



The Summerset Review

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The Somerset Review

Editors' Notes



The Somerset Review participated in the annual Literary Magazine Magathon held by the Council of Literary Magazines and Presses (CLMP) in New York City the weekend of June 4-5. We were one of about fifteen journals who gave readings at the New York Public Library, to promote literary writing and provide a taste of what each of these literary publications was like. Other readers included *AGNI*, *Fence*, *Other Voices*, *Confrontation*, and *Inkwell*. We also participated in the annual book fair in Soho, our third year of doing this. The small, used book shop—The Housing Works—was more crowded than ever, for the duration of the day, and all proceeds went to good causes. A thank-you goes out to those who stopped by our table to learn more about us.

Our Lit Pick of the Quarter is a double shot this time, back-to-back stories we read in Vol. 71 No. 1 of *New Letters*. Robert Day's "The Skull Hunter" and "The Story I'm Pitching" are whimsical rides of fun. The issue includes an insightful interview with the author. This excerpt is from "The Skull Hunter" -

"Her husband was a trapper who also worked cattle for the Codys. He's still alive even after he shot himself, but he can't make it on his own anymore, so he's in Cottonwood at the home for cripples. I'm the one who saved him. I think maybe Sally shot him. I can sort of see it. Sally's a little fucked. The bullet went through his neck. He's a lot older than she is, and some people say he never was her husband. I found him by one of his traps. He was out, but he wasn't bleeding as bad as you'd think. I put him in my canoe and took him down to the Two Sleep Bridge. Tom Bitters came by just about then, and we laid out Sally's husband in the back of the truck and drove him into Cottonwood where they said he wasn't dead. I hadn't been with Sally before he got shot, but I was afterward. That night, if you want to know."

Incidentally, when *New Letters* heard our nice words—we're inclined to send happy feedback now and then to literary magazines—they passed them on to the author, who consequently invited us to see a play adapted from "The Story I'm Pitching," held in April at Montgomery College in Silver Springs, Maryland. We went, and enjoyed it very much. Our thanks goes out to Robert Day and the play's director, Perry Schwartz, as well as Michael Malone, whose lunch and hospitality we regrettably missed. Robert told us a little about his characters in these stories: "Those guys are a bit nuts, I think." Well, they could be nuts, but they are a delight to experience, whether on the page or on the stage.

For this, our Summer issue, we think the cover graphic entitled "Carnival," sums it up fairly well. See if you can make the connection.

Here, you will find a college student with an admirable goal: to write a story a day. We're running two of B. J. Hollars' pieces, both light and amusing, weaving a blurry boundary between what's possible and what's not. The graphic accompanying these stories is from a wonderful collection of black light paintings by Maxi Hellweger.

There's a young girl—a third-grader to be exact—who suddenly becomes very busy by the time we reach the end of Catherine B. Hamilton's short essay, "Infidelity," touching on a variation of the subject some of us experience many years after elementary school.

When was the last time you read a literary journal and saw fiction written by a high-school student? We're happy to run a short story by Mariel Boyarsky, a graduating senior, who gives us "Soldiers," a story of desperation and struggle, one that we hope will stir further successes of this young and talented writer.

You'll also find here a retired school teacher who took it upon himself to finally send out work for consideration in literary journals. He selected us for a first try. We loved "Junkyard Dog," which takes us on a journey of self-recovery, and so you see it in this issue: Michael J. Cunningham's first submission ever.

The Summerset Review

Joseph Levens – Editor
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The Summerset Review



Two Unlikely Stories

by B. J. Hollars

An Odd-Looking Catfish

His daughter, who disappeared at age nine, was found ten years later, living inside a leather boot he had reeled in from the bottom of the Ticonderoga River.

Nobody questioned it at first, but rather, congratulated him on his catch, "the finest of the season" some called it, while others, who did not know about the incident involving his daughter, noted that it was "one odd-lookin' catfish, if I ever saw one."

It was a cold morning in mid June, and Alvin Artobury was fishing with live bait, cramming a writhing worm onto the hook, spearing it, doubling the body over to spear it again, covering the hidden metal underneath. He had collected the worms in the middle of a thunderstorm, with a flashlight. On spotting them, he would dash over, grab them by the handfuls and toss them into a wooden bucket, never an easy task. The worms could see him, feel the reverberations, and they squiggled into the ground, as if playing tag, or Ghost in the Graveyard, or Spud. Still, some were caught, and once within his grasp, he never relinquished the grip.

It was a cold morning in mid June, and Alvin Artobury stood on the banks of the river, watching the bobber bounce gently against the movements of waves. But he was a patient man, and did not jump to conclusions, did not reel before being absolutely sure of what was on the other end of things,

until the bobber was completely submerged in water.

He feels the pull, the tug, and begins a fight which will end with no victors.

He uses his shoulders, his entire body, and he jerks quickly, then releases, careful not to break the nylon string. Beside him, in a wooden bucket, the other worms cheer in silence, hoping the sacrifice of one will save the rest, that maybe he will be content for today, that they will live on for another.

The battle is by no means quick, and after half an hour of palpitations and jerks, releases, and more jerks, the catch is landed, a brown boot captured and brought to the surface, an unruly entity.

"Well I'll be ..." Alvin mutters, staring deep into the hollow cavern of the boot, wondering just what part of it could put up such a fight. Was it the sole, he wonders. Or the laces?

He stares down into the hole, and sees a thin, pale hand reaching up. He jumps back, startled, then carefully peers into the hole once more.

"Hewp," a voice shouts, and although the voice cannot be more than a foot deep, it sounds distant, as if recorded and played back on a foggy tape deck. "Hewp me ..." the voice calls again, a few bubbles released. Alvin reaches for the hand, touches the cold, hard flesh, and pulls gently.

And somehow ... his daughter comes sliding out, wearing the exact clothing she was wearing the last time he saw her, ten years earlier, before she ran away and never came back. Her clothes are tattered now, ripped by her growth spurts, dingy and moist and moldy from the years spent underwater in a boot.

"Abigail ... Abby?" he murmurs, unable to grasp the idea that his forgotten offspring could somehow be in front of him, could somehow be alive and breathing and ...

She coughs, says she needs some water, fast, and having forgotten his canteen, he has nothing to offer her. As always, he has fallen short. She looks around frantically, eyes growing to the size of billiard balls, and then, as a last resort, dunks her head back into the river known as Ticonderoga, released.



They got along well at first, Alvin carrying Abby home wrapped in damp sheets, splashing water on her face every few seconds, as if the water had somehow become her air. She struggled at times, attempting to reacquaint her lungs with oxygen, but the element would not take.

And so she relied on water, and wandered around her old home, a drink in her hand everywhere she went, gulping it down, refilling it, gulping it down again, so her throat would not dry out.

"And ... this was your room. You remember, Abby? You remember when we lived here together? I ... I didn't touch a thing, didn't touch a damn thing. It's all as it was when you left it."

Abby smiles, still dripping from her tattered clothing. "You didn't change a thing, Daddy?"

"No, didn't change a thing," he says proudly, hands on his hips, his beard graying, more so in this one day than in the past ten years combined.

"Everyone ... everyone said I should, even the Reverend, said it was part of the grief process and whatnot, but I said no. Like hell they were going to make me disrupt my daughter's room."

She seems pleased, touched at his capacity to leave things the same, but

then she realizes he had done a similar thing to her mother's sewing room after she passed away, locking the door with a solid silver key, allowing nothing to touch it but dust.



The father looked at the daughter across from the dinner table later that evening, and they smiled, hoping that their locked eyes would make up for the lack of words they uttered.

"So ... what'd you do down there all that time? In that boot of yours?"

She shrugged, said the river was wonderful; there are all kinds of things to do down there.

"Like what?" he asked.

"Like watch ducks' feet paddle from below the water's surface. They look like a million tiny babies trying to swim." She paused. "What about you, Dad? What have you done?" she asked, finishing her water.

"Fished," he answered, somehow, an entire decade summed up in a syllable.

"Fished."

"Waiting for the big one."

That night, as they went into their respective rooms for the night's rest, Alvin finds himself in a dilemma, not quite sure if girls Abby's age still need a kiss before bed, if they still need to be tucked in, a light flicked off. He waits outside the door, hand raised, as if to knock, but something stops him. And a moment later, the door opens from the other side, and Abby catches her father standing there, statuesque, hand raised, pausing in midair, as if considering.

"Daddy? I can't sleep," she whines.

"Want me to tuck you in, kiss you goodnight?" he offers, assuming that, like always, this will put all of her fears to rest.

She shakes her head, no thanks, asks if it will be all right to sleep in the boot again, like she's used to.

He nods, bashful, and says he'll go get it from the garage.

And he does, grabbing the sloppy, slippery piece of material, ripped at the laces, and places it in the center of her bed. It smells of seaweed and moss and tungsten. She slips inside as if slipping into a sleeping bag, or a cocoon, and then smiles, winks goodnight to her father, pushes her head in deep.

Alvin Artobury, not sure what to do, does what he imagines any good father might do, and gently tucks the boot in under the white and purple blankets, kissing it goodnight at the top of the leather tongue, and flicks off the light.



"The finest of the season," Rick Hallows said on seeing the girl for the first time in years. "Truly the finest."

They are sitting at a bar in town, Eddie's Bar, and there are mounted walleye and sturgeon displayed against the oak paneled walls, men admiring them as they suck down beers, nibble on peanuts and then spit

the shells on the worn ground.

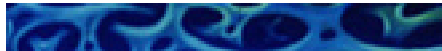
Alvin glances at his daughter, noticing for the first time just how beautiful she has become, as if the ten years inside the boot had fermented her, changed her from a good beer to a great wine, metallic in taste, bitter and natural all at the same time.

Bruce Conus walks up from behind, takes a lengthy sip of beer, makes a clicking noise from the back of his thick throat, shakes his head and comments on what an odd looking catfish she is.

The men laugh, slapping each other on the back, but father and daughter look down at the table sheepishly, wondering where they are, or what they are doing, and if this is what fathers and daughters are supposed to do.

Should I ... should I defend her? Alvin wonders. Do I hit Bruce in the face?

But he does not, and she does not expect him to. He finishes his beer and catches his daughter staring longingly at the fish on the wall, prize fish, every one. The other men do not notice, do not notice the silence surrounding them, the sound of darts whizzing through the atmosphere, connecting with the cork. They do not notice the tight lips on a girl who has never been to a school dance, never gone to a movie in Technicolor. And they do not notice the one hidden tear desecrating her gentle face, slipping down and falling to the dirty floor as she stares enviously at fish that got it right, the ones who knew that the life of a fish out of water was no life at all, and chose death instead.



"It was ... it was wonderful seeing you, Abby," he told her, hugging her one last time on the bank of the Ticonderoga River, later in that evening of the second day. The moon reflected down on the rushing water, flushing, moving onward, the ripples carrying pieces of it away all the time.

"I'll miss you, Daddy," she cried, no longer needing the water to keep her alive, the tears do just fine. "I'll miss you like I missed you long ago, when you were gone and Mommy was gone and I had nowhere to go. So I ran away from everyone, like Alice, looking for that rabbit hole, you know? You remember? Mommy used to read that story to me."

