using the patented non sequitor he and Nick had developed once.

Nick smiles. "I was talkin' to Jim today. He showed some of my slides to a guy up in Pittsburgh. Turns out I might get to show my stuff alongside Jim."

"For real?" Travis asks.

"Yeah," Nick is excited now that he has told someone.

"Dude. That's great."

"I'll probably go up there for two or three weeks in August with Jim. And the gallery'll know later this month if I'll be in the show. We're shipping them some work to look at first."

"That's excellent, man." Travis thinks about it. "Pittsburgh, huh? That's a ways away."

"The lease is up at the end of this month, right?" Nick asks.

"Yep. They'll be kickin' us out." Travis confirms.

"Do we know what we're doin' after that, yet?"

Travis shrugs. "Do we ever know what we're doing?" and Nick laughs at this.

"Well, we can extend it 'til August if we want. Most people won't want to start leases until September anyway. Ian and I are looking at some places last week houses actually."

"Yeah. You, me, John and Ian."

"That's the plan."

"Cool."

"Man, the four of us living in one place..."

"It'll be a little scary," Travis agrees, chuckling. "We found a nice little number over on Habersham actually. It'd run about two fifty a piece a thousand a month."

Nick thinks about the numbers. "That'd be good. I could handle that." Nick sits up a second. "Hey. I don't think Karen's keeping her house. We should just ask her."

"Yeah," Travis agrees. "Her place is the shit."

"I'm pretty sure their lease isn't up until the end of August though."

"Well, we can extend ours, then."

"God, I can't wait to move out of this place. It's such a shithole," Nick says with sudden distaste.

"Home is where you take a shit."

"Yeah. I mean with all of us there and all it's tolerable, but whatever persuaded us to get it in the first place..." and Nick rolls his eyes.

"It could use some work," Travis admits.

Beating his hands on the steering wheel, in time with a new song on the stereo, Nick replies, "Somebody should burn it down."

Travis scratches his head. "I imagine we'll eventually manage."

. *Why is a Raven like a Writing desk?*

Travis has been watching a girl at the end of the bar for some time. She is sitting a couple of stools down from anyone else, and he thinks, as cliché as it is, she is too pretty to be sitting by herself. He keeps trying to discern her mood through her motions—the way she orders her drinks, or speaks to acquaintances. She certainly doesn't seem particularly interested in anyone despite the fact that she is dressed very nicely and looks intelligent. Looks intelligent—Travis has to stop and think about that for a moment. How could she *look* intelligent? How could he know that about her ahead of time? She isn't being a bump on the log, granted. She frequently looks around the room, staring at things not people. And there is plenty to stare at in the Engine Room—odd antiques and old store signs hang from the walls and suspended from the ceiling.

The more he thinks about it, the more Travis gives into the idea that he could not know if she is intelligent. She might be sad or thoughtful, but he has no well developed distance IQ test. Finally, Travis decides that he should talk to her. And of course, right when he decides this, a handsome young man walks up to her and says hello. At first Travis just shakes his head—he isn't surprised at his luck. But then, it becomes apparent that the two know each other from the looks on their faces. Travis sits back in the booth, hearing Nick for a moment “*Nothing* happened in the Baroque period.”, and watches the pair at the end of the bar exchange pleasantries. After a moment, the young man turns and walks away down the bar past Travis to the bathroom. When Travis looks back from the bathroom to the girl, he catches her glance. It is short, and she looks right back to her drink, but he caught it and decides that if the young man comes back out and doesn't rejoin her, he will.

Looking back to the table, Travis hears Nick saying, “No, I'm sure Kandinsky was the first.”

Karen shrugs and replies, “I guess you're right. I don't really remember.”

Sitting opposite of Travis, Chris speaks up, “Out in space there, champ?”

Travis smiles sheepishly. “Nah. I'm just watchin' that girl down there.” He makes sure his eyes don't wander in her direction when he is speaking. She probably can't read lips, but anybody could read eyes.

Chris turns around and looks over his shoulder though, obviously blowing Travis's cover. Luckily she isn't looking, and Travis just puts his head in his hand. “The one in the black dress?” Chris asks facing Travis again.

“How 'bout I just have her come over here so you can get a good look at her?” Travis asks sarcastically.

“Huh?” Chris asks.

"Yeah. The girl in the black dress."

"That sounds like a song," Chris muses.

"A very bad one."

"Well, you should go talk to her," Chris says encouragingly.

"I'm workin' on it," Travis says, nodding slightly. "In a second."

Chris looks confused. "Wha'da ya' mean: working on it?"

"Don't worry about it," Travis says, not being rude, but unwilling to explain his own neurosis.

Chris just nods, as Travis watches the young man returning from the bathroom. He walks up the girl and stops for a moment again. Just as Travis suspects he is out of luck, the young man walks out the front door. Travis sits up a little, pleasantly surprised. He starts to stand, "All right, ya'll," he says coolly, "I'll be right back."

"Go get'em tiger," Nick says, like a dad at a little league game. Travis just waves him off. His nerves bubble as he makes the long walk down the aisle. Something inside his stomach leaps and won't accept that walking up to talk to an attractive girl at a bar is something he has done before. There is something about her. There is something Travis likes. He knows he wouldn't have cared if she'd been an other girl. And it would not have seemed such a long distance except that she has noticed him stand, and is watching him approach. Travis can't help but think to himself that she is going to blow him off, that she had only been waiting to blow him off. He can tell she wants to be alone, but he can't help it there is some reason he has to say something. Most women, he knew, did not, contrary to popular belief, sit alone in bar to get hit on. Travis knows better he has heard the lament from Dizzy and Kristin one too many times before. But then, Travis thinks, he would be relieved to get blown off. He isn't sure what the hell he is doing walking up to a complete stranger anyway. He doesn't want a relationship. All he knows is that he misses the company of a woman, or maybe just romance. Maybe she just looks as lonely as he feels.

"Hi," he says, none too casually.

"Hi," she replies, warily.

"Is this seat taken?"

"No," she replies, as though stating the obvious, but implying that she doesn't necessarily want it occupied.

Travis does not sit at first he figures he had gotten this far, he should earn it. He sets his drink on the bar though. "It's just that my friends down there are talking about art history, and I really don't know anything about it. I'm kinda' in the mood to talk about somethin' though." Travis laughs inside. It certainly is an honest enough approach. She smiles at him. Maybe it's the right approach too.

"Well, what exactly interests you?" she asks politely, curiously, even. Travis already likes her she is coy.

He thinks about his answer. "Everything" is the correct answer, but that wouldn't take him very far. His mind is racing through possible topics now, but he finally admits, "It's not so much what interests me, so much as what I can yammer on at length about."

She raises her eyebrows. "Yammer?"

Travis isn't sure whether she doesn't know the word or is just being facetious.

"Yeah, ya' know yammer. Talkin' without getting anywhere."

Smiling, she replies, "No, I know what you mean. I just don't recall anyone using it besides my grandfather."

Travis just shrugs innocently. Sincerity almost always beat facetiousness.

"Well, by all means," she says, "yammer away." She turns her hand out and offers the barstool with a wave. Travis smiles inside, relaxes a little, and sits down.

He holds out his hand. "My name's Travis."

Shaking his hand, she replies, "Melissa."

"I haven't met too many Melissas."

"That's all right, I've never met a Travis."

"Well, you don't have to meet anymore then," Travis says, "we're all exactly the same."

"So, after you and I have talked, I won't need to speak to any other Travis's to know anything about them?"

"Travisae," Travis corrects.

She giggles. "Is that right?"

"Oh yeah, like octopus." The words came easily from his mouth, laughter having made it so much easier for him to be himself.

Chuckling again, she takes a sip of her drink to let Travis lead, and it strikes him as funny. He feels like leading. He is suddenly feeling a little punchy, a bit funny. "What're you sippin' on there?" he asks.

"Gin and tonic."

"He hold up his own glass. "Here's to good taste."

"You too?"

"Oh yeah."

They clink their glasses and take drinks. Travis smiles naturally as she looks into his eyes, in a searching way. She is looking for something, and Travis loves the feeling of being searched. "Do you know how gin got its name?" he asks, attempting to distract her.

"No. Do tell."

But he just feigns surprise instead of answering the question and then replies shortly, "No, I don't know I thought maybe you did."

Laughing lightly, Melissa says, "And here I thought we are going to talk about something interesting."

Travis looks around to see if she is mistaking him for someone else. "I'm sorry," he says sincerely, "did I say I is interesting? I meant I just liked to talk." He shakes his head and looks at the bar sheepishly.

Now Melissa is really getting a kick out of his antics. It seems apparent that she is coming out of a funk of some kind and Travis hopes he is partly responsible for that. It is akin to giving a present that way. He liked to cheer people up.



"Actually, I have to admit," Melissa says sheepishly, twirling her straw in her drink. "You never actually said you were interesting. I guess I just deduced that." It is Travis's turn to raise an eyebrow, caught off guard by the subtle compliment. Melissa smiles, because she too could be disarming. "Still though," she continues, "as cliché as it sounds, you do look familiar to me."

Sure he hadn't seen her before though, Travis shrugs. "Round here... I guess that happens a lot. Where do you hang out at usually?"

Melissa thinks about it, "Here sometimes not often the Manhattan Club, City Bar, DT's."

Travis decides to give a possibility a whirl: "I've played DT's a couple of times maybe you caught a show there?"

She looks down at the bar trying to recall and then seems to realize something, looking up at Travis and scrutinizing his face more seriously than before. "I can't believe I didn't recognize you."

"Really?"

"Oh, God yeah. You used to have longer hair though, right?"

Travis rubs his head and agrees, "bout six months ago."

"Oh, that's so funny."

"Is that why you were looking at me?"

"Well, uh... no." She hadn't realized she'd been caught and seems embarrassed.

Travis just smiles in reply though, not insinuating anything.

"You played a song about... an... oath or something."

"Pledge?"

"Yes. Pledge. That's it. I'm sorry. I don't really remember it, but I remember thinking it is really beautiful." She lets her eyes show the compliment for a moment and Travis obliges with a curt nod. "When are you playing next?" she asks.

Travis is taken aback by her enthusiasm. He never expected it directed at his own music. "Next weekend actually not this coming one, but the next."

"Oh," she looks disappointed. "I won't be here."

Travis shrugs. "Honestly, I think the owner's are pretty satisfied. They'll probably be retaining me for a while."

"Well, I'll have to see you play again. Especially now," she says. "Do you have an album out or anything?"

"No," Travis says simply. He thinks about it for a moment. He should have made an album at this point, and he really doesn't have an excuse for not just going into a studio and doing it. Everyone in John's band had offered to back him for such a venture. "I, uh... I haven't really" he always feels stupid explaining why he doesn't have an album. It made him feel small somehow. "No," he says finally.

Melissa nods, not sure why Travis is so unclear on the matter. "I guess Athens must be nice that way. You can make enough money just playing around here."

"If you know people," Travis agrees. "I guess I'd like to get out and play some

other towns, but that's more difficult. I'd probably really need a band to back me up."

Frowning slightly, Melissa offers, "I thought you were good. It's nice just hearing someone play guitar."

"I think so too," Travis agrees, as he watches John walk into the bar and shows the bouncer his driver's license. He waves as John starts to pass him by, almost missing him.

John steps up to Travis and Melissa, hands in pockets, and a box underneath one arm. "Hey."

"What's up, Lardo?"

John shrugs and looks at Melissa.

"Hi," she says.

"John," Travis starts, "this is Melissa. Melissa, John."

Reaching out, John shakes Melissa's hand. "Nice to meet you," he says plainly, and Travis looks at his friend more closely. Something is wrong.

"You all right?" Travis asks without hesitation.

John tilts his head left then right, and then says, nodding slowly, "It's been an interesting day."

"The band? Rachel?"

John just squints his eyes a bit. Hesitantly, he repeats himself. "It's just been an interesting day."

Travis nods in understanding. "Well, uh, Nick and Karen are here. And I think we're goin' to Mean Mike's to find Dizzy and Kristin a little later."

"Okay," John replies. Looking at the bar, John says, "I'm gonna' get a drink."

"All right, buddy," Travis pats John on the shoulder and as John starts to walk away, calls after him, "Are you drunk?"

John just throws a don't you know it look over his shoulder.

"Is he all right?" Melissa asks as Travis turns back to her.

"I don't know," he says, slightly amused, and glances back over his shoulder.

Shaking his head, Travis continues, "With John, you can never tell." It isn't entirely true, Travis knows, but it is mostly true.

"You can go talk to him," Melissa offers, smiling. "I won't be offended."

"Oh," Travis says dismissively. He looks back over his shoulder and watches John sidle up to the bar with a pretty miserable expression on his face, like he'd just sat in something wet. Looking back at Melissa, Travis takes a breath. "Yeah, maybe... I guess I should." He finds himself genuinely troubled by John's demeanor, and genuinely pleased with the fact that this stranger understands his loyalties.

"I'll talk to you another time," Melissa says hopefully.

Travis is more content leaving the conversation this way anyway no numbers exchanged, no last names just on a good note and a hope that they might meet again by chance. That is good. "Yeah," he agrees, "I'll see ya' around." He gets up from his stool.

Melissa gets her purse and is finishing the last of her drink. She holds out her hand and Travis takes it. She lets him hold it for a moment longer than is just polite. "I'll

come find you at one of your shows," she says, leaning in.

Releasing her hand, Travis offers, "Maybe next time we can talk about something *interesting*."

She smiles. "I'm sure." And then she turns and walks away. Travis watched her leave and heads for the booth, grabbing an empty chair on his way, and slides it up to the table, straddling it. Nick already looks somewhat concerned by John's demeanor as well, but Chris and Karen seemed pretty engrossed in the conversation.

"You wanna' shoot some darts?" Travis asks John.

Reaching down to the floor, John picks up the box he had brought in and replies, "No. But let's go play this."

Travis looks at the box more carefully now and sees it is John's chess set. "Okay." He and John get up and made their way to an empty spot towards the far end of the bar, near the bathrooms. They sits down on a couple of stools and set their drinks down. John takes out the chess set.

"Are we talkin' about it, or ignoring it?"

"Well," John starts, setting up his pawns, "We're movin' to Atlanta the band. Eric found a place, and I think we all agree that moving there right now is the best thing for the band."

Travis furrows his brow and begins setting up his own pieces. "That doesn't sound so bad."

"It's not," John agrees with a sniff. "Actually, after listening to Eric and Leo, I have to agree that they're right."

"Well, we'll all be sad to see you go, but Atlanta's not that far away."

John nods his head in agreement.

"So..." Travis asks, lingering, figuring there is more.

It takes John a moment to think about what he wants to say. When he sets his last piece down he looks Travis in the eyes and says, "When I told Rachel, she dumped me." John pulls in his lips and sighs through his nose.

Disappointed immediately, Travis shakes his head. "Well, shit," he says quietly. John just nods and drinks from his beer as Travis finished setting up his side of the board. "She seemed pretty sure? Maybe she is just overreacting, you know?"

"Well, hell. *I'm* sure now. If she can't back me up on this..."

Travis nods, "Yeah, that's true."

John sighs again and moves his queen's pawn out two spaces.

"So, you've been drinking?" Travis asks, a little amused. He leads with his king's knight.

"I went down to Foxz' and drank a pitcher just to think awhile," he says absently looking at Travis's move.

"I can't blame ya'," Travis says. "Did the same thing when Meryl and I broke it off. What else are ya' gonna' do?"

John stares at the board and then moves his queen out two spaces. "I could kill

her,” he says seriously.

Travis smiles. John doesn’t. It is a joke and John means it as a joke, but he doesn’t feel like laughing. Travis just takes it as a sign that John is going to be all right, and he doesn’t say much else about the matter as they play.

“It’s a good a plan as any,” Travis offers, moving out his other knight.

John just nods in silent reply.

. *Exactly So*

"I love you. Marry me," Travis says, grinning like an idiot at Dizzy. He is drunk and has just sat down.

"Hey everybody," Dizzy says, talking to the whole table, "Look who it is! It's Travis!" She leans over and gives Travis a big, wet kiss on the cheek. In a kind of mutant double date, Travis, Ian, Kristin and Dizzy are all sitting at a table by the front door of Mean Mike's. Travis and Dizzy are on one side, Kristin and Ian opposite them. No more perfect pair of pairs that could never exist could ever have existed.

"Don't avoid the question," Travis says, trying to be irritated something he can never manage with Daphne. She looks at him and beams, and he has to smile back.

"I told you we'll get married when we're thirty."

"Oh c'mon," Travis whines.

"What?"

"You'll have found a perfect, gorgeous, rich guy by then."

Thinking about it while sipping on a jack and coke, Daphne nods excitedly at Travis with a bright smile, and replies, "Okay."

"Well " Travis stutters, still whining, "you'll never marry *me* then."

Daphne smiles again. "Okay." When Travis looks forlorn, she stares Travis seriously in the eyes and then begins petting his closely shorn hair with a concerned look. "You can be my puppy."

Throwing his hands up in the air, Travis gives up as Nick sets a drink in front of him and then scoots past Dizzy to take a seat. "Thanks," Travis says as Nick sits down.

"How come you only say this stuff when you're drunk?" Daphne asks, chuckling because she herself is drunk, and because she thinks Travis is cute when frustrated.

"The love is too painful to bare when I'm sober."

"Well, I think you should try to say it when you're sober." Daphne lingers for a moment, and then raises her eyebrows. "You might get somewhere."

Travis hates Dizzy for saying things like that. He can never tell if the joke is a joke. He didn't want it to be a joke. "You'd never be seen with me if we were sober."

Tapping the ashtray with her cigarette, Dizzy replies, "That's true."

Then, snapping out of his feigned self pity, thanks to an errant thought, Travis offers neutrally, "I wrote a song for you."

"Really?" Daphne asks.

"Yeah."

"That's so sweet. I wanna' hear it."

"I'll bring my guitar next time I come over."

"Yay!" Dizzy cries, triumphant. "Is it good?"

Travis shakes his head. "No. It sucks."

"No!" Dizzy yells and slaps Travis on the shoulder.

Taking a drink, Travis offers, "It sucks less than my other stuff."

Daphne looks at Travis seriously and says, "Your stuff doesn't suck.."

"I know," Travis admits.

"You have to play it for me this week. I'm leaving Saturday."

"You are?"

Dizzy nods.

"I thought you were getting a job here."

She shrugs.

"Well, I'll play it for you sometime this week then."

"Just come over. I'm not doing anything but packing a few things."

"Okay."

"When're you having another party?" Nick interjects.

"Not for a while. There's nobody here right now."

"Yeah. That's true," Nick agrees.

Leaning over, Travis wraps Daphne in a hug. She accepts graciously, putting her hand on his arm. "You're my inspiration" he blubbers, "my muse."

Daphne looks at Travis sweetly before Nick says, "He said earlier that you're a fat nag." She hits Travis in the shoulder again and refuses to speak to him for ten minutes.

Travis just sits for a while, kicking his feet beneath him. As Ian and Kristin talk about photography, and Nick tells Dizzy about his Pittsburgh deal, Travis lights up a cigarette. Content to just be among his friends for a while, and not contribute, he watches people walking by the front of the bar—some peering in cautiously, some passing, some walking in. There is a steady stream of people, although not as thick as it sometimes is, diluted by the conditions of summer. There are couples and gangs, the occasional party and loners. Mostly Travis is thinking about John though, who has already gone home for the evening—having had enough to drink. The only question in Travis's mind is whether John has said all he wants to. Never wanting to be a genuine irritation, Travis had let John go home without too much fuss. In his mind, his friends had minds. They meant what they said to Travis, and if they didn't, then there was nothing to be done about it. He could only imply that his friends were liars by persisting in discovering the truth. He believed in giving his friends more credit than that. And he believed that the best friend he could be was a present one.

In John's mind, Travis believed, there was no such thing as sympathy. If you knew what he was feeling, you knew it. There was no agreement necessary, no need to say anything. Sympathy, on the other hand, was just pity, worth little more than a condescending pat on the head. Travis had no business condescending to his friends. He did to the people on the street. Watching flocks glide by, he could do little else but watch

them and think: he's ugly, she's not, he's confident, she's insecure, she's trying too hard, he's laughing too loud, she has no faith in anything. All of these thoughts are inherently wrong to Travis, even his thoughts concerning John's ex girlfriend or Nick's reason for painting. All his thoughts ended up irritating him. He isn't sure at what point in his life he'd become a cynic and he could only understand any of it from his own peculiar perspective. There is no comfort in that. Travis thinks about his assumptions these days. He sleeps on them like a pea beneath a stack of mattresses. He is tired, spinning his drink on the table top. It isn't his brain or his body just his soul. He is tired and doesn't know why, watching his fellow passengers on the carousel.

"Are you all right?" Kristin asks from across the table.

"Oh yeah." Travis brings his chin up from his hand. "I'm fine."

Dizzy looks at him and makes a pouting face. "Did you really call me fat?"

Travis closes his eyes and shakes his head in earnest.

Turning to her right, Daphne punches Nick in the shoulder, crying "Ow!"

But Nick is indignant. "He did! He called his muse fat earlier today, and then just now says that you are his muse."

"Yeah, but I didn't mean *that* muse."

Looking confused for a moment, Daphne crosses her arms and sits back in her chair. She looks from Travis to Nick, and from Nick to Travis before hitting both of them and crossing her arms again, in feigned frustration. Irritated, she blows a strand of hair out of her face.

Almost immediately, and in unison, Travis and Nick begin petting Dizzy's shoulders and cooing, "You're beautiful. We love you," and "You're the most beautiful girl in the world." After a moment, she relents, shaking the guys off. She feels like she had a harem, and it is strange and somehow more irritating than the boy's usual crudeness.

"You guys are pushovers," She says, taking down the last of her vodka cranberry.

"Oh, and a challenge is *exactly* what you need," Travis replies, rolling his eyes, and finishing his own drink almost as a challenge.

"What's *that* supposed to mean?" asks Dizzy, ready to be insulted.

Travis peers over the rim of the glass, down into the remnants of his gin and tonic and a squeezed lime. "I have no idea what that meant." He looks up to the paper maché flying dog over the entrance. "It just sounded like the appropriate sarcastic reply," he offers meekly with a shrug, and then dodges quickly when Dizzy's open hand comes swinging down toward his leg. Travis pushes her. "Why're you bein' so rambunctious?" he asks.

Clenching both fists and baring her teeth, Dizzy says meanly, "I *feel* rambunctious." She turns and hits Nick, and then turns and hits Travis, and then turns and hits Nick again. "Somebody get me a drink."

"I think you've had enough woah!" Nick says as another play hit comes his way.

"Make Travis do it. I went last time."

Dizzy shows her teeth at Travis who replies, "Okay, okay." He kisses her on the

cheek and stumbles off to the bar. After a moment he comes walking back. "What did you want anyway?"

"Same," Dizzy replies.

"Jack and Coke, moron." Nick says.

Travis walks away again and fetches the appropriate liquors and chasers. He steps up to the bar his third time that night, and Phil is there and ready for him. "Gin and tonic?" the bartender asks. Travis just replies with a wink and a thumb's up and then says, "A Vodka Cranberry and a Jack and Coke too, please." After a few minutes, when Travis comes back Nick and Daphne are in conversation.

"For absolutely *everything*," Nick emphasizes.

"What?" Travis asks.

Dizzy replies, "We're trying to come up with a universal generic response to everything."

"Yeah," Nick agrees. "Something you can say in any given situation so you never have to pay attention."

Immediately, the threesome fall into thought on the matter.

"How 'bout: what're ya' gonna' do?" Nick asks.

"Yep," Travis agrees.

"That's a good one," Dizzy adds.

In reply, Nick shrugs and says, "What're ya' gonna' do?"

Turning to Travis, Daphne says sadly, "I've got cancer."

Travis shrugs and says sympathetically, "What're ya' gonna' do?"

"Them's the breaks," Nick offers.

"That wouldn't work with, 'I won a thousand dollars,' would it?" Travis asks skeptically.

"It does, but it's not really the *best* thing I guess."

"See, in that way, 'what're ya' gonna' do' is better because it can also operate as a question." Nick and Dizzy both made inquisitive faces. "For instance," Travis begins academically, "Should you be put in the given situation in which someone tells you that they just won a thousand dollars. 'What *are* you going to do' would be the proper enunciation, as opposed to 'What *are* you going to *do*.' See?" Travis feels like he should have a flow chart somewhere on the table, and Nick and Dizzy nod and look at each other, before Nick applauds the lecture the claps resounding out, punctuated and sarcastic, into the bar.

Kristin and Ian had been listening for a few moments, and Ian asks, "What? Are you trying to come up with some sort of generic reply?"

"The reply to *everything*," Nick emphasizes.

"Oh c'mon," Ian says. "Fuck."

The whole group raises eyebrows and rolls the word 'fuck' around in their mouths for a moment. I won a thousand dollars! Fuck! I've got cancer. Fuck.

"I'm pregnant!" Travis informs the group, followed by a round of nicely diverse



proclamations of the word fuck.

"I got kicked out of school," Nick declares. Everyone intones a dismissive or disappointed fuck.

"I've got Herpes!" Dizzy says, giggling. Everyone replies with a mischievous yet sullen fuck, before she notices the bouncer at the door looking at her peculiarly though. "Oh no," Dizzy says, waving her hand. Suddenly embarrassed, she puts her hand in front of her eyes and laughs drunkenly. "Ohmigod."

"Fuck," Travis agrees.

Nick pats Daphne on the back, consoling her, while telling Ian, "I think that's gotta' be the one, man."

Travis is still running through examples on the other side of the table. "It works for everything!" he declares and Ian snaps his fingers in reply. Travis just counts examples on his fingers. "I just won the lottery, finished my dissertation, or had sex with a goat and/or a super model."

"Fan tastic," Nick says, lingering on the word jubilantly.

"I'm gonna' marry Travis," Daphne says.

"Fuck," says Travis in total shock, his mouth hung open.

"That was just a hypothetical," Dizzy says, patting Travis.

"Fuck," Travis says again and Dizzy laughs.

"You know you're never gonna' marry anybody," Kristin says.

Travis furrows his brow.

"Yeah, dude," Ian says encouragingly. "Vaquero. You're a cowboy."

"No time for dames," Nick agrees gruffly and then quickly corrects himself to Kristin and Daphne. "Except for you two luscious women." Kristin and Daphne nod curtly.

Travis shakes his head. "I was at a party a couple of months ago, trying to explain to this girl that I was a mysogonist she asks me if I 'had to go to school for that'."

Nick looks over at Travis, "Speaking of pizza."

"Sorry," Travis agrees. "It is the whole marrying thing got me on it."

"Actually," Nick says, "that's like that girl at that party at Appleby Muse." Nick elbows Ian. "Do you remember that?"

Ian just shuts his eyes and shakes his head, somewhat shamefully. He waves the matter off with his hand as Travis laughs in remembrance.

"I mean, Ian totally *lambasted* this girl. She is just totally playing it up and flirting with Ian..." Nick turns to Ian for a moment, "What was it you said? I can't even remember now."

"He said somethin' like 'I know you're just tryin' ta' get laid,'" Travis offers.

"No. She is just acting all stupid and fishing for compliments. I told her that if she was just looking for flattery, she should look elsewhere."

"That's like that girl here Rhonda's friend Jamie," Travis starts. "Ian told her that he didn't expect her to remember him after they'd already met once, but that it didn't matter anyway because he didn't want to inflate her already sizable ego."

Ian laughs. He had said that, and he could remember the expression of horror on the girl's face.

Kristin hits him playfully, her mouth wide open in utter amazement. "You did *not* say that."

"He can be a feisty little spic when he wants to be," Travis adds.

"Eh," Ian says dismissively. "She deserved it."

"Oh no," Travis agrees, "That is the beauty of it. She totally deserved it."

"But you don't *say* things like that," Kristin argues.

"I would never be able to say something like that," Dizzy agrees.

Ian shrugs though. "I was feelin' surly."

"I don't think I'd ever have the guts," Travis says.

"I'm gonna' hire Ian to say somethin' like that to Vicky."

"Aren't you still with her?" Kristin asks.

"No."

"I haven't seen her around in a while."

"Yeah," Nick answers. "She got an internship." He shakes his head.

"You didn't *do* anything?" Dizzy asks.

Nick shakes his head and shrugs.

In sudden epiphany, Kristin leans over across Ian and asks Nick, "What are you doing with your old *girlfriend* tonight?"

"I jus' hadn't seen her in a while," Nick says unemotionally.

Kristin nods her head knowingly keeping her eyes on Nick.

"No," Nick answers. "That's it."

"She's got a *new* boyfriend," Travis adds, leering, and Nick takes his turn rolling his eyes in response.

Raising one eyebrow suspiciously, Kristin leans back into her seat and watched Nick.

"Yeah. *He's* real interesting."

"He's not a bad guy," Travis argues.

"Eh."

"Okay," Travis concedes, "he's a moron."

"Are you *jealous*?" Kristin asks.

Nick looks frustrated for a moment, with Kristin's line of questioning. "Noooooo," he says, as though you'd have to be an idiot not to know it.

Kristin raises her eyebrow in suspicion again.

"How long did you go out with Karen?" Ian asks. Nick and Karen had been dating since before Ian met Nick.

"Two years."

Ian nods appreciatively. "That's a while, man."

"I guess we were the standard bearers for a while."

"You're the standard bearer now," Travis says, pointing to Ian accusingly.

Ian doesn't seem quite comfortable with the notion, and he shifts slightly in his seat. "Really?"

Travis nods.

"What about John and Rachel?" Ian asks in his defense.

Travis makes a cutting motion at his neck with his forefinger, and Ian, Dizzy and Kristin look surprised.

"When?" Ian asks.

"Earlier today. John left just before you got here."

"Shit."

"No. Fuck," Nick corrects him.

Ian laughs lightly and then asks, "What happened?"

Travis shrugs. "He didn't say much. Apparently she is not interested in a long distance relationship."

Ian looks confused.

"The band's moving to Atlanta."

"You're kidding?"

"No. *Fuck*," Nick corrects Ian more emphatically.

Ian just nods.

"They decided on it this afternoon apparently."

"When's he leaving?"

"Sounds like the end of this month."

Ian nods again and says, "You know, I kinda' feel like getting out of town." Dizzy agrees with a silent nod. "Maybe go home for a couple of weeks," Ian finishes.

"What would you do that for?" Travis asks.

"Eh. I just don't feel like I'm getting anything done around here. I really wouldn't mind going home and at least making a few bucks working for my Mom. It'd be relaxing."

Travis looks around the table. I guess it'll just be me then."

"It's only for a couple of weeks," Ian offers. "Actually, you could come with me if you wanted. We could head up to the city for a while. Check out some clubs."

"Nah," Travis says.

"Suit yourself."

Travis leans back in his seat. "I don't mind. I'll get some stuff done if I stay here." *I could sleep more, anyway*, he thinks to himself.

*. You Think You Can Find Out the Answer to It?*

"Oh my God. I'm not gonna' make it," Nick says, stumbling up to the intersection of Baxter and Milledge Ave. At two thirty in the morning, the intersection is still relatively busy. Young sorority and fraternity members are shuttling each other home after the parties. The downtown crowd is going home too.

"C'mon," Travis argues. "It's good for you." To prove his point, Travis inhales a deep breath through his nostrils, filling his lungs to capacity with the warm night air.

Nick catches up to Travis and mocks him in a whiny, self righteous tone, "It's good for you." He shakes his head. "It's good for you when it's three o'clock in the afternoon and you're not wasted."

"I don't know what the hell *you're* doing, then."

Nick looks perplexed.

"I'm always wasted at three in the afternoon." Nick laughs, and Travis looks up Milledge and thinks about the walk to Ian's instead of their own. "We could always just crash at the Teke house and walk home in the morning."

Nick waves Travis off. "I'll be fine. Just let me catch my breath."

"Right on," Travis agrees.

"Right on," Nick mocks.

"What?"

Nick shrivels up his face. "I just hate it when you say that."

"Sorry."

"Ah," Nick waves Travis off again. "It's no biggy."

Shrugging, Travis crosses the street with Nick right behind him. When they get to the other side, Nick stumbles on the curb, catching his tow. Looking back to make sure he is okay, Travis watches with amusement as Nick dramatically transforms a mere stumble into complete collapse. Lying flat on his back in the grass by the sidewalk, Nick looks at the stars for a moment before smiling when Travis looms over him with an outstretched hand.

"Get up," Travis urges.

"No, no. You go on without me." Nick coughs a couple of times and holds his gut like he has a bullet wound. "I'll only slow you down."

Travis stands up straight and tough in reply. "You're gonna' get up and you're gonna' make it home. Now that's an order, soldier."

Nick sits up and sighs, then stands and rejoins Travis who is already walking ahead of him.

"Hell, we're halfway there," Travis offers.

Nick just looks up at the sky again. The stars are impeccable, even in their unfocused majesty; white pixel space siblings shoved to the side by the vainglorious red bully of city light. Nick is dissatisfied with the sight, whereas moments before he had been glad to be part of such a bright, party glow. Now he wished it would all go away for the sake of that white on black simplicity the sky possessed in the countryside. The haze did not suit his mood.

Joining Nick in reverie, Travis passes his eyes across the sky, focusing for a moment on a flickering airplane or satellite. He feels inclined to talk, though, not just stare. "We are very small."

"Cheesetoast," Nick replies.

"No, I'm serious," Travis argues.

