

Blackwater: A Collection of Stories

By Dean M. Roughton

Abstract

Roughton, Dean Morris. *Blackwater: A Collection of Stories*.
(Under the direction of Angela Davis-Gardner.)

The stories in this collection all either take place in or deal with characters from Blackwater, a fictional town in eastern North Carolina. Blackwater is not meant to represent any real town, but is more an amalgamation of the small towns that exist in the region. Eastern North Carolina serves as a point of convergence for various waters, salt and fresh, alkaline and acidic. The term blackwater refers to a specific kind of water often found in the slow moving rivers of the region and named for its dark color which is, as described on a plaque at the entrance of a river boardwalk/nature trail in an eastern NC town, “the result of a continuous process by which bacteria and fungi in the wetland soil break down plant material.”

The visitor will often comment upon perceiving a foul odor rising from this highly acidic water, a byproduct of the dense nutrients in suspension. Despite the displeasing smell, these waters are home to an abundance of wildlife, fish and aquatic animals, which would not thrive so readily in different waters but which do manage to survive and even do reasonably well at the points of converging waters where a mixture of elements is achieved.

I find blackwater an apt metaphor for the culture in the region and, so, have named my fictional town accordingly. Life in eastern North Carolina, comparatively speaking, is often slower on the surface than in more metropolitan

areas. However, there is a rich undercurrent of events, which often are avoided in conversation.

The stories in this collection, for the most part, are not given to monumental action, but instead focus on what lies beneath the surface. In addition, several of the stories investigate the way characters develop from or respond to a convergence of waters. It is my purpose in writing these stories neither to condemn nor uphold life as it exists in Blackwater; nor is it my purpose to condemn or uphold life as it exists in the waters that converge. I write in the hope that the reader will recognize that, though the breadth of towns like Blackwater is less than that of other areas, the depth is not lacking.

Blackwater: A Collection of Stories

by

Dean Morris Roughton

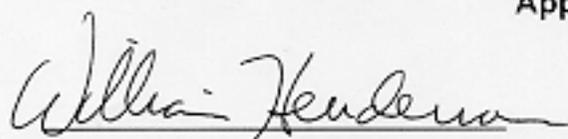
A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of
North Carolina State University
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

Department of English

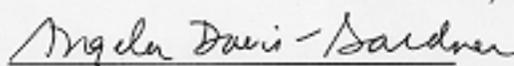
Raleigh

2000

Approved by:






Chair of Advisory Committee

Biography

Born in Edenton, North Carolina on May 25, 1971, Dean Roughton lived most of his years prior to college in Columbia, North Carolina. He has been a student, farmhand, bagboy, carpenter, plumber, roofer, convenience store clerk, shrimp boat deckhand and college instructor. All of these experiences helped develop who he is as person and a writer, as well as providing material for his fiction.

Roughton received his B.A. in English from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 1997. After earning his M.A. in English at North Carolina State University, he will be continuing his work in writing fiction and teaching on the university level.

Acknowledgements

I thank my parents, Wayne and Frances Roughton, for their love and for their continued support of all my endeavors, both personal and academic. While my interests are sometimes ones that they do not share, they have always encouraged me to pursue my own dreams. I also want to thank my brother Shannon, my sister June, my brother-in-law Chuck, and my niece Ginny for their interest in my pursuits and for the smiles they have provided over the years.

I would like to thank my committee members Bill Henderson, Dr. Harry West, and especially Angela Davis-Gardner for their time and energy involved in my thesis work. I would also like to acknowledge Angela Davis-Gardner for her wonderful writing workshops of which I am lucky to have been able to be a part.

Thanks to Jodi French who was there when I first began to write fiction, whose support helped me write through the blocks and whose continued friendship is very valuable to me.

A special thank you to the people of eastern North Carolina, and in particular the coffee drinking crew, for your many stories of people, places, and things filled with the local flavor. It is without any reservation on my part that I have blatantly ripped off specific details from you to give my stories the ring of authenticity. That's the price you pay for filling my eyes with smoke and my ears with gossip ever since I was old enough to have memories.

Finally, I would like to thank Jennifer Garling. Her love, inspiration and motivation have been invaluable to me during the often grueling process of revision.

Table of Contents

Revival.....	1
The Color of the Sun.....	21
Cigarettes and Soap.....	43
Fish Stories.....	55
When the Sax Man Blows <i>Windmills</i>	78

Revival

Eli Davies nudged the *Lady Splendor's* bow up against the pole and cut the wheel hard so that the momentum caused her to glide in perfectly parallel to the dock. He smiled. He knew the preacher hadn't had such a smooth ride on fishing trips with other members of the congregation, and those amateur fishermen couldn't have found the honey holes that he did.

"Catch a hold of that pole there, Reverend, and I'll tie her off."

The preacher threw both his arms around the pole in a great bear hug as Eli stepped up onto the dock. Tying off the ropes, he stifled a laugh. The front of the preacher's blue button-up shirt was wet from rubbing against the pole, and a vein on his pale forehead had popped out from exertion. His loafers had begun to slowly slide on the wet boat bottom, but he didn't let go of the pole. He looked as if he were on a torture rack being pulled from opposite ends, and his whole thin body seemed about to separate at the waist. If it had been anyone besides the preacher looking so ridiculous in his boat, Eli would never let them aboard again.

"I got her, Reverend. You can turn loose now."

The preacher breathed out with a huff. "Thank goodness. When Marvin Johnson and I went out, we had one heck of a time docking. I didn't want anything to happen this time."

Eli gritted his teeth at the mention of Marvin's name. Marvin, a friend of his once upon a time, was his main rival for the open Deaconship.

"No need to worry about that. I've had a lot more practice at this than old Marvin has. Hand me those rod and reels there, and I'll stow them in the back of the truck."

"Certainly," the preacher said passing up the fishing poles.

"I'll be right back to help you with the cooler, Reverend."

Eli walked to the back of the pick-up and laid the rods down to one side. He crawled into the cab and started the engine so that he could run the air conditioner. He wanted the preacher to be as comfortable as possible.

As he stepped out of the truck, Eli heard the preacher coming toward him.

"Eli, do you think we might have time to cook a few of these trout before service? I do love fresh fish." He was struggling with the cooler by himself, ice and fish sloshing inside as it bounced off his hip with each step.

"Oh, I expect so," Eli replied, taking the cooler from the preacher and setting it on the back of the truck. "Won't take no time for me to clean em and then only five or ten minutes for Marjorie to fry em up. Hop on in the truck. I'll get us a couple of colas out of the cooler, and then we can be on our way."

As the preacher got into the cab of the truck, Eli opened the lid of the cooler and raked around on the side where the drinks were buried, careful not to

jam his hand on the fins of any fish. He grabbed two cans and wiped the ice from them before closing the cooler. He smiled; things were going well indeed.

He crawled in the truck and passed the preacher a cola.

“You know, Reverend. I’ve been thinking. If a man breaks an oath to God, like say, breaking his marriage vows, is he fit to be a leader in the church?”

Everyone knew about Marvin Johnson’s affair last year with the mail lady. In a three-month period, the Johnsons received enough packages too big for the mailbox to start their own Wal-Mart. Eli’s wife, Marjorie, had commented more than once that it took an unusually long time for the Johnsons to sign for their packages. This had prompted Eli to ask Marvin after Men’s Fellowship one night just what he had been getting so much of in the mail. Marvin had replied with a grin, “Oh, just stuff.”

“Well, Eli, the Bible does say ‘Judge not lest ye be judged.’ But then again, you and I both know that an adulterer would not make a good role model.”

“I reckon you’re right there, Reverend,” Eli said, trying to contain a grin as he pulled the truck onto the edge of rock road that led from the docks to town.

He was feeling pretty secure about the Deaconship when that all too familiar bicycle came into view. God damn it. Leave it to Samuel to mess everything up. Maybe he was too busy riding in and out of mud puddles to bother with the truck. Eli continued the slow drive up the road trying to ignore the boy on the bicycle.

But as they got closer, the boy looked up and, grinning, jumped off the bike while it was still rolling, allowing it to veer out in front of the truck before doing a slight U-turn and collapsing at the side of the road.

“Goodness!” the preacher exclaimed bracing his hands against the dash. Eli smiled; they were going all of five miles an hour.

The boy stood there in the middle of the road still grinning.

Damn it all to hell. “Reverend, that there is Samuel. He helps me and some of the other crabbers sometimes. He works real good, but he’s not just right in the head. Don’t worry if he calls you ‘Daddy’. He calls every man that is bigger than him daddy, which is about everybody cause he’s so short.”

Eli eased the truck ahead around the bicycle and up to where Samuel was standing with his arms extended, both hands in the thumbs-up sign. He was quite a sight in his Spiderman T-shirt and bell-bottom corduroy pants with no shoes. He was small to be sixteen. Eli felt bad on Samuel’s birthday. Other kids his age were getting their driver’s licenses, but Samuel would probably never be able to drive a car. Everyone knew that Samuel’s mother had continued to drink while pregnant with him, but no one ever talked about it. Eli had gotten him the bike and felt a bit better when Samuel made such a production out of getting the thing with its squeezable horn and metallic flecked purple handlebar grips.

Samuel walked up to the window on the drive’s side and, with the rest of him hidden by the door, looked like a huge bodiless grin. Eli rolled down the window.

“Hey, Daddy! You got fifty cents? I want a soda.”

“I got drinks in the cooler. You can have one if you want it.”

“I don’t like that kind.”

“Samuel, you don’t even know what kind it is.”

“What kind is it?”

“Cola.”

“I don’t like that kind. You got fifty cents. I want a soda.”

“Here,” Eli said reaching into his pocket for the change. “But I’m going to start keeping track of all these fifty cents you get. You ask for fifty cents three or four times a day. What did you do with the twenty dollars I give you for helping me the other day?”

The boy lowered his eyes to the ground and half-whispered, “Mama says a man got to pay his way.” He put his hand up to the side of his face gingerly and still looking down said, “I work good.”

“I know you do, Samuel. Here,” Eli repeated handing the boy the money. “You want to help me tomorrow?”

Samuel looked up, his eyes brightening as he rubbed the two quarters against each another. “Yeah. Whatchya want me to do, Daddy? Want me to wash your truck? Billy Hooper showed me how to Armor-All the tires. I can do it good too. Want me to Armor-All the tires?”

“No, I got to take up some pots. They’re getting algaed over, and they won’t catch crabs when they get like that. Be at the boat at 4:30 in the morning if you want to help me.”

“Ok. Who’s that?” the boy asked sticking his arm through the window and pointing at the preacher.

“That’s Reverend Wilks.”

“Hello, Samuel. How are you?”

“Hey, Daddy. I ain’t never seen you. You preaching at the Revival?”

“Yes, son. Would you like to come tonight?”

Samuel stepped back from the truck and eyed the preacher nervously.

“Mama says them Jehovah’s Witnesses is full of shit.”

“Samuel!”

“That’s alright, Eli. Samuel, our church is not the Kingdom Hall for Jehovah’s Witnesses. We’re...”

“Mama says them Catholics molest young boys.”

“We’re not Catholic either. We’re...”

“Mama says them Baptists are hypocrites.”

“I see. Well, maybe some are, but at our church we try to live for the Lord.”

“Mama says that Jesus was stupid to just let them drive nails in his hands. You ever had nails drove in your hands? I got a fishhook in my finger before. It bled a lot. Mama poured peroxide on it and said it wouldn’t burn. It burned like hell. I poured turpentine on a cat’s tail hole one time. You shoulda seen him go. He ran around in circles for a hour and then he took off under the house. It’s cold under our house. I found a nickel under there one time. You got fifty cents?”

“I told you, Reverend. Samuel you ought not to talk that way, and I done and give you fifty cents. We got to go now. Come in the morning if you want to work.”

Eli rolled up the window and put the truck in gear before Samuel could say anything else. He pulled off and, out of the rearview mirror, saw the boy get on his bicycle and ride straight for another truck that was coming up the road. For a second, Eli’s stomach tightened until he saw the bike veer out of the truck’s path.

“Reverend, I want to apologize for Samuel and his mouth.”

“No need to. It’s obvious that he hasn’t been taught any better. He’s just a reflection of his parents’ apathy.”

“I guess you’ve got a point there.”

At four-thirty, there was a gentle offshore breeze that rocked the boat slightly. It would be nice on the water. Eli wished Samuel had showed up. If he had, they could have brought in all the pots that needed cleaning. He waited until a quarter to five before casting off. Most of the other crabbers were already headed out of the creek, and Eli was determined not to be the last to leave the dock. He eased the *Lady Splendor* out into the middle of the creek and bumped the throttle up one notch. Just as he was coming to the last section of dock, he heard the piercing yell, “Daaaa-deeee! Daddy, wait!”

Eli knocked the throttle into idle and let the momentum carry the boat up against the dock. He heard the flap-flap of feet on the wooden slats and turned to see Samuel running for all he was worth.

“Wait, Daddy! I’m coming!”

Samuel jumped as he reached the boat and almost went over the other side as he skidded across the dewy deck and crashed into the washboard.

“You alright, boy?”

“Yeah, let’s go,” Samuel replied, bouncing up as if the fiberglass deck were a trampoline.

“Well, where were you? It’s not like you to be late.”

“I’m sorry, Daddy. Mama said for me to leave my bike in case she needed to go to the store later.”

“How’d you get here then?”

“I walked up until I heard the boat motor. Then I ran.”

“Samuel, that’s over six miles to your mama’s trailer. You shoulda called me to come get you,” Eli said. He remembered only after he said it that there was no phone at Samuel’s.

“I don’t mind. I chased a possum on the way. He kept trying to go in a ditch, but I headed him off at the pass.”

“Alright, well get up there and locate them channel markers.” Eli didn’t need the boy’s help for that. There was no fog to obscure the lights, but it made Samuel happy to point out the markers. Eli saw no harm in that.

They worked hard all day. Eli gaffed the corks of the crab pots and pulled in the line. Samuel lifted the pots out of the water and dumped the few crabs there were into boxes before stacking them in the pot-rack that extended off the back of the boat. Mid-morning, Eli knocked the boat into neutral and poured himself a cup of coffee.