"Yes, sweetie, I remember."

He does not remember how to be a father, not sure if he ever knew in the first place, but he does know how to cry, having practiced every night for years.

"So I ran Daddy, and I looked for that rabbit hole, but I found a boot instead and ... I thought I would be back, just a day or two on my own but ... but then I went for a swim one day and it all felt so right and ..."

"Shhh ..." he silenced her, holding her close, allowing their tears to mingle with one another like ballroom dancers, fox-trotting.

"But I meant to be back ..."

"Shhh ..."

"And I would be back now except ..."

They both realized that they had drifted apart, that the years had taken them further downstream than ever before, that no fish should be confined to such earthly pressures as breathing.

They do not talk, and he watched curiously as his daughter pushed herself

back inside the boot, a golden fleet of falling hair the last to disappear.

And Alvin Artobury gently pushed the boot back into the Ticonderoga, like a miniature sailboat, and watched the river take it away, take her away, siphoning out the evil and the filth and leaving her pure, a daughter inside a boot and nothing more.

He threw her back, decided to let her grow a little.

It is midnight, and he can feel the eyes of a million nocturnal animals watching him, witnessing a goodbye.

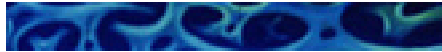
He takes his fishing pole, baits the hook, tosses it into the deep, cold, splashing water and waits, patiently, for a fish he cannot catch, for a fish that does not exist, one worth knowing, loving, mounting on a wall.

He cries then, dunking his face under the surface, eyes open, cheeks puffy, mixing the only water he has ever known with the only water his daughter has ever known.

The boot is no longer visible through the darkness, and he wonders what ducks' feet must look like from down below.

Like swimming babies, he was told.

He has thrown her back. He has thrown her back so that she can grow a little while longer, so that he can too. Hoping, praying, that they may just grow in the same direction this time, depending on the current.



The Adventures of Pig Latin and Short Stack

Once there was a gay midget who fell in love with the same man as a dumb mute.

Lila Ellerbee worked at a radio station, KKTY, as a DJ, but she never spoke into the microphone. She was assigned the graveyard shift, in which all she did was choose the music, set the tracks, and press the buttons. She could never spill out words without jumbles, mixing syllables and scrunching letters, putting the beginnings of words at the end and backward again, inside out as well. Like Pig Latin. It's what the children at her high school used to call her.

Hey Pig Latin, spit it out.

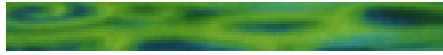
And so she would, she'd spit it out, a great glob of spit and mucus directly on their shoes.

But it was not required of her to speak at the radio station, merely to nod, to smile politely, to use her fingertips in robotic motions and be pleasant. And she was beautiful, dark hair flowing and eyes like green fire, until she opened her mouth and no words came out.

Big Mike had the early show (Big Mike in the Morning) and there was nothing he loved more than stepping into the sound booth to find Lila Ellerbee curled into a ball on the rolling chair they shared, her hands between her thighs, eyes closed, humming along to her freshly chosen song, cradling it as if it were a newborn child.

Big Mike had big hands and big feet and a small head, and while some might call him misshapen, Lila would have called him unique, if she could call him anything at all.

He would clear his throat to make his presence known, and she'd jump, smile, wave politely and get up from her chair, nervous, scratching her hair, trying to put herself back together, checking her watch, unable to believe the night had drifted by her again.



"You ... I listened to you on the way to work," he tells her in the early morning one day, and she nods. "Good picks. Nice easy listening."

Again, a nod. Sometimes, while playing the music, she forgot that she was not alone, that everyone within a hundred mile radius could hear her secret lullabies, that she was not as secluded as she would like to have thought.

"Well I guess I'll go ahead and ..."

She looks down, embarrassed and grabs her coat, leaves the sound booth, closes the door behind her and stares at Big Mike through the impenetrable glass that separates the booth from the office. He slips on the oversized headphones, adjusts the angle of the microphone and reaches for his coffee. He glances up, catches the dumb mute staring at him, and he raises his Styrofoam cup to her as if in a toast and then she runs, down the stairs, fast, to the Channel 67 studio below, a local news station. She is running down the stairs, and Bruce Candorly is reciting his lines at the bottom, and she trips over his little body, sending it sprawling, as if she were the bowling ball and he was the pin.

He does not cry, even though that is what people expect from midgets. Their size, typically the result of a deficiency in the pituitary hormone gland, seems to put them in the same category as children, but that is not the case. As Lila bends down to him, mouth sputtering noises as if possessed, Bruce stares at her wide-eyed, shocked, unable to understand the reasoning behind the attack.

"I ... err ... you ... blood," she manages to spew, and she grabs his miniature hand as if taking a child's and rushes him up the stairs, back to the KKTU studio and runs to the refrigerator for an icepack and some tissues.

Bruce Candorly, who is four feet three inches and sinking into the floor, holds the cut on his head and stares at Big Mike as he talks eloquently into the microphone, making hand gestures that could indicate any number of things.

Lila hands him the icepack, and both find themselves staring at Big Mike longingly, as if in a trance, waiting, wondering what life might be like if they were normal, if they too could speak words into a microphone as eloquently as he, and in the case of Bruce, if he could reach it without the humiliation of a booster chair.

"Thanks for the icepack," Bruce mumbles to her as he holds the blue bag to his forehead, but now, he seems to be in even more pain than before, on realizing that a man like Big Mike truly exists, and it not just a premonition in a dream he once had after drinking too many shots of tequilas.

She nods, does not look at him, and then Bruce walks down the stairs carefully, repeating his lines like before, preparing for a commercial shoot for Greg's Auto Loan, in which he will be paid two-hundred dollars to say, "Greg's low, low rates are smaller than all the rest!"

And although it is not much, it is work, and he always wanted to be an actor.



Pig Latin and Short Stack greet each other in the mornings as she is leaving and he is coming. The producer of the commercial for Greg's Auto Loans, who produces all of the commercials for the local channel, has agreed to allow him to intern for a few months, learn the tricks of the trade, and the midget is grateful for the opportunity. Not grateful to learn the tricks, but to be able to see Big Mike every morning, open the door for him occasionally, smiling, wishing him a good morning.

And he knows that Big Mike remembers him. Because, if nothing else, no one ever forgets a midget.

Every morning, he sees the woman who cannot speak as well, and after several mornings of nothing more than an understanding nod to one another, a broken smile, Bruce stops her.

"Listen, about the man upstairs ... do you think he could love me? Because I think I might love him."

Lila drops her jaw, shakes her head and points to herself, saying Me, Me, I'm the one who loves him.

"What?" he asks and she points to herself angrily, pounding her pointer finger into her chest.

"You? You love him too?"

She nods, smiles at the differences between them, and the similarities.

"So ... what do we do? I mean, I guess you can have him because ... well, he could never love a midget and all ..."

She shakes her head and points to her mouth, opens her lips, says nothing, then closes them again.

"And you can't talk," he tells her. "Yeah, that's right. I guess we're both coming up short in one way or another."

She nods sadly.

They are standing on the staircase, halfway up the stairs, somewhere between Heaven and Hell and helpless to their positions. Bruce is three steps higher, and with the extra height, they seem to level out rather nicely.

"Maybe if ... maybe if I can help you talk to him then you can help me grow?" he says, and she squints her eyes as if saying How? How could it ever be?

And he smiles, says anything is possible in love, and promises to meet her later that night, as she presses the buttons with robotic fingers, as she serenades the world in sounds.



"You feel ... you feel as if your heart is breaking when you see his face?" he asks and she nods, points to the paper in front of them, and he writes it down. She cannot speak and she cannot allow words to drift out coherently, so Bruce has agreed to write the love letters and she will approve them.

"And ... and you think of him as you play your songs, wondering if maybe,

miles away, the radio beside his bed is flicked on and he is listening to you sing to him?" Again, she nods, this time more excitedly, and smiles, claps loudly and Bruce pushes the letters from the lead in the pencil.

"Sometimes you think you see the morning sun drift through the window but you realize that it is only his face, waking you from your slumber once more, coffee cup in hand and holding your heart somewhere within the crushed beans."

Pig Latin stares lovingly at Short Stack and she rubs his scruffy face with her hand, wondering why no one has ever touched her soul like this before tonight.

"How do we sign it? How can we ever sign it correctly?" he asks. "Your friend? Or Sincerely or ... Love?" he asks, but she just continues rubbing his face, his cheek, and smiles plainly and he puts the pencil to paper once more, and decides on love.



He says that he has seen this in a cartoon once, and maybe it will work. They wrap themselves inside a trench coat, his legs dangling over her shoulders like a father and son at the park, watching swans. Then they button the buttons and she walks around blindly as he directs with nudges from his legs into her chest, a tap from the left foot meaning turn left and a kick from the right meaning the opposite. It is like driving a horse, or a dogsled, but Lila is willing to do it as payment for the words he has written for her.

They stumble around the sound booth to the smooth sounds of John Coltrane's India and Bruce pretends to act natural.

"Hey Mike, how's it going, I'm Bruce," he says, holding out his hand, which he realizes is much too short, and instead, asks Lila to hold out hers instead, to make it look more realistic.

"So we'll try again, Lila," he calls down to her. "When I say, 'My name is Bruce,' you hold out your hand. Got it?"

A nod of the head from between his legs.

"Hi, my name is Bruce," he tries again and like magic, her hand levitates outward. Bruce smiles at the beauty of it, at the powers he possesses, and they dance around to the music, her legs carrying both of them, his arms thrust outward as if flying, as if they will never come down again, and if they do, she will only lift him higher next time.



Bruce calls into Mike's show nearly every morning, from the payphone downstairs, and they laugh about the news and "what a mad world we live in." Meanwhile, Lila slips the notes under the base of the microphone every morning before he arrives.

And somehow, they both court the man they love, in ways that make them seem normal, in ways that make it seem real.

It is a game they play, and after the day is through, and Big Mike, with his big hands and his big feet and his small head, goes home, the two of them rush to each other, hug, and rejoice over their newfound love.

"He ... he said he loved talking to me! Can you believe that! He said I better keep calling, that it's helping his rating!" Bruce smiles.

And Lila grins as well, presses a note written on a napkin to her chest, and it reads, "Thanks Lila, you're a really great girl."

"See? He likes you too!" Bruce assures her.

And she picks him up on her shoulders once more, and he touches the ceiling, taller than any man he has ever met, and he laughs and she smiles and they twirl and spin until ... until she stops and sees her reflection in the mirror, sees the legs dangling over her. And then she is frozen solid.

"What? What is it?" he asks. "Lila, what?"

But she cannot tell him, wouldn't tell him if she could.

But this is what she thinks: *He can never love both of us at once.*

"Lila? What? What is it now?" he repeats, but she just stares at her image staring back, his feet kicking gently, his size three shoes touching her breasts and skimming off, like skipping stones before breaking the waterline.



They meet in the hallway, halfway up the staircase, and Bruce asks if she is sure this is a good idea. She nods, bends down low and allows for him to climb up. They wrap the trench coat around themselves and continue upstairs.