Nick shrugs. "Great." Being small or large didn't transport him home.

As they cross the relatively barren Rockspring road, Travis shakes his head, sure there is a thought somewhere within bewildering caverns of meaningless drivel. As he takes care to step on each bar of the white crosswalk, he searches for a complete fractal picture in his mind, zooming out from thought to thought, until the pattern inevitably repeats itself. "I don't know what the hell I'm talking about."

"I gathered that much."

Travis regroupes and tries again, diving into the fractal from a different, new set of coordinates. "You believe in fate, right?"

"Sorta'," Nick says as a car rushes by them going the opposite direction. It passes in the closest lane, and leaves a wave of dry summer dirt in its wake, buffeting the boys lightly as they stride.

"Do you think there's someone in the world who's perfect for you?"

"I don't know. I guess maybe. But that doesn't meet I think I'll ever meet her."

"See, but I think it does."

Nick looks surprised, makes the face of a critical academic. The statement neither sounded like the usually fateless, dreamer; nor the particularly cynical Travis as of late. It also isn't something Nick is inclined to believe right off hand.

"Part of the definition of perfect revolves around time and place. There are probably a lot of women in the world who are perfect for me personality wise, but there's only one of them that will be in the right place at the right time."

Nick shakes his head. "I don't think so."

"Otherwise, they wouldn't be very perfect for me."

"No..."

"Sure. Perfection requires the belief that what you think is perfect is perfect. It's subjective."

"Wait, wait, wait. You mean to say that if you're in a relationship, all you have to do to keep it going is pretend like it's perfect?"

Travis looks down at his boots as he takes steps, measuring his gait, so that he

steps between two cracks and then on one, between two cracks and on one. He realizes that he hadn't quite meant what he said. "First of all, I did not say pretend I says believe big difference. Secondly, I didn't mean that the belief is all that is required just part. You do actually have to be in love with the person."

"You thought Meryl was perfect," Nick offers.

"No, that's my point," Travis says, holding up his index finger. "I failed in that. At one time I believed she was perfect and *then* I started listening to what everyone else was saying." They walk on a little ways, mulling over the statement, picking at it, coloring it outside the lines. "Besides," Travis adds, "she didn't believe it was perfect either."

"Why didn't you just both agree to go back to being perfect."

"You can't. Once it's tainted, there's no believing that it was ever perfect. The perfection vanishes from the past as well as the present that's what's weird."

"So love is just a delusion. If both people believe in it enough, i.e. are in insane, then it's love."

Travis hadn't thought about that implication, and its logic politely boxes him in the nose, and he laughs lightly. "I guess I'd have to agree with that statement," he says unsure, looking for a rational fire escape of some kind.

"According to your theory," Nick adds scientifically.

"Well," Travis shrugs, "What's so bad about being deluded if you never know you are?"

"Because it's not real. It implies that love is just persuasion."

"But everything's like that. People only believe Newton's theory of gravity because we've been persuaded to believe it is correct."

"No, that's a fact," Nick pokes the palm of his left hand with his right index finger, tabula proofa style.

"No. Gravity's a fact. Newton's theories about it are just descriptions actually, they're wrong."

"Wrong?" Nick asks incredulously.

"Einstein."

"Einstein didn't prove Newton wrong."

"I know. Newton isn't right to begin with."

"No, no, no. I mean you still use Newton's laws to predict things."

"Yeah. Einstein just kind of says Newton needs to expand a little bit. But neither of them explain what gravity is just which direction it's pushing."

"No, Einstein says that gravity is space being bent."

Travis rolls his eyes, "What the hell does that mean? The model accurately describes what happens, but it still doesn't *explain* gravity. Is it a force, a particle... angels running around bending space."

"So, love is a fact."

"And we have theories about it none of which can ever be proven empirically."

"I kind of like that. But that means we're not delusional about Love just our

theories.”

“We’re delusional in our theories about love,” Travis sums up not sure in his own mind that they had proven anything at all. He makes a mental note to double check his thinking in the morning. Love is equal to theory times delusion squared.

“Sounds like a song,” Nick comments.

Travis smiles and looks at Nick, who offers him a cigarette. Travis takes it and says, “It would make a good line all right.” They light their cigarettes before Travis continues. “You know what?”

“What?”

“That’s all that matters to me.”

“That it sounds like a song.”

“That I discovered a lyric, not a theory.”

“Yeah,” Nick agrees thoughtfully.

Another car races down the street, this time coming from behind the pair. The driver screams out his window, “You faggots!” disturbing Nick and Travis momentarily until they recognize the vehicle. The black thunderbird slows down a few driveways ahead of them and pulls into a parking lot, Pink Floyd blasting out of the open windows. John waits patiently in the car, his elbow resting on the rim of the open window. He turns his tape player down as Travis and Nick approach the car. To Travis, the whole scene reeks of a criminal element in which top secret documents or drugs are about to be exchanged for a large sum of money. The yellow lights of the parking lot create three or four variations of every shadow. “What the hell are you doing, asshole?” Travis asks nonchalantly.

“Eh. I sobered up a bit thought I’d go for a drive,” John answers.

Travis watches another car pass up the hill, parallel to them, and catches a glimpse of a forty year old man a vacant expression on the driver’s face. Travis takes a moment to wonder where the man is going at two thirty in the a.m. and wonders what the man is deducing from their impromptu parking lot meeting; if he even noticed at all.

“Give us a ride home, fatso,” Nick requests.

“Now you’re walkin’, bitch,” comes the reply.

“Aw, please,” Nick says, leaning heavily on the car.

“Yeah, yeah,” John relents. “Sit up with me a while on the porch when we get back though.”

“All right,” Nick agrees congenially, walking around the passenger side. Travis just remains standing where he is lost in some tangent drawn across two cars passing in the night.

“You comin’?” John asks when Travis doesn’t move right away.

Examining the parking lot, Travis replies, “You go on ahead. I’ll catch up.”

“Suit yourself,” John says and starts the car.

“I’ll be there in a minute.”

“You’ll take a half an hour, fatty!” Nick hollers from the passenger seat as the Thunderchicken peels out in classic Thunderchicken style, tearing across the mini mall

parking lot towards a side entrance to the apartment complex.

Travis sets off at a good pace in the same direction that the Thunderchicken is gradually vanishing. He had given up the ideas he'd been debating moments ago with Nick, and lets his mind wander up and down note scales to see what key best expresses love as a force of motion. He decides on E flat, strangely enough, and begins to hum pieces of potential melody, doling out lyrical enough possibilities. He isn't entirely comfortable with his surroundings however, and the song's dream waxes and wanes with every few footsteps of the seven shadows surrounding him. The shadows seemed more dangerous now that he is alone. After a while, he puts the song's infancy away in a chest of drawers in the back of his head, and begins trying to equalize his steps between white parking lot lines.

Equalization turns into a balancing act, and Travis makes his way across the parking lot toe to toe for a while, testing his mental state. He isn't sure how drunk he is to the onlooker, but he feels more sober now that he had walked a good distance. There is relief for him in that if he went to bed in an hour or so, he wouldn't suffer from the prerequisite hangover.

After he covers half the parking lot, his inner thoughts wrestle their way to the surface, and he begins to wonder about Meryl and Daphne in terms of his newfound theory that somehow he had merely been robbed of love by the highwayman Reality is a farce. Love is meant to be an against all odds optimism; for rich or for poor, in health and in sickness. One does not fall out of love, one should have to be dragged from it like an addict. The real question in his mind is whether anyone can believe in him like he believes in Love and his fairy tale land? Could he believe in a woman the way she might believe in love? Could someone feel the majesty of the kiss the way he did and would he ever meet that woman?

A phrase leaps into his head as he turns into the apartment complex: "I'm in heaven now." Months before at a party, Travis had done the unthinkable he had gotten wrapped in conversation with a devout and very dogmatic believer of the Christian faith.

"I just believe that Christ is my savior," the apostle Jennifer had spoken.

Whirling his rum and coke in his glass, watching his flirtatious nature flush neatly down the whirlpool he made, Travis just replied, "I'm not saying you're wrong." For thirty minutes already the tides and truth and light had risen and fallen, and Travis was growing tired of the cycle. Debates are meant to rise, not cycle. "But what's right to you may not be right to me."

"But if you don't believe Jesus is your savior, then you can't be saved."

"Maybe I have no desire to be saved."

The comment moped across the couch and sat on Travis's opponent's brow. It was a red herring, a diversionary tactic, Jennifer decided. Who would not want to be saved? "You don't want to enter into heaven?" Jennifer asked as though she had not heard Travis correctly. "You would condemn yourself to hell?"

Travis shrugged, sipped his drink, and looks deeply into Jennifer's eyes, wading through the fear and exasperation, diving beneath the glassy surface of the stare. "I'm in



heaven now.” Travis leaned back, satisfied with the sincerity of his statement and its delivery. “Christ is your savior in that I have no doubt. But for me, acceptance of a savior is an admission that this world is not my heaven.”

Not much could be said then. Travis had revealed his belief in the face of an adversary, and Jennifer was no believer. The debate had come down to a matter of faith.

“This is not heaven,” Jennifer responded doubtfully.

The memory reverberates out toward the darkened apartments and the noise of crickets as Travis walks toward D. He wishes to believe his statement again as he approaches his home, but around him, the neatly lined cars of neatly lined nine to five existence borders him; the dark apartments of people asleep surrounds him; somewhere he knows someone is hungry and hurt and crying; and the red city lights in the distance, drown him. There is remarkable evidence all around that life is not heavenly, that love is delusion, that youth is a lie. Something about the statement’s resurfacing makes him angry; that he had said it in rebuttal; that his innermost truths were not *meant* to be believed by others, were not intuitive, but that he is alone with his beliefs for there is no music without them he knows. He is just love found along the way. He is a strange reminder, constant only for himself in his lonesome dreaming state

A hundred yards away, his own porch light shows out, the only one among many, as Travis watches silhouettes of Nick and John sitting and talking in the distance, John with his guitar in his lap. Travis picks up his pace, blurring the edges of his peripheral vision with darkness, racing down a tunnel toward a light. The painted horses scream from their poles that they might be left behind and the cacophony of braying steals heaven from the grey one, the soft one, the one no one pays attention to, the free one.

. *Suppose We Change the Subject*

Nick and Travis stand up against the windows in the Living Room as if avoiding a sniper's line of fire. The blinds are drawn, and they peer out between the plastic slats, watching the parking lot intensely.

"Oh my God," Nick says. "She's gonna' get him."

"Shit. Poor Ian."

"I told you we should have warned him."

"I hadn't seen her in a while," Travis says innocently. "You'd don't think I'd intentionally do this, do you?"

Nick just shakes his head. "You'd be damn cruel if you did."

Outside, Ian has parked his car and is walking up to the apartment where a very large woman with knotted, curly blonde hair stands hovering by the apartment door. Moments ago, she had knocked on it and had stood around aimlessly while Travis and Nick had hid in the confines of the apartment. As Ian reaches the stoop of the apartment, she greets him.

"No," Travis says, quietly trying to send Ian a telepathic warning. "Don't talk to her, man just keep going. Run."

"Nope," Nick replies. "She's got him now."

The woman stands talking to Ian, who is immediately and visibly uncomfortable. She is between him and the door to D. As Ian tries to subtly position himself to slide past, she shifts in response, continually babbling about something, strategically holding him prisoner to her senseless speech.

"I work at St. Mary's," Nick imitates from behind the window shade, letting his tongue dance a crusty southern accent. "I *take care* of the old people there," he says, his eyes widening threateningly.

"I bet she does," Travis replies.

Nick shudders and continues watching as Ian just stands helplessly and nods, feigning interest in whatever it is the woman is saying. As she speaks, she leans in toward him, and Ian takes little steps back every time she does. His attention is held by some quality of her face that cannot be seen from the window. Nick and Travis can't help but be a little amused as the woman assaults Ian with non sequiturs and nonsensical tokens of anecdotes from her life.

"Look, she's got him," Nick says as though he is watching a deer in the sight of a hunter's rifle.

"It's that hypnotic missing tooth," Travis laments.

After a minute or more, Ian makes a gesture toward the door and states something, probably about needing to get inside. The woman seems oblivious to the gesture and continues blabbing. Ian leans on his back foot and then glances over the the window where Travis and Nick are watching. He smiles lightly when he observes that he is being watched. He'd heard the stories about the Flod, but this is his first encounter. Travis and Nick let the gaps in the blinds shut and lean in to listen. They can just barely hear what the woman is saying.

"I turn 'em over and stuff," she says in a monotone southern accent. "It's a hard job."

There is no response. Travis can visualize Ian nodding politely though, still being polite enough to seem interested.

"I hafta' work mostly at night though." For some inane reason, this is funny, and the large woman cackles terribly like a cat in a paper bag being banged against a wall repeatedly. It is a high pitched laugh trapped within her throat a part of her anatomy that is not visible from the outside.

Travis shakes his head. "She's gonna' eat him."

"Do you think we should help him?" Nick offers.

"How?"

"I don't know. Lean out and tell him he's got a phone call."

"No way, man. She keeps asking me if I can drive her places."

"I guess I'll have to do it, then," Travis replies. He moves over to the door and prepares himself. Nick moves back into the corner of the room where he can't be seen from the stoop. Taking a breath, Travis opens the door a little and leans out. He comes face to face with the Flod's back, and can just see over her shoulder Ian's wild relief. "Hey man, somebody from the House is on the phone wants to talk to you."

"Oh, okay," Ian says.

The Flod turns slightly, not enough for Ian to get by, and looks at Travis smiling. A large hole glares from the middle of her top row of teeth. "Hey," she says.

Ian quickly slides past her as she turns and Travis opens the door wide enough to let Ian in.

"Where's your tall friend?" the Flod asks stepping toward the door.

"He went home to visit his parents for a little while," Travis lies. In the corner of the Living room, Nick rolls his eyes in relief.

Ian moves over to where Nick is and whispers, "Where's the phone?"

Nick shakes his head and holds his index finger to his lips.

"Well," Travis says, "I gotta' go got somethin' on the stove."

"Okay," comes the scratchy voice from outside. "I gotta' work tonight."

Desperately trying to understand the relevance of the statement, Travis only replies, "Oh. That's too bad."

"I got three weeks vacation time now. I built it up."

"You should take a day off then. Just call in sick."

The comment doesn't seem to register with the woman. She stands at the door, scratching her elbow, staring at Travis with a glazed look in her eyes.

"Yep. I gotta' go," Travis repeats.

"If I called in sick, what would they do with them old people?" The woman asks. She cackles again at this, and Travis tries to laugh along with her. What would they do indeed? "They's all shit themselves, that's what!" the woman continues. This is really funny. Scratching her elbow, the Flod releases a loud laugh and reveals the entirety of her mouth to Travis, a mess of black and yellow.

"Yeah," Travis says, "I guess they would."

The woman nods vehemently.

"Well, we'll see ya' later," Travis offers.

"Prob'ly not. I'll be workin'."

"Okay." Slowly, Travis shuts the door. He watches to see if she turns away. Once the door is shut, he moves to look out the peephole. The Flod is still standing directly in front of the closed door. After several long seconds she turns and walks away towards her apartment next door. Looking to Nick and Ian, the three boys all laughs nervously.

"What the *fuck*?" Ian asks.

"*That's* the Flod, man," Nick says incredulously. He and Travis and John had told Ian about her before, but Ian had never taken them seriously.

"Oh my God, dude," Ian replies.

"Told ya'," Travis says, sitting down next to Absinthe on the couch. Nick sits down on the love seat.

"So you were just saying there was a phone call to get me out of there?" Ian asks.

"Oh, well, if I'd thought you wanted to stay and hang out with the Flod, I guess I would've let you."

Ian holds up his hands. "No that's fine."

"Look at him," Nick says to Travis, "he can't get her out of his mind. He's in love."

Ian just shakes his head as he sits down in the blue chair.

"It's that hole," Travis offers.

Nick makes a hypnotic spiraling motion with his hand coming from out of his teeth, "I work at St. Mary's," he imitates.

Ian laughs nervously. "Seriously, I thought you guys were just being silly, but *that* is scary."

"Just be glad you're not John," Travis offers.

"Why?"

"We're pretty sure old Flod there has a crush on him."

"It's weird," Nick adds. "Like every time John leaves or is out on the stoop, she comes out to talk to him."

"A couple of weeks ago, she was yelling across the parking lot to him as he is going to the car."

"For real?" Ian asks.

"Something about the grocery store not having grapefruits," Travis says, petting the kitten and shaking his head.

"When did she move in?" Ian asks.

"Just at the beginning of July," Nick says. "I was stupid and offered to give her a ride to pick up some stuff from her old apartment."

Ian shrugs.

"Fuck the good Samaritan," Nick continues.

"They didn't have half ton, weird ass neighbors with hypnotic missing teeth in those days," Travis agrees.

"Dude," Ian says, "thanks for getting me out of there. She wasn't going to move."

"Was she telling you about her job?" Nick asks.

Ian shivers. "We need to go break those old people outta' there."

"I don't even *want* to know what she does to them," Travis agrees.

"Man, I've heard her make subtle allusions to her care techniques."

"I don't wanna' know," Travis says. He picks Absinthe up and places the kitten in his lap.

"Probably treats them about like we treat the cat."

"Poor guy," Travis says, patting the kitten lightly on the head. Looking at Nick he says, "This is the most spoiled cat on the planet, man."

"Except for when John scares the bejesus out of it," Nick remarks. "Or when you put him in paper bags."

Travis smiles. "What? He likes the bags, man." Travis laughs a little though.

"Not when they're stapled shut."

Ian laughs and looks to Travis.

"It's funny as hell. He totally loses it. I've never seen a cat go so berserk."

"That's mean," Ian argues.

"Nah. I treated my little sister the same way makes 'em tough."

"You put your sister in a paper bag and stapled it shut?" Nick asks.

"Oh yeah."

"No wonder..."

"All right," Travis admits with a shrug, "she's not exactly well adjusted, but she *is* tough."

Ian watches, wondering which parts of the conversation are true. He didn't grown up with Nick and Travis, doesn't know what facts are real and what is made up.

Travis turns to Ian to defend his actions. "Despite what Nick will tell you, I did not staple the bag shut. I just crumpled the top shut. And I only did it twice."

"Three times," Nick argues.

"Whatever," Travis says.

Absinthe yawns and stretches and then begins sharpening his claws on Travis jeans.

"What'd he do?" Ian asks.

"It is hilarious. He totally freaked out when I let him out. He was running from one room to the next like a bolt for about ten minutes."

Turning to Nick, Ian suggests, "That cat is a little demented."

Nick just shrugs. What animal living with John, Travis and himself wouldn't be a bit off its rocker.

In the last several weeks, the cat had developed some very peculiar habits. Among them was one that was particularly horrible. Every morning it took to following the first member of the household who was awake and "screaming." There really is no other way to describe it. Most cats mew at their owners, a kind gesture of welcoming a new day, just a pleasant natural sound like birds chirping or dogs barking. This was simply not the case with Absinthe. This furry black reincarnation of a bad horror film actress would literally sit at the feet of its caretakers and for five to six seconds at a time release a surreal vocal noise at a most god awful pitch. Feeding it did no good. Petting him, holding him, telling him that you would buy all the cat toys in the world if he would just *shut up* did no good at all. It was a ritual for the "little black shit" as he had come to be known. For ten minutes, first thing in the morning, it screamed. Then, as if nothing had happened, the cat would cease its cacophony and curl up on the couch to sleep for an hour or so.

For a while the boys had assumed that something was wrong with the thing. Nick took it to the veterinary school on campus a couple of times to consult the students there. He only ever received a reply that the cat was healthy, and was probably "just vocal." No matter how many times he patiently explained that vocal simply wasn't the word for it, he got no sympathy. No one could believe that such a small creature could cause such a din until they were witness to it. Instead, he simply decided that the kitten represented some sort of karmic retribution for an unremembered sin he'd committed, and the roommates had no other choice but to peacefully live with the mentally handicapped animal as best they could, hoping the epileptic throat fits were just a phase.

Travis picks Absinthe up, the kitten's claws detaching from his jeans, and tosses it lightly to the floor. A little disoriented, the black cat examines the room for a moment and then makes its way into Ian's lap.

"Hey there," Ian says, politely, reaching out to scratch Absinthe's head.

In a fit, the cat falls onto its back and attacks Ian's hand ferociously with all four legs. Ian grapples with it for a moment and then shoves it to the floor. "Shit," he says, examining his newly wounded hand.

"*Now* tell me you wouldn't stick it in a paper bag for fun," Travis says.

Nick just shakes his head. "He's just playing," he says, making the schizophrenic behavior out to be cute.

"What's the story?" Ian asks, changing the subject.

Travis gets up to peer into the kitchen at the clock on the wall. "We're supposed to meet Kristin at City Bar in about a half an hour," he replies making his way back to his seat. Absinthe, having disappeared for a moment now suddenly appears behind Travis, clawing its way up the back of the couch and taking a swing at his head. As soon as he

turns to confront the blur behind him, the kitten dives back down into the chasm behind the couch. "She's got a friend visiting, and wants us to show him the town."

"That oughta' be fun," Ian replies.

"I figure we'll get him real drunk and get him laid. That about sums up any given night here."

"Just about," Nick agrees.

Ian starts laughing at something he'd think of. Nick and Travis wait until he stops. "You " Ian says, trying to talk through convulsions, "you could introduce him over to the Flod."

Travis and Nick both wince at the thought. "I just don't think that would be very nice," Nick says.

"That's just mean, man," Travis agrees.

Just then, John walks in. "Okay let's go."

"Well. Thank you so much for joining us," Travis says sarcastically.

"Sorry. I got held up."

"Yeah, we should definitely go," Ian interjects, checking his watch.

"Yeah," Travis agrees, dropping the act. "I need a drink anyway."

They all wait for each other to make a move.

"All right," Travis says, "who's drivin'?"

"Not it!" Ian and Nick say at the same time.

"I'm not drivin' your asses anywhere," John replies.

"We could all pile on the motorcycle," Travis offers.

"I'm tired of bein' the driving bitch."

Travis reaches down into his pants pocket. "I got ten bucks. Anybody beats me to the Engine Room gets a pitcher on me."

"You serious?" Nick stops to ask, but John is already off the couch heading for the door. Ian leaps past Travis and intercepts John, just sliding past. John manages to grab Ian's shirt and pulls him back into the apartment when Nick, having finished pulling on his shoes, pushes past both of them. John follows, and Ian, having stumbled a little hurtles himself out the door, using the doorframe for leverage. Travis stands up out of the armchair, looks around the apartment and then at his ten dollar bill. Nodding, and speaking quietly to Alexander Hamilton, he says, "Well, that worked."

*. You Should Mean What You Say*

Travis is waiting for them when they arrive. He'd followed right behind John down Baxter Street, taking a "short cut" on Church Street—he had pulled right out in front of Nick on Broad when he got there. In the end though, it just didn't matter. Travis drove down Washington Street right to where ER was, and parked right in front of the doors. Nick had been behind him almost the whole way down Washington, but had to veer off in order to find a place to park, gesturing rudely as he did. Travis is waiting at the bar with a drink when John walks in and joins him. "You cheated."

"I parked intelligently."

"You parked on the damn sidewalk."

"So?"

"So, what about the bet? You cheated." John says as he sits next to Travis on one of the barstools.

"So, I figure I'll give you a consolation prize and buy you and me a pitcher of beer."

"You weren't even trying."

"I don't have to."

"That's true."

"There's something about motorcycles—cruisers anyway. Coasting is all you need to do. Something about the way they're built. There's no hurry."

John orders a pitcher from the bartender, does his best to smile at her, and then asks, "Really?"

"Oh yeah. I'm not kiddin'." Travis thinks about it for a moment. "I don't know what it is really. I feel safer on Mary Jane than I do in a car. I feel safe from time."

"That's funny. Now that I think about it, I've never seen you drive a car," John remarks.

"I'm more hurried when I drive a car, definitely. It's as though I was trapped in a bubble, and you're just rolling along with all the other bubbles. On a bike, you're still part of the world. Everything is around you; you are still in contact with it. Other cars just become moving obstacles—you're no threat to them. Cars have this ridiculous sense of proximity. If you get too close while passing, there's hell to pay. Nobody seems to care when a motorcycle gets a little close."

"I could see that," John says, nodding appreciatively.

"When I bought Mary Jane, it was funny. I went into the shop with, like, four thousand dollars in my pocket. I mean, I went there to buy a bike. I saw her, and I just knew I wanted her. You don't have to shop for bikes like that. It's not about the color or



the style, or who makes it. You see *the one*, and it's the one more like a woman really "

"Hence the name," John interjects.

"Right. But this old man at the shop tells me right off the bat 'Now I ain't gonna' sell you a bike if you think you're gonna' go drivin' around crazy and fast.' Right off the bat he says this as though he isn't there to just sell me a bike." The bartender brings the pitcher up to them, and Travis pays for it before continuing. "But I told him, 'No, you don't understand. I'm not interested in that. I just wanna' drive backroads and feel the wind on my arms, smell the things alongside the road.' He got this real appreciative look on his face and just sort of nods didn't say much after that." Travis thinks about the old man's face, how gnarled and long it was, and gray. "He knew what I was talking about. I could tell."

As Nick came up to the bar, John says to him, "We're gonna' get a table."

"You suck," Nick says to Travis.

"I ain't buyin' everybody beer, damn it."

Nick scoffs, and Travis and John head for one of the off color booths. Sitting down Travis adds, "I wrote that one song, 'Young Man in Me' about that incident in the shop, you remember that one?"

"Oh yeah," John says, nodding and pouring his beer.

"about the man who sees his younger self in another man. I just wonder... if I were sixty five and had lost some of my idealism I mean I hope I don't, but if I saw some young guy who believed in the things I used to believe... would that bring my idealism back?"

John shakes his head. He has no answer.

"Everybody talks about growing old as though losing your idealism is a matter of fact."

Just then, Nick sits down and having overheard the last sentence, adds, "Oh yeah."

"What?" Travis asks. "You agree?"

"Just look at my grandmother."

"What about her?" John asks.

"It's hard to say." For a moment, Nick looks at the pitcher between John and Travis. "Did you win that?" he asks John.

"Not really," John replies.

"You suck," Nick repeats to Travis.

"I bought the stupid pitched," Travis says.

"Oh," Nick says.

"You're just mad 'cause you didn't get it."

Nick takes the pitcher and sets it in front of him.

"I'd like to get a bike one of these days," John says.

"Really?" Travis asks, ignoring Nick.

"Yeah. A big one. One I can lean back on."

"You'd look good on a bike," Nick says. "At least *you* can grow facial hair."

Travis rubs his chin to help illustrate the point.

"I'm convinced that's why you get the women you do," Nick says. "They can't bitch about your facial hair." For about the last year and a half, Nick had kept a beard. He'd heard more about it than he cared to from the woman he had dated.

"No. It can't be that simple," Travis argues. "getting women has to have something to do with the phases of the moon something we're not paying *any* attention too."

Ian sits down next to Travis and says, "I guess I lost," referring to the pitcher on the table.

"You had no intention of winning," Travis replies.

"I guess not."

"It amazes me, man. You would kill yourself driving to the bank, but if you gotta' go to a bar, it takes you half an hour."

Ian shrugs, "It's casual."

"You have to be gay," Nick says. "That's the only way to get women."

"That certainly seems pointless," Travis says.

"I'm serious though. Women love gay men."

"Women are good for one thing," John says patiently, holding up his index finger. Everyone around the table starts to laugh in anticipation, and John allows the moment to linger. When Nick, Travis, and Ian have stopped smiling, and lean in for the punchline, John smiles, and says, "Holes."

"God damn," Ian coughs through a suppressed laugh. "You're unbelievable."

John shrugs carelessly and drinks his beer, trying to keep himself from laughing.

"Get out, bitch," Nick says, gesturing with his foot out from under the booth table.

"I think if I ever get a steady girlfriend again, I'm gonna' keep her the fuck away from you three," Travis says.

Ian looks around the table innocently. "How do you think I feel? I'm guilty by association."

"You've never told Lisa any of this, have you?" Nick asks.

"Well..."

"No way! You broke the locker room rule!"

"I just thought it was funny."

"Did she?" Travis asks.

Ian looks at Travis as though no answer need be supplied.

"That was stupid," Nick says to Ian.

"Actually," Travis says, "if I could find a girl that *did* think it was funny that would be the one."

"Good luck," Nick replies.

"Dude, there's got to be women out there that talk about men like we do."

John looks at Travis peculiarly. "We don't talk about men."

"That's not what I meant."

. *Twinkle, twinkle, little bat!*

A katydid spins around on the asphalt in a tight circle making a loud buzzing noise. It sounds like an electric shock buzzer and flits about erratically. Ian and Travis are standing in the middle of the parking lot, watching the little insect in awe. They let it fly around and then experimentally push it with a shoe, and watch the whole show all over again.

When Nick and John catch up, Nick gives Travis a little shove and says, "Quit it." The noise is pretty loud, and somewhat irritating.

"It's so cool. It sounds really pissed off," Travis puts his boot, the one with the hole in it, up against the katydid shoves it again. It spins and buzzes and makes an angry sound. Ian jumps to his left to keep from being bombarded by the bug, and then laughs out loud. "What the hell?" Travis asks. "I guess it must be hurt."

"It thinks the streetlamp's the moon," John interjects, coming up beside Travis, lighting a cigarette.

"What?"

"Katydid's navigate by the moon. When they get too close to a streetlight, they think the moon's only fourteen feet off the ground. They're trying to fly away from it."

"Who told you that?" Ian asks suspiciously.

"Your dumb retarded mother."

"I don't know," Travis argues.

John points at the katydid. "Look at him. Why the hell do you think he's flying upside down on his back?"

Travis, who had squatted down towards the ground to get a better look, has to agree. The creature is indeed lying on its back as it flaps its wings. The angry noise seemed to be, in part, the flapping of the hard plastic like wings on asphalt.

Shrugging, Nick says, "Sounds reasonable to me."

And standing up, Travis snickers, "That's pretty funny."

Ian begins simulating the flight of a normal katydid, and Nick joins in. They walk around the real katydid in small circles, buzzing and talking to one another. "Sure is a nice night to go flying."

"Yep. Couldn't agree. woah! Shit!" Nick promptly falls to the ground and begins writhing on his back as Ian does the same.

Travis stands laughing at the tipsy pair while John watches a group of two guys and a girl walking past the group. Waiting to make eye contact with the passersby, John nods politely at the threesome as they watch Nick and Ian flailing on the ground. "It's the drugs," he says politely in explanation, disappointedly shaking his head. Travis watches to

see if the onlookers believe John. He isn't sure, but they do pick up their pace a little bit as Nick cries out, "Who the fuck put the moon there!"

Pushing the katydid with his foot, Travis watches Ian and Nick scramble to their feet to get out of its way. Turning to John, he says mysteriously, "Hey, what if that streetlamp really is the moon?"

Giving Travis a cynical look, John just stares in reply.

"Seriously. What if we're just as dumb as the katydids, and our senses are totally tricking us into thinking that the moon is a streetlamp?"

Acting as if he were contemplating the matter seriously, John lets his cigarette hang from his mouth with his hands in his pockets, and walks slowly over to where the katydid is lying. Travis, Nick and Ian step up as well, completing the circle of attention. Then, John steps on the misguided creature with a loud crunch.

Nick and Ian laugh nervously, but Travis appears genuinely disappointed. "That was totally unnecessary."

John shrugs, merely a bemused god, "It was boring me."

The four boys turn and continue walking in a little crowd as Travis says, "I wonder if he would have flown away once the streetlamp turned off?"

"If he didn't die from something else," Nick says.

"I shoulda' chucked a rock at the light just to see."

"Actually," John interrupts, "I don't believe any of that crap for a second."

"What? About the katydid and the moon?"

"Yeah. My brother told me that. I don't buy it."

"What makes you think its wrong?"

"Bugs don't give a shit about the moon."

Nick smiles to himself. "That's funny: bugs don't give a shit about the moon."

The four of them keep walking up out of the parking lot onto Lumpkin. A few katydids in the trees on the edge of the parking lot chirp away.

"Humans are the only species that are obsessed with the moon. That seems reasonable."

"No," John says, "I just think things in nature would find something more consistent than the moon to use."

"Yeah. The moon's not real," Nick adds. He waits for a response from anyone. Only the katydids made a rebuttal though. "It's fake! Put their by Nasa scientists."

"Sure," Travis agrees. "Why not?"

"There *is* a real moon," Nick continues, "but the one you see these days is fake a projection on a giant shell around the planet that the Pentagon built to keep anyone from escaping the planet."

"Why wouldn't they just have built a transparent shell?" Travis asks.

"Don't be silly."

John just laments, "Ayep, the moon just ain't what it used to be."

"I used to think the moon followed me around when I is a kid." Travis says.

"Didn't everybody think that?"

John nods. "When I was a kid I thought the moon was following you."

Laughing, Travis replies, "That's not exactly what I meant."

"And I can't believe," Nick says, stubbornly continuing his own vein of the conversation, "that everybody expects us to believe that crappy footage of astronauts walking on the moon."

"Nobody believes that," John says.

The boys stop for a moment on the corner of Clayton and College. Travis speaks, "You know, nobody ever thinks about the astronauts themselves when they say that. I mean, can you imagine working your ass off to get to the moon the fucking moon and then when you come back people just call you a liar. That would be like someone telling you that you didn't paint your paintings or I didn't write my own music. I'd be pissed."

