

"Man Inside!" and other stories

by

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Signatures have been redacted for privacy

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*for Mom and Dad...
and most of all, Jennifer,
my Juicyfruit Editor*

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The horror is this: In the end, it is simply
a picture of empty meaningless blackness.

We are alone. There is nothing else.

Alan Moore,
The Watchmen

FRAGILE THINGS

Rory wakes in the dirt, staring at the open sky. It is filmy and red. He is holding the Cherokee's steering wheel, bent in the rough shape of an egg. His fingers will not let it go.

"Easy buddy, don't sit up. Ambulance is coming," a man says. He is holding Rory's shoulders down with strong, warm hands. Rory cannot feel much else. He still hears Sam Cooke playing someplace far off. It is warbled and tinny.

"Beh." Rory bubbles spit and blood.

"Shh. You gotta relax," somebody tells him.

"Beh," he says again, then passes out.

"And then he must have slammed on the brakes and lost control," the woman says to the police officer. He scribbles on a notebook.

"No. I think he must have skidded first," the man says.

"It's no wonder, the way traffic is this time of day," another man says.

They stand on the edge of the highway, negotiating what happened. Some of the passing cars, slowed by the pylons and burning flares, linger for a look, then rev slowly forward. They will drive more carefully, the scene lingering for awhile.

Rory's Cherokee rests upside-down, cradled in a ditch. The rounded triangle of a Yield sign juts twisted and bent from the grillwork. The local fire company peels away its crumpled doors with the jaws of life. Weldon Brown,

postmaster, is closest to the vehicle, holding the jaws. The men work swiftly, steadily. They are trained volunteers.

"I was born in a wreck." Weldon shifts his weight. He is the biggest and strongest among them. "Everybody Loves to Cha Cha Cha" plays on the Cherokee's tape deck. Every few seconds, the tape slows and the words seem to stretch on forever.

"What?" Tony Houck says. He has hurried away from Houck's Hunting and Hardware to help in this, a volunteer's blue light pulsing on his Cavalier to warn motorists out of his way.

"It's a line from Flannery O'Connor," Weldon says, "Hold tight, sweetie. We're almost there."

"That a movie?" Tony says.

"Book." Weldon sees her smashed head.

"Never read that." Tony sees also, swallows hard.

Cecil Hunt, one of the paramedics, peers into the hole. He shakes his head and walks away.

"Chaaaaaa," the song goes, then the tape falls silent.

Emily is awake in the dirt. Ants are crawling in her hair, down her face and around her tiny nose. She cries out.

"You hear that?" Cecil says.

"Hear what?" Tony says as they widen the hole in the Cherokee, less urgent now.

Weldon climbs up on the embankment to survey the field.

"Jesus, over there!" he yells. They all look, forty feet or more to the North, gray and blue plastic poking out of the high timothy.

"Who the fuck missed that?" Weldon is running now, Cecil not far behind.

Tony reaches into the Cherokee and picks up a fractured bottle. Apple juice leaks slowly down his fireproof gloves.

"Car-seat," he whispers, running to help.

After the Cherokee is towed and the glass is swept from the highway, the volunteer firemen pack up their equipment. Some smoke cigarettes and talk about their jobs. A new yield sign is erected by the transportation department. And then they all go back to what they were doing before.

Rory has a dislocated shoulder. The inside of his cheek is bitten and stitched. There are numerous bumps and bruises scattered over his arms and torso. Small cuts cover the rest. Six metal staples close a gash over his right eyebrow. The doctor assures him that scarring will be minimal, at least he thinks so.

Everything is under control.

His in-laws have made all the calls. His parents are flying in from Harrisburg. He has confirmed Daina's identity to the coroner. He has answered the highway patrol's queries.

Emily is alive and well.

"She may have hearing problems on this side." The doctor points. "We'll have to keep a close eye on that."

Rory nods. He has not cried yet. The doctor says its only a matter of time.

"There's something you need to know."

Rory looks at the doctor. There's always something more.

"Emily's seat was thrown through the windshield," he says.

"She's so tiny," Rory says.

"The emergency responders found her in the field just off the road. It was a real miracle."

"So tiny," Rory says.

"The important thing is that you and the baby are fine," he says.

Rory nods.

"I want to know why he won't come over here," Rory's mother says into the phone. She is sitting in Rory's and Daina's apartment. Her husband kneads her shoulders slowly.

"Lainie, you have to understand," Rory's mother-in-law says, "they left things undone. Laundry. Emily's toys all over. You know--"

"We've cleaned that up."

"He can't take it right now," Rory's mother-in-law says.

"But he's my son. My daughter-in-law died," Lainie says.

Rory's step-father stops rubbing for a moment, and then resumes, kneading a tight, cramped kink in her shoulder.

"Karen, I'm so sorry," Rory's mother says, "I wasn't thinking."

Karen holds the phone in her lap, shaking.

"Karen?" Rory's mother says.

Her husband takes the phone from her.

"We'll call you later, Karen. We're very sorry." His voice is low and soothing but Karen does not hear.

Rory lays awake on his brother-in-law's bed. Daina's old room, with all her stuff inside, is locked. Track trophies line the shelves and dressers. Posters of Duran Duran hang on the ceiling. A quarter will bounce off the bed. Daina and her friends still mug for the camera in Polaroids tacked to the rose-petal wallpaper. Dust has not had time to settle on the fragile things.

Rory cannot sleep. His shoulder aches and no position is comfortable. He has avoided the Tylox pills the doctor prescribed. He does not want the pain. He needs the pain. He is afraid of sleep and dreams.

Rory's father-in law opens the door and light falls across Rory's face.

"Your mom and dad are in town." He sits down at the foot of the bed. "They got in a little while ago."

"Step-dad," Rory says.

"Right. Might be a good idea if you call them later," he says.

"Sure."

"Karen says Emily will be ready to come home in a few days," he says.

"I know."

"Might be a good idea if you go see her at the hospital." He rubs his temples and does not look at Rory.

"I will."

"I'll bet she misses familiar faces." He rises and heads for the door.

"Stan?" Rory says.

"Yeah?"

"Do you hate me?"

"Yeah," he says.

Rory swallows hard.

"I'll get over it," Stan says and closes the door.

Rory and his parents sit in one of the corner booths at Hoss's Steak and Sea House. His mother holds his right hand on the tabletop, his left arm hangs loose in a sling. Rory's step-father, Abner, quietly munches soda-crackers while they wait for the main course.

"Why don't you take some time and come home for awhile," she says.

"What for?" Rory says.

"You could bring the baby." She squeezes his hand on the last word.

The waitress brings their food.

"Let me know if I can get you anything," she says to them, but looks mostly at Rory, then shuttles off.

"I don't think traveling would be good for her," Rory says. In the next booth, a young woman stares at the swollen cuts on his face. She doesn't look away when he catches her.

"But honey, think of the good it will do both of you. You could relax," she says. "And Ab and I will take care of Emmie."

"Emily," Rory says. The woman in the next booth whispers something to her companion. Rory cannot make it out.

"I like to call her Emmie," his mother says.

"Her name is Emily," Rory says.

"Yes, yes." His mother begins to cut Rory's T-bone.

"I can do that!"

Several people in nearby booths look at Rory. The young woman whispers to her companion again.

"Rory, you need someone to take care of you," she says.

"I'm okay."

"Well, I'm sure when the funeral is over, Karen will need the break," she says, "Then you'll need me."

Abner squeezes her knee under the table, kneading the soft flesh below her kneecap.

"I just don't understand why I'm not allowed to be sad," Karen says, squeezing lemon into her iced tea.

"You want us to drop your suit off at Bob and Karen's later?" Abner says.

Rory slides to the edge of the booth and stands. "Why are you making this about you?" he says.

"What?" Her eyes fill with tears.

"Don't fucking cry. Don't you dare," Rory says. The people in the other booths are looking again. The young woman whispers.

"Why are you saying these things?" She is crying now, mascara-dark tears smudge her face.

"This is about me. I did this," Rory says.

"Let me help you," she says.

Rory turns to leave.

"Eat your goddamn steak!" he says to the young woman.

Abner hands his wife a checkered napkin and slices into his meat.

Emily sleeps in a hospital crib wrapped in a rainbow-patterned quilt from home. It is soft and familiar. A mobile of friendly, smiling jungle cats hangs above her. *Talk to the Animals* will play softly when the knob on top is wound, the lions and leopards revolving and bobbing in time.

Rory sits in the dim light and watches her breathe, the quilt rising and falling slowly.

"There's something I have to tell you," he says. His throat is sore and dry.

The door to the suite opens slowly and someone peeks inside.

"Excuse me," a man says. He stands in the doorway with another, much larger man. Each wears a pullover sweatshirt with an emblem of a fire-engine sewn at the breast.

"I know visiting hours are over," Rory says. "She's my daughter. We were in a wreck."

"We know. We were there," the smaller man says, "I'm Tony."

"Weldon." The large man offers his hand.

Rory shakes with both men.

"Do I know you?" he says.

"We were the First Responders at the scene," Tony says.

"I don't remember much," Rory says.

"That's understandable," Weldon says. "We're very sorry about your wife."

Emily stirs a little, yawns, and then falls back asleep, snoring softly. Rory adjusts the quilt, tucking it under her chin.

"She's a cutie," Tony says. "What a miracle to find her like that, huh?"

Weldon scowls slightly at Tony and then offers Rory an over-sized envelope.

"We brought her a card. It's Big Bird. The whole fire-team signed it," he says.

Rory takes the envelope.

"Listen. The important thing is that she's just fine, right?" Weldon says.

"We found her in the grass a little piece away from the wreck," Tony says, "upside-down and still strapped in."

Weldon scowls at him again. Rory doesn't notice.

"They told me." Rory opens the envelope. He only pretends to read the signatures and Big Bird's ballooned caption.

"Safe and sound," Tony adds.

"She let us know where she was. I'll bet she'll sing opera one day," Weldon says.

"How did she survive that?" Rory strokes the blonde hairs on Emily's head.

"She did, that's all," Weldon says. "We'd really like to see her when she's all better. You should stop by the station."

"Sure."

"If its any consolation, your wife didn't suffer," Tony says.

Weldon puts his beefy hand on Rory's shoulder. Rory has felt it there before. It is strong and safe.

"We can't even presume to know your pain," he says.

"Yeah," Tony says.

And then they leave Rory alone.

His in-laws are all sitting up when he returns. They are watching home-videos. Daina is four-months pregnant, serving a volleyball. Rory runs around her, guarding her stomach with a throw-pillow. The sound is turned down low. A bowl of popcorn rests on the coffee table, untouched. The phone rings and Rory's sister-in-law answers.

"Oh, hello, Mrs. Pratt," she says. "Just a second."

She holds the phone out to Rory. He shakes his head and does not take the receiver.

"Mrs. Pratt?" she says into the phone, "I think he went to bed."

On the video, Rory rubs Daina's stomach like a magic lamp. They are sitting with her family at a picnic table. Daina dabs Gulden's mustard on his nose. They all laugh, including the camera operator. The camera shakes in time to her high giggles.

"We can bring him," his sister-in-law says. "Why don't you get a good night's rest. Tomorrow will be a long day."

Rory reaches for the popcorn, brushing his father-in-law's arm. Stan scratches it absentmindedly, watching the television. There is a tear building in the corner of his eye.

"Thank you. It means a lot. Good-night now," his sister-in-law hangs up the phone.

Rory gets up and climbs the stairs. He doesn't wait for the message. In his brother-in-law's bedroom, he shakes four of the Tylox capsules into his palm and dry swallows. Then he waits for sleep, the throbbing in his shoulder and head waning slowly.

Rory sits in front of a bowl of cereal. It has gone soggy, uneaten. His sister-in-law brushes lint from the lapel of his suit. They hear the door-bell, Stan answering it, men's voices. The rasp of the lint brush falls silent. The words are too low to hear clearly. Then they hear the door close and Stan comes into the kitchen. His tie hangs over his shoulder.

"Tie this for me, honey," he says to his daughter.

"Who was at the door?" she says.