“You had any breakfast, Samuel?”

“Yeah, I had me some hotdogs and peanut butter.”

The combination of foods did not bother Eli. By now, he was used to hearing Samuel describe worse. One of his favorite dishes was fried chicken with marshmallows melted on top.

“Well, if you get hungry I got some sausage biscuits here. A man needs his energy to work, you know.” Eli took a biscuit from the bag, unwrapped it, and took a bite.

“How’s your mama doing, Samuel?” Haven’t seen her out in a long time.”

“She’s okay. She got fired from the Piggly Wiggly. She said the manager wanted her to work above and beyond the call of duty and his breath stunk.”

“Well, you be sure and tell her about Revival this week.”

“Mama don’t take to church much. She says she don’t like crowds. She’d rather pray in her room. Sometimes I hear her at night hollering to God, and then she comes out all sweaty and gets a drink. I asked a Daddy one time what was Mama hollering about and he said that she was thanking the Lord for the blessing he gave her. Mama told him to shut the fuck up.”

Eli nearly choked on a bite of biscuit. “Samuel, don’t say that.”

“Say that?”

“That bad word.”

“What bad word?”

“That word your mama said.”

“What? Shut up? That’s a bad word?”

“No, Samuel. Fuck. Don’t say that. If you say that out loud, people will think you ain’t got no upbringing.”

“I heard you say it before.”

“Well, I shouldn’t say it in front of people either.”

“It’s okay to say it as long as nobody hears you, huh?”

“No, it’s... Never mind, Samuel. Let’s take this load of pots in,” Eli said, stuffing in the empty wrapper in the bag and returning to the wheel.

Eli put the boat in gear and watched as Samuel teased a crab with a stick. He wished Jessie would quit having so many men at the house, at least around Samuel. The boy was confused enough as it was. But no one would ever say anything to her about it. Even after two decades, she still held a certain amount of sympathy with people because her father, a preacher, had kicked her out of the house when he caught her and her prom date just necking in the driveway. She had been on her own ever since, her parents moving away a few weeks after the incident. She had gradually begun to get a reputation in town, never dating the same man for long. Eli had thought that she would change after having Samuel, but she didn’t. Marjorie called it “abandonment issues,” but Eli thought she was just damn lonely.

It was hot that evening as they brought in the last load. The morning breeze had died out, and a legion of gnats ventured out over the creek from the marshy shoreline. Samuel eyed the dock and paced the deck.

“Hey, there’s my bike!” he shouted, pointing at the Marina Sandwich Shop, which was just across from the spot where Eli usually docked. His spot and the shop were separated only by the loading and unloading dock that was mostly used by sport fishermen.

Eli looked over at the shop in time to see Samuel’s mother come out carrying a huge ice-cream cone and a brown paper bag. Jessie looked as good as ever in her yellow summer dress. The open back showed no tan lines, evidence that she still lay out topless in her backyard. Her legs were long. Eli bit his lip.

The *Lady Splendor* bumped hard against the dock, hard enough that Eli had to shift his weight to keep from losing his balance.

“Samuel, tie her off.”

Samuel clambered up on the dock and first tied off the bow and then the stern. He jumped back in the boat and began unloading the pots.

Eli glanced at the sandwich shop. Jessie was licking her ice cream slowly. She was engaged in a conversation with two men from out of town who were pulling their shiny bass boat out of the water. One man stood at the front of the boat trailer cranking the reel to load the boat, while the other stood down in the loading area in the edge of the water looking up at Jessie who was leaned up against the side-wall. Eli could make out only murmurs and giggles. Jessie

made eye contact with him and, without losing it, tilted her cone toward the fisherman in the water to be licked. She then waved to Eli. He looked away.

“Samuel, you want to help me clean these pots tomorrow?” The smell of algae and rotting baitfish was much stronger now than it had been on the open water. A washing was long overdue.

“Sure, Daddy. You got fifty cents?”

Eli looked back at the sandwich shop. Jessie was crawling in the cab of the bass fisherman’s truck, then over the passenger to sit in the middle.

“Yeah, here,” he replied absently. “I guess you better go get your bike. Your mama left it over to the marina. Put it on the back of the truck. I’ll give you a ride to your mama’s house.”

“Okay, Daddy,” Samuel replied, walking to the drink machine outside the sandwich shop before retrieving his bike.

They loaded the bike on the back of the truck, and Samuel hopped in behind it. On the way, Eli kept checking the rearview mirror to make sure Samuel was still there. Once he had jumped off the back to catch a turtle at the edge of a canal. Today, he was busy drinking the grape soda he’d bought and admiring a dirty penny he’d picked up before getting on the back of the truck.

At the house trailer, Eli pulled up next to an empty truck with a boat on a trailer. It was the truck Jessie had gotten in at the marina. He put his own truck in park and got out to help Samuel with the bicycle. Samuel walked back to inspect the bass boat while Eli took the bike out of the truck. The door of the trailer opened, and a man stepped out on the porch. It was the same one who

had been driving the truck earlier, except now he didn't have on shoes or hat. His head was bald except for a little scruff on the sides.

"Hey there, you get away from..." the man stopped short and turned towards the trailer listening to someone inside.

Eli could see inside the trailer when the man turned sideways. Another man was sitting on the couch next to Jessie who was slouched down with her legs crossed so that her knees were almost level with her eyes. Both of them held glasses.

The man turned back towards Samuel but said nothing more.

"Hey, Daddy! Where's your hat?"

The man's eyes widened, and he went inside slamming the door behind him.

"Here, Samuel. Take your bike. Be there about seven in the morning."

"Okay, Daddy."

Eli got in his truck and drove off, checking the rear-view mirror until he rounded a curve.

Eli and Marjorie arrived that night early enough to get a front pew. Marvin was nowhere in sight. Maybe he was skipping tonight. That would surely be a mark against him.

From the back of the church, came the cry of, "Daddy!" Eli froze. He knew it had been the right thing to do to ask Samuel to church, but he prayed

that boy would not come bounding up the aisle to sit with him. The last thing he needed in his pitch to become Deacon was to have the boy come clamoring in beside him in church and start the rumors flying again.

Once more, "Daddy!"

Eli turned his head just enough so that he could see down the aisle with his peripheral vision. He grinned. It was only Deacon Harrison's little boy trying to get his father's attention. The Deacon was engaged in a conversation with someone. Eli turned his head all the way around. It was Marvin. Damn it. Deacon Harrison was talking to Marvin. Eli started to look away, but Marvin caught his eye. Eli forced himself to wave, but Marvin just smiled back and nodded his head.

"Damn Marvin," he muttered.

"What's that, dear?" Marjorie asked looking up from the hymnbook she was studying.

"Nothing." After more than sixteen years of marriage, Eli knew this response would stop any further questions.

The Deacon and Marvin walked up the aisle and took the seats to the side on the raised platform in front of the congregation. Marvin's hair was plastered back with Brill cream and he wore a shiny new three-piece suit bought no doubt just to impress the preacher and church elders. He looked slick. It made Eli think of the affair with the post lady and how Marvin had gotten away with it. That Marvin. He always had the right look, knew the right thing to say at just the

right time. He wasn't anything more than a used car salesman, and he was trying to sell the church a lemon.

"What in the world is Marvin doing sitting in Deacon Avery's chair?" he half snapped at his wife.

"Oh, Deacon Avery is sick. I expect Mr. Johnson is up there to help out with the collection plate tonight."

"They could've asked me," again muttering.

"What's that, dear?"

"Nothing."

Eli began to boil. Seeing Marvin up there smiling all over himself, it was obvious he only wanted to be Deacon to look good in front of everybody. He was so concerned with appearances.

When it was time for the offering, Eli smiled. He drug out his wallet and took out a ten dollar bill. He held it high enough for everyone to see, but not so high as to be obvious. Marvin stopped beside Eli and passed the plate to him. Eli took his time placing the bill in the collection plate. Marvin wasn't smiling so big now.

The rest of the service was a blur. Eli could only stare at Marvin and think that he must get to the preacher first after church to ask him to Sunday dinner.

Driving up to the dock early the next morning, Eli could see Samuel already there stretching a water hose from the marina to the stacks of pots. His bike lay in a heap beside the dock.

“Good morning, Samuel. You ate yet?”

“Yeah, I had me some cupcakes and Swiss cheese.”

“Well, I got the bleach and stuff on the back of the truck if you want to mix it up in the buckets.”

“Okay, daddy.”

By three o'clock, Samuel was spraying off the last of the newly scrubbed pots. He was drenched from head to toe and talked non-stop.

“Gonna rinse you, you nasty ass pots! Think I can't? You just sit there and take it then. What did you say, you dirty pot?” He rolled to the ground and sprayed the pot closest to him. “Hah, got you!”

“Alright, Samuel. That's good enough. You'd better spray yourself off and put up the hose.”

Samuel's shirt and pants were now covered in sandy dirt and grass. He grinned and pointed the hose at himself.

“You dirty Samuel. I'm gonna rinse you off too.”

After he finished rinsing off, Samuel skinned up the hose and returned it to the marina. The truck with the bass boat pulled up next to him as he walked back, and Jessie got out.

“Thanks,” she said to the driver and waved as he pulled off. “Samuel! Samuel, come here!”

Samuel shuffled his feet but did not move forward.

“Get your ass over here right now!”

He walked towards her with his head down.

She raised her hand and slapped him.

“I thought I told you...”

He covered his face.

“...to go to the store...”

She struck him in the back with her fist.

“...and get me some juice...”

He crumpled to the ground.

“...before you went to work!”

“Jessie! That’s enough,” Eli called out. “Don’t you hit that boy again..”

She turned to face Eli. “What?”

Eli walked over to her. “I said not to hit that boy again. You ain’t got no reason to be hitting him like that.”

“Don’t you tell me how to treat him. He’s my son. I raised him. By myself, without no help from *you* or nobody else.”

“That may be, but you keep on like that and Social Services is gonna take him from you.”

“What for? Punishing him when he needs it?”

“No. For hitting him and living the way you do.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“For God’s sake, Jessie. You ever thought about why he calls every man he sees ‘Daddy’?”

Jessie just stared at him. He kept his eyes on her as he kneeled down beside the boy, placing a hand on his shoulder.

“He doesn’t know who the hell his Daddy is. With all the men you have in and out of your house.... Shit, any man with a pint of liquor’s got a shot at being his Daddy.”

“You go to hell, Eli Davies. Seems to me you and Marvin and some more of you damned hypocrites used to like drink a few too. Or have you forgot your bachelor party night?”

He still had not forgiven Marvin for taking him there that night, nor had he forgiven himself for what happened. Marjorie never knew about it; no one really knew for sure. But he knew. He couldn’t ever forget.

“That was a long time ago, Jessie.”

“Yeah, about seventeen years ain’t it?”

“We all make mistakes, Jessie. The thing is to learn from them and not go on living a certain way.”

“You son of a bitch. You think it’s easy raising him? You should try it then. I get goddamned lonely you know. It’s hard to keep a man coming around whey they see Samuel and find out that he’s... that he’s like he is.”

Eli moved from his knee and sat a few feet away from Samuel. “Ain’t no reason to hit him all the time.”

“Fuck you.” She wiped a tear from her face and brushed back her hair. “I was just wondering, Eli,” she said, bending over and placing one hand above his head against the wall so that her breasts almost fell out of her loose fitting blouse into his face. He averted his eyes. “What does he call you?”

Eli thought about that. He thought about church. He hated the possibility of having to call Marvin, Deacon Johnson.

“What does he call you, Eli?”

She leaned over and kissed him on the neck. It felt good. Marjorie didn’t kiss him like that. He closed his eyes and let it soak in.

“You know, Eli. It’s been a long time,” she said emphasizing the word long in a sultry voice as she kissed him on the lips.

He opened his eyes quickly and looked around to see if anyone had been watching. Thank God no one had.

“Jessie.”

“Hmm?”

“Get away from me.”

She stood up. “Eli Davies, I hope you rot in hell. She then turned on her heel and walked into the marina.

Eli stood and helped Samuel to his feet.

“Boy, I reckon you better put your bike in the back of the truck.”

Samuel walked over to the dock to pick up his bike. Jessie came out of the marina carrying a two-liter drink and stormed past without speaking to either of them.

Samuel watched as his mother walked up the road alone.

“Mama’s thirsty.”

He hopped on his bike and pedaled a few feet before doing a U-turn and coming to a stop beside Eli. A huge grin returned to his face.

Eli watched Jessie as she walked up the road, her hips swaying. He stared after her until the sound of a boat motor broke his concentration.

“Here, let’s put the bike in the truck. I’ll take you home.”

As they loaded the bicycle, the sound of the boat motor became louder. Samuel crawled on the back of the truck. A bass boat pulled up alongside the dock about fifty feet away. It was Marvin’s boat, and he and the preacher were in it. Marvin waved and smiled that smile.

“No, Samuel. Don’t get back there. Ride up front with me.”

Samuel hopped in the truck beside Eli.

“Do you have a shirt with buttons, Samuel?”

“Yeah, I got a blue one.”

Eli put the truck in gear.

“Good. We’re going to stop by your mama’s house and get it and some other things.”

“What we gonna do, Daddy?”

Eli looked in the rear view mirror and saw Marvin staring after them. Eli shook his head. Deacon Johnson.

“Huh, daddy? What we gonna do?”

“I don’t know exactly, Samuel. But first we’re going to Revival.”

The Color of the Sun

The sunrise is merely yellow this morning. It was much the same yesterday. I've been hoping all week for a little atmospheric interference to brushstroke the horizon and paint me happy. Last week, I saw a sunset full of rich pinks and blues while driving down the freeway. I wanted to reach up and grab a handful of sky and eat it like meringue; it reminded me of the way I used to have an overpowering desire as a kid to pop the shiniest and most colorful marbles in my mouth and chew them up like gum. But this sun. It is ugly, sickly even. Like a giant broken egg yolk smeared across the horizon.