Ian shrugs. "They probably never hear it."

"I gotta' go to the fake ATM to get some fake money," Nick says.

"Me too," John agrees.

"I'll go check out Shitty Bar and see if they're there," Travis replies. "I'll see you there in a sec."

John still stands staring at Travis as Nick and Ian walk down College toward the ATM. "Are you the *real* Travis Fleeting?" he asks.

Travis shakes his head and John nods and walks away.

. *It's Laid for a Great Many More Than Three*

If you start at Mean Mike's, walk out across Clayton Street and then turn right and walk to College Avenue, cross College Avenue, you'll see City Bar. Both "Shitty Bar" and Mean Mike's serve alcohol. Any relation ends there. City Bar has high ceilings and wood paneled walls. There are plants and a pretty classy bar. There's a bartender named Evan Hille. He knows how to make every drink there is. And if you make up a drink name and ask him to make it, he will tell you to go to hell. That wouldn't be so funny except that he says it so politely. Travis sidles up to the bar in the back of the room, squeezing between two clusters of friends and holds out his five dollars. When Evan comes over to take his order, Travis asks for a Daisycutter. Evan replies, "Go to hell." and smiles very nicely.

"Okay. How about a gin and tonic then." Nodding, Evan moves to fetch the drink while Travis waits patiently and thinks about all the stupid drink names he'd come up with to fool old Evan with. Travis isn't a regular at the bar he is a regular at Mean Mike's but Evan knows who he is because of the originality of his fake drink names: Daisycutter, Sea Urchin, Asimov cocktail, and Sapphire and Deluth. Ever since Travis had discovered Evan's peculiar habit, he could never resist the temptation to try and pull the wool over the bartender's eyes. Travis liked all his fake drink names so much so that he vowed to one day come up with drinks for all of them.

The bartender came back with a tall gin and tonic, larger than the usual, and put it in front of Travis. "Three dollars."

Travis raises his eyebrows in surprise and looks to Evan.

"I liked that one," Evan replies. "It was original."

Travis smiles. "I got it from the name of a bomb they used to use in Vietnam."

"Very appropriate."

"Maybe I could talk you into making one, one of these days."

Evan thinks about it. "What do you think it would be?"

"Probably a martini. I don't really like martini's, but that's what it sounds like to me."

"I'll see what I can do." Evan takes Travis's five dollars, and Travis walks away from the bar, figuring he'll leave all the change since he is getting a heavy discount and he liked the conversation. *A good conversation is worth at least two bucks.* Walking back to the tables along the side of the bar, Travis spots Dizzy, Kristin and Kristin's friend Eric seated at one of them. Seating himself, he holds up his drink with pride, "Now that's how you get customers."

"What's that?" Kristin asks.

"You give them more booze for less money."

“Well, and if you make them alcoholics, then you have them for life,” Eric adds. Travis smiles, “I like the way you think, Eric.” He holds out his hand, and Eric shakes it. “How ya’ been?”

“Good, good,” Eric says slowly.

“Good, good,” Travis replies.

“Good?”

“Good.”

“Great!”

“Woah now. There’s no need to get carried away there, pal.” Travis leans back on his stool holds up his hand.

“Where’s everybody else?” Dizzy asks.

“What? My company not good enough for ya?”

“No.” And she shakes her head vehemently.

“They went to go to the ah tee em.”

“The what?”

“The Assistant Tank Master.”

Eric laughs, and pretending that he didn’t hear Travis, asks, “The Autonomous Truck Motor?”

“No,” Travis says, raising his voice, “I said, an Actual Testicle Massage.”

Dizzy hits Travis for being crude, and Travis looks at her innocently. It was the best he could do off the top of his head and it was funny.

“I can’t believe that,” Eric says. “We do that back in Colorado too.”

“Stupid minds think alike,” Krstin says, rolling her eyes.

“I’m sure everybody does it,” Travis agrees. “These acronyms are getting out of hand.”

Kristin puts her chin in her hand. “I wish you wouldn’t use big words in bars.”

“You mean like magnanimous?”

“Or how about meticulous,” Eric chimes in.

Kristin rolls her eyes and looks away from the table, disinterested. The only way to get them to quit now would be to ignore them.

“I love it when people use big words wrong,” Dizzy says.

“Yeah.”

Putting on her teenybopper accent, Dizzy replies, “Oh I think that dress is just parsimonious.”

Eric nods his head in agreement. “It makes me sanctimonious when people do that just absolutely fabricated.”

Dizzy laughs gleefully, but Kristin just looks at them all with an irritated look. “Where’s Ian?” she asks Travis, pretending to still be annoyed by his company.

“Where’s Ian? Where’s Ian?” Travis teases. “Why don’t you just marry him and then you won’t have to ask me all the time.”

Kristin grins and put her hand over her mouth. “I *love* him.”

Travis laughs to himself. From time to time, Kristin looked remarkably like a six year old. It always warmed Travis; reminded him of the fantastic crush that he'd first had on Kristin three years before. He preferred to remember that instead of the reason that they had ceased their romantic involvement. He smiles as he watches Kristin tell Eric about Ian, because he realizes he no longer remembers the reason for the break up or what the arguments had been about. He could only remember the good parts. The blue bandana she'd been wearing the first time he saw her... asking her out... their first kiss. It is the way he wants his life a collection of good memories.

Turning to Daphne though, Travis sees his own contradiction, his greatest lack of attention. He watches Daphne look about the room for faces she knows, and he stares at her eyes always adorned with mascara. Only on a few occasions had Travis seen her without, and in those moments he was always embarrassed. Her blue eyes released made her appear naked to him proof that he didn't really know her.

Holding his hand up to his head, Travis casually tries to hide the fact that he is staring, but Daphne glances in his direction and their eyes meet. Once she had described to him in a note an inexplicable and irresistible attraction to his cheek. Always, Travis wondered if that attraction was still there when they glanced at each other. She wondered things, too, floating in glances. In fact, could their relationship ever be described, it would have to be in those sparsely found moments of unknown intentions. Perhaps it was the cause of their resolution to simply be married when they both turned thirty. If one thing and only one thing could be clear between them, that much could.

"Tell Eric about the yours game," Kristin requests.

Turning from Dizzy, Travis smiles, "Oh yeah. Ya' gotta' know how to play Yours." Looking around the bar, Travis sees a woman at the end of the counter and tells Eric, "Okay. You see that chick at the end of the bar?"

"Yeah... the one with the tank top?"

"Yeah. She's your girlfriend now."

Eric looks disappointed. "Oh." Looking back to Travis, Eric nods. "I think I get it." Then, after a moment, "That's not a very fun game."

"It's more fun when you get someone else," Travis reassures him.

"Okay."

"And there are a couple of other rules."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah." Travis lists the rules, quid pro quo, on his fingers: "No one over twenty eight or under eighteen. No lying you can't say someone's good looking when they're not. And if you get someone three times with the same person on different occasions, then they're yours for life. Got it?"

Eric nods solemnly. "What about you guys?" he asks Kristin and Dizzy.

"Oh yeah. We play," Dizzy says.

"But they have to be *boys*," Kristin adds. "Like that one over there by the plants by the door." Everyone looks. "That one's Dizzy's."



Scrutinizing the character a second time, Dizzy turns back to the table. "I like him. He's cute."

"Yeah right. Nice try," Travis replies.

Dizzy pouts and played with her straw. "I don't like you, Kristin."

"Sorry," Kristin giggles. "I think his rat tail's sexy."

"Man, you guys are crass," Eric says, shaking his head. "I love it."

"Welcome to hell, Eric," Travis says, patting Eric's shoulder. He holds up his pack of cigarettes. "Cigarette?"

"Well, why not?"

Travis holds up his lighter and lights it for Eric as Kristin begins laughing. "Now you're my bitch," Travis says politely.

Eric looks to Kristin, perplexed.

"It's another game," Travis explains.

"They have *lots* of games," Kristin adds.

Just then, Nick, Ian, and John amble up to the table. "Hey guys," Travis says standing up from his seat. "What the hell took so long?"

Nick nods to Ian, "He ran into a girl."

Kristin gives Ian a nasty look, but Ian just laughs, "I hate her, dude. She wouldn't shut up."

"We were gonna' leave him there," Nick explains.

"This is Eric," Travis says. Eric holds his hand out. "Eric this is Ian, John and Nick."

"Nice to meet you guys," Eric says.

"Yeah, that's what *you* think," Nick replies sarcastically.

Ian shuffles over to Kristin by the wall, giving Daphne a kiss hello on the cheek as he goes. Travis explains to Nick and John, "Eric's my bitch, and that fat girl over at the end of the bar is his new girlfriend."

Stepping past Travis, Nick examines the girl and makes a pained expression. "I see Trav has been schooling you in some of our more juvenile social traditions."

Eric nods. "Oh yeah."

Ian makes his way to the bar, hollering to Nick and John, "I'll just get us a pitcher."

"Cool," Nick replies. Turning back to Eric he says, "It could be worse. He could've given you the girl on the couch by the front door..." Travis tries to stop himself at the last moment, but looks in the girl's direction. "... but that's *his* girlfriend," Nick finishes.

Eric laughs and Travis smiles tight lipped at Nick.

Pointing in Travis's face, John mocks, "You're girlfriend's a mongoloid."

Eric laughs again, almost spitting up his drink.

"Thanks, John," Travis replies calmly. John nods curtly and takes out a cigarette, to which Travis holds his lighter. "Need a light?" Travis asks.

John becomes very angry and stares at Travis's hand.

Leaning back to Eric, Travis explains, "That's another thing you should know: don't *ever* try to play the bitch game with John."

"I don't play that stupid game," John says, still angry.

Eric looks on curiously, but nods.

"Just trust me," Travis says as John lights his own cigarette. "You don't wanna' go there."

Ian comes back from the bar with a pitcher of stout, and hands Nick and John glasses. "You guys just get the next round wherever we go."

"Thanks," Nick replies. Looking at Travis's half empty pint of gin and tonic, he remarks, "You seem to be doing okay."

Travis smiles gleefully. "I sure am."

"How'd you get that?"

"I'm so damn cool."

Eric leans in to the table conspiratorially. "Hey, Daphne. I didn't want to say anything, but I think that guy over there's been checking you out just so you know."

Travis and Nick smiles as Dizzy looks exaggeratedly in the wrong direction. "Where?" she asks loudly. "I don't *see* anyone."

"Nice try, friend," Nick says. "You'll have to try harder than that."

Eric shrugs innocently. "Okay. But I think he really digs you."

"Dizzy's used to that," Travis says, patting her hand. "Everybody's always looking at her."

"I love you," Dizzy replies through pursed lips, and kisses Travis's cheek with a loud smack.

"You guys missed out," Travis says to Dizzy and Kristin.

"What?" Kristin asks.

"We were playing southern dysfunctional family earlier this afternoon."

"Aw," Kristin replies disappointed. When Eric looks to her for an explanation, she says, "I'm always the soft spoken, abused housewife, and Dizzy's my loud mouth gossipy friend."

Dizzy leans in. "Did you know that the reverend's sleepin' with Emma Lou?" she asks in an exaggerated accent.

"No!" Kristin hollers.

Tugging his pants up around his waist, Nick says, "Now you womenfolk quit your gabbin' and get ta'fetchin' us some drinks."

"Yeah. This ain't no time for rumor mongerin'," Eric adds joining in.

"Hey there, Billy," John says to Nick. "I think that there fella' over there is lookin' at Kristi."

"Wha?" Nick asks, looking around furiously. "I'll kick his *ass*."

Reaching over behind Eric, Kristin grabs hold of Nick shirt and pulls him over. "Now, honey, don't be fightin' tonight," she pleads. "You know I love you."

"Don't be tellin' me what ta' do, woman. I'll give you whatfer fer lettin' some

jackass check you out."

"I didn't mean it, honey," Kristin pleads dramatically.

"We'll kick his ass, Billy," Travis says.

"I got my guage in the truck," John adds.

Eric looks to Ian, who had just been looking on. "What about you?"

Ian holds up his hands. "I'm from Jersey."

"Damn yank," Travis says.

"Yeah. We kicked your ass once. We can do it again," Ian replies with a Jersey accent.

"That's it," Travis says, standing. "Them's fightin' words."

Dizzy motions for Ian to come stand by her. "Ya'll don't be pickin' on my Vinnie. He's in the *army*. He's gonna' make somethin' of hisself."

"He's gay," John says.

"I'll tell all yur wives what you been doin'," Dizzy threatens.

John and Travis stand down a little, but Kristin looks to Nick lovingly. "You ain't been foolin' around on me, Lovebiscuit."

"You know it, Sugarbutt," Nick says confidently.

"That ain't what Sally Sue says."

"That bitch is a liar and a Jezebel!"

"OhmaGod," Kristin says and takes a drink.

"What d'ya think?" Travis asks Eric.

"Right on," Eric says, nodding.

"Ah hah! Right on!" Travis points at Eric and looks to Nick and John.

Nick shakes his head at Eric. "Nobody says that around here."

"I do," Travis argues.

But Nick just shakes his head again. "Nobody says that around here."

Eric looks to Travis. "I don't get it."

"He just doesn't like 'cause he thinks it sound too hippy."

"We don't like hippies," John adds.

"Among other things."

"Flies, the French, anything sounding French..."

"Retards," John adds.

"No, that's just you," Travis corrects him.

"I don't wanna' have this argument again." John shakes his head and begins to count on his fingers as he speaks slowly, "It goes mongoloids, dolphins, people and my dick."

Travis and Nick exchange a confused glance.

"It was brought to me by a omnipotent alien beings."

Travis and Nick nod in complete understanding.

"Right on," Eric replies.

Nick scoffs and Travis laughs.

Looking around the table at everyone's drinks, Ian says, "Hey, let's mosey."

"Yeah," Kristin agrees. "I want you to see the whole town," she says to Eric.

"Listen," Travis adds. "the staff at Mean Mike's is having a private party after the bar closes."

"Cool," Ian says.

Travis holds up his glass. "Here's to drinking all night and waking up in somebody's bed." Everyone congenially clinks glasses and Travis can't help but notice a shared glance between Eric and Kristin. He smiles in approval to himself.

"How do you guys know each other?" Ian asks Travis and Eric.

"We both knew Kristin and met at Mardi Gras what two years ago?" Eric asks Travis.

"My God. What a blast," Travis says and laughs, finishing his gin and tonic.

"I think the best part is probably Kristin's driving."

Kristin hides her face in her hands as everyone looks to Eric in anticipation. Taking center stage, Eric speaks, "She's driving up an entrance ramp to the freeway, and we all decide that we're going the wrong way. So she tries to back up and turn around, but ends up backing off the ramp."

Kristin hits Eric in the shoulder. Looking around she picks up her drink. "Okay. I'm going to hide now."

Grabbing her free hand, Eric urges, "No, no, it's funny."

"Hell," Travis says, "It's not like anyone remembers what the hell happened."

"I was sober," Kristin defended herself.

"*You* were drunk," Eric says, pointing to Travis.

"How completely out of character," Nick says.

"Yeah, well, it wasn't entirely my fault," Travis argues. "That chick Abby had it in for me."

"She had *some*thin' for you," Eric agrees.

Travis looks across the table sheepishly to Kristin. "I wasn't exactly an exemplary boyfriend those four days."

Kristin waves Travis off. "It's Mardi Gras."

"You never figured out where you got those beads, did you?" Nick adds.

Travis shakes his head.

"I always wondered about that," Kristin says. "You disappeared for, like, an hour, and then showed up with them on."

"Travis was gettin' naughty," Daphne says, smiling slyly, but Travis smiles innocently in reply. It *was* Mardi Gras, after all.

. *The Party Sat Silent for a Minute*

"Yeah. This is definitely cool," Ian says, nodding vigorously.

From the streets below them, Ian and Travis can be seen as shadowy figures lingering at the top of one of the downtown parking garages. They can see the whole stretch of College Avenue and most of Clayton Street. Everything looks smaller but still familiar. Standing there with Ian, Travis is fascinated with the migratory patterns of the evening's thrill seekers. Where they are coming from, where they are going. It is the same pattern he can see in his own life through his own eyes only multiplied and from a bird's eye view. Travis can see himself standing on the sidewalk with everyone. He watches as the crowds plan who will ride with whom, who knows where they are going, where they can crash afterwards.

"I need to get some pictures from up here," Ian declares.

"I think it's rather eloquent that it took me three years of living here to find this vantage point."

"Very true. This town used to seem so big."

"Huge."

"I think it seemed bigger because it was also the first time in life when we had to find everything for ourselves, you know? No parents with tour maps and binoculars."

"Well, it's the one thing in my life I have to be proud of. I mean, not only do I know every joint in this town, but I know half the people that work in those places. I definitely managed to find my way around."

"Yeah. You know a lot of people."

Travis shrugs. "I know who a lot of people *are*. I don't know them though."

"There's still a lot of new stuff, though."

"Oh yeah. There's always new stuff." Travis turns to face Ian. The top level of the deck is mostly empty, lit by the ambient light of the city. "It's funny. You and I know that. Doesn't seem like anybody else does."

"What d'ya mean?"

"I don't know. I'm just always thrilled to see shit. I love the way things look in the fall, spring, whatever. Fences, people, tress." Travis broadly gestures to the city. "All of it."

"No, I know, dude. Lisa's always complaining when I stop to shoot stuff which is funny to me, because she likes the pictures. But she doesn't understand why I do any of it."

"It's *life*."

"I know." Ian watches two young girls walk five stories beneath them, giggling.

He can hear the laughter rebounding up the sides of the brick and concrete buildings.

"Don't sweat it, dude. Just be glad you get to see it."

"It's not really fun without anybody to share it with."

"I'd rather be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied."

Travis turns and leans on the retaining wall. "I'd rather not be so privileged."

Reaching into his pocket, Ian takes out his cigarettes and offers one to Travis who takes it. Ian takes one for himself, lights it with a bit of flare that makes Travis chuckle.

Then, Ian reaches over and lights Travis's. "Now you're my bitch," he says.

"Yeah, yeah," Travis replies nonchalantly.

"I think I'm a little tipsy."

"Amen to that," Travis says, taking a drag. After a moment more, he continues, "I just can't figure one thing out."

"What's that?"

"If I'm so damn content with my life, then how come I'm not content?"

"You're content. You're just not happy."

"See," Travis replies, "that freaks me out."

"What?"

"Sometimes I am so completely content, that I don't care about anything. That kind of apathy is dangerous."

Ian squints and looks to the clock on the City Hall tower. They are just about even with the clock, and he thinks that the view would make an exceptional photograph the way the tower is lit. "I can get that way too," he agrees.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. I just wanna' listen to depressing music or lie around in bed... sometimes."

Ian shrugs while Travis leans over the wall and thinks about the fall not seriously, just curiously. He can feel the air rushing past him. He can feel the impact on his body as the concrete crushes him. And he almost laughs when he realizes that he actually might bounce if dropped from such a height. It isn't a feeling he can imagine accurately his body bouncing like a rubber ball. "When I was a little kid, I used to be really afraid of death the whole idea of it." He smiles up at Ian who is looking at him curiously. "Really. It used to scare the shit out of me. I'd lie awake in bed, and just try to think about nothing what nothing would be like."

"You thought about that when you were a kid?" Ian asks skeptically.

Travis shrugs. "Some kids think about sex. I never thought about sex when I was that age. I thought about death." Travis pauses to take a drag of his cigarette and looks out over College Avenue again, the flocks of night creatures passing by. "I think it might have had something to do with being raised Catholic. There is so much focus on death and the afterlife like the whole of life is just one big damn fancy parade into the abyss."

Ian nods and smiles. "I never thought of religion that way."

"I don't think most people do or are supposed to. But the thing is now... I've kind of spent more time in my life thinking about death than anybody."

"Everybody thinks about death, dude."

"Oh I know... but I don't think they're obsessed with it. I mean, you know me. I don't like to make a drama of things. I don't like to exaggerate. I want life like it is. I wouldn't say I was *obsessed* with something unless I really thought it was unhealthy. It's not so I can have a psychological spotlight of attention like everybody else."

Ian concedes. "Yeah, that's true."

"I've just reached this point where I can see that focusing on death like I have all this time is unhealthy. It's not about death. Death is just there to define what it is to be alive. *This* is what matters, not what happens after your dead."

"You *know* I agree with you there."

"So death is irrelevant, right?"

"I guess."

Travis widens his eyes a little, almost hopelessly, trying to get Ian to see what he means. "So what now?"

Ian thinks on it for a few minutes, smoking his cigarette casually. "I can't remember who said it, but somebody said once that the only thing that made being alive bearable is having each other."

Travis nods thoughtfully and leans back down on the wall again. "Yeah..."

"And you've got your music, dude. Don't forget that."

Travis shakes his head. "Music's just opium for whatever it is inside me that's dying. The only time it's worth anything is when I'm playing for everybody else."

"I like that. That's poetic."

Travis leans back, runs the words through his head again. "Yeah, well, it's also little overdramatic," he says hesitantly. "But I guess it is one way to look at it. There's nothing *in me* that's dying. I just *am* dying. We're all dying." Travis holds up his cigarette in illustration.

"Nah. That's the glass is half empty mentality."

"You're right."

Peering over the wall at a couple more passersby, Ian says, "Just spit on somebody. That'll make you feel better."

Travis laughs. "That wouldn't make me feel any better. Do unto others as you would have them do unto you."

"No, no, no. It's: do it to others *before* they do it to you."

"Round here, yeah." Travis can see himself coming to stand below a ledge, could see a person desperately wanting to jump. "I think if it kept somebody from jumping off a ledge though, I'd let them spit on me."

"I wouldn't. Fuck 'em. Let 'em jump."

"Damn right. Who needs 'em."

"I mean it, dude. If you went and killed yourself, I'd be pissed off. Don't expect any weepy tears from me. I'd piss on your grave." Ian couldn't quite finish the sentence without smiling.

Looking very touched, Travis nods and replies, "I really appreciate that, man. That's touching."

With a tough sniff, Ian tosses his cigarette away. "It's the least I could do." Adding an afterthought, Ian continues, "I mean, if you quit, it makes it that much harder for the rest of us not to have an excuse."

"Sometimes. I think there's a point when you have to tell somebody that it's okay to quit that life isn't about getting what you deserve. I think if someone's in enough pain, it's okay to tell them to quit."

"Maybe."

"Nobody asks to be here. Some of us are lucky. Some of us get the shitty end of the stick." Travis finishes his cigarette. "You ready to go to this party?"

"Let's do it."



. *Twinkle, Twinkle, Twinkle, Twinkle...*

As Ian pulls into the Teke parking lot, Travis questions him, "You forget something?"

"No, dude. The party's only two doors down."

"Oh. Really?"

"Yeah. What's her name at Mean Mike's said it was next door to the radio station." Of course, the radio station is next door to the Teke house. Travis and Ian could both remember occasions in which they had yelled requests out Ian's window to the D.J. next door. Most of the disc jockeys were pretty cool about the noise. One had even run a mike to the window to put Ian and Travis on the radio because he thought it was so funny.

"I got two guys here that wanna' make a request real bad, but they're not bright enough to use the phone," the D.J. had said across the airwaves. And Ian and Travis proceeded to yell something in unison completely incomprehensible to anyone listening to the radio.

That same D.J. had found Travis playing at D.T.'s, and had asked him to do an interview on a local's only show. Travis had agreed to do it so long as he could do it from Ian's window at the Teke house. The D.J. agreed, and several nights later hundreds of people tuned in to Travis yelling answers to serious questions fifteen yards away from the microphone. "So, tell me Travis, why did you decide to play guitar?" And then a muffled answer would come screaming across the radio waves. Walking along Milledge, in front of the radio station, Travis thinks to himself that he should talk his D.J. friend into doing another show this time in the same room. *It would be good publicity*, he thinks. But then, Travis laughs at the idea of publicity.

"What?" Ian asks as they stroll.

"It's just funny the idea of advertising myself. I can't ever get over it."

"I think it's cool, dude. I wish you'd let me do some flyers for your shows or a t shirt or something."

As the two walk up to the house on the other side of the radio station, they can hear the noise of the party in a low lovely rumble that trickles down an ironwork staircase on the outside of the house. "All right," Travis agrees. "You got it. We'll do some pictures and make some flyers."

"I wanna' photograph you on Mary Jane anyway even if it's just for posterity."

They make their way up the gravel driveway and spot Nick, John and Dizzy standing on the landing of the fire escape. "What took you so long?" Nick asks as they come up the stairs.

"We were checkin' out the view on the top of the downtown parking garage," Ian answers.

Travis adds, "I've been meanin' to show him for a while. There are some good pictures up there."

"Really?" Nick asks.

Ian nods.

"I guess I never thought about it."

"It's pretty crowded," Dizzy says. They all had plastic cups of beer.

"Hang out here," Travis says to Ian. "I'll get us a couple be right back."

"Are you sure, dude?"

"It'll be easier if just one of us goes," Travis replies, looking warily up the stairs toward the noise. Mounting the stairs, Travis listens contentedly to the thumps his boots make on the metal. He loves it when his feet make noise.

"Where's Kristin and Eric?" Travis hears Ian ask as he walks away. Any explanation gets drowned out by the noise though as Travis comes to the second landing on the stairs. There are people standing all along the stairs, conversing, talking. Travis recognizes a few of the faces as he slides past, and he gives those faces a nod and smiles. At the top of the stairs, the door to the apartment is open. Two or three people stand in the doorway, and beyond them, through a hazy, yellow light, Travis can see nothing but milling bodies, pressed up against one another in good moods, smiling and laughing. *Abandon all hope, ye who enter here*, Travis thinks sarcastically. For all the qualities of hell the room beyond holds sin, smoke, heat and noise Travis thinks there is probably no happier place to be.

Like a hand into a tight glove, Travis slides into the crowd and begins making his way towards an entrance to a kitchen on the other side of the room where he assumes the beer will be. With no direct route available, Travis makes a wide arc, across the room, stepping shortly, trying not to tread any toes. There is a little bit of breathing room in the kitchen once he gets there, and Travis slips out of the crowd in the living room like a baby squeezed from the womb. On the opposite side of the pale, white kitchen, Travis can see another room packed with people, while around the periphery of the small kitchen sixteen or so people sit on the counters or stand, doing jell o shots and drinking beer. Near the pantry, the gold awaits, its tap held in the heavy hands of a friendly face. Travis smiles at Phil and waves.

"Travis!" Phil declares, holding up his own beer. "Glad to see you could make it!"

Stepping up to the keg, Travis replies, "Where there is beer to be found, so shall I be."

"Good credo, old chap," Phil teases. He grabbed a cup off a ledge in the pantry and begins to pour a beer.

"Did you have a good night at the bar?"

"Raked in some tips, but I'd rather be drunk!"

"Who wouldn't?" Travis asks, taking his beer from the portly bartender. "Mind if I get one for my friend?"

“No problem!”  
 “It must be tough bein’ around all that alcohol and never gettin’ to drink any.”  
 Phil shrugs.  
 “There’s a lot of people here.”  
 Phil shrugs again. “I don’t know half of ‘em. But whatever. We got six kegs here.  
 The more the merrier!”  
 “Six kegs? We’ll all be drinking ‘til dawn.”  
 “That’s the idea,” Phil says and hands Travis the second beer.  
 “Very cool. I’ll be hear.”  
 Phil shakes his head. “Enjoy. I’m gonna’ pass out in about an hour.”  
 “Tired?”  
 Phil nods reluctantly.  
 “All right, then. Sleep tight if I don’t see ya’ before ya’ go.” Travis takes the two  
 beers and makes his way back out into the living room towards the stairs. On his way  
 though, a bright eyed blonde steps directly in front of him.  
 “Travis!” she declares with a little bit of a slur.  
 Travis smiles. “Hey, Sandy.”  
 “Where the hell have you been?”  
 “Around.”  
 “I miss you,” she says in a somewhat stately manner, her cigarette poised between  
 two flexed fingers.  
 “What have you been up to?”  
 Sandy rolls her eyes. “I got a job downtown. It sucks. But, whatever. It’s  
 summer.”  
 “We’re all just treading water.”  
 “You need to *call* me. We should go out.”  
 “Yeah. That’d be fun.”  
 “I tried to find you for a while, but you fuckin’ disappeared on me.”  
 “Sorry. I tend to do that.”  
 Sandy takes his arm tightly in her hand. “You’re such a scatterbrain.” She leans in  
 a little. “But you’re not gettin’ away tonight.”  
 “Well, listen, grab a beer and come out on the stairs. I’m just hanging’ with some  
 friends.” Travis does his best to just remain friendly keep the sparkle out of his eye but  
 in his tipsy state he can only feel the strength on Sandy’s grip and the magnetism that is  
 somehow unavoidable. For a moment he can only smell whatever conditioner or perfume  
 she is wearing and it fills his nostrils and leaves him lingering on memories that had not  
 surfaced in many months.  
 “All right,” she agrees congenially. Leaning into his face, the crowd pressing them  
 together, she says with a cunning look in her eyes, “but don’t you go anywhere.”  
 Travis can’t contain himself. He gives a cunning look in reply and says, “Where  
 would I go?” Sandy smiles, having just had the course of the night revealed to her like a

premonition. She turns toward the kitchen like a melody as he turns toward the stairs like a troubadour, and their wastes and chests move in opposition, close to one another. Just as she passes, they share a smile confident in the telepathy that is occurring only between them.

Out into the night air and on down the stairs, Travis finds everyone, including Kristin and Eric, standing on the landing.

"Good luck," Travis says to Kristin.

"Man, that took forever," Ian says, taking his beer and drinking a generous portion. "I was just about sober."

"Sorry. I had a bit of a run in." Travis eyebrows perform all the implication for him.

"What's up?" Nick asks as Kristin and Eric make their way up the stairs, leaning on each other.

Travis turns from watching the pair to Nick. "You remember Sandy Bennett?"

Nick has to think about it for a moment, and then his eyes widen in remembrance. "The one with the boots?"

Travis nods, letting Nick see what he is thinking.

"Oh boy! Somebody's gettin' *laid* tonight."

Swining at Nick and looking over his shoulder to insure that Sandy isn't already on her way down the stairs, Travis replies, "Keep it down, dude."

Nick is drunk and acting silly. He covers his mouth and looks up the stairs, too.

Ian, John, and Dizzy are still waiting for an explanation of all the covert motion going on between Travis and Nick. "Who's this chick?" John asks.

"Old girlfriend sort of."

"Dude," Nick interjects, "You pretty much ditched her. You think she's still got it on for you?"

Shrugging, Travis replies, "Near as I can tell, from what happened up there."

Nick performs a little jig and imitates a bad seventies porno soundtrack bass.

Dizzy hits Travis on the arm. "You're so *bad*."

"Hey," Travis laughs. "Take it where you can get it."

"You know," Ian says, changing the subject, "we should just go over to the house and get a bunch of beers in a cooler drink 'em right here."

"They got six fuckin' kegs up there," Travis argues.

"Six?" Nick asks incredulously.

"That's what Phil says."

"Is Phil up there?" Dizzy asks lovingly. "I *love* Phil."

"He is standin' by the keg in the kitchen."

"I'll be back," Dizzy says. "I'm gonna go say hey."

As Dizzy makes her way up the fire escape, Nick leans over and punches Travis in the shoulder and then gyrates his hips. "Git in laid!"

Despite Travis's attempt to retain a casual demeanor, Nick's optimism is catchy.

"Bout dam time."

"What the hell'ya' doin' down here, man. You should be schmoozin' it up there."

Travis laughs confidently, and looking to Ian remarks, "It's casual." He gives Ian a cheers with his plastic beer cup. "Gotta' play hard to get sometimes."

"We'll play it cool, dude. Make you look good," Ian says, smiling vicariously. "You know," Ian says, laughing, "make it look like you just ducked out on her 'cause of some super secret government mission or somethin'."

"Hell. I liked her. I just wasn't gonna' be the *other man*."

"Yeah, but dude, the *other man* has no obligations."

"Da' otha' man gets his booty fo' free!" Nick yells excitedly. Travis gives him a disapproving look, and Nick covers his mouth again, laughing.

"*You* need to get laid," Travis informs Nick.

A surprised look comes over Nick's face some drunken epiphany. "You know what? You're right." And he wonders off up the stairs.

"What the hell?" Travis asks to no one in particular after Nick has walked off.

"He's drunk, dude," Ian replies.

"Hell yeah. I've just never seen him like that, though."

"He's horny," John replies.

"How're you doin'?" Travis asks.

John shrugs. "I'm horny too."

"No, no, no. How're you *doin*?" Travis asks again, holding up his beer.

John examines the glass soberly. "I'm drunk and horny."

"Right *on*," Travis replies.

Good blues are pouring out of the smoky den above, trickling down the stairs like water. For a moment, Travis, John, and Ian look up in contemplation of the noise above. Travis can't help but tap his foot. He smiles at Ian, who just replies, "I want *Kristin*," with his teeth gnashed.

"Normally I'd tell ya' ta' go for it, buddy, but I think she's taken this evenin'."

"Aw. That's all right," Ian replies nonchalantly.

"You should though. Shit. You'd have *my* blessing."

Ian growls in his throat.

"You had your chance," Travis says knowingly.

"When?"

"At the High Hat that night."

"Shit. I did, didn't I?"

Travis looks to John. "He had to call home."

John looks to Ian for a confirmation. "You're a wimp, boy."

