Sloppily dressed in a remote, unimportant place

by

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Signatures have been redacted for privacy
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All Perils

After Davey and I were married, we decided we needed to buy a house. I imagined that there were houses in our price range, somewhere. I imagined them next to international airports or poisoned streams, with collapsing roofs, lead paint, asbestos shingles, no running water, whatever it took. Hell, I was a college drop-out working part-time at a low-budget petting zoo. I’d started drawing in the evenings, so I’d feel like I had some kind of secret ambition and I’d be justified in referring to my job as a “day job.” When I was leading the nearly comatose old camel in circles with shrieking children on his back, I liked to convince myself that I was a starving artist and that even the old camel was inspiration. And if people weren’t interested in buying pen-and-ink drawings of wasted circus animals, Davey and I were young and bright and someone was bound to give us a chance. Someone was bound to say “Otta Mae and David Coldiron – I can tell just by their names that they’re destined to succeed in life!”

I was wrong. What we ended up with was a flat half-acre that cattle had been grazed on for the past hundred years. The farmer and the cattle were gone and the outer pastures were being sold off, one by one, by the farmer’s daughter. Our little parcel had only one tree growing on it, but there were a wealth of cow skulls and thick leg bones, which would wash to the surface of the earth sometimes when it rained.

“I think this is where the cows came to die,” Davey said one day, excavating a large horned skull from the muddy ground.

“Well, that’s encouraging.” I leaned over to examine the skull. “Let’s put this on our mantel when we get a house.”
We were only a mile out of town, but it was a small town— a grain elevator, a convenience store, a tornado siren and twenty-some ranch houses. Sometimes it felt like we were the only people in the world. Our property was bordered on two sides by an endless expanse of bean fields and on a third side by a dusty frontage road, an overshadowing row of high tension wires and a two-lane highway no one had really driven on since the interstate went in sometime in the mid-eighties. On the fourth side our only neighbor, a divorced electrician named Gary, lived in a tiny trailer surrounded by a Stonehenge-like ring of tool sheds and dead cars.

We loved that land. It afforded a clear view of everything. We planned the home we’d put on it, drawing in pencil on the backs of junk mail envelopes and brown paper bags. We knew our plans were not architecturally sound, but that didn’t matter because we had almost nothing left. We bought our trailer with a loan from the only bank stupid enough to take us on. Maybe they were impressed that Davey worked full-time for the biggest agricultural company in the state. What they may not have realized was that he was the most expendable, unskilled technician in a large laboratory where they were struggling to develop a new genetically engineered breed of seed which would repel rodents and insects without killing birds. The project was not going well. They had a lot of dead crows on their hands and the corporation was threatening to cut the program. However, the bank did not know this. When Davey tried to explain what he did for a living the loan officer just smiled and pushed more forms at us. The money was ours.

In the first photo we ever saw of the trailer, it looked like it was about to be hit by a tornado. The sky was yellow and the cloud formations were ominous. What sort of desperation had prompted the previous owners to take the picture at that moment was beyond
me. I imagined them outside, arms raised to the sky, shouting, “Spare us and we’ll sell this hovel immediately, move to the city and change our heathen ways!” Certainly they knew something we didn’t.

The exterior had once been aquamarine, but was now whitewashed and graying. The bedroom floor had been stripped down to plywood, with crusty patches of old adhesive here and there. The kitchen appliances were all vintage. The ancient gas stove was dull goldenrod yellow and cranky about striking a flame. When we tried to turn it on (and sometimes when we hadn’t touched it at all) it would let out a monotonous mating call of mechanical clicks. Usually we took pity on it and held a match to the burner, though this was risky business because the flames sometimes leapt so high that they’d singe our fingertips if we didn’t drop the match the split second after ignition. This became routine. We didn’t worry.

We also never thought much of the frequency with which birds could be seen flying to death on the high-tension wires outside the bedroom window. Birds in our neighborhood didn’t seem to have the innate understanding of electricity that other birds have. There was always one on the end who would try to step from the wire to the pole, breaking the perfect circuit and grounding itself. We would find it smoldering and limp on the edge of the lawn. Davey kept tally in green grease pencil on the side of the pole.

Then there was the owl that fell on the truck’s hood one night, just as we were getting out of the cab. It was snowy white and soft, not a feather out of place, just dead. I’d never seen anything like it. Davey stood holding it, absentmindedly stroking the feathers. He looked up, but there were no trees, no wires, nothing. The owl had just dropped from the sky.
I buried it as far away from the chicken coop as possible, in case it was carrying some kind of communicable disease. I knew Davey would never forgive me for letting the chickens come to harm, even unwittingly. He loved those six chickens like some people love their dogs or even their children. When they were still awkward little pullets and we'd first moved them to the big coop outside, Davey used to wake up five times a night, running outside to make sure some beast of prey hadn't clawed its way through the wire and plywood.

We'd bought a shotgun for those birds and propped it against the only eastern window, the one that afforded a clear view of the chicken coop. I don't know what use it was there. The shells were locked up tight in a box beneath the bathroom sink. The way I figured it, in the time it would take a relative novice like either of us to pry the window open, then load and aim the gun, any animal with half a brain could have eaten every single one of the chickens, fortified the coop with scrap metal and set up shop.

It was only a few weeks after the arrival of the dead owl that the electrical outlets began to spit sparks. It was an unpredictable phenomenon – the outlets were unwilling to perform this trick for Gary when we lured him inside with promises of cherry pie. We liked Gary. He was stocky and broad-shouldered, with an amazing head of curly hair and a reassuring smile. He said he couldn't find a thing wrong, but he ate three big pieces of pie and seemed reluctant to leave, telling us he'd been lonely in his trailer and it was wonderful to have kind neighbors like us.

The next morning I unplugged the hair dryer from the bathroom outlet and an orange flame leapt from the wall, melting the bristles on my toothbrush six inches away. Davey stared dumbly at the toothbrush when I brought it to him. He pushed away his bowl of
cornflakes and took it by the handle, examining the strange plastic blob on the end. He squinted at it.

"Doesn’t this look like something to you?” he asked me.

I crouched down to look at it from his angle. The melted bristles had formed an oddly familiar shape.

“A duck,” he said. “It looks like a swimming duck.”

And it did, if you squinted one eye shut and tipped your head forty-five degrees to the left. It had a short, squat beak and a pert little tail, more like the rubber bathtub variety than the real, feathered kind, which I had plenty of experience with lately, since the duck pond at work was located in the center of the circular dirt track I had to lead the camel around.

“What do you think this all means?” I asked him.

“I don’t know.” Davey ran a hand through his thinning hair. “There does seem to be something weird going on. Do you think the birds are on our side or not? There’s an awful lot of them – I wouldn’t want them to see us as enemies.”

“No,” I said. “I meant the flames shooting out of the bathroom outlet.”

“Maybe it means that the wiring’s shot.”

“Gary said it seemed fine when he looked at it.”

“Yeah.” Davey picked up his cornflakes again. “Well, I guess it’ll all make sense in the end.”

Davey had been talking about “the end” ever since I’d met him. It didn’t refer to any one singular apocalyptic moment. It was just his way of saying that everything would come clear eventually, whether you had to wait five minutes or five hundred years. It was always impressive to me that he had this kind of patience.
I met David Coldiron during my first – and last – year of college. And before I’d even met him, I’d been inside his closet. It was empty.

His college roommate used to raise beer money by charging other dorm residents a two dollar admission to Davey’s side of the room.

“He only has one pair of socks,” he whispered dramatically to me and the two girls I’d come with, as he pulled the dresser drawers open, one by one, revealing bare plywood.

It wasn’t a hoax. Davey had come to school with nothing but one complete outfit. Socks, underwear, jeans, a T-shirt and a sweater for colder weather. A black pea coat was the only thing hanging in his closet. An economy size box of powder detergent sat on the floor underneath it. His mattress was bare, with a crumpled white flat sheet draped over the side. No pillow, no blanket.

“He washes his clothes every other night,” the roommate explained. “While they’re in the wash, he wears that sheet. Then, one night a week, he washes the sheet.”

In the middle of Davey’s desk we saw a small stack of textbooks, a legal pad and two sharpened pencils. In his cubby in the coed bathroom down the hall, there was a bar of brownish green soap and a toothbrush.

“What, does he brush his teeth with soap?” Jill asked.

“Yeah, he does.”

“Does he have a towel?” Maria asked.

“No.” And with that Davey’s roommate concluded the tour, strolling back down the hall with our six dollars in his pocket.

I didn’t feel like I’d fallen in love that day, but I guess I had.
On the first day of Biology 211, spring semester, I was partnered with him. He was
tall and serious and his plain white T-shirt was clean, but so worn-out it was nearly see-
through. He had a high forehead, thinning red-blond hair, and a permanently bewildered
expression. His hands looked large and scrubbed as he held the bird skull we were supposed
to be analyzing.

The professor paced the front of the room, explaining the characteristics we should be
examining in order to identify our bird. He stopped and said, “First, introduce yourself to
your partner.”

Davey didn’t laugh at my name or ask me to repeat it five times like other people
often did. He shook my hand and he said, “Ottie Mae, I’m David.”

I looked down at the skull in his hands. I felt a soft sympathy for him and his empty
dresser drawers.

The emptiness around Davey was an amazing thing. When I was alone in a room
with him it felt as though everything but the air had been sucked out. It would grow quiet
around us. I thought I could hear the blood surging through our veins, our hearts beating in
syncopated rhythm.

When I was somewhere without Davey, that emptiness would creep up behind me. It
alighted on my shoulder and sat, ruffling its wings, breathing quietly and steadily in my ear.
It was a living thing for sure and with it I was never alone.