Slowly, I become aware of a phone ringing inside the dorm. It's coming from my suite. Is it mine? The dull sound seeps through my ears and down my torso. I let it ring. She won't hang up though. The sound reverberates through me; I'm a human pager set on vibrate.

Ring. Ring. She won't stop. My spinal column feels like it's about to fuse with the icy balcony. My boxers afford little insulation. Taking a last sip of bland coffee, I stand up and walk from the balcony back into my dorm room.

I pick up the receiver and try to sound a little groggy. "Umm, he... he..llo?"

“Don’t even try it, Stephon. Sunrise was nearly ten minutes ago. I saw it; it was yellow. I bet you tried to make it orange, huh?”

Jessica knows me so well. She definitely gets top billing in my category of “woman as friend.”

“Yeah, well, I didn’t have any luck. It’s hard to convince celestial bodies to change for me.”

“But that doesn’t stop you from trying, does it?”

“One can always hope.”

“I don’t know why you have such a fascination with the sky.”

“I don’t know. It’s kind of an inspiration thing I guess.”

“Yeah, well, speaking of inspiration, I’ve got someone I want you to meet.”

“Oh God, Jess, you know I don’t like you fixing me up.”

“Give me some credit will you? It won’t be a date. Besides, you’ve been in a funk too long. You need cheering up.”

“I don’t know if I’m up for it, Jess.”

“C’mon, Steph. It’s been over six months since you and Jamie broke up.”

Jessica tactfully omits the fact that it was Jamie who did the breaking up, citing a need for “more personal space” only after she slept with a guy she met during girls’ night out. “Besides, it’s not like I’m trying to put her into your category of ‘woman as lover’. You know I’m trying to get myself promoted to that category.” She laughs. “Seriously though,” she continues, “just meet her. We can all three go out tonight as a group, and I’ll even hold your hand.”

“You do not amuse me, woman.”

“Look, Odessa is very attractive and intelligent. What more could you want from a girl?”

“Odessa?”

“Yes. Odessa Rossier. She’s from my hometown and came up to Chapel Hill to visit for a few days. She says she’s getting culturally starved at home. You know how that feels -- to live in Small Town, USA.”

This whole time I’m repeating softly, “Odessa, Odessa, Odessa.” It sounds silky. It makes my tongue feel luxurious.

“I can hear you, you know.” She knows I don’t care. “I see you like the name. Well, you don’t have much of a choice now, do you? You’re going to have to see the girl to see if she matches the name. Besides, she is dying to meet you.”

“Well, just how does she know about me, little Miss Meddlesome?”

“Umm. Now don’t get mad. It was a complete accident. I had some of your poems sitting out on the coffee table. In fact, I was reading some when Odessa got here. She just sat down and started reading too. By the time I knew what she was doing, she was in deep and I couldn’t very well ask her to stop then.” She pauses ever so slightly before asking, “Are you mad?”

I think about this for a moment. I want to answer truthfully. That’s the kind of relationship Jessica and I have. I could tell her she looks bloated without fear of reprisal. The truth is I am unsure how I feel about the matter.

“Steph? You there?”

“Yes.”

“Are you upset with me now?”

“No. I suppose not. It’s not like it was intentional or anything, I guess.”

“Good, because after she read them, she was dying to know what you looked like. I showed her the picture of you and me on Bourbon Street last spring break. You know the one where you don’t have on a shirt, and you’re covered in beads?”

“Jesus Christ, Jessica. I’m piss drunk in that picture. You didn’t have to show her that for God’s sake.” I smile in spite of myself. Mardi Gras. Jessica and I got ripped on that trip. We ended up kissing at the hotel the night that picture was taken. Thank God I passed out when she went to the bathroom. It would have been very awkward the next day had we crossed the friendship line further than that. “You just wait. I’ve got a picture of you too, you know. Does ‘show us your tits!’ ring a bell with you?”

“You wouldn’t! C’mon, Steph. I’m just trying to cheer you up, and she’s really a fun person to be around.”

“All right already. Stop trying to sell me a car. I’ll go, but it is *not* a date.” Anyway, I never have seen an Odessa before.

“Fine, it’s *not* a date. And if you don’t like her,” she says laughing a little, “then you and me can go home and make hot, passionate *Harlequin Romance* love.”

Jessica and I often flirt even though we both know it doesn’t mean anything. She knows me better than Jamie ever did.

“Ooh, baby. But only if you wear a baggy T-shirt and those sexy Granny drawers.”

“Hey, I happen to like my baggy T-shirts, thank you very much.”

“Well, why don’t you grab you a man with a T-shirt fetish and bring him out tonight too?”

“You know I don’t have time for all that nonsense. I have to concentrate on my schoolwork. Besides, you know you’re the only man for me.”

“Of course. But seriously though, Jess, don’t try to get your friend and me together when you get feeling like mommy after you’ve had a few drinks.”

“Who me? Try to find you a ‘lover’? No way. You just go have a good run, and don’t worry about a thing. Bye sweetie. Love ya.”

I hang up the phone unsure of how I feel about the whole situation. I know Jessica means well, but the whole college night life thing feels to me like something from *Wild Kingdom*. It’s so...predatory.

I decide not to go down that road this morning. I sit down on the floor and stretch out instead. Matters of the body are sometimes a great way to get away from matters of the mind. After stretching out, I alternate between sets of forty sit-ups and forty push-ups. My muscles are pretty loose after the first set. The second set, I’m sweating. The third set, I begin to hear the ringing of the blood in my ears. The last set, my muscles are burning, and I’m completely in the zone. I keep going until I feel like the veins in my arms will explode through my skin. Now, I am alive and ready to run. I quickly put on shorts, a T-shirt and running shoes. Leaving my dorm, I take the steps two at a time and hit the sidewalk

running. I am barely conscious of my surroundings. My feet seem to hover over the sidewalk, and I run on a cushion of air. I go on like this for miles.

I could probably keep going, but out of nowhere Jamie pops into my head. What the hell does more personal space mean exactly? Isn't that the same thing as a Fuck for Free card in the College Dating version of Monopoly? I honestly don't know why we dated as long as we did. We had nothing in common really, except good sex. Sometimes when it was really good, I got a kind of runner's high. I laugh aloud at this. Maybe that's why I run so much these days; after all, I don't like chocolate.

I try to quit thinking about it all, try to keep running. But then I think of the word "Odessa." I like the sound of it. It's creamy. Now I begin to think about this person. What is she like? Will I like her, or will I even care if I like her? It's too late now. No use running anymore today. I'm back in an interactive world.

The return trip to my dorm seems to take days. Back in my suite, I shower. Yesterday, I took a steamy one, so I think maybe cold today. I step under the frigid water, and goose bumps break out all over my flesh.

In the cafeteria, I get a western omelet, loaded with peppers and onions. It promises to be flavorful. No such luck. I have to give the eggs a liberal dousing of hot sauce just to taste them.

The rest of my day is just a blur. I don't really know what any of my professors have to say. It's not like my mind is somewhere else; it's more like it's not anywhere at all. I remember that my history professor had chalk smudges on his face. It made me think of zombies.

After classes, I stop by a coffee shop, having skipped lunch. I order a doughnut with my black coffee. They both taste like cardboard. Maybe a night out will do me good. Jessica always seems to know how to bring me back from the edge.

She and I have been close for over three years now. When we were both freshmen, a mutual friend introduced us at a frat party. I guess we hit it off so well because we both hated that whole scene. She decided to leave, and I walked her home. That was the first of many long and intimate conversations we've had. Funny how in all this time, the intimacy has been limited to the conversations, well except for that one kiss. I guess she knows me too well for something more to happen between us.

Walking back to the dorm, I see some baby chipmunks playing in a pile of dry leaves. They play hide and seek, alternately poking their heads up out of the leaves and then swimming down in the middle of the pile. They are funny to watch, and I am suddenly ready for a night out.

I call Jessica to verify the plans for tonight. "Hey, sex-kitten."

"Well, somebody seems to be in a good mood this afternoon."

"Yeah, just thinking about your smiling face and cute ass."

"Did you say smiling ass?"

I laugh. "Yeah, cheek to cheek."

She laughs. "Well, I'm glad you're feeling perky, because it feels like a tequila night to me."

"That could work. Where do you want to go for dinner?"

“I thought something spicy. Maybe Mexican.”

She knows me well. “Sounds good. Meet you at El Rodeo at say seven?”

“Why don’t Odessa and I pick you up? That way you don’t have to leave your car at the parking deck all night.”

“Okay. See you at seven then.”

“Cool. Bye, Steph.”

I hang up determined to have a good time tonight, not just for me, but for Jessica too. She worries over me like a mother or a wife. Once when I had a bad case of the flu, she stayed with me in my dorm room and waited on me hand and foot for three days. I love her to death.

I try to read a little Thoreau, but I keep going over the same passage. After a while, I toss the book aside and get ready to shower again. We’re having Mexican so I think a scorcher is called for. The water turns my skin red as soon as it hits me. I know what it must feel like to be a lobster. I quickly lather and rinse off but remain under the hot water for some time after that. The steam opens my lungs to their peak capacity, and I feel like I could suck up enough air to swim down the drain and all the way to the ocean.

When I go back to my room, Jessica and Odessa are there. I’m wearing only a towel.

“Oops. Sorry, Steph. We’ll wait outside.”

I can’t help noticing Odessa as they walk out the door. Jessica was right; she is very attractive. Her lips are full, and her eyes are the greenest I

have ever seen. She has long reddish-brown hair in a spiral perm that goes half-way down her back. I love long hair. She's about 5' 9" and has an incredible figure. She doesn't seem to mind showing it off either in her skin tight black dress. Jessica on the other hand is in her usual attire, jeans and loose fitting T-shirt. She looks very comfortable.

I quickly dress and call the girls back in the room so they can sit down while I finish getting ready. Brushing my hair in the mirror, I can't help but steal glances at Odessa.

"Okay. I'm ready whenever you guys are."

We leave my room and walk to the elevator. It stops one floor below and several more people get on, crowding us into the back of the elevator. Odessa is pressed tightly against me, and I get a whiff of her perfume. I have to stop myself from bending down to sniff at her neck.

In the car on the way to the restaurant, Odessa engages Jessica in conversation.

"Jessica, did I tell you? I'm going to New York for Spring Break this year after all. Daddy already got me tickets to *Cats*. Of course, now that David and I have broken up, I've got an extra ticket. It's not like he would have wanted to go anyway. He's all about Cancun. How clichè. So anyway, do you wanna go with?"

"Maybe. It depends on how much money I can save between now and then."

"So, Steph, have you ever seen it? *Cats* I mean."

“No, I can’t say that I’ve had the pleasure.” She’s got to be kidding.

“Well, If Jessica makes the trip, she can tell you all about it when she comes back.”

“Yeah, that’d really be something.”

Jessica shoots me a look in the rear-view mirror, and I stick my tongue out at her. Odessa begins telling her about some recent dinner party, and I tune them out.

At the restaurant, Odessa takes us into art, telling about a recent trip to a museum somewhere in the mountains. She hasn’t really done anything to provoke me, but I begin to dislike her for some reason. Still, the dress she is wearing is pretty damn sexy. If only she could shut the hell up for a few minutes, or at least try not to be so pretentious. I wonder what kind of “lover” she would turn out to be.

When the waiter brings the chips and salsa, I ask for a dish of fresh jalapeños. Whenever Odessa speaks, I find myself eating another pepper. If she keeps talking, I think my tongue will be burned completely in two. Maybe she should eat some jalapeños.

“So, Stephon, I read some of your poems. I hope you don’t mind.”

I don’t say anything.

“I have to tell you,” she says leaning towards me, “they really moved me.”

“Well, thanks, I guess.”

“I love it when a man has a sense of culture,” she says touching me on my arm.

“Uh-huh.”

“David’s idea of high culture is to have a Heineken instead of a Budweiser with his bloody steak.”

Am I supposed to respond to this? So what if the guy likes beer and steak?

“That’s too bad. Here. Have a jalapeño,” I say shoving the dish at her.

“Umm, no thanks.”

The waiter comes, and we order Margaritas.

“So are you doing anything for Spring Break, Steph?” Odessa asks.

“Yeah, I thought I’d shoot down to Cancun for a few days.”

“Well, I’m sure that will be fun.”

“Yeah, I just hope it’s not too much of a cliché.” Jessica gives me a look, but I can’t help it.

“Oh, when, I said that I was just talking about David,” Odessa says. “He never wants to do anything new.”

“To each his own.”

“I suppose so.”

We sit quietly, and Jessica looks at me sternly as if to say, “Behave yourself.”

I gulp some of my Margarita by way of reply.

Odessa is scanning the walls of the restaurant.

“They have some interesting artwork here, don’t they?” she asks.

“Yeah, a lot of Aztec motifs,” Jess answers.

“I saw that painting once called *The Scream*. It was like a surreal Macaulay Culkin. You know *Home Alone*.” Odessa puts her hands to the sides of her face in imitation of the scream. “Seriously though, you could feel the agony in the picture.”

I can’t stand it anymore. That was just plain stupid. “I know what you mean. Whenever I feel gray, and I want to paint myself completely black...” At this point, Jessica kicks me under the table, but I ignore her. “...I lose myself in *Guernica*. Picasso has a brutal honesty that can block out everything else. It’s delicious.”

Odessa doesn’t say anything after this, and when our food arrives, we eat in silence.

After dinner, we go to a bar. We each have a beer and a tequila shooter. After two rounds of these, things begin to loosen up. I decide to make the best of it, and Odessa becomes even more friendly. We’re sitting roughly in a triangle on some wicker chairs on the veranda. Throughout the evening, Odessa frequently touches my arm. After the third round of drinks, she begins to cross and uncross her legs towards me very slowly. Very Sharon Stone. I can see clearly that she is wearing black thongs. Jamie used to have a pair just like them. Odessa catches my eye, and I see her smiling. Does she know I was looking? How could she not? She obviously wanted me to look. I glance at Jessica who seems not to have noticed anything. The situation is very uncomfortable. I can’t not look, and at the same time Odessa continues her incessant jabberings. I feel like crawling in a hole and pulling the dirt in over me.