Ian just shrugs. He did the best he could, given his circumstances. He couldn't be blamed for having a possessive girlfriend.

Kristin dances back down on to the landing and makes a light pirouette. She looks around at John and Travis and Ian and smiles playfully. Then, curling her lip in a snarl, she

announces, "I'm *drunk*."

"Seems to be goin' around," John replies.

"Not you," Travis replies. "You're always totally cool."

John nods knowingly. "I have the wisdom of the Gods of Pepé."

"That's the only time I've seen you drunk," Travis says, laughing. "Man!"

Eric comes down the stairs, sluggardly. Everyone had been buying him shots, and he is starting to feel the affect of the last few. Stepping down onto the landing, he leans slightly, spilling some of the beer in the four cups he is holding in offering to the group. "I got some more for us."

Looking at each other in the eyes, Travis and Ian race to finish their beers and toss the cups off the landing behind them. Turning to Eric, they each take a new beer. "Dy no mite!" Ian offers in thanks.

Eric looks at Travis as seriously as he can. His expression contains more of a plea for assistance than anything else though. "There's some girl up there askin' about you."

Travis laughs and looks up the stairs. "Did you see her shoes?"

The question seems odd, but Eric makes a face of exaggerated amazement and manages to reply, "Big boots."

Travis puts his hand on Eric's shoulder. "You all right?"

Struggling, Eric manages to nod. "Oh yeah," he says. "But I am going to sit down right now," and he proceeds to fall more than sit on the stairs with a thump when his rear end hits the iron.

"Who is she?" Kristin asks, oblivious to her companion's dilemma.

John intervenes, "Travis's fuckmate."

Ian and Travis laugh. Kristin looks shocked. But before anyone can add anything else, John looks at Travis with all the seriousness of a father, "Do you have a condom?"

"Ohmygod!" Kristin hollers, "I can't believe you just said that in front of me."

Travis laughs mischievously.

Kristin hits Travis on the shoulder playfully. "You're gonna' have *sex* with her!"

"The bird's and the bee's do it," Travis replies. Then, shaking his head, he says seriously, "She'll probably pass out before she gets out of here."

Eric laughs in sympathy from his spot on the stairs.

"I need more beer," John announces despondently and begins making his way up the stairs.

"Grab me one, will ya' dude?" Ian asks. Turning to Travis, and sipping his present drink, he asks, "Seriously, who's this girl?"

"Ah. It's really not a big deal. We met back in September and got along really well. We'd hang out and flirt and make out and whatever. After a couple of weeks she told me that she was dating this guy, and that's why she hadn't done anything serious with me."

"So?"

"Well," Travis smiles mischievously, "*after* she told me she had a boyfriend, we started doin' stuff."

Ian laughs. "You're a bastard."

"It isn't all my fault. We just got really drunk one night... I mean, it's no excuse, but I don't think we would've fucked around if we had been sober."

"So then what?"

"We did that for a couple of weeks, and it was nice. I kinda' liked it that way sneakin' around. But she ended up tellin' her boyfriend the whole thing."

"Did he come after you?"

"Yeah. Actually, he did. I remember he was real pissed off when he found me at The Manhattan. I think I told him somethin' like, 'You can hit me, but it won't do you any good. I'll probably just fall over.' He sorta' lightened up and we had a drink and talked for a while."

Kristin giggled. "You're so weird talking to the guy whose girlfriend you cheated with. You probably bought him a drink."

"I did." Travis smiles. "Well, look, he and I both knew that it was really Sandy who had put us in this position. Neither of us could tell her that we wanted her to stop seeing both of us he didn't even know. I mean, the way I saw it, and I told him, is that it was up to her to do anything about it. We could fight all we wanted. It wasn't going to do any good."

"That's true," Ian agrees.

"And the funny thing is, after I told him that, he came to the conclusion that that's exactly what Sandy had wanted. She wanted us to duke it out and she'd take the winner."

"You think?" Ian asks.

"Yeah." Travis thinks about it for a minute and sips his beer. "Yeah, I do. I mean, she told him where I was, when I would be there, and what I looked like. That's definitely what she was up to. And it makes sense. The whole reason she started screwin' around with me is because he wasn't giving her enough attention. She wanted the guy that would give her all the attention she wanted whoever would fight for her at that point."

Laughing, Ian asks, "But you guys wouldn't do it?"

"Not physically. Jason did end up sort of fighting for her told me that he wanted her. He'd put too much time into the relationship to just give up. I think he even thought it was his fault that she cheated on him said something about being an absentee boyfriend. But, in the end he told me, 'Just walk away.'"

"And *now*, she's after you."

"Of course she is, man. Think about it. Wouldn't you want to know why someone just totally gave up on you?"

"No."

"Okay, smart ass do me a favor and imagine you're a somewhat insecure twenty year old woman and answer the question. You got two guys after you, and all of sudden, one of them just up and quits. You'd wanna' know why you weren't good enough. In fact, you might even go to certain lengths to *prove* you were good enough."

"Maybe she just likes you, stupid," Kristin says.

Travis laughs. Maybe she did. He shakes his head. "Nah. I never go for that possibility totally implausible."

Nick comes down the stairs like a pimp with a woman under each of his arms. Travis immediately recognizes the blonde in the knee high boots and they make eyes at one another, but he has never seen the other girl. She is wearing combat boots, a short leather skirt, and a blouse that exentuates her rather buxom chest. "Heeeeey," Nick says as he comes to the landing. "Look what I found."

Sandy detaches herself from Nick and latches onto Travis, leaning herself up on the railing of the landing. Travis puts an arm around her, and then notices she is just wearing a short dress with her shoulders bare. He stands her up for a moment, takes off his leather jacket and drapes it over her shoulders. She smiles lovingly, even though she is warm from the drink, and snuggles under his arm again. Travis is unnerved by the feeling of breath on his neck. He tries harder to keep his cool, but he can't help the momentary lapses of rationality that make him want to attack her in a fury of passion.

"Hey," Nick says again to the crowd on the landing. "This is Erica. Erica..." Nick pauses. "This is everybody."

"Hey everybody," Erica says quietly.

Eric tries to wave, but can't quite get his head out of his hands. Kristin, Ian and Travis all nod politely, though. "How the hell'd you meet this scoundrel?" Travis asks Erica. He is half serious too. He'd never known Nick to just pick up a stranger at a party.

"We were in Studio together Spring quarter," Nick answers.

Travis looks to Nick, and the two exchange approving glances. From the looks of cradled heads on shoulders, they would both be partaking in carnal activities, although Travis has his suspicions that he would more or less be taking care of a lost soul for a night. He could never take advantage of a drunk woman tipsy, but not drunk. He genuinely enjoyed the practice of watching over someone anyway. There was something simple and beautiful about caring for another human being.

As if sensing his concern, Sandy looks up for a moment into Travis's eyes. "I broke up with Jason," she says, seeming genuinely sad and as if no one else is around. Ian and Nick exchange amused glances as Travis strokes Sandy's blonde straight hair in reply. She puts her head back down on his shoulder, obviously tired. Moonlight falls across the carousel in Travis's mind for a moment. He smiles and pulls Sandy in a little tighter. Kristin looks at Travis with one eyebrow raised when he looks back up, questioning his motives. With his left arm draped over Sandy, though, Travis just gestures to Eric on the stairs. "You got your own to take care of," he answers.

Eric waves with one hand, keeping his head down in the other. "I'm f f fine," he mutters.

"C'mon," Kristin urges, tugging on his arm. "If you don't get up and move around you're gonna' get sick."

Eric makes an incredible effort and stands up. His eyes widen brightly, and he



starts to sit back down before Kristin grabs his arm and pulls him to her, his arm over her shoulder. He leans heavily, but seems to be a little better off for standing.

Daphne and John come gaily stomping down the stairs, laughing at some joke they were sharing. Each of them is carrying three beers apiece, bringing the music from upstairs down with them in the silent moment on the landing. "Who wants beer?" John calls jovially. Ian and Travis each take one, and Travis can feel Sandy dig her nose into his shoulder in revulsion.

Dizzy and John take up position in the circle between the now symbiotic beings of Nick and Erica and Kristin and Eric. "Doh see fuckin doh!" John yells and slams half of his beer down. Ian, Nick, and Travis sip casually.

The conversation drifts as the music falls from above, all of the sound carried out onto Milledge avenue, out into the city lights, out into a quietly sleeping world. The laughter and jests cool the late summer evening. There beneath the katydid moon there is hesitation, knowing glances and simple talk that lingers into the early hours of the night like a lullaby. Settling on the landing, a comfort of contentment comes against the iron, matches without pairs, pairs without matches. Getting back to simple is the effort; the work is forgetting that anything matters just then. Travis smiles quietly and lets himself slip out of the conversation to feel Sandy leaning on him. He is comfortable in support, meaningful under her weight, and he just laughs quietly to himself when she quietly informs him that she is going to be sick.

. *They'd Have Been Ill*

The easy part is helping Sandy stand behind John's car in the gravel, and letting her stomach do the work. Once she is done, and Travis and John have made their way back to the apartment, the hard part is getting her to lay her head down on a pillow and relax. Something of the exorcism of alcohol brings on a wash of emotions, and it seems to Travis that Sandy is a whirling ball of desperation, there on the cold tile of his bathroom floor. She cries and tells Travis of her commitment to making her life better. She is both humiliated and embarrassed. In one moment, she thanks Travis through tears for being there for her, only to push away from him moments later because she can't stand to be looks at. Travis feels ashamed for helping her, for watching her go through her pain like a voyuer. He holds her and strokes her hair and smiles lovingly not for love of her but for the love of pain that life sometimes brings a pain he enjoys through her because he is numb to it himself.

After a while, she can no longer stand being chained to the movement of the carousel, and Travis picks her up, takes her to his bed and covers her up. Kneeling beside her on the floor, next to the bed, he can just see tears through blue moonlight, mixed in reflection with the glow from the bathroom just outside in the hall. He quiets her as best he can, tells her that she will be fine. He kisses her forehead and tells her that he thinks she is beautiful. She is. Travis slumps on the floor and lays his head on the bed and sees that she is beautiful for someone, just not for him. In the darkness, he continues to stroke her hair and quietly sings one of his own songs as a lullaby: "When you gonna' look in water to see a meaningful glance / When you gonna' give yourself half a chance / It's just a merry go round, baby / a spinning rock with too much pavement / it's just a merry go round, darlin' / and we're all chained to the movement."

She falls asleep quickly, breathing in and out through her cute nose that Travis touches lightly with his fingertip. The covers rise and fall in a slowing pattern. Travis sees his own sleep vanishing before him, but tries to stay awake to watch her tears dry. If anything, he wants to cry there with her because he knows a calmness will blanket him if he can't shed tears. As the moments passes, he can feel his heart drifting further and further away from him. In the darkness, a kind of sadness slides by, orbiting just far enough away for him to know it is there but not feel it. That cold miniature moon alienates him, leaves him feeling empty instead of sad. Staring blankly at the face of one he could've have loved but gave up on, Travis can see the void inside himself, and he mutters, holding his stomach, "How could I not feel this?" Shaking his head, the nothingness inside him swelling, he whispers "How can I not feel this?"

*Just walk away, Fleeting.*

### Part III

August

#### *. Half Hoping That They Would Call After*

The most he can do with Mary Jane is drive her down to the mailboxes to get the mail. It is the most he can do. He does it in bare feet with a smile the smile worn because he knows that what he is doing is stupid, although it is surprisingly easy to drive a motorcycle with bare feet. Of course, there is not much threat of anything when he is only traveling fifteen miles an hour. The most that will happen if he screws up is that he will leap off the bike lightly and let it fall over onto something other than his toes. The smile vanishes from his face for a moment as he puts the thinks of of his head. He doesn't like the vision of Mary Jane dropping to the asphalt at all. The imagined sound of the chrome exhaust pipe scraping along the asphalt sends a chill up Travis's spine the discordance too much to bare.

Travis had grown so used to the motions of steering and driving the motorcycle, driving it in bare feet takes him back to the beginning when he'd first learned how to drive her. Everything is new then. When he bought Mary Jane, two years ago, he'd had a friend drive it home from the shop. The friend, Bret, hadn't driven a motorcycle in a while, on account of having been in a nasty accident. He is happy to do it once more for Travis though. Like smoking, it is something not entirely out of his blood just yet. Bret drove the bike home and Travis followed in Bret's beat up blue Camaro, feeling vaguely like he is letting a friend have his way with his girlfriend for one night. That had been the first spark of his genuine adoration and love for Mary Jane the first time he thinks of her as her and not it.

Bret parked the bike in the front yard of Meryl and Travis's little duplex. She had been as happy as Travis when the bike arrived, knowing how much he had wanted it and how it completsed him in a way. Travis looks like he belonged on that bike, and Meryl always told him that it turns her on. They sits in the afternoon heat on the stoop and watched the bike for a while. Travis can't watch though. The more he tried to work out in his head how he is going to get lessons or or get it anywhere, the closer he inched to its seat. He already had the learner's permit. And eventually, he started the bike with the key, lets the clutch out carefully, pulls the gas and stalled the engine. He smiles, started the bike again and stalled it again. And again. At some point the bike inched forward in the grass, and Travis drove it around in circles, getting a feel for steering it and leaning, until he moved it out in the parking lot and up into second and third gear. Before even he knew it, he is driving a motorcycle.

Now as he drives down the long stretch of asphalt in front of D, he listens to all the sounds of the engine that had become familiar to him. When an old friend mispronounces a certain word, that is the sound of her engine sputtering. When an old friend gives you a look because you both know you've done well, that is the sound of her shifting. A spark plug misfiring is a cough and the sputter of the exhaust pipes as she downshifted and tore up hills is the sound of laughter. At his age of course he isn't supposed to have imaginary friends. He had done it long enough now that he started to believe it. She *is* alive. And as the engine slows coming toward the mailboxes, he can't help but feel that maybe he had neglected his old friend these last few days, opting to walk most every place instead of ride. The weather had been perfect, but he hadn't feels like getting anywhere too quickly. Walking ate up the time. He pats the gas tank lightly as he stands. It makes a hollow "thunk thunk."

As he rights himself and sets his feet on the grass, he rolls his eyes because he is an idiot. He always kept his house keys separate from the bike key. The ignition is in the side of the bike, up under the seat, and any keys attached to the bike key tended to bang up against the cylinder casing. He had not brings his other keys with him though. He can't get into the mailbox. "Okay," he says quietly to himself. It is only half a block back to the apartment, *no big deal*, but this is typical of the way everything is going today: complicated.

Driving around the the island in the center of the parking lot Travis gives the engine some gas and leans back as Mary Jane tugs him up the straightaway. He leaves her humming in neutral as he gets off, jogs up the steps and quietly hopes that he doesn't lock the apartment door behind him. When the door clicks and opens, Travis thanks some unknown mystical god of laziness for his apathy towards locking the door when going to the mailbox. He gets his keys off his nightstand, and seems self consciously convinced that some neighbor watching somewhere is greatly amused.

The ground by the mailboxes is damp, warm and muddy. Travis tries to hop from the asphalt to the concrete isle where the mailbox foundations are drilled. He lands lightly on the stone on his toes, balances for a precarious moment, reaching out for the mailbox casing to balance himself, and then steps back with his right foot into the mud. *Yup. Typical.* He pulls his keys out of his pocket and opens the mailbox with an unusual amount of anticipation. Boredom had been on the attack the last few days, and Travis wants anything to entertain him. Sure enough, there is a handful of entertainment stuffed into the little metal safety box. There are two utility bills for the apartment, three letters for Resident, a bill for John and two bills for Nick, a letter from Nick in Pittsburgh, and an informational brochure on hemorrhoids that Travis had ordered in John's name. He resolves to order another one and have it sent to Jon's new address in Atlanta.

Travis takes the bundle of mail and shoves it into the front of his jeans waistband. He jumps again from the concrete to the asphalt though there is less point now and hops on Mary Jane to drive back to the apartment. On the way back up the parking lot, a couple of letters loose themselves from Travis's pant's waistline. He tries to stick his stomach out to create enough pressure to stop the slippage, but two of the letters flicker

miserably to the ground despite his efforts. He stops the bike, rolls his eyes, puts the bike in neutral, gets off and fetches the letters. Then, he gets back on, shifts the bike into first and drives back to the apartment. *Much too complicated*, he thinks.

Once inside the cool apartment, he has to hop on one leg to keep the mud on his foot from staining the carpet. He sets all the mail on top of the television, placing Nick's letter meticulously on top of the stack. He is going to save the letter for later. He hops into Jon's vacant bathroom and sticks his foot in the bathtub momentarily with the cold water running. It is cold. Very cold. And with one numb foot and one warm foot, Travis walks back into the kitchen and gets a half empty bag of stale pretzels and a glass of orange juice. Orange Juice is all that is left, and Travis decides he has one more thing to do go to the grocery store either today or tomorrow, or the next day. Of course, without Nick or Ian to play tag with, or Jon attempting to embarrass him, the store won't be its normal form of entertainment. Still though, it is something to do which is better than nothing to do.

Throwing himself into the armchair, Travis adjusts his weight to make it lean precariously back. The feeling of it almost tipping over makes him feel light and then it comes back to the floor with a disturbing "Thang" resonating from the springs. He laughs and looks at his hand. He has spilled some of his juice. "Damn it!" he says to his hand or the glass. "Look what you went and does!" He sets the pretzels beside him in the chair and sets the glass on the floor, getting up to jog lightly into the kitchen for a paper towel or two. When he pulls on the roll suspended over the sink, it wobbles and spins and four paper towels unwrap themselves, but do not rip at the designated, perforated line. Travis looks at the roll blankly for a moment and shrugs defeated. Turning and walking out of the kitchen, a line of paper towels unravels behind him and settles to the floor. He wipes off the glass and looks at the unraveled paper towel trail leading back into the kitchen. He can't care if he tried. His excuse is that he will care later. This also seems doubtful though.

With the glass still on the floor, Travis thrusts himself more completely into the old blue armchair. It leans back, keeping its balance for just a moment, until he kicks his legs out and it falls backwards to the floor. He hollers as it swoops back as though he are on an amusement park ride. When the chair lands with a thud he feels the sensation in his spine and laughs. Then he shifts around and kicks like a beetle on its back. "Help me!" He sits still, his posture perfect but rolled back ninety degrees. Kicking again, he cries with futility "Somebody help me!" No one answers and disappointedly, he rolls off the chair to pick it back up.

Digging the remote out of the seat cushion, Travis sits back down, opens the pretzels and begins clicking through the television channels. "News, soap opera, news, commercial." He moves through the channels as quickly as he can, while still taking long enough to discern their content and announce the the result to the empty room like an elevator operator. "Game show, cooking show, music videos," and then he stops. There is a moment of recognition in his face as he watches the image of two policemen approaching a

car . From their dated uniforms and the yellowed tinge of the film Travis is sure of what he is looking at. Travis's mouth opens a little at the baked look of the highway in California and the circa        vehicles that litter it. True to form, one of the officers casually removes his sunglasses to reveal his amazingly playful eyes. "Yes!" Travis hollers out like a roulette winner. "Chips!" He sinks down into the chair lazily, with only his neck still propped up vertically. As Travis takes a pretzel out of the bag, the policeman makes an oh so casual joke about the speed that the attractive female driver had attained. "Ahhh. Eric Estraaaaada," Travis coos. "You're the maaaaan." He thinks to himself letting his eyes wander back to the trail of paper towels strewn across the floor. This is the epitome of drudgery, and he relishes it    mind numbing drudgery. As his eyes wander to the paper towels though, he can see the empty space where once one of Nick's paintings would have stared at him in horror and disgust. The empty space seems worse. "Shut up," he says to no one and turns the television up.

Travis roams from bad sitcom to to cheesy romance movie to game shows for three hours. At one point in time, all the television channels conspire to show nothing but commercials for three or four minutes, and Travis is forced to give up his undisputed throne over the entire empire of blatant mindlessness. Travis completes the cycle of channels, from two to fifty two, because he *has* to. He has to be absolutely sure that there is nothing he is missing. And then, finally, he shuts the television off.

The room darkens mildly, the light low in the late afternoon, the blinds closed. Travis looks around blankly, as though he had just been placed there. Travis sits still and listens to the quiet. The refrigerator had ceased, the air conditioners on both sides of the apartment are off. Everything is quiet. Sitting up in the chair, he crosses his legs underneath him, closes his eyes and lets the silence leak into his head, lets his thoughts evaporate into it. He relishes the silence, and hangs as long as he can with the knowledge that the moment a certain part of his brain recognizes the silence, the music will come. The silence will end abruptly, stabbed by a rhythm or a note.

When he opens his eyes after a minute, they are focused on the top of the television sets and Nick's letter. "Letter for me! Letter for me!" Travis hollers. He stands up and lifts the envelope off the television. The address is scrawled in Nick's familiar artistic handwriting. There is no denying the resemblance between Nick's handwriting and his art. Over the years , in fact, Travis had watched as Nick's handwriting became more and more like his art, almost as though the bent, twisted images in Nick's head were struggling to get out in any shape or form possible. The letters in the address look like bare winter twigs laid down to resemble an alphabet. The "T" in "Mr. Travis Fleeting" should have simply been two straight lines, but instead there is an awkward cross of ink tributaries, bent and warped. On the back of the envelope is scribbled "You're fat!" Travis laughs, glad to see it.

Lounging on the big couch, Travis reads the letter twice. It is two and a half pages, and rather than fold it, Nick had simply crumpled the paper and jammed it into an envelope, smashing it flat with a blunt instrument, no doubt. The writing crawls across the

wrinkled page, each word wrinkled itself. The letter says that Nick is doing well in Pittsburgh and that Travis is fat. Nick rather liked one particular bar that he and Jim had been to several times. Travis is “stoopid”. It looks promising that Nick would get to show his work in the gallery. The curator had been impressed. And Travis is fat. For the most part, Nick is having a good time. And for the most part, Travis is fat, stupid and lazy. The last few sentences makes Travis smile particularly brightly:

“I saw a chick in a bar the other night that would make an excellent specimen of a girlfriend for *you*. She even had a lazy eye! You can’t beat that! Looking forward to getting a beer with you when I get back.”

Folding the letter more accurately, Travis places it back in the envelope and carries it into his room. He pulls out a large shoebox from under his bed. Every letter that Travis had ever received he kept in this shoebox and one other like it. The letters are divided up by name with rubber bands holding bundles together. Travis sifts through the bundles, but can’t find Nick’s. He reaches further under the bed groping for the other box. He finds a helmet for one of his action figures, a double A battery, a spare rubber band which he puts around his wrist for future use and a couple of guitar strings still in their packages. Finally, he latches on to the second shoebox and drags it out. It is even more full than the other, letters falling to the floor as he pulls it out. Opening it, he pulls out more bundles of letters and finds Nick’s. By far, Travis notes, Nick’s letters are the most decorative. Some are simply covered in tiles of bizarre symbols, while others have angels and demons holding the addresses aloft on the paper. Travis smiles and adds the new letter to the bundle.

He picks out a few other letters at random. One is a note from an eighth grade sweetheart. Travis, though he remembers little of anything before eighteen, remembers Katie well. She dotted her eyes with hearts and her whole concept of a relationship was posing the question, “What’s wrong?” or “Are you mad at me?” The reasons that inspired the questioning were numerous, paranoid and ranged from “You didn’t say much during lunch.” to “I couldn’t find you during the class change. Are you avoiding me?” Travis shakes his head. He’d known even then that he was in trouble. Despite the fact that there were a myriad of variations on the question, Travis felt most women his age were still asking the same question. Without thinking about it Travis announces to the room, “If only I knew now what I knew then.” He thinks about what he had said for a moment and laughs out loud and puts the letters back.

There are letters from old crushes, old friends, summer loves, and people he still knows. His favorite letter is from a Catholic bishop in North Carolina. Traveling somewhere at some point years ago, Travis had encountered an article in a magazine written by the bishop an article on free will. Put off by the article, Travis had dashed off a letter to the bishop, pointing out what fallacies he could find in the article and proposing a



different point of view. Surprisingly enough, the bishop wrote back. Travis had hoped for an intellectual engagement, a debate that would span years and time. There is some education in even attempting an exchange with a bishop – a man who is surely gifted with insight into matters of free will – matters crucially important to a young Travis Fleeting. That is not what Travis got.

He had only ever read the letter once, and could never bring himself to read it again. Even holding it in his hand, sitting on the floor by the bed, he feels like he is holding an overripe banana. The bishop's words had wandered lazily and condescendingly across the page, barely attempting decisiveness or aim. The letter had been little more than a lecture on how young and stupid Travis was. If Travis had been put off by what he read in the article, the letter was atrocious. It left him genuinely indignant, with a vision of the bishop as a gruesome old man methodically lifting tickets from youngsters and hurling them onto a carousel thoroughly rusted to a standstill, the only joy left in his tired heart: the crying of children who realize too late they've been cheated.

The night he received the letter, he let Nick read it, and the two took a long walk, decrying everything in the letter. They ended up at a twenty four hour International House of Pancakes and discussed the subject of religion until four in the morning. Travis could never remember anything specific from the conversation except the feeling that it had made him stronger and had insured that he and Nick would be lifelong friends. The only particular thing Travis can remember is what Nick said as they were walking into the newly bruised dawn: "If God's not laughing, then none of us need to be."

Looking up from the letter Travis looks round his room at his bare walls. He never had posters or calendars – he never wanted them. They were too much to carry and too much to look at. But now he sees the walls' emptiness, and sets the letter down to run to the kitchen. He comes back with a permanent marker and scrawls across the wall, "If God's not laughing than none of us need to be." It runs half the length of the wall opposite his bed, written in four inch high printed, capital letters. Stepping back from the wall, Travis beams brightly. The emptiness seems severed. After a moment he writes underneath the quote, "Nick 'fatass' Osborn". Then, in another spot on the wall he writes in the same careful all caps fashion, "Don't write on the walls." and beneath that, "Okay!"

Other phrases follow without any logical causation – as though they had been lodged in his head, leaning against the first phrase, waiting to pour out in a disorganized stream of words and letters like dominoes. Gradually, the grey wall is divided into smaller and smaller sections. Travis writes lyrics from his favorite songs. He writes graffiti quotes and famous quotes. He writes "The revolution will not be televised," right next to "Jesus Saves – at the Chase Manhattan Bank!" Underneath that, he quotes John, who'd once said, "I have to take a crap so bad it will baffle a toxicologist."

There is no pattern, no meaning, just the pungent odor of the marker's ink, the sensual intensity of concentration in synch with movement, the squeaking of the tip and of the feel of the marker pulling down the walls, it's black liquid painting over the grey in streaks, forming letters and words. Words! They look strange so large, and often Travis has

to stop and look back at what sentence he is writing, or even what word. They all look so ridiculous. And he writes each of them meticulously. He makes no spelling errors or mistakes. When he isn't sure of how to spell a word, he fetches Nick's dictionary. Without knowing why, he cannot not permit a single error, a single letter out of place. It takes his full and complete concentration, a balance of the symmetry of his motor skills and the messiness of his imagination. There would be no word marked over or drawn through just open words all across the wall.

And after a couple of hours he runs out of words and things to write. He steps back from the wall again and stares at the chaos of words and letters. They reach across the flat expanse of the wall in long winding arcs, gently rolling hills, and unevenly spaced blocks—all capital letters but all different sizes. He feels something is missing though, and after a minute he realizes that of all the things he'd written, none of them are his own words. So he kneels by the floor in the corner for a while and thinks. There is nothing in him that feels memorable or notable though. There are no words important enough or silly enough to rest among the others. It doesn't bother him really. He is no wordsmith, had never desired to be.

Instead, he leans over and writes the notation to a lullaby he'd written years before. The notation looks odd in contrast with the words. The treble clef and the rigidity of the measure lines aren't as simple as all the letters and words. The notes themselves, two half, eight quarter, and six eighth notes lack even elegance to him. But Travis reads the notation from left to right, gently singing to himself where he kneels. "Da da da, da da da, da de da." And he smiles. It is the most beautiful thing he's ever said.

*. He's Murdering the Time!*

Surveying the room, Travis looks to the ceiling fan where four bedsheets are draped. Folded over each other to cover any gaps, their printed lengths of stripes, flowers and plaids fall down across the backs of four chairs that Travis had brings in from the kitchen. There is an inner glow where the light from the ceiling fan lights the space. The whole construction appears as either a circus tent or a structure for the Center for Disease Control designed by JCrew.

Travis turns up the dixie jazz coming from the stereo and bobs his head in time with the rin tin tinny rhythm. The CD is a copy of a much older analog recording and the music has the hum and warmth of age. Still bobbing, Travis walks into the kitchen and removes three canned beers from the door. Taking a plate from the kitchen cabinet, he opens the cans and places them on the plate, carrying it all back to living room like a waiter.

He ducks inside the tent with the drinks and proceeds to dole them out to two of three stoic figures. "A beer for the man in the titanium suit," he says and sets one of the beers in front of his gaily smiling plastic space man. "A beer for you, my man," Travis reaches for a second beer and sets it on the chair next to a portly robot. The vibration from the can being set on the chair causes the precariously balanced toy to fall over on its side. "Woah there," Travis says, setting the beer down and his compatriot upright. "Hang in there, pal. We're just gettin' started." Leaning conspiratorially to the space man, Travis whispers, "Lightweight." He pushes the beer close to the chubby robot so that they both stand upright, and then presses a button on the toy's built in keyboard. A stilted electric voice replies, "Try to spell animal."

"What a card," Travis cackles. "Now that's the spirit, my man." Travis spells out A N I M S L with his own beer precariously balanced on the plate still.

"I'm sorry," the robot droned. "That's incorrect."

"You just calm down," Travis says. He points at the robot's beer threateningly. "I'll cut you off if I have to."

The robot stares vacantly at the other side of the tent, a ridiculously large grin on its face.

"I thought so."

Sitting down with his own beer, Travis looks to a third gruesome figure to the right of him. It is the most interesting of the three, composed of a rubber Tyrannosaurus Rex puppet for a head, with a stuffed bunny rabbit for a body. The green rubber of the puppet's skin contrasts harshly with the soft blue fur of the rabbit, and because the puppet has its own sets of gangly arms, the creature in the chair as a whole has six appendages,

giving it an insect like appearance. "You sure you don't want anything?" Travis asks, but answers the question, as well, "Yeah I know, I know Doctor's orders. Can't argue with that." Travis sips his beer and nods, studying his compatriot carefully. "I guess it's not every day that they perform... uh..." Travis searches the air for the words for a moment, "a mid torso/head transplant." Leaning over, Travis squeezes the nose of the dinosaur puppet which growls horribly in response.

"You're damn right!" Travis agrees energetically.

He squeezes the puppet's nose a second time and it roars again.

"I would too!" Travis replies. Taking a large gulp off his beer, Travis looks around the tent. It doesn't feel cramped surprisingly, but cozy. With only one of the lights in the ceiling fan beaming, the shadows and colors on all the interior of the sheets have a softened quality. "So?" Travis asks, "You three all travelin' together?"

There is no response until Travis leans forward casually and presses one of the three brightly colored buttons on the space man's suit. "I come in peace," the little man announces cheerfully.

"Sure, pal. That's what they all say."

Travis presses the space man's buttons for another reply. "Prepare to defend yourself, space scum."

"No. I didn't mean it that way," Travis offers innocently, putting his hands up defensively. "I was just kiddin' around."

The t rex/bunny creature screams with what might have been interpreted as agreement.

"Exactly," Travis says. "You can't always go around bein' so serious all the time taking things people say literally. People don't think about what they're saying sometimes."

"Prepare to defend yourself, space scum," the space man replies.

The t rex/bunny creature hollers in response.

"All right. I don't want any trouble in here. You two can take it outside." Travis drains his beer to the last third, sets it on the floor, and picks up the space man. With a solid plastic right hook, the space man knocked the T rex/bunny creature's head off onto the carpet.

"Oh my God!" Travis hollers dramatically in surprise. He turns to the robot and says, "Quick man, you've gets a medical degree do something!" He lunges at the robot and presses a button on its chest. "The correct spelling is A N I M A L."

"Oh Christ! You're so drunk you can't even stand." Travis shoves the robot to the side of the chair where it wobbles slightly and then falls to the floor. In desperation, Travis drops to his knees and tries to give the T rex puppet mouth to tooth filled mouth resuscitaion. After a moment, Travis checks the little three figured hand for a pulse. There is none. He turns to the space man with a grim look on his face. "You bastard. That half dinosaur, half blue rabbit thing was my sister's fiancé." With the speed of lightning, Travis pulls a rubber dart gun from out of the back of his pants and points it with two hands at the space man lying apathetically on the floor. "What d'ya' have to say for

yourself now, you heartless cyborg?” Travis hesitates tensely, weighing the consequences of firing a sure fatal shot, and then he pulls the trigger. The dart gun clicks and with a whoosh of air, strikes the space man squarely in the face.

Jamming his hand into his pants pocket, Travis pulls out another dart, loads the gun and aims at the spelling robot. “Sorry friend,” he says sincerely, “I can’t have any witnesses.” He shrugs. “Nothin’ personal.”

Leaning forward, Travis presses a button on the robot’s chest. “lets’s try another word. Spell ‘probably’.”

“Spell ‘positively’,” Travis replies and shoots the little robot. Blowing off the barrel of his gun, Travis brags to the empty room “As deadly as Doc Holiday, as witty as Mark Twain.” He looks around the tent solemnly for a moment, examining the massacre and then begins picking up his toys, replacing them on their chairs. “I don’t understand why you guys can’t just be civil. Every time we do this, I end up shooting all of you.”