Stan looks at Rory, stirring his cereal slowly.

"The police," Stan says. "They wanted to know if we wanted to press charges. Reckless Endangerment. I think that's what they called it."

"Daddy, you can't be serious. The funeral is today!"

"They said it was standard procedure."

"What did you tell them?" She waits before knotting the tie.

"I told them to leave us the hell alone."

Rory stirs his cereal.

Soft organ music plays in the funeral parlor. Vases of lilies and assorted flower arrangements line the various shelves and furniture. Relatives and friends of family slowly file past the casket. It takes Rory a few moments to recognize the First Responders wearing dark suits. He walks over to them, shakes hands, and thanks them for coming.

Daina's hair is arranged to cover the stitches and staples. Karen and Stan told him about the open casket at breakfast. Rory looks at Daina now, wishing he had argued.

"Let everyone see her one last time," Karen says. She has not cried in Rory's presence.

"What about her face?" Rory says.

She only looks at him, then walks away to greet visitors.

His father-in-law hugs him. It is quick and strong, then gone.

Rory's mother does not speak to him.

Abner sips tea and chats with the pastor.

Rory leans over the casket. The mourners give him respectful distance. He grasps Daina's hand. It is cold and waxy to the touch. Her cheeks are blushed in a shade she seldom wore.

"Doesn't she look like an angel?" his mother says to one of the relatives, her voice a little too loud.

"No. She looks dead." Rory shuts the lid of the casket.

Everyone stares. Karen moves toward him, but Rory holds the lid closed.

"Just keep it shut!"

There is silence and then the sound of china breaking against the carpet.

"I turned around to make Emily laugh," Rory says.

No one tries to stop him in this.

WATCH CHILDREN

In a small town with mostly unbroken sidewalks and the smell of fresh-mown lawns and chestnut trees on dry breezes, a man sits in his yard, sipping Kool-Aid from a frosted glass. An old novel is beside him, dog-eared in remembered places, all very comfortable.

"Adam," he calls to his son, checking on him.

"Yes, Daddy," the boy replies, nearby.

He returns to his novel, his moist fingers leave dark splotches on the page, smudging the letters.

Entering the town, a visitor will see the legend, "*Welcome to Ribot (pronounced "ree-bow"), People Like It Here!*" No one disputes this.

A proud banner hangs over the entrance to the elementary school. "THIS IS A DRUG FREE ZONE," it reads. It is enforced with great conviction.

The lawn chair is slick with the man's sweat, so he stretches a towel across its length, then sits back down. His wife has gone shopping for groceries and such, necessities. He has given her a portion of his paycheck and now he rests. It is the weekend. His only duty is to watch over their five-year-old, keep him from harm. He knows about the value of baking soda on bee-stings and the curative powers of Bactine, despite the burning.

Every fifteen minutes or so, mainly at chapter breaks, he calls out. "Adam," he says.

"Yes, Daddy," the son replies. As long as the boy is within earshot, everything is fine. The man thinks of it as "the transitive law of parenting," something he will share with his wife later, during their quiet time.

"This is the life," the man thinks. His job at the Mead plant pays well and he is liked among his co-workers. His wife makes love to him with great regularity. Sometimes she calls out his name, her nails sinking into the freckled flesh of his back.

Taxes are low and he is in fine health. His life is very satisfactory.

"You staying out of trouble, pumpkin?" he says.

"Yes, Daddy," the son says, running past, hurrying to something. He is toe-headed and sun-burnt, an only child. They have taken precautions. They love this one dearly, but do not want the burden of another. They have had discussions, talk of diaphragms, the pains of nursing the man can only imagine.

He waits a moment, then returns to his novel.

They have set up a college fund for their son. They contribute to it regularly, as they do to their retirement account. There is also mad money, some for emergencies. Their house has less than a dozen payments remaining. It is small and comfortable. They enjoy working in the yard together, cutting grass and weeding flowers, or plucking potato bugs from dewy leaves in their small garden. It brings them close.

A young mother walks past their house, pushing a stroller. She is wearing jogging shorts and a sweatshirt. Her baby gurgles and waves. The man chats with her, puffing his chest. He covers the rolled skin of his mid-section with the book. They talk about spouses and children, the weather, and other small things.

"And how about your little fellow?" she says.

"Adam," he calls out.

"Yes, Daddy," the son says. He is carrying a Tonka truck. It is covered in something dark.

"Mud," the father thinks, and imagines him building out of the earth, a bridge, or an enemy fort, designed only to be destroyed later, bulldozed over with fully-poseable action figures at the wheel. He will have to give Adam a bath before his wife returns, bribe him with Crazy Foam or something sweet, the proper currency.

The man and the young mother flirt a little, voices low in the Fall sun. But there is a line he does not cross, even when he watches her push the stroller up the street, lingering over the muscular curve of her calves. When she is gone, he sags back into himself, basking in the chair like a sun-warmed reptile.

The father reads his book. He does not smoke. Spicy food does not readily agree with him. An occasional beer is the extent of his vices.

He hears something, but cannot make it out. A car backfires, ricocheting off awnings and cornices, the hard angular places. He jumps a little, then laughs at his nerves.

The man hears it again, something mewling, tiny and in pain. It is almost familiar, like the sound children make to themselves, little nonsense songs or the mimicking of animals, Disney things.

"Adam," he says.

There is a long pause. The sound does not return. He waits, holding his place in the book with a damp thumb.

"Yes, Daddy," Adam replies, somewhere behind the house, near the neighbor's hedges.

His son's voice is strong and calm.

MAN INSIDE!

Yevgeny sits in front of the polarized glass and watches the sun rise over the Southern Hemisphere. The cloud patterns on the Atlantic coast of Africa swirl and eddy in the final gasps of a hurricane, and he captures it in words, composing a poem from space. Later, he will take it with him on a space-walk, perhaps attach it to one of the passing satellites he is assigned to *inspect*. He may even let the sheet of paper drift off into the vacuum, propelled by the solar wind. He hasn't decided yet. The day is young. And he is going home soon.

Joe makes a placard out of a yardstick and some cardboard he cadged from Snare's Grocery. The only paint he has in his work-shed is a light blue enamel he used to touch up the wainscoting of his house the Summer before. It isn't bold enough, so he rummages around until he finds a drum of old roofing tar. He heats the hardened crust on top with a blowtorch until it runs slick and the shed is filled with dark smoke. With a small, stiff brush he writes *SHOVE IT* on his sign. He has thought about these words for quite awhile.

When the air has completely cycled out of the airlock, a green light signals that it is safe for Yevgeny to open the outer hatch without being blown out with the escaping gas and severing his tether to the station.

"You must always remain anchored," he whispers to himself. There are many rules to remember to stay alive in space.

This morning Yevgeny will pass a European communications satellite and a spy probe recently orbited by China. He will photograph both for reference. If he can get close enough, he'll bend the transmitting antenna on the spy, maybe

nudge its orbit a little in his inspection, just enough to make its photographs fuzzy and indistinct.

The road that passes Joe's property is little more than a wide swath of mud and pebbles. Once, it had been a very quaint one-lane dirt trail that Joe had taken great pains to maintain. He mowed the center patch of wild grass and thistle regularly with his Toro tractor. He also filled any ruts or low spots with gravel he spirited away from the Department of Transportation's country lot late at night. Joe was very proud of that road. Now, it had been gouged away, widened, and made ready for the highway extension. Joe doesn't care much for that.

In his kitchen, he sits drinking his morning tea and watches the squirrels chase one another around the trunk of an oak. Sometimes he laughs. The sign leans next to the door, Joe's words spelled out in tarred bas relief.

Yevgeny is a little worried. He pushed the spy satellite too hard and now it is tumbling away. Its orbit will decay slowly and it will eventually burn up in the atmosphere. So will his poem. He had hoped to leave it for someone to read when the satellite is visited for its usual repairs. Now it is hopelessly spinning to its doom. There is something inherently artful in that, he muses, like Icarus. He only wishes his superiors could share the sentiment.

Joe's phone rings.

"Mr. Weidel?"

"Yes," Joe says.

"Good morning. I hope I didn't wake you."

"Not at all. I'm an early riser," Joe says.

The phone crackles and Joe pulls the antenna out further to help the reception.

"I see. That's very commendable."

"Thanks." Joe doesn't smile.

"I'm Lonnie Everhart, with the D.O.T."

"Yes." Joe tries to remember the last time he took a load of gravel.

"I work on the Highway 23 project."

"And?" Joe says.

"And well, we're all familiar with your displeasure on the road carving up your property."

"Bisecting," Joe says each syllable slowly and clearly.

"You could call it that."

"I do."

"Well, the official ground-breaking is today. And we would very much like it if you would make an appearance as a sign of good faith. You can shake hands with the governor."

"Whoopee." Joe covers the handset.

"I'm sorry?"

"I said I'd be there," Joe says.

"Outstanding. This really means a lot, Mr. Weidel."

Yevgeny drinks from a tube of concentrated orange juice and listens as his ground support, Katya today, reads the newspaper to him. There is unrest and threat of revolution. He prefers the athletic news to the rattling of sabers.

"So much bad news," she says.

"Change is good." He tosses the tube aside and it floats to a corner of the chamber, rebounding.

"Not down here."

"Would you let me buy you coffee sometime," he says, "when I'm back on the ground?"

"Are you wealthy?"

Yevgeny wonders if she is blushing, or if the monitor's tint gain needs readjusting.

"Not yet," he says.

"Are you tall? I like tall men."

"I used to be five-foot-ten." He grins broadly. "But you know this."

"Used to be?"

"My spine has stretched a little in zero gravity. I think I'm very close to six feet now."

Katya laughs.

"Is that yes?" Yevgeny says.

"Only if you don't shrivel back up."

"I won't," he says.

"Will you shave that beard?"

"I'm a poet," Yevgeny says.

"Ah, so you're poor."

"I command the heavens." Yevgeny stretches his arms wide.

"I'll buy." She winks and cuts off the transmission.

Joe likes the quiet and his little log house. He likes knowing that when he doesn't want to be seen or heard, he won't. Some days he likes to walk the distance of his ten-and-a-half acres and survey what is his. There are no fences, no boundaries. Joe knows what is his, and what is not his by the marks he has carved into the bark of certain trees, or odd-shaped rocks that jut out of the pine-needles and moss in secret code. He likes being the only one to know this.

Yevgeny misses his morning jog. He hasn't known the exhilaration of running on a Winter's morning in so long, the taste of the wind on his tongue, how it feels so crisp in his lungs. Sweat. Exertion. He has been swimming in weightlessness for almost a year. Yevgeny knows that gravity will not be kind. Ground support has told him to expect a wheelchair. He may also have to carry oxygen with him for when he is lightheaded. He does not look forward to this. But he misses home and company.

At lunch time, Joe heats up some leftover vegetable soup from the previous night's supper. While the soup simmers in a pot, he cleans the dandelion greens he picked earlier, rinsing them with lukewarm water in a colander. He'll fry them in flour and butter later, and drink fresh lemonade with them. As he dries his hand on a checkerboard tea towel, his daughter calls him. She always calls on Mondays. It is her ritual.

"Daddy," she says.

"Yes?"

"How are you?"

"Just fine." He samples the soup to test its temperature.

"I'm not interrupting anything, am I?" she asks.

Joe's daughter, Stephy to him, has three daughters under the age of ten, two pets, and a husband who rarely has much to say -- to Joe at least. Stephy is usually very busy, and doesn't visit often. She misses the house where she grew up. Joe's cabin is foreign to her, a house but not a home.

"No," Joe says, "just sitting down to lunch."

"Are you eating okay?"

"Like a rabbit." He eyes the dandelions.

"I worry about you, Dad," she says.

"Worry about what?"

"That you're all alone. That we'll find you sometime. Somewhere in those woods."

"I'm fine."

"Why don't you get a puppy or something to keep you company."

"My soup is burning," Joe says.

"Well, go then. I don't want you to starve."

"Bye now, Stephy," he says.

"We love you, Daddy."

"I know." Joe hangs up the phone and turns off the stove. He isn't one to throw the word *love* around just to say it.