"Because ... I don't know if I'm quite ready to meet him. I don't know if we've perfected this yet. Remember, if I kick left then ..."

She makes a frustrated groaning sound and he shuts up.

They step into the KKTY office, and he has to duck to avoid hitting his head. He loves the feel of ducking.

Big Mike is talking into the microphone, talking to his listeners, and then he presses a button and plays some commercials and motions for the tall man in the trench coat to step inside the booth.

"Dear God ..." he prays, hoping his newfound height will help his prayers reach God faster.

"Hey, I'm Mike," Mike says and Bruce breathes, and Lila holds her eyes closed, then opened, staring at Mike's face through the crack in the coat.

"Hey," Bruce begins. "My name is ... Bruce."

And she reaches out her hand for him to shake, and he does, and she feels the electricity flowing through her. *Too much*, she thinks. *I love him too much to lose him.*

And she drops her better half, her upper half, and Short Stack falls to the ground once more, Pig Latin staring down through the coat, then running for the icepack.



The three stare at each other guiltily, no one sure of anything.

"I love you, Mike," Bruce admits. "And I only wanted you to love me back."

Lila points to herself frantically, and Bruce nods, "Oh yeah, and she loves

you too."

Big Mike removes the earphones from his neck and stares at the two, first at the gay midget, then at the dumb mute.

"You ... you both ... love me?"

They nod in unison.

"But ... I'm married. I have a family and I'm married."

They both stare, wide eyed, expecting a different outcome altogether, but receive this instead.

The posters on the wall reveal nothing. The man before them has become a gawking statue.

And suddenly, love has faded, or changed forms, at least, and the dumb mute feels a little dumber. And the gay midget feels a little shorter.



It is midnight, and after much crying, much holding, Pig Latin and Short Stack sit side by side in rolling chairs in the studio.

"Tonight ..." she starts, words dripping out like static, but more beautiful, "we ... have ... a ... special ... guest."

And Short Stack stares at her with passion in his eyes, fiery passion that matches the green burning within hers.

"You ... think I'm special?" he asks and she nods, although she'd have rather said unique.

And the microphone is turned on, and they are live, broadcasting to their listeners a silent void, no music, just silence.

And then, they inch forward, forward still, and they kiss, holding the breath between them, letting it rise in temperature, pushing into one set of cheeks and then the other.

A million miles away, Big Mike, who is lying in bed beside his wife, listens to the silence on the radio, but hears something much different, and he pulls his wife closer, closer still, but he can never get close enough, the silence making it very clear to everyone that love is an illusion worth believing.



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It was a creek, but we said crick, and we played there everyday after school and on weekends, panning for gold, corralling frogs into Maxwell House cans, and pretending to be, as I liked to call it, "drowning orphans."

James, a shrug of a boy whose freckled face looked as though his mother had flicked a paintbrush dipped in cocoa satin at it, never said much. He didn't complain that his best friend was a girl. He really didn't have much choice, and besides, I was the one who did most of the work, inventing all of the games. He participated in most of them, with the exception of a few variations on the "orphans" theme (he refused, for example, to do "Orphans Reunited with Mother," while "Prairie Orphans" was, in fact, a favorite).

Sometimes, between seasons, on the days that blurred winter and spring, when the water in the creek bubbled cold, though not cold enough for ice (or "Orphans Stranded in Antarctica"), we would ride our bikes to Maplewood Elementary School, where James was in fourth grade and I was in third. There, we would hang upside down from the monkey bars unless Ronnie, a kid from James' class, was on the premises.

Ronnie wore KISS T-shirts and a Pittsburgh Pirates baseball cap. He carried a comb in the back pocket of his jeans and frequently ran it through his hair during special programs in the school's multi-purpose room. At recess, he played kickball like a kangaroo, and, between turns, would sometimes inform his teammates that they were all going to get drafted if Jimmy Carter was re-elected (political views courtesy of his brother, Jesse, who was a senior and drove a Trans-Am). It was also rumored that Ronnie had, in his possession, all of the *Star Wars* action figures and a dirt bike, which had propelled him to near legendary status. Ronnie didn't know James very well; at least, I didn't think he did, from the way he'd say, "Hey kid,

wouldja go get that ball," or "Kid, get outta the way."

Whenever Ronnie was at the playground, I'd turn my bike around as if to go home. James would want to stay, though he'd refuse to go on the merry-go-round or the swings or the teeter-totters. He would just put his kickstand down, dig his heels into the dirt beside his bike, stuff his hands in his pockets, and squint at Ronnie.

One Saturday afternoon, a late start because of swim lessons, I jumped on my bike and flew up the road to James' house. With long strands of my damp, chlorine-scented hair whipping around my face, I pretended that I was driving a Corvette and flicked on an imaginary turn signal—click, click, click, my tongue dancing on the roof of my mouth. I pulled in James' driveway, threw my bike down on the gravel, and walked past the scarecrows we'd stuffed four months ago, soggy straw leaking out of their flannel shirts and overalls.

James answered the door.

"Hey," I said.

"Hey," he said back.

"We could play pioneers today. Or 'Lost Orphans' maybe," I suggested.

"Can't."

"Your mom won't let you out?" This had only happened twice before.

"Nah," he said. He looked at his feet. "Ronnie's here."

Ronnie appeared behind James holding the Millennium Falcon. James looked like the deer that lived in the woods behind my house, the one that sometimes wandered onto the road when my dad was driving home and stood there until my dad slammed his fist down on the horn. "We're playing Star Wars," Ronnie informed me. I noticed how perfectly feathered his hair was.

"Can I play?" I asked.

Ronnie and James looked at each other. "No."

It was then that I noticed the Han Solo guy in James' hand. I kicked a few stones on the way back to my bike, then pedaled off towards the creek.

I spent the rest of the afternoon pretending that I was an orphan who was trying to build a dam in the river, to save the townspeople from the big flood. It wasn't as much fun as it would've been with James. Even still, I told myself that when he called tomorrow, begging me to come over and think up a game, I'd have to say, "No, I'm *busy*."

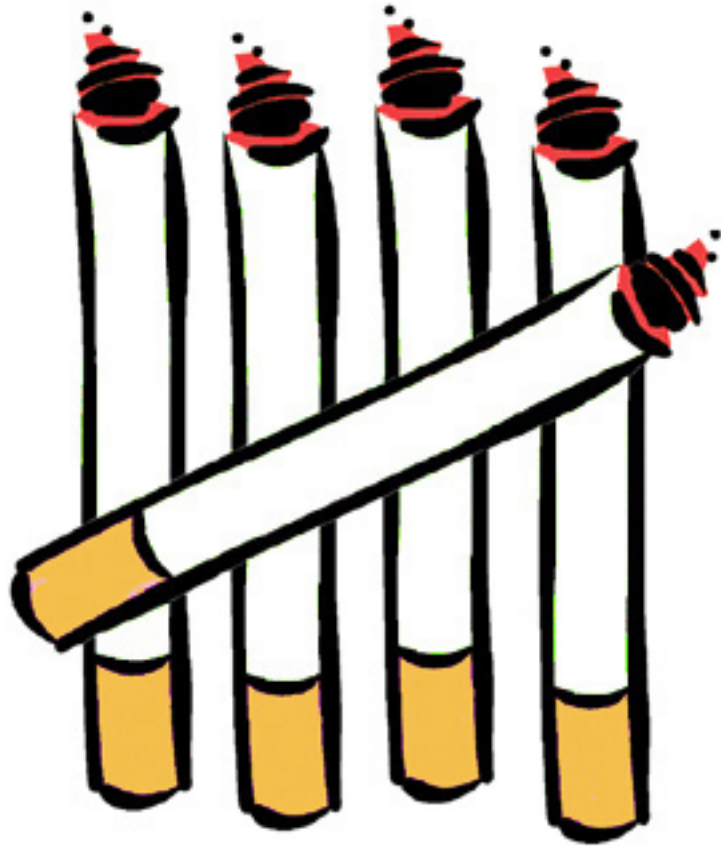


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Soldiers

by

**Mariel
Boyarsky**



The third time Roger came home with his hair disheveled, wearing that other woman's perfume and a faint smear of lipstick beneath his chin like the dying rind of a rainbow—the third time this happened, Cheryl started keeping a tally in her purple notebook. There wasn't much else she could do. Both her brain and her heart urged her to say something, to do something drastic, but each time she thought of this, her throat fought back, closing in on her so her heart could not escape; her skull, too, fought against her, rattling the brain stem, lobes, pituitary gland in a headache of explosions, flashing lights, nothing she had ever experienced before. So instead of doing anything, she bought a purple notebook, opened it, smoothed the first page. She drew three thin, lonely lines like starved soldiers.

The next evening, she was making lasagna when he walked in. She smelled him almost as soon as she heard the door close. He reeked; the scent permeated the kitchen, beat the lasagna smell out the window to the street. She imagined neighbors passing by, sniffing, thinking of the good, happy things that happened inside her house. So she held her smile, and after they had eaten and she rinsed the dishes, she drew a fourth tally mark in the notebook.

At night, he went out again. The clock cast neon shadows on her face: three a.m. She lay on her back, flat against the mattress; the pillows had fallen off hours ago, but she had not bothered to pick them up. On the other side of the bed, not touching her and leaving some two feet of empty wrinkled sheet between them, Roger swung his legs over the side

and shuffled to his dresser. He pulled a stiff pair of jeans over his underwear, a jacket from the closet, and he was gone.

Cheryl listened to the door click, that quick and quiet meeting between latch and frame that brings to mind all sorts of secrets. She waited a moment until she was sure he'd had enough time to get out of the house, and then made her way to the kitchen for a glass of water. She paused at the window, an uneven hole in the rotting wood over which mosquito netting had been carelessly stapled. She drank, then placed her glass on the top of a teetering pile of dirty dishes that consumed the small sink, and wandered into the tiny living room where she had stashed the purple notebook between a trashy novel and an old atlas.

Cheryl took out the notebook, dragged a pencil diagonally across the other four lines, then stared at the marks. They looked like some kind of haunted symbol, a ghost calling. She snapped the book shut before she could wonder how long it would take for Roger to have her fill each page.



Sarah found the notebook. In the blue shadows of insomnia, she had wandered from her room at the end of the hall and stood in front of the living room bookshelf at four in the morning. She had pulled out a book, glanced at its cover, pushed it back toward the wall. Again. Again. Then something caught her eye. It was purple.

A journal. She brought it to the couch, which was pushed against the open window. A milky light dripped from the glass. She opened the book.

The first page was filled front and back with straggly lines that formed a total of forty-nine tally marks. She flipped through the rest of the book. Empty. She turned to the last page, thinking that perhaps something had been printed there, maybe an entry in a backward diary. Nothing.

Then Roger walked in. He pushed the front door open quietly, eased it closed as silently as though the frame were lined in velvet. He maneuvered his shoes off his feet, pushed them into the closet. His daughter watched from the shadows, shrinking from the moonlight so he wouldn't see her. She needn't have been so careful. Roger didn't even glance her way. He shuffled down the hall to his bedroom, lay across the mattress exactly as he had been before, and closed his eyes. Cheryl squeezed her own shut even tighter.