In the trailer this emptiness started to make me nervous for the first time. I listened to
music on a secondhand pawnshop stereo. I filled the dresser drawers with socks and
underwear and enough T-shirts that we didn’t have to do laundry for weeks at a time. I put food in the cupboards and in the refrigerator. I hauled furniture I’d found on the curb in nearby towns home in the back of the pick-up truck. We had rugs and curtains and pictures on the walls. None of this stuff was going to save us.

The tornado came one night just after dinner. There was no time to turn on the radio. We stood outside with the siren blaring and watched the sky darken like a bruise.

“I meant to dig a tornado shelter,” Davey said.

“No, you didn’t. You never mentioned any such thing.” I didn’t mean to sound bitter, but there was an edge to my voice. I couldn’t imagine Davey ever having the foresight to dig a tornado shelter.

“Well, I wish I had,” he said sadly.

The wind picked up suddenly and an empty flower pot went flying off the front steps and up into the sky.

“The chickens!” Davey exclaimed. “We have to get the chickens!”

“There’s no time!” I hissed, grabbing his arm.

The power lines hummed. We hurried across the yard. Gary was standing by his van, yelling something and gesturing to the tiny cement storage building behind his trailer.

“I built this as a tornado shelter, but it’s also a good place to do welding and stuff, in the winter,” Gary shouted as we ducked inside. He let the metal door slam. It was just light enough inside to keep from tripping over the pieces of metal pipe and scrap lumber that littered the floor. Davey and I sat on a cold metal toolbox and he wrapped his arm around my waist. The siren blared and we stared out the tiny window up by the ceiling. We heard a
rushing noise. A large piece of corrugated aluminum rocketed past the small window and Davey said, “Fuck.” Gary and I nodded in agreement. The rushing noise was closer and more insistent now. I pressed my body against Davey’s side. We heard a series of crashes somewhere very near by. Davey turned to me and, in a strangled voice, asked, “Do you think the chickens are all right?”

In the quiet afterwards we were eager to count the damages. A light rain was falling when we stepped out of the shed. For a moment, all three of us thought we were hallucinating. Where Gary’s trailer had been, there was nothing but bare dirt. It had been picked up and put down twenty feet away, upside-down. Everything else was exactly where it had been. The circle of sheds and cars were undamaged. Gary’s van was parked just where he’d left it, not a scratch on it. Davey and I said things like, “That’s lucky,” and “How’s your insurance?”

Our property, at first glance, looked almost untouched. The trailer was battered and dented, but still standing where it always had. Our truck was backed up against the badly beaten oak tree. But as we walked closer, we realized that the chicken coop was gone. Not even a scrap of wood or a piece of straw could be found.

Davey stared at the sparse, ruffled grass and shook his head.

“My poor girls,” he said. “And they were laying so well.”

I’d always had an incredible memory for tornado stories and I’d heard so many where people found their babies twenty feet up in trees, completely unharmed, or where people discovered their dogs alive inside kitchen ovens that had been blown into ditches. While Davey stood and sniffled and muttered, I began to circle the trailer, looking up into the oak
tree, under the truck, up in the air. And, sure enough, when I got around back there the
cockens were, roosting precariously on the high tension wires. I called to Davey and he got
out the extension ladder, rested it against the roof and climbed as high as he could, calling to
the hens. One by one they leapt into his arms, flapping hysterically.

It was cramped with Gary and the chickens in the trailer. Gary lay a sleeping bag out
on our sagging couch and the chickens roosted in the bathroom, splattering the tub and tile
floor with droppings. Gary didn’t go to work the day after the tornado. Instead he sat at the
kitchen table and talked to his insurance company. When he was done with them, he called a
friend who worked at a large construction company, trying to determine what kind of
machinery he’d need to turn his trailer right side up again.

“He thinks we can do it next week,” Gary told us excitedly. “It’s gonna cost me a
fortune to get everything back in working order. The refrigerator ended up in the bathtub,
somehow.”

“Really?” I asked. I was drawing a picture of Gary standing outside his upside-down
trailer in my sketchbook. I made him waving his hand congenially.

“Well, I hadn’t put in a wall between the bathroom and kitchen yet, so it’s not as bad
as it seems. You know, I live alone, it was sort of an ongoing project. Still, this is a pretty
big set back.” Gary rocked on the rear legs of his chair. “Do you two have homeowner’s
insurance?”

“No, we don’t,” Davey said.

“You gotta get on that,” Gary said. “And I’d invest in a good all perils policy. I’ve
had hail damage, flood damage, now this. You’ve got to be covered.”
Davey took this advice to heart. He came home from work the next day with a stack of computer print outs.

"Iowa mobile home insurance quotes from ten different companies," he said. "Look, this one offers coverage for 'Damage from Ink, Paint, Dye, Shoe and Nail Polish,' as well as 'Damage by Wild or Stray Animals.'"

Gary chuckled. "Maybe you could convince them that those hens were wild animals and get the insurance company to cover the damage they're gonna do to that bathroom."

The next day we bought a policy as well as a truckload of supplies to rebuild the chicken coop. I wanted to start on the coop right away, but I'd just been promoted to emu-keeper at work. The male emu was temperament and prone to respiratory illnesses, so I needed to show them I was up to the responsibility. When I came home Davey was sitting on the couch, holding one of the hens in his lap and telling it, "Don't worry, Ida. Your new house is on its way. Gary's outside right now cutting the wood."

Later that night Davey and I cleaned the bathroom and took a bath together while the birds perched on the edge of the tub and scolded us.

"This is exactly what I always imagined it would be like to be married," Davey said, sighing contentedly and leaning his head back against my wet, naked shoulder.

And then it rained for a week. We kept the cut lumber dry the best we could, wrapping it in tarp s. We got up and went to work each day and when we came home we edged our way through the bathroom door and collected eggs from the drains and the narrow space behind the toilet. On Saturday morning the sun came up and burned away the dampness in the air. The fields were bright and green and lush all around. Small brown
birds flocked to the oak tree and sang in a deafening chorus. Davey and I pulled the wood free of the blue tarps and laid it in the sun.

We dug holes and set the frame first. The sun came down hot on our backs and dry dirt stuck to the sweat on our faces. I was weak with hunger and thirst by the time the last supporting beam was in place. Davey threw himself down on the ground, using the damp T-shirt he’d peeled off hours ago to shield his face from the sun. I headed inside to get some food.

After gulping cold water from the jug in the fridge, I unwrapped two frozen burritos and laid them side by side on a plate in the microwave. I hit “TIME,” but the display was black. It wasn’t plugged in. I picked the plug up and reached for the outlet. I never thought that, given the trailer’s track record, this might not be the safest thing to do. Before the plug even made contact a brilliant spark leapt from the socket to one of the prongs. I jumped back just as the stove let out one particularly dramatic tick and went up in flames.

The fire shot upward with a loud whoosh and consumed the red checkered curtains above the kitchen sink. I screamed so shrilly that my own ears rang. Before I could make it out of the kitchen Davey was behind me, picking me up by the elbows and heaving me towards the door. I grabbed the two closest things, my purse and a pair of insulated rubber boots Davey sometimes wore outside. Then I ran. I didn’t stop until I had reached the edge of the yard, where our truck was parked.

Smoke was beginning to billow from the back windows of the trailer. I couldn’t see Davey anywhere. I saw the kitchen window shatter and I heard a crash from inside. And then there Davey was, throwing the door open, shirtless and gasping, his arms full of flapping hens. He stumbled on the doorstep and opened his arms. The birds scattered and began to
totter away from the thick smoke. Davey turned and disappeared into the trailer again. More smoke drifted out through the open door. I screamed his name and in a moment he appeared, coughing violently, one last hen under each arm. As he ran towards me a loud explosion resounded across the yard. It was followed by another and then a whole chorus of loud bangs. I pushed Davey underneath the truck and dived in the dirt next to him as the whole back end of the trailer flared up spectacularly.

"The shot gun shells under the bathroom sink!" he exclaimed hoarsely, grabbing my hand.

We heard sirens and then someone screaming our names. I rolled out from under the truck and saw Gary running across the road.

"Oh man!" he said, gasping for breath. "Are you all right? I saw the smoke all the way down the road." He helped us up and we dusted ourselves off. I noticed that Davey's face was dark with ash and that his bare chest and stomach were covered in scratches. He held his right arm up, examining it with interest. The skin at the top of his wrist was burned almost black.

"This doesn't hurt," he said, puzzled. "It sure looks like it should."

"Probably burned right through the nerves." Gary's nose crinkled and he looked away. "That's disgusting."

"I don't think it's that bad," Davey said, but Gary made him sit in the back of the truck while we rounded up the chickens and forced them into the cab. Once they were all inside Davey peered through the back window, counting.

"Yep, all six of them." He coughed, then pointed to each bird in turn, saying their names. "Ida Jean, Ida Mae, Ida Belle, Ida Grove, Ida Gray, Ida Bean."
The trailer was still burning strong. Yellow flames formed a tall, flickering column over what was left of the bedroom and living room. A fire truck came barreling down the frontage road, followed by a police car and an ambulance.

"Good thing we got the chickens in the truck," I said to Gary as the fire truck peeled onto the lawn, narrowly missing the oak tree. "These guys are crazy drivers."

The kind people at the Super 8 two towns over were adamant about their no pets policy. Neither Davey nor I said anything about the chickens, but the desk clerk reminded us twice that cats and dogs or pets of any kind were certainly not welcome. We had to wait until darkness fell to smuggle the birds in. Davey’s right arm and hand were heavily bandaged, so he held the doors open for me as I tucked the chickens, two at a time, under my jacket and crept up to our second floor room with its queen bed and extensive cable television selection.

We cleaned up the best we could in the bathroom full of chickens. I washed Davey’s hair in the sink with hotel shampoo and the water ran black with ash. Little singed ends of his hair broke off as I tried to comb through it with my fingers. Ida Grove, the smallest of the hens, a honey-and-cream-colored bantam, hopped up on the counter to investigate, her ridiculous feathered feet slipping on the slick counter.