Yevgeny busies himself by cleaning up the station. Lately, he has left food tubes scattered around him, floating in the vacuum. He has rationalized that clutter makes it much more of a home than just a steel and plastic house. Soon it will be someone else's home for a year. It is common courtesy.

He is startled when the blue light on the communications console flashes. The transmission is much too early.

"Captain Samoylov!"

It was Rybin, who is always red-faced and urgent for no reason.

"Yes?" Yevgeny replies.

"We're very disturbed down here."

"Why is that?"

"Your oxygen levels are dropping," Rybin puffs, "we think your air is leaking!"

Another rule to live in space is to never panic. Panic makes you scramble or flail your arms when you miss a handhold, which in turn pushes you further away. There is no room for panic.

"Where is the leak?" Yevgeny asks. He imagines he can hear the hiss. There is only the low rhythmic hum of the computers, or an occasional beep.

"We don't know."

"I'll find it," Yevgeny says.

"We don't think there's time."

"What about the station?" Yevgeny asks.

Rybin does not look at the screen.

"Funds are limited, you know. We may have to shut down for awhile."

"Then I'll wait until the rocket comes to get me," Yevgeny says.

"There's no time for that either."

Yevgeny scratches his beard. Rybin waits for him to speak.

"I suppose I have to drop down in the lifeboat," Yevgeny says.

"Yes. We think that would be best."

"I'm not over Russia. I won't be for another nineteen hours."

"You should drop no later than two hours," Rybin says.

"Where will I land?"

"America. We think somewhere in the Northeast."

"Have you told them?"

"Oh, yes," Rybin grins. "They're expecting you."

"Then tell Katya I'll be a little late for coffee." Yevgeny doesn't wait for Rybin's reply. There is much to do. He breathes deeply and tastes the air, stale and flat.

At 1:30 p.m., Joe walks down his gravel lane to the scarred and muddy swath that will be Highway 23's mountain extension. He is carrying his sign high. The governor and his aides all wear shiny, yellow hard-hats with the Pennsylvania Keystone insignia outlined in deep, dark blue on the brims. A younger man, Lonnie Everhart, Joe assumes, is directing where people should stand in respect to the television cameras from Channels 6 and 10. They do not see him yet. Stretched between the trunks of two centennial pines is a red satin ribbon. Someone hands the governor a pair of oversized scissors. And then one of the cameramen looks up at Joe and his sign and points for the others to look also.

"Oh, Christ," Lonnie Everhart says.

The governor steps between puddles to offer his hand.

"Mr. Weidel," he says, "it's a pleasure to finally meet you."

Joe raises the sign over his head.

"You see this?" Joe says.

"Turn off those cameras and give us a minute, please." Lonnie Everhart steps between them.

Joe's sign and several tailored suits are muddied before it is all over.

Yevgeny has never been to the United States. By his reckoning, it will be the first time a cosmonaut has touched down on American soil. He wonders if he should shave. He wonders what will happen to the station after he leaves and all the air is gone. Someday its orbit will also decay and it will begin a slow, spiraling descent into the atmosphere. It will melt and burn with the friction. Astronomers will plot its descent. Young lovers will wish upon it. Somewhere less populous, someone more primitive will see omens and portents in its passing, he thinks.

Yevgeny finishes his tidying and begins the tedious process of donning his pressurized suit. He thinks he can already feel the cold of space settling in.

Joe takes a nap in his hammock. He has wedged foam plugs into his ears to drown out the bulldozers. Now there is only the faraway drone.

Yevgeny tries to write, but the gloves of his suit are too bulky to hold the pencil. He is waiting for the order to descend. His portable air supply is primed in the event he should begin to feel drowsy.

Sifting through his earlier works, Yevgeny decides to take a few poems with him and folds them as best as his gloved fingers will allow. He tucks them in the insulated pouch at his belt. His favorite, a sestina about sunspots and his

memories of firing his grandmother's coal furnace, is taped to the console. Yevgeny looks around once more and heads for the lifeboat.

When the local news comes on, Joe is sitting in a rocking chair. It belonged to his wife. She found it many years ago, worn and abused, and refinished it with a light walnut stain. In it she nursed all of their children. Not long ago, she sat there, swaddled in afghans, fighting the cancer. All of their children have laid claims to it. For now, it belongs to him.

Joe sees himself on the news, holding his sign. The highway project leads the evening's stories. Joe didn't realize that he was so thin. The newscaster makes a joke that isn't favorable to Joe. The governor talks about the economic value of the road. A computer-generated graphic illustrates the old highway distance versus the new. Joe waits for his interview, where he gets to tell his story and tell why he's been edged out. It never comes. He switches the television off, ranting. Nobody hears what Joe has to say.

He closes his eyes, settling back into the rocker, and wishes he had written something different on his sign, maybe a four-letter-word.

The closer he gets, the heavier Yevgeny feels. His helmet and mask are in place. He breathes from his suit only. The internal air of the lifeboat is already warming from the descent. Yevgeny feels a little claustrophobia. There is no room to be claustrophobic in space. He smiles at the pun, amending, "There is nowhere to escape."

On the outside surface of the lifeboat, stenciled in heat resistant paint in English are the words: *Man Inside! Help!*

All the Russian landing craft have that legend now, just in case.

Yevgeny practices saying hello as he falls.

Joe has never been much of a drunk. At parties, while others danced and giggled, he was merely quiet, smiling thinly or looking strangely through his fugue. The bottle of wine, not yet empty, sits beside him on the grass overlooking the road. Joe loads .22 shells into his rifle, careful not to drop any in the darkness. Lightning bugs flicker yellow-green incandescence around him as he takes aim and shatters the window of a back-hoe parked in the mud below. The next shot misses the glass and ricochets off metal. Joe amuses himself in this way until the box of shells are all gone. And then the sound of the crickets returns and Joe walks back to his house, slipping a little in the dewy grass.

Communication is no longer possible. Either the surface of the lifeboat is too hot and the antenna has melted, or he is simply too far from home. Yevgeny is not worried. There will be contact soon enough. Authorities and liaisons, red tape and diplomacy. In it all, Yevgeny knows he'll eat well. Italian food will be nice. Several miles from the ground the parachutes will deploy and it will be smooth sailing.

Joe knows that they will come for him in the morning, probably before he's finished his breakfast. He isn't too drunk to realize that. He won't deny the vandalism. As he slips beneath his covers he sees a shooting star and makes a wish, then changes his mind.

"I didn't mean it," he says.

Yevgeny prays that he doesn't land in water. Water is too complicated. The lifeboat is designed for buoyancy, but his suit is too bulky, and he knows he will not be able to swim.

Joe awakes from a dream. In it, Esther is still alive. She is baking pumpkin pies in the old house on King Street. The kids are there also, the girls laughing at old stories, while the boys watch football on television, arguing. Esther needs someone to hold the oven door. Her left arm holds onto an i.v. bottle trailing into her arm while her right balances a pie. Wires trail from under her sweater to a heart monitor on the kitchen counter. Sugar, both granulated and brown, flour, and containers for tea bags sit atop the machinery. There is a grace with which she cooks, never tangling the wires and tubes.

He hears loud crash, boards or tree limbs breaking under some great strain. Bleary eyed, Joe looks at the clock. It isn't morning. He wonders if the bear has come back to root through the garbage barrels that he's had to chain to the cabin. The violence, somewhere in the woods, sounds terrible.

And then there is silence. The crickets return soon enough. He does not hear the bear go away, trundling off into the woods. Joe dresses quickly and picks up the .22. He remembers that there are no more shells, but he carries it anyway. The bear, an old near-sighted black, always runs away when it sees him. *It* respects him at least.

Yevgeny is upside down. The lifeboat rolled after hitting the trees. He is sure that it was trees, slowing the parachute's fall in jerks and spasms. He must

remember to take something away from the lifeboat, a souvenir or good luck piece for doing its job so well. He is alive.

"Hello," he practices, laughing.

When Joe finds the lifeboat he is frightened and drops his flashlight. He fumbles for it and then looks at the blue sphere of welded metal, imbedded in the soft earth. The air smells of hot sap.

Joe sneezes, clutching the flashlight. With shaking hands, he surveys the lifeboat's size with the light's beam. Writing of some kind is imprinted on the surface. It takes Joe several minutes before he understands that the markings he sees are upside-down English and not some alien alphabet.

"Man Inside. Help," he reads. Yevgeny cannot hear him.

The instructions continue.

"Take the key. Put into the hole." Joe searches for the key.

"Turn. Open the hatch." Joe realizes that the hatch and key are on the side imbedded in the ground. He knows he cannot move it. He is old and thin and nobody pays much attention to him.

Inside, Yevgeny waits.

Joe sits down on a rotted stump and wonders what to do.

"Hello," Yevgeny practices, still breathing his suits' air.

Later, the sun will rise and someone will find them.

YOUR SEAT CUSHION ALSO FUNCTIONS AS A FLOTATION DEVICE

I can barely hear the dial-tone above the airport. Despite all the people, I always feel so alone in places like these, everyone speaking in tongues while I struggle to hear a credit card call.

Some kid across the concourse, all sneakers and attitude, keeps looking a little too lovingly at the carry-on slumped at my feet, so I wrap the fingers of my free hand around the strap, twisting it into a clump of flesh and leather. There's still no answer, and I stare him away between rings. He doesn't know what he could have stolen from me.

If I concentrate hard enough I can tune out much of the white noise all around and eavesdrop on the calls close by -- business chatter here, someone missing someone else there. In the end, all I'm left with is an empty line and stolen voices, so I hang up and wait for my plane.

When my carry-on rolls along the X-ray conveyor, I watch the attendant's face to see if her screen shows the diamond, padded and secure between pairs of my socks. She doesn't seem to notice. She's only looking for guns and contraband. Airport security aren't trained to spot love.

Going or coming, buying or selling, it's all the same here -- never any grounding, just connecting flights. No one has the time to care in between.

When the boarding call goes out, the flight attendant shuttles all of us strangers through the door and down the gangway. We're like cattle, or lemmings, or something mindless and driven like that. She smiles prettily to

each of us, but I can see the plastic at the edges. I don't return the gesture. She knows that I've caught her, and doesn't bother to reattach her mask.

Inside the jet it's the usual bump and shimmy, people struggling to stow excess baggage and winter coats in the overhead compartments before squeezing into their seats. I've gotten a window. I can play the dialogue game with the person who sits to my left, volleying small talk back and forth until someone opens up. Sometimes they don't need you to get through the flight. The conversation just falls away, rolling into some dusty corner, forgotten. And then they cloak themselves in the Wall Street Journal or USA Today, or get lost behind a forgettable novel plucked from an airport vending rack. Many become headphone zombies and drift off, leaving you surrounded by a plane full of gray people.

No one wants to invest time in anyone else. The few hours together are so fleeting that a friendship, or any connection at all, just isn't justified by the time invested in it. I go to sleep, too. I just close the window's sliding shutter and let the engines drone me away. I'm as guilty as the rest.

Outside my window, I see one of the handlers finish loading the luggage, giving each of the bags an extra hard bounce when he throws it onto the conveyor, regardless of the labels -- *Fragile, Handle with Care*, or *Won't you please just give a damn*.

I catch his glance when he looks up, and he knows I've caught him too, whether he cares or not.

"Hi," the older man says when he slides in beside me, but it's only cursory. He's neat and trim in his khaki and chambray. A little nattier and he'd probably be a professor.

"Hello." I extend my hand, but he pretends not to see, intent on securing his briefcase under the forward seat.

"I'm Allan," I say, my hand waiting.

"Hi, Al," he finally responds, shaking. But I know that he'd much rather have gone through the flight without connecting in this way. When men shake hands and truly mean it, they give that extra little squeeze, as if to test your mettle or establish your place in the food-chain. His hand was lax -- just *there*, merely going through the motions. I've forced him into friendliness and I can tell he's a bit put off by it all.

"No, just Allan." I smile.

"Right," he says, before going gray behind a sheet of newsprint.