As Odessa becomes more chatty, and I become less so, Jessica puts down her drink and stands up.

“I’ve got an idea,” she says, “why don’t we all go dancing?”

She knows I like to dance.

“That sounds like fun to me,” Odessa says.

“Sure. Why not?” I try to sound cheerful. I know if I can just make it to the dance floor, everything will be at least tolerable.

We each get a beer at the club. Odessa and Jessica stand around talking a little while, but I make a bee-line for the dance floor. They’re playing hard-driving dance music. I find a spot to myself in a corner and let the rhythm control me. I feel like I am jogging again; my body seems to move of its own accord.

Two girls come over to my corner. I think they want the extra space; the rest of the floor is so crowded, and I seem to have carved out a little niche for myself. They come directly up to me and without speaking a word begin to dance with me. The DJ mixes so well that it’s hard to tell where one song ends and the next begins. One of the girls moves behind me, and the other closes the gap in front. We form a kind of singular rhythmic creature. We dance and dance.

My concentration is broken as the girl in front steps back slightly to do a spin. From out of nowhere, Odessa takes her place. Odessa closes in on me, and the other two girls move away. Jessica comes over but doesn’t get too close. The DJ puts on some funky grinding music, and Odessa responds like a

charmed snake. She faces the same direction I do, and bends ever so slightly so as to move up and down the front of me.

I don't like this any more. Who does she think she is anyway? I walk off the dance floor. Jessica starts to come after me, but Odessa pulls her back and the two dance a little longer.

It's the last song, and I wait for them at the door. We catch a cab to Jessica's apartment. I roll down the window so I can breathe the fresh air.

Jessica pays for the cab, and Odessa goes on ahead into the house. I wait to walk in with Jess.

"You okay, Steph?"

"Yeah. I'm fine."

"Don't lie to me."

"No, really. I'm okay. I just got a little too hot in the club is all." I decide its better to tell her a little lie than to risk driving a wedge into Odessa's and her friendship or in mine and hers.

Inside, Odessa has fixed everyone a drink. We move to the couch, and Jessica puts on some CD's. I don't know who the group is, but they sound very mellow. Odessa continues to be overly friendly, insisting on touching or brushing against me when ever she speaks. We're all a little drunk.

I finish my drink, say goodnight, and go to Jessica's room. She always insists on putting me there when I crash at her place. She says she likes the couch better anyway. I shut the door and take off my clothes. As I stand there in my boxers, I hear a knock at the door.

“Hold on a second. I’m not dressed.”

Odessa walks in and closes the door behind her.

“Jessica sent me to see if you needed anything.”

“Umm, I’m not dressed, Odessa.”

“That’s okay. I don’t mind.”

Well what if I do? To hell with it. I stand up and face her. She doesn’t bat an eye.

“Odessa, I don’t really know you that well.”

“But I feel like I know you. Your poems are so beautiful -- so profound. I feel like I’ve seen into your soul.”

She’s either drunk or full of shit or both. I stand there at a loss for words; it’s all very weird.

“What’s the matter, Stephon?” she asks kicking off her heels. “Don’t you think I’m sexy?”

I don’t answer her. I can only stand there and wonder if she told David that she needs her own space. Is she trying to use her Fuck for Free card?

“Is that a no, then? Well, if it is, I bet I can change your mind.”

She locks the door, and turning towards me, unzips her dress, letting it fall to the floor. Those are definitely the same type of underwear Jamie used to own.

I feel sick. I want to tell her to get the hell out, but I don’t.

She steps toward me, and I step back bumping against the wall.

“Trying to run away from me? Don’t you want to be with me?” she says leaning in and kissing my chest.

Ten minutes ago I could have easily answered that question. Now it's not so simple. Her lips are soft against my chest, and she places my hand on her breast. She kisses me violently.

Somehow we end up on the floor in a tangled mass.

"Oh, Stephon."

It feels good to me too. "Yeah, Ja..." I catch myself. Jamie. That fucking bitch. I break the rhythm.

"What's wrong, Stephon?" Odessa asks, moving her hips beneath me.

"Nothing." To hell with her. She's not the only one who can use a Free card. I concentrate on what I'm doing. I block it all out, ignore my surroundings. I am running again.

Minutes later, we emerge sweaty and exhausted.

Suddenly, I need to be away from her. I stand up and put on my boxers.

"Stephon, that was great. You know what would make it perfect though?"

I walk in the bathroom without responding.

"It would be perfect if you would tell me how it made you feel. Like in your poems."

I want to tell her that she is a whore of the intellect, but it's hard to be sanctimonious at this point.

"Like what?"

"Anything. Just tell me how I make you feel."

How I feel? I feel angry with her for trying to gain something spiritual out of the experience while I just feel dirty.

“How you make me feel? You make me feel like... You make me feel like the center of a snowflake.”

“Oh, that’s so beautiful.”

Is she really *that* dense?

I walk out and shut the door behind me. On the way to the back door, I go through the living room. A pack of cigarettes lie on the coffee table, menthols I think. I light a cigarette and walk outside. It tastes like I’m smoking a cough drop. Just as I am finishing the cigarette, Jessica comes out to sit beside me.

“Smoking? What’s got into you?”

“It just seemed like the right thing to do.”

“Oh, so I take it she made it into the ‘lover’ category, huh?.”

“You might say that.”

Jessica turns her head away from me after that. What the hell did she expect?

We sit in silence for ages. Eventually, Jessica gets up to go check on Odessa and comes back to report she is asleep. Jessica sits on the step above me and rubs my shoulders and neck. It feels good; she makes me feel safe.

“Want to talk about it?” she asks.

“Nothing much to talk about.”

I scoot down one step and half turn my body so that I can put my head in Jessica’s lap. She strokes my hair and lets me just be.

Jessica says nothing for a few moments and then stands decisively and, pulling me by the hand, says, “Come with me.”

"Where are we going?"

"Just c'mon."

She leads me by the hand to the bathroom. I have no idea what is going through her head as she shuts and locks the door behind us. She walks over in front of the shower and slowly removes her jeans and T-shirt. She's wearing a deep purple bra and panties. They look very smooth and shiny. Silk maybe. No, satin. Whatever they are made of, they are very pretty and feminine. Nothing like the baggy clothes she wore out tonight. She removes these as well. I am unsure of what to do. I have never seen Jessica completely naked before. She stands there making no effort to cover herself.

Her body is wonderful. It is not the same hard body that Odessa has. Jessica's is more human. One breast is slightly larger than the other, and she has just the beginnings of a little belly. Her thighs are a little thick. Her pinkie toes curve inward. She has a light brown mole just below her left breast.

I feel as though I'm staring, so I look away. My attention can't help but be drawn to the bra and panties on the floor. They are in stark contrast to Jessica's jeans and T-shirt and look nothing at all like the cotton underwear that I've seen when we do laundry together. She seems to blush a little at my staring at her underthings and tucks them under her T-shirt with her toe.

I stand there waiting for some cue. She gets in the shower and turns on the water.

"Well, are you coming in here or not?"

I follow her into the shower.

“Are you going to keep those on?” she asks indicating my boxers.

“Uh, no,” I say, taking off the now wet boxers and tossing them out of the shower. How stupid.

Neither of us speaks as we stand under the spray. We get sufficiently wet, and Jessica takes a sponge from the shower rack and squirts it full of lavender gel. She scrubs me down and then washes my hair. She massages my scalp, and I feel the tension dissolve in an effervescent stream. She commands me to rinse off and then hands me the sponge. I imitate her actions making sure to spend adequate time on her scalp. Next, she lathers her legs and shaves one. She hands me the razor, but I hesitate.

“It’s okay. Go ahead.”

I begin shaving her leg. It’s a surprisingly easy process, yet I nick her skin at the knee. A tiny red trickle seeps out and mixes with the foam to become a pink chowder.

“Shit, Jess. I’m sorry,” I say as I try to give her back the razor.

“It’s ok, Steph. I think I’ll live. Besides I always have trouble in that spot myself.”

“Maybe you should finish.”

“No, it’s okay. You do it. Maybe just slow down a little bit though,” she says grinning.

“Okay.” I smile back and resume shaving the leg. When I finish, I try to hand her the razor again.

“You’re not done yet. Now do here,” she says, raising her arms over her head to reveal stubbly underarms. I lather the area and shave very, very gently. I’m still not done; she indicates her bikini line. When I am done, she has a neat triangle of hair. We both rinse off and stand there under the water a little while longer. She embraces me tightly and puts her head against my chest.

Slowly, she reaches up and gives me a kiss. It’s soft, like Mardi Gras. I kiss her back. She trails her open palm down my chest, beneath my abdomen, and touches me. I begin to get aroused and kiss her harder.

“See what you missed in New Orleans?” she asks playfully.

She stops then and kisses me on my cheek. Then, she gets out of the shower and says, “I’ll get you some clothes.”

I remain in the shower a little longer and try to make sense of what just happened. I don’t feel drunk anymore, and Jessica didn’t seem to be either. This is going to be awkward. When I turn off the water, Jessica has already left me a T-shirt and shorts. I dress and go out to find her sitting on the steps. As I sit, she offers me a cigarette.

"No thanks."

She smokes in silence. Finishing her cigarette, she stands and turns to go in the house. I hear the door open and, for a second, nothing. Then Jessica asks quietly, “Steph, do you think you’ll ever move past Jamie?”

I pick up a gumball from the ground and twist the stem. “I don’t know, Jess. Maybe,” I say as I spin around to face her.

Without a word, she turns to go inside. I toss the gumball at her.

She turns back around. "What the hell? First, you cut me with a razor and now you're throwing things at me," she says with an obviously forced smile.

"I was just thinking."

"About what?"

"What do you mean, 'about what?' Hello? Shower?"

"Oh, yeah," she says smiling. "And what were you thinking?"

"Maybe you need to be in a different category."

She doesn't respond. I feel stupid. I knew this would be bad.

I have to turn away. I look to the sky. It is dawn, and there are long, narrow bands of clouds that streak the horizon.

"Hey, Steph."

"Yeah?" Well, this is it I guess--one way or the other.

"The sun is kind of orange today, don't you think?"

Not exactly what I had in mind, but I look at the sun anyway. Why should this morning be different than any other?

"Yes, it is. And I didn't even have to convince it to be." I guess we will leave it at that then.

"I was just thinking."

"Oh yeah, about what?" I ask.

"Hello?"

"Oh. And what were you thinking?"

"Maybe you should come up with a new category."

I turn to Jessica. "That may be."

She smiles and walks back in the house.

I look back at the sky. The sun is indeed orange today; it's a tangerine, and I think if I squeezed the clouds I could get great splashing drops of juice.

Cigarettes and Soap

The day his mother died Jason McAllister smoked two and a half packs of Marlboro Reds and took the Lord's name in vain several dozen times. He was angry. At God, for taking her. Maybe at the world. Definitely at the doctor who'd said there would be plenty of time and not to worry about trying to catch a redeye flight. At himself, for not ignoring the doctor's advice. At his bosses; the office had been so hectic during tax season that he'd had rare opportunities to go home for a visit in the past months. Perhaps at his mother a little for not holding out, not waiting to say goodbye. Maybe she was punishing him, again. She never could understand why he had to live so far away, why he couldn't just be an accountant in Blackwater instead of distant Charlotte.

Yes, angry. Definitely angry. And all those people inside eating chicken and biscuits and stewed corn and God knows what else made it no easier. He took a last drag from his cigarette, flicked it to the ground, and stood up from the steps to crush the butt into the gravel of the driveway. He turned towards the house and peeped in the window of the door. Look at those crumbs, all over his mother's floor. If she were alive to see it, she'd have thrown a hissy. She'd probably come in with a broom and dustpan and made people lift their feet up so

she could sweep under them. And somehow it probably would have been his fault. “Jason, just look at this mess you made!” He had to admit he’d tracked up those floors often enough. He was always getting into trouble when he was a boy.

His mother had been so domineering his whole life. He had never been able to live up to her expectations. That’s all he could think about ever since he found out about her death. The anger was a blanket, and he wrapped himself in it; it kept him warm. He had been thinking all morning, trying to remember just once when she had not been so stern, such a Nazi commander. What right did she have to be upset with him for moving away? Who the hell would want to stay close to home and endure as an adult what they had to go through their whole damn childhood? He had every right to be angry with her. Her and those damn impeccably clean floors.

Jason tiptoed to the living room and dropped to all fours where proceeded to half-crawl and half-slide across the hardwood floor that was slick with polish. He didn’t have to worry about getting his newly washed blue-jeans and Incredible Hulk T-shirt dirty; his mother had just cleaned the floors – again. At the door, he slowly raised his head until he was eye level with the lowest pane in the window. His mother was standing beside the rust colored sedan; he let his body drop to the floor as she swiveled her head in his direction. His body made an audible thud; he was sure that she had heard him. He lay motionless, not breathing, until he heard the car start. Then he flipped over onto his knees and again raised up

high enough to peep out the window. His mother was in the car with the windows rolled up.

Shit, he thought.

His mother put the car in gear.

With his eyes still at the window level and his mouth just below it, he started to swear but didn't.

The car began to move down the driveway.

Standing up so that his whole head was in plain sight, he whispered, "Shhh.....ucks."

The car reached the end of the driveway and stopped. He could see his mother turning her head both ways checking for traffic.

He put his hands on his hips and very clearly said, "Shit."

The car edged out of the driveway and made a left onto the road.

Jason slung the door open, poked his head out, and swore a little louder than before, and quickly darted back inside the door.

He was mad at her still. No matter how many times he rinsed his mouth with water, he couldn't get the taste out. Besides, it wasn't his fault. He hadn't even meant to say "shit." It's just that when he ran sock footed through the den on the way to his room to get another plastic dinosaur (the little green army men had broken the T-Rex's tail in a skirmish, and now it lay dying under the magazine rack), the steel post of the day bed jumped out and almost broke his toe. How could he not have said shit? Anybody would have said it. His mother

would have probably said it herself. Well, actually she probably would have said, "sugar," but she'd have been thinking "shit." He was sure of it.