"We’ll have to finish that new coop soon," Davey said as I handed him a thin white hotel towel for his head. His voice still sounded scratchy.

"Davey, the lumber burned too. Didn’t you see? It’s all gone."

"Well, maybe we’ll get enough insurance money that we can build an even bigger one." He fluffed his hair so that it stuck straight up.
But what are we going to do now? I asked. We can't stay in this hotel forever.

The fire inspector and the insurance people will come look at the trailer tomorrow," he said. "We'll see what they say."

There was nothing left of the trailer. There was no trailer, now. He knew that. But he didn't seem concerned. We lay down on the bed and turned on the television. I rested my head in his lap. On the screen brightly colored blurs that must have been race cars ate up black track. Davey put down the remote control and rested his hand in my damp hair. The chickens clucked and rustled on the other side of the thin wall.

I wish I had my pajamas," I said. "And maybe some books. I wish they hadn't gotten burned up."

"Don't worry," Davey said. "No one really needs pajamas and books. It gets easier."

My boss was incredulous when I called in the next morning.

"First a tornado," he said. "Now you're telling me your trailer blew up?"

"It's true," was all I could say. "I'm sorry."

"Look, Otta Mae. Eugene's in bad shape. We've had the vet out here twice."

Eugene was the male emu. I felt bad, but he wasn't a very pleasant bird. They had to keep him behind an extra tall fence to keep him from attacking small children.

"So, I'm promoting Richie to emu-keeper," my boss continued. "I'm sorry, but we need someone more reliable. I'll put your last paycheck in the mail."

"Fine," I said. "I don't want to work at your stinking petting zoo anyway, asshole."

But he'd already hung up.
We pulled up on our singed, windblown half-acre promptly at nine AM. The chickens were back at the hotel, eating scratch corn and two cold leftover McDonald's hash brown patties, with a "Do Not Disturb" sign on the door. The fire inspector was standing in the driveway, waiting for us. He was small and pigeon-toed.

"Otta Mae? David?" He held out his hand for us to shake. "Sorry about your trailer."

"That’s okay," Davey said.

"I don’t mean to upset you folks," he started, leaning against our truck and crushing the brim of his John Deere baseball hat with one hand as he spoke. "But there are some concerns."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Well, the cause of the fire isn’t real clear. And since you’ve taken out an insurance policy on the, ah, residence less than a week ago, your insurance company requested a thorough investigation."

"Are you saying they think we did this on purpose?" Davey asked, cradling his bandaged arm. "Do I look like an arsonist?"

"Well, of course you don’t." The fire inspector smiled nervously.

"We’ve had electrical problems!" I exclaimed. "The outlet was spitting sparks. I told the police that yesterday."

"Look, the trailer was barely worth two grand," Davey said. "Who’s so desperate that they’d burn up everything they’ve got for two thousand dollars?"

As he said that I caught a glimpse of the two of us, reflected in the darker glass of the truck window. The image was dim and distorted, but I could clearly see the hard line of my
jaw, the tiredness around my eyes, the tangle of dark hair over my shoulders. I brushed away a stray chicken feather that was clinging to my tank top. I could see Davey by my side, unsmiling, looking beaten and pale, his thin T-shirt tight around his shoulders. I could see, what the police and the insurance company might see, two tired people with a half-acre and six chickens and nothing else around them but emptiness.

The electric company was stymied. They came and disconnected the lines, then climbed the pole and stripped it of all wires and equipment. The next day they put up new equipment. By nightfall we found one owl and one crow lying cold and lifeless on the ground below.

The insurance company wouldn't call us arsonists to our faces – instead they told us that they refused to pay out for mysterious electrical malfunctions. Bizarre phenomena like that did not make their list of qualifiable disasters. They needed a reasonable explanation and until they got one, we wouldn't see a cent. In the meantime, we could no longer afford the hotel room. We pitched a tent behind Gary's trailer, which was still upside-down. His friend had never gotten access to the heavy machinery they needed, but Gary didn't seem to care. He was sleeping in there now. Sometimes, in the evenings, we saw him soldering pipes and heard him dragging heavy things around and driving nails. It seemed that he'd given in to the upside-down life.

Since Gary's decision to make the best of things, we'd given up on our hopes of moving the chickens into the capsized trailer. As a temporary solution, we bought a second tent on clearance at Wal-Mart. The chickens did not like camping. They flapped and threw themselves against the sides of the tent. Davey stood outside and tried to calm them.
“This is only temporary, girls,” he said. “Once we get this figured out, we’ll build you the biggest, best coop we can.”

“And we’ll be living in it with them if we can’t get the insurance company to pay out,” I said bitterly, unzipping our tent door and stepping inside.

Davey looked thoughtful.

“That could work. We’d need a lot more wood, though.” He ducked through the little doorway too.

“I was kidding.” I turned my back and fumbled in the plastic bag I’d been using as a suitcase. “All you care about are the stupid chickens. What about us? I’m not working, you’re not working, we hardly have a cent. You don’t even seem to care.”

“Otta Mae.” I could tell by his tone of voice that he was frowning and furrowing his brow. “I’m sorry. We’ll get the insurance money soon. And I’ll go back to work next week. I don’t even need to use this arm, really. They just make me enter stupid numbers in the logs half the time anyway.”

I lay down on the camouflage camping mat we’d borrowed from Gary and opened the interior decorating magazine I’d bought that morning. I’d also bought a new sketch pad and some pens and pencils, but I didn’t feel like drawing. Somehow it made me feel better to thumb through the magazine and look at those big rooms full of designer couches and deliberately distressed farmhouse furniture. Davey sat beside me and hesitantly touched my leg.

“I don’t know what to say,” he said.

“Then don’t say anything,” I snapped.
I knew something was wrong as soon as I woke up. The sun was up and it was bright and warm inside the tent. Davey was sprawled on his back beside me, snoring lightly. Otherwise, it was quiet. “The chickens,” I thought, hurrying to unzip my sleeping bag.

I crawled out into the open air and hurried to the other tent. Even from ten feet away, I could tell something was wrong. The thin nylon wall beside the door was ripped wide open. I stuck my head through the jagged hole and saw that, other than a mess of stray feathers, the tent was empty. On the ground I saw spots of something wet and dark like blood.

I didn’t want to wake Davey up. I started to walk the perimeter of Gary’s property, scanning the grass and the trees and the ground underneath the junk cars for any sign of our birds. Beneath a rusted black Grand Am I found a pile of feathers. They must have been Ida Bean’s, because they were pure white. They were also covered in blood.

“What the matter?” Gary asked, emerging from his trailer. He had to step high to get out the upside-down door.

“I think something got the chickens,” I said.

Gary was dressed for work in old jeans and a blue shirt with a name patch on it. He knelt down by the Grand Am, peering under its rusted body at the little pile of feathers.

“Fox,” he said. “I bet it was a fox.” He shook his head. “That’s too bad.”

He helped me look for survivors for a few minutes, but he couldn’t be late to work. After he left I went into the upside-down trailer and, careful not to trip over any of the ceiling light fixtures, which were now sticking up from the floor, I took a slightly stale frosted chocolate doughnut from the box on Gary’s coffee table. I sat outside eating it and wondering what I would tell Davey.
Davey cried. He knelt down outside of the ripped tent and he put his face in his good hand and he sobbed. I couldn’t remember ever seeing him so upset about anything. I sat beside him. Behind his hand his mouth was stretched into a pained, upturned grimace, as though he were trying to smile through his tears. Watching him made me tear up too. The previous night I might have been pleased to see the chickens disappear forever. Now I felt guilty for even thinking it. They’d done nothing wrong. They’d been laying right up until we moved them into the tent. They’d been content to nest in bathroom sinks and roost on the edges of bathtubs. They’d been nothing but agreeable in the face of all this disaster.

“I should have stayed in there with them,” Davey sobbed. “I should have known this would happen. My poor girls. It’s all my fault!”

“It’s not your fault,” I said, rubbing his back. “We didn’t have any other place to put them.”

Davey cried for a long time and when he finally wiped his eyes with the back of his hand and stood up, I followed him nervously. He climbed into Gary’s trailer and went into the bathroom, which was probably the strangest part of the whole renovation. Instead of installing a new shower, Gary had simply moved the bathtub underneath the sink, which was still mounted in its original spot. All you had to do was reach up and turn the knobs and the water would pour down into the tub. The toilet, thank God, had been reinstalled right-side up, but the toilet paper holder was still where it had always been. Davey reached up and tore a few pieces off, then blew his nose loudly into them.

“What do you want to do now?” he asked me.

“We can get new chickens when we settle down somewhere,” I said.
“We could build a tree fort,” he said. It was hard to tell if he was joking. I decided to stay on the safe side and assume he was serious.

“We only have one tree,” I said. “And what if another tornado comes?”

Davey put his arm around my shoulders.

“Don’t worry,” he said. “I’ll figure something out. For you. You’re all I have left, now.”

But I wasn’t all he had left. That night, as we sat around a big camp fire in the yard, watching Gary humming and flipping steaks on what looked the grill of an old car, I heard a small squawk. Davey gripped my knee hard and we both turned around. Ida Grove was weaving across the yard on her little feathered feet, stopping every few steps to strike the ground with her beak.

Davey jumped up with a shout and ran to her, almost scaring her out of the yard again. He scooped her up with one arm and squeezed her, all the time making hen-like noises himself, sniffing and exclaiming, “Otta Mae! Look! She’s alive!”

All through dinner she sat in his lap and ate raw green beans from our hands. I could hardly protest when Davey wanted to bring her to bed with us. I walked out to the edge of the field and ripped up handfuls of dry grass, which I brought back to the tent and stuffed into one of the corners. Ida Grove nested quietly in this pile of grass and we slept soundly.