Maybe later, if he lets me in, I'll have a chance to tell him about the ring I'm taking home to her.

A few people on the plane have taken advantage of the cellular phones imbedded in the backs of the seats, inserting their Visas or Mastercards to release the handset and make a quick call to somewhere. I'd try it myself, but I'm sure it would probably cost like hell -- the signal bouncing and rebounding off satellites and transceivers, zig-zagging at the speed of light across the globe, converted to energy and diffused of emotion. There's always time.

Across the aisle a kid is reading comic books, while his mother and father consult travel maps of Pennsylvania.

"So, got any Superman?" I lean forward.

My aisle mate peers over his paper at us before continuing to read. The kid's parents don't seem to care that I'm a stranger. Instead, they busy themselves with travel brochures of Gettysburg.

"Nah," he says. "Just WildC.A.T.S" And then he shows me his collection. I don't recognize any of the heroes.

"Don't like Superman, huh?" I say.

"Nah," he says. "My friend Eric does."

I want to talk to him, maybe share comic book stories I read as a boy -- the ones that got me through boredom, or lonely hours. I want to connect.

"You read comics?" the kid asks.

"Used to," I say. "I sold them all a long time ago."

"Bummer. Talk to you later," he says, then turns his page.

In the seats in front of us, an elderly man consoles his wife. She's afraid of flying, and I can hear her whimpers of concern above the growing whine of the jet engines. She sounds small and trapped. I stretch to help.

"Statistically, it's safer than driving." I grin. She smiles back, the corner of her mouth quivering a little. I think her husband is grateful for the help.

"Are you sure?" she says.

"Well," I say, winking. "I'm told that the safest place to be is the restroom." When I settle back into my seat, I see her crane her neck around to find it.

Not long after, the Pilot makes his way down through the aisles, greeting the passengers. He's all pressed and polished, capped teeth perfectly complimenting a ruddy tan. The airline couldn't have built a more convincing figure.

"Are we gonna take off soon?" the comic-book kid asks.

"Sure thing, champ," he says, kneeling down, "We've got just a few more minutes of de-icing."

"Is it safe?" he says, although it sounds more like curiosity than worry.

"My mom wouldn't let me fly if it wasn't." He gives the kid a double thumbs-up before moving on.

A few seats away, some business-type, all gray in his double-breasted suit and power-tie, asks the Pilot if he thinks it's really safe.

"Right, like *I* want to die." His shiny, white caps are a little too vulpine now. The kid is absorbed in his reading. My neighbor snorts a little chuckle at the sarcasm. And through the molded plastic and padded seat I know that the old woman is holding tighter to her husband, her wedding band biting gently into his liver-spotted hand.

I play a little game on plane trips. I don't think I'm all that worried about dying. I imagine that if we do ever go down, it will be in with all the drama and pathos of an Irwin Allen disaster film, Airport so-and-so, a new tragedy each year. I like those movies, with all their cardboard characters, each fulfilling some cardboard niche -- a two-dimensional stand-in for some corner of humanity. I imagine what roles my fellow passengers will play: *the coward, the pregnant woman about to give birth, the helpless blind man, the star-crossed lovers*

struggling through the wreckage, together, or not at all, and the hero. I'm always the hero, marshaling my strength to make all the cut-outs connect.

We take off with little fanfare, the other passengers settling into their own while the flight attendants make their rounds. I'm a bit nauseous for a short while after taking off, my personal routine. It's not flight-sickness, just that feeling of disjointedness when the rear wheels of the jet leave the ground, g-forces pushing me back into the seat, and gravity resisting to let go.

I get the same feeling when elevators take off, either lifting or descending, that moment of not being grounded, before I swallow my heart and go on. Moving walkways in airports are the same. It's that lurch when the walkway ends, looping underground to begin again, and my momentum or inertia or whatever has to readjust to a non-moving ground -- the moment when I feel like I'll either fly headlong, or fall downward into something hard and unyielding. Lately, I've felt that way with Carrie.

Dinner is served to us in small, plastic containers. The servings retain the shape and flavor of their receptacle. The whole process can be so impersonal, so gray. The flight attendant plops your meal steaming in front of you with few words, and retrieves it, eaten or not, after the obligatory thirty minutes, or when you return to whatever you're reading, whichever comes first. Sometimes they don't even bother to give you the whole can of soda.

When the meal is over, the turbulence begins and I try to decide if it's the meal or the rumbling that has my stomach all twisted into knots. I think it's the

ring. It's not as if it were Kryptonite or something worse, just the uncertainty of whether or not it will ground us. I wish I knew.

"We apologize for all the commotion," the Pilot announces over the intercom, "A winter squalls below us is kicking up some pressure. Try to bear with it, and remain seated and buckled in until we're clear."

The old woman asks the attendant if she can use the rest-room and is escorted there, despite the captain's instructions. She tells her husband it's just "a quick trip," but I know she won't be coming back. When she slides the latch into its clasp, and sits down on the commode to chew her brittle nails and cry, it's for good.

My neighbor folds his paper neatly and returns it to his briefcase. His motions are steady and methodical in all the plane's rocking.

"They never include these scenes in the commercials," I say when he looks my way.

"No, they certainly don't." He reclines his seat slightly and closes his eyes.

"I think there should be a turbulence rebate."

"Uh-huh," he says.

"Or at least a mileage bonus."

"Look Al, I'm sorry. I'm really kind of tired and I have a long drive ahead when we land," he says, eyes still closed, before making himself more comfortable.

That was it. I gave him the chance. He could have known who I am, what I want. He could have known my reason. Instead I'm just as gray to him as he is to me.

I've never feared flying, or dying from it. I've never feared leaving anyone behind to pick up the pieces of the life I left incomplete in my passing. I always thought I'd be the one to be left alone -- not unfettered, just not grounded.

When the Pilot announces that the jet is having engine troubles, I'm not really scared. Nor am I afraid when he says that the plane will be making an emergency landing at the nearest airport. Cincinnati, I think.

"I'm sorry about this folks, but we're going to have to take her down."

I can almost hear a tremble in his voice above the rising chatter. It's easy to hear things like that or other people's phone conversations. All you have to do is listen.

"I'm sorry. I'm really sorry," he says, and I imagine him sweating and rumpling his finely tailored uniform. I wonder what the kid thinks of him now, or that man he answered so sarcastically.

No one is screaming or hysterical, so very *un-Irwin-Allen-like*. The kid is straining over his parents to see out the window, his comic book rolled up in his small clenched fist.

The elderly man keeps looking to the rear of the cabin to see if his wife is returning from the lavatory. She doesn't come. I wonder if she is tearing off small, neat strips of toilet paper to scrawl notes to her children and grandchildren, flushing them into the air to be found later, wind-blown and impaled on tree limbs -- read by strangers and forgotten.

As the shaking grows, the chatter increases. I see that people are talking, connecting in some small way, and I smile. My neighbor starts talking to me, but

I don't hear him. He's had his chance. I can tune out one voice just as easily as I can tune out the background noise.

I wonder. How would my loss affect Carrie? How long would she cry before some sort of cathartic healing begins and she moves on? Would she know right away that I'm carrying an engagement ring with me, and that I'll offer her everything -- and then wait that disjointed moment, so infinitely long, to know if our centers will be pulled closer, or repelled, spinning away. In the Irwin Allen version, I know that someone will hold her close and tell her of my tragic heroism, offering the ring at the last. In reality, I suppose my carry-on would be found much later, several miles away, wrapped around some twisted metal from the fuselage or something. Then it would just be a footnote.

The elderly man knocks on the lavatory door, but his wife doesn't answer. The stewardess wants her to be seated and strapped in for our emergency landing. Nobody is saying "crash." I guess you can only say that after the fact.

"Ellie? Come on out, hon. We're supposed to sit down and buckle our seat-belts." He smiles at the flight attendant, embarrassment in his faded blue eyes. She leaves him alone to bring his wife out, and moves throughout the cabin, trying to keep her balance and maintain her practiced smile between the jolts.

"Ellie," he says again, but she still doesn't answer. I don't think she will at all. I bet they've only recently celebrated their golden anniversary, perhaps flying to meet new grandchildren. But it all doesn't matter. All the years intertwined and babies loved can't unlatch the door.

"Ellie, if you won't come out, will you please just let me come in?"

She doesn't answer.

If I'm going to die, not that there is any cause for worry, I want to know that I've said the things I've needed to say, at least to the important people. I don't want to be gray, or bleached of everything else. It's important to have identity and gravity in this world, because nobody cares about anyone else. The guy speeding wildly down the interstate because he's late doesn't know or care that the people driving around him love and are loved. You don't hear that on the news. You see it on grave markers, and you hear it whispered and lamented among people who knew, or loved back. The gray people who don't know, don't care. It's important to know. I believe this.

The Pilot announces that we'll be landing shortly, and that it may be quite rough. His voice is thin and unconvincing. The kid is excited. I hope that somewhere he wants and believes that super-heroes can fly and make things okay. I still do. My neighbor is gabbing away at me, something about his daughter majoring in political science at Carnegie-Mellon. I didn't know he was so talkative. I don't care. Not now.

Ellie is locked in the bathroom and the flight attendants can't get her husband to leave the door.

I have to tell Carrie. I need her to know. If I'm going to have that feeling of disjointedness, I'd rather it be now, its split-second of infinity, before gravity reclaims me and the rest of the plane.

It only takes a moment to plug my credit card into the slot in back of the forward seats, and the cellular phone pops out to fit into my hand, more comforting than a parachute. The flight attendant tells me to put it back. Its signals might play havoc with the jet's radio during the landing. I ignore her. All I hear are the disjointed around me, and the dial tone.

"I'm sorry," the Pilot announces. I think he's crying. I hope he is. He's got to know that the people he's flying love and are loved.

"Ellie, please let me in," the husband says. I *know* he's crying.

"Wait'll Eric hears this," the kid says.

It's hard punching the numbers with all the lurching. The flight attendant has other worries. Twice and I've flubbed it. On the third attempt, it's right, and I try to hear the ringing. I try to hear her voice.

"Hello," she says, and I struggle to tune out the gray.

"Carrie, it's me. Listen," I say, and she fades, something about another call, asking me to hold.

"I can't," I say, but it's too late.

This is the moment, and the connection is fragile between us, waiting for that pull. And I can't help feeling that I'll fall and keep on falling in the blackness.

If I am going to love, I mean *really* love, that true and beautiful thing where the inside and outside become one, then I will do it on my terms. I'll pluck my heart out, all raw and bleeding, and hand it over on bent knee to be caressed and nurtured -- or crushed to a pulp in an uncaring hand. The outcome

isn't important, just the act. I'll do it. I need to do it. I need to know that the moment of waiting after you say that you love someone is worth the fall.

Carrie's back on the line and I can hear the warmth in her voice, so sweet and scratchy. I'm as captivated by it now as I was when she shot me down after I asked her out the first time. She gave in. She has the capacity.

It's getting so hard to keep everyone else out. The plane is making its crippled approach, and I'm not sure what to say.

"What's all that *noise*?" She enunciates the last word, an idiosyncrasy I know so well, like so many other connections we've made. It's real. She must think I'm at a party or something. She doesn't know that I'm flying to her with a question that might make all the difference in the world.

There's a surge of static on the line and I wait to see if she'll be there when it's over.

If I am going to fall, I'll fall knowing what's at the bottom.

"Carrie, please just listen to me." I'm not really sure if she's still on the line, but I say it anyway. "I don't have much time."

Ellie still won't let him in.

"I'm on a plane. I'm coming back to be with you."

The kid's mother is trying to get him to tuck his head down between his legs for the landing, when all he wants to do is see the adventure unfolding, if only a peek.

"There's a problem. We've got to do an emergency landing or something."

My neighbor is crying, but I don't have time.

"I love you, and I want you. I can't do this with anyone else."

The Pilot recites the Hail Mary slowly, whispering like a school-child memorizing a poem or the list of personal pronouns. The intercom crackles and is silent.

"I'm bringing you a ring. All I want in this world is to love you and be loved by you, and feel whole in your arms."