The car picked up speed and continued down the road.

He slowly opened the door and stepped outside. Sitting down on the front steps and picking up a rock, he swore again, louder than before.

The car disappeared around a curve, but he could still hear the tires against the concrete road.

He stood up and threw the rock at a bird on the light wire. He turned towards the direction the car had gone and hollered, "Shit!"

He stood perfectly still and listened. After a few seconds, even the sound of the car disappeared.

Jason ran to the end of the driveway and climbed the fence. Straddling it with his legs hooked together, he cupped his hands to his mouth like a bullhorn and screamed at the top of his lungs, "Shit! Shit, shit, shit! Sheeeeeeee-yit!"

He climbed down from the fence and leaned against it. He kicked a pinecone. The car was gone, and there was no bringing it back. Not only could he not go to the store with his mom, he'd have to stay home by himself all afternoon. To top things off, his mom would probably bring home some health cereal and with no prize in it either. All for saying one little swear word.

Jason spat on the azaleas. His mouth still tasted like soap. It was almost as bad as the time he got caught with a cigarette butt from the ashtray in his mouth pretending to smoke it. He had to smoke three cigarettes back to back

with his mom watching closely to make sure he inhaled with every puff. He had been green for days after that.

Well, he would show her. Wouldn't she be sorry when she came home and found him gone? Jason ran to his room and dragged out his backpack. It wasn't big enough. He ran to his mother's room and scooted under the bed. He pulled out the big, light-blue, vinyl suit-case with the duct tape over the rip in one side. It had gotten ripped during parent's weekend last year at camp when he had tried to carry it to her room but ended up dragging it across rocks. Now empty, he carried it to his room easily. From the bottom drawer in his chest, he got a pair of denim shorts and a red T-shirt with "Hot Stuff" written on it. He went to his desk, got out three X-Men comic books, and tossed them in. He removed a camouflage jacket and a baseball cap from the closet and put them on.

What else? Food. Of course, he would have to have some food. He went to the kitchen and got out the chunky peanut butter. He made a sandwich, ate half of it, and wrapped the other half in plastic. This wasn't enough food for very long so he went to the pantry and got some sardines, a box of minute rice, and new bottle of ketchup. He put these in as well, along with some leftover banana pudding in a Tupperware container from the fridge. He had to admit, as mean as she was, his mom made really good banana pudding. Jason carried the suitcase to the living room door and stood surveying the room.

"Good-bye house. I'll miss you."

He took a last look at the mantle with the picture of his mother and him at his birthday party at Chuck E. Cheese when he was eight. Then, turned out the

lights and shut the door behind him. The best place he could go would be to the club in Tommy Knox's basement. But that was a few miles away, and besides, Tommy's mom would probably turn him in. No he would have to go some place that moms didn't know about. Some place private and far away. He had to go to the tree fort.

Actually, it wasn't quite a fort. They had never gotten enough lumber to finish it. It was really only two seats, boards nailed across forking branches, but it had steps nailed to the side of the tree so he could probably get the suitcase up there.

Jason crossed the backyard and jumped the ditch. They had picked all the corn last week so he wouldn't have to skirt the edge of the field; he could just walk straight through it to the woods. He quickly crossed the hundred or so yards to the edge of the trees and tossed his suitcase across the ditch. Slowly, he walked the log that spanned the ditch and picked up his bag. The sun was warm, and the path was visible a good distance into the trees. He followed the path that he and Tommy had to make with hedge shears because they couldn't get machetes. In a few minutes, the big gum tree that was their fort came into sight. He looked around to make sure no one was watching and then begin to climb the tree. The suitcase made it impossible to climb, so he put it on the ground behind the tree and covered it with dry leaves. Free of the extra weight, he went easily up the tree and sat in his seat.

Jason sat there for a while and looked around the trees. There really wasn't much to see. A few squirrels scampered about in a tree a little ways off.

He plucked gumballs from his tree and tried to hit the squirrels. He came close to one, and the squirrels jumped to a tree farther away. He reclined in his seat and let the sun shine on his face. Since Tommy wasn't there to talk to, he sang "G.I. Joe. A real American hero" over and over in his head. He heard some cracking noises but couldn't see anything so he continued singing, but out loud now.

After a while, he grew tired of singing. He decided to climb over to Tommy's seat. He had never sat there before. Each of them had their name carved in a branch beside their seat to show that it was in fact their seat and that no one else could sit there. But Tommy wasn't there now, so Jason took the opportunity to sit in forbidden territory.

He sat there for a while slowly tearing leaves into strips. Soon this too became boring. He decided to eat supper. He climbed down the tree and recovered the suitcase. It was much darker on the ground. The sun had dropped below the tree line, and the canopy of leaves blocked light so that it seemed to be nearly night. He debated trying to take the suitcase back up the tree with him again but decided it would be too difficult. He would just sit there on the ground.

Jason first ate the half of a peanut butter sandwich. He was still hungry. He next tried to open the sardines, but the pull ring broke. He didn't have any water or fire so the rice was out as well. He didn't have anything to put the ketchup on, so he just ate the banana pudding, scooping it out of the container

with his fingers. It was too dark to read the comic books, so he had to be content with just eating the pudding.

A twig snapped a little ways off. Jason froze. He looked through the trees but could see nothing. He quickly finished the pudding and put everything back into the suitcase. The wind picked up slightly, and the tops of the trees swayed gently. Something rattled some leaves a little ways off in the same direction that the twig had snapped.

Jason's chest tightened; he sat absolutely still, listening.

"I see you. I see you over there. You had better not mess with me. I've got a shotgun in this fort," he said trying to make his voice deep and definitely loud.

Some leaves rustled again but from a new direction.

"I'm getting my gun," Jason said loudly as he jumped up and quickly climbed back up the tree.

It was darker now even at the top of the tree. The blue had all but disappeared from the sky, and the wind was gusting now. The tree swayed heavily, and Jason nearly lost his footing. He wrapped his arms around the closest branch and locked his fingers together. But the sun was going down, and so the wind began to pick up even more bending the tree in wide arcs.

Jason didn't have a choice. If he stayed in the tree, he would surely be blown out of it and probably break a leg. Then he would be on the ground unable to move. If he climbed down now, at least he would have a chance to make a break for it and hope to outrun whatever kind of animal was making all the noise

on the ground. He climbed about halfway down and listened. His heart beat faster, and he seemed unable to get a good breath.

He struck upon a plan. He began to bark like a dog as he climbed the rest of the way down. On the ground, he picked up some sticks and barking and growling he threw them in the direction that he thought the noises had come from earlier. He grabbed the suitcase and made a break for it.

It was almost black in the forest now, and he could hardly see the trail. He stumbled twice; one of those times a briar dug at his face as he fell. At the log crossing, he fell into the ditch. He tossed up the suitcase, but his foot was stuck in the mud. He thought he heard the beast again, and his panic gave him strength enough to wrench his foot free though his shoe remained stuck in the mire. He picked up the suitcase and ran. All the way across the field, he kept looking back. He could barely make out the tree line now it was so dark. The wind blew angrily, and he was sure he heard footsteps behind him. He had a pain in his side, and his arm felt like it would fall off from running with the suitcase. Twice he dropped it; the second time he debated leaving it but wasn't sure if he was more scared of the thing in the woods or what would happen if the suitcase came up missing. He'd have to chance it. Picking up the suitcase, he sprinted on. Reaching his backyard, he was sure he wouldn't make it inside.

He ran for all he was worth to the backdoor, snatched it open and tossed the suitcase inside. He slammed the door behind him and turned to run to his room to get his Louisville Slugger. He tripped over the suitcase and fell to the floor, muddy clothes, bloodied face and all.

"Shit."

"What did you say?" he heard his mother say, her voice fierce like that of a Rottweiler if Rottweilers could talk.

He pushed himself up onto his elbows and looked to find his mother sitting in the recliner with a book in her lap. Her eyes were wide, and her nostrils flared.

He slowly stood up and wiped his cheek. "I..."

His mother looked from him to the suitcase and back to him. He tried to look away but couldn't. Her eyes pierced him, held him momentarily, but then softened.

"There's a new bar of soap in the bathroom."

Shit.

"Go take a bath. Make sure you wash your face. I'll fix you dinner."

He started to walk past her, but then throwing his arms around her, he buried his head in her chest and began to cry softly.

His mother just stood there for a second. He was sure he would get in trouble for getting her blouse dirty. But then she put her arms around him and squeezed him against her. He was suddenly sorry for having sworn so much that afternoon.

"Aren't you going to eat dinner?" He heard Mrs. Jacobs' voice before he recognized her face.

"Jason? Jason, dear?" She was the pianist at his mother's church.

“Oh, yes Mrs. Jacobs. In a little while.”

“Jason, you’ve been standing at the door for ages. Do come in and eat something. You’ve got to keep your strength up you know.”

“Yes, ma’am. I’ll be in in just a few minutes. I’m going to have a smoke first, I think.”

“Okay, dear. But don’t be too long. I’m afraid there’s not much chicken left.” She went inside and shut the door.

Jason pushed himself away from the wall he’d been resting against. He turned around and, sitting on the steps, lit a cigarette.

He didn’t want any God damn chicken. It’d just get crumbs all over his mama’s floor, her beautifully polished floor. He sat on the steps and stared across the backyard through the field to the woods. He began to cry softly. He lifted the cigarette as to take a drag but stopped. He looked at the wisp of smoke curling up around itself from the cherry and drifting off into the air. Fire and smoke, burning itself into nothing. He suddenly had no desire to smoke and let the cigarette droop loosely in his hand. A chill wind breezed, and he became aware that he was actually cold. Looking in the window, he saw the spot where his mother had put her arms around him. In a flood, he remembered how she had hugged him that year at camp when he lost the potato sack race, and that time at Chuck E. Cheese when he lost to Tommy at skee ball, and all the other times she had been there for him. Now she was gone. Somehow though, looking at all the people in his mother’s house milling around and eating off

grease soaked paper plates and imagining her chasing them out with a broom made him smile.

Fish Stories

The pier was empty, almost deserted. Frank counted maybe a dozen people scattered up and down. Even though it was mid-October, he had expected a bigger crowd. Even the beach at the pier entrance was desolate. Shells dotted the sand that would have been picked clean during the busy season. He'd only fished off the Outer Banks Pier a handful of times, but each time before there had barely been room for people to make casts without hooking one another on the backswing. Now, not only were the fish not biting, there were really no people to watch except Jim and Bear.

Jim sat dazedly staring at the ocean. He was taking it easy at the moment, just sitting there in his tattered sneakers, blue-jeans and white tee shirt with a grease spot. Frank had become good friends with Jim in the past couple of years, spending more and more time with him since their first meeting at Ocrakoke where they had each been on separate fishing trips. Actually, Jim had become like a little brother to Frank. The man Jim had wanted him to meet, however, this Bear Woodley, was an unknown. Frank winced when he thought of how Jim listened so readily to everything that Bear had to say, especially when a lot of it sounded completely preposterous.

Bear sat a few feet past Jim busy fumbling among the odds and ends in his tackle box. He wore a long brim fishing hat pulled low over his face, a face that looked much too grizzled for a man in his thirties. Complementing the hat were a pair of faded brown work boots, camouflage pants, a dingy tee shirt and an unbuttoned camouflage jacket. This outfit, combined with the image of Bear that Jim had related, made Frank half expect to see Bear pull a disassembled rifle rather than fishing lures from the tackle box. Jim had made him out to be some kind of legend. He certainly didn't look like any legend Frank had ever heard about. He was skinny, too skinny to deserve a nickname like Bear. The name must have stuck from some earlier story, some tale about Bear and a real bear.

Of course, Jim had told Frank much about Bear, but this was the first time meeting him. Hearing Jim talk about Bear and his adventures made Frank think of the two grown men as a couple of school kids talking about sex. If Bear was the cool kid, the one who pretended to have all the experience, then by default Jim was the one that swallowed up every detail—hook, line and sinker. That's what worried Frank the most about those two. But he had come on this trip to enjoy himself, not to tell Jim about his poor choice of friends.

Frank reeled in his line lackadaisically and made a short cast. He watched the surf take his line out another twenty yards before he flipped the brake to stop the line from spooling off the spindle. No sign of fish. He picked up his beer with the hugger he'd just bought inside the pier-house and smiled. A large white fish stood erect on the light blue background with a lit cigar in one fin

and the other fin held in a salute that touched the brim of the fish's hat which read "Cap'n Leroy." A bubble extended from the fish's mouth with the encapsulated words, "Good fishing, mate!" Yeah, right, he thought as he took a swig of beer. This trip was turning out to be a lot less eventful than most of the others.

Jim had arranged this outing as usual. On these trips, discomforts that other men complained of were proof to Frank that he was out of the climate controlled concrete monoliths and in the middle of something with more life. Jim's energy and his affinity for the outdoors brought something out in Frank, something he was not in touch with in his daily life as a data entry supervisor. Jim might have been an overgrown kid, but it was that energy that invigorated Frank. He felt more in touch in the outdoors—more alive, not like being cooped up in the office in Charlotte. There was certainly no one there like Jim. Not that he blamed his coworkers exactly. Crunching columns of numbers eight or ten hours a day was enough to turn anyone into a drone. Still, couldn't he expect more than the occasional joke forwarded on email or coffee room imitation of some supervisor?

Days in advance of this fishing trip, Jim had been telling Frank stories about the Great Bear Woodley and all his glory. Frank had heard how Bear fell, twisting his ankle, while hunting and lost his box of ammo in a canal but still managed to kill two bucks with the single bullet in the chamber. He heard how Bear had been bitten by a rattlesnake while cutting firewood. The snake had supposedly rolled over and died while Bear simply spat and went back to cutting wood. Jim tended to get excited when he talked about Bear, his voice rising and

falling in pitch as his arms flailed about to emphasize a point, nothing like the drab Jim sitting silently beside Frank now.