With a physical prod, the space man replies, “Hmm... this planet is strange.”

“You said it, pal,” Travis agrees. He finishes the last of the beer in his hand and trades with the robot’s still full beer. “I think you’ve had enough.” He presses ‘P’ on the keyboard and hit enter.

“I’m sorry. That’s incorrect.”

“*You* don’t know your limits,” Travis accuses.

“The correct spelling is P R O B A B L Y.”

“I love you, man. You’re a nut. Seriously.” Travis seats himself with his new beer in hand and examines his companions, looking around the tent slowly, thinking to himself. He rubs his head and looks at the beer in his hand. “I think I might be bored,” he admits to the can. “If I was *stoned*,” he offers conversationally to the robot in front of him, “*that* would be different.”

The robot doesn’t reply.

“But I’m not stoned, so... I should probably be worried right now.” Looking to his audience for agreement, he gets nothing but vacant stares. “Exactly.”

Sitting back in his chair with a long sigh, sipping his beer, Travis reviews all the names of people he knows in town. He knows quite a few, but the majority of them are people he saw on a regular basis at coffeeshouses or bars or his shows. Most of the people he knew were acquaintances and nothing more. There was no one he could call, or even anyone whose number he knew.

“Well. This is ridiculous.”

Travis remembers the last time that he had gone this particular route for personal amusement, maybe some six months before. It was early Friday afternoon and for some reason Travis had nothing to do at the time. He set up the tent and drank with his toys. At some point around the third beer, Nick walked into the apartment only to overhear the last of a fight between Travis and the spelling robot, and peered into the tent apprehensively.

It took several minutes for Travis to convince Nick that yes, he was fine, and no,

though he was a bit tipsy, he was not stoned.

"I *know* you," Nick had says. "This is very typical stoned Travis behavior."

Eventually though, Nick graciously accepted the space man's beer and takes his seat in the tent. And by the time John arrived at home, early in the evening, Travis and Nick are having such a good time that he didn't question it although he did speculate that Travis and Nick might be "nerds". The statement was taken in all good humor and Jon replaced the spelling robot.

After a while, it was unilaterally decided that the no smoking indoors rule could be suspended for the night, for the purpose of smoking in the tent. And the sheets could always be washed. The atmosphere of the carnival construction was conducive of the ridiculous attitudes that Friday nights often inspired. Ian came knocking on the door, and when no one answered, but noise was evident, he opened the door and peered in. With an energetic enthusiasm typical of Ian, he joined the party, remarking, as the others had, that "I used to do this shit when I is a kid."

"Nothin' wrong with doin' it now then," Travis had replied.

Unfortunately, the somewhat mystic ritual failed to summon Travis's friends to their chairs this second time. He stares at the emptiness where they had sat six months before and sighs again not out of self pity or a nostalgic yearning for a better time, but just because he wasn't enjoying his own weirdness as much without confirmation from other well respected weirdoes. Travis had played alone often as a child, but then, the "imaginary" friends had been quite real. Now, try as he might, they are not.

A kind of longing creeps into his head as he fiddles with the push tab of his beer can; the kind of longing he can only avoid with his friends and his guitar an irritation that the procession of time should not apply to him, that growing older was a process he should not have to endure a longing for the days of foolishness a two year old who simply couldn't have known better. Surrounding himself with toys and old letters, words that people had once said are no magic charm against age though. They are evidence of time, of a life that had gone before him in this moment. Noise. Talk. Music. Motion. The only things that salvaged the present from the quickly disappearing past for Travis were those things that allowed him to ignore the procession as he described it to Ian once, "a fat, happy parade into the abyss."

Time seemed like an unfortunate creature to accuse though, Travis thinks. Time is a referee, an objective observer who is just doing his job take it or leave it. Forward is a universal principle, an unbreakable human possession. There is no way out. So, Time, with what surely must be a weary, tired face, denies the finger of accusation from Travis Fleeting. It is Travis's fault if time passes and he notices.

Without too much effort, Travis discovers himself in his room, fetching his jacket and his keys, lacing up his boots, pulled by a rip tide of indiscreet seconds, plankton in a sea of time, Travis feels only the urge to go. If he moves, the longing will not seek him. Like running in step against the spin of a carousel, Travis can always keep his place by moving. The artifacts of proof are all around him: mad scribbling on the wall, a carnival made of

bedsheets, shoebox archives of old letters all of them said "Go."

He turns the lights off in the apartment, pets Absinthe sleeping quietly on the long couch, and thinks about his options. He can drive Mary Jane around aimlessly until he thinks of something interesting, watching streetlights turn on as the late evening turns from dark blue to black. He can head to or Mean Mike's in the hopes of running into someone to talk to some acquaintance that might be willing to bare a heavier role for one evening.

Standing in the door frame of the apartment, the dusk stretching out beyond him, Travis pauses and contemplates his guitar laying somewhere in the darkness of his bedroom. The temptation is a heavy one, the beauty of music always enticing addictive even. He can play, and in playing can forget everything, entrancing himself until the day was gone. But something in the darkness says "No." Something in the quiet of the apartment is reflected inside him, and Travis wishes for no more enchantment. A shadowy adversary at the end of a tumbleweed ghostown street waits patiently, his wrist near his weapon, and Travis shuts and locks the door.

. *Who's Making Personal Remarks Now?*

A purple hue, dotted with three or five bright stars has overtaken the western sky as Travis drives down Baxter street, Mary Jane shining like an angelic halogen cyclops. His intentions are laced with desire to have a good time a genuine one. If he searches long enough, through his own head, he knows he can come up with some form of entertainment a sane form. His apartment had suffered enough damage at the hands of his boredom. He smiles, his breath moist and warm inside his helmet. "gotta' love Tuesday!" he hollers out. No one can hear him inside his helmet he knows, but it matters less because there is no one to hear him anyway. A car or two is on the road, one a few blocks ahead, another already fading in his left rearview mirror, softened red brake lights shrinking into the purple sky.

There won't be anyone downtown on a Tuesday night in the summer except the bartenders with their books and newspapers and crosswords. The only thing that keeps him driving on is thinking that there will be people somewhere. An image comes into his mind of thirty thousand people in a warehouse somewhere partying, dancing, drinking. They are all watching him on giant television screens, hiding from him. There is that image in his head, and the image of his apartment, empty and cluttered, blue grey fading to black even now as he thinks. And even looking to a fictional place full of smiling familiar faces seems better than facing the same four walls for even five more minutes.

Travis comes to the bottom of Clayton and turns left onto Lumpkin, leaning into the turn and pulling hard on the throttle. Mary Jane stands herself up and pushes into the asphalt, climbing Lumpkin as his speedometer climbs, Travis leans left and right, wagging Mary Jane's tail with his thighs. She veers and makes a wavy line beneath the large green oaks and maples that line Lumpkin.

Straightening her out, Travis brings Mary Jane to a stop at the light of Thomas and Lumpkin. He pushes the visor on his helmet up and leans his head back to get a look at the sky. There are a few clouds catching the light of the setting sun, burning with a half glow as the masses of water turn pink. The leaves of the late summer trees reach out from either side of the street, their swollen green color burned by the reflected pinks of the clouds. Travis beams and turns his head down to the road again. Only then does he notice that everything the street, his skin, Mary Jane's chrome and instruments bares the rouge of a fading light in summer.

The bright red light of the intersection cuts through the desaturated colors easily though, and Travis turns his attention to it hopefully as it shifts to green. He lets the clutch out and pulls on the throttle again, launching himself into the pink hued world. Pink. How ridiculous. How carefully had Travis worn clothes of certain colors; black and



white and dark blues and greens, for the very purpose of never standing out too much. Now his olive skin and blue jeans seem lightly warmed with colors that are not normally comforting to him. But he doesn't mind the world making a fashion statement on him. He smiles through the open visor of his helmet, the wind caressing the lines of his grin.

Turning off Lumpkin onto Clayton, he takes his pick of parking spaces in front of Mean Mike's. Through the window at the front of the bar, behind two bright neon signs advertising beer, he can see a red darkness beckoning him. He shuts Mary Jane off, takes off his helmet and hangs it from the handlebars, gets off and walks in the front door, propped open by a barstool. No one is working the door and no music plays over the stereo system. The soft hum of the electric signs and ice machines, the swift shuffling of shoes on concrete are the only auditory clues of life. Now and then, the tinkling of a glass scuttles out. On a "good night," it is impossible for Travis to hear his own thoughts. The sound of his boots on the floor now is disturbing to him. A few people are drinking at tables, talking quietly. On occasion a laugh sounds out filling the bar like a flock of migrating birds, and with the same unsettling quality of flapping wings indoors.

The girl tending bar and Travis approach each other simultaneously. They both recognize each other, barely, and smile politely. Travis fiddles in his pocket for a moment, searching for money. "A gin and tonic and two bucks in quarters."

She nods and takes the six dollars he offers hesitantly. Walking away to the cash register, she rings up the drink and gets Travis's change first, bringing it back to him. For an instant, Travis feels the worry that he isn't going to get his drink but just be charged for it. After a moment, though, the girl makes the drink there in front of him.

"Slow night?" he asks.

The girl makes a face and pours the drink.

*Okay*, Travis thinks. "I suppose that's a good thing for you though, right?"

She finishes pouring the drink and puts it in front of him and then leans on the bar attractively with her arms crossed a gesture that makes no sense to Travis considering her talkativeness. He looks over and thinks, : to himself *definitely not in the yours category*. "I mean, you're not having to run around and no one's screaming at you or anything."

Rearranging the sipping straws, the girl nods in agreement. To Travis it seems that the only reason at all she is standing there, is due merely to some perfunctory duty as a bartender. Then, she looks at his drink and moves away down the bar, reaching down into a plastic container. She recovers a lime, brings it down to Travis and drops it in his drink almost as a challenge. "Forgot your lime."

Travis blinks. "Thanks." *Okay*, he thinks again, making a valiant attempt to discern this girl's interest in conversation or complete lack thereof.

She looks morosely around the bar and absent mindedly scratches a tattoo of a sun on her bare shoulder. "Actually, it's bad one way or the other."

"Pardon?" Travis asks looking at his lime again. He hadn't expected the oracle to speak and wasn't paying attention.

"If it's really slow, then there's nothing to do. But if it's crazy then it's... well... you know crazy."

Travis sips his drink to hide his amusement. Here is a person with whom he can discuss matters of contentment and happiness. *Yeah right.* The glass isn't half empty or half full; the glass just pretty much sucks. What Travis wants to ask is, "Well, why the hell do you tend bar?" He doesn't. He says, "Crazy," after he gets his first sip of his gin and tonic down. She has made it strong. After a pause, he takes a dollar out of the pile of change she had set before him, and tips her, acting as though he had forgotten.

"Thanks," she says, still leaning up on the bar.

"Sorry... forgot."

"Is that any good? I don't get many gin and tonic drinkers."

Normally Travis would have criticized the strength of the drink. A good gin and tonic is a definite balance with a twist of lime. Made right, they are smooth and refreshing. Too much gin and they taste like a diluted cleaning product with house gin, at any rate. "Oh yeah. It's great," Travis says. He'd rather be drinking a strong gin and tonic than water. He takes another sip to illustrate his point.

She makes a face. "I hate gin."

Travis nods in feigned understanding. The glass sucks and whatever is in it in whatever quantity sucks too. "It's an acquired taste."

"Yeah," she says slowly.

"No, really," Travis continues. "I used to hate gin." Travis calculates the depth that this conversation is going to obtain on its own momentum. Not much. He adds a catalyst to entertain himself. "My Dad used to make me drink it when I was bad."

She examines him seriously with her dark eyes, but can't get past his indifferent beaming smile. He doesn't exactly have the demeanor of an abused child. "Really?" She sets her head in her hands and leans forward an inch.

"Oh yeah. Terrible thing. He was a great Dad, but that was his one failing I suppose. And it wouldn't have been so bad except that he used really shitty gin the kind in plastic, you know?"

Covering her mouth in horror, the girl just laughs self consciously, hoping she isn't offending Travis.

"No, that's all right. It *is* funny." He sips his drink and looks thoughtful. "I suppose I shouldn't use the word acquired in that case forced is more like it."

"I can't believe you still drink it."

"Oh, I can't live without it now. At least once a day. If I could get it intravenously, I probably would."

"That's not true."

"Well, it is the only way to get over the punishment. I just had to learn to like it a lot."

"You should... see somebody about that."

"Well, I suppose except that I like it. I mean, it's not like I was born with an

addiction to crack, right? It could be worse.” Travis sips his drink again. He is in a hurry to order a second for effect.

“I’ve heard of some weird things. That’s weird. I mean...” she pauses again, thinking that she might have offended him again.

For a moment, Travis wishes for John’s inherent lack of shame something to really push the story over the edge. He could scream, “There’s nothing wrong with my gin drinking habit, you bitch!” and pound the bar, really angry. Travis laughs to himself, thinking about it, but knows it just isn’t in his nature. “I’ve learned to look at the matter objectively,” he tells her academically.

She just looks at his drink doubtfully.

“I’m aware that it’s a problem,” Travis adds sincerely. “That’s being objective, see? I’m not in denial or anything.”

She nods apprehensively.

Travis feels the momentum of the first lie wearing off. He thinks for a moment and says, “What’s really funny is when I go back to my folk’s house, I’ll make myself a gin and tonic for dinner or whatever, and I’ll sit and drink it in front of my Dad. I’m really obnoxious about it too lots of satisfied sighs and lipsmacking.” Travis stares at his compatriot blankly, observing her reaction.

“That’s awful. You shouldn’t do that.”

“Yeah. One time it made him cry. These days though, he just seems kind of uncomfortable around me.”

“Really, you shouldn’t do that.”

“Really?”

“Really. That’s very mean.”

With a last, long, gulp, Travis finishes drink. “You’re right. I won’t do that anymore.” He pauses and they both stare at the empty glass. “How ‘bout another?”

Clearly, this is one of the most difficult ethical dilemmas the girl had ever suffered through. She stands for a moment looking at Travis with an expression that clearly asks him to rescind his order. Travis takes out his cigarettes and lights one, blatantly ignoring her request for sympathy. Slowly, she goes to make the drink and Travis watches out of the corner of his eye to see if she pours a strong drink or a light drink. It is well measured to a quick count as far as Travis can tell, almost meticulously. He can’t hide his smile.

Looking around over his shoulders, Travis can see that a few people had begun trickling in. One group of three is led by a tall brunette with long hair pulled through a baseball cap. She smiles and waves to Travis. It is Bobby. Travis recognizes one of the guys she comes in with, but not the other. They approach him at the bar as the bartender comes over with his gin and tonic, lime and all.

Travis pays her and asks, “What is your name?”

“Clare.”

“Clare, I want to thank you. You’ve given me a lot to think about. I mean, I’ve never really talked about my problem to anyone else, you know? I appreciate that.”

"Sure," she says, and she turns to take Bobby and her friends' orders.

After ordering, Bobby sidles up to the bar next to Travis. "What's going on, asshole?" she asks old joke.

"Tuesday night," Travis shrugs. He looks to see that Clare is out of earshot. "I've been scaring the hell out of Clare there with stories from my childhood."

"I'd be scared. Cool." Bobby says, nodding. Turning to her friends behind her she says, "Travis, this is Josh and Aaron."

Travis shakes their hands in turn from his stool. "Hey," he says, wondering to himself which of the two is inevitably chasing after Bobby, Travis makes a mental note that it is probably Aaron who a does not say hello and b doesn't stand a chance in hell of picking up Bobby if he isn't a little more chipper. As it is, Aaron's remarkably stoic eyes just look over Travis like a challenge from beneath his baseball cap.

"You here by yourself?" asks Bobby.

"Me and my friend, Gin." Clare who is getting the money for Bobby's crew's drinks makes a disapproving face behind Travis. "I was just gonna' play some pool."

"Good. I'll play." Bobby turns to her companions and says, "You guys wanna' play some pool?"

"I suck," Josh offers with a grin.

Aaron shrugs indifferently.

"Okay, Asshole, it's you and me then."

Aaron gives Travis a look not annoyed or friendly or anything just a look. Travis doesn't return it.

"Are you any good?" Bobby asks, getting up to go to the back room where the table are.

Travis smiles. "I'll kick *your* ass."

Laughing, Bobby replies, "You prob'ly will. I'm not very good."

For a moment, as Bobby talks about the last time she played, Travis wonders why she is hanging out with Josh and Aaron. She seems more than content to ignore them both, walking in front of them at all times. Of course, Travis had noted that she didn't pay for her own drink. So they are her entourage. And that much makes sense. Bobby can always be found among three or four guys, but unlike Dizzy or Kristin, she seems to do it for security. Even if she puts on a Tomboy facade, Travis doesn't buy it. She is terribly congenial, terribly beautiful, terribly ignorant of what men really think of her, but at the same time, terribly conceited in her expectation that men should be in love with her. Everything about her demeanor says "Look, don't touch."

The first time Travis had spoken to her was on a dare about a year prior. The fashion council of Dizzy and Kristin had been berating Bobby concerning a polo shirt she was wearing. Normally, Nick and Travis gets a kick out of the catiness and usually participate, effeminate lisp accents and all. It is a vision of the other side of the gender lines, in one way or another. But this particular night, desiring to end the conversation Travis and Nick, already drunk, had offered to inform the girl of the horror of her fashion

sense if that would stop the onslaught of insults. When Dizzy and Kristin agreed that doing so would be the most diplomatic thing, and since the normal ambassador of condescension is Ian, and Ian was absent, Nick offered Travis a drink if he would do it. It hadn't take Travis more than a moment to decide that a free drink in exchange for mildly insulting a stranger was a reasonable exchange.

"You have to say stupid," Dizzy said.

"*Remarkably* stupid," Kristin added.

"Remarkably stupid?" Travis asked.

"I think atrocious would be more appropriate," Nick added.

"No, no," Kristin disagreed. "Atrocious is too mean. It's just stupid."

"Yeah," Dizzy agreed, "if it was a bad evening gown, you could say atrocious. But that's just a shirt."

"Yeah. It's just stupid."

"Okay, okay," Travis relented, "Remarkably stupid."

He stood up and made his way over to the table across the bar, tapped Bobby on the shoulder and said, "That's a stupid shirt."

Bobby looked stunned for a moment and asked above the noise, "What?" because she was sure she'd not heard Travis correctly.

"I said that's a stupid shirt." Travis paused. "Well, actually, I'm supposed to tell you that it's a..." Travis searched his memory for the word, "*remarkably* stupid shirt."

Bobby observed Travis's facial expression. There was something automatic about it, as though what he had said was merely an objective remark, not to be taken personally. He could just as easily have said, "You are a girl," or "You have brown hair." But he'd definitely said that her shirt was remarkably stupid. And her boyfriend definitely did not like it. He stood up angrily, but she turned to him dismissively, "Sit *down*," she said condescendingly, and Travis thought that the remark would be appropriately followed by "Good dog." Furthermore, he realized he'd just stepped into a nasty smelling affair. It was obvious he was in the middle of a lover's spat that had been going on for at least a little while already. He berated himself for not being more observant but then who could blame him. It was really hard to see anything but Bobby's shirt for about a quarter of a mile. Bobby stood up off her stool and faced Travis.

Sheepishly, Travis looked back to his table with annoyance. He was about to get an earful, and wanted to let his friends know that they were partially to blame somehow. Nick and Dizzy and Kristin were all waves and smiles though. Nick made the gesture of drinking a glass and gave Travis a thumb's up. He *was* going to get a drink out of this after all.

"Well, you're an asshole," Bobby said resolutely, after a full minute of thinking.

Travis was genuinely stunned in return. "No I'm not," he said seriously.

"What?" Bobby asked incredulously.

"An asshole would have stayed on the other side of the room and made fun of you behind your back." He shrugged and walked back to his table, feeling like the entire room

was paying attention to him. His rationale was bizarre, but he stuck to it. For the rest of the evening, Bobby had stared at him with a very peculiar stare.

Nick greeted Travis back at the table. "What'll ya' have, jerk?"

Travis rubbed his face, "Just get me a gin and tonic."

It was a month and a half before Bobby leaned on the bar next to Travis and asked, "What's your name?"

Travis, more sober this time, blew a cloud of smoke and replied, "Asshole. Asshole Fleeting." He held out his hand with a smile and a genuine look of apology.

"Nice to meet you, Asshole. I'm Bobby."

"Travis."

"All right."

"And I'm really am sorry if I embarrassed you. It was just a stupid dare."

"That's all right," Bobby said cheerfully. "It was my boyfriend's shirt." She paused a moment and thought. "My x boyfriend." She paused again. "It was a stupid shirt."

Travis shrugged. "I didn't really think so."

"Uh. That's not exactly what you said."

"Long story."

Bobby nodded. "So I can wear it out again with approval?"

"Only if you want me to tell you how stupid it is again."

And it was another two weeks before Travis saw Bobby at a party and they had a normal conversation about things other than dares and stupid clothing.

Travis, Bobby, Josh, and Aaron get back to the two pool tables in the back. Aaron and Josh take seats in a booth next to the pool table. Josh talks to Aaron and Aaron says nothing in reply, keeping a vigilant eye on Travis. In the meantime, for about ten minutes, Bobby proceeds to soundly beat Travis in a game of eight ball. But what annoys Travis in the blue light of the back room is that Bobby continually laughs and proclaims every shot she takes is "dumb luck". It is one thing to get beat by a decent adversary. It is another thing to get your butt handed to you by "dumb luck."

Bobby coaxes Travis into a second game and six turns into it, Travis looks demurely at his six solids on the table and proclaims, "Dumb luck my ass."

"I used to play with my brothers. They always beat me though."

"Don't tell me," Travis says sarcastically, "you're brothers just happen to be professional pool sharks."

"No. They are good though."

After two more turns, though, Bobby sinks the eight ball early. "Oops," she says, and Travis feels his self esteem lift a miniscule amount. He is, considering, in excellent spirits already though, having found someone to talk to and knowing that he is probably being quite a thorn in Aaron's side. For fun, he glances over at Aaron as Bobby puts the rest of the balls in. He nods, but Aaron either does not see him or ignores him and Travis smiles to himself. Bobby is the kind of girl Travis could have fun with, but it wouldn't be anything long term. It was strange. He's not after Bobby at all, but he is all for pissing off

the guys she generally hung around with. All of them except Josh.

When Bobby clears the table, the foursome head to get another round of drinks and then take seats at one of the tables along the length of the bar.

“You got anything going on?” Travis asks.

“Actaully,” Josh says, “my apartment complex is having a big party this weekend. You should come. And invite everyone you know.”

“A party, really? It seems kind of dead in town for a party.”

“Trust me. We got four bands and twenty kegs comin’. All night Saturday and as long as we can go on Sunday. They even got noise permits for the band.”

“Hell. I’ll be there.” Travis thinks about what he would feel like after his show. In all likelihood, a party would be the perfect thing.

“There’s a lot of people comin’ back into town for this,” Bobby adds excitedly.

“All right. But you guys gotta’ promise me I can hang out with you. Everybody I know is out of town.”

“That’s not a problem,” Bobby says with a very wry smile.

Travis doesn’t have to look at Aaron. He can feel the warmth of the glare. He smiles triumphantly into his drink.

*. You'd Better Finish the Story for Yourself*

It is raining on Thursday morning. The sky the night before had a static tension of warmth as Travis drove home from Mean Mike's. He stood on the stoop to have one last cigarette before bed and watched the clouds sparkling brilliantly in the darkness. For brief flashes they would be illuminated here and there in patches in the distance. Travis settled into bed very aware of the emptiness in the apartment. Absynthe took up a vigilance at the end of the bed, purring quietly, a little black spot at the end of the bed that Travis could barely make out but for the vibrations of breathing. Travis closed his eyes and listened to the hum of his air conditioner, and beneath that, the interim rumbles of thunder from the oncoming storm, while patiently waiting to lose consciousness.

He laid awake for hours before finally drifting off to sleep. He doesn't remember what hour that had been at. All he can remember is the gradual increase in proximity of the thunder and eventually, the flashes of lighting. When he awakens, late in the morning as usual, the room's light is gray and it is Travis's insides that first told him it is raining outside. So, he stays in bed for awhile, enjoying the quiet and the pressure. The air feels heavier.

Absynthe makes his way up the length of the bed and lodges between the sheets and Travis's thigh, his head resting flat on his outstretched paws. Glancing to his clock on the floor, he sees the red digital numbers blinking back at him the result of a power outage. Lazily, Travis rolls over on his other side, shoving Absynthe over. The cat just stretches its body into a long arc and yawns. But after a few minutes of yellow eyes blinking in the grey light, and a few smacks of the tongue, the screaming begins. Absynthe sits up straight, almost looking proud, and releases a high pitched howl.

"Oh Jesus," Travis says and jams his head under the pillow. His voice muffled, he yells at the cat, "Shut up!" And he tries to think of some rational way to coax the beast into silence. He can never be sure if the cries are in despair or joy. Travis peeks his head out from underneath the pillow only to find that Absynthe has made his way further up the bed. As soon as he looks, Absynthe is in his face, screaming. "Were you raised by a fucking rooster?" Travis asks. Absynthe responds predictably with a single falling tone.

Finally Travis sits up and picks up the cat just underneath its forelegs and holds it out at a distance like a soiled baby. Absynthe absently looks at Travis and around the room, his screaming unabated. "Money?" Travis asks. "Do you want money? Just say it, man. It's yours. As much as you want!"

"Eeeeeeeeeeyyyyyyaaaaaahhhhhhhh!" Absynthe's baby teeth show white from underneath his black furry lips that pulls back as his jaw open wide and his tongue rolls out its full length. "Eeeeeeeeeeyyyyyyaaaaaahhhhhhhh!"



"Christ. You're impossible." Travis drops the cat to the floor where it immediately dashes into the living room ahead of Travis, suspecting breakfast, its screams dropping in pitch with a doppler effect as it runs out of the room into the hallway. "What the hell did I do to deserve this?" he asks out loud and makes his way to the kitchen where Absynthe sits patiently beneath the sink, screaming. "Shut up," Travis says without emotion as he enters the kitchen. Reaching in to the cabinet underneath the sink Travis gets Absynthe's bowl, resting on the floor at the far end of the counter. Absynthe sniffs it, and sits on his haunches, screaming at the food now. "It's just a *phase*," Travis says, imitating Nick obnoxiously. He puts his hands on his face and dances in front of Absynthe. "Oh look!" he says sarcastically. "The cat's screaming again. How cute!" He stands up straight and watches Absynthe rear his head back and howl with increased volume. "Good thing it's just a fucking phase."

As Travis pours the last of his milk on to some cereal though, Absynthe stops his racket and begins eating quietly. Travis shakes his head in disbelief of the quiet and takes his cereal into the living room.

The television reveals nothing but static on all fifty two channels. Travis is not surprised. Rain frequently knocked out the cable, and just beneath the television, the VCR clock blinks patiently. For a moment, he stands blankly in his boxer shorts and t shirt wondering how to keep himself entertained while eating. He turns and opens the window shades and pulls the armchair over in front of the world. *No better entertainment than that*, he thinks. He sits contentedly eating his breakfast, watching his neighbors scurry through the rain to their cars and mailboxes. They run with umbrellas and newspapers over their heads as the sky above them thunders almost apathetically, as a matter of formality. Travis can more feel the rumble in the glass and the walls than hear it.

On occasion Travis spies an act of folly in which one of his neighbors wets himself, stumbling into a deep puddle or tripping in a hurry to get to their car. Their mistakes, of course, illicit an obnoxious laugh from Travis in his velvet throne, his mouth full of oats and milk. The world seems a comedy because of the rain, transforming normally industrial human beings into scurrying idiots. The view from D does not make a half bad show after all. Life in the morning is funny, when you think about it.

When he finishes his cereal, Travis still has no solid idea of what he is going to do beyond that. Obviously, going to the grocery store is not an option. Travis puts his breakfast dishes in the sink and goes back to his bedroom to get his cigarettes out of his jeans from the day before. Absynthe follows him a bit, grappling with Travis's socks, but loses interest halfway through the room and trots off to attack and unsuspecting houseplant.

Travis steps out onto the stoop in front of the apartment and lights his cigarette, listening to the full volume of the pattering rain. By squatting against the wall of the building Travis can avoid the water, the walkway to the second story apartments above protecting him. In patches, the sun shines through the clouds and has already warmed the asphalt enough to create a steam that rises even as the rain still falls in sporadic waves. Travis watches the smoke from his cigarette mingle with the steam. He breathes in deep

the wet air and burning tabacco. Smoking in the rain gives tabacco a different taste, one less dry, and so more flavorful. All summer long it had seemed that the tabacco had burned because of the atmospheric heat, fire added to fire. The rain, though, makes the cigarette burn in opposition to everything. Travis feels it more appropriate to smoke in the rain, despite the obvious contradiction. The act feels more possessive, more solitary, and he imagines himself a cowboy on the range, smoking a cigarette, huddled beneath a tree.

Sitting only a few yards away, Mary Jane seems forlorn. It is easy enough to put on his raingear and take Mary Jane wherever he liked. He had done it hundreds of times in the last two years, and it bothered him hardly at all unless it was cold. Something in his heart told him he was going no where for a while though, that he'd have to wait out the rain. Today was to be declared a day of rest at least the day part. Travis knew all too well what would happen to his state of contentment when the night came on. Mary Jane sighs in acknowledgement, content to wait, her smooth gas tank sliding water back onto her black leather seat where the water beads.

After a moment, a roach crawls out from some crevice in the apartment building wall. It scurries toward the rain at first, but then detects the moisture and scurries back toward its hole, tracing a zigzag across the sidewalk. Travis casually tries to ash his cigarette on top of the bug. Leaning over, his hand hovers menacingly near the roach, and the roach twitches and shifts until Travis gently taps his cigarette. He misses, but the roach sits still on the concrete, possibly detecting the warm wad of carbon, feelers askew and searching carefully.

"Socrates!" Travis declares. "So good of you to join me."

The roach quivers, but does not move, and Travis wonders briefly what behavioral mechanism inside the insect's tiny head is rotating through option or sifting through processes, perhaps attempting to decide if it should consume the cigarette ash.

"No, no," Travis chastises the bug. "You shouldn't eat that, Socrates. It's bad for you." Though he has no idea if ash is truly bad for a roach or not. *What the hell do they eat anyway?* Cocking his head, Travis looks at the roach technically, in this case, a palmetto bug more appreciatively. It's sleek shell has no cracks and its legs, like spiked thin sawblades, look like a good defense and mode of transportation in one. All in all, though not one to wax poetic about bugs of any kind especially houseflies, Travis still generally feels that roaches are the victims of a scathing and deraugatory public relations campaign. Somehow the vast majority of American households had taken to despising these creatures, certainly no more dangerous than a ladybug or a japanese beetle brethren of a more appreciated variety. Certainly, Travis thinks, roaches are no more disgusting than houseflies, and he feels a wave of nautious madness rise inexplicably through him and laughs at what Nick's response would have been.

Granted, roaches live in filth, but Travis shrugs, giving his front door a cursory glance. His eyes linger on the rotting doorframe and move over the roofs of the apartments, shingles in terrible need of repair, and rusting iron staircases, peeling paint. *We live in filth.*

Travis looks back to the roach to find that it had moved to the other side of the cigarette ash. He raises his eyebrows. "Feel like hanging around?" The roach doesn't respond, but does not run away either. "You don't really look like a Socrates, do you? You look like a roach with a deeper curiosity. Kant maybe?" Travis laughs along with the rain. "Mein Kant," he repeats in a generic European accent. "I 'ave read your books on judgement and zuch. Very thinksful."

The roach moves a little in Travis's direction, and Travis tries to ash on the bug again, this time leaving an asteroid of bruned tobacco on the roach's exoskeleton. It hurries away as the ash rolls off it, and then turns up under the wall, but only halfway. "Just 'cause I like you don't mean ya' need to go gettin' all mushy on me, for God's sake." Travis stares at the porch absent mindedly for a few minutes.

The sound of a door opening cuts through the low patter of rain and catches Travis's attention. As the door squeaks in its arc, Travis looks loathsomely in the direction of the disturbance of his reverie. Without looking, he knows it is the Flod and contemplates hopping up and going inside before she sees him. But that seems silly, and entirely too much to do so quickly. Travis smiles as she approaches. Part of him is in the mood to be baffled this morning.

At first it appears that she might walk past him. She shuffle steps her bulk at the edge of the stoop though. Travis watches his cigarette and the Flod's shoes out of the corner of his eye. From the motion of the sneakers, it is evident that she is thinking. Travis waits with bemused anticipation.

"Well now, this ain't right," she says.

Travis smiles at the Flod's horribly colored jogging pants a kind of neon fuchsia. There are several unidentifiable stains dotting them in various places from ankle to knee. "What's that?" Travis asks her.

"I don' wanna' go out in the rain."

"Yep," Travis agrees.

There is another long pause and shuffle of feet as Travis throws his cigarette out into the rain. "Ain't right," she says.

"You can always take the day off," Travis offers. *She has two weeks of vacation saved up*, he thinks.

"I got two weeks of vacation saved up," the Flod says, scratching her elbow, but not looking at Travis.

Travis raises his eyebrows.

"I ain't missed a day since January." She thrusts her pointer finger upraised out into the air. "not one," she says as though the argument might deter the weather.