We all wait for the fall.

"Will you let me?"

The phone has gone dead. But she heard. She knows.

We're rumbling so much now. Outside my window, I can see houses and buildings growing larger as we're pulled closer to Earth. They look unreal, so artificial and small from the air. But I know. I know that inside each, or most, people connect and love. We do, too.

"Listen everybody." I try to stand. It's so hard with the plane's shaking. The flight attendants don't bother to stop me.

"We're going to be all right." The phone is slippery in my palm.

Some of them look at me. I see desperation. I see hope.

"I just wanted you to know that I think we're going to be all right." I smile, holding my cheeks rigid despite the plane's shaking. The cabin feels like it's vibrating apart. I want to be convincing.

"My name is Allan. I'm going back home to give Carrie an engagement ring. I love her and she loves me." I wish I had time to show them the diamond, offer them proof.

On the other side of the compartment, I can see the landscape rush past the windows. It doesn't look much different than the scenes projected on false screens behind planes or cars in the movies to make it look real, dangerous.

We're coming in too fast. Our seat cushions also function as flotation devices. It says so in the safety brochure. I could tell them that. But there's no water, so there's no point.

"I just wanted you to know that," I say again.

The ones that are listening to me are captivated.

"I know that you love, too."

My neighbor grips my free hand firmly, with feeling. I let him hold on.

"If something should happen, I'll do my best," I say.

The tarmac is close. It looks so smooth, so hard.

"It's never too late." I hold the phone out to them as testament.

"Shut up and sit down you crazy fuck," someone says. I can't find the face, and I'm jostled to my seat as the planes rear wheels rub the runway.

"I just wanted you to know that." I buckle my belt. "I can't save all of you."

I get that feeling when gravity catches up with us and connects.

Our plane comes down hard. The emergency lights trigger and we're bathed in that weird glow, so appropriate to disaster. We skitter and slide down the runway before coming to a jerky stop that spills carry-on luggage and coats

into the aisles. And then there is that long silence, before someone breathes, and tears come between uneasy laughter.

Ellie's husband sits dazed, one hand still clutching the door handle, while the other nurses a cut on his forehead. Ellie should be there for him.

The comic book kid mouths silent 'wows' that his friends will probably mimic as they sit around him at recess, enraptured by his heroism, at least for awhile.

Somehow, the Pilot is back to his old self. I don't think anyone will remember him the other way -- my way. Maybe it's better.

"We did it!" My neighbor smiles and claps me on the back as if we're partners-in-crime who have just pulled off the most daring escape.

"I did it."

I replace the handset in the forward seat. I wish I could take it with me.

In the end I know my neighbor well, and I listen politely as he tells stories of his daughter. I feel like we've lived on the same block for years, and our good-byes are said a little regretfully. The kid is bursting with excitement, especially when he sees that we have to disembark by an inflatable slide. It's like some day-glo umbilical to the Earth. I'm sure he'll think that every flight should end in one. I hope he remembers me.

I linger a little in my seat as everyone else shuffles forward, going back to their lives. The names and faces shared here today will probably fade with time. I wonder who will hold on, for how long.

With a little coaxing from the Pilot, not at all as disheveled as I imagined, and some maintenance workers' tools, Ellie is peeled from her shell. And after-

the-fact, she clutches at her husband and dabs at his cut with small strips of toilet tissue. He seems a little distant, and I wonder how long her tiny betrayal will echo in his thoughts.

When they're all gone, it's only me and a flight attendant left.

"Do you mind if I sit?" she asks.

I nod, unbuckling my seat-belt.

"You know, we're not supposed to be afraid in times like these," she says.

"Against regulations, huh?" I wink. "Some kind of FAA rule that says that all screaming must be done by us poor civilians only."

She laughs at my joke and kisses me lightly on the cheek before escorting me to the slide. Her perfume is sweet. She doesn't smell gray or plastic at all. And her nudge is gentle and safe as she pushes me towards the earth, holding tightly to my carry-on.

I play a little game as I walk past fire-trucks and emergency vehicles and head toward the terminal. I try to imagine where I'll see Carrie -- what she'll look like, her hair French-braided, or long and flowing, trailing behind her as she runs crying to me at my destination, just a connecting flight away. Will she stumble through them? Or will the crowd of strangers sense love and divide, like Moses parting the Red Sea? There's some synchronicity in that. Charlton Heston played the Irwin Allen saviors, too.

I'm not sure where she'll be, but I know that she *will* be there.

FAITH

then

Hurley first tried to fly off the Oneida Street railroad bridge on a cool October night, teetering on the rotted wooden ties and singing a drunken medley of *Free Bird* and *Jesus Loves Me*. Dewy webs clung to the rails. He spat at the lazy, bloated spiders that dangled there.

"You ain't so tough," Hurley said.

His nose was dusted white from the coke, and his bladder ached from all the beer. Occasionally, he would sneeze, almost losing his balance and tangling himself in the quilt he had fastened to his jacket with safety pins.

"God bless me," he would laugh.

Hurley dropped his bottle and watched it tumble and shatter into tiny amber shards on the road below.

"Alley Oop!" he said, then followed the bottle to the concrete.

When Hurley awoke and could not move his legs beneath the starched hospital linens, he started yelling.

"You've got to settle down, Mr. Hurley," the nurse said, emptying a syringe into his arm. "You broke your legs pretty badly."

"How bad?" Hurley's voice was slurry. He repeated himself to make sure he was heard.

"Doctor Mihelic inserted rods in each."

"What for?" Hurley fought the drowsiness.

"To remind the bones to knit together straight." She fluffed Hurley's pillows and filled his water tumbler. "You don't want a limp, do you?"

He could not answer. His tongue wouldn't move. The nurse dimmed the lights and he dozed.

Hurley heard whistling and opened one eye, surveying his room. A man in a dark suit busied himself opening the blinds and arranging Hurley's lunch on the rolling bedside table. Hurley saw the stiff white clerical collar and feigned a deep snore, shutting both eyes tight.

"Don't try that on me, William." He pulled a chair close to Hurley's bed. "Or do you like Bill better?"

"Whatever."

"I'm Pastor Hissong. Call me Sparky if you like."

Hurley scowled at his lunch -- soup, Jello, and a container of apple juice. "Who pissed in that?" Hurley said. Pastor Hissong did not laugh.

"Pretty soon you'll be wanting a fix," Pastor Hissong said. "You'll need your strength."

"What do you know about it?" Hurley said.

"I've been asked to come to your rescue," he said.

The pastor handed Hurley a stack of pamphlets. "I been to the dark side, too," he said.

"And?"

"And I got better."

Pastor Hissong opened one of the pamphlets and began reading, spooning chicken-rice soup to Hurley's mouth. Broth dribbled down Hurley's moustache, but the Pastor did not notice.

much later

Sometimes Hurley would break out in a cold sweat and crouch down between the pallets of steel fittings at the Bonney Forge plant and just shake. At home, his wife would walk into the kitchen, or leave the house. He did not know where she went. Hurley's son came to him during one of the fits.

"Daddy?"

"What?" Hurley lay face down on their old couch, squeezing a pillow in his arms. Stuffing oozed out of a frayed seam. His son held out one of his action figures. Its right leg had been snapped off at the hip socket.

"I broke Magneto."

Hurley took the action figure, a red and purple costumed man. A stylish helmet hid the face except for his red eyes and sneer.

"Looks like the devil." Hurley licked sweat from his upper lip.

"He's a bad guy." His son fidgeted, tapping his foot. "He fights the X-Men."

"Go out and play now." Hurley squeezed the figure tightly and bit into the pillow.

"Don't squish him."

"I won't. I'll fix him later."

Hurley's son went to the door. He turned to face Hurley. "I'm glad you don't drink or smoke stuff anymore," he said, then ran outside. The screen door clattered shut behind him.

When the shaking had passed, Hurley pulled out Pastor Hissong's pamphlets and began reading, rubbing the raised muscles of the action figure between his thumb and forefinger.

close to now

"Only those of us that can look in the mirror and not see some pot smoking, child-abuser staring back out of some big hole will be worthy of the GLORIOUS RAPTURE."

He would read without pause, one hand holding his text, the other passing out extras to the lingering shoppers.

"I've been there. I know," he would say.

Hurley made little wagers to himself to see who could be saved. He thought of it as "gambling for God." The ones who still had the pamphlets when they reached their cars had the best chance. The people who tossed Hurley's tracts into the nearest trash bin were headed straight for the hole, he thought, no waiting.

He did this every Friday and Saturday evening, standing on the bales of peat moss stacked outside the store, until a night manager would chase him away. Hurley would take his pamphlets to the front of the So-Fro Fabric Shop and start over. When shoppers began shying away from that storefront, he would be asked to leave yet again. So Hurley would move on to Waldenbooks, and then the Village Theatre, and then to the Unitas National Bank before coming full circle to K-Mart.

"When the rapture comes, it'll be better than any possible thing you can stick in your body for pleasure," he told a young couple. "And I mean *anything*."

"Here." A passing man stuffed a dollar into Hurley's hand. "Why don't you go get a cup of coffee at McDonald's."

Hurley gave him the finger, despite all his self-control, and then was asked to leave.

now

Dear Brother Hurley,

The Glorious Rapture Ministry appreciates the time and devotion you have shown THE FAITH. However, your account is past due and the Glorious Rapture Ministry can no longer send you literature of THE WORD until you make full restitution in the amount of \$87.95. Payment in full is due before the Glorious Rapture -- or within fourteen working days.

As above and below,

Pastor Marshall "Sparky" Hisson, Controller

P.S. Please remember that unauthorized reproduction of THE WORD for distribution is a violation of copyright law and would most certainly be regarded as a mortal sin. Thank you.

Hurley teetered on the edge of the K-Mart sign and squinted at the cars in the parking lot below. The light from the sign made it hard to see, but he could hear the crowd of onlookers had gathered below. He only wished that he had something to say. But he could not remember the words. The gold embossed logo of the letter was smudged with oil from the forge. Hurley read and reread the letter, as if it might give him a second chance. Finally, he gave up.

"I can't do it no more," he said, ready to jump, "I don't know what to say."

Hurley gave God to the count of ten. He took the Magneto action figure from out of his pocket. Its left leg was melted onto the hip and was now slightly shorter than the right.

"It's you and me," he said. "Busted legs and all."

Below, the manager of the K-Mart peered up at Hurley.

"You better come down! I'm calling the cops!" he said.

Hurley hawked and spat a thick wad of phlegm. The manager jumped out of the way, then stomped off.

Hurley had gotten to the number eight when he saw the Pizza Hut truck weave slowly through the parking lot. The driver got out of his truck and attached flyers to the windshield wipers of a few cars.

"Hey," Hurley yelled to the driver, "I'm up here."

He looked up at Hurley, standing on top of the K-mart sign, waiting.

"Are you a messenger?" Hurley stared at the stack of flyers the driver carried.

The driver looked around at the other onlookers, then back at Hurley.

"Yes, you!" Hurley called.

"What?" The driver blushed, turning to the crowd. "I don't know this guy."

"A messenger," Hurley yelled back. "You brought them to me."

"I didn't bring you anything! I don't deliver to signs," the driver said, and went about his business. Most of the crowd laughed, waiting for Hurley to do something.

But Hurley knew. He dropped the letter and watched it flutter to the ground. An onlooker picked it up. "Shit! It's not even a suicide note," she said, then walked off.

Hurley jammed Magneto back into his pocket and limped to the ladder.

A tired woman on her way out of the department store, toddler squirming in one arm, and an ironing board slung under the other, took his flyer and

walked to her car. And so did the next person, and the next, and so on, with few exceptions.

sometime soon

Hurley would find that place to kindle a fire in his soul, wherever that was, if only to warm him up or salve old scars.

"Just for tonight, Lord," he said. "You know how it is, the burden."

"What's that?" the bartender said.

"Can I have another beer?"

Magneto lay in a puddle of beer on the bar. In many places the red and purple paint was rubbed off to reveal the pink plastic beneath. The helmet still looked as if it had horns ready to sprout, at least to Hurley.