In the living room, Sarah finally exhaled. It seemed as if her breath hung about her in an invisible cloud, something too delicate to even see, but it had a strange scent: something bottled and clean. She sniffed. No. That was not her breath.



One night in the sixth month of their affair, Roger shrank from Adèle as she dabbed perfume onto her shoulder blades, the insides of her thighs. The bottle was spun glass, a tiny fragile dome that glistened purple in the light.

"Don't, Adèle." He reached for the bottle.

"This is the finest scent in France," she told him. Her voice was beautiful, her French accent like a slight, lovely limp to her words. It made him want to kiss her mouth, the wound that began the velvet path to her larynx. "I use it only for you."

"My wife ..."

"You said you didn't love her anymore." She put down the bottle. "We can go back to France."

He shook his head, a feeble attempt to clear the confusion. What had seemed so simple and right in his mind was melting away in the clouds of her beauty, her accent.

"You don't want to leave?" She arched one perfect eyebrow, gestured out her window toward the rolling miles of sand, the scattered trailers covered in peeling yellow and brown paint. Somewhere above the falling, rotting gray roofs and tired trees, a crow was swinging on an invisible thread of sky, shrieking, plummeting. Mixed in with the hot sand, empty cans and bits of old paper swirled in the wind like part of a twisted, ugly dance. Pueblo Pintado, New Mexico. Roger bit his lip.

"You know I hate this place."

"I've almost saved up enough for two tickets ... in France, we will live a different life. No trailers. No sand." She fingered his palm, crept her hand up his arm to his neck. "Paris ..." She massaged his shoulders for a moment, then pulled his shirt off his back. He let himself become lost to the familiar rhythms of forbidden comfort and dangerous pleasure, the paradoxes of his life and his mind. Like an empty can trailing on the ground from a little boy's string, he lost himself to her pulls and jerks, her tongue, hands, spaces, and her poisonous, beautiful words.



Roger looked like a man someone would want to paint, especially now, his strong chin tilted only slightly, his large clear eyes staring unwaveringly at his daughter. Sarah, too, was lovely, her pale hair pushed around her shoulders by the wind. She was on the cusp of adolescence, poised with one foot cautiously poking off the cliff of childhood, half-ready to jump toward whatever lay beyond, half clinging to the things she knew.

They stood barefoot on the sand, some three hundred miles from home, watching the sea fold and unfold itself against the land. Roger's rusted pickup truck, with its bruised bumper and broken headlights, sat near them on the gravel road. It, too, gazed wearily at the ocean, its punched-out lights grimacing at the dark blue water and white breaking waves.

They made this trip twice a year, just the two of them. Sarah and Roger had always loved the sea, the giant wet umbrellas of waves. Cheryl, wildly afraid of any bodies of water larger than the tiny tub in their single bathroom, preferred to stay at home. So father and daughter traveled five hours on dirt and gravel roads in the rusted pickup truck to see the ocean. Usually, they talked the entire five hours—about school, Europe, the sea. Roger would admire her dimples, her clear voice, and he always thought that she didn't belong there, in the rusted truck bumping along a narrow road surrounded on all sides by the gritty sand. She didn't belong, deserved more than what he and Cheryl could give her—a slender bed, two battered trunks for her clothing, the sand particles that permeated everything and rolled down the slant of her bedroom floor, found their way into her food, her shoes, her hair. What she deserved, he mused now, watching her watch the water, was what Adèle had been promising him. To fly over these waves, far from the heat and the sand and the peeling paint, and, like a dream, to land somewhere else—a city like Paris. He wanted it so badly for himself. He wanted it even more for his daughter.

Roger noticed that Sarah's face had changed recently, had become longer, thinner, older-looking. She had grown taller, too. And there was something in the wetness of her eyes that looked hurt and tired. He sighed. He thought of everything that would come to her, the changes and pains of growing, the distance she would soon ask from him. He

thought of the boys with their dirt bikes and outdated CD players who would let their wide eyes fall on her body; of the houses she would dream of living in, free of sand and smells and cheap narrow beds; of the loneliness that would bite at her as she grew. Something in him ached to think of her having to do these things on her own.

And then he panicked. He imagined what would happen if she ever found out about Adèle, that he and Cheryl weren't sleeping together anymore, or talking to each other, that they even avoided looking at one another when they could.

Roger glanced at Sarah again, and he noticed a deep, permanent furrow in her brow that hadn't been there the last time they'd taken the trip.

"Sarah?" He placed a warm hand on her shoulder, but she shrugged it off. The sun glinted off the waves and threw purple specks into Sarah's eyes. A cold, inexplicable wave of fear hit him; he tasted salt beneath his tongue and knew that she knew.



That night, Cheryl reached out to stop her husband as he began to swing his legs over the bed and search for his shoes. She placed her fingers gently on his chest.

"Don't go."

"Cheryl?" He pretended to be confused. "That you?" She sat up, twisted the lamp on. They both blinked in the harsh, crude light.

"Roger, for whatever reasons, you don't care about me anymore." She smoothed the blanket on her lap and looked at the soft shadows on the wall behind his shoulder. "But what about Sarah? She's going to find out. And when she does, she'll be ..."

He knew this. He slumped his shoulders, leaned his head against the wall. Fatigue washed over him; he was so tired of waking up in the middle of each night, tired of Adèle's promises, as empty and hopeless as her purple bottle of perfume. Then he thought of Sarah and he was flooded with a sudden, different kind of energy. He sat up again.

"All right. I'm not going to see her anymore."

"Promise me."

"Yes."

"Or I'll leave. I will. I'll take Sarah with me, I'm not going to let her live in this trash with her father ..." Her voice trailed away. "Right in front of her. She can't grow up like that."

He nodded.

"So come back to bed," Cheryl said.

Roger looked at her face, at the worn cheekbones and bed hair of his wife. So different from Adèle. He saw something of his daughter's changing face in his wife's tired one.

"I'm going to get some cigarettes. I can't sleep." He pulled his shoes on, tied the laces with hard, angry jerks. Cheryl got to her knees on the bed.

"Don't."

"I'm just going to get a pack of cigarettes. I promise."

She bit her lip. "If you don't come back with cigarettes, I'm leaving."

He nodded. "I swear. I swear to God, Cheryl. I'm just going for cigarettes."

"No more of this woman. Ever."

"Just cigarettes."

"Or you won't see your daughter again. Come back with the cigarettes. Roger."

He grabbed his keys and left.



Roger's truck grunted as he pulled into the parking lot of the only gas station in town. The lights inside were off; it looked closed.

"Fuck." He got out anyway, and jogged up to the battered door of the store. He pulled at the handle. Locked.

"Mother fucker!" He rattled the door in frustration, then jumped back in his truck. There were no other stores nearby; the closest open supermarket or gas station was a good fifteen minute drive. He considered going back to Cheryl and telling her the gas station had been closed, but decided against it. He really needed a cigarette. So he started the truck again and tore out of the parking lot, the wheels spitting gravel and small stones.

When reached the next town, he jumped out of the truck and pulled open the doors to the A&P.

"Pack of Camels," he told the black-eyed man behind the counter.

"Softpack O.K.?" The man asked. Roger nodded. The man retrieved the cigarettes and placed them next to the cash register.

"Anything else?"

Roger grabbed a lighter from a counter display and dropped it next to the Camels. "Those two. That's it." He inhaled sharply.

"Five dollars."

Roger reached into his pants pocket, then froze.

"Shit." The man stared blankly at him, waiting for his five. "I left my wallet in my jacket at home."

"Sorry." The man shrugged, and reached for the Camels to put them back.

Roger put out a hand to stop him. "No. Wait."

"Do you have money, or not?"

"I need those."

"Not if you can't pay for them."

"Please, sir, I really need those cigarettes."

"They cost four dollars and fifty cents."

"Please! They're very important to me. Look, I ..."

"You can't pay for them."

"Fuck," Roger muttered under his breath. He kicked the counter. "Fuck!"

"I'm going to have to ask you to leave if you don't stop."

"Can't you just give me the pack, and I'll come back tomorrow with the money. I will, I swear it."

"I can't do that."

He looked at his watch. Cheryl would never believe he had not been with Adèle if he came home without the cigarettes. "I need them. I'll do anything."

"I'm sorry." The man put the cigarettes back in their slot behind the counter.

"I'll work for them. I'll ... I'll sell you something." He tore his watch off his wrist. "Here. Take my watch. I need those cigarettes."

The man shook his head. "If you have no money to buy anything, I'm going to have to ask you to leave."

"I can't leave. I need cigarettes. Shit, give me your cheapest pack. Take my watch, I don't care. Take my shirt, I don't need it. I just need those cigarettes."

"I can't do that, I'm sorry."

"I'll do anything ... anything!" He heard his voice rise in desperation, and felt a flood in the back of his throat, his eyes. It seemed as though he were drowning. There was nothing to be done; Cheryl would not believe he could not get the cigarettes; this man refused to give him any; she would be gone before breakfast, Sarah with her, maybe swinging a few belongings in plastic bags. All was lost. He could not go back to Adèle. He would never make it to France, or even out of this trailer park. No, if there were ever a purpose to his life, it was now gone.

"Please," he heard himself say in a cracked, wet voice that was his and not his. "Just give me one. Give me half of one cigarette ..."



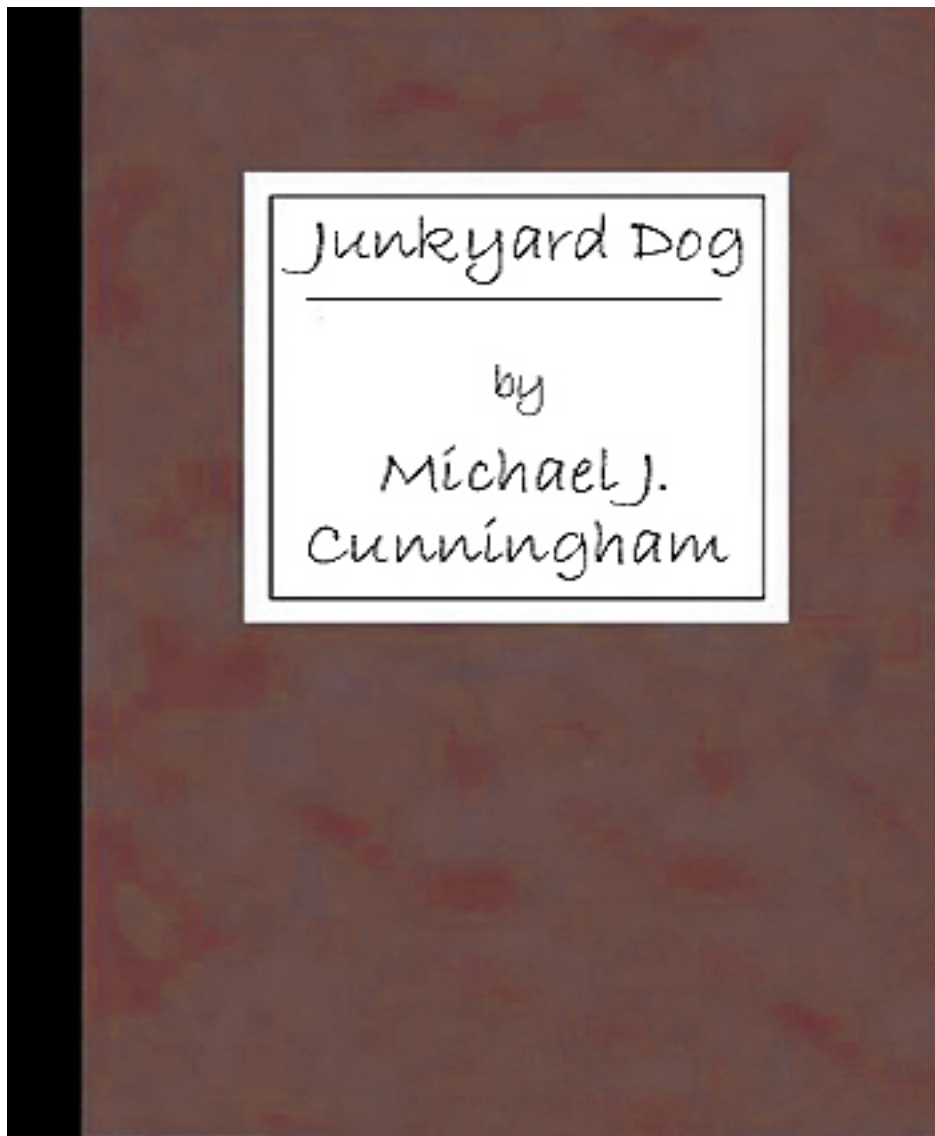
Several minutes later, Roger left the A&P, followed by threatening shouts to call the police if he came back inside without money and the intention to actually pay for his purchases. He opened the door to his truck and stuck his head between the passenger seat and the dashboard, searching for loose change. He found a dime, gripped it in his sweaty palm.