The next day I drove into town, thinking I’d pick some things up at the store and check with the insurance company in case they’d had a change of heart. They hadn’t, but I spent a long time in town, dreading my return to the tent and the long evening hours with
nothing to do but draw on damp paper or watch one of the three television channels that had decent reception in Gary’s trailer. By the time I came cruising down the gravel road it was so dark I barely saw what Gary and Davey were doing. They were on our land, between the oak tree and the blackened spot where the trailer had been. Davey was crouched with a level in his hand, Gary with a nail gun. I drove right up under the tree, so my headlights nearly blinded them.

Somehow, between the two of them and their three usable hands, they’d managed to erect the entire frame and two entire walls of something I really hoped wasn’t our new chicken coop, since it was ridiculously large. I got out of the truck, but left the headlights on.

“What do you think of your new chicken coop?” Gary asked me.

“Chicken coop? We only have one chicken! This thing is huge.” I looked closer at the wood. Some of it was new, but much of it was weathered and full of nail holes.

“We tore down two of Gary’s old sheds,” Davey said. “He said he didn’t need them anymore.”

“Always makes me feel good to share,” Gary said.

They worked on the coop all weekend. Gary worked a half day on Monday so he could come back and shingle the roof. I didn’t help. I sulked in the trailer, I sulked in the tent and I sulked on the hood of the Trans Am with Ida Bean’s bloody feathers under it. Ida Grove followed me around during the day. I couldn’t blame her. She didn’t know about the palace they were building her. She hadn’t asked them to do it.

“Someday we’ll want to start a family,” I told Davey. “Would we just keep living in this tent? It’s going to get cold, you know.”
"Think about everything she's been through," he said, stroking Ida Grove's sleek little honey-colored head. I wanted to hit him.

I know people tell you that marriage is about compromise. I don't have a problem with compromise. But I always thought that compromise implied a reconciliation of your own wants and someone else's wants and, more often than not, Davey met my wants with a blank stare. He didn't understand what it meant to want something. As much as he sometimes insisted that he wanted me with all his heart, it was hard to believe. In the face of everything he seemed to care so little about, I felt pretty insignificant.

"This is my whole life," I said, opening my arms only wide enough to encompass him and the lucky chicken and our tent and a little bit of the land around us. "I'm not complaining. But you've got to be what means home to me or I've got nothing."

"Okay," Davey said. "Home."

The coop did look beautiful. Inside it was bigger than our room at the Super 8 had been. The ceiling was tall enough, even for Davey. There were two real windows and an adjoining run with a hinged door. I sat in the middle the plywood floor and imagined Ida Grove hopping around in all of this empty space. No one had showed it to her yet. It was supposed to be a surprise.

That afternoon, when Davey and Gary took Gary's van to the big hardware store three towns away, to buy things like a lock for the door and more insulation, I drove the truck to the Salvation Army. I bought a scratched-up coffee table and a lumpy loveseat, as well as a lamp with a red shade and an old clock radio. The clerk agreed to throw in a framed poster
of an eagle diving for its prey if I bought the green paisley bedspread they’d been trying to get rid of for months.

I drove home as fast as I could without losing any of the furniture and wasted no time in setting up the coop. I put the couch under the window and the lamp on the coffee table. There’d be plenty of room for a bed in the back corner, eventually. For the time being I dragged the camping mat from the tent in and laid the bedspread over it. I hung the framed poster on the back wall.

I set up the camping stove we’d borrowed from Gary under the other window and then I went and got Ida Grove. She trembled in my arms as I slid the door to the run open and when I tossed her out onto the dirt she flapped and hopped and tasted the dry grass with delicate little pecks.

I looked around the little room I’d filled and I felt that I was home for the first time since the trailer blew up. I sat on the loveseat and waited for Davey to get back. I imagined that he’d be angry when he saw what I’d done, even though I knew that Davey didn’t get angry. He did things like shrug and smile patiently and say, “You didn’t have to do all this.” I imagined him doing this and how I would get up and grab him by the shoulders and just start shaking him.

I passed the time by drawing a picture of Ida Grove’s return, with the three of us at the campfire and her ambling in from the fields.

Davey wasn’t angry. He walked around the room and touched the lampshade and the surface of the coffee table and then the upholstery on the couch, like he’d never seen furniture before.
“Isn’t this better?” I asked him.

“It’s very nice,” he said, sitting down beside me on the couch. “Does it make you feel better?”

“A little bit.”

He smiled. “Good.”

That night it smelled like damp wood and dry feathers in the coop. Ida Grove was settled in a straw-filled milk crate and Davey held me under the slightly musty bedspread.

“I want a real bed,” I told him.

“Okay,” he said drowsily. He was almost asleep. I could feel his breath on the side of my neck. The room around us was cool and, in the dark, it seemed infinite. I could not even make out the shapes of the things I’d dragged home. For all I knew, we were sleeping exposed on the very top of the world, me and Davey and our little chicken and all of that great big emptiness.
Making our sleepy, drunken way back from the Campustown bars, Mike and I stopped on the crusty snow to watch the two swans hunched together on the not-so-distant shore of Lake Laverne, the sludgy campus pond. It was late January and very dark, even so close to the busy hum and streetlights of Lincoln Way, the long, wide street that bisects the whole town into North and South. A car sped by and through the sparse grove of trees we heard their stereo thumping. Lancelot and Elaine, the two university-owned swans, were used to the noise. They didn’t even turn their heads.

“They can’t fly away, can they?” Mike asked, laughing and digging his hands deeper into the pockets of his gray stadium jacket. “Stewey! We should kidnap one. This is our chance!”

I laughed too. Kidnapping the birds and holding them for ransom had been a running joke on our dorm floor, back in college when Mike and I had hung out all the time, instead of only Wednesdays and Fridays after work.

“I bet you can’t catch one,” he said.

“Sure I can.” I was only joking. But it had been bitter cold for days and the ice looked quite thick, so I took a few tentative steps out, then skated a not-so-graceful arc in my sneakers, plowing the thin coating of snow from the ice. By now I was almost in the middle.

“How deep do you think it is?” Mike asked me.

“Not very.” I took another step and the ice cracked. It cracked all around me and my feet went in, slowly, it seemed. “Fuck,” I said, as my socks absorbed the cold water. And then, in real time, I plunged through the hole.
I remember nothing until I woke up and struggled to open my eyes. My eyelids felt like they’d been glued shut. After I managed to peel them open the first thing I saw was a ceiling fan turning slowly above me. “I don’t have a ceiling fan in my bedroom,” I said to myself. “And my bed is much more comfortable than this.” I sat up. I was naked except for a flimsy white sheet, which slipped down around my waist. Beneath me there was nothing but bare metal. There was one man in the room with me and he screamed when I moved, dropping whatever he was holding. I looked down at the white tiled floor and saw a hairdryer, still spinning with the momentum of its fall.

The man who’d been holding the hairdryer was crouched down behind another metal table. The person lying on top of the table was clearly dead. She was covered up to the neck with a sheet, but her face looked about ninety years old and her blue eye shadow contrasted sharply with her white, bloodless skin. The whole table shook as the man hiding behind it held tight to the side.

“Hello?” I said, testing my voice. It sounded faint and scratchy. I tried again. “Uh, hi. I’m not gonna hurt you. Do you think my clothes might be around here somewhere?”

The man peeked out from behind the table slowly.

“You’re alive,” he said incredulously. He was tall, with a full head of salt-and-pepper hair and wire rim glasses. “Are you alive? Aren’t you the guy who drowned in Lake Laverne Wednesday night?”

“I guess so.” Flickering filmstrip images of the swans and the ice and Mike, yelling my name from the shore, clicked through my head. I swung my legs over the side of the table, wrapping the sheet around my waist. I didn’t feel ready to put my feet on the floor yet.
"I should take you to the hospital or something," the man sputtered, nervously wiping his hands on his blue button-up shirt. "I mean, I've heard of stuff like this, but you must be in rough shape."

"What day is it?"

"It's Friday. You've been in the cooler here for awhile. They weren't gonna start on you till tonight. Everyone's over at Jean Thompson's funeral. I really lucked out with her. Did her hair every month for the past six years at my own shop. One of those fluffy old lady bobs. I could have styled it in my sleep. And she talked a lot less when she was dead."

"Who are you?" I asked.

"Oh, sorry. I'm Charles, the stylist."

Charles was nice enough to find the suit bag with the clothes they were going to bury me in and to drive me four blocks to the hospital.

"You're the first body I've ever had sit up and start talking," he said, chuckling as we pulled into the parking lot at Mary Greeley. "Are you sure you're okay? You're not gonna lunge over across the seat and try to suck my blood, are you?"

"If I was a vampire, I would have been fried up by now, wouldn't I?" I said, gesturing through the window at the afternoon sunlight. "I feel pretty normal, really."

I wasn't sure if the emergency room was the appropriate place to go. I told Charles that he should just drop me off and I waved as he coasted out of the parking lot. I felt awkward approaching the woman at the desk inside. She was busy talking on the phone and eating a jelly doughnut. She looked me over and, deciding that I wasn't an actual emergency, continued to ignore me. I shifted from one foot to the other, waiting for her
phone call to end. Finally she finished her doughnut, hung up the phone and, in a mock-cheerful voice, asked me what I needed.

"I just came back from the dead," I told her. "I mean, I wasn't dead - it was a mistake. You guys sent me to the funeral home, but I wasn't dead."

The woman gave me a tired, irritated look.

"Look, I don't have time for this."

"I'm not joking," I said. I started to dig in my back pocket for my wallet, but there was nothing there. "I'm Stuart Fawkes? I fell through the ice on Lake Laverne, uh, Wednesday night."

The woman crossed her arms.

"Fine," I said. "I'm going home."

The walk home from the hospital wasn't all that long. I cut down Main St., looking in the windows of the shoe stores and vacuum repair shops that occupied the first floors of all the tall brick buildings. I turned onto Clark and had to wait at the tracks as a mile of graffitied freight cars rumbled past. The wind picked up and blew my suit jacket open. Jenny will be glad to see me, I thought as the last train car rolled away and the railroad crossing arms lifted. I made my way across Lincoln and past Taco John's, wondering how long it had been since Jenny and I had gone more than a day without seeing each other.