"You're cut off, Hurley," he said, polishing a beer stein with a stained rag.

Hurley staggered off the bar stool. His legs were stiff tonight and he nearly fell down.

"I'm good for it."

"I said you're cut off."

Hurley reached over the bar and tried to grab at the bartender's apron.

"I am righteous!"

"That's it." The bartender yanked him down into a headlock, squeezing Hurley's head between his hairy forearm and bicep. He dragged Hurley across the floor and threw him out into the snow, slamming the door behind.

Hurley sat shivering. The door banged open again and the bartender threw out his coat.

"Heathen fuckers anyhow," Hurley said, sliding on the ice as he tried to stand.

He ambled off in the moonlight, walking in the road to keep his feet out of the deep slush that filled the shoulder of the highway. Several times, he looked longingly at the high places, a grain silo and an overpass, a tall stack of wooden pallets that stood beside the Meineke shop. But he did not stop, despite his stiffening leg.

and then

Hurley's wife sat in front of the television, smoking. She stared at him as he struggled to unlace his wet shoes with fingers numbed from the cold.

"I'm leaving you," she said.

Hurley climbed the stairs.

"I mean it this time," she called, "I'm not fucking around anymore!"

Hurley stopped in the bathroom to piss. He heard the front door slam and the ignition of his wife's car flood, then start in broken coughs. The engine revved stronger and she drove away. He washed his hands and then walked down the hall to his son's room. Hurley left the light off, surveying the room by the wide slats of moonlight that shone through the window. He walked to the shelves that were anchored to the wall, searching through the action figures that stood in dramatic poses.

"Daddy?" His son sat up in bed.

"Can I have this one?" Hurley picked out one of the figures.

"That's Beast." His son got out of bed and padded over to the shelves, barefoot.

"Good guy or a bad guy?" Hurley said.

"He's good."

"You sure?" Hurley looked close at the figure's white fangs and blue plastic fur.

"He's good."

Hurley climbed into the small bed, clutching the action figure as he went to sleep. His son covered his damp legs with blankets and watched over him, holding Hurley's hand when the shakes came.

THE PET HIERARCHY

From out of a side-street, the young Labrador ran, black and shiny, its tongue lolling. A chain leash dragged behind its muscular legs, metal links clinking on the pavement. At first, Noel thought it was part of the shadows, a trick of the light distorted with the sunset.

She closed her eyes and pumped her brakes, barely feeling the impact. But she knew. The shopping bag fell off the seat, but the Ziploc bags did not spill out.

The Labrador lay in the street, its front legs pawing frantically at the air. The hind legs were unmoving, one twisted askew, bloody splinters of bone poked out of black fur.

The dog howled. Noel rushed to its side.

"It's okay," she said.

The Labrador barked, a frightened and pained sound.

"I'll take care of you." Noel hefted the dog in both arms. Its hind hung slack, dangling limply and smearing blood on her sweater. The dog shook, whimpering. She moved the shopping bag out of the way, then lay the dog down on the back seat of her car. The labrador pawed at the upholstery, tearing small holes in the weave of the fabric. Noel struggled to unfasten the dog's choker.

"It'll be okay." She closed the door, locking it. "I mean it."

The Labrador bared its teeth.

"What the hell are you doing to my dog!" The Labrador's owner jogged up to Noel's car and tried to open the door. Sweat stained his T-shirt and his thin hair stuck out in windblown cow-licks.

"I hit him." She stared at the steering wheel.

"You crazy college kids drive too damn fast on this street!" He reached through Noel's window and unlocked the door. The Labrador cried for him, tail thumping weakly. "Come on, Midnight. I'll fix you up."

"I could drive you to the vet," Noel offered.

The dog's owner cradled the Labrador in his arms. He kicked the door shut with his Reebok.

"I'm sorry," Noel said.

"Yeah, I'll just bet." He gave her the finger, then hurried away. The Labrador rolled its head back and licked his hand.

Noel tapped lightly on the glass door to Quisp's Animal Kingdom. She buttoned her denim coat together to cover the blood on her sweater. The overhead fluorescents inside the store were already dimmed and the front display window glowed red with a stylish, neon light that beamed *CLOSED* in cursive. The rope handle of the shopping bag cut into her hand, but she did not set it down on the sidewalk.

Behind the cash register, a very large man busied himself checking the day's receipts. He unrolled the register tape methodically, scanning the totals in one pudgy hand while the other punched numbers on a wafer-thin calculator. Occasionally, he would whistle softly at the exotic birds hanging in cages from the ceiling.

Noel tapped again. She woke a cage of Border Collie puppies. They yipped playfully, wagging their small tails in anticipation.

Mr. Quisp looked up and stared at her. His left hand continued punching numbers for a few moments.

"Can I come in?" Noel mouthed. She hoped that he would remember her.

Mr. Quisp pointed at the neon sign mounted in the display window.

"I know," she said. "Please."

Mr. Quisp marked his place on the register tape with a felt-tipped pen and placed it on its side before going to the door. He rooted in his pants pocket for his keys and unfastened the locks. Noel took a deep breath.

Mr. Quisp opened the door a few inches. "Yes?" he said.

"Um." Noel stared at his eyes, one brown and one blue.

"Yes?" he said.

"Mr. Quisp?" She dropped her gaze to the shiny, silver name badge on his chest.

"What is it?" he said.

Noel cleared her throat. The puppies continued barking at her. She wanted to pick one up and hold its soft fur to her neck, feel the cool moistness of its nose.

"I'm waiting," he said. Mr. Quisp was large, but not fat. Tall, but not imposing. His hair grayed slightly at the temples, but he did not look very distinguished. His eyes, one brown, one blue, seemed to examine her independently, as if she were talking to two people instead of one. Noel took a deep breath and spoke quickly. "All my fish died and I want new ones or a refund." She held open the shopping bag for Mr. Quisp to see.

There were several Ziploc bags filled with water and fish, all floating near the trapped air bubbles at the surface. In one bag, a crab waddled along the plastic, searching. In its single, oversized claw it grasped the severed head of an albino

catfish, its whiskers jostling with the water. The rest of the bag was filled with cannisters of fish food, mostly unopened.

Mr. Quisp pushed the door open further and gestured for Noel to come inside. She placed the shopping bag at his feet. He carefully lifted and held a bag of tiny, red and blue striped fish up to the wan light of the shop. The fins and tails of each were nibbled away.

"Tetras," he said.

"Uh-huh," Noel said, "I liked the colors."

Mr. Quisp reached into the bag for another Ziploc. This one held a miniature black shark with pale orange fins that floated belly-up. Its skin was mottled and diseased with Ick. Noel looked at Mr. Quisp's mis-colored eyes, magnified through the baggie.

"They were sick," he said.

"Um, yeah," Noel said. "And they ate each other."

Mr. Quisp held up the baggie with the crab, still clutching the catfish head.

"He seems fit," he said.

"I was going to flush him down the toilet." Noel did not meet his gaze.

"But I was hoping for a trade instead. I guess."

Mr. Quisp replaced the baggies in Noel's shopping bag and crossed his arms.

"You purchased them a few days ago, correct?" he said.

"Yes."

"Who helped you that time?"

"A girl with red hair. She was sort of, um, I don't know."

"Chubby?" Mr. Quisp said.

"Um. Yeah."

"Marta," he sighed. "It figures."

Noel twisted a turquoise ring on her finger, rubbing the skin sore. "Can I have another pet?"

"Did you follow the instruction sheet we provide?"

"Well," Noel said, "I mean, yes. I've had fish before."

Mr. Quisp looked into the shopping bag and back at Noel with his mis-colored eyes. Again, she dropped her gaze, not knowing which eye to look into. The brown one felt better, but the blue was cold and hard to ignore.

"Fish are very low on the pet hierarchy." He picked up the shopping bag and walked down the aisle of chew toys and rawhide bones, some as small as bow-ties, others larger than a child's arm.

Noel walked over to the aisle of rodent cages, stopping to watch a teddy-bear hamster cram food nuggets and sunflower seeds into the fat pouches of its cheeks. It looked at her for a moment through tiny black eyes, then continued its task.

"The goldfish won't love you," Mr. Quisp said, "It only knows that its world is small and dinner will come at the same time every day, or when the owner remembers."

Noel followed him past the shelves of ceramic aquarium decorations -- deep-sea divers with sunken treasure chests, imitation coral and starfish, and reduced-scale reproductions of the Titanic and Bismarck.

"The goldfish, however, can live for quite a long time in the same tepid water. It doesn't require a filter or any of the fancies." He stopped beside a tank easily three-feet deep and twice as long. Bright saltwater fish, as large as dessert

plates floated silently. Among the various rock and coral, all authentic, sea anemones and kelp wafted in the tiny currents generated by the bubbling filters. A thin layer of dry, white brine covered the lip of the tank. Noel peered into the glass.

"This is an ecosystem. Completely in harmony. Balanced."

Mr. Quisp held open Noel's shopping bag and moved to the bank of smaller tanks that lined the opposite wall. Noel watched a delta-shaped fish, brighter in color than a canary, drift slowly the length of the tank while Mr. Quisp emptied each baggie into a five-gallon bucket labeled "DISEASED" in red magic marker.

"A sudden drop in temperature or the introduction of an aggressor species is Armageddon to that little universe," he said.

Noel thought about her fish and felt a little guilty. Mr. Quisp emptied the final baggie, with the crab, into another tank labeled "QUARANTINE." The crab floated slowly to the bottom, dropping its trophy when it reached the lime-colored gravel. Several fish gave it respectful distance as it ambled sideways along the pebbles, surveying its new quarters.

"I should have flushed him," she said.

"*She* was merely being a crab, notice the coloring," Mr. Quisp said. "Not much above the goldfish on the hierarchy, but certainly more interesting, at least until it tires of looking for a way out of the glass."

Noel looked at her watch. The sun had already begun to set when she entered the shop and the street traffic had been sparse as the downtown shops turned off lights and pulled down shades.

Mr. Quisp walked along the row of tanks and dropped bits of food into each. At the piranha, he deposited a netful of tiny goldfish. The piranhas swarmed over. Bits of orange flesh settled to the bottom in a flurry of white. Noel did not look for long.

"Having a pet is a complex endeavor." He went to a door at the rear of the aquarium section and unlocked it with another key from his pocket.

"I picked the ones I liked!" Noel called out. "I didn't know they would get sick and eat each other."

Mr. Quisp whistled a soft tune to himself.

Noel surveyed the various tanks. Printed in bold letters on each glass face were the labels "AGGRESSOR" or "NON-AGGRESSOR." The former was color-coded red, the latter yellow. Noel twisted her ring again. Mr. Quisp returned from behind the door and held out a clear wine glass. A small, pale fish, no larger than Noel's pinky, floated inside.

"Now this," he said, "This little fellow transcends the whole order."

"What is it?" Noel hesitated, then took the glass and peered at the fish.

"The Devil's Hole Pupfish." Mr. Quisp beamed.

"What's so special about it?"

"There are only two-to-five hundred estimated in existence. They come from the most confined habitat in existence, a ten-foot by fifty-foot aquifer in Nevada," he said. "They're on the endangered list. Number ninety-seven, according to LIFE magazine."

"Wow," Noel peered more closely at the Pupfish.

"Indeed."

"Is it for sale?" Noel asked.

"That depends. Tell me, Miss, can you love the Pupfish?"

"I guess so. I'd be preserving it, right?"

Noel smiled at him, open-mouthed. She thought her front teeth were much too small and unattractive. Mr. Quisp continued speaking. He didn't seem to notice.

"In a way," he said, "but owning the Pupfish is similar to owning a stolen work of art, the Mona Lisa perhaps. You couldn't possibly tell anyone. The intrinsic value is only meaningful to you. Otherwise, he's just as small and simple as a goldfish. A very *illegal* goldfish."

Noel dropped the glass. "Oh no," she said before it shattered.

The fish flopped in a puddle of water and shattered crystal. One of its fins was cut slightly, and its gills puffed air it could not breathe. Mr. Quisp bent down and cradled its injured body in his hands.