"Well, there you go then. You can stay home," Travis offers helpfully.

The Flod only looks perplexed in response. She looks down at Travis almost beligerently. "What would they do with all them old people?"

Travis shrugs.

"They'd shit themselves is what! That's why they got ta' have me!" This is

remarkably funny, and the Flod cackles loudly. She stands another minute longer, and Travis holds his tongue, not really tempted to take the conversation to higher levels. "I better go," the Flod says. "Don't wanna' be late."

"Nope. Don't get too wet," Travis offers.

"I'll pro'ly get wet."

"Right."

With a sort of forward motion that resembles the kinetic energy of cold molasses, the Flod makes her way to the car. She pauses as she gets in and looks at Travis over the roof and then at this motorcycle and back to him. "I guess *you* ain't goin' nowhere!" she says and makes a face as though she were about to laugh, but freezes in a grimace, her missing tooth bared.

"Not unless I want to get wet," Travis calls back.

"Huh," she says, almost seeming disappointed and gets in her car. It sags quietly in the rain, then starts off with the squeal of a loose belt somewhere in the engine.

Travis rubs his short hair and says, "I gotta' do somethin' about my neighbor karma."

He shakes his head and turns to say something to the roach, Kant, but it had fled the scene. Instinctively, Travis checks behind him and under him to insure that it is nowhere near him. He does not see it and lights another cigarette. The rain is wetting his feet though, picking up strength again, and Travis carries his cigarette inside, not thinking about it.

If he is going to stay at home, as the Flod had indicated he must, he would half to find something to do. Television is not an option, which is too bad. It is a good day for B grade films. Travis remembers all the rainy Saturdays that he and Nick had spent watching atrocities of film that had men who can talk to animals and women who are too dumb to wear sensible clothes in dangerous situations. More often than not, their heckling was no more talented than the scriptwriting, but it was worth it for having something to laugh at while they rode out their hangovers. Thinking about it, Travis realizes that without anyone to laugh along with him, heckling the television wouldn't be any fun anyway.

Then he suddenly realizes the oddness of what he is doing standing in the living room with his cigarette. With only a few weeks to go on the extended lease though, Travis considers the matter closed. He gets a plastic cup with water in it from the kitchen to ash in. Watching the smoke in the light of the living room is strange. Undisturbed by a wind of any kind, the smoke weaves itself into curled bands and strings, looping in on itself hypnotically. Smoking outside, beyond the practical reasons, was always important to the rhythm of the apartment as well. Often, Nick would be in his bedroom throwing charcoal at the canvas with the motion oiled by the music floating from Travis's guitar, floating through the open closets connecting the rooms. Now and then, Nick would stumble through the door, his face smeared with charcoal, his eyes wild, and declare, "Smoke!"

Travis never argued. He would set his guitar down, stand up and walk to the other

side of the apartment to get Jon, busy recording something or playing his guitar or practicing his bass. All three would walk out onto the stoop and take their places of honor, pausing to discuss the trivial and crude. In Travis's mind, the sky had always been clear and it was always night. He can remember no other occasion perhaps only because he never paid attention to anything other than the energy between the three of them.

On occasion, when the cigarettes were squashed, the energy would be high, and it was known to the three of them, at the peaks of their creative powers, that the time had come. Lead by Nick, they would walk into this room and stand patiently as he applied warpaint to their faces with pastels. They would scream and holler in unison and dance around to music blaring from the stereo like rabid apes. And then, without further ceremony, they would return to the task of battling their respective muses, invigorated by the collective spirit of the endeavour. Several times an hour, one of them would call a yawp from room to room until all three joined in the chorus like wolves to the hunt.

These were the best times when Travis was truly alive in the moment, death and sleep and loneliness pushed to the edge of his consciousness. Melody after melody would present itself in grand randomness as Travis hammered the six strings of his guitar through them like the most professional of assassins, impassioned and clearheaded. During these sparse moments in time, short breaks in the fat, happy parade into the abyss, Travis felt the one thing he desired most: healed. Whole. Unified. Undamaged. His heart was not porous, his mind free of debris, his bones like new iron, his lungs expanding in full pink swells. He was free, his body afloat and free of damage.

. *Much of Muchness*

*Something new, something new*, Travis thinks, speeding away from the numbing comfort of his living room again. Driving on up Baxter Street, towards town, Travis runs down the list of all the bars in Athens that he can think of. A new place to haunt is not exactly what he is looking for. As far as that is concerned, there are no new places. In his recollection, Travis had spent one night in every bar that Athens offered. For that matter, Travis had been in bars that are not even there anymore. Like laying a logic puzzle out in columns and rows, Travis lists the qualities he is in the mood for: low light, noise soft enough to think in, a lack of faces he would know, and small. Several bars fit that description. But he is stuck on the need for something new. If he can find a band or something, that might do it. Somebody, somewhere, is playing on a Thursday night in a bar that fit the necessary prerequisites had to be.

All this adventure requires is a bit of research on his part. Enthused by the challenge, Travis pulls back on the throttle and switches lanes on Broad street to pass a little four door sedan in front of him. As the sound of his engine bounces off the side of the car, Travis sits up and looks to where the city can be seen in the distance. He walks himself through the steps he will take as soon as he reaches his vantage point as he downshifts Mary Jane to come to stop at the intersection of Baxter and Lumpkin. *Step one, head downtown.* Travis makes a mental check by the first item. *No problem. Step two, go to Blue Sky and check the bulletin board. Step three, if there is nothing suitable at Blue Sky, scour all the posters and handbills in College Square.* They'd be there on newspaper machines, lightposts, telephone booths. The first block of College Avenue, between Broad Street and Clayton, had, at some point, been declared a free for all for advertising. Poorly copied / by inch pieces of paper sung of poetry readings, film showings, holistic medicine classes, and band outings.

Sure enough, as soon as Travis parks Mary Jane on Broad, he spots two playbills on the electric transformer on the sidewalk. Unfortunately, both of the shows had passed already. Travis takes the liberty of taking the posters down and crumples them up in his hand as he crosses the four lanes of Broad to College Square. On the right side, Blue Sky sits, its rustic awning leaning over the sidewalk. It is a coffeehouse, but as far as Travis is concerned it is little more than a place to find Ian. At almost all times, when Travis can't find Ian by the light of his internal combustion fires, it can be assumed that Ian is hard at work on something in the basement at Blue Sky.

Travis can see in his mind's eye, entering the shop, turning left and walking down the the loud iron rimmed wooden stairs, turning right and leaning down on the landing to peer out at all the tables spread out across the concrete basement floor. On the left side of

the fountain in the center of the room, Ian would be at “his” table though only Travis referred to it as that scribbling away or looking at slides, or sifting through stacks of photographs.

This evening though, Travis’ real eyes peered down the length of the ground floor of the cafe, watching as the door opens, and turns to the immediate right to pour over the sheets of papers stapled to a three by four foot corkboard. One of the first one’s he spots, genuinely subconsciously, is unfortunately a show he can not attend. It reads:

“See Travis drink.  
See Travis play.  
Travis likes to drink and play.  
Friday August 11th,  
The Washington Street Tavern.”

Ian and Travis had written it up on Ian’s computer, and Nick had suggested a favorite painting of a guitarist by Picasso to decorate it. Travis smiles at the bill. The face of the guitarist is long and distorted and seems possessed by the instrument he holds upright in thin bony hands, his eyes closed. Though the guitar player in the painting is older, Travis fancies he sees pieces of himself in the cubist pieces of the fictional musician’s face. Travis can see his own face in pieces.

Looking over the other bills and posters, Travis recognizes a few, but doesn’t recognize most of them. A lot of shows had already passed. Apparently, for whatever reason, last weekend is the weekend to play, though Travis can think of no reason for the surge. That in itself makes sense. Music comes and goes in waves during the summer, as if by sheer coincidence. But after looking over the bulletin board for several minutes, Travis can find nothing that interests him. Granted, he is doing nothing but judging books by their covers what else is there to go on when looking for the New? Ah well, on to Step 2: hit the street.

The lightposts prove to be more helpful. More recent shows seem to show up there, including two more copies of Travis’s own poster. One other poster shows out, and almost intuitively, Travis decides to see this band. Not because of the name, Harrowcall. Just because they are playing in the Shoebox, a literal hole in the concrete over on Washington Street. There is a picture of the band, and they look unintimidatingly intellectual. They all have short hair except for one, and two of the five wear simple round nondescript glasses. They are standing in a line with their hands in their pockets. One of them holds a guitar by its neck out in front of him. Another holds a bongo up under one arm. Travis can see this is what he wants. Three bucks will let him sit at the end of a dark bar, in a place he had not often sat before, and listen to a band he’d not heard before.

The show starts at ten, though, and judging from the sun just setting in the sky, Travis figures he has an hour or two until he needs to head down to the Shoebox. What to do, what to do? The possibilities are horribly endless. He can get a cup of coffee and

watch people. He can get a drink and watch people. Or, if he wants to, he can sit on the sidewalk outside in the summer evening and watch people. Travis raises his eyebrows in sarcastic amazement as he finds himself walking aimlessly down Clayton Street. Not two steps later he berates himself for being cynical about his lifestyle. He watches a well dressed couple walk out of a clothing store that is closing up for the evening. They are laughing together about something, bags in their arms. *Jesus*, Travis thinks, *you could be walking around worrying about getting to bed early for your job, relishing these moments of freedom in which you gets to go out and buy clothing for work.* Travis laughs lightly to himself as he reaches the corner of Lumpkin and Clayton in front of the bank. He turns around to walk back up Clayton, and berates himself again for overgeneralizing about people and being generally cynical. He figures he can appreciate what he has without degrading what others have. In fact, he knows he can. He is just in a bad mood. Nobody else wants boots and a motorcycle, and freedom enough to write on walls and play music. It is just him him and a few others. And *nobody* wants to be a cowboy as badly as he does.

A conversation he had once with Daphne comes back to him as he walks into Mean Mike's instinctively. The two of them had sat at the table by the window and watched the world going by. It was pre Meryl, pre Mary Jane.

Travis greets Phil, who greets Travis back. He orders a beer and walks slowly back through the bar to the table where the ghosts of himself and Dizzy sit talking.

"What do you want, Travis?"

Travis had been surprised by the question. In those days, Travis and Dizzy had been content with wandering from coffeehouse to bar discussing the inane, the political, the metaphysical even. The question was proof that things were changing. The future, as distant as it still was, life beyond the boundaries of Mean Mike's and Jittery Joe's, was coming into focus.

"What do I want?" Travis had repeated. In a moment of chronological synchronicity, Travis looks out the window of the present toward the street as he had then, and feels in his heart still the awful relevance of the question. *What do you want?* To not want is to want to die. Travis knows that in his bones. But want what specifically? To want to be happy seems trite. And Travis remembers his answer it held no more satisfaction now as it did then. "I want what I've got." Of course, then, there had been a postscript, "and a motorcycle." Now he can see Mary Jane, waiting patiently for his return right over on Broad Street. Imagine that. He had what he wanted.

"What do *you* want?" he asked Dizzy in reply, less to discover, and more to find out if he had made an error in his answer.

She wrapped her strawberry blonde hair around her finger and gazed out the window too. "I don't think I know just yet." Then she turned to him and scrunched her face, dissatisfied with her answer. "I wanna' be famous," she said glamorously, spreading her arms out widely, like a Scarlet, "I want them to *love* me."

Travis cooed, "They do love you, dahling."

"I know," she said with a strange mix of immodesty and self consciousness,



smugness and doubt. But it was all that much more confusing in the joke.

The pair had moved away from the conversation like gazelle shifting lightly away from an unseen predator. A predator, Travis thinks, sipping his beer in August, that is still out there somewhere. Somewhere in the screaming and kicking of the painted horses there is the hint of fear that something terrible is coming for them. It is not just that they can not move freely that frightens them so much. It is that they can not run away. Travis knows, because he feels it too through them. Travis takes a long sip from his beer. His own lament from an old song he had written comes back to him "Life's a carousel / we're all chained to the movement." The damage is the negative people, inexplicable tides of doubt and self mutilation, the horrible visages of Nick's paintings, the smoke leaving his lungs even at that moment as he sits and thinks. *Right then.*

Then? Now? How fast does the whole thing slip by before he can't tell anymore what is the present, the past, a god damned dream or a fear and it's over? There is an incomprehensible Flod like creature lurking between the meanings of all of Travis Fleeting's actions; a consumption, a swallowing vacuum of nothing swirling in and around him.

"Fuck this," Travis says quietly under his breath. "Fuck this." Stoically examining his now empty beer, Travis walks to the bar again. Phil is waiting for him at the corner this time, and the look on his round face is uniquely comforting to Travis.

"How 'bout a gin and tonic on the house," Phil offers.

Travis beams, his eyebrows shooting up. "Hell yeah."

"I hate it when you drink beer."

Left to stand in confusion by the statement, Travis ponders its meaning until Phil comes back with a gin and tonic a double. "What the hell do you mean you don't like it when I drink beer?"

Phil shrugs. "I don't know. I've always liked your attachment to gin and tonics. It's always been nice to know that the some day famous Travis Fleeting drinks gin and tonics in my bar."

Travis is doubly confused now. He isn't sure a lot of the time if Phil even remembers him, let alone his last name. For that matter, Phil had never said or heard his last name. "How do you know my last name?" Travis asks.

"Don't be stupid," Phil replies.

"No. Seriously."

"You think all I do is work here? I've seen you play at DT's."

"No shit?"

"Yeah."

"Well, you'll have to excuse me, man. I thought all you ever did was work here."

Phil smiles. "How're you doin'?"

"You wanna' know the truth?"

"Course."

"I feel great. Really great." Travis pauses. "But I don't feel like I'm supposed to."

"Well, I guess you'll have to get over that."

"Yeah?"

"Unless you know what's buggin' you."

Sipping his gin and tonic, Travis gives the thought an honest effort. What is bugging him? What the hell is the irritation living inside him besides a feeling that it is August as irrelevant but reasonable as any other explanation. There is a rise of a new and different irritation, a manufactured one, a rebellious one. Travis can feel it in his hands. It rises up through his spine as he sits up straight in defiance. "Fuck it. Fuck it, man. Nothin's bugging me."

"You sure?" asks Phil in disbelief.

"It's just that nobody wants to be happy, and I am. I'm happy, and it pisses me off."

"A good gin and tonic will fix that."

"Here's to that," Travis raises his glass and Phil receives the toast with a meaty fist.

"Just be careful," Phil says cautiously.

"Careful?"

"You've got a helluva' talent. Don't waste it."

*And that is it*, Travis thinks, watching feeling retreat down the length of the bar. Waste what? The fame? The money? The future? Or is it the music? How can he waste that unless he just stopped playing? And how would that ever happen? It was as unthinkable as amputating one of his own limbs. I want what I've got. *Don't worry*, Travis thinks, his mental reply to Phil. *Don't worry*. Travis goes back to his table by the window.

Some parallel comes to him as he sits. He'd heard the word "waste" with the same meaning in a different form a speech that Meryl had made once about "forward progression." They had been dating for two years then, and what? They had fun. But there is no forward progression, she had lamented. Marriage? Travis had no other ideas in the archives of his brain that could explain Meryl's lament. She had claimed that marriage was not it. Marriage was merely superficial she said. But what then? Forward progression is what she had spoken of when Travis knew that what he was doing was running in place, against the spin, to keep it all from moving. Keep it the same, keep it the same. Don't change a thing, right? What do you want? What I've got. In the end, that had not satisfied her, and Travis had drawn the conclusion that he then, could not satisfy her. *That's forward progression for you*, Travis thinks bitterly. He cops Nick's "tough face." *You want forward progression, eh? I got forward progression right here in my pants.*

*Something new, something new.* Travis returns to the very thought that had sent him out into a damp evening. There was a need within him to find something tonight. He sips and tastes a drink he had been drinking for years now, it seems. But he feels no need to change the pattern. If someone robbed him of the opportunity to have his favorite drink, would that not seem unfair to him? The taste of it is sweet only because he is so used to it. Drink after drink, he'd learned to appreciate the subtleties that even such a simple drink can contain. After years of playing his guitar, he'd learned to create sounds that before, he could not have even heard, let alone make. This is what he desires when all else had to be

be forsaken: the comfort of simplicity and his own ability to find elegance in that, in the minutia, in the absolute infinity found between every inch, every second. *Let them find the next big thing*, Travis thinks. Let them search for what I have found. He sits quietly and finishes his gin and tonic watching the world outside pass down Clayton's length.

And then, he orders another.

. A Door Leading Right Into It

Men, at a young age, typically get very excited at the prospect of going out, getting drunk and getting laid. Who wouldn't? It is an exciting prospect. Reality, on the other hand, typically gets very excited at the idea of denying young men these prospects. More often than not, a young man awakens in his bed to discover that the only thing he has acquired after a night of carousing is a nasty headache and a lack of self esteem. Getting drunk and getting laid are a pair of activities that only the most cunning and controlled individuals, when pressed, can accomplish at the same time. These occasions are both rare and amazing. If you get most men in a room alone after managing such a feat, they would modestly tell you that they had no idea how it happened. And strangely enough, most young women would explain to you that it happened because they decided it would. So much for "getting lucky."

Travis leaves D with no intention of getting drunk or getting laid. He is going to play a show at the Washington Street Tavern where he expects to be mostly ignored, ask the bartender for a bottle of gin to take home with him, and watch a movie while quietly falling asleep in a blue chair. And he doesn't think there is much that would deter him from this plan. For days now, he had waited and waited for the advent of the night that would give him a stool to sit on, and a PA system that would amplify the notes of his guitar, and red lights.

If lights can speak, low and red, they might scream if they had no one to see silhouettes that ride along their beams, sensuous and colored. If red could talk, it would speak of endless dark nights whose gloom it has lit, not bright but sleek. As motions that would come beneath a red sun might seem slower. As though a fog in its wake might seem more like love. If red could move then motion would seem to burn red so slow and willing to cover only those figures that speak loudly. In the silence of red sit the ones who think. In the red are the souls of the quiet ones; their noise wrapped by meaning without words; their noise within the music that suffers so pleasantly.

When Travis plays, it can only ever be in the dark, red lights, like jealous planets all around. Red lights from the ceiling and red lights from the cigarettes that burn patiently through the music. Patience that is not the virtue of making time speed patience that enjoys the wait. As though he'd known all along that he was better than they expected, Travis's left hand dances across the frets as his right hand lances the six strings sitting just beneath his shoulder, and his voice calls out through the speakers in the bar, loud and full of dreams of painted horses.

All in all, to Travis, as always, it comes back to darkness. The darkness of the stage when his sets is done. The darkness of the bar and of the changed moods of the patrons

that seem aware of his happiness at having played. And then of course, there is the darkness outside that Travis knows will always be waiting. This is how the nights go when Travis plays. All the pieces fall into place time and time again. After every show he seems to lose the easy sentiment that is the music in him. The adrenaline gone, he feels like a bird beneath a lovely clouded sky ready to fly south, but not sure why.

Imagine his surprise when a pair of alluring legs come to stand before his squatting figure as he is packing up his guitar after the show. Instinct would normally dictate that he look up to see who this person is, but his instincts are feeling as apathetic as the rest of him, and he finishes packing before standing up to meet the gaze of the owner of the legs. As he stands, his eyesight rises up past the legs, past a black, short skirt, a thin waist, a periwinkle blue t shirt, past a mid sized chest and a beautifully sculpted neck to a face he actually recognizes. He smiles and says simply, "Melissa."

She is happy to have been remembered and smiles. "Well, I finally got to see you and know who you are at the same time."

"Ta da," Travis says plainly.

She cocks her head, can see his spirits are down and she had expected as much from listening to the show. "I thought I would congratulate you. I really liked your... music."

Travis feels a tinge of guilt for being unnecessarily glum. After several days of being alone though, merely seeing an acquaintance isn't going to fill the void forming in the center of him. There is something more to this "acquaintance" he knows, but he does not except it right away, standing before her, toying with his guitar pick. He tosses it in the air playfully and catches it. "I'm sorry," he apologizes. "My mood probably brought the show down."

"Well, it wasn't exactly Friday night dance music but it was beautiful." She stresses beautiful in a way that shows she knows it is an overused word, but that she still means it.

Travis manages to nod awkwardly and look at his boots.

"Listen, what are you doing now?"

"Well, strangely enough, I don't drink at the bars I play at, and I don't play at the bars I drink at. So, I'm not staying here. I can tell you that much."

"I just thought I'd see if we were heading the same direction..." Something in the statement sounds like direction takes on a number of possibilities.

Travis decides to play along. "Where are *you* heading?"

"... actually." She says it to cut him off from innuendo.

Travis realizes suddenly that he is too tired to play any games himself. She obviously wants no part of it. What he wants is blatant honesty, cruel even. He wants to say something that he means, that is not trivial or buried in half truths. He wants that or no human contact at all. And that option, the one he had been dealing with for days isn't appealing at all anymore. Bending down, he picks up his guitar case and takes his defenses off. "I'm going home. I'm tired and lonely. I would very much enjoy your company if you

came with me, but only if you know ahead of time that I'm not making a pass at you."

What Travis can not know, what he can only suspect by the light of her smile, is that Melissa feels precisely the same way. "I would really enjoy your company, too. And I'd be glad to go to your place if you really wanted but I'd rather go to ."

Travis smiles sheepishly and looks at his boots. The hole in his left foot humiliates him, and he loves it. He smiles down at it. He had not meant to be *so* blunt not to the point of looking pathetic it'd just come out. "Sorry," he apologizes again and laughs at himself, thinking about going to one of his favorite bars, not by himself, but with company. " would be great."

The pair begin making their way to the stairs. Travis stops by the bar to speak to Alex, the owner. "I'll be by in the morning."

"Yup," Alex replies.

"You mind if I take a bottle of Sapphire with me take it out of my pay."

Reaching under the bar, Alex removes a bottle of Bombay Sapphire gin. setting it carefully on the counter, in front of Travis, he keeps his hand on the neck and says sarcastically. "You didn't make *that* much."

"So sue me," Travis replies as he takes the bottle in hand.

Alex smiles, "See ya' in the morning."

Travis waves and follows Melissa up the stairs, consciously keeping his head down. The last thing he wanted to do is to look at her ass and get his hormones involved in his already bizarre thought processes. They get to the top of the stairs, Melissa looking cautiously to see if he is still behind her, and then they walk through the rest of the bar, out into the street where it is still warm and wet.

Taking out his cigarettes, Travis offers Melissa one. She takes it. He lights hers and then his own, and they walk to the corner of Thomas and Washington Street in silence. When they turn the corner, Melissa says, "I hope you don't think that if I..." she pauses to word the sentence.

Travis finishes her thought for her thought. "No, I don't. I really would just like someone to talk to for a little while no strings." They takes a few more steps before Travis continues. "Then we can have sex."

Melissa laughs out loud, and then coughs because she is in the middle of a thoughtful pull on her cigarette. Travis stops and turns while she tries to catch her breath. He can't help but smile, and she slaps him on the shoulder as she finishes out her last coughing fit. They start walking again.

"Well, you are certainly serious about being *honest*."

"No," Travis replies slowly, carefully, "That wasn't honest. That was funny. The first part was honest."

"I think it's funny because it is honest."

Silently, Travis curses his hormones the very part of him that had makes the joke. He shrugs. "You are entitled to your opinion."

"Am I?" she asks incredulously.

"No. I just said that to be polite. You're actually only entitled to my opinions."

"Well, can I try another?"

"Sure."

"You're lonely and it's kind of sad."

Travis just takes a couple of steps. He consciously lets his silence be his answer.

"Why?"

"Oh, my friends all up and left a while ago." Travis shakes his head. "I'm not very good at being by myself."

"Well. None of us are."

Travis thinks about it isn't sure if she knows what he really means that being by himself had nothing to do with being physically alone. He doesn't think she does, and he doesn't pursue it. At the same time, it is all he can think about the last several days in particular the void inside him, the horrible vision of Sandy Bennett's tired face, and that somehow he could end up looking like her. He shoves the thought from his mind. The worst thing about pity is that you never ask for it, it is given to you freely. His footsteps feel heavy, his guitar feels heavy, the night air feels heavy. He wants to latch on to Melissa already, he knows; beg her to just hold him. He is disgusted by the desire though, because he can see sadness in her eyes, too. He has to harshly remind himself that he does not know who she is, even though he is sure he might.

In his mind, he can feel Sandy's bird like grip on his bicep. He can hear her begging him not to leave her side. He remembers the genuine pity he had felt for her, and despite the void inside him, he refuses to wish the same pity on himself. He believes he is stronger than that.

"That last song you played..." Melissa begins. Travis comes out of his thoughts and looks at Melissa, his eyebrows poised at attention. "When did you write that?"

Smiling Travis replies, "Recently." He knew she knew.

"I was just wondering. I guess I knew that. It was very..."

"Sad?"

"No." She cocks her head, looking for an emotion to describe what she is thinking, looking to his face for the emotion. It seems as though there isn't one. "Empty."

Travis can't smile. His face is blank, a complete mask. He didn't think anyone would have heard that. He had disguised the words so carefully. But he has to smile when he remembers that he is a musician. Of course she heard. "Bad song to end a show on, huh?"

"No. I wouldn't say that at all." She wants to tell him that it is precisely what she is feeling, though for a very different reason. That for a month, she had known he felt what she felt not because he had lightened her spirits, but because of the way he had looked at his friend John. She knew at that moment that she was not alone with her emptiness. She had looked, but had found nothing else to turn to for relieving a disappointment she'd come to feel in herself.

They cross Clayton Street, then Thomas, and walk a block up Broad Street. Three

doors up the street they walk in quiet synchronous motion and step up the stairs to the bar. The coolness of the stone arch in front of the door, illuminated by a thin blue light sheltering the pair as they approach. Travis can smell frying food from one of the restaurants down the street as he opens the door for Melissa. "The bartender here Harris and I have a little game. He gives me my drinks for free, and I tip him the amount of the drink."

"Sounds convenient."

"Not really. It would be preferable if one of us were selfish. It's the only way either of us will ever get ahead. If you put two generous people together, nobody gets anywhere."

"I don't think that's true."

Travis smiles. "I don't either it's just something I like to say for effect."

They walk inside and are pleasantly surprised to find that the bar reflects their moods. There are only a few people dispersed throughout, jazz playing over the sound system, and everything seems to be a muted green or auburn. The bar itself seems to be quietly nodding off to sleep.

Harris approaches Travis and Melissa from the far end of the bar. He greets Travis with a quiet nod.

"How about two Sapphire and tonics, Harris?"

Harris nods and goes to get the drinks.

"You don't have to get mine," Melissa offers.

"You paid the cover for the show. I'll get the money back tomorrow anyway." He shrugs apathetically, but his eyes watch her mischievously.

"Well," she replies, jokingly offended. "If you put it like that, you can buy all the drinks tonight."

Travis smiles in reply.

"So what have you been up to if you have all this time on your hands?"

Laughing, Travis replies, "Twiddling my thumbs until I played this show tonight. It's been kind of dull around here lately."

"Yeah. Not too many people left around. Don't you have a job though?"

"Nope."

"Must be nice."

"Well, I shouldn't say I have *no* job. I do stuff to get money. It just never seems much like work."

"That sounds clandestine."

Harris sets the drinks in front of them. "Just run a tab for me, will ya', Harris?"

Nodding again quietly, Harris walks back to the cash register, makes a note, and then walks back to the far end of the bar to his book.

Travis gestures to a table behind Melissa, a round table that sits in a recessed alcove on one side of the bar. Setting his guitar on the floor, Travis steps up and slides into the semicircular alcove. He thinks to himself that there are few other places in the world



where he feels truly comfortable – capable of and able to take his guns off. This table is one of those places. He had sat there innumerable times, over the years and watched as friendly faces he knew poured through the door, waved to him, and sometimes sat with him to discuss cable cars, Spanish poetry, the hatred of houseflies, or the importance of the letter K. He laughs as he sits next to Melissa. Turning to her he smiles mockingly, “Clandestine?”

“You ‘do stuff? That’s not supposed to sound clandestine?”

“Yeah. Well, I play shows. There’s not a lot of money in that during the summer, though.”

“So what else do you do?”

Travis smiles and light a cigarette as coyly as he can. “Can’t tell ya’.”

“Yeah, I thought so,” Melissa says disapprovingly.

“Strictly top secret.”

“So what? Am I going to get shot hanging around with you?”

“No, no – nothin’ dangerous. Just stupid stuff.”

“I’m safe then?”

“You’re safe with me.” More innuendos, Travis thinks. He slides into them too easily as if for some reason he didn’t want her to know who he was. Sitting up straight he promised himself to remain present – honest.

Melissa spins her straw in her drink for a minute, thinking about something. Travis lets her think, smoking his cigarette. “It’s kind of funny,” she starts, and then pauses again. She is obviously debating whether to say what she is thinking. “I’ve been going to the Engine Room a lot.”

Travis nods seriously. “That *is* strange.”

“No.” She pats his arm, thankful for his playfulness. “I’ve been looking for you.”

“Me?” He is honestly surprised.

“Yeah,” she says as though he should know it. She looks at him until he looks back and then holds his stare for a moment.

“Did I do something wrong?” he asks.

“No,” she replies, as another thing he should already know. “We never finished what we started.”

“Oh yeah,” Travis replies, looking out into the room at a large mirror on the wall opposite the table. He can see Melissa’s reflection next to his. It is a strange sight. He doesn’t feel like he is sitting next to her, doesn’t feel like he is actually a player in reality’s show. “That interesting conversation,” he says to the mirror.

She looks at the mirror, into his reflection’s eyes, “Exactly.”

Smiling he turns back to the real Melissa and says, “I’m not sure I’m the same person I was when you met me. I don’t know if I’ll be interesting anymore or not.”

Leisurely, sipping from her glass, she swallows and replies, “Talk.”

“I don’t know. Something’s been eating at me.”

“Did something happen to you?”

"What? Bad?"

"Yeah."

Travis laughs lightly. "Nothing bad ever happens to me." Travis slumps a bit. He is tired from sleeping so much, but he feels a tiredness coming on. He looks at her again, shaking his head defiantly. "Nah. Nothing bad ever happens to me."

"Nothing?"

He raises his eyebrows as though he were watching a card disappear in a magic trick. "Nothing."

Crossing her arms like a skeptical journalist, Melissa inquires, "And how do you keep bad things from happening to you, Mr Fleeting?"

"Well, Miss...?"

"Keller."

Travis nods. Melissa Keller. "Well, Miss Keller, when something bad happens to me, I enjoy it. Voilà."

Melissa laughs. Travis is the equivalent of an amateur magician, declaring he can make something disappear by merely throwing it under the table with a loud crash. "That's it."

"That's it."

Musing in private thoughts, Melissa ventures another dangerous question dangerous in her tone of voice, laced with a genuine concern, "Then why are you so empty?"

Travis cannot hide his frown. He looks down at the table, tries to smile, but fails. When he looks up, Melissa does not recognize his face. The cheeks are hollow, the jaw line slack, the muscles that bare his large smiles are tired. He looks at her with a plea in his eyes. "I don't know."

Melissa touches his arm again. Shocking him with her touch, like the mirror, proof of the exstistence he persistantly tries to ignore his own. "Maybe you're so busy enjoying yourself, you haven't stopped to feel..." she looks for words again. What is it he bore? "...the damage."

Travis straightens in the booth. "No. I haven't got time in life to feel regret or sorrow. It's not my place let somebody else do it damn it." A warmth comes over him then, the warmth of the defiance, the kind that he feels when he is playing his guitar. His own words surprise him then, as the music so often does. "My place among the stars is reserved. I will cry for all eternity there, but not while I am still alive."

Surprised, Melissa removes her hand from Travis's arm. The plea in his eyes closes itself off, and is replaced with a kind of intensity that makes her believe that he is somehow possessed. Her look is one that contains fear and joy. "That's beautiful."

"We said we were being honest."

"That's beautiful," she says again, trapping him, keeping him from hiding in the menial again.

"You wanna' know something really crazy?"

"Yes."

"If I'm as happy as I say I am, then I'm the loneliest person in the world." Travis laughs. "That doesn't make me very happy."

"Is that what's bothering you then?"

Travis shrugs. It seems too easily explained. "I guess."

"You're not alone."

"Oh, I know," but he feels like he is lying. He is always lying for the sake of saving them their confidence. None of them are happy. He is alone in his joy. He struggles through the lie. "If you weren't here, I'd have never been able to say that to anyone."

"Well there ya' go. Feel better?"

Travis laughs in earnest. The laugh feels good. "Do you mind if I don't?" he says, still laughing, a kind of noxious state of tired clouding his brain. The show had done him in.

Melissa smiles flatly. She knows she doesn't entirely understand what he is feeling but says, "I'll guess you'll have to live with it then."

"People keep saying that." He takes a drink. "It's what I do every day." For a moment, Travis worries he is putting a damper on things. He doesn't know why Melissa had come looking for him or why she seems to sympathize but he feels he is disappointing her somehow by not feeling better. "You wanna' hear a joke?"

"No."