Jim didn't much look like he was in his thirties either. Frank always thought of the movie, Big, when he looked at him, a kid trapped in an adult's body. Jim was not exactly skinny, more like wiry. But his hair always wanted a good combing, and he was quite clumsy. Frank couldn't help but imagine Jim being followed around by his mother, perpetually wiping his face with the corner of her apron, even now as a grown man. But Frank had to admit, this overgrown kid image worked well whenever Jim told stories, wide-eyed and exuberant.

As if on cue, Jim began to relate another Bear tale: "Say, Frank, I ever tell you bout the mud-runs we used to have in Blackwater?"

"No, Jim. I don't believe you have."

"Well, you see a mud-run is -- not that you're ignorant of the fact, but just to set up the story-- a mud-run is a field that one of the boys leaves untended. You go out there with the tractors and cut up a good patch in the middle of her and let it sit. After a few good rains, you start to get a big ol' mess of slop. When it's plenty muddy, bring on the rigs!" He belted out the last sentence while waving his hand as if to motion someone forward.

Frank patiently took a sip of his beer.

"You have contests, see, to find out who can drive the furtherest through the mud-run before they get stuck."

"Well, what do you get if you win?"

"Braggin rights, boy, braggin rights!"

"So you can brag on who has the best truck, I take it?"

"Well, that too, but also on who drives the best. A monster of a truck ain't no good lessen somebody knows how to handle her," he said exuberantly and with an air of authority as if he were the Dick Vitale of mud-runs.

"So, anyway, for two years running Bear was king of the mud-runs. He had an old beat up Chevy painted sky blue -- called her the Blue Goose. Well, the Blue Goose mighta been ugly, but she was a pulling son-of-a-bitch."

Frank thought he caught a glimpse of a smile on Bear's face.

"One spring the run was muddy as I ever seen it," Jim continued. "Two boys had done been stuck half-way through and had to be pulled out by a tractor. Well, Bear rolls up in the Blue Goose and says, 'Look out boys,' and then revs her up pretty good and plows on out. He's a slippin and slidin," Jim explained all the while making snake-like motions with his arms, "but he's making progress the whole time. He gets to the spot where the other boys got stuck and guns her. Well, you know what happened, Frank?"

"The Blue Goose flew through?" Frank predicted. What else could have happened?

"Right as rain. She slicked on through pretty as you please. But that ain't all. After seeing how Bear got through, another feller tries it and gets stuck plum in the middle. Well, they send the tractor out after him, and I guess cause Bear tore it up even more, the tractor gets stuck too. Next thing you know, without a word to nobody, Bear goes back out. He hooks up to the other boy's rig and

pulls him straight out. Then, get this, he goes out and hooks up to the tractor. Well, the boys is starting to snicker now. But Bear don't care none."

Frank glanced at Bear; he sat stone faced staring straight ahead.

"He just hooks up and guns it, but the tractor ain't budging. Some of the boys tells him to quit before he tears up his rig, and they're all laughing. So, Bear sends another boy to his house to get some cinder-blocks. The feller gets back, and they stack a bunch of them in the back of the Blue Goose for extra weight. The boys ain't laughing now."

Frank again looked at Bear who now absently scratched at his little scruff of beard.

"Bear gets in the cab and eases forward till the chain is tight, and then... he walks on her!" Jim exclaimed, smacking his fist against the palm of his other hand. "Sure enough the tractor starts to inch forward. After she got moving a little bit, she came right on out. Well, Bear unhooks the Blue Goose from the tractor, climbs back in and starts to leave. But just before he leaves, he rolls down the window and says all calm like, 'Hey, fellers, call me when it gets muddy.' Well, after that the boy whose field it was said we couldn't have no more mud-runs there."

Frank had to smile in spite of himself. "That must have been something to see."

"Sure was," Jim replied. "at least ways, it would've been. Damn sorry I missed it."

"So you weren't there then?" Frank asked.

"Well, see, no, but..."

"Jim tells it better than I do," Bear interrupted.

"Oh," Frank replied, pausing slightly before adding, "You know. I'd really like to see that Blue Goose sometime, if you don't mind, Bear."

"Cain't. Sold her a while back," Bear replied flatly.

"Oh, that's a shame then." Frank sipped his beer and stared at a couple of seagulls circling from the pier to the shore and back. He just bet that's what happened. There probably wasn't even a Blue Goose to begin with. This Bear Woodley was clearly a fraud, a hoax perpetrated on poor gullible Jim. Not that it was hard to dupe Jim; he was always looking for something, anything, to break the monotony of his life. Jim worked forty hours a week for the state holding a sign with "Stop" on one side and "Slow" on the other. He had been showing people which side of the road to drive on for so long that now he would direct grocery cart traffic during visits to the supermarket.

"Say, Bear, did I ever tell you how me and Frank there met?"

"Cain't say that you have, Jim."

"Well, see I was down to Ocracoke a few years back doing some surf fishin, and Frank and some of his buddies he works with were camped out up the beach and doing a little fishin of their own. Well, I was busy fightin me a monster size fish and weren't paying no attention at the tide rolling in on me. Next thing I hear yellin and look over and see Frank chasing my cooler that's being took out to sea. Well, I got this big fish on line so I cain't drop my pole. So the rest of my gear start's getting pulled out and Frank is chasing all of it..." Jim's voice trailed

off as he took a side-long glance at Bear. "Well, anyway that's how we met." He was quiet for some time after that.

Poor Jim. He was so desperate for Bear's approval. Bear could at least acknowledge Jim's story. After all, Jim lived through Bear's stories. It was as if the Bear chronicles were Jim's Bible, and Jim blindly followed them.

Bear obviously wasn't as good a friend as Frank. He would never lead Jim on; in fact, he tried to get Jim to see the world as it really was, to try to instill some ambition in him to be more than a sign wielder before he retired. He knew that Jim would never be a doctor or lawyer of course, but he could do so much more than he was now—if he would stop living through other people's stories and start building his own life. Frank often talked with Jim about improving his situation on their trips.

Since the time Frank and Jim had met nearly four years ago, Jim had planned all manner of excursions for the two. Frank almost always managed to squeeze time into his schedule when the trip sounded good, and at times went even when it sounded lame. He was able to get out of Charlotte for weekends and occasionally a full week at a time. He never knew exactly what to expect when his caller id. box read Blackwater, North Carolina.

He had hunted black bear in the swamp under direct attack from legions of helicopter-size mosquitoes. On that trip, Jim had gotten the idea that the strong smell of tobacco juice would act as an insect repellent and, so, covered his exposed body parts in tobacco spit. He soon discovered that the smell of tobacco juice was more sweet than strong. Frank nearly laughed aloud each

time Jim had to dunk himself under swamp water to escape the torment of the mosquitoes on his mad dash out of the woods. Hunting bear had been memorable, but no more so than hunting geese on the lake in blinding snow or frogging at midnight in ponds clearly leased out to the snakes.

“Could you take that ruckus somewhere else?”

Bear’s voice pulled Frank from his ruminations. He was startled to hear Bear speak so sharply. Frank followed Bear’s gaze and saw two teenagers standing on the other side of the pier. A scruffy boy with spiky looking hair and no shoes was arguing with a grungy girl about his own age. The girl looked upset, but the boy kept at her.

“I don’t give a damn where you were going. You know I don’t like you hanging out with Sarah. She’s a bitch,” the boy declared.

“Hey, feller,” Bear interjected again, “can you go somewhere else to exercise your jaw? We’re trying to fish over here.”

The boy looked as if he wanted to say something, but the girl pulled him by the hand. The two of them walked up the pier. The boy kept looking back, however, and gulped from a bottle in a brown paper bag that Frank had not noticed before.

"So the guys were all playing pool in the Long Branch," Jim's voice broke the silence, "drinkin some beers and shooting pool when ol' Bear here walks in and - Hey Bear, hand me that bottle."

Bear quietly handed the bottle of Wild Turkey to Jim without ever peering out from under his long brim hat. Obviously, he was playing it cool now. He had

to finish the tough guy scene he had created by ordering the teenagers about. He didn't look tough though. Surely Jim wasn't impressed by that little display of authority over two kids.

"And ol' Bear walks in and plops hisself down on a bar stool like he owns the place and says, 'I'll have a draft.'" Jim paused long enough to take a swig of liquor. "Bette done told him he couldn't come in on account of him and another boy tearing up the place the Saturday before over that little redhead. Anyway Bette tells him to get out and Bear don't say nothing. So Bette tells him again, and Bear says, 'I ain't going to cause no trouble' but only he's grinnin like a shit eatin dog while he's saying it, so it just pisses Bette off even more. Then, Bette sticks out her chest -- and God knows that's a lot to be sticking out--well she puffs up and says in a deep voice like she's in a western or something, 'I ain't going to tell you again to get.' Then she pulls out that little .25 she and Pops keep behind the bar and points it square at Bear.

"You know what that crazy son-of-a-bitch does, Frank?" Jim asked, tugging Frank's shirt at the elbow.

"No, what?" Frank responded trying to hide his growing impatience.

"He says 'Well go ahead and shoot then. I'll still be laying in your damned old bar.' Then Bette spits in the floor -- she chews tobacco -- and cocks the hammer on that pistol. Bear sticks his left pointer finger over the end of the barrel like one of them Bugs Bunny cartoons and says, 'See, Bette, you cain't shoot now,' grinning the whole time. I guess Bette never seen them cartoons cause she shot. She blew the very tip of Bear's finger clear off. It's all gushing

blood and everybody's yelling and running around. Bette realizes what she did, and suddenly she don't feel so manly no more, so she drops the gun and starts bawling. Bear looks at his finger. He looks at Bette. He looks at his finger. He looks at Bette and says, 'I'd like that draft now.' Then he waits a second and says, --now get this Frank--, he says, ' and bring me a Band-aid.'

Frank glanced at Bear's hands. One was wrapped around his fishing pole; Bear curled the fingers of the other as if he felt the stare.

Jim drank more Wild Turkey and roared in laughter, "Bring me a Band-aid. He's a bleeding to death and he says cool as a cucumber, 'Bring me a Band-aid.' Sure wished I'd a seen that one."

"Yeah, me too," Frank added flatly. How would Jim ever come into himself if he continued to live in Bear's fantasy world?

"You got a bite, Jim," Bear stated with just a hint of irritation in his voice.

Jim tossed Frank the bottle, spun on his heels and took hold of his rod in almost one motion. His rod was bent, and the line was spooling out, so he gave one sharp tug to set the hook and then let the fish take out more line. Jim was silent now, his jaw set hard and his brow knit. He looked like a man on a mission. Judging from his side-long glances at Bear, he was more concerned with pleasing his mentor than catching the fish for himself. Whatever his motivation, Jim struggled with the fish before landing him five minutes later.

When Jim pulled the six pound sea bass onto the pier, Frank thought it a decent size, but Jim turned to Bear and said apologetically, "He's a might puny."

"That's all right. He'll be a good bait fish."

Frank had to sit up in his chair at that. A six pound fish was nothing to sneer at. How the hell did this guy have Jim so brainwashed into believing that he was this kind of self-styled Paul Bunyan of the South?

Frank stood and walked over to Jim. "I don't know, Jim. He doesn't look all *that* small," he offered.

"Do a lot of fishin in the big city, do you?" Bear asked in a snide voice.

"I've done my share," Frank replied.

"I'll bet."

Frank caught Jim's worried gaze and let the matter drop.

Bear got from his tackle box two shiny hooks each as long as a man's hand. Following Bear's lead, Jim used his fillet knife to deftly split the bass down the middle from nose to tail into two halves. Bear reeled in his line and rigged his big hooks about four feet apart with weights just above each to keep the fish parts from buoying to the top. Jim passed over the fish halves, and Bear slid a hook lengthwise in the back of each so the barb ended just an inch or so behind the eyes. Any larger fish swallowing either piece of bait head-first would be completely hooked. Bear walked to the end of the pier and slowly let his line down.

"Now I'll show you how to catch a real fish," he announced.

Complete and utter bullshit. Bear was obviously setting up another story, creating another myth about himself. Not that Frank had a problem with mythology. Hell, if you took the mythology out of religion, all you would have left is a moral rulebook. The problem Frank had was with who was doing the telling.

He never did like autobiographies; besides how great could a man be that had to tell you how great he was himself?

"Hey, Jim boy, how about bring me my lounge chair down here?" Bear asked from the far end of the pier.

Jim obediently carried the chair and then began moving the rest of the gear to the same spot. Frank fought the urge to go with them. Instead, he slowly drifted to their end of the pier by making a series of short casts. He wasn't going to be another of Bear's blind followers; still he didn't want to look or feel isolated.

"Hey, Frank, c'mon over here. We still got cold beer in the cooler. Come get one." Frank smiled. Good old Jim.

"Sure, I'll be right there. Just let me make one more cast."

Frank reeled in his line, walked the last few yards to where Bear and Jim sat in lounge chairs, and took a beer from the ice. He sat on the closed cooler, opened the beer, and took a long swallow. It was cold, and he closed his eyes as he drank from the bottle. Then, he pressed the cold bottle to his cheek and let the condensation wet his skin. It didn't feel as soothing as if it had been summer, but it was nice nonetheless. He could smell the salt in the air (he had to remember to wash his Range Rover when he left the beach), and sound of the rolling waves was almost hypnotic. This was the life; he'd be damned if he would let worrying with Bear ruin it for him.

As if sensing Frank's thoughts, Bear jumped to his feet. His attention, however, was on his rod bent nearly double. Bear's line screamed out as it was

pulled off the reel at rocket speed. Instantly, all were on their feet and searching the water.

"See anything, Jim?"

"Naw, Bear. It's too far out."

"God almighty, it must be big!" Frank couldn't help himself.

Bear seized a moment of relatively slow spooling to flip the brake, and the line became instantly taut with an audible "Twang!"

"Lucky the line ain't snapped."

"I didn't have no choice, Jim. She was a spinnin so fast anything coulda happened."

"I know. I was just sayin. That's all."

By this time, both Frank and Jim had reeled in their lines in case they might be needed to help land so large a fish.

Bear, his left foot braced against the bottom board of the pier railing, was tugging back on his rod which was still bent in the middle. Sweat began to pop out on his face.