Maybe, he thought, just maybe, he could scrounge up enough money from the dusty floor of his truck and the crevices of the sidewalk outside to buy a cheap pack of cigarettes. He spotted two nickels and a penny, closed his fist around the hot, dirty metal and squeezed the coins as though he held hope itself between his fingers.



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The Somerset Review



Day 1

O.K., here's the deal—I have to keep this journal. Stephanie says it will help me to clarify my feelings about everything. She's the marriage counselor I met this morning and will meet every Saturday until I have resolved my problems.

Stephanie is O.K. Nice body. The only other counselor I saw before was a guy. I was in seventh or eighth grade. He asked me over and over why I had so many problems. I told him I had no problems except for people always asking me to tell them about my problems. I'll never forget what he said in our last session: "Jack," he said, "If you don't have any problems, you really have problems." I thought the guy was queer, but he wasn't. He went to jail later for horsing around with some of the girls at the school. In high school, they tried to make me see counselors too, but I refused.

Maybe I am a little screwed up, but everyone is. I don't know anyone who isn't screwed up in some way. That's true, isn't it?

I was screwed up twenty-two years ago when I married Allison, and she didn't kick me out then. She couldn't get enough of me.

I'm going to do exactly what Stephanie tells me to do. I can't go home until she tells Alli I'm ready, so I'm going to get ready in a hurry. Living here in my motor home at Bob's junkyard isn't where a forty-four-year-old schoolteacher ought to be living. My TV at home is like twenty-six inches. The one here in the motor home is seven. I may go blind watching this thing.

Day 2, Sunday

Bob doesn't want me to call his junkyard a junkyard. He calls it an "auto recycling center," but it looks like a junkyard to me.

Except for the lousy TV, it's not that bad here. I made some coffee this morning when I woke up and sat out in the sunshine to drink it next to this rusted-out '72 Chevy. There was no one else around. Bob has a bunch of Mexicans working here during the week, but they were all gone this morning. I wonder where they go. Maybe to Tijuana to visit their families. Probably not, though. Then they would just have to sneak back across the border to get to work on Monday.

The only noise here this morning was the traffic up on Main Street, two blocks away. Not that much traffic, though. This town isn't that big.

In high school, I lived alone like this. Wasn't that bad. It's funny, but when I woke up this morning, I reached over to cop a feel off Alli, but she wasn't there. For a second, I felt kind of ... you know.

The counselor, Stephanie, told me yesterday that I had to learn my true "feeeeeelings" (She said it like that.) and "deeeeeeeal" with them in a healthy manner. How can one broad be so stupid?

And who the hell am I writing this to? Stephanie said I never had to show this to anyone, not even to Alli. So, there you go. I used to know girls who kept diaries, but never guys. Guys don't do this.

That's enough for now. I feel pretty hung over. I drank a lot of gin last night, like anyone would.

Day 3 and 4

I forgot to write in this yesterday, but I don't think I'll tell Stephanie. I told her I'd write every day, and a promise is a promise.

On the way home from school today, Ed almost took me to my house. Habit.

Ed is the football coach and English teacher at the little high school where I teach Shop and Agriculture and run the Future Farmers of America—FFA.

For the past five years, except during football season, Ed and I have carpooled. The kids at school call us "lowlanders" because we live down the hill here where it doesn't snow. It's a good drive every day. There's no traffic, and Ed's good company most of the time.

He didn't seem surprised when I told him what happened. "You fuckin' idiot," he said. "You can't shit in your own backyard." He didn't judge me or anything. He just said that.

What he meant was that I was an idiot for bringing Krystal, the skinny math teacher, home to my house last Thursday and then getting drunk and naked with her in the master bedroom.

Getting caught by Alli wasn't all my fault, though. Mostly, it was Alli's professor's fault. He's the one who didn't show up for her class so she came home way early.

Krystal and I were on our second round when I heard the key in the front door. Krystal hopped out of bed and closed herself in the closet—just like on TV.

I covered myself and pretended I was taking an afternoon nap all by myself. When I knew Alli was standing in the doorway, I opened one eye just a tad so it would still look closed.

I saw Alli holding a neatly folded stack of woman's clothes, including the under stuff, that Krystal had thrown around the living room.

As Alli stepped toward the bed, I closed my eye and felt her place the stack gently on the foot of the bed. Then I heard her walk quietly away down the hall into Sarah's room.

"Crazy lady! Crazy lady if you think something happened!" I said, as I walked into our daughter's room, Sarah's room, where Alli was sitting stoically between two stuffed animals.

"I'll pick up the children from school, Albert," she said, as if she were ordering lunch. "We'll stay at the Jorgenson's tonight. That will give you time to get your things together."

"But, NOTHING HAPPENED!" I screamed. "NOTHING! I'm too drunk for that. I'm so drunk I don't even know what's happening now!"

"You're sober enough to know you're drunk," Alli answered calmly.

"You want to ask her? Ask her! She's right there in the closet."

"I think we should allow her some dignity. Don't you, Albert? I'll wait here until she's gone."

"Then I'm waiting with you," I said, as if I were conferring a huge honor.

I turned away from Alli and tried to find things to do with my eyes and with my feet and with my arms while listening to Krystal moving around my bedroom. Finally, she exited the front door, having trouble opening it. After Krystal's car sped out of the driveway, Alli just got up and left the house. "We'll be home when you're gone," was all she said.

I think higher education has screwed Alli up. In the old days, she would have just scratched Krystal's eyes out, and the thing would have been over in about two minutes. Alli and I would have smoked some dope together, gone to bed, and made up. Everything is so much better when you don't think too much.

I had to call in sick the next day so I could pack and all.

Day 5

Blood all over the place! This idiot kid almost cut his finger off today in my shop. George, our principal, tried to blame me, and I wasn't even there. I

was outside the shop talking to Krystal. She's feeling a lot of guilt and needed to talk.

I told George I would definitely kick the kid out of my shop class for not following the safety rules I handed out on the first day of school. George is a pretty mild guy, but he looked kind of mad at me when he told me that the kid was "special ed." and probably couldn't read.

Then I got mad and asked George what a non-reader was doing in my shop class.

George then told me he was sending me to some touchy-feely seminar at the county office. Something about students "at risk." He also said I couldn't kick the kid out of my class.

The real reason George doesn't want the kid out of the class is so his parents won't sue the school. That's all administrators think about. I think when I die and go to hell, they'll make me a school administrator. Of course, they'll have to cut my balls off first.

Anyhow, Krystal came by the junkyard after school. It was great. She brought some pot, and we smoked up a storm. Then we screwed liked crazed weasels.

Krystal is a screamer. A little embarrassing for me, but the four Mexicans who work for Bob got a big kick out of it. Bob told me later that they all quit work and sat around the motor home watching it rock, and listening to Krystal scream.

Afterwards, when I came out of the motor home, the Mexicans cheered and said things like, "Bueno, Amigo," and "Mucho macho, my friend." Krystal stood in the doorway, wearing just her panties, waved at the guys and smiled like she had just won a free pizza. The more the Mexicans cheered, the harder she waved. She was only like three feet away from them, but she waved like mad anyhow. I could tell the Mexicans loved it. These guys don't get a lot of entertainment, so they get a big kick out of almost anything ... in a kind of half-assed way, of course.

I think in my next life, I'll be a Mexican and work for Bob.

Day 6

My day to drive.

On the way up the hill this morning, I told Ed about Krystal's visit and about the Mexicans and everything. He didn't laugh. I thought it was funny, but he thinks Krystal should be in "the quiet room." "She's a mental case," Ed told me. "She gets off on danger and drama, soap opera shit."

Ed sees himself as a real thinker because he teaches English. He is pretty intellectual for a football coach. Most football coaches are complete, flying turds.

In high school my freshman football coach was this guy whose T-shirt couldn't cover his fat, hairy, white gut. "Gain some weight, kid, and try again next year."

Then they tried to make me a manager. Gave me a team shirt. I liked the shirt, but then the players started telling me to pick up balls and bring them water. I told them all to get fucked. That's when I bought some chickens and became an aggie.

Day 7

Almost a "snow day" today. As we got closer to school this morning, flakes were hitting the windshield, but nothing stuck. If it sticks, George closes down the school because he's afraid the parents will sue the school if all the school busses slide off the roads.

Ed drove today, so I got to look at the snowflakes on the windshield.

They're all different. Ed said everyone but me knew that. Excuuuussee me.

We still closed down an hour early because some parent called George's secretary and said it was snowing in Cuyamaca, which is just up the hill from our school. The parent also said that if his daughter froze or anything, he would hit George "upside the head with a lead pipe." A lot of redneck types live in our school district.

When I got back to the junkyard, it was raining pretty hard. All the Mexicans and Bob had gone home, or somewhere. I bought a pint of gin and rented a dirty movie and a VCR. I drank all the gin, but it didn't make me drunk like I wanted, and I almost went blind watching the movie on the screen that is only seven inches.

At home, we have a fireplace. I bet my son, Jacob, got a fire going today. Jacob is in the sixth grade, or seventh, and loves to build fires. I think my daughter, Sarah, is in ninth—high school.

Tomorrow I see Stephanie. Puke!

Day 8, Saturday (I think)

Stephanie wore this really tight sweater this morning. I got there a little late because I felt really sick when I woke up. Stephanie said I looked like I had a hangover. Ha! I'm starting to think she's kind of dumb.

Anyhow, she kept asking me again and again how I "feeeeeel" about everything and how did this or that make me "feeeeeel."