"There are these two race horses sitting in a bar." Melissa shifts her posture to appear inattentive, but Travis can see through the gesture and continues undaunted. "The one race horse, Mama' Good Gravy, turns to the other, Old Magic Hat, and says, 'You know, the strangest thing happened to me the other day. I was racing and was dead last coming around the last turn, when I suddenly gets this really sharp pain in my ass!'" Travis says it loudly, and a few of the bar's occupants looks in his direction more out of curiosity than anything. Melissa indicates that she would listen to the joke, but only if he quieted down. He leans in toward her. "So the other horse says, 'You know, that *is* strange 'cause the same thing happened to me. I was in a race, and not doin' so hot, when all of a sudden, right down the last stretch, *I* get a shooting pain in my ass. Felt like fire or somethin' and I just bolted ahead of the pack on the outside and won the race.'" Raising his eyebrows, Travis around the bar and back to Melissa in conspiracy, as if they are sharing a secret. "So this dog comes up to the two race horses. He says, 'Say, fella's, I didn't mean to be eavesdropping, but I couldn't help but hear ya' talkin'. Thing is, same thing happened to me. I was in a race, and I was chasing the little bunny, you know, and fallin' behind. But just like you're sayin' I get this sharp hot pain in my ass, ran like hell, and I couldn't believe it! I won the race! I even beat the little bunny!' Well, the dog nods and walks off, and Mama'a Good Gravy turns to Old Magic Hat and says, 'What the hell was that? A talkin' dog!'"

Melissa laughs.

"I love that joke," says Travis, "cause it just doesn't go where you're thinking it's going to."

"I was waiting for something about hot dogs." Melissa chuckles and nods a little

embarrassed by her admission for some reason. "That is pretty good." She takes a sip of her drink, and Travis settles down to the table and his own drink again. Looking around the bar for a moment, Melissa looks to the mirror on the other side of the room and catches just an instant of emptiness in Travis's expression as he looks down toward the table. "And you even managed to successfully change the subject."

Travis is in mostly in good spirits now, though tired from the show. He walks away from the void in her laughing. He can hear the jazz around him, hear the noise of other quiet conversations. "Let's change it again."

"Yeah?"

Yeah. Let's change it to you."

"No. We don't wanna' do that."

Picking up his cigarettes, Travis offers one to Melissa who takes it. "Yes we do," he says, lighting the cigarettes. "And none of that 'I work at... I was born in...' bullshit either. You said you came looking for me. Now tell me why."

"No. I really don't want to now. Later. Let's talk about something else."

"Renaissance Art? Quantum Physics? Epistemology, perhaps?"

"No," she drones. Her mind can not bare it.

"No more honesty then, I take it?"

Melissa sighs. "That is why I wanted to talk to you again."

Taking a moment to be more serious, Travis finishes his drink and looks to Melissa. He sees her on the bar stool at the Engine Room again. There in his memory, she struggles to speak, in a way he hadn't noticed at the time. It was the way she'd spoken to everyone that night the disappointment. "What happened to you when I met you at the Engine Room that night?"

"Oh that? That was nothing my Dad and I got into a fight."

Travis nods.

"He's still not speaking to me."

"He's not speaking to you?"

Melissa nods.

"Well, that's the quickest way to resolve a dispute."

"Yeah," Melissa agrees sarcastically. "Tell me about it."

"Does he do this as an act of kindness?"

"Not exactly."

Travis waits while Melissa gathers herself to spill what she is feeling. She looks cautiously at Travis trying to sum up whatever reactions he could have to what she is about to say. The only thing she had known when she first met him was that he was a stranger who might cheer her up. Now he had taken time to explain things about himself. He had sung things from his heart that she knew well. He had, for some reason, tried to be honest, and had pursued this secret of hers that she desperately wanted to tell someone. She makes up her mind that she will. Taking a drag off her cigarette, slowly, she says, "I got pregnant."

Hiding every reaction he can have, the whole gamut, Travis sits stoically, looks to Melissa and listens.

"I had been dating this guy for a year and a half, and I got pregnant."

Travis looks to his drink. "You're not pregnant now?" he asks quietly, though it is more of a statement judging from her demeanor.

"No."

The jazz plays on as Travis smokes his cigarette and scenes of Melissa and her father screaming at one another over the phone appear in his head. He sees vague images of her boyfriend, frightened and scared, probably too young in mind to take responsibility. He sees Melissa in a white, dirty room in a white gown, by herself, waiting. He thinks about how her relationship must've fallen apart, and how she feels more alone than he can biologically understand. He listens to a distorted electric guitar decrying all of this in a flat key signature. He gathers himself and takes a breath and focuses on her patiently waiting porcelain face. Leaning in and taking her hand he says simply, without emotion, "I'm sorry."

"I just... what you said about enjoying the sadness..."

"It doesn't mean that."

"No, no. That's the thing though. I had it for a moment a real joy before everything the consequences, the time, my father collapsed on it." She looks at him helplessly, seeing her own sadness in his face as he listens. Her mouth breaks and the corners of her lips fall to her chin as tears well up in her eyes. "Now all I have is the rest of my life," she chokes.

Travis holds on to her hand tightly. If he can absorb every ounce of pain, her sorrow, her shame, he will. He can't. He holds her hand.

Melissa tries hard, and Travis watches her, stoically, bravely, trying to hold back tears. "I... uh..." She wipes her eyes for a moment and blinks. She does not want to cry again. She wants to say that she is relieved, but the moment she admits it, she knows what will happen. She stares at Travis in complete indecision. She squeezes his hand harder, and the corners of her mouth frown reflexively down again. She rolls her eyes and a tear makes a path down her cheek like a trickle on a dam. "I... just..."

"Don't," Travis urges. "Don't" He doesn't know what she doesn't want to admit or say, but he doesn't want her to. Melissa looks at her drink, seeming ashamed. Travis sees it and speaks naturally, "C'mon. We don't have to be here."

"I just don't want to be alone right now." The sentence is filled with the kind of dismal reverse sort of faith that the sun is not going to rise again. She looks at Travis and he sees the question in her eyes needing an answer. He sees a trust he can never betray. He nods, pays off his tab, takes his guitar in one hand and she takes the gin the gin bottle in hers, before their free hands slide together.

As they move out into the warm dampness, Travis steps aside and pulls Melissa into the alcove between the stone front and the wooden paneling. He does it without urgency. He sets his guitar down on its wide end, and pulls Melissa into him, pressing her face against his shoulder, his hand against the back of her head. She resists only a little,

but after a moment, Travis can feel her small shudders and the warm saline dripping down his neck beneath his t shirt. A few more moments pass, and Melissa brings her head up, her sadness colored by the blue neon light above them. Travis wipes away a few tears with his thumbs, before they began walking. For one mile and a half, three thousand, four hundred and forty seven steps, neither of them say a word.

. I Only Wish it Was

Melissa and Travis sleep together that night, huddled in the darkness of Travis's bedroom, still mostly clothed. Latched together like two ivy vines, they breathe and stare into the dark. Laying on his back, Travis cradles Melissa's head on his shoulder and chest. After a while, he can hear her breathing lightly and rhythmically. He tries to breathe in unison with her, taking in breath and letting it out as she does, but he can not keep up. She is a fast breather. Not long after that though, he drifts off as well. They sleep and both sleep soundly through the night.

When he wakes up, Travis is covered with the comforter. He had slept in his jeans and his t shirt, and sees Melissa across from him in the bed, sleeping comfortably in one of his t shirts. Travis puts his head up on his hand and watches her sleeping. Her layered black hair is still smooth and round, and the look of contentment on her face is uplifting. As he moves to pull the covers up over her shoulder, one eye opens slightly and she smiles at him.

"Good morning."

"Nooo." She snuggles down into the covers and pulls them over her head. "Go away."

Travis puts his arm under the pillow and lays his head back down.

Peeking out from beneath the covers, Melissa giggles. "I woke up at about four this morning and was halfway tempted to leave, but I didn't know where the hell I was."

Travis makes a face. "You were gonna' ditch me?"

Melissa nods feecitiously, the comforter wrapped around her head like an old woman's shawl. Then she smiles more sweetly and says, "I'm not used to just going home with complete strangers."

"Oh, well that explains it. I'm totally used to that."

"Oh really?"

"Oh yeah. I'm a slut."

Melissa bats her hand out for a moment, long enough to make contact with Travis's shoulder, and then slides back underneath the covers.

"What? I says *I'm* a slut. How can you possibly take that offensively?"

"You were implying that I was one."

"I was not."

"I was kidding anyway." Melissa giggles again, and then brings her head up out from under the covers for a moment to listen more closely to a very strange sound emanating from the living room. Travis hears it too, and before Melissa can ask, he replies, "No, no. Hide, hide." He slides underneath the comforter, and without really thinking about it,

Melissa does the same.

“What are we hiding from?” she asks the darkness between their noses.

Travis can feel her breath, and replies in the general direction of the question, “The Screamer.” He can feel Absynthe make his way across the mattress, walking up Travis’s leg. After a moment, Absynthe crosses the bed and put his weight on Melissa’s thighs.

“Oh my god!” Melissa hollers and squiggles around in the bed, shifting toward the wall. She had thought Travis was kidding about some thing coming for them.

With all the sudden movement, Absynthe takes his cue to jump off the bed. He sits on the floor, near the head of the bed, screaming his lungs out.

“Relax,” says Travis. “I was just kidding around. It’s just my roommate’s cat.”

Melissa looks around the bed for the cat, and hears it yelling from the floor. She pulls herself over Travis’s side to look at it. “I thought it is a rat or something.” As soon as she looks at the kitten though, the cat screams back at her. “Aw...” Melissa replies, “I think we hurt it.”

“No, you don’t understand,” Travis says. “He does that *every* morning.”

Melissa looks perplexed as Absynthe screams again. She sits up in the bed and looks at Travis. “Are you serious.”

“For ten minutes, you watch. It’s a God damn ritual or something.”

By the time Absynthe screams a third time, Melissa catches on. “Oh my God. That’s awful.” She looks at the kitten as it claws its way back up to the top of the bed, sits down and lets out a disheartening, “Eeeeeeeeeeyyyyyyaaaaa aaahhhhhhhhh!”

“Aw...” Melissa’s sympathy’s are renewed. “It just wants attention.” Travis just rolls his eyes as she reaches out to pick the kitten up. It promptly falls on its back and claws vigorously at the approaching hand with all four paws. Melissa pulls her hand back quickly. “Good Lord.”

“Told ya’.”

Absynthe rolls on his side and stretches lazily, using all of its relaxed muscles to push forth yet another scream, followed by two more quiet ones directed at the opposite end of the bed. Travis sits up a little bows his legs out underneath the comforter, picks Absynthe up despite protest, and folds his legs and comforter around the kitten. Absynthe screams from inside, but the noise is pleasantly muffled.

“I only do this when I have guests or a hangover,” Travis reassures Melissa, who is already laughing. “What?” Travis asks.

“I’ve never heard anything like that.”

Travis rolls his eyes. “I’ve only been having to put up with it lately because Nick’s gone. He usually get’s up before I do.”

“What did you do to it?”

“Nothing! I swear! It just started doing it one morning, and now it always does.”

“Probably because you fed it, and now it thinks it has to do that to get fed.”

“No, because we don’t always feed it, and even when you give him food, he won’t



stop right away.”

“Really?”

“Really. As soon as he hears that someone’s awake, he starts, and then about ten minutes later, he stops.”

Melissa laughs again.

“It’s not funny,” Travis says desperately.

“It’s hysterical.”

“It’s punishment.”

“For what?”

“I don’t know. We’re all a buncha’ jerks. We deserve it one way or another.”

“You and your roommates?”

“Yeah. I figure.”

Melissa shrugs.

“Watch this,” Travis says. He puts his hands on either side of the clam shell trap that he’s made with the comforter, and waits for Absynthe to scream again. As soon as the cat does, Travis pushes it back and forth, making the scream vibrate like an engine.

“Stop. Stop it.”

“He doesn’t mind,” Travis replies.

“That’s terrible. Quit it.” The request sounds genuine the second time, and so Travis stops in mid shake.

“He really doesn’t mind,” he says, and opens his legs, revealing a much enthused Absynthe on his back, trying to claw his way out of the cave. Picking the cat up underneath the forearms, Travis lifts Absynthe whose body stretches down lazily beneath him, long and black. Absynthe blankly looks around the room with wide eyes and then screams at the wall near the bed. “See?” Travis offers.

Melissa looks at the cat distastefully. “I would’ve killed it by now.”

“Nah,” Travis replies and drops the kitten down off the bed. “I prefer to torture it.”

Absynthe walks out of the room without a sound.

“Is he done?” Melissa asks.

“Yup. That’s it. Next show’s tomorrow morning.” They both sit upright, facing the doorway, confused. Already they had slept together, and yet neither had attempted to lay a hand on the other. Neither of them has any clear indication of what they are supposed to now, what the other party is thinking, or what is appropriate in this particular case. “You want some breakfast?” Travis asks.

Melissa hesitates, feeling that maybe she should just leave.

Seeing her reaction, Travis says simply, “It’s just sleeping. It’s just breakfast.”

“All right,” Melissa replies and she starts to get up.

“No, no. My treat. Stay in bed and sleep some more. I’ll just be ten minutes.”

Without more coaxing than that, Melissa slips back under the covers and snuggles into the warmth as Travis walks to the bathroom. He splashes a little water on to his face

and his head, dries off and walks into the kitchen. He gets out a frying pan, some eggs, onions, green peppers, and tomatoes silently grateful for grocery shopping before the show and makes an omelet.

When the omelet is done, slightly singed and brown on the edges, but not burnt, Travis slaps his creation on a plate, gets two forks, pours a glass of orange juice and carries it all into his bedroom. He pulls the comforter back enough to set the plate on top of the sheets, sets the orange juice on the nightstand, and sits himself on the floor next to the bed.

Melissa had obviously gone to the bathroom to repair her hair. Her face has lost the black smear of eyeliner and tears, and she looks cheerful and awake now. She looks up at him amused, her blue eyes more shocking without any make up, "You know your room is *much* more interesting in the daylight."

Travis peers over his shoulder. "The wall?"

"And the toys." There are a number of Travis's toys spread out all over the floor. "I thought for a moment that I'd gone to bed with an eight year old."

Travis nods. "You did."

Sitting up on one arm, she remarks, "This is impressive."

"You have to split it with me."

"What if I don't want to?"

Travis looks away and says, "You can have it all."

She responds by reaching out with her free hand and petting his head. "You're very sweet." She says it seriously. Travis knows she is talking about last night all that he is doing, really but mostly last night.

Travis picks his fork up, cuts a bite and holds it out to her. He feels like he is offering food to a timid wild animal. She is in a strange place with a strange person, maybe a little unsure of the situation now that it is morning unsure of the implications, anyway. She takes the fork out of his hand and eats the bite. After chewing for a moment, self consciously, she swallows and remarks, "Not bad."

"Thanks." Travis takes the fork and feeds himself a bite. "I love eggs browned on the edges."

"Yeah."

"Sorry. I know this is weird. I just wanted you to have breakfast or something. I thought that would make a difference like I wasn't just trying to get you in bed or anything."

"Oh my God, Travis. I would never have thought that."

"I just wanted to be clear about it."

"Even though, I *should* be insulted."

Travis puts his head in his hand. "Don't do that. That's not what I meant."

Melissa giggles at Travis's feigned frustration.

"Too... many... complications..." he holds his head as though it might crack open, and then falls back on the floor, pretending to be dead. He gets up after just a moment

though, and takes another bite of the omelet.

"This *is* weird though."

"Well, at least we can admit it. I've been in stranger situations where nobody says a word."

Melissa settles back on her pillow and says, "This is a nice t shirt," halfway hoping to complicate things again as a joke.

Travis hadn't noticed, and then realizes that Melissa's shirt and skirt from the night before are laying on the floor at the end of the bed. "Oh," he says, surprised. "Well, I'm glad you like it. That's all I got."

Wrinkling her nose, Melissa asks, "You mean you only own one t shirt?"

"No, no, no. I meant I don't own any other *kinds* of shirts. Sorry."

"Oh."

Travis looks back to his closet. "I don't have much use for anything but t shirts, I guess." He smiles sheepishly, "I thought women always liked wearing guy's dress shirts."

"Mm. That's a fetish I haven't yet acquired."

"Whatever." Travis shakes his head. "That is just a Travisworld comment anyway."

"Travisworld?"

Travis laughs again. "My old friend Kristin started that. We dated way, way back, and she used to say that everytime I said something... I don't know... something that seemed logical to me but didn't make sense to anyone else."

"Like that all women have a fetish for wearing men's dress shirts."

"Yeah."

"That's kind of funny."

Travis looks down at the plate. Three bites into it, and he is full. "We're not gonna' finish this, are we?"

"Sorry. I'm not a big breakfast eater."

"You neither?"

She shakes her head.

Travis moves the plate to the nightstand and starts to sit back, but Melissa grabs his arms and pulls him up into the bed. "C'mere." Travis moves back onto the bed, a little awkwardly, laying down with his back to Melissa. She wraps her arms around him, and her embrace is warm almost hot. After a moment of laying still, she rubs his head and says, "You're cuddly."

"Thanks." Travis shuts his eyes and lapses into a wakeful but thoughtless state after a few minutes. He wants to just absorb the feeling of being held and hang onto the feeling because he knows it will pass. She has no intention of getting into a relationship with him, and Travis reminds himself that she does not need to. She needs time and space to be alone with what she had finally gotten out last night.

He does not notice as he drifts off into sleep. His dreams are waking ones, solid and real because somehow he is only partially unconscious. All the colors in the dream are

saturated and stark, grainy shades of nothing but yellows and browns. There is a field and some familiar faces and shapes lean at odd angles. The feeling of his own feet on the ground remains imperceptible. And there is no sound of talking, just breathing. But as soon as he began to understand the vision, grasp where and who he is, he is awake with a start.

"You all right?" Melissa asks.

"Yeah. Sorry. Drifted off there."

She rubs his back with her hand. "Fall down some stairs?"

Travis rolls over and smiles looks at her sincerely, and says, "Fell off a merry go round."

"That's odd."

"Tell me about it."

There is a pause for a few minutes, and then Travis says, "I need to get downtown pretty soon." After having woken from the dream, he feels anxious suddenly.

"That's fine."

"You can stay here if you want. I'll go get my bike, and then I can drive you to your car."

Melissa looks shocked, "You're gonna' take me on your bicycle?"

"No, bike. Motorcycle."

"Oh!"

Travis laughs at the vision of trying to balance two people on a bicycle. For some reason, the vision involves him wearing thick glasses, talking with a nasal voice, and wearing a bow tie.

"You have a motorcycle?"

"You knew that," Travis says, trying to recall.

"No I didn't." She is visibly excited.

"Welp. I do."

"That so cool!" Melissa's voice rises in pitch. "I get to ride on a motorcycle!"

Travis loves the excitement. He can feel the joy of the first ride vicariously.

"That *so* figures."

"What?"

"That you would have a motorcycle."

"Don't say that," Travis replies indignantly. "That's insulting."

"It's true." Melissa lists the following items on her fingertips, "Guitar, musician, only wear's t shirts and probably leather when its cool motorcycle." She shrugs with her face, having presented him with the facts.

"You forgot boots."

"Oh. I'm sorry. Boots."

"Okay, okay. Whatever."

Melissa is smiling at a private joke practically breaking out from between her pearly teeth.

"What?" Travis asks, waiting for a punchline.

“No... nothing.”

“What?”

She puts one hand under her head, looking at the curve of his jaw and the eyes that looks like they belong to a child. She sighs and put her hand out, lightly touching his nose with her index finger. He tries to look at it as she speaks. “You’re just such a cowboy.” She smiles, brilliantly, having said it. “Happy now?”

*. I'll manage better this time*

It is a good August Saturday to walk downtown. There is a cool breeze coming up and over the hill, and even though it is somewhat cloudy, long white bodies laid out bare against the sky, the sun heats everything. Travis's legs feel warm in his jeans. Normally on such an occasion, he would have worn shorts, but since he is getting his motorcycle, he sticks with the pants. The thought of peeling layers of skin off his knees and thighs never appealed to him. He misses feeling the warmth of the sun against his legs, though, and as he and Melissa walk, he vows to lay out by the swimming pool in the next week. His apartment complex had two, and he'd never occasioned either one.

The awkwardness Travis feels near Melissa is still present. He wants to hold her hand but is afraid of rocking the boat. Melissa seems content to smile and not say much. Travis lets it alone at that.

"What did you write on the wall?" he asks. While he had been taking care of the breakfast dishes, Melissa had asked if she could add something to his wall of graffiti. He said yes, and she told him that he couldn't read it until after she was gone. He had asked why and she had only said something about it being embarrassing to her.

"I'm not telling you."

"What's it matter? I'm gonna' see it in an hour. You're not suddenly going to be embarrassed in an hour are you?"

"That's the point," Melissa replies.

Travis nods without further debate. "Well, is it something you said or was it somebody famous?"

She smiled. "Somebody who will be famous."

Travis thinks that Melissa must have mean a friend of hers. Then it dawns on him. "I hope you didn't quote me."

"Why?"

"That would be a bit pretentious, don't you think? My own words on my bedroom wall?"

"No. They're in my handwriting. That makes it okay."

"It does?"

"Yes."

"What standards board declared this?"

Melissa thinks about it. "The Graffiti and Quotemonger Board of Etiquette."

"Okay."

"I would think you'd be touched."

"Depends on what I said. I'm the one who's gonna' have to look at it for the next

two weeks.”

“You’ll like it. Shut up.”

They walk for a block or so, smelling the breeze and being warm in the sun. Travis can feel his legs starting to sweat. “What then?” Melissa asks curiously.

“What then what?”

“What are you doing after two weeks?”

“Moving.”

“Moving!”

“Yeah.”

“Where?”

“Cross town,” Travis waves his hand in the general direction of Karen’s house.

“Oh.” Melissa seems to breathe a sigh of relief. “I thought you meant you were moving away.”

“No.” Travis says simply. After a moment of rolling the words around in his head, wondering if he should say it, he says, “Would that matter?”

Melissa almost stops. She brings her brisk afternoon pace down and gives Travis a look that means he should know better than to have asked the question. Then she smiles kindly, “Yes. It matters.” She looks up at him seriously from beneath her brow, her eyes smiling.

They ride small talk downtown, and when they get to the corner of College and Broad, Travis doesn’t know how to say goodbye. It is clear that Melissa has made up her mind, though she is waiting for him to say something. Travis jams his hands in his hip pockets and says, “There’s this party tonight...”

Melissa shakes her head like a schoolteacher. “Not for a while, Travis, okay?”

“Okay.”

“I’d just like to walk away from this, get back to things, and then run into you again. And we can see what happens then.”

Travis is tempted to explain to Melissa that he knows windows of opportunity like this inevitably pass, but he says, “Okay.” If she wants to make the mistake, Travis knows he can’t change her mind. He only hopes she knows better, and for a moment, hopes he is just wrong. “I’ll see you around then.”

There is no awkward embrace, no attempt at a kiss that moves to the cheek at the last moment. Melissa turns and walks away, leaving Travis standing on the sidewalk in sight of Mary Jane with his hands jammed in his pockets, and his boot tapping on the concrete with a gaping hole in the toe.

. *Nibbling at the mushbroom*

From the looks of the weather in the late evening light Saturday, the party at Elm Hollow is at least going to be pleasantly warm and dry. The clouds have cleared up, and what is left of them, now draws thin patterns in the fading sunlight. Travis can feel the night coming on and it is his favorite part of the day. And from the looks of the arrangements being made at the party when he arrives, the occasion is also going to be everything promised. Behind the apartments, set back into a hill, a myriad of concrete staircases weave their way together and down to a large parking lot. One every landing sits two or three unadorned kegs, while opposite this mountain of brew, on the far side of the parking lot, a temporary stage had been built. Travis smiles. The scenery speaks of no simple party, but of a concert. A private concert, which meant a wild one.

Travis parks Mary Jane at the top of the hill near a restraining wall where it looks like she will be out of the way, but within view. He gets off and makes his way down the hill, where he is greeted by two boys who tell him that the party is five dollars a head. They wear no clothing that indicates that they are rightfully owed money, but each of them had a large handful of neon orange bracelets. Travis pays his five dollars and gets one of the plastic bracelets wrapped and snapped around his wrist, leaving him to feel like a hospital patient.

The first thing he does is acquire a cup and pour himself a beer from one of the open kegs at the top of the stairs. *At least*, Travis thinks to himself, *if they are going to put the kegs on staircases, they have the wisdom to go from top to bottom as the party progresses*. Travis can see an image of people falling like dominoes as one drunk slips at the top and falls into the others, all patiently waiting in line. At that moment, though, no one occupies the stairs, just Travis. Evidently, he is early, but as he sits himself down on the grassy hill to the side of the stairs in the sun, he doesn't mind. He sits and drinks his beer, watching the activities of those who are preparing. And after doing that for about twenty minutes, he gets another beer.

Some of the musicians begin arriving at that point. The first group comes in two unmarked vans, old and dilapidated Fords. After a short discussion with the boys with the bracelets, barriers in the driveway are moved aside, and the vans meander down into the parking lot in front of the stage. Like clowns from a car, the musicians exit, long hair flowing, flannel shirts born even in the warm summer air. Travis smiles. He recognizes two of the members of Half Gray, Robert and Jay. He had opened for them once on short notice at the Georgia Theater. It had been the biggest crowd he'd ever played in front of, and after listening to his voice pour out into the openness, and not close set comforting walls, he decided it would be the biggest crowd he would ever play to. There is no denying



the fact that he loves the attention of so many eyes and new ones, at that and that he loves sharing his music, but he feels it is meant to be a private thing. His words, his meanings, his carefully picked melodies are meant to be played in small rooms where there is barely a difference between the stage and the floor, where people sit, don't stand, and where no one hollers out drunkenly with security because they know Travis cannot see him. And that is the crux of it, really. Travis wants to see his music in his audiences eyes, know it in their faces. But standing four feet above his listeners, he can't do that. And they are listeners with him lording over them in such a fashion, when he does not want listeners he wants friends, he knows the motion of his melodies, does not just memorize them for lack of contact.

Travis finishes his beer and gets a third, deciding to wait until Robert and Jay are finished setting up before he approaches them. He does not want to get recruited into helping them set up their gear not in his current state. Normally, assisting his fellow musicians would give him pleasure, but today, as the sun is setting over the woods that border Elm Hollow, he feels inclined to simply observe the scene. He stretches out on the hill and relaxes. Any action on his part seems unnecessary, a contribution to the hurried anticipation of events to come. He wants to remain to be the sole consumer of the energy

he and a fellow sitting in a lawn chair fifty yards off at the top of the hill. Travis smiles warmly at his compatriot in complacency. The guy has the air of a king, drinking his beer at the top and center of the hill, watching over his domain. Travis decides that this man has to be the brain and/or primary investor behind the ensuing madness, and he makes a mental note to ask to see if he is correct.

In a way, it is the air of anticipation that Travis lingers in the longest. It is the time that occurs before the Thing that Travis loves. It is the threat to time. It is the sultry confident smile that even though all time would be lost in the fever of the moment, Travis can know and appreciate time's absence before it leaves him. When the pulse of the wind and weather come to slow and finally to still before a reversal in the equilibrium of the tides, Travis is content to be still in unison, at the peak of the arc as the armchair falls over. The feeling that something is afoot is not nervous or jittery for Travis, as it seems with most. That feeling is reassuring and calm. Travis lusts for that eternal first footstep onto stage from off, before the lights quite reveal his shadow, because once it is over, it is over. It will come again, but every calm before the storm seems a fingerprint, varied, unique, and precious, where the blur of motion, though wonderful in itself, is always a blur.

Travis stands and makes his way down the stairs to where Robert and Jay are checking the amplifier and their bass and guitar. When he gets to the edge of the stage, he stands and waits for them to notice him so as not to distract them. After a moment, Jay looks and smiles. "Travis! Hey man!" He takes his guitar off and sets it on a rack, then walks to edge of the stage where he stands a half foot higher than Travis. "What's goin' on, man?"

"Nothin' much. You guys plannin' on just doin' a duo?"

Jay looks mildly annoyed. "Yeah. No kidding." He looks to Robert for a moment,

who is still preoccupied with his bass. "Nah. They'll show up in about ten minutes, trashed and rarin' ta' go." But he does not sound happy about it. He turns to Travis and sits on the stage, removing his cigarettes from his shirt pockets. "You playin'?"

"Me? No." Travis shakes his head.

"You want to?"

"What? Jam with you guys?"

"Yeah, man. This is a total free for all. We're gonna' play some covers to keep the party goin', and then fuck around for the most part. Hell, they want us to play for three hours."

"Who all's comin'?"

"Uh, us, Barclay and Sixteen. That's all I've heard of."

"All right, then. A friend of mine Bobby "

"Bobby McKale?"

"I don't know actually."

"She Bobby?"

Travis nods. "I imagine there aren't that many."

"Oh yeah," Jay says emphatically. He tosses his hair back and pulls hard on his cigarette. "There's definitely only one."

"Yeah." Travis pauses and then remembered his point. "She said there'd be about six bands."

"Yeah. That's what I heard."

"Who's brainchild is this?"

"Uh... some guy named Allen Philman."

"Friend of yours?"

"No. A guy I know knows this Allen guy told him to call us. They're payin' us four hundred bucks."

"For a party?"

"Yeah, man."

"Well," Travis turns to the three sets of concrete stairs, all bejeweled with kegs, "if they get enough heads in here to finish all of those, they'll still make money."

"Hell, man, we just wanted to play outside, you know?"

"Yeah."

"Always sounds better to me."

Travis nods in agreement.

"Oh, dude, c'mere. You'll appreciate this." Jay stands up on the stage with a bit of an effort, his cigarette hanging out of his mouth, and waves Travis to follow him.

With one step, Travis rises to the level of the stage and walks with Jay over to Jay's guitar. With a humble amount of reverence, Jay lifts his guitar out of the rack and presents it to Travis with both arms outstretched like he is holding a baby. Travis, in turn, receives the gift with an appreciative smile. He hefts it and smiles. "Nice."

"Hell yeah, man. I'm not fuckin' around on a Peavey anymore."

"Hey," Travis says, feigning insult. "I still got a Peavey."

"For real?" Jay seems surprised.

"Well I don't play electric that much."

"Yeah." With almost a certain amount of pride, Jay turns to the amplifier and turns it on with a knowing look. "Go ahead, man. Treat it right."

Travis looks around. There are thirty or so people milling about. A few of them have looked to the stage as the amplifier pops and turns on with a hum. "All right then," Travis says with a confidence that matches the turning of the switch. He puts the strap across his shoulder and lets the guitar settle into his grip. "How much did this run you?" he asks. "It feels good."

"Seven hundred. But it's worth a lot more than that."

Travis hears the light ringing of his fingers on the strings as he runs his left hand up and down the frets to find his way. Somebody on the other side of the parking lot hollers excitedly at hearing the noise. For a moment, Travis's mind searches for a melody that would sound right on electric, solo. Then, it occurs to him, and he hopes he can still play it. It had been a little while, but he knew it well: Little Wing by Jimi Hendrix. He strikes the six strings with his right hand firm but distributed and runs his left hand down the neck of the guitar, stretching the sound out in pitch. At that moment, a few people look on in recognition, Jay included, and Travis lets the first three fingers of his left hand dance out the notes of the chords freely, low in pitch and far out on the neck of the guitar.

Taking two steps back and facing the side of the stage, Travis relaxes into the melody as he plays, mouthing the words to himself. And though he isn't paying attention, a few faces mouth the words or hum the melody along with him. The evening sun, now behind the trees, fires through the spaces in the branches, beams pushing the music on further.

When the time comes, Travis leans almost imperceptibly back and moves into the fantasy of the solo's notes, high on the neck of the guitar, his right hand and his left moving in closer together in perpendicular motions but under the influence of some magnetic attraction. His eyes closed, and the music consuming him as it always does in these moments of complete attention. His focus pours like rain into his hands as he masters what it is to feel the music. He rocks in rhythm, but sporadically so, as the guitar strap pulls against his shoulders, even though gravity itself is imperceptible to him. He is walking through the clouds, and the music sings, as it is meant to, of freedom.

This is the thing that had been anticipated as unknown and newly discovered, but never found. Its truth is in the passage of indiscrete measures of time, a state of the instantaneous and the luxury of the present. Travis travels from note to note, like rock to rock across a sea that is his meaning. He travels so well that his perceptions leaves him to infect others who sway and smile there with him. They join together in the nature of the music and the attention to it that simply leaves no room for unrelated thoughts, and Travis, like an angel, brings that heaven to them, freely, and unknown to himself.

Jeanee Martin had heard that song, that same song, as recorded by Hendrix, a

thousand times before the age of twenty. She met a man who loved that song as much as she, and they would smile together in the darkness of their bed when it would play. That guitar's scream would sing to them as they touched each other's faces. But in time she lost the touch of her lover over incompatibilities. She put the album away and unconsciously ignored the melody that had once set her so free in romance. There, that day, as Travis plays, she lets a smile break her lips, and after only moments of hearing that song played for all's need to fly freely, she realizes how gone is the pain that she had once felt deep inside her. She leaves the conversation she is in momentarily, turns to the stage and closes her eyes to run free again. Her heart, a beast in need of running, tattooed with the vibrant colors of damage, breaks free and ran hard west toward a setting sun running hard and running unchained.