As I walked down our street I realized that her car was not in the driveway. I pulled the spare key out from under the green plastic flowerpot, which was full of frozen dirt and the sad stem of some long-dead houseplant, and let myself in. I took off the cheap black dress shoes I'd found in the bag and placed them on floor beside a pair of Jenny's boots.
The place looked different than I remembered it, but the differences were subtle. The couch had been pushed back from the TV. The clutter on the coffee table was gone, replaced by a matching set of heavy pewter candlesticks. I waded into the bedroom through piles of wrinkled, cast-off clothes, but I noticed they were all Jenny's. On the bedroom floor there were actually bare spots, places where the old beige carpet showed through. A black lacy pair of underpants and two small, black, cat-hair encrusted athletic socks lay crumpled on the bedside table. My wallet peaked out from under one of the socks. The leather was damp and water stained. I opened it and found that someone had taken all of my cash, as well as my driver's license. My credit card was still there, however, as well as an old Wal-Mart phone card and a picture of me and Jenny, wet and nearly disintegrated. I shut the wallet and stuffed it in my back pocket. Figuring Jenny was still at work, I sat down on the bed. The cat was sleeping on the pillow, but when he saw me he hissed and leapt down.

"Seymour," I said, peering over the edge of the bed. "It's me. I know I probably smell funny. But it's still me."

He gave me an accusing look before slinking down the hallway. I sighed and leaned back against the pillows. Seymour was always crabby when we left him for a few days. Maybe he was mad at me for not being around. He loved Jenny, but he preferred to sleep on my feet for most of the night. When I wasn't around he didn't even bother coming to bed.

I thought I'd go wash my hands, to see if that made any difference to old Seymour. I was sure I stunk like all sorts of funeral home chemicals.

The bathroom light flickered a few times before coming on. I'd never liked that light. It made my skin look green, even on the best days. Today was certainly not one of my best days. It looked like I hadn't shaved in a week. Beneath the patchy stubble my skin was
almost transparently pale. There were dark circles under my eyes. I looked tired and stoned and not very clean. My hair was thin and flat and something about the way it was lying gave away the exact shape of my skull. I didn’t want to look at myself anymore. I washed my hands and dried them on a black hand towel. I looked in the medicine cabinet for my shaving cream and razor, but they weren’t there. The top shelf, where they’d always been, was now filled with an array of small nail polish bottles, all in different shades of red.

As I shuffled back to the bedroom, it occurred to me that I should call in at Fareway. I figured they’d excuse me taking the evening off, since I’d just risen from the dead and all.

“Tom,” I said to my manager, who always sounded kind of breathless and feminine on the phone. “This is Stuart.”

“Is this some kind of joke? Who is this?”

“Tom, it’s me, Stewey. Look, I’m not coming in today. You probably heard about the accident the other night and everything.”

He hung up. I rested my head on the pillow and didn’t realize I’d dozed off until I heard the sound of Jenny’s old Trans Am in the driveway.

“You’ve got to get that muffler fixed,” I shouted when she came in. “The car sounds like a Hell’s Angel’s parade.” I got to my feet and went to meet her in the living room. “Just go down to Midas tomorrow.”

Jenny let out a terrible scream, high-pitched, like something right out of a horror movie.

“Sorry. You probably didn’t know I was home. How would you have known? I mean, this is pretty weird.”

Jenny backed up into the wall, wide-eyed.
“Sweetie, what’s the matter?”

She shut her eyes for a few seconds, covering them with one hand. Then she looked at me, blinking. She was gorgeous, standing there in her long black wool coat and black and white striped stockings. I wanted to walk across the room and just grab her, pull her to my chest, kiss her. But the way she stared at me was a little too unnerving.

“I should be happy to see you,” she said in a strangled voice. “But this is really freaking me out.” She took a deep breath. “Okay. What are you here to tell me?”

I laughed.

“What am I here to tell you? Jenny, I live here. I’m off work tonight. I thought I should take it easy, after the accident and everything.”

She was clutching her car keys with both hands.

“Stewey,” she said. “You’re dead.”

“I’m not dead. That was just a mistake.”

“I identified your body,” she said firmly. “You are quite dead.”

“I’m not dead. I think I would know if I was dead. What? You don’t believe me?”

“I was at my mother’s,” she said. “I’ve been at my mother’s all day.” She seemed to relax slightly. She let her keys dangle from one hand. “Here,” she said. “Play that message.”

I walked over to the answering machine. An unblinking number one showed on the display.

I pushed the button. “Wednesday, ten-o-six AM,” droned the machine. A pause, then a squeaky, young guy’s voice.
"This is Matthew, from the Adams Funeral Home. We want to extend our sincere sympathy in this time of loss. We know this is a difficult time for you, but it would be helpful if you could get back to us as soon as possible and tell us if you’d like the body embalmed or cremated and -" 

I pushed stop. Jenny crossed her arms. Her broad, pale face was serious. 

"See?"

"What? I’m standing right here in front of you. Who are you going to believe?"

"Get out of here."

"Jenny! Where am I going to go? I don’t have a car! I don’t even know where my car is!"

"Can’t you fly or teleport or something?"

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"I’m not the one who’s undead here. You figure it out."

"Can I at least get some clothes?" I asked. "I can’t just keep walking around in this stupid suit. Where are my clothes?"

"I took them to the Goodwill," she said stiffly.

"All of them?"

"I didn’t want to think about you every time I walked through the door. I thought it was time to start cleaning this place up." She began to unbutton her coat.

"What?" I asked. "Have you just been waiting for a chance to get rid of me? Are you disappointed that I’m not really dead?"

Jenny’s chin wobbled like she was going to start crying, but all she said was, "Could you please leave now? You’re scaring me."
I found Mike and Travis in their usual Friday night booth at Sporty’s, the smallest and darkest of the downtown bars. It was the kind of place where all the bar stools’ seats were criss-crossed with liberal amounts of duct-tape and the men’s room had no paper towels, just a filthy cloth hand towel hung from a wooden rod. However, the beer was cheap and the place wasn’t completely overrun with loud, drunken twenty-one-year-olds like a lot of the other bars in town.

Mike and Travis had pint glasses and they were ogling a group of girls in tight jeans who were playing pool a few feet away. I had to duck behind one of the girls to get to the table. She leaned on her cue and gave me a look of disgust that made me wish I’d at least taken the time to shower while I’d been home.

“Hey,” I said, sliding into the booth.

Mike choked and spit a mouthful back into his glass.

“What’s the matter?” I asked.

“Dude,” Mike said to Travis. “What’s going on? Am I hallucinating?”

“Guys, it’s me,” I said. “What’s wrong?”

Neither of them moved. Mike didn’t even put down his glass.

“Oh. You thought I was dead, didn’t you? It was a mistake. I’m not.”

“Yes, you are,” Mike protested, setting his beer back on the table carefully. “I saw you die. It took an hour to get you out and you were nearly frozen solid, not to mention drowned. They had a date for your funeral. That’s pretty dead.”

“Well, I don’t feel great. But I’m sure as hell not dead.”

Mike pressed his thin lips together. His moustache quivered.
“Really?” he asked.

“I’ve read stories about this kind of stuff,” Travis offered, rubbing his short hair nervously. “People used to get buried alive and shit like that.” Travis was one of those guys who was always telling you about something he’d read. He was bitter because he had a masters degree in English and he worked at Cub Foods. He didn’t have anything to say about real life most of the time.

“Did you go to a doctor?” Mike asked. “What did they say?”

“I went to the hospital, but they didn’t believe me. I mean, it is pretty weird.”

“Have you been home?” Travis asked me. “What’s with the suit?”

“I went home, but Jenny freaked out on me. She thinks I’m a ghost or something. I thought I’d give her a few hours to calm down.”

Mike shook his head. “Stewey, you know how I’ve always said your girlfriend was a psychotic bitch?”

I sighed. “Yeah?” I was tired of Mike always complaining about Jenny.

“Well, she nearly clawed my eyes out that night after you fell through the ice. And I was scared. You’ve got to tell her it’s not my fault. I’m afraid for my life here. She’s not a small girl. What does she weigh? One-ninety?”

Travis snickered.

“Shut up,” I told him. “At least I have a girlfriend.”

“I’m sorry,” Mike said. “It’s just that I was upset too. Man, I thought that was it. And it kind of was my fault, telling you to go out there. But I didn’t think...I mean, we’d been drinking, we were acting stupid...” Mike rubbed his eyes with the back of his hand. I could almost swear that he was crying.
"It's all right," I said. "I'm fine." I put my hand on his shoulder and squeezed it lightly. He looked at me and then at my hand.

"Uh, Stewey?"

"What?"

He brushed his fingers over the back of my hand.

"Your hand is cold."

"Well, it's kind of cold out. I walked here."

"No," Mike said. "Your hand is really cold." He edged away from me.

Travis leaned across the table and grabbed my arm.

"Whoa," he said. "You're right. Hold on." His fingers probed the tendons in my wrist. Then he let go.

"You don't even have a pulse," he said. "Dude, this is just fucked up."

"I'm not dead!" I said. "I've been here talking to you guys for ten minutes."

Travis and Mike both got up.

"Look," Travis said, turning to Mike. "I don't know what's going on, but I've gotta get out of here. Maybe it's that stuff we smoked after work today?"

"Maybe." Mike was pulling on his jacket. They both got up at the same time.

"Guys! What the hell?"

"I'm sorry, Stewey," Mike said. "I'm really sorry."

After they left I noticed the girls at the pool table staring at me. I nodded to them and they turned around in a hurry, whispering to each other.