I kept telling her that everything wasn't that bad.

Then she told me she was going to tell me what she thought. She told me I was afraid of commitment because I was even more afraid of rejection and that if I really committed to someone that I would risk ... You know what I mean. Piles and piles of bullshit.

Then I got mad and told her how full of it she was, that I knew all about rejection and that it wasn't that bad. Finally, at the end, I blamed everything on Alli. "I haven't changed since she married me," I told her. "I mean, if Alli didn't want to be married to an asshole, why did she marry me?"

That shut her up. She wouldn't even answer when I asked her if I could go back to my house.

Day 9, Sunday

Usually at home, when I was at home, Jacob and I would make breakfast for everyone. Jacob would do the pancakes, and I would do the little fancy stuff—like fruit cups. When the Wimbledon tennis was on TV from England, I made strawberries and cream like they do there.

On cold, rainy days like today, Jacob would make a fire, and we'd watch the early football game as we cooked.

This morning I had two Kentucky Fried Chicken legs left over from my dinner last night. Not bad. But it's cold in here. The little heater Bob loaned me isn't working too well. It's kind of hard to concentrate.

I'm supposed to write and think about my youth, my childhood. That's what Stephanie told me to do. My youth wasn't that bad. No one has a perfect one. Now it's starting to rain pretty hard, loud on the roof of the motor home. No one here but me.

I wonder what my freshman football coach is doing today. I hope the fat bag of pus is dying.

Day 10, Monday

There's no way! I mean what Stephanie said about my youth and my "fear of rejection." I'm forty-four, for christsakes. Guys forty-four don't ... you

know. I got kicked in the head a few times like every other kid, but I got over that stuff pretty quick. Like becoming an aggie. That made me forget all about football. Besides, I had more time because taking care of the chickens didn't take as much time as football. I had more time to go with my mom and help her sell her "Watchtowers" and "Awakes."

The whole family, except Dad, was Jehovah's Witness. My mom can't speak to me now since the elders kicked me out twenty some years ago.

Ed is starting to really piss me off. I think he might be working with the bitch, Stephanie. This morning I told him about the horseshit session, and he said, "We're all affected by our past."

Our past. I had a lot of good things in mine. When I was a junior in high school, my steer won "Best of Show" at the San Diego County Fair, and I won "Top Showman." My parents both wanted to be there, but Dad had to pour a foundation for a guy, and Mom had to do her Watchtower thing. My Agriculture teacher seemed proud. He was so proud, he got drunk at the fair and lost his job.

When I was a senior, I was elected president of the Future Farmers. It didn't work out though. They kept making me do all this stuff, so I told them all to get fucked.

Day 11, Tuesday

Allie called school today and left a message for me to come by the house. I was pretty nervous when I got there this afternoon. Sarah and Jacob answered the door. (I knocked on the door of my own house.)

"Mom wants you to fix the garbage disposal," Sarah said, without looking up at me. I fixed it as both Sarah and Jacob watched. Sarah kept asking me why I wasn't living with them. I told her to ask her mother. I didn't see Alli. She was doing something in the back of the house, Sarah told me. Jacob didn't say anything at all. He just watched me work. Neither of my kids seemed very happy.

When I left, I tried to give Jacob a good ole' high five, but it didn't quite work. Foul tip.

Day 12, Wednesday

Alli could have, at least, said hi yesterday, or thanks. Something. Maybe she was going to, but I left too soon.

Greg, my old roommate from college, called me at school today and wanted to come down from L.A. and stay with us for the weekend. Greg is a golf teacher at some fancy country club. I told him about everything, that his timing was bad, and not to come down.

In college Greg and I and two other guys rented this little house that everyone called The Zoo. They called it that because of how crazy it was there. Greg was a member of a fraternity in college, but he lived with me instead of at the fraternity house. I never tried to be a fraternity guy. How do they get off telling some guys that they are cool enough and others that they are not cool enough to be a fraternity guy? Who is so cool that he can tell another guy that he is not cool enough? I think the whole fraternity thing is stupid.

Greg is the reason I met Alli. She came home with him late one night during the spring part of our third year. I was the only guy not out that night. I stayed home with a deer that I put into our bathtub. Long story. I hit this little deer by accident. The mother deer made it across the street but not the little guy. I should have just left it there on the side of the road because a lot of deer get hit every day, but I, like a dummy, went back and put it into my back seat and brought it home and tried to nurse him back to health. I cleaned all the wounds and put a splint on its broken leg. It was a little boy.

The deer got me laid, at least. Alli said hello to me but then went into

Greg's room with him. She came out after just a few minutes, making terrible and vulgar comments about Greg's manly abilities. Greg was pretty drunk.

When she went into the bathroom, I forgot to tell her about the deer in the bathtub. I had kind of forgotten about the deer because I had been sleeping when Alli and Greg came in. I heard this crazy scream from the bathroom and ran in there. Alli was standing on top of the toilet, scrunched against the corner of the bathroom, screaming at the deer in the bathtub. I felt worse for the deer than I did for Alli. The poor deer had this expression on his face that said, What the fuck?

I got the deer calmed down, and got Alli to shut up and left the two of them in the bathroom. When Alli came back into the living room, she had made friends with the deer and made me tell her why the deer was in the bathroom. She thought I was really something for bringing the deer home, and she demonstrated her admiration for the next many hours in my bed. In the morning, the deer was not in the bathtub. I guess he got to feeling better and took off during the night to find his mother. I'm not sure, but I think I saw him and his mother the next day. I saw a mother and baby way off in a hay field, and I think the little one was the same guy who stayed with me. I love happy endings.

Anyhow, it was a great night with Alli. Many great nights followed. A year after that first night, Alli and I got hitched.

In those days all Alli wanted to do was drink and eat and smoke pot and screw. Why does everything have to change all the time?

Day 13, Thursday

My birthday is only ten days away. What if I spend it alone here in the junkyard? I told Ed about my birthday, and he told me I could come to his house, but his wife hates my guts. She thinks I'm a bad influence on Ed because I brought him home drunk one night. It wouldn't be that much fun at Ed's.

What I need to do is get back home. I think I'm going a little crazy here. I thought maybe I'd get used to this, but every day I'm hating it more and more. Everyone but me goes away at five. Then I write in this thing and drink gin. When I think about it, I cook something.

I love sleeping, but lately, I keep waking up.

And Bob is starting to attach strings to my living here. Today he made me the night watchman and gave me a shotgun. Like I'm going to shoot some poor bastard trying to steal a hubcap.

Maybe I'll just go to K-Mart and buy my own birthday gifts. Alli tells me I always spend too much money on her and the kids at Christmas, or when one of them has a birthday.

When I was growing up, we didn't do birthdays or Christmas because of the Jehovah thing. Everything was so goddamn serious all the time.

Ed is a Catholic. Catholics seem to have a pretty good time just drinking and horsing around. Then all they have to do is go to confession and the priest forgives them. Very cool set-up. Maybe I'll be a Catholic. My family is nothing right now.

I really hope I can make it home for my birthday.

Day 14, Friday

Krystal, the skinny math teacher, came by the junkyard today after school, but she didn't bring any pot or get naked, or anything. The Mexicans were disappointed.

She just cried and said we had to "break it off." What the hell is there to break off? She said her husband is going to shoot me.

"Why?"

"I had to tell him."

"Why?"

"I couldn't live with myself."

"That was a stupid thing to say."

Then she started crying because she thought I called her stupid. "And Billy Barns, the senior class president, has fallen in love with me," she sobbed.

All the senior boys at school are in love with Krystal because she always wears these little skirts and sits on her desk when she lectures, crossing and re-crossing her legs all the time. Plus, she gives everyone A's and B's. What's there not to love?

"So, when is he going to shoot me?"

"He just got so jealous when I told him everything."

"But why did you ..."

"Oh, Albert, don't you understand. Do you remember innocence? Honesty? The Golden Age of Innocent Honesty? I just couldn't honestly live the lie any longer."

"I've never heard of The Golden Age of Innocent Honesty. When the fuck was that? So, you can't live. So, you be honest. So, I get my balls shot off. Jesus fuck!" I laughed. I always laugh when I get really nervous.

"Oh, very funny," she hissed. "Sure, you just laugh it off, Albert."

We were standing outside of the motor home. All the Mexicans stopped working and moved a little closer so they could hear.

"I'm not laughing," I chuckled. "Believe me, this is no laughing matter for me."

"You can't just use me and then laugh it off, buddy."

"I'm not laughing!" I shouted. And then I started laughing so hard I thought I was going to throw up. You know how you start laughing when you think about how bad it would be if you started laughing?

She didn't get it. She just turned quickly and stomped toward her car. The Mexicans whistled at her, but she didn't wave like before. Instead, she turned toward the Mexicans, spat at them, grabbed her crotch with her left hand, and gave them all the finger with her right. She waved the finger at them like she was spraying them all with a water hose.

I think there might be something wrong with Krystal. She ought to know by now that honesty is way overrated.

Day 15, Saturday

I think I kind of let my guard down today with Stephanie. It was because I was so tired. I hardly slept last night. I kept watching for Krystal's husband to come shoot me. Bob's gun came to bed with me, but then I started thinking about rolling over on the gun and it shooting my foot off or something. Anyhow, the guy never showed up.

When I got to Stephanie's office, I'm pretty sure I looked like hammered dog shit. Felt like it too. And right away she starts in on me.

"You've got to feeeeeeel your pain before you can do anything about it. If you just keep covering it over with booze, you'll always have it. The pain, I mean, not the booze. You'll never be able to express your emotion. It will

just fester inside of you."

Stephanie wore this slinky, white, silk blouse with the top buttons undone. She kept catching me peeking, and gave me this disgusted look each time. Why did she wear that if she didn't want me to look? She could have buttoned up.

She's a wacko anyhow. If I had all this pain, I'd feel it, wouldn't I?

After telling me all this bullshit, she changed—got really calm and asked me to just relax, close my eyes and try to think of my moment of greatest sorrow—a time when I cried or something.

I couldn't think of any time except the day when that dick-wad of a freshman football coach told me ... you know. I cried that day riding my bike home, but no one saw, and I got over it pretty quick.

I finally told her all about that day because I figured if I told her something, she might say I'm cured and let me go home. But, that didn't work. All my story did was make her cry, and, as she was sobbing, she said how happy she was. She said I had made a "breakthrough." "The highs and the lows of life are what make life a thing of quality, gives it texture, value. You've been living where there are no highs or lows."

Driving home from Stephanie's, I thought about what she said. I really did. But I don't think I can even fake what she wants me to be—some guy going around laughing and crying all the time, like some kind of homo.

Day 16, Sunday

Talk about showing emotion! I should have told her about me in high school—screw champion of my senior class. They didn't give me a trophy or anything, but everybody knew. (I wonder what the trophy would have looked like.)

It was just luck, really. I discovered this thing about girls and horses. I kept a horse behind my house when I was in high school. It belonged to some kid who was in our FFA whose family moved into an apartment, so the guy's family paid me to keep the horse at my house where there was more room.

I asked this girl to go riding with me one day in the summer before my senior year. She was a Jehovah's Witness at my church, so my mother and her parents were all happy about our date.