"I'm so sorry," Noel said. She wished she had just thrown her sick and wounded fish away, flushed them out of sight and mind.

Mr. Quisp returned to the locked room. Noel held her breath and watched as he eased both hands into the water and waited for the fish to swim. Slowly, it recovered. Mr. Quisp unlaced his fingers and the tiny fish darted between, swimming beneath a ceramic rock ledge to hide.

"Will he be okay?" Noel asked.

Mr. Quisp dried his hands with paper towels and looked at her with his mis-colored eyes.

"Why do you want a pet?" he said.

Noel cleared her throat and looked at the row of tanks. She thought about the Labrador, how it had looked at her, so trusting.

"I don't know," she said, "I get lonely sometimes. I thought it would be nice."

"Nice?" Mr. Quisp said.

"Nice," Noel repeated, "Nice to have something to need me."

Mr. Quisp walked to the cage of puppies. There were five inside, nuzzling each other out of the way to meet his hands. He picked one up by the loose skin near its neck. Noel saw that one eye was surrounded by a black patch, the other in white fur, but both eyes were the warm, friendly brown of dogs. Mr. Quisp handed it to her.

"It might be argued that this little one tops the pet hierarchy," he said.

"I can't have puppies," Noel snuggled the puppy under her chin, "Or kittens. It's not in my lease."

"Oh, cats are aloof and independent. Dogs, on the other hand, are pack animals. You are the alpha. Dogs exist to be with you. If you choke on a chicken bone from your dinner, a dog will lick your face, love you, right to your last moments."

Noel stroked the soft fur of the puppy's belly.

"You've got something on your hand," Mr. Quisp said.

Noel rubbed a spot of dried blood, no larger than a penny.

"I cut myself," she said.

"Hmm." Mr. Quisp took the puppy away from her and placed it back with its siblings, offering each a lick of his palm. He unwrapped a few squeaky toys and offered them to the puppies. Noel scanned the cage for the price tag. It was too much, even without her apartment rules.

"Dogs," he said, "reciprocate."

Noel thought about the Labrador again and shivered.

"I really should be going," she said.

"Hamsters, gerbils, and the like," he said. "Well, they would much rather hoard food and burrow. They're very single-minded. Some aren't much for petting either. I suppose it's akin to an elephant caressing one of us. It would be rough, unpleasant. For us, I mean."

"I'm really sorry about everything," Noel said. "Really."

Mr. Quisp walked to a large, hexagonal glass terrarium that rested on a wrought-iron stand. He removed the lid and reached in, withdrawing a long, sleepy snake.

"Now the anaconda isn't as pretty. It takes a different sort of person to care for reptiles. They are soft in their own way."

He returned and draped the snake around her shoulders. Noel could not speak.

Mr. Quisp pulled out his step-ladder and went to one of the hanging cages.

"Birds have their own allure. Pretty. Colorful." He reached into the cage. A small, blue macaw grasped his finger with its talons.

Noel stood still as the snake wound round her neck, exploring. A tiny sound escaped her throat. Mr. Quisp did not notice.

"But you never know with caged birds," he said, "Sometimes, they're tragic suicides, just waiting for that final chance for flight out an open window, only to freeze to death, perched alone. Or caught by a predator."

Mr. Quisp descended the ladder and held the bird level with Noel's head. In a tiny flutter of its wings, it hopped from his finger to her hair, searching for firm purchase. The anaconda flicked its sleek, black tongue.

"Can I go now?" Noel whispered.

Mr. Quisp went to another row of glass tanks, each filled with wood shavings. He gingerly poked around the bottom of one with a pair of metal tongs. The snake stealthily worked its way up Noel's thin neck. The macaw was oblivious, chirping its song.

"Now this is truly an equal relationship." From the nest of shavings he extracted a scorpion, the color of sandstone except for its long, pincered tail, which was purple, like a plum or a violent bruise.

"Hold out your hand," Mr. Quisp said.

Noel did not move. Mr. Quisp grasped her long, thin fingers and lifted her palm. His hands were warm and dry, almost sandpapery.

"Careful," he said, "the scorpion depends on you. You are its universe. Without you, it would starve."

He placed the scorpion on Noel's palm. Her thumb twitched a little. The scorpion tensed as if to strike, uncoiling its tail, then relaxed. "Why are you telling me these things?" she whispered.

"Without you, it is nothing. It was meant for the desert, not some heated glass box. I often wonder if it tires of eating crickets it doesn't hunt. But it cannot evolve into a house dweller. Not in its own lifetime."

The macaw's chirping became more urgent as the anaconda edged past Noel's ear, its tongue flicking.

"Yet, it would rather strike you than be petted," he said, "Or be a *pet*."

The scorpion moved slowly across her palm, its legs settling into the grooves etched by her heart line, her life line -- then climbing over Noel's watch to her wrist, one leg at a time.

"Tell me, Miss. Can you love the scorpion?"

Noel bit her lower lip. She felt itchy, all over and all at once.

"Can you love any of these creatures," he said, "Even if they only need you? I'm sure they don't *want* you. They don't want to be kept."

Noel dropped the scorpion onto the carpeted floor. It landed on its back, flexing its tail until it turned over and righted itself, then skittered away. The macaw took flight, the anaconda's flicking tongue just missing a taste of the bird's talons. Mr. Quisp reached down with the tongs and snatched the scorpion from the floor before it could reach the Border Collies' cage.

Noel shrugged the anaconda from her shoulders, wrenching her neck to each side. The snake fell to the floor with a solid thump, disoriented. With his free hand, Mr. Quisp grasped the anaconda from behind its head, the rest of its body wound the length of his forearm like a spring, squeezing until his blue veins stood out. Noel ran to the door. The macaw fluttered from corner to corner of the ceiling, then descended to a gum-ball machine standing near the door. Noel turned back to Mr. Quisp. Her coat hung open now, revealing the Labrador's blood, drying dark on her sweater.

"I hit a dog," she cried. Her throat felt dry and scaly.

"Dear," Mr. Quisp said.

"I didn't mean to." Tears ran down Noel's cheeks. Her face was puffy and red. "It just ran out of nowhere."

Mr. Quisp stood with the pets writhing in his hands. "Perhaps you need something that is hardier, requires less maintenance."

Noel shoved the door open and stood in the doorway, waiting. The macaw looked up at her and then out into the deserted street. Mr. Quisp

whistled at the bird, and it looked his way, at the snake wrapping around him and the scorpion dangling from the tongs. Then it cocked its head at Noel, chirping. Mr. Quisp whistled at the bird again. "*Think* about it," he said.

The door swung slowly shut, but not before the bird took wing.

Noel was not far behind.

DOODLES

I met a girl today named Kendra, hanging upside-down from an overpass. Now she sits patiently with green fingers while I walk up and down the interstate to see her work from different angles. I can photograph the low Missouri ridges framing the overpass. It'll look like some weird shrine or a temple if I cut the highway off. It could be anywhere, forgettable. A couple of words and the big green outline of a frog. I'm not even sure if Kendra is her real name.

"Permeable Pariahs," I read aloud.

She's wearing a Walkman. I can hear the faint, throbbing pulse of the music. "Uh-huh," she says.

I return to the cycle for my 35-millimeter, loading it with Pentax black-and-white film. It should make the paint look like old movie blood, dark and syrupy. A little cheesy Gothic to go with the sunrise. Red sky in the morning.

"When I first saw that gaudy green paint, it must have been thirty miles back, give or take. I expected I'd eventually come across a couple of college guys in some beat-to-shit Camaro."

"Really," she says.

"Yeah. With 'Margaritaville or Bust' sprayed across the hood."

She takes the headphones off. I've interested her.

"That's rich." She grins, just a little.

I check the light. Everything's perfect.

"Surprise," she says.

"Do me a favor." I lie down on the interstate after the last car passes and the way is clear. "Tell me if a semi comes."

Kendra just shrugs. "You better watch out," she says, "There's one coming now."

Before I'm through, I take a few color Polaroids of Kendra's graffiti for my own reference. I also take a few pictures of Kendra. I'll give her a witty caption. She doesn't pose. She just looks at the lens. If eyes are windows to the soul, hers are opaque, dark and unfathomable. I've just met her, and already I like this girl.

"So what does it mean?" I slide the Polaroids into my breast pocket.

"What does it mean to you?" She rubs her hands with some of the red clay from the berm. It only softens the brightness of the green.

"I don't know. It sounds poetic, but not Romantic," I say, repacking my camera bag. "More like Beat poetry."

She laughs for the first time, and I see the clean, white teeth behind her lips.

"Give me a ride," she says.

"How old are you?"

"Twenty," she says.

"Show me your driver's license."

"No," she says.

"Are you running away from somewhere?"

"No," she says.

Kendra has tied her hair back with a strip of rawhide to keep the wind from blowing it into her face. Her knapsack is lashed to the motorcycle with my

things, balanced just right. I offered her my helmet, but she refused it. So I don't wear it either.

"Lean with me in the turns," I tell her.

"Don't worry," she says, wrapping her arms around my waist, not too tight or too slack, just right.

"Where are you from?" I yell over the roar, turning my head enough so she'll be able to catch it. She leans close to my ear.

"Hannibal."

"Where Mark Twain lived?" I yell.

"Something like that."

The service at the hamburger stand is a little slow and the girl behind the glass partition offers to bring our food to us. Kendra asks for Blue Cheese dressing with her fries.

"I'll have to look," the girl says as we walk to one of the picnic tables arranged on the grass just off the road. We choose one with an umbrella for shade.

"So tell me." She plays with a bottle of malt-vinegar, shaking it and watching the foamy bubbles settle. "What's the point in taking pictures of--"

"Graffiti?" I say.

"Yeah."

"I've been shooting it all the way from New York."

"I see," she says as the counter-girl brings our food to us in plastic baskets, steaming.

"All I could find was these." The girl hands Kendra several small packets, then jogs back.

Kendra tears each open and squeezes the dressing into a pool on her napkin, adding a large dollop of ketchup. She swirls the mix into a pale sauce.

"So you're taking pictures of--"

"Any place people spray messages."

"Is that what you think they are?"

"In the end. I'm doing a book."

"People will buy a book about graffiti on overpasses?" She just looks at me.

"Sure, *God - 42, Us - 0, John loves Mary*, you know, with the heart instead of the actual word," I tell her, "*Frogs Are Beautiful*, or, what was it, *Permeable Pariahs*? Is that a band?"

Kendra leans close. I can see a tiny beauty-mark partially hidden by her turtle-neck. Her face is clear, smooth. I continue. "In upstate New York, there's this spot where the road cuts through a steep hill. Some guy climbed to the top of the rock facing the road and wrote a suicide note in blaze orange, then he jumped."

"How can you afford to do this?" she says.

"The money came from a grant. That's how I got the motorcycle. You're the first vandal I've nabbed."

Kendra just laughs

"Well?" I say.

"Well what?"

"The frogs?"

"Later."

Before the night is over, there will be a seduction, although I'm not entirely sure who will be seducing whom. There's a certain thrill in that, the not knowing.

The day is clear and blue, with those big, fluffy cumulus clouds touching the horizon. Except for singing a few lines of *Old MacDonald* as we passed a farmer riding a decrepit John Deere, we've just watched the highway unfold, our *e-i-e-i-o* trailing behind.

In the distance, we see an overpass. I know what she's thinking before she leans forward. "Pull over," she says.

"Come on." She pulls a can of that bright green spray-paint out of her knapsack and we climb the embankment. Kendra walks across the bridge and scrambles over the thick, metal railing, hooking her feet under the lowest bar. She grasps the top rail with one hand, the other pops the lid off the can with her thumb. It tumbles to the road. A truck honks.

"Try it," she says.

Another car crosses the bridge. The metal thrums with the vibrations.

"Now lean back," she says.

"I'll fall."

"No you won't," she says, "you've got your legs hooked. Watch."

Kendra leans back and her hair slips out of its tie. I watch the rawhide thong flutter to the ground. She hangs upside-down, arms out-stretched.

"Kendra!"

"I'm fine," she says.