I left the bar feeling pretty low. It was well below zero, but it didn't bother me. I crossed the tracks and zigzagged down the dark side streets. Clouds zipped across the full
moon like a time-lapse movie. All the houses around ours were dark, but I could see lights on in our living room. When I tried the door, it was locked. I banged on it, but Jenny didn’t come. I looked under the flowerpot, but the extra key was not there. I banged on the door again. I could hear the television and I peered through a small opening in the curtains. She was watching the Simpsons.

"Jenny! Let me in! We have to talk."

Jenny didn’t move.

"Come on!"

"Go away," she shouted, never looking away from the TV screen. "You are making this so much harder for me."

"Just let me in. Please. I love you."

"If you really loved me, you’d go away."

The overnight desk clerk at the Ames Motor Lodge looked almost as I had as I did. His eyes were red and his skin looked dry and gray. When I walked into the office he was staring straight ahead, mouth hanging slightly open. I stood in front of him for a full minute before he even acknowledged that I was there.

"Just a single room?" he asked hollowly.

"Yeah." I wondered if everyone they hired at this motel had a drug problem or if it was just the night shift.

He took my credit card and mechanically told me to have a nice night.

My room was much smaller than I had thought it would be.
Jenny and I had been living together for three years. Our life together had been full of laundry and debt and her endless complaints about her telemarketing job, but it had been three good years all the same. At night we used to lie with our faces pressed together, her legs thrown over me. Her legs were not thin, they were round and the weight of them there had always been comforting.

Alone in the hard motel bed, I conjured every mental picture of Jenny that I had: her in her coat; her driving the Trans Am in her black plastic sunglasses, the ones that made her look like an old time movie star; her naked, on her knees. I stared at the ceiling and fell into a dreamless, sleep-like trance.

The morning was brighter. In the huge mirror behind the television I looked pale, skinny and unfamiliar. There were dark circles around my eyes and my lips were nearly colorless. My thin, brown hair was flattened to my head where I’d slept on it. I showered in the clean white motel bathroom. When the water hit my skin it gave off a chemical smell. I got dressed, checked out of the hotel and walked down to Target. With my credit card I bought some shaving cream, a razor, a tube of toothpaste and a toothbrush, as well as some T-shirts and underwear.

In the store’s bathroom I put on a new pair of underwear and a T-shirt. I shaved and brushed my teeth. I wished I’d thought to look at coats, but when I struck out across the parking lot, the pockets of my suit jacket bulging with personal hygiene supplies, I realized I didn’t feel cold. The wind blew and I felt nothing.

It was now almost noon, Saturday. I always worked from 12-8 on Saturdays. I would have to hurry to get there on time.
Tom was on the floor, instructing a woman I had never seen before in how to clean the rotisserie. His white shirt was clean and ironed. A lump of ground beef was stuck to the shiny toe of his black safety shoe. He was so caught up in explaining the intricacies of proper chicken rotation that he didn’t even see me.

“Tom! Where’s my timecard? It’s not in the rack.”

The noise Tom made upon turning around and seeing me was sort of a cross between a grunt and the squeak of a machine badly in need of oil. The woman he was training, however, looked perfectly relaxed. Her little paper hat sat jauntily on her head.

“Theresa,” I read off the side of it. “Nice to meet you. I’m Stewey.” I extended my hand. She reached out to take it, but Tom leapt between us.

“Don’t – don’t touch him!” To me, he said, “I don’t know what is going on, but you need to leave.”

“I’m working today, Tom. It’s Saturday. It’s gonna be busy as hell.”

“I hired Theresa to take your position,” he said. “You can’t be here. I need to protect my employees. Not to mention the customers. I don’t know what kind of dark magic this is, but we have no place for it at Fareway Foods.”

I trudged home to the house on Walnut. I didn’t think Jenny would be there. However, not only was the Trans Am in the driveway, my mom’s Dodge Neon was parked crookedly out on the street.

“Mom!” I yelled, standing on the doorstep. “Jenny!” I tried the door, but it was still locked. Jenny and my mom came to the window.
“See,” I heard Jenny say to my mother. “He just keeps coming back here. Tell him that’s not right. Tell him he needs to go.”

“Stuart,” my mother said through the glass. She was talking slowly, moving her lips in an exaggerated fashion. “Stewey. Honey. You need to go.”

I’ve had some low moments in my lifetime. The day my father died, when I was fourteen. The day my dog Roscoe got run over by the meter maid. The day my first girlfriend, Lucy, broke up with me. The day I found out I’d gotten a score of 120 on the LSATS, probably the lowest score in the state. As I walked across town, I tried to remember how each of those things had felt. I tried to remember what it was like when I carried Roscoe’s limp body into the front yard, why I cried. I tried to remember why I had taken a pile of textbooks and lit them on fire in the backyard when I found out I’d never have a chance of getting into law school, then yelled at Jenny for asking me why I’d wasted all those perfectly good books. It was like looking at the life of an entirely different person. All there was now was me, on the street without a coat, when the digital thermometer in front of the First National bank read -13. I did not even shiver. This was how I knew they were not wrong. I was dead.

I walked all over downtown, numb from this realization. In the end, I didn’t know what to do. I walked back to the Motor Lodge, figuring I’d get a room, at least for one more night. The same clerk as before was standing stiffly behind the counter, his eyes fixed somewhere on the wall behind me. There was no one else in the office and, despite a good number of cars out in the parking lot, the place was quiet.

“I need a room,” I said.
"How long have you been dead?” he asked me, in a low, flat voice.

“What?”

“How long? Do you remember?” His pale eyes were unblinking.

“Well, uh,” I stammered. “Since Wednesday night, I guess.”

“There’s another place you can stay,” he said. “Just so you know.” He reached for a notepad bearing the motor inn’s logo and he scrawled a few lines of directions on it. “Take Lincoln Way out to the west side,” he said. “Then take a right on North Dakota and walk all the way to the bottom of the hill. It’s the last road before the cemetery. Look for an aqua doublewide trailer, on the west side of the park. You want to talk to Barb.”

“Thanks,” I said, taking the piece of paper.

“Someone had to tell me where to go once too.”

I smiled at him. He did not smile back.
In four months time I was starting to forget things, like what the house on Walnut Ave. looked like or what my old girlfriend’s name was. Those were details from my old life, the life of a living person.

In my new life, my unlife, I lived with a girl named Della in a pink trailer in a mobile home park that people called “Hamburger Hill.” The trailer dated from the early 1960’s and it had been remodeled several times with fixtures ripped from other old trailers. There was a little yard at the bottom of the portable metal steps and, even in May, all the grass was brown.

Our neighbors on one side were young and they were not dead, though they were not completely in the world of the living either, since they smoked more pot than anyone I had ever met. They slept for most of the day, with heavy blankets over their windows. Some nights cars would pull right up to their steps and they’d buy and sell right there in the yard.

Our neighbors on the other side were an older couple named Barb and Dave. They had been dead much longer than us, but they were remarkably well-preserved. Dave had found a way to keep one’s body indefinitely fresh with a homemade sour mash that smelled chemical. Every undead resident in the trailer park drank this concoction. A few nights a week we’d all congregate outside Barb and Dave’s door, settle into their broken-down lawn chairs and pass the moonshine around in big plastic cups, comparing death stories. No one had much else to talk about. We were obsessed with our deaths. They were the last real things that had happened to any of us.
My death story made some of the older folks nostalgic for the fun times they’d had drinking and raising hell before they died. Once you were dead, alcohol had no effect on you. Bob, from five lots down, chuckled every time I got to the part about drunkenly trying to cross the frozen campus pond to kidnap one of the swans.

“Man,” he would say, smiling and showing off a ragged mouth of missing teeth. “It’s the kind of thing I would have done at that age too. Those were the days.”

My new girlfriend Della was from Wisconsin and she’d been dead for three years already. She had long dark hair and a pinched, thin face. Her arms and legs were stick-skinny. Hidden under her hair was a shallow indentation in her skull, where the bone was crushed and pushed inward.

I started living with Della because everyone thought I should.

“It’s perfect,” Barb said. “You’re just about the same age. You shouldn’t have to live alone. Besides, the only empty trailer we have right now is in awful condition. Bob’s working on repairing it now. He used to do construction, before he fell off a roof and broke his neck.”

Della been only twenty when she died. She was driving back from visiting friends in Des Moines, her boyfriend in the passenger seat. Just as they merged onto Rte. 35 they’d hit a patch of ice and spun out into a bread truck. They were both killed instantly and he didn’t come back. None of the other folks thought that this story was sad. Even Della herself had nothing to say about the dead boyfriend.

“Do you think he was the lucky one?” I asked her one night in Barb and Dave’s yard. “Do you think that being like us is worse than being gone for good?”
Dave laughed at me.

"Listen to the kid," he said. "Getting all philosophical on us."

Most of us dead folks worked the night shifts all over town. This worked out pretty well, because we didn’t need to sleep. Della stocked at Hy-Vee. Dave stocked at Wal-Mart. His wife, Barb, worked with me at the Kum and Go down the street, the one on the corner of Lincoln and South Dakota. She’d gotten me the job. We hadn’t gone to see the regular manager of the gas station. We’d gone to a shabby whitewashed trailer at the edge of the trailer park, looking for a guy named Phil. Phil was long dead and rather fat. He asked me to sign a blank sheet of paper and then he filed it in his desk drawer.

"Pay day's the first and third Friday of every month," he said.

"Doesn’t he need my social security number or something?" I asked Barb as we walked back to our side of the park.

She looked amused.

"Stewey, those are for living people. You don’t have a social security number anymore. We don’t pay taxes. As far as they’re concerned, we don’t exist. That’s why we go see Phil. He’s got connections."

"Connections with who?" Phil didn’t look like he’d have connections with anyone. He probably worked out of his trailer because he was too flabby and poorly preserved to get away with leaving the trailer park.