Anyhow, it was a pretty hot day, and we were riding double and bareback, and I had no shirt on. The horse got pretty tired and sweaty, so we stopped at this little grove of eucalyptus trees near the lagoon. I mean, even before I could get off the horse, she was all over me. We did it three times. The first time standing up against a tree. The next two times right down in the dirt.

Afterwards, she was real sorrowful. She blamed everything on "the whole atmosphere." She said it was the sweat and the horse and the hot weather and the lagoon and even the grove of eucalyptus. I told her that everything was O.K.—that god would forgive her. I was a little tired of her by then.

I took a lot of girls riding after that. I started with the ugliest and most unpopular, but worked all the way up to the cheerleaders, including the homecoming queen.

And Stephanie says I can't show emotion. If she only knew. How dumb can she get? I can't say, because I think she's a work in progress. She hasn't yet fulfilled her dumb potential.

Ha. Ha. I made a joke.

Day 17, Monday

On this morning's news I saw Krystal's husband being arrested on TV. The news guy said that late last night Krystal's husband shot this student

named Billy Barnes. He's the senior at our school that Krystal said was in love with her. Krystal was interviewed and said that her husband, "for no reason" shot Billy in the right buttock as he was leaving her house out the back bedroom window. The poor TV guy could hardly get Krystal off. After she finished talking, she kept smiling and waving at the camera like she had done with the Mexicans. This time, though, she wasn't topless.

The kid will be hurting for a while, but I know it will be worth it to him. He will be a hero forever. Even I never boinked a teacher.

Day 18, Tuesday

School's been major jolly for the past two days. All anyone wants to talk about are Billy and Krystal and Krystal's husband. Krystal hasn't been back to school. Probably won't be. Billy came by on crutches today just to hang out and bask in his new fame. Krystal's husband is in jail and may be there for a while. At his first court appearance he tried to attack the judge after the judge suggested anger management classes. It was in all the papers.

Ed says the whole thing is "tragic." I guess it is, but someday we'll all look back and laugh like crazy. I am almost at that point already.

Day 19, Wednesday

Ed came by the junkyard early this morning to tell me there was no school — "Snowing up the mountain." Raining like crazy here. No one working.

Ed took me out to breakfast and laid a lot of Psych 101 horseshit on me. He told me I need to "communicate" with Alli. I'm starting to think ... you know ... Ed and Alli?

After breakfast, Ed dropped me off here like he didn't want to hang out with me. I wrote more today than I ever have before because there was nothing else to do. I threw away most of it because it was mostly scattered.

I started thinking about what Stephanie said about the best and the worst of my life. I wondered why I should think about all that. What the hell for? But I did it anyhow.

Being "Best Showman" at the fair was, for sure, the best time. Of course, being screw champion was also pretty cool. There were a lot of other best times too, like all kids have, but I ... you know.

Maybe the worst thing was when they kicked me out of the Jehovah's Witnesses. They call it something else, but it's still being kicked out. I don't think I ever really believed in God or anything, but I liked Sundays. Everyone was pretty nice to me.

Day 21, Friday (forgot to write yesterday)

It rained all day yesterday, and didn't stop until sometime last night. I slept almost all day yesterday because there was nothing else to do. I also drank a lot of gin so I could sleep better. Even the Mexicans didn't come to work.

Ed was out sick today, so I drove alone to school. After school I went by my house (I guess it's still mine.) to look at the lawn—maybe it would be dry enough to mow. Ed's car was parked in front, so I didn't even slow down. I think he's doing all he can to get me and Alli back together. That's it, isn't it? If it were something like ... weird, Ed wouldn't park in front of the house, would he?

So, I came back here after buying a case of beer to share with Bob, but Bob was busy, so I gave the beer to the Mexicans when they got off at five. I tried to talk to them, but they don't speak English, and I don't speak Spanish. They are good listeners, though. They hung out with me, smoked cigarettes and drank my beer and nodded and said things like "Si, amigo" when I told them things.

I told them that if Alli is humping Ed, Ed doesn't have to feel bad or anything. Everybody should be screwing somebody, I told them. They all agreed with me, I think.

Day 22, Saturday

Stephanie gave me Xeroxed copies today from some bullshit psychological magazine. One was about men who hate women. Like I hate women. The screw champion hates women. Ha! Ha!

Stephanie did all the talking today. She told me that if I really do love Alli, I should tell her. I don't like that stuff, and Alli already knows anyhow. Why else would I have married her?

No, I am not calling her even if tomorrow is my birthday. For sure, I am going to stop chasing her all around and let her chase me for a while. If I know Alli, she's going to feel huge guilt about not letting me come home on my birthday.

Day 23, Sunday

I called Alli this morning at about eleven from Bob's little office. I told her I loved her. I just came right out with it, the way I had practiced. She waited a second or two, or, maybe even more than that, before answering. All she said was, "Albert, go take a flying fuck at the moon." Then she hung up hard.

Well, happy birthday to you, too! I thought. The only thing I liked about the whole conversation was that, at least, Alli sounded a little bit like the old Alli.

Sunday here is pretty depressing. I am glad I don't get depressed. I could be hanging around the ol' Kingdom Hall if they hadn't kicked me out. God! That was more than twenty years ago.

It was just before Christmas during my last year at San Luis. When I got home to start the break, my mom told me that the big shots at the church wanted to see me. Mom looked real serious, but she always did, so I didn't think much of it. I even thought that the Witnesses were going to give me some award for being near the top of my college class. You know, for making the Jehovah's Witnesses look good.

At the Hall, the big shots brought me into this conference room and sat me down at the foot of this big, oak table. There were five fat guys, all wearing coats and ties, sitting around the table. Bill, the biggest shot of all, sat at the head of the table facing me. Bill ran the plumbing store in our town. He had a daughter I had taken horseback riding a few times. Bill had all these papers in front of him. No one was smiling.

"We're concerned about you, Albert," Bill began.

"Like what?" I asked, in a cocky tone. It was a pretty cocky time in my life. I was getting ready to graduate. I had a lot of money because I had a job selling cars, and I was pretty good at it. I also made money selling pot and mushrooms to my classmates, but I quit that after a while.

"I'd like you to answer that, Albert," said Bill, after blowing his nose and then examining the handkerchief like he had blown out something really interesting.

Then, everything started to fall into place for me. His daughter had squealed about going riding with me. I decided to come clean and admit almost everything.

"Well, sir," I began. "Your daughter and I did get naked out in the grove, but nothing happened. We just horsed around a little. I repeat, sir, nothing happened."

Then Bill tried to kill me. Before I could react, I was up against the wall with his big, stupid, fat fingers squeezing my neck. The four other guys pulled Bill away from me and then blocked him as he tried over and over again to get back at me.

Finally, after what seemed like a long time, we were all back on our chairs around the table. One of the other guys took over the talking. Bill sat glaring at me with his squinty little pig eyes. He was sweating like crazy and moving his lips in a weird way, showing his clenched teeth, like a dog getting ready to bite someone.

The other guy said, "Albert, we were not aware of your fellowship with Bill's daughter. We asked you to come here today to discuss reports we have received from San Luis."

"Nothing happened. Nothing." I said.

"San Luis?" asked the guy.

"Nothing."

"We understand," the guy continued, "that you are living there with a girl. Sharing ... everything."

"Strictly to save money. Nothing happened."

"Couldn't find a male roommate?"

"You must stop it!" said a third guy who hadn't said anything before. "Stop it, or else."

"What? Or else, what?" I was starting to feel a little out of control. Angry, maybe.

"We're just concerned about your soul, Albert," said the guy who had taken over for Bill. Bill was still glaring and showing his teeth.

"Fine," I said. "My soul is just fine."

"Our requirement is that you get rid of the whore you're living with," said the third guy who later became the head of the whole church.

The guy was calling Alli a whore. She wasn't really the holiest person around, but I didn't like this guy calling her a whore. "Requirement?" I shouted. "I thought you guys were supposed to save sinners, not just get rid of them."

I leaned back in my chair and tried to calm myself and control my voice. I didn't want to say anything stupid. "Fuck you!" I said. I said it in a calm and controlled voice.

"I beg your pardon," said the second guy.

"He's out!" screamed Bill, jumping from his chair as if he were going to attack me again.

"Yes, I am," I said, standing and moving toward the door. "And, Bill," I said, as I opened the door to leave, "your daughter gives the best head in fifty states."

As all five guys chased me down the hallway toward the parking lot. I heard Bill screaming at me, calling me a little peckerwood, over and over again. I still don't know what a peckerwood is.

Anyhow, that's why my mother hasn't spoken to me for over twenty years. It's not her fault or anything. The Witnesses told her that if she spoke to me she'd go to hell. And, that's why I am not at the Kingdom Hall this morning, on my birthday.

None of that ever bothered me, though.

Day 28, Friday

I haven't written for a while because I haven't had a lot of time. This past week was a blur. I drank lots of gin, but that wasn't why I missed school. I

just woke up with really bad headaches. I think I have the flu or something. It makes it so I can't sleep or anything. O.K., maybe the booze has something to do with it.

But, anyhow, on Tuesday or Wednesday, I got kind of lonesome and went to the Foxtail. It's a little bar in town here. I met this girl who used to be a shop student of mine a few years ago. She came back to the junkyard with me, but she didn't stay. I don't think she liked the junkyard or the motor home, and she said I wasn't looking too good. I wasn't feeling too romantic, anyhow, but I thought if she wanted to horse around a little, it would be O. K.. But, she didn't stay.

My son, Jacob, came by the junkyard this afternoon. He didn't say much. Just parked his bike and sat on the little bench next to the motor home. "Dad," he said.

"Jacob, my man," I replied, and tried to give him a high five, but he didn't understand. Then he just sat there and looked down at his feet like he was trying to say something he couldn't say.

"How's it goin'," I asked, leaning against the door of the motor home.

"Fine."

Lots of silence.

Finally he asked, "When you coming home?" And his voice cracked like he was going to cry or something.

"It's up to your mother," I answered. "She holds all the cards on this one, ol' buddy."

"Well," he sputtered, still staring at his shoes, "it's not too great around the house. Mom cries all the time." Then he really started sobbing. He seemed embarrassed. He kept his head down, but I could see the tears falling on his shoes. Then he just stood and picked up his bike and turned away from me. As he rode off, he was still crying, but real quiet like, more like he was just gasping for air. Suddenly, I was riding my bike home after being cut from the freshman football team. The whole thing made me feel pretty sad. Maybe not sad, exactly, but ... it made me feel something. I wanted to talk to someone, but Bob was busy as usual. Stephanie said I could call her any time, so I gave her a buzz, but all I got was her answering machine telling me that my call was very important to her. I didn't leave a message. I could have tried Ed, but he was probably doing his family stuff by then. It was four-thirty.

Finally, I hopped in my truck, went to the liquor store and bought a case of beer and four packs of Camel cigarettes for the Mexicans when they got off at five. They like hanging out with me, drinking beer and smoking. All four of them came over to the motor home and we had a good, long talk. They smoked cigarettes and drank my beer and I told them about everything that was happening in my life. I can really talk to these guys. I think they understood me now. They laugh when I say something funny, and they look real sorrowful when I tell them sad stuff. We talked until all the beer was gone. It's good to know that someone understands what I'm going through. They call me amigo. That means friend.