Phil Allen sits up in his chair, wondering what band Travis is in. He'd watched as Travis made his way down the hill and talked to Jay and then joined him on stage. He vaguely recognizes the song, but as Travis moves in and out of the melody from chorus to bridge to solo, Phil sits back in his chair and smiles contentedly to himself. He had wanted more than anything for the last several weeks for this party to come up. Since June, he'd thought about it, how simple it would be to buy a lot of kegs and get some bands, and have some fun. The money he got from his rich parents down in Atlanta, but it doesn't mean he is apathetic about it. This party is his chance to make money by having fun. For him, the spirit of the song is just that: that life is meant to be easy, laid back, and paid for. Phil never cared much for the details, but that is all he had worried about for the last several days details. Now, laid out before him is his dream, crowned by the liquid music pouring out of the black amplifiers. He looks up from the stage and sees a cloak sewn from indigo past burnt oranges that dress the sky, as though the sky itself was invited to the party.

Harry Davis and Jennifer Lamb just hold each other on one of the landings. They slide into each others arms and look up into each other's eyes easily, peacefully. They'd only met a few weeks ago, and the party had been Harry's idea, though Jennifer thinks that maybe she isn't up to it. Now, looking into Harry's eyes and feeling the excitement of new love, a tumbling in the stomach that seems further moved by the guitar's simple cries beneath her, Jennifer wonders if there is anywhere she wouldn't go just to look up at Harry the way she is doing now.

Simon Eiden had never heard "Little Wing" before. His musical tastes tended toward whatever was on the radio when he drove. For the first time, he hears Jini Hendrix, passing through one of his many, many avatars, playing his own songs over and over for the uninitiated. Simon leans in and marvels at the ability of this guy on stage in the t shirt. As Travis walks over the frets in an almost slow gait, unhurried, Simon listens to every note with his brow furrowed. He becomes so absorbed in the song, each and every note, that he doesn't want to miss a single one after just a minute of listening. He has never heard music like the kind he is hearing, but all he knows is that he wants to hear it again had to hear it again.

Blair Matthews laughs out loud when she hears Travis break into "Little Wing."

For her, unlike Simon, The Jimi Hendrix tune is as old as her memory, all the way back to high school. It had been her anthem then, driving around in her father's t bird alone, or with her friends, and even though she doesn't listen to the song quite as often, it is still her anthem. She doesn't just mouth the words along to the Travis's guitar, she *sings* them and much to the delight of her three friends, because she has a lovely voice. They stand and listen with her on the edge of the parking lot, and each of them too, feels that in a way, they are part of that song's needs and praises. They each give smiles away for free and tell lovers they dream of moonbeams and butterflies sometimes.

In a mere five minutes, Travis comes to stand still and straight, lingering as long as he can on the last few notes, and then lets go, opening his eyes and smiling brightly at the August evening. He turns to Jay, still smiling, and says, "Thanks."

. *Very Curious*

Travis is still walking the surface of his melody for several hours after he plays. It is one of the best introductions he could've asked anyone for. At every stop at the keg, there is either the friendly face of Robert, Jay, Bobby, or some complete stranger who remarks, "Hey, were you the guy playin' Hendrix earlier?" The reaction is one that warms Travis dearly, and a kind of pride comes over him, straightening his back out and making him a couple of inches taller. It's also a reaction that incites Jay to drag Travis to the stage again and ramble drunkenly through an inspired blues version of "Highway Child" with the band Sixteen.

After a while, the party seems a rolling tide, and Travis finds himself bouncing from conversation to conversation and from band to band until midnight maybe. Travis jams with Half grey again and when he comes down off the stage, feeling free, he is practically assaulted by a younger kid, maybe twenty. "That was *incredible*, dude!"

"Thanks, man."

The young gent puts his hand on Travis's shoulder and starts walking with him back to the keg. "Who're you playing with?"

"Me?"

"Yeah. I've seen you with Half grey before, but you're not in the band, right?"

The guy almost leans forward accusingly when he said it.

"Yeah, I just open for them every once in a while."

"So you're just solo."

"Yup."

"That's *awesome*."

Travis is somewhat put off by the young man's demeanor not in a bad way, but definitely unsure. Never before had he encountered such enthusiasm concerning his own music. "It's not bad creative freedom and all that."

"Do you write all your own shit?" The young man pours a beer for Travis and hands it to him.

Travis takes the beer with a polite nod, and replies, "Yeah."

The young man stands facing Travis with his beer, staring at him in approval, nodding his head. "I wish I could do that."

"Write music?"

"Yeah."

"I don't really see how's it's possible not to be able to..."

"Oh no, don't get me wrong. I write stuff it just sucks."

"You in a band?"

"Yeah. Some friends of mine and me got a garage band goin'. We're okay."

Travis and the young man walk over to some long six by fours that had been laid across cement blocks for benches. Putting out his hand, Travis says, "I'm Travis anyway."

"Oh yeah. I'm Mark."

They shake hands and Travis reiterates his point. "As long as you're playin', you'll get better." In a way he feels obnoxious informing someone of this fact. He doesn't consider himself good enough to be a mentor for anyone, and yet there was no denying the look of a student in the eyes of Mark. Travis feels almost inclined to just say something really not even advice necessarily.

"We play a lot," Mark says, nodding, his wavy earlength blonde hair bobbing lightly toward his nose. "We try to play, like, three times a week. But it's hard to get everybody together."

"Yeah. I don't mind doin' my stuff solo. Dealin' with other people's shit's not my greatest talent."

"I can tell, dude. You're too relaxed to put up with shit."

Travis nods as there comes a momentary lull in the conversation. Travis watches as another bunch of musicians show up in another unmarked van no one Travis recognizes. They immediately start hauling equipment out of the truck and moving it toward the stage.

"So, you're not playin' tonight?"

"Nah."

"Why not?"

"Well, I wasn't asked to namely. These guys are all gettin' paid."

"Oh, dude! That's all good. My friend is Allen the one throwin' the party or organizing it. Dude, he wouldn't mind if you played a bit."

"I also don't have my stuff. I'd go and get it, but I'm on my motorcycle, and it's kind of too much a pain in the ass tonight I just don't feel up to it."

"C'mon, man. This is gonna' be, like, the jamboree of the summer. You gotta' play. Where do you live?"

"Over in University Gardens."

"No prob, man, I'll drive you."

Travis frowns a bit. Mark's graciousness is inexplicable. But then, maybe it is just a supreme effort on his part to make friends and insure that everyone has a good time.

Suddenly Travis feels compelled by the opportunity. "Are you sure?"

"Man, that's, like, over the hill University Gardens. I'll give you a lift."

"All right, cool. Let's go."

They walk up the hill past a group of people at the corner of one of the apartment buildings. "Hey, guys," Mark says to the group. "I'm gonna' take this guy to get his stuff. He's gonna' play tonight too." A tall kid in a baseball cap at the back of the little crowd yips. And a blonde at the front of the group smiles nicely and said, "I really liked what you were playing with Jay and them."

"Thanks. It's always been one of my favorites."

"That's like my boyfriend's theme song."

Travis smiles brightly. "Is he hear?"

"Yeah. He's over there in that lounge chair." She points in the direction of the party king, and then puts her hand to her mouth, "Allen!" she yells. "C'mere a second!"

Allen turns his head only slightly, and then waves her off. She flips him the bird. "He's bein' such an asshole tonight."

Travis rub his head and infers, "He's probably just really into watchin' party grow."

"Whatever. He could at least come over and say hey."

Mark is still standing next to Travis, and seems antsy to go. He leans in a little and says, "C'mon man, my car's just around back."

Travis isn't quite through looking at the girl, Karen, but he relents and follows Mark. She has a boyfriend anyway. Still though, he can't shake the feeling that she had not looked at him, but looked him up and down. It was an impressive look.

It doesn't take Travis and Mark more than fifteen minutes to get to Travis's place and fetch his guitar and cords and a pick. Travis figures he can use the amps there already rather than bring his own. He grabs his electric accoustic, which is pretty much like a normal accoustic except with a round back and plug for the cord to the amplifier. He puts all the stuff in Mark's trunk, and finds that he is still wondering about the genuine nature of Mark's charity. It seems odd, but pleasant. He finds he can't doubt it.

"I really appreciate you doin' this," Travis says. "I hadn't thought about it much, but I guess I really do feel like playing tonight. Most of the time I don't after a show."

Mark shifts the car, his eyes on the road. He is driving an old camaro built before the days when camaros got real square. When Mark shifts up, the engine has a pleasant rumble as it eases its way into the higher RPMs. Travis likes the sound, and the spacious bench seat in the front reminds him of riding in Nick's Montego. "Where'd you play last night?"

"Washington Street Tavern."

"Oh man. We were gonna' go there, but the brew pub was havin' a special on their local brews." Mark looks away from the road to Travis for a moment. "Good stuff."

"Yeah. I've been there."

"That's too bad we didn't run into you. If you play like country rock dylan stuff, Allen would've asked you to play then. He loves that shit."

"Everybody seemes pretty crazy about Allen."

"Oh yeah man. He's just cool and laid back. Like, this party. He just put it together for the hell of it. His parents give him a lot of money, but he saves it the way most guys would just blow it. Then, earlier this month, he just announced that he was gonna' throw this blowout. It's all he's been talkin' about. I wish Karen would leave him alone."

"Ah," Travis says dismissively, "you know how girls are."

When they get back to the apartments, Mark parks in front and carries Travis's cords as they walk back down into the party, and on down onto the parking lot. Half Grey



is just about ready to quit, and Rob sees Travis coming and smiled. "Awright, dude. Bring it on!"

"Thank Mark here," Travis says, mounting the stage and turning back for the cables. "He insisted on driving me back to get my stuff."

"Cool, man," Rob says to Mark, giving a nod.

"Listen," Travis says to Rob, "I'll just play a couple with ya', off and on. I don't wanna' get in the way."

"You can play the whole time, Travis. It's like I said, we're jus' gonna' fuck around."

"Hey, man," Travis says to Mark, still waiting at the edge of the stage. He has the remarkable resemblance of a boy watching his older brothers. "Thanks a lot. Grab me after this, and let's get a beer."

"Right on," Mark says, walking away toward his friends again.

"That was weird," Travis confides in Rob.

"Like, he drove you to your house to get your stuff."

"He was pretty excited about it."

"You got a fan, man."

"Is that what it's like?" Travis asks with a grimace.

Rob rolls his eyes. "Get used to it, dude."

Half Grey, guest starring Travis Fleeting, play for three and a half hours, half an hour of which is a long cover jam of "Sweet Home Alabama." Travis relents several hours before that and sits and talks with Mark about a great many things concerning music. The two of them have very similiar tastes and gradually wind their way through band history after band history, relating stories that they'd heard about the members. It is an easy way to spend two hours. And there are very few people in the world, besides Jon, that know as much music trivia as Travis does. The more meaningless the better. To him, the obscurity of the story was what made it worth telling.

After Half Grey finally finishes, Travis introduces Mark to them all, and the conversation continues in its original vein, with only stranger tangents because the participants have more irrelevant facts at their disposal between them, and also because they are getting drunker. Halfway through the new band, Barclay's set, and an obnoxious conversation about the English invasion ever happening again, Bobby waltzes up to give Travis a pat on the head and lure him away from his fellow musicians. She and Josh are pretty chipper and glad to see Travis, which surprises him. He always felt that he just didn't run in the same circles as the pair, but Josh talks a lot, and Bobby even kind of leans on Travis, her hand around his elbow. Travis does his best not to notice which even he thinks is stupid.

When Barclay finishes their set, the master of ceremonies, by order of Lord Allen, tells Travis that the stage is his again if he wants it for a while. Sixteen doesn't mind waiting, and Allen, for some reason or another, wants Travis to play. In fact, it seems like everyone wants Travis to play. Bobby is pushing him, Mark is smiling and waiting, and Rob and Jay cheer him on. "Just for a little bit," is all he says. It isn't a refusal, but just abashed

modesty. Travis is overwhelmed by the enthusiasm. For just a moment, approaching the stage, Travis wishes that Jon could be with him to play with him. With no ceiling, he knows he is going to feel very small playing in front of the three hundred or so people that had gathered.

It turns out that he doesn't really have to play all that hard. After a churning rendition of one of his own songs, Rob and Jay get up immediately to play alongside him. They improvise a blues tune for a while, Travis making up the lyrics as they go along. They aren't poetry, but they are blues, and everyone in the crowd cheers and laughs at lines like "You can run away but I'm gonna' getcha'," or "I'm down as my dog got down." Whatever. Travis laughs along with the crowd, sometimes skipping a verse or a chorus because he can't get words out for laughing. Jay and Rob make good backups. They follow Travis well, and still find elbow room in the time and music to do their own things. Travis hears parts of his songs he never heard before, licks in the bassline, and rhythm guitar. They all sound new.

As if that weren't enough, a short stocky guy by the name of Ray Collins comes up on stage and asks if he can play drums. Travis shrugs and asks if the guy has a set. He is playing with the next band, Lizard Cult. "Sure. You bet." Travis says, and he listens to the rhythm of the drums through his songs too. Sometimes he turns around before a song, and tells Ray, "It's a double time four four." Sometimes Ray sets the beat, and Travis finds his own stuff is better for it. All in all, for a completely unrehearsed performance, it goes well, and no one in the audience cares because they are drunk and the night is warm, and from the looks of it, everyone that is left in Athens was at the party.

Travis decides to close up with a cover of "Purple Haze" always a party pleaser and he borrows Jay's Les Paul guitar again to do it. It works, and "the band" walks off stage with a feeling of real comradary in having jointly organized chaos. The whole party cheers at two thirty in the morning, and with the sound of the hollering whistling through the trees, Travis hears applause like he's never heard before. It is strange and loud and energizing. He gets himself yet another beer with the firm feeling that he can now party all night long as the "Master of Ceremonies" again takes the stage and asks for a round of applause for the Travis Fleeting Band. Travis takes the applause in stride now that he is in the middle of it. He can't help looking to Jay and shrugging out of modesty. He wouldn't have been so bold as to call it his band. Jay just pats him on the back and laughs at his discomfort.

Talking to Mark for a while, Travis finds that the whole party has invigorated him, has him talking about the beauty of music and transforming people and time. He is running on stupidity again, and he wonders why. The stage seemed so concretely real, and yet when he comes down off the stage, the whole event always plays out like a dream. It is as though he is allowed to see the world in color only some of the time, and the rest of the time he had to watch it in black and white. He sits back on his heels though and just listens to Mark talk after a while. Travis is surprised to hear Mark sound so young. He is doubly excited now that Travis's prowess on guitar had been proven. Travis can't be more than

three years older, but he feels ancient in comparison with the energy. So much had happened since the beginning. And he had been playing guitar for eight years almost a third of his life and all of the life he could clearly remember.

As he is thinking and listening to Mark, a girl comes up to stand with Travis and Mark. Assuming she is a friend of Mark's, Travis perks up a little, and smiles at the girl politely.

"I just wanna' know where that stuff comes from," Mark laments.

"It's just kind of there," Travis tries to explain. "You just kind of tap into it."

"What do ya' mean?"

"I don't know." Travis gives the girl an apologetic look. He always felt a little ashamed being mystical around total strangers, but he keeps on. "There's just all these ideas of songs floating around out there. There present to begin with. The Ninth Symphony was there before Beethoven wrote it, even before there was musical notation, the song was there it was a possibility. It's like the great songs are just more than possible though. They're the unavoidable melodies, and when you hear them, you can't help but think you already knew it."

"Yeah, man," Mark says in amazement.

The girl stands on watching, but seems to have no real opinion on the matter. She just stares at Travis.

"Sometimes I think its a muse..." Travis says. "There's this being that helps me out sometimes, or that I become, or..." Travis shakes his head. "Nevermind. It's hard to explain and it just sounds weird." *It sounds weird to some people anyway.*

"Hey, man, Let me get you another beer."

Travis looks down at his glass. It is mostly empty, and he is mostly tipsy. "Sure. Thanks."

As Mark fades into the crowd, Travis stands in awkward silence with the girl. She says nothing, just stares at him in a knowing way. She is happy with him, but disappointed he isn't happy with himself. Her eyes are wide and blue and almond shaped. Her hair is blonde. And her whole form is diminutive and slim. She couldn't weigh more than eighty pounds.

Finally, Travis turns to her to at least introduce himself when he can't think of anything else. But before his head finishes its horizontal arc, he feels her hands on his cheeks, and he is looking down her fair skinned arms like two shoots toward her shoulders. She holds him that way for just an instant, kisses him full on the lips, which he graciously allows her to do, then smiles mischievously and walks away into the crowd. Travis says nothing. He just lingers in the touch, the kiss. It feels wonderful and real more real than himself. He just watches as she makes her way a few yards, and then she is gone.

Mark is back in two minutes with the beers. "Here ya' go, dude."

Travis is still dazed and looking into the crowd, but takes the beer and takes a large gulp to wash the kiss down.

"Where'd your friend go, man?"

Travis looks at Mark strangely. "I thought she was wantin' ta talk to you. I thought you knew her"

Mark kind of shakes his whole body goofily and replies, "No, man. I've never seen her before."

. *Treacle*

Travis walks into D early Sunday evening, in pieces. His muscles are tired, his mind is tired, but for the life of him, his eyes will not close. He walks inside and shuts the door behind him with a heavy sigh and the sound of the door sliding tightly into its frame seals him in. Looking about the apartment, with a bored, tired expression, Travis finds that there is no lack of anything to do; he lacks any desire to do anything. And without turning on any lights, he makes his way through the grey light of dusk into his room.

The first thing to catch his weary eye is the wall on which he'd written. Without knowing why, he walks slowly toward the wall and lays his hands flat against the words, letting his weight off his feet, and leaning. His palms move slowly across the sheetrock as though he were healing it of a wound, and feels the texture of it, but not the words. The words are smooth and untouchable like music. Dragging his hands down, he bends at the knees and stops, resting on his boots. There before him again is the quote that Melissa had written:

"My place among the stars is reserved. I will cry for all eternity there, but not while I am still alive."

Travis Fleeting

Travis closes his eyes, hangs his head and smiles. It hurts, cutting through the exhaustion and the alcohol's depression, but he smiles. It's god damned hard, but he smiles wide while wild painted horses kick his sides and break his teeth.

*Epilogue At Last in the Beautiful Garden*

The Globe is of an unusual light and brilliance as Travis returns to one of the two couches that he and Nick and Jon and Ian are occupying. He sets his beer down on the table between them and relaxes into the space between the arm and Jon.

"I mean, you've never seen a guy on fire like this," Nick explains.

Ian puts his hand up in the air, weak in the wrist, "Darling. These paintings are just darling," he says in a high tone with a bit of a lisp.

"I'm serious. That bad."

"Well he still bought your shit, right?" Jon asks.

"Not bought, no. They only agree to sell it on a commision." Nick pauses to sip his beer and then leans forward to emphasize his point, "But one of 'em already sold."

"Shit yeah!" Travis hails. He holds up his drink in a toast, and the others follow, clinking their glasses and drinking full swallows.

Having finished, Jon picks up his cigarettes and pulls one out. Travis takes out his lighter and offers it up to Jon charitably. Nodding curtly, Jon leans over the light and catches the cigarette on fire.

Travis smiles. "Now you're my bitch."

Ian catches the joke and laughs, but Nick just shakes his head, almost fearfully as Jon's face freezes in anger. Jon pulls his cigarette out of his mouth and stares a challenge at Travis, who doesn't seem concerned at all with the threat. After a moment in a duel glance, Jon hollers at the top of his lungs, "I don't want to be your *bitch*!"

Those patrons of the bar nearest the couches look to Travis and Jon, some irritated, some looking out of morbid curiosity. Travis doesn't care why they are looking, he wants them to stop. Having attention for work is different from attention gained from disruption. He stares straight ahead at Ian, not looking at Jon, but feeling the heavy stare that directs everyone who looks at the pair, to see that Travis is ultimately to blame for the disturbance. Nick amusedly twiddles his thumbs, distancing himself from the group and hoping that the shame of the moment will pass as quickly as possible, hanging in the air like an embarrassing mildew.

"All right then," Travis says at last, to break the silence. "That's enough of that."

Jon's stare breaks into a merry grin, his mouth slightly open.

"See if I ever light one of your cigarettes again," Travis says.

"See if you ever call me your bitch again," Jon replies more knowingly.

"It's just game, dude," Ian says.

Jon nods and explains himself, "I didn't say I *wasn't* his bitch. I just said I didn't *want to be* his bitch."

"So, you're playing the game, but not nicely."

Jon takes a drag off his newly lit cigarette, "If ya' wanna' play with the big boys "

"I don't wanna' play with the big boys," Travis argues.

" you gotta' annie up the big wager," Jon finishes.

"My humiliation is not a wager." Travis points.

"If you're playin' with Jon," Nick says, "your humiliation is *definitely* your wager."

"It's the only thing of value to me," Jon says like Old Scratch himself, and even Travis has to relent at this.

"You guys gets a gig yet?" Ian asks Jon.

"Hell, we've played twice already since we got down there."

"Yeah? Where?"

"The Dark Horse Tavern."

"Seems like I've heard of that," Nick says.

Jon shrugs, "Some big bands used to play there. The Black Crows."

"We'll have to come down there some time," Ian offers.

"Yeah. Shit. It's only like forty five minutes down there," Nick says.

"An hour and ten to Virginia Highlands," Jon replies.

"Well, we can do that."

"It's a good excuse to go down to Hotlanta," Ian agrees.

Jon turns to Travis. "I talked to Rob. He says you've been playin' a lot lately."

"I'm not talking to you, bitch," Travis replies, pouting.

"Aw. I still love you."

"Quit it."

Jon stares at Travis for a moment, concerned. "You have pretty hands."

Travis scoots over on the couch as Ian and Nick gaffaw.

"Why you pickin' on me?"

Jon leans back into the couch and in the perverted uncle's voice, replies, "Ain't nothin' like bein' a bitch."

Nick has tapped Ian on the shoulder in the mean time and pointed out something across the pub. "Yours!" Nick yells gleefully as Ian glance wanders.

Ian leans back on the couch and shakes his head knowingly. "Fuck."

Leaning forward on the couch, Nick says to Travis, "Man, you gotta' see this!"

Travis glances in the general direction of where Nick and Ian have been looking. The bar is only moderately full, certainly not packed, and Travis can see around the bar to the table on the far side of the room where a woman is standing in fishnet stockings with a leather skirt that accentuates her rather large rear end. Travis can't see her face, but can see how high her hair towers over the back of her head. "Oh my God, dude," Travis says seriously to Ian, "Your girlfriend's a whore."

Ian nods wisely. "It was a moment of weakness," he says as he put his cigarette out.

"No, seriously, dude. She's a whore like two dollar blow jobs."

"A moment of weakness or blindness?" Jon asks standing up to look.

"God damn it," Travis says. "We can't take you anywhere."

Jon looks hurt. "Do I embarrass you?"

"Hell yeah you do!"

"I'm sorry," Jon says, seeming completely sincere.

"The hell you are."

Jon thinks on the statement carefully and then agrees, nodding his head vigorously with a mischievous grin attached. And then, after a moment, he looks hurt when Travis doesn't stop staring. "I'll go," he says easily, and gets up to leave.

"Sit down, you lug."

"No. I don't want to."

"Sit down. I'll buy you a beer."

"No way," Nick says, still sitting up. "The next round's on me."

Jon sits back down to the couch while Ian and Travis looks on for an explanation.

"I've been poor for too long. We're drinkin' that painting I sold."

"Only good use for art there is," Ian offers.

"All right then!" Travis says.

"The artisté is buyin'," Jon says.

"Not if you keep talkin' any of that Frenchy stuff," Nick warns.

"He's not French," Travis offers. "He's a retard."

"I'll kick your ass."

"Yeah. Shut up you Mick!" Ian joins in.

"Put your money where your mouth is you eurotrash Spic."

"Shut up Frenchy," Nick replies for Ian.

"I ain't French! He's the one who says 'artisté!'"

"Whatever. You're French."

"You better take that back."

"Oh! What're you gonna' do? Retreat?"

"You're French," Travis says dejectedly. "And fat."

"Hey," Ian interjects. "If you're buyin' the next round, lets's get it at ."

"Sounds good to me," Nick agrees.

"We ready?" Ian asks.

"You're always in such a fuckin' hurry," Travis replies. But before he can finish, Ian and Nick and Jon have all finished their beers and are standing up.

"You're French," Nick says.

"You don't know a free drink when you see one," Jon says.

"I *paid* for this one. I'm gonna' enjoy it."

"Enjoy it by yourself, fatty," Nick says.

"All right, all right." Travis relents and takes down the last of his beer. It isn't the alcohol he likes, it's the company. The foursome make their way through the Globe, all taking a turn to poke Ian and say something rude about his "girlfriend."

"You sure you don't want to kiss your girlfriend goodbye," Travis asks at the door.

"Nah. I'll fuck her later give her two bucks."



Everyone laughs at this as they exit the bar in a fashion meant for exiting a bar: laughing, pouring.

"You just wait," Ian says to Nick.

"Oh. I'm waitin'."

"You're gonna' get some grim chick at ."

"Hey!" Travis argues. "There are no grim chicks at . Have some respect."

Ian shrugs. This is true for the most part. But after a moment he says, "Except for that one you brought home that psychology chick."

"First of all, that was Tasty World, dummy. And secondly, it is your fault I had to sleep with her."

"What!"

"I picked her up on a dare! If you hadn't insisted that she come inside after she gave us that ride home, she wouldn't've stayed."

"Don't blame me."

"Wait, wait, wait," Nick interjects. "Which one was this?"

"Ellen. I don't know if you met her."

"Yeah, yeah. I remember." Nick thinks about it. "She wasn't grim though."

"She was grim, dude," Ian argues.

Travis nods. "She was grim."

Nick seems surprised. "She looked all right to me."

"No, no. She looks all right," Travis offers. "I just mean that she got nasty."

"What? Like, talk dirty to me, big boy?"

"Yeah. Grim, dude."

"I wouldn't mind that," Ian says in a kind of gremlin pitch. "Yeah, yeah. Talk dirty, bitch." He makes a slapping motion with his hand.

"That's just because you're a perverted little fuck," Travis explains calmly.

"What? That shit's sexy," Ian retorts.

"Okay. Like, to an extent," Travis agrees. "But to the level this chick took it... I mean, seriously, dude, she said some revolting shit."

This seems to get Ian's attention and he drops back a little into the foursome out of curiosity. "Like what, dude?"

Travis makes a face. "I don't know. Like she wanted it in the ass, man. And that's how she said it too."

Effecting a female voice, Ian says, "Oh, Travis, give it to me in the shit shoot."

"I'm serious, man," Travis says.

"Bullshit," Nick replies, walking backwards a few steps.

"Not shit shoot," Travis replies, "But she did say anus." Travis can't help but laugh when he says the word.

Ian laughs too. "She says 'anus'?"

"Yeah, man."

"Like: Travis, put your dick in my anus?"

"Yeah, dude. I told you this before."

"That's sick!" Ian pauses only as long as is polite. "Did you do it?"

"Like I was gonna' waste a perfectly good condom on somebody's asshole." Travis realizes as he speaks, gaily and with mirth that he's talking loudly. Any passerby might hear Travis's sentence out of context. What would that sound like? But in the same instant that it occurs to him to care, he realizes he does not care. He is among the only people he cares the most about because they are the people who will not judge him. He looks to Ian with the last sentence dacing around in his head. "What the fuck?" he says.

"All right. I was just curious."

"I'd fuck her in the ass," Jon offers.

"Oh God," Nick says, knowing this could be the beginning of an avalanche of crudeness.

For Nick's sake, Jon says, "I'd tear her a new asshole, and then fuck her small intestine."

Nick grimaces but just smokes his cigarette and keeps walking.

"Nothin' warmer than the ooze of bacteria," Jon says with grim satisfaction.

This is more than Nick can take. He goes into convulsions.

"Oh God," Ian says.

"I'm gonna' throw up," Travis says.

Jon turns to Travis and says, "You fucked her in the ass and you know it."

"Whatever, man."

"Actually, I had a friend whose girlfriend really dug that."

"Really?" Ian asks.

John shrugs. "They tried it once, and she liked it so much, she wouldn't do it any other way."

"Oh man," Travis says.

"There ain't nothin' better than some vagina," Nick says, intoning the words slipperiest syllables.

"I guess some guys take it where they can get it."

"I don't know," Nick says drunkenly. "When you think about it, takin' a really good shit's pretty nice."

"Fuck that," Ian says.

"All right. You're right," Nick agrees. "I was just tryin' to comfort Frenchy and his anal difficulties." Nick slows up to pat Travis sympathetically on the shoulder.

"I didn't fuck her in the ass!" Travis replies, defending his innocence.

"*Sure* you didn't, Frenchy."

"And fuck the French shit. I'm not French."

"Fenchmen fuck people in the ass," Jon says simply.

"Okay. I'm not French and I didn't fuck anybody in the ass. Drop it."

The foursome walk down Broad street toward , merrily watching the passersby, Nick, Jon, Ian and Travis forming a moving square.

"Jay told me about you playing Little Wing," Jon says.  
 "Really?" Travis is surprised it comes up.  
 "Yeah. He says you were really good."  
 "That's quite a compliment coming from Jay."  
 "You know what? You should screw this whole scene and come down to Atlanta. I  
 can get you a gig or two with us, and you and I can do somethin' together."  
 "I'd like that."  
 "So think about it."  
 "I don't know, man. I'm pretty comfortable here. Hotlanta kind of makes me  
 anxious, ya' know?"  
 "Yeah. It sucks."  
 "Really?"  
 "No. Not really. It just sucks not bein' here."  
 "Personally," Travis offers, "I just think it sucks when you guys aren't around."  
 "How'd your show go last week?"  
 "Really well, actually. A buncha' people showed up, and I got my first groupie."  
 "For real."  
 Travis shrugs. "Sorta'. You remember that girl I met at the ER that one night?"  
 "Which night?"  
 "You'd just broken up with Rachel."  
 "No. I don't remember."  
 "Actaully, come to think of it, you were pretty trashed. But she came to the  
 show."  
 "That's cool."  
 "It is nice."  
 "You like her?"  
 "Yeah I do. I mean, I don't think either of us are in the position to do anything  
 about it, but maybe down the road..."  
 "Does she have a boyfriend?"  
 "No, no. She's just been through some tough shit."  
 "Give it time."  
 "You know what we need to do?" Travis asks, introducing a tangent.  
 "What's that."  
 "The four of us should take the long way home."  
 "That'd be cool."  
 "In the Thunderchicken."  
 "Yeah."  
 Nick holds the door open as the four walk into .  
 "The conspiracy table!" Ian notes as they walk in.  
 "Go grab it," Travis says. "Nick's got you covered."  
 "All right. Grab me a Bass."

"Right on."

Jon joins Ian at the table while Nick and Travis move to get the drinks. "I'll help you carry," Travis says, asserting his right on a free drink.

"Cool," Nick agrees. They stand at the bar for a moment waiting before Nick says, "Sorry I only got to write once."

"That's all right, man. You were busy."

"I'm fucking happy about what happened up there."

"Hell yeah."

"You says you had the house taken care of?"

"Yeah. No problem. Karen is totally cool about it."

"Cool. I figured she would be."

"We got the lease from Septemeber until June next year."

"June?"

"I didn't figure anyone would want to hang around any later than that."

"No kidding." Harris walks up to the pair and Nick says, "Three Bass and a bombay sapphire and tonic." Harris moves away to get them.

"I'm touched. You gettin' fancy on me?"

"Wouldn't be a party without a Travis and some gin."

"Gin makes a man mean," Travis agrees.

"Gin makes a man mean!" Nick says.

"Good stuff."

Travis and Nick stand casually smoking and scanning the bar for prospects, both grim and good. Harris comes back with the drinks after a minute and Nick pays him in cash.

"You doin' all right?" Travis asks.

"Man, there's nothin' better'n gettin' paid for what you love to do."

"You got that right."

"And nothin' better'n spendin' the money on your pals."

"God damn right," Travis says, fetching two of the beers. He and Nick take them all back to the table and set them out. Travis scoots into the booth next to Ian, and Nick sits on the other side as they shift the drinks around. "Anything interesting happen?" Ian asks.

"What? While you guys were gone?"

"Yeah."

"Well, I was just tellin's Nick that I gets the house all secured."

"Fuck yeah."

"That should be sweet," Jon adds.

"Dude, that's gonna' be awesome," Ian agrees. Turning to Jon he says, "You can stay whenever you want."

"We'll play shows in Athens," Jon agrees.

Nick adds, "The front porch is sweet for that."

"I can't wait," Ian says.

"Are you headin' back to New Jersey?" Travis asks.

"Yeah just to get my car new tags and see my sister though. Maybe another week."

"What about you?" Travis asks Nick.

"I'm gonna' go pay the folks a visit."

"All right. I'm just checkin'. I'm gonna' move my stuff into the house, and then I'll send you guys copies of the keys."

"You're not gonna' be there?"

"I'm gonna' take off. Honestly, I was thinkin' about drivin' up to Graceland."

"For real?" Ian asks.

"Yeah. It's one of those things. Everybody's supposed to go see Graceland. And it's a perfect drive for Mary Jane."

Jon nods, with Nick in agreement. Ian smiles.

"You just gonna' go?" asks Nick.

Travis shrugs. "Maybe I'll see if I can get a gig up there."

"When are you thinkin' about comin' back?"

"Oh I'm just goin' for a little bit. I'll be here when you guys get back." Travis looks to the mirror across from them for a moment, sees them all crowded around the table on one side like a mad tea party and then continues: "Hell, I'll always be here when you guys get back."

The End.