"Turn my hat around, Jim," Bear commanded.

Jim spun the long brim so Bear could see more clearly. Bear continued to fight the fish, now giving line, now taking line, for ten minutes or more before Jim said quietly, "Let me know if you need me to spell you."

"Don't need no help."

"Here let me move this mess out of the way," Jim said and quickly cleared a wider area for Bear to work in.

Frank stood still. He didn't want to help Bear, nor did he really want to distract. Let him succeed or fail on his own.

After another fifteen minutes, Bear announced, "Gotta do something different. He just keeps going deeper, and I'm almost out of line. I need some rope."

At that Frank raced along the pier, through the pier-house, down the sloped entrance and into the parking lot. He bolted to the Range Rover, found rope and ran back.

"I've got it!" he wheezed as he half walked that last few strides.

"All right. Just hold it for a minute," Bear said patiently before beginning a slow step-by-step walk up the pier towards shore.

Frank saw that all the extra line had now spooled completely off, but the fish was still attempting to go deeper.

"Gimme the rope."

Frank handed it over, and Bear tied one end securely to the handle of the fishing rod above the spindle so if it slipped it wouldn't come off.

"You boys hold him till I get down there and then toss me the end. Don't snatch it. Let him go a little if you have to."

Without another word, Bear half walked and half ran the same path Frank had taken, cut towards the ocean, waded out knee-deep until he was below Frank and Jim and called for the line. Jim held steadily onto the rod as Frank tossed over the rope.

Bear pulled in all the slack. "Wait till he gives a little, then drop down the rod," he yelled up, "and cross your fingers!"

Frank was astounded; he'd never seen fishing done quite like this. He leaned over the rail of the pier to see Bear more easily.

As soon as the line became slack, Jim yelled, "Go!" and dropped the rod. Bear pulled the rope until he had one hand on the rod. At that moment, the fish dove again and nearly sent him to his knees in the frothy water. Somehow he remained standing and managed to yell, "Got it. C'mon down!"

Frank and Jim ran down the pier, then across the loose sand which was only underwater during unusually high tides, before arriving at the shore to cheer him on. Over a span of fifteen minutes and through slow methodical steps, Bear managed to back out of the water ashore. His face was red and the veins in his neck were prominent. When Jim reached out his hands to offer him a break, Bear pulled the rod away. "What, you want the gravy after I did all the work?" Bear and the fish fought for another twenty-five minutes before it leapt close enough to the shore for the men to even glimpse.

"Mackerel," Jim said.

"Thought as much. Damn strong too," Bear replied.

"Get him, boy!" Frank exclaimed, slapping his hand on Bear's back and then immediately wishing he hadn't.

After another grueling ten minutes, the mackerel was pulled into the knee-deep water, and Bear exhaustedly said, "Go get him, boys."

Frank and Jim rushed out with gaffs and hooked the fish in the gills. All three dragged him onto the beach. This done, Bear, soaked with sweat, collapsed onto the sand and smiled.

Jim whooped loudly and attempted a cartwheel. He fell flat on his face but rose grinning anyway and yelling, "Look at him! Look at him!"

From nowhere a small crowd began gathering around Bear and the fish. Frank looked up to see the pier emptied; this was after all the only excitement of the day.

"Look it," Jim continued. "The hook was most pulled outta his lip. It's a plum miracle Bear landed him!" Then he jumped up shouting, "Camera!" and ran to get it from Frank's Range Rover. He hurried back yelling, "Picture! Picture!"

Frank, caught up in the excitement, suggested, "Yes, you can put the picture in the paper in Blackwater."

"Ain't no paper in Blackwater," Jim replied.

"The paper here, then."

"Sure! Sure! That'd be alright!" Jim agreed.

Bear grinned and rolled onto his stomach. He used his arms to push himself up. Then he picked up his rod and motioned for Frank to lift the fish. With a grunt, Frank picked up the mackerel by its gills.

"Whoa! He must weigh between forty and fifty pounds!" he exclaimed.

"Go ahead," Bear said, "Take all the pictures you want. I'm done." Then, the smile ran away from his face as he sat on the beach and sprawled.

People were talking excitedly. "Forty or fifty pounds! Could be a pier record!"

The fish was flopping weakly, so Jim hurriedly took a few pictures. More people were gathering. "Let's get him weighed," he exclaimed.

Bear sprang to his feet. "No!" he half-yelled. Looking sidelong at Frank, he continued, "I mean, I'm letting him go."

"But why?" asked Jim.

Bear seized the fish and eased it into the water, making sure it could swim before letting go completely.

"But why?" Jim echoed himself.

Bear did not answer, watching the fish swim away.

A little boy exclaimed to no one in particular, "He let that fifty pound fish go!"

"Could of been even bigger," his father replied. "Maybe sixty."

"He let a sixty pound fish go!" the boy screeched, "Maybe bigger!"

The grin renewed itself on Bear's exhausted face.

"But why?" Jim continued.

"He fought good. Deserved to go free," Bear tried. "Yep. Brave fish," he said nodding his head.

"Did you see that?" the little boy yelled, running up and down the beach.

"He let a sixty-five pound fish go!"

Bear smiled broadly, but turned his head away when Frank caught his eyes. "Going to the bathroom," he muttered and walked off toward the pier house.

Frank looked at a bewildered Jim who stood staring after the long gone mackerel.

"I just don't get it."

Well, Frank got it, and he wasn't going to let Bear get away with it. He would force Bear to admit he was a sham, that this was nothing more than another example of his trumped up stories, his fish stories. He had no right to fill people's heads with crap. Frank ran up the entrance ramp but stopped when he saw Bear in the middle of the parking lot watching two teenagers several car lengths away. It was the couple from the pier, and they were arguing worse than before. Bear took a step towards the couple, hesitated, and then turned around. As he did, Frank locked eyes with him from across the lot. For a second, Bear froze but then set his jaw and turned back to the couple. The boy held the girl by the shoulders tightly.

Bear yelled, "You let her alone, you hear?"

Just as Frank had expected.

The boy took a pull from his brown bag, flipped Bear the bird and slapped the girl across the face with one hand.

Damn. Frank was all the way across the parking lot. He hoped that Bear actually had the nerve to do something.

Apparently, he did. Bear sprang and pinned the boy's arm behind his back. The girl immediately ran down the highway not looking back even once.

"Let me go, damnit!"

"You just settle down. You ain't so big and bad when it's a man that's in your face, are you?"

The boy relaxed a little and said, "I'm sorry sir. I didn't mean to hurt her. I was just mad, that's all."

"Well, you should know better," Bear said loosening his grip.

The boy quickly squirmed free and twisted underneath Bear's larger body. Frank ran towards them. Bear fell down clutching his side as the boy moved towards him. Bear managed to stand up, though he still held one hand over his side. With the other hand, he sent a powerful jab to the boy's face. His nose exploded in crimson. The boy fell, holding his nose, and Frank rushed him. He rolled him over and jammed a knee in his back. Bear let out a low moan, and as Frank turned towards him, the boy wriggled free and sped off down the beach.

Frank moved over to Bear who was now propped against the front tire of a Winnebago, holding his side and breathing irregularly. In one hand, he held a broken wooden handle of some sort. Frank pried Bear's fingers from his side and saw in the center of gushing blood, fitted neatly between two ribs, the shiny blade of a fillet knife belonging to the broken handle.

"Bear?" Frank checked for vital signs.

"Name's Sonny," Bear replied. "He was a good seventy pounds, weren't he, Frank?"

"Sure. Sure he was. Maybe bigger," Frank managed.

Bear then looked down; a circle of wetness spread outward from the crotch of his pants. "Lordy, I done pissed all over myself." Then, Sonny dropped the knife handle and quit breathing altogether.

Frank saw that all the fingers of that hand were indeed intact and, then, felt ashamed for having looked. He heard footsteps behind him and then a voice, audible but seemingly distant.

"I saw everything," a man Frank recognized as the pier house manager said. "Police'll be here any minute."

Frank said nothing. He couldn't take his eyes off his own hand which was now covered with Bear's blood.

The next few minutes were a blur. Finally, the police and an ambulance arrived. Frank managed to give an accurate account of the conflict, and the manager corroborated his story. The police called in the boy's description.

As the paramedics were lifting Bear's body onto a gurney, Frank heard Jim's voice drifting up from the beach.

"Then, he puts his finger over the end of the barrel, kinda like Bugs Bunny," he was telling the little boy as they walked towards the entrance ramp. As he came within sight of the ambulance, Jim stopped telling the story and stood perfectly still.

The paramedics loaded the gurney into the back of the ambulance, and Jim rushed over to where Frank stood.

"What...What happened? How?"

Frank stared at Jim without speaking.

"Frank, what happened?"

"He saved a girl who was getting beaten. A boy stabbed him, Jim."

"A boy?" Jim's eyes widened, and his mouth fell partially open. "A *boy*?" he repeated. His eyes took on a vacant look, and his mouth began working, but nothing came out of it. He crumpled to the ground, a marionette without strings. Finally, he looked up and managed, "Are you telling me that some boy done killed Bear?"

"Well, Jim," Frank paused. He had wanted to tell Jim all about Sonny and his stories, about how Sonny had lied to Jim all these years to make himself seem bigger, more important, about how Jim should see the stories for what they really were.

"You see," he paused again, looking at his hand now beginning to crust over with Sonny's blood and at a shattered Jim. "What you have to understand," he continued, "is that there were three of them. Bear hit one of them like this," Frank said mimicking some sort of karate thrust. "He knocked him out with one punch. Then when he was fighting the second, the last one snuck up on him like a coward and knifed him. But Bear refused to go down. He whipped them all so bad that they ran off before he fell. The manager called the cops and an ambulance, but it was too late. I'm sorry Jim."

Jim stared back at Frank for a few seconds and then, wiping his hand across his cheek, stood up again.

"Lordy. It shoulda been me. Good ol' Bear," he said straightening his back as if the mere utterance of Bear's name strengthened him somehow. He looked for a few seconds down towards the beach where Bear had landed the fish. "Did he say anything before...before he passed?"

Frank stared into Jim's eyes, seeing a need there, a plea for something. Frank thought about Sonny's last words. But Jim didn't know who Sonny was, wouldn't have stood as tall at the mention of that name, so Frank told him what Bear would have said.

"Yes, Jim, he did say something."

"Well, what was it?"

"He said, 'Tell Jim to bring me a Band-aid.'"

Jim who had begun shifting from one foot to the other now stood perfectly motionless, a resolve coming across his face. "Damn fine man."

Frank wondered about that. Who was it they loaded into that ambulance? Sonny? Bear? Both of them? Frank wasn't sure, but he did know one thing: he was telling the story now, and Jim didn't look like he needed his mother to wipe off his face. In fact, standing there rock solid staring at the sun, Jim didn't look like he needed any help at all.

When The Sax Man Blows *Windmills*

I like the night; it's like some twelve-hour recurring virus that infects the mind and shades the perceptions so that everything is filtered through a feverish lens. But I loathe the day, the sun burning away visions like fog until pure logic is all that remains. As a university freshman, I once went two entire weeks without even the slightest glimpse of the sun, a vampire drinking in music escaped from open windows and bumming cigarettes on balconies. It's amazing the way grimy brick buildings of the daylight speak voluminous histories of themselves and their inhabitants after the sun has gone down.

Cemeteries, too, have a heightened sense of mystery and power at night. I went to one near campus once with a girl who was a friend of mine mostly by virtue of the fact that she was also a nocturnal creature. High school kids would go there to play ouija board on the graves with cracks in them. The night I'd gone there with this particular girl, she'd been looking for her father's grave. He died when she was fairly young, and she didn't remember the exact location of the grave. Her mother never spoke of him.

We searched the graveyard with a single dimming flashlight. Even in the daytime, it would have been nearly impossible to find his grave in this huge cemetery. The girl said that she had indeed tried in the daytime.

The idea of helping alleviate this girl's pain by finding her father's grave made my heart pound in my chest, and I searched in earnest. We ended up just sitting beside her great-uncle's grave who had died just a few months before and whose ceremony the girl had attended. There she cried for both her great-uncle and for a father she didn't remember ever speaking to in life and probably never could in death. I sat close enough to touch her but didn't. That would have spoiled it, this moonlight mourning. I wanted to brush back her hair and dry her tears, to tell her everything would be all right, to protect her from intangible fears. But I didn't; I didn't need her to love me that night as long as she let me share in her sorrow.

If it's one thing I know about, it's sorrow. There's an old saxophone player who plays for quarters downtown between the restaurants and the nightclubs. I used to go listen to him blow for hours. He makes up music about people he knows. He's got one called *King Lear* that's about himself, and when you hear it and how sad it is, you can almost picture the man's life history unfolding before you. I used to talk to him a lot and share private things with him like my trip to the graveyard. He made up a tune he calls *Windmills* that is supposed to be about me. It's a funny little tune with a galloping beat mixed together with slow soulful moments. I never felt the connection between that one and me the way I felt it between *King Lear* and him, but it didn't matter. I could listen to that music

all night. It put me in a kind of zone, like I was in another world. Besides it was night music, and I like the night.

I guess that's why when I flunked out of school and moved back to my hometown, I got along so well with Dana. He's kind of a night person too. He got me a job working with him nights stocking shelves in a supermarket. We'd go in at nine and usually be out by one-thirty or two so that we'd still have the darkest part of the night to drink and occasionally get high.

Dana had a sort of live-in girlfriend; that is she was there when he felt like having her over. Dana had a way with women. He always had one or two around somewhere in the background. Me, on the other hand, I could never seem to hold on to girls. Try as I might, I could never seem to protect the women I cared about. I think part of me was hoping that some of Dana's confidence would rub off on me and that maybe that would translate into a greater personal strength, an ability to shield the ladies I cared about.