Nine months later, December

I thought I'd lost this journal during all the moving. I found it this morning in a box of Christmas lights. My last entry was the day before my last session with Stephanie.

What a session! Alli was there. Surprised me. She started crying and everything, saying she couldn't live another day without me, but that she would, anyhow, if I couldn't agree to make some major changes in my behavior. I agreed to everything even before I knew what everything was. I was feeling so tired and beat up and so sick of that tiny TV.

Here's what I agreed to:

No more gin No more womanizing Sell my house and buy another Join a church Take up a healthy hobby

Those are the things I remember. I've done all of that and more, and life is good. Selling the house was the best thing on the whole list. I made a small fortune because the little house had six acres with it that got rezoned to "commercial" right before I sold it. I am kind of a rich guy now.

Alli said she couldn't sleep with me in that house since I defiled it with ... what I did with the skinny math teacher. Of course, she did come to bed with me on my second night home at the little house. She said she could do it because I put up a sign in front of the house that said, *For Sale by Owner*.

I never thought I would live in the kind of house I'm living in now. It is amazing! It's huge! Two-story job, up on a hill, overlooking the country club, the golf course, and the equestrian center.

Golf has become my "healthy hobby." My old roommate, Greg, comes down a lot on the weekends to play golf with me and help me with my swing. He's a golf pro at a fancy country club around L.A. He says my fourteen handicap isn't bad for a rookie.

Greg and Stephanie, my marriage counselor, are screwing now. Funny how things work. After that day at Stephanie's office, Alli and Stephanie became "sisters." Stephanie is at my house a lot, visiting Alli. They say things to each other like, "You go girl!"

This is the second marriage counselor that Greg has screwed. When he was married, his wife made him go to this woman marriage counselor because Greg was not being faithful. The weird thing that happened was that Greg started screwing the marriage counselor. "Right there on her office couch," said Greg. "Talk about backfire."

But, anyhow, Alli thought that Greg and Stephanie would make a "cute couple." I thought cute couples were like for seventh graders, but there you go.

They both stay at our house on some weekends and sleep in the bedroom next to ours. Stephanie is a screamer, so it's kind of fun to listen. I wonder what the kids think about all that.

Stopping gin was tough. I think I might have been an alcoholic, but I was able to whip it. I haven't had a sip of gin since that last session with Stephanie. I only drink now when I'm on the golf course. But, no gin. Strictly vodka. But, even then, I only drink after a good shot or a really funny one, like into the water or out into the parking lot or something.

But, that's really it, unless my golf buddies drag me into the Nineteenth Hole after a good round, or a really funny one.

But never at home in front of the kids, unless ... you know ... we have guests who enjoy a glass of wine or something. Greg and Stephanie enjoy wine when they visit us on the weekends.

Not being a womanizer was easy. Every time I'm tempted, I just think of that tiny TV. Besides, since I quit the booze, I don't think other women look that good.

I'm a Baptist now. Believe that! I was going to be a Catholic. Our whole family went with Ed to his Catholic church a couple of times, but they wanted me to take like six months of instruction, and the church was almost five miles from my new house. The Baptist church is only a mile away, and all I had to do was "accept Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior." It took only about two minutes.

I even got to be a guest speaker at the church to tell everyone how evil my

life was before I accepted Jesus. (Most Baptists say Jaasus.) When I spoke at my new church, I made some of the women cry. One woman, who was sitting in the second row, cried so hard her breasts jiggled. The jiggling was fun to watch for a minute, but then I thought about the tiny TV.

My kids, Jacob and Sarah, are doing great since I've changed my life. Sarah is a sophomore or maybe a junior, now, and has a boyfriend. Alli said they made a cute couple. Alli and Sarah spent a lot of time together, talking and giggling, until Alli came home early one day last month and caught Sarah and her boyfriend naked in Sarah's bedroom smoking pot. When will Alli learn not to come home early? Now, Sarah and Alli are not on the best of terms. Alli wants Sarah to get another boyfriend, but it hasn't happened yet.

Jacob told me he wanted to take up golf so we could golf together. I took him out once for a few holes, but he needed a lot of work on his swing, so I bought him a set of lessons from our club pro. Jacob only showed up for the first one, and then he got interested in his computer. He forgot about golf and has become a real computer expert. He's very dedicated. Spends all his time in his room with it.

Alli is happier than I've ever seen her. She has her own school now. After she got her teaching credential, she tried to get a job in the public school, but it didn't work out. She decided to start her own Montessori school, so I bought her this two-bedroom house in town and converted it— brought it up to code. I'm good at that kind of thing.

She has only seven students—fifth and sixth grade—all little, white, rich looking people. I don't like them much. I bet they'll all be in fraternities and sororities when they go to college.

Their parents all drive fancy, new cars, so Alli's self-esteem was suffering because she was driving a ninety-nine Ford Escort. Stephanie told Alli that if she had a fancy, new car, her problems would be solved. I bought her a new Lexus. (Leased it, really.) Red.

Then I bought her one other thing—two things, really—breasts. She told me that with them, her life would be one hundred percent perfect. She used those words. I told her I liked the old ones, but there you go. The new ones are huge, but they don't quite fit her body, and they feel like volleyballs. Anyhow, she tells me now that her life really is one hundred percent perfect. Lately, though, I have caught her standing in front of the mirror kind of playing with her nose. I like her nose the way it is, but I'll do whatever she wants.

I've even become a volunteer. The equestrian center needed an experienced horseman to help kids learn about horses ... not to be afraid of them and all. The classes will be on the second and fourth Tuesdays of each month for an hour and a half, starting next Tuesday. I'm putting up signs around the club inviting the kids. I call the class "Invitation to Horsemanship."

The mothers of the kids can also participate if they want to. If they get really interested, I would even be willing to give separate classes just for the mothers. Maybe even individual classes.

I'm now car-pooling with Ed again, because football is over. He had another good season. Second, I think. He seems a little sad to me lately. I think it's because he doesn't get to hang out with Alli anymore. Has to go home for his pootang. I've never asked anything about him and Alli, though. He would never admit it.

He tells me that he is a little down because two guys who used to play football for him went to fight in Iraq. One came back in a coffin, and the other came back with just one arm. I try not to pay too much attention to all that war stuff.

He does say some pretty weird things to me, though. Mostly compliments, I think, but I don't get half of what he says. When I told him how good everything has become for me since I changed, Ed said, "The more things change, the more they stay the same." He also told me that I was a real modern success story.

I don't know if he's sincere or not. It's kind of hard to tell about Ed.



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Contributors' Notes

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Maxi Hellweger,

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The Somerset Review



Guidelines for Submissions

Writers are invited to submit literary short stories and essays of up to 8,000 words. Pieces of light or subtle content are likely to be given more serious consideration. To get more of an idea of what we are looking for, please read *The Somerset Review* or consult our [Recommended Reading List](#). We suggest that contributors be familiar with the writing typically found in literary publications such as [these](#).

Email submissions to editor@somersetreview.org as an attachment in MS Word format, or as plain text. You may alternatively submit in hard-copy by sending to 25 Somerset Drive, Smithtown, NY 11787. All submissions receive replies as quickly as possible. If we have not responded within three months, please hassle us. We read year-round.

All submitted work is assumed to be original. Book excerpts will be considered if you believe the work stands alone. Reprints will be considered if the work has not appeared elsewhere within the last two years. Simultaneous submissions are accepted.

We do not give previously-published authors any more attention than new writers, and judge submissions objectively on literary merit. Even so, a brief note accompanying the submission is preferred. We are not sure what we want to read in this note, but would appreciate the extra effort, rather than a blank email with an attachment. We are always interested in knowing how you've heard of us, and what you like about us.

Authors will see drafts of accepted pieces for review prior to release. Unfortunately, contributors cannot be paid at this time.

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We nominate stories annually for the *Pushcart Prize*, *New Stories from the South*, *storySouth's* Million Writers Award, and at other notable places.

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Author	Title	Source
Aciman, Andre	Cat's Cradle	From the November 3 rd issue of <i>The New Yorker</i> , 1997
Altschul, Andrew Foster	From A to Z	From Issue #1 of <i>Swink</i> , 2004
Anderson, Dale Gregory	The Girl in the Tree	From the Spring/Summer issue of <i>Alaska Quarterly Review</i> , 2003
Ashton, Edward	Night Swimmer	Online at <i>The Blue Penny Quarterly</i> , Spring/Summer, 1995
Baggott, Julianna	Five	From <i>Other Voices</i> #28, 1998
Bardi, Abby	My Wild Life	From <i>Quarterly West</i> #41, 1995
Baxter, Charles	Snow	From the collection <i>A Relative Stranger</i> , published in 1990
Benson, Amy	Vectors: Arrows of Discontent	A memoir excerpt in Issue 29.2 of <i>New Orleans Review</i> , 2004
Borders, Lisa	Temporary Help	From the Spring/Summer issue of <i>Bananafish</i> , 1998
Broyard, Bliss	Mr. Sweetly Indecent	From the Fall issue of <i>Ploughshares</i> , 1997
Burns, Carole	Honour's Daughter	From <i>Other Voices</i> #31, 1999
Cain, Chelsea	Pretty Enough To Be a Showgirl	From the Spring issue of <i>Grand Tour</i> , 1997
Cheever, John	The Stories of John Cheever	A collection published in 1980
Christopher, Nicholas	Veronica	A novel published in 1996
Clark, Susan	Besides the Body	From the Spring issue of <i>Red Rock Review</i> , 2004
Crane, Elizabeth	When the Messenger Is Hot	A collection published in 2003
Crowe, Thomas Rain	Firsts	Online at <i>Oyster Bay Review</i> in January, 1997
Dancoff, Judith	Vermeer's Light	From <i>Alaska Quarterly Review's</i> Intimate Voices issue, 1997
Dormanen, Sue	Finishing First	From the Summer issue of <i>Lynx Eye</i> , 1998.
Doyle, Larry	Life Without Leann	From an issue of <i>The New Yorker</i> in Fall, 1990
Kennedy, Thomas E.	Kansas City	From Vol 62 No. 4 of <i>New Letters</i> , 1996
McInerney, Jay	Model Behavior	A novel published in 1998
Millhauser, Steven	Enchanted Night	A novella published in 1999
Moses, Jennifer	Circling	From the Spring issue of <i>Gettysburg Review</i> , 1995
Murakami, Haruki	South of the Border, West of the Sun	A novel published in 1998
Offill, Jenny	Last Things	A novel published in 1999
Orlean, Susan	The Bullfighter Checks Her Makeup	A collection of essays published in 2001
Raboteur, Emily	The Eye of Horus	From <i>StoryQuarterly</i> #40, 2004
Robison, Mary	Why Did I Ever?	A novel published in 2001
Salinger, J.D.	For Esme - With Love and Squalor	From the collection <i>Nine Stories</i> published in 1953
Tilghman, Christopher	The Way People Run	From the September 9 th issue of <i>The New Yorker</i> , 1991

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