"I don’t know. Does it matter?" Barb sounded vaguely exasperated. "None of this matters, Stewey."
Phil was as good as his word. On the first and third Fridays of the month all of us would line up outside his trailer and he'd hand out wads of cash. I made a hundred dollars every two weeks. I'd never been particularly good at math, but I knew this figured out to a little more than a dollar an hour. Still, it seemed like a lot of money because we needed so little. The lot rent on the trailer was cheap. We used just enough electricity to keep a few lights on and, in the summer we'd need the air conditioner running on 75 degrees – Dave cautioned me that if you didn't keep yourself cool, you'd need more than his moonshine to preserve your body over the years (there were some people walking around the park who'd been careless, like Bob, who was missing most of his teeth and had the saggy skin of an eighty-year-old man, even though he'd been forty-three when he died). Our only other household expense was the cable bill. We didn't have a phone or a car. Our debts had been erased when we died. I would never have to make a college loan payment again. And we didn't really have to eat. I suppose this was convenient, in that we had no grocery bill and very seldom had to use the bathroom, but we missed food. Some mornings I would bring things home from work: frosted donuts, a six-pack of beer, beef jerky. However, eating and drinking these things made us sad, because they never filled us up the way they'd fill a living person up.

I'd only been working at Kum and Go for a few weeks when I experienced my first hold-up. It was slow, as usual, that night, though there'd been a big group of people buying beer and Blue Bunny ice cream around midnight. I slid two twenty dollar bills into the drop safe, stocked the cigarettes and read yesterday's newspaper. Nothing that happened in the world had much meaning to me anymore, but I noticed the obituaries. Sometimes I felt
jealous of those people, with their nice funerals, their grieving families, the real endings that they got. Today the recently dead (and probably destined to stay dead) were all old: grandparents with hobbies like knitting and container gardening and chamber music.

I'd put the paper down and was absentmindedly dusting the need-a-penny/give-a-penny dish with my finger when the door chimed. It was the first customer in an hour and I looked up, curious. Would it be a couple of stoned college students? That guy who buys beer every six hours? Someone rumpled and exhausted from driving all night, desperate to use the bathroom and fill the tank one more time before they got home?

The man who came through the door did not appear interested in purchasing beer or using the bathroom. My first impulse was to wonder why he was wearing a red ski mask, in May, when it was nearly sixty degrees out. This amused me, even as I realized, yes, I work in a convenience store, and, yes, this man is going to hold me up, in fact, he has a gun, there in his hand, loose by his side.

The gun was small. The man was wearing a hooded sweatshirt and baggy pants so big that, rather than walking, he shuffled. He held the gun up slowly. His bare hands were pink and pudgy. I wondered what he looked like under the mask.

"Open the register," he said.

"There's only forty bucks in here," I said, counting the fives and ones.

"Open the fucking safe, then."

"I can't. It's a drop safe. I don't have the combination."

He cocked the gun.

"Jesus," I said. "You should know better than to rob a convenience store. There's never any money in the register." I could imagine how frightening this situation could be for
a living person, but, after the first time, facing death meant nothing to me. There were advantages of not having a life to value.

He pointed behind me to the stacks of cigarette boxes.

"Put 'em in a paper sack," he said. "With the money." I did what he said, throwing the forty dollars in first and taking my time with the boxes, carefully selecting one of each brand. He tapped his foot impatiently, the gun wavering in mid-air.

"Could you get that gun out of my face?" I asked him.

"Well, hurry the fuck up, asshole."

He seemed to be weighing his options. I imagined him thinking that this was a stupid botched robbery now, not worth anyone's life. Why get blood on your hands for a few boxes of cigarettes? What were the chances he'd go to jail for this?

"Look," I said, shoving the half-filled bag across the counter. "You're in here stealing fucking cigarettes. Is this really worth it? I could call the cops on you five seconds after you're out the door. What are the chances you'd get away?"

He raised the gun, shakily, and fired two bullets into my chest, one on either side of where my heart would be. I staggered backwards and gasped, more in surprise than pain. In fact, I didn't feel any pain. I felt a warm, prickling sensation in my chest. And then nothing. The robber was still facing me, staring at me through the eyeholes of the ski mask. He was backing towards the door, clutching the paper bag and the gun, as if he wasn't sure whether to run off with his forty dollars and six cartons of cigarettes or to try and finish me off. I scrambled over the counter, knocking a few more cartons of cigarettes on the floor in the process. The robber shakily raised his gun, but I brushed right past him.
"Look, give me the bag back," I said, blocking the door with outstretched arms. "If I'm short forty bucks, I'll get in trouble."

I yanked the bag from his arms. The robber rubbed his eyes, then pulled off the ski mask. Underneath his hair and face were dripping sweat. His skin was red and blotchy. He couldn't have been older than twenty-one or twenty-two.

"I got you," he gasped. "I got you twice." He pointed a quivering finger at my chest.

I looked down and I saw two clean holes in my polo shirt, as if I was nothing but a paper target hung out in a shooting range. How would I explain those holes to the store manager? Maybe I'd just tell him the shirt burned up in the dryer or something and he'd have to give me a new one. I'd have to leave him a note. I never actually saw him in person.

"Let me out of here," the robber said. "This is fucked up. What are you?" He looked like he might be about to cry. I could not remember what it felt like to cry. I stepped out of the way and he ran, stumbling, across the parking lot. I peeked my head outside to watch him. He darted around one of the gas tanks and took off across Lincoln Way. His figure was illuminated momentarily in the headlights of an oncoming pick-up truck and then, in one split second, the grill of the truck collided with his body and he was thrown over the shoulder of the road. The truck's tires screeched as it swung out into the other lane and smashed sideways into the base of a stoplight.

I wasn't supposed to leave the store, under any circumstances. Even the bags of trash got piled by the back door, to be taken out at seven when the morning shift people arrived. I imagined that some of the other clerks might step out onto the sidewalk to smoke cigarettes during their shift, but I sure didn't. So after watching the scene in the street for a moment, I retreated back behind the double glass doors.
Two squad cars arrived and blocked off half the road. A wailing ambulance pulled up a few moments later. The truck’s driver had gotten out and was gesturing dramatically to one of the officers, pushing one hand through the air and smacking it against his other palm, as if demonstrating the way in which his vehicle had come into contact with the robber’s body. I was leaning against the door handle, just watching the people and the red, white and blue flashing lights, when an old black Dodge came careening into the Kum and Go parking lot. It missed one of the gas tanks by about a foot and came to an abrupt halt at the very edge of the lot. The person inside leaped out, carrying some kind of rake or other long gardening tool. He raced across the road, flitting between the two cop cars and disappearing over the shoulder, where the robber’s body was still lying.

In another ten minutes I saw two EMTs loading a stretcher into the ambulance. They were obviously in no hurry. A few cars passing by slowed down to look and the police waved them on. Then I saw the driver of the black car, walking back towards the store. Neither the EMTs nor the police took any notice of him, even though he walked right past them. He was all dressed in black, which made him kind of hard to see. The hood on his long coat was up, hiding everything but a narrow strip of eyes, nose and mouth. His skin was very pale in the light from the parking lot. He stopped at his car and tossed the rake into the backseat, than came towards the store.

I was back behind the counter, straightening the cigarettes when he opened the door. He went to the cooler and grabbed a small carton of skim milk.

“Just this,” he said curtly, placing it on the counter. I realized that what he was wearing wasn’t a coat at all, but some kind of long, hooded cloak.

“Eighty-nine cents.”
“You have some holes in your shirt,” he said, pulling a dollar bill from somewhere inside his cloak.

“Oh, yeah.” I looked down. “I—”

“No need to explain,” he said. “Accidents happen.”

I gave him his change.

“Serves the guy right,” Delia said. “What a dumb-ass. Who would hold up a Kum and Go at one AM?” She stood next to the bed and peeled off her work clothes. There was white powder all over the knees of her black pants. “Flour,” she explained. “I did the baking aisle tonight.” She stood there in her underwear and pulled back her hair, which was long, but limp and dull-colored. It was not so easy to find hair-care products formulated for the undead.

“People hold up convenience stores all the time, I guess.”

“Not in Ames, Iowa,” Delia said.

“Well, I suppose it’s better he’s dead. At least he won’t say anything to anyone. He seemed pretty freaked out when he realized he hadn’t hurt me. Actually, I’m kind of surprised the police didn’t come in and ask me any questions. They just drove away after an hour or so.” I wondered if I should tell Delia about the guy in black, but I decided not to. It seemed irrelevant now.

“Stewey.” Della lay down on the unmade bed. “Nobody cares. Do you think it’s just a coincidence that no one bothers us up here in the trailer park? Living people don’t want anything to do with us. They barely even see us. No one would have believed the guy anyway.”
I took off the polo shirt with the bullet holes. I hadn’t thought about what might be underneath. It was strange when I saw two small bloodless holes in my chest where the bullets had entered my body. They were not even large enough to poke the tip of my finger into. Right around the edges the skin was blackened and burned-looking.

“They’re inside me,” I said with awe. “Are they just going to stay in there?”

Della poked my chest, studying the marks.

“I guess so.” She kissed my neck. It was a dry, quick kiss.

Sex has none of the same appeal when you’re dead. It just seems like a waste of time. I could never remember what was so great about sex when I was living. The memories I had were vague. One night at work I’d gotten so bored as to slit open the plastic wrapper on a Playboy magazine and what I found myself drooling over was not the bare breasts of the models inside, but the aliveness of them, the flesh that was obviously warm and filled with well-oxygenated blood, rather than Dave’s formaldehyde moonshine.

So what Della and I did, out of a long, undying habit on both our parts, was lie on the bed in our underwear, not sleeping, but resting, our arms around each other’s cold bodies. It was the closest thing to the comfort we used to know in another person’s body, when we were living.