She blows the drivers kisses, laughing in their wake.

"Where did you learn that?" I say.

"Recess."

"Now you try." She reaches up to grasp her knees and sit upright. Her face is a little flushed.

On the road below, someone honks as I fight the vertigo.

"Write something."

"What?" I say.

"Et Ranae Morituri," she says.

"Is that Latin?" She doesn't answer. I draw the rough outline of a frog, stretching for the feet. Beside it, I begin writing her name.

"That's original," she says.

Something rumbles across the bridge. It's a tractor-trailer. I can tell. The tires go on forever.

The spray-can tumbles end-over-end, landing on its nozzle and painting a gurgling stream of green on the tarmac. It could be blood. Bright green blood. And I wait to land in the middle of the spreading pool, mixing my red into something dark and viscous.

When the roaring stops, I'm still clinging to the rail, yelling. Kendra holds my legs, and peers down.

As we head down the highway, Kendra's hand slips between the buttons of my shirt and makes little circles in the hair on my chest. Around dusk, I pull into a Dairy Queen just off the highway.

"So let's get your questions out of the way." She bites into a sugar-cone.

"I don't need to."

Some melted ice cream leaks out of her cone and down the back of her wrist. She licks it. "You think this is all very romantic, don't you?"

"Yes," I say.

"And you probably think that we'll find a place under the stars and screw to the tune of the crickets."

"I think I've known that since this morning."

"Oh, really?" She bites into her cone.

I'm lying in a motel bed feeling the buzz from some red wine. Outside in the hall, I hear the Coke cans falling in vending machines. Kendra is showering off the dust and grit from the road, while I get quietly drunk, waiting for her. We're going to make love.

When she comes out of the shower, she's wrapped in a fluffy, white towel. The motel's name is embroidered along the edges in light blue. I drink more wine as she sits beside me on the bed. Her wet hair is as dark as her eyes. She combs out the knots tangled by the wind. I wait for her to finish.

"Have you ever been to Hannibal?" She sets the brush on the night-stand and begins unbuttoning my shirt. She kisses my chest.

I slide my hand beneath the towel.

"I rode through it." I pull her closer. "Cute. All those tourist spots."

"Do you remember them?" She moves down, kisses my navel.

She reaches out to turn off the light. Then I hear her dig through her knapsack.

I run my fingers through her wet hair and try to pull her close.

"Aren't you afraid?" I try to pull her close again. She lets me this time.

"Of what?" she says.

"Reality." I kiss her forehead, then her cheek.

"I'm ready," she says.

I feel the sharp coldness of a knife against my skin and I laugh. She slides the blade without cutting me. I've had too much to drink.

"There's no grand meaning," she says, "it's all just big doodles."

She jabs me slightly with the tip. It's very exciting, in a way.

"That's all it is, huh?"

"Yeah."

I laugh again and the knife jabs me again. Then she kisses the spot lightly.

Several times during the night I wake up a little disoriented, my head still swimming from the wine. Soda cans echo in the hallway. Kendra sleeps beside me. I lie awake listening to her breathe, watching her sleep. The blade of her knife reflects the numbers of the clock on the night-stand.

In the morning, Kendra is gone. The only proof that she had been with me are a few dark strands of her hair clinging to the sink. My cameras are gone and so are all the photos, all the film. All my work gone. But she didn't take my wallet or any cash. She left me that.

I look out the window and see that she left the motorcycle also. But its tires are flat. The blade of her knife juts from the rear tire. She left me that, too.

After I shower and dress, I go out to my bike and see her parting words sliced into the seat in bold, block letters. There's also an angular frog carved into the vinyl.

"Walk on. Walk on," I read, and laugh long and hard. It echoes in the motel parking lot, but it doesn't sound real. I don't feel anything. The manager is looking out at me from his office.

SURVIVAL SKILLS

Simon stood on the deck of the Wolf Chief and spat into the dark water. He wished someone would lend him some chew, or a smoke. The tribal elders had let him out of the locked cabin for a few hours of fresh air, to feel the sun on his face. The water was far too cold to swim. Besides, where could he go? The boat rocked slowly as it plowed its way to the island, a brown and green smudge on the horizon. For the next eighteen months, that smudge would be his home. It was still better than prison.

The old man ambled along the edge of the fishing boat, holding onto the rail for balance. His face was wrinkled and tough. "This all worth taking some cold pizza and cash for beer?" his grandfather asked. He carried Simon's backpack.

"What do you think?"

"I think you'll be wishing something fierce for pizza in a couple days." The old man laughed, dry and throaty. He dropped the backpack at Simon's feet.

"I can do this," Simon said.

"Not a matter of *can*," the old man said, "You have to. This is punishment, remember?"

"Beats being some guy's girlfriend in jail," Simon said.

"Tell that to your poor mother," the old man said. "Or the memory of your father. Maybe things'd be different if he was around."

"Hardest people you meet are in prison." The Husky scampered across the rolling deck and nosed Simon's hand, licking his fingers. The old man nodded. "Hard, yes, but not very smart."

"Get off me, dog." Simon pushed the animal away. It pawed at the old man.

"Sit," the old man said.

The Husky settled back on her haunches. Simon stared at the waves.

"Good girl," Simon's grandfather said. "You should treat her with a little more respect. She's the only friend you're going to have."

"I don't need a fucking dog." The wind tugged at Simon's baseball cap. He adjusted the strap and settled the cap more securely on his head. The ends of his long, black hair whipped against his collar, and he shivered in the sea spray.

"She'll warn you of bears. May even keep you warm," the old man said.

"Bears?"

"That's what I said."

"I thought you and the other elders were going to help me build a house?"

"A one-room house gets chilly." The old man scratched the dog's belly. Its leg thumped with pleasure against the deck.

The island rose out of the Pacific waters just ahead. They could see the small shapes of trees becoming more distinct as they closed the distance. Simon toed the backpack with his boot. The old man bent down and unzipped it.

"What are you doing with my stuff?" he asked.

Simon's grandfather rooted through the pack, scattering clothes around him.

"I asked you what you're doing."

The old man unraveled a flannel shirt and a portable radio fell onto the deck, batteries spilling out and rolling as the boat pitched. Simon did not pick it up.

"No music," the old man said.

"What if I want to hear the news?"

The old man laughed. His two front teeth were gapped and worn from biting fishing lines. "News won't make much difference to you," he said, picking the radio and batteries and tossing them into the water. "The world will go on without you, anyway."

"Dickhead," Simon muttered into the wind.

"Call me that when I'm building your house. Or when I show you how to store your salmon so the animals don't run off with it."

"I'll eat beans," Simon said.

"Beans'll get old real quick." The old man continued searching through the pack and found a couple PLAYBOY magazines, wrapped in plastic, tucked in between some folded blue-jeans. Simon spat into the water again.

"You want these for the news?" His grandfather peeled the plastic sleeves and thumbed through the glossy pages.

Simon stared at the island, growing out of the water in the distance, becoming real. "Can't I have something to read?" he asked.

The old man opened the centerfold, smiled, and tossed the magazines into the water. Simon watched the girl, her large breasts and blonde pubic hairs, wash away in the boat's wake, sinking out of sight.

"That what you call it, huh?" The old man pulled a book out of the pocket of his wind-breaker and handed it to him.

Simon rubbed the leather cover of the Bible with his fingers.

"Oh, this'll be a blast," Simon said. "Got any pictures?"

The old man finished his search, and stood up, laughing.

"You keep that spirit if it'll get you through," he said, and walked away.

"What about the rest of my supplies? You gonna look through my blankets for pot?" Simon said.

"Maybe I will," the old man called back.

Simon reared back to pitch the Bible high and hard into the waves but thought better of it.

Rain pelted the window of Simon's cabin in droplets the size of nickels. The Wolf Chief bobbed in the storm. Simon looked through the glass. The island was still there, between the gusty sprays, so close now. He sat down on the edge of his cot and opened the Bible, reading a little. "Fuck this." He threw it against the far wall. The Bible tumbled to the floor, falling open. The onion-skin pages were folded and crumpled.

Someone knocked at the door to the cabin.

"Go away." Simon waited. He heard the outside bolts slide free.

The old man opened the door. He looked at the Bible sprawled on the floor and shook his head.

"Bad for the spine." He picked it up and smoothed the pages with his calloused thumb. "It'll fall apart in a couple months if you treat it like this."

"Just leave me alone," Simon said.

"Your mother's on the radio," the old man said. "Wants to wish you luck."

"I don't want to talk to her."

"About time you started thinking about people other than yourself." The old man held the door.

Simon's grandfather and the other elders crowded the Wolf Chief's tiny kitchen, chewing sandwiches and sipping steaming coffee. Some sat around a table bolted to the floor. The rest propped themselves against the walls. The Husky meandered from man to man, begging. Simon sat in the corner, holding onto the radio handset. It buzzed low static. His face was wet with tears. The men ate and did not look at him, or offer kindness.

"Grab something to eat," the old man said.

"Can I eat here?" Simon wiped his face with a faded red handkerchief. "With all of you?"

The old man shook his head, then took another bite.

"I'm sorry." Simon looked around the room, at the weathered brown faces. They chewed their sandwiches and sipped their coffee.

"We know," the old man said.

"I'm scared. Is that what you want me to say?"

"Fool if you weren't," Theodore Guthrie said, pouring himself more coffee. His thick vest covered the pitted brass badge he wore as tribal deputy.

"I admit it. I shouldn't have beat on that pizza guy for his cash. It was wrong," Simon said.

"That guy had family. Responsibilities." Rudy James, captain of the Wolf Chief, turned off the radio. "He don't need hospital bills."

"I said I was sorry." Simon twisted the handkerchief in his hand.

"Sorry don't ever take it back," Melvin Charles said. He looked out the window. The rain had stopped and the air had begun to clear. Fog rose from the tree-tops of the island in long wispy curls.

"I've learned my lesson. That's what this is about, right?" Simon said.

The men drank the last of their coffee and began hanging their mugs on hooks that lined the kitchen. They filed out of the room, climbing the steps to the deck of the Wolf Chief. Simon got up.

"This is just a lesson, right?" he said. "You're just trying to scare me and teach me a lesson. Right?"

"Let's go take a look." Simon's grandfather held the door.

The Husky followed. Simon sat for awhile, wiping his eyes.

"We can go home now, right?"

Working together, they built the shack in only a few days. Simon carried wood while the other men cut and nailed. At night the elders sat around the fire and smoked. They did not offer any to Simon. He sat outside the circle the men made around the fire and listened to the old stories they told.

His shack was stocked with a larder of rice and beans, and some other basic foods stored in aluminum cans and mason jars he could save wash out and recycle. A few loop snares were set to catch rabbits or squirrels. They also gave him a gun, someone's used .22, wrapped in pieces of old linen to keep the sea air from rusting the barrel. Theodore Guthrie handed Simon several boxes of shells.

"You be miserly with your shots and you'll be alright," he said. "We'll bring more when we check on you."

Simon hefted the rifle and aimed at a swooping gull.

"Shoot what you're going to eat, and keep it oiled," Theodore said.

Simon nodded, watching the gull snatch a crab from the beach and soar away.

Later, the old man showed Simon how to wrap fish in skunk cabbage for storing. Its leaves were dark and smelly, but grew in abundance on the island. Ted Guthrie explained how Simon could condense salt from the surf to cure meat. Leonard Watkiss pointed out wild yams and other roots that could be eaten. And so it went for three days, each of the men contributing some bit of knowledge. Now they were leaving.

The old man walked down the beach to the dinghy. The other men of the tribe held it steady in the ebbing tide. Simon ran after his grandfather, the Husky not far behind.

"Stay with me awhile," he said.

"We'll check on you in a week or two." The old man walked on.

"I'm not ready."

"You know enough to get by," the old man said, stepping into the boat. "Survival skills."

The waves lapped at Simon's boots, soaking his feet. The dog barked and jumped at the crashing water.

They paddled off into the waves, leaving Simon alone.

"Hey dog," he called, but she had wandered away, chasing something through the underbrush and relishing her new freedom.