Dana and Crystal, his current girlfriend, would bitch at each other a lot, but you could tell she adored him by the way her eyes followed him around the room. When I first started sleeping on the couch, I thought he cared about her too; he'd talk about her a lot at work, even though the discussion was mostly of their sexual escapades. But it eventually became apparent that, though he liked Crystal and enjoyed having her around at times, he in no way loved her. I think she knew this but still held hope. I didn't necessarily approve of the way he kept her hanging on, but at least he never lied to her by telling her he loved her or anything.

One Saturday night at work, Dana and I were pissed off at not being able to go out. Whenever we went into the storeroom, we took huge gulps of malt liquor from a case we'd stolen from the cooler and hidden there. About an hour before quitting time, we began to get buzzed. Dana started in again telling me about Crystal and him in the bedroom, the bathroom, even the laundry room.

"You know, Jay." My name is Jonathan, but he calls me Jay. "Crystal is really flexible. She's like a damn gymnast or something." He has no problem whatsoever with clichés.

"So you've said." It got really old hearing these kind of things about *his* girl.

"So I've said? Well, shit, you just need to see for yourself."

I didn't say anything. It's like he was reading my mind. I'd thought about making love to Crystal often enough. Something about her touched something inside of me. I would sometimes sit at the window pretending to read the paper but really watching her as she mowed the grass in cut-off jeans and bikini top. I fantasized about licking the sweat droplets from her breasts as she told me how much she loved me; however, she was Dana's girl, and he was my friend, so that was that.

"Besides," he continued, "I told her just night before last that if she ever wanted to do it with you, she should go ahead."

"And what did she say?" I asked with a laugh to cover my hope of ever being with Crystal and my annoyance that Dana would talk to her like that.

"Nothing at first. But then I told her that it was okay, because me and you share everything anyway."

"You are a crazy bastard." A pause long enough to make myself look uninterested. "Then, what'd she say?"

"You know Crystal. It was just, 'Whatever.' Seriously, though, don't be a dumbass. If you get a chance to hit it, then hit it."

I treated the whole conversation as if it were a joke. I couldn't take it seriously. After all, even if Dana didn't care, Crystal would never fall for me. She was in love with him. I had to change the subject to a girl that Dana and I had seen in a club wearing a black miniskirt the previous weekend. His mind was on sex (he had after all been drinking), and the only way to get him to stop talking about sex and Crystal was to get him to talk about sex and some unknown dream.

We didn't get off that night until almost three. I guess the extra talking and trips to the storeroom kept us from stocking the shelves at our normal speed. We didn't care. We were feeling no pain, and all the bars were closed anyway. Dana grabbed another twelve-pack from the cooler making sure to get one from the bottom of the stack. One or two degrees could make a difference when you factored in the hot six block walk home on a July night. Dana wanted to see a buddy of his about buying a used car. The guy was black, so we had to make a detour of a few blocks since the town where we lived was still pretty much informally segregated. Dana knew Terrell from working with him for a couple of years at a shipping warehouse a couple of towns away before he, Dana that is, got fired for smoking weed on the job.

When we got there, Terrell was sitting on the front steps of his house taking off his shoes.

"W'sup, T?" Dana asked.

"Chillin. Just got in from work."

"You remember my boy Jay?" Dana asked handing Terrell a can of malt liquor. "He's working with me at the supermarket now."

"Yeah, w'sup, Jay?"

"You know, just chillin," I replied imitating the accent that Dana used, but it sounded affected even to me.

"You got something to put in this?" Dana asked pulling out a cellophane wrapped cigar that he'd also taken from the store.

"You know this, man," Terrell said turning his head toward the screen door of the house. "Hey, Tisha, come here."

A tall, thin and very pretty girl came to the door wearing a nightgown. I recognized her as a girl Dana had gone out with one summer.

"What is it?"

"Go bring me my shit from out the drawer beside my bed."

"Excuse me?"

"C'mon, Tisha, please."

"That's better," she said turning to go in the house and get Terrell's "shit."

Tisha came back to the door a few minutes later having changed into shorts and a shirt.

"Here," she said handing her brother a rolled up sandwich bag.

While Dana and Terrell broke up the buds and rolled the blunt, I watched Tisha watching Dana. She looked at him with a mixture of contempt and longing. I imagined her trapped here in this house, working for minimum wage, tending the baby crying softly in the background and nursing the broken heart Dana had given her. The more I thought about it, the more I knew I had to make sure he didn't do the same thing to Crystal.

"Hey, you deaf?"

"What? Oh, sorry." I accepted the blunt and took a long, slow drag. We passed it around in a circle, everyone smoking but Tisha, who only drank. I got so high I couldn't smoke anymore, and I motioned for Dana and Terrell to finish the blunt by themselves.

The baby began to cry louder than before, and I thought I saw a look of extreme sadness come over Tisha's face. I wanted to take her in my arms and let her spill all her sorrows on my shoulder.

"Tisha, will you check on him?" Terrell said.

"It's your baby. You check on him."

"C'mon, Tisha. I got company."

"Shit. Just Dana."

"What you mean, 'Just Dana?'" Dana asked, putting his hand to his heart as if he'd been stabbed.

"Boy, please."

The baby cried even louder.

"Tisha."

"Alright, damn." She went inside to check on her nephew.

"Tisha still seeing that fake-ass niggah at college?"

It always amazed me how Dana used that word around his black friends and never got a second glance. I was sure that if I used it that I would get the shit beat out of me.

"Naw, she's messin with some guy at that company where she's doing her internship. They talking about putting her on full time when she graduate."

No baby, no minimum wage, no broken heart. Oh well. I looked up at the stars and wondered if Crystal was sitting up waiting for us, perhaps also looking at the night sky.

"You asleep?"

"Huh?"

"Damn, that shit was good to you weren't it? C'mon, I gotta go see a girl."

I stood up to go.

"A'ight T. We're out."

"A'ight then, Dana. A'ight, Jay."

"Alright then, T." Somehow it just wasn't the same as when they said it.

We walked the remaining blocks home slowly, me in a half-daze and Dana babbling something about putting a stereo system in the car which he might buy.

At the house, Dana went into the kitchen and got a sports bottle with a twist-off cap and a flexible straw. He poured two and a half cans of malt liquor into it and chugged the other half a can. While we were making cheese sandwiches, Crystal came out of the bedroom.

"Where have you been? I was getting worried."

"We had to work late, and I stopped by T's to see about that car."

"You coming to bed soon?"

"Naw, me and Jay going down to the graveyard to finish up drinking."

"To the graveyard?" Crystal demanded and looked hard at the both of us.

I just stared at my can, silent. I didn't want to be a part of this lie. Dana had already mentioned seeing another girl.

"Yeah, we're gonna go see who can find the oldest one."

Great. They both knew how I liked to go to graveyards, so now this whole thing would be my fault.

"We won't be gone long," Dana said standing and tugging me along by the sleeve. "Don't worry," as he pulled the door shut behind us.

It soon became apparent that we actually were going to the graveyard which was at the edge of town and about a fifteen minute walk from the house. "Damn," was all he said the whole way there. He just sipped on the straw and kicked rocks. I didn't mind.

At the entrance to the cemetery, Dana made a sharp left and walked all the way back to a far corner and stopped in front of a grave which in the daytime would have been shaded by a giant magnolia tree. I followed blindly.

He sat beside the headstone and traced the carved letters with his fingertips.

I just stood there wondering what the hell he was doing. I took a sip of my malt liquor but almost choked on it when I heard a cough from a few feet away.

“I been waiting half an hour, asshole,” a woman’s voice said angrily. It scared the hell out of me.

“Sorry, baby,” Dana said. “I had business. Come on over here.”

A figure stepped out of the shadows into the moonlight. I recognized it as Tonya, a grocery checker from our store.

“Jay, you know Tonya?”

“Yes. Hi Tonya.”

“Hello, Jay. How you doing?”

Dana was still seated, but he began to rub his hand up Tonya’s leg. “Me and Tonya gonna party a little bit. You wanna join us, Jay? That be alright with you, Boo?”

“Fine with me. He’s kinda cute.”

I couldn’t believe Jay was going to make it with Tonya and in the cemetery too. I’d heard from guys at work that she smoked crack. What the hell was Dana doing? Trying to show me in no uncertain terms that he didn’t care about Crystal, or just showing off how many girls he could get?

“So what about it, Jay?”

“No thanks, man. I’m pretty tired. I think I’m just going to head home.”

“A’ight then. Suit yourself,” he said patting Tonya on her ass. “Just tell Crystal I’m at T’s.”

The nerve. He didn’t even care if Tonya knew about Crystal. What’s more, he didn’t give a shit that Crystal was home waiting for him, probably crying her eyes out.

I left Dana there to do whatever it was he intended.

Back at the house, I found Crystal sitting on the middle of her bed with the lamp on and listening to the late night radio show, *The Quiet Storm*. I went to tell her that Dana would be home in a little while. As soon as she saw me coming down the hall alone, she looked like she was going to cry and asked, "Is he down there still? Is he down there with some bitch?"

I felt sorry for her. "Crystal, I really don't want to get in the middle of you guys' problems. All I know is Dana said to tell you he was going back to T's for a while."

"Son of a bitch." She looked really upset. I stood there at the door like an idiot. I didn't know what to do or say.

I started to walk out of the room, but Crystal called me back.

"Jonathan, come here and talk to me. I don't want to be alone right now."

I went back in and sat on the bed beside her. "Do you want to go watch a movie or something?" I asked.

"No, that's not exactly what I had in mind," she said and then leaned in close to me.

My heart was pounding like crazy to be this close to her. She was so beautiful it almost hurt to look at her. She was like artwork, a sculpture of Venus come to life. She turned her face up to mine and kissed me. It startled me at first. I kissed her for a few seconds, but then my conscience got the better of me. Dana was a complete ass, but he was still technically Crystal's boyfriend.

"Crystal, I can't. Dana's my friend."

"I don't want to talk about him. He doesn't give a shit about me. He's probably at T's right now screwing some trashy bitch."

She had a point. Still, this was just her anger talking.

"I'm sorry, Crystal. I really want to. Believe me, but I just can't." With that, I got up and went to the living room. I sat on the couch and just stared at the wall.

After a couple of minutes I heard what sounded like sobs coming from Crystal's room. Then the door opened, and she came down the hall. She came and fell to her knees right in front of me. She was crying.

"Jonathan, if I were your girl, you wouldn't do that to me would you? You wouldn't ever leave me home alone to cry myself asleep would you? Jonathan?"

My heart was breaking for her. I couldn't stand to see her cry. Her pleading touched me at the core, and I just wanted to make it all better for her.

I slid down to the floor beside her and put my arms around her. "No, Crystal, I would never do that. I'm sorry he hurt you. I really am. Please don't cry."

She looked up at me and said simply, "It's not fair."

"I know."

She began to cry more softly. I reached out to wipe the tears from her cheek with my thumb but only smeared makeup all over her face.

She looked up at me and said simply, "Kiss me."

I kissed her, and she kissed me back. I wanted to soak up all her tears and take away all the hurts that all the Danas had ever done to her.

"Make love to me, Jonathan," she whispered.

I couldn't stand it anymore. I picked her up and carried her to her bedroom. Before I knew it, our clothes were coming off in a whirlwind of excitement. I became frenzied, and as I went to enter her, she stopped me and made me do so slowly. When I was inside her, she locked her legs around my waist and put her hands around my neck so that any movement we made was in complete unison. As we moved together slowly, an electric charge began building simultaneously from the top of my head and the tip of my toes, creeping both from the outside of my body inward and from the extremities to the middle. Time seemed frozen, but at some point I became aware that we were sweating profusely, and I tried to bend my head down to lick the sweat droplets from Crystal's breasts. The movement was awkward and inhibited our rhythm and my building energy, so I stopped trying. Crystal moved us faster and faster then, and I felt the electricity in my body build to lightning proportions. In the final moments, I seemed outside myself; I was entering Crystal with more than just my body, two waves of energy crashing together and mingling essences to be forever inseparable. I heard the building speak and the sax man blow that otherworldly music; and when we climaxed at the same time in an explosion of light and color and music, I knew I loved this woman.

I don't remember separating myself from her, but hearing her voice made me realize we were lying side by side.

"Feel," she said placing my hand on her inner thigh where I felt thousands of tiny little earthquakes taking place. I smiled. I was happy as I envisioned our

future together. I just hoped Dana wouldn't take it too hard.

She lit a cigarette. The whole time she smoked it, I lay there silent, listening to the sax man play impromptu in my head. As she crushed her cigarette in the ashtray, she turned to me ever so slowly and with ever so beautiful a smile and glowing said, "You're a good screw. Now would you mind getting out so I can get some sleep? And shut the door behind you."

I sat up stunned. I looked at her, but she just stared back unblinking.

"Really, Jonathan. I'm tired, and you better not say shit to Dana."

The sax music exploded in my head. "Dana? To hell with Dana. You said yourself, he didn't care about you."

"Well, he sure as hell doesn't love me. But he cares in his own way. Besides he might freak out or something if he found out about this. I really don't want to move out right now. Anyway, he's great in bed."

"But then why...."

"Oh for God's sake, Jay. Grow up will you?"

I fumbled around the bed clumsily for my clothes. After what seemed like days, I found them, picked them up and walked out of the room.

Walking down the hall, the music in my head began to take on more structure. It was *Windmills*. Hearing it then, the music hit home. The soulful parts were all the more powerful. But the part with the galloping beat was not funny anymore. It was taunting, sarcastic even.

I couldn't believe Crystal was acting this way. I just wanted to take care of her, protect her.

I put on my underwear and walked to the front steps. I looked up at the purple sky and saw floating clouds changing shape. I tried to distract myself by making them into shapes as I'd done as a kid and as I still sometimes did. An airplane. A rocket. A dragon.

But I couldn't get *Windmills* out of my head. I sat down on the steps with my clothes in my lap. I pictured the sax man playing that music. I saw him laughing, laughing at me. The very music laughed at me. I wanted to take the saxophone and throw it under a bus, but the music played on.

I looked once more at the clouds. They still only looked like clouds. I no longer wanted to make them into rockets and dragons. For the first time since I could remember, I wished the sun was up. I wished it would come up in a burning Sahara heat, burn those clouds into nothing.