Us dead folks in the trailer park never got much mail, other than the occasional Wal-Mart mailer or package of coupons addressed to “Current Resident.” The drug dealers sometimes got letters from their moms or catalogs filled with electronic equipment they’d be able to afford if only they stopped smoking up all the profits, but Della and I and the rest of us never saw our names printed on an address label. Still, I checked the mailbox every night.
The walk to the center of the park took me down a bumpy gravel driveway, lined with
dilapidated trailers in a variety of sizes and colors. I rarely saw anyone outside. And when I
did, we never spoke. We would wave or nod hello and I'd keep walking.

So, two nights after the hold up, when I heard someone calling my name from across
the driveway, I thought that I might be imagining things. I stopped and peered into the yard
that the voice seemed to be coming from. In the shadows, in the far corner, I could just make
out the shape of a man, leaning over like he was practicing his golf swing.

"Did you just say my name?" I asked. He took one mighty swing with what I'd
thought was a golf club and a shower of grass bits fell on the lush lawn. Then he shouldered
the club and came forward.

"I did," he said. In the light from the nearby trailers I saw that what he was holding
was not a golf club, but an old fashioned scythe. He was my height, thin and dark-haired and
dressed all in dark clothing. His face was familiar.

"You can call me Ed," he said. "I believe we met the other night. In the Kum and
Go?" He was pale, but I couldn't tell if he was living or not, even as he stepped closer to me.

"I didn't know you lived here," I said.

"I've lived here for a long time," he said.

I squinted and behind him, along the edges of the little yard, I could make out a tiny
pond, with a gurgling waterfall, and a border of plants and lawn ornaments.

"Isn't it a little dark to be out cutting the grass?" I decided not to say anything about
his instrument of choice for grass-cutting.

"This is my favorite time of day," he said, absentmindedly spinning the handle. The
blade rotated with it, only inches from his head.
"I like it too," I said. "I work at night."

"Seems like everyone here does." He looked at me pointedly. "On your way to check the mail? Want to walk with me?"

He carried the scythe with him. When we got to the mailboxes we both pulled out glossy coupon booklets addressed to RESIDENT, but he also had a thick manila envelope with a large official-looking seal where the return address would be. He noticed me looking at it.

"For work," he said. "What a waste of paper."

"What do you do?"

Ed cleared his throat.

"Government stuff. Lots of bureaucracy."

Back at his trailer he invited me to sit down on the steps. I did, looking around the yard. It was no larger than anyone else's, but every square inch of it was landscaped and planted and decorated with small statues, fountains and even a pond, which looked black and bottomless in the falling darkness. Vines with white flowers twined up the metal railings. A fountain ran nearby, a round stone basin with a gargoyle vomiting a continuous arc of water. Ed propped his scythe against the side of the trailer and disappeared inside. In a moment he was back, holding two slices of lemon-poppy seed bread, with white lemon icing, in two paper towels. He offered me one.

"I'm not really hungry," I protested.

"Neither am I," he said, taking a small bite of his bread. I did the same. It tasted better than anything I'd eaten since my death. The lemon icing was smooth. The bread was moist and sweet.
"I know what happened at the Kum and Go the other night," Ed told me.  

I nearly choked.  

"What?"

"Don’t worry, that guy won’t be telling anyone about what happened. And he won’t be shooting any convenience store employees anytime soon, either." Ed chuckled. “I’m surprised his number wasn’t up sooner. Some people never learn to look both ways before crossing the street.”

“How do you know what happened?”

“Doesn’t take a genius. That kid had a semi-automatic on him, a .22. So, when I saw those holes in your shirt, I figured it was no coincidence.”

“Who are you?” I asked.

“We’ve been neighbors for almost four months now, Stuart,” he said.

“Yeah, you said that.” I lowered my voice. “But I haven’t really seen you around, you know... I don’t understand...are you dead?”

Ed laughed.

“Not even close.” He stood up, waving the envelope he’d gotten in the mail. “I’ve got some business to take care of. You have a good night. Here.” He handed me a ziplock bag. Inside was another large chunk of the lemon poppy seed bread. “Just for you,” he said. “Not to share. You understand? In fact, don’t show it to anyone either. Put it somewhere safe.”

Della was on the couch, watching the evening news indifferently. I did not show her the bread. I stashed it in one of our otherwise empty kitchen cupboards.
“Want some coupons?” I asked her, holding up the envelope that had come in the mail.

“Why would I want those?”

“Just asking.” I dropped them into the trash and sat down beside her. On the television screen an upside-down Greyhound bus lay flaming at the bottom of a muddy gulch somewhere. The words “43 dead in Southern California” flashed at the top of the screen. Della sighed and looked at me.

“What took you so long at the mailbox?”

“I met this weird guy. The one with all the stuff in his yard, a few lots down from the mailboxes? I saw him the other night when I was at work and it turns out he lives here.”

“I don’t know who you’re talking about,” Della said. “Is he dead?”

“I don’t think so. He’s just weird. He told me he worked for the government.”

“I wonder what he’s doing here,” Della said, but she didn’t look curious. It was something I’d noticed about her and most of the other dead people. Nothing fazed them. And over the past four months, since my death, I could feel that indifference creeping up on me. It seemed that the longer you’d been dead, the worse it got. I thought of the bread Ed had given me, sitting there in the cupboard, and it seemed as though there was nothing unusual about it or the fact he’d told me to keep it secret. I thought of the bullets in my chest and the entry holes, two days old and already a permanent part of me. And there was Della, her feet up on the edge of our sagging brown couch, her black jeans loose around her stick-like thighs. I’d known her for less than four months and already I seemed to know everything about her, every inch of her cold, bony body.
Della and I both went to work at 11. I got off after she did and I always walked home. It was not a long walk. Sometimes I ran into people out jogging or walking their dogs. The dogs always strained their leashes to get as far as possible from me. Their owners didn’t seem to notice at all.

The morning after I’d run into Ed, I noticed a strange sensation while walking home. My stomach – the area just above my belt, but under the bullet holes – hurt. It was a familiar feeling, but not one I’d had recently. One of the nice things about being dead was that nothing ever hurt.

I walked up the gravel hill to the trailer park nervously clutching my stomach. It had started to make strange grumbling sounds, as though it was angry. What was wrong with me? “I’m dying,” I thought, instinctively. And then I laughed.

Della was already in bed, still in her work clothes. I could see her small, bony feet hanging off the edge of the bed in their graying socks.

“Stewey? Is that you?”

“It’s me,” I managed to call out, gripping the doorknob tightly to keep from falling on the floor. The pain in my stomach was only intensifying and my head felt light and floaty. “I’ll be there in a second,” I said. All I could think of was the bread. The bread had done this to me.

I opened the cupboard and there it was, sitting innocently in its ziplock bag. The white icing was smeared on the inside of the plastic. Looking at it caused another strange sensation - I felt a tiny ache in the corners of my jaw and my mouth was suddenly wet inside. I swallowed the wetness and it happened again. I wanted to eat the bread. It looked like the most delicious thing in the world. Peering around the corner to make sure Della was still
lying in bed, I opened the bag and shoved half the bread into my mouth, barely taking the time to chew. It tasted incredible. It was sweet and lemony and my stomach felt better even before I was done swallowing. The feeling of eating when I was actually hungry was so wonderful and unexpected it brought tears to my eyes.

"Stewey, what are you doing?"

"Nothing!" I said hastily, wiping my mouth on my sleeve. I thought about rinsing my mouth out, in case the smell of the lemon poppy seed bread gave me away, but then I realized Della wouldn’t be able to smell it anyway. Dead people just can’t smell things like that. It would take a whole warehouse of the stuff to tip her off.

"How was work?" Della asked me when I lay down beside her.

"Fine." I settled against her, one hand on the sharp point of her hip. Neither of us said anything else. What was so important that we had to say it? We were good at that, lying quietly together for the long hours of the morning and afternoon. For all we knew, we had an eternity together and there was only so much to talk about.

We never really slept. Sleep was for the living. We laid down and shut our eyes and often we lost track of time for a little while, but it was not really sleep. It goes without saying that none of us ever dreamed. I remembered what dreams were, but I could not remember the sorts of things I’d dreamed about when I alive. It was like that with everything – I remembered that for years I’d lived in an old house somewhere in Ames that was cold in the winter and hot in the summer, but I could not remember where this house was or what it really felt like to be hot or cold. I remembered that there’d been someone else there, a girl I had been with for a long time, but her name was always just out of reach. I longed for my old life, but in a vague, absentminded way.
That morning I lay and waited for the daylight hours to pass. I shut my eyes and I felt something new. Instead of feeling as though my thoughts were slowly drifting away and my mind was growing blank and slow, I sensed a weighty, haziness coming over me. I didn’t want to move or open my eyes, but my mind was not empty. Colors swirled behind my eyelids. I found myself transported to an unfamiliar place. I was standing behind a counter, looking out on a store that was much bigger than Kum and Go. Aisles of tall shelves stretched out in front of me. The floor tile was not clean and bright like the tile in Kum and Go – it was yellowed and worn from constant traffic. The overhead fluorescent lights flickered. The store was crowded with people and shopping carts. I was waiting on these people. They would point into the case below the counter and tell me what they wanted and I would remove the raw meat from the case and weigh it, then wrap it in paper for them. I knew exactly what to do. I waited on what seemed like hundreds of people. I could hear their requests clearly – half a pound of lean hamburger, enough chicken breast for six people, the sale T-bone on the left. There was a familiar rhythm to it – reach, grab, slam it on the scale, wrap, sticker, slam it on the counter, say “Thank you, have a nice day,” and then on to the next person in line. I believed I was really in this place, waiting on these people, but reality began to seep in eventually. I realized I was lying on the bed, in the bedroom with bare white walls, and that the air was stale and dry. Della was next to me still, lying quietly on her back, eyes closed. I looked at the alarm clock on the otherwise empty bedside table. It was nearly four in the afternoon. I jumped up.

“What are you doing?” Della asked me, not bothering to open her eyes.

“I’ve gotta go do something,” I said. “I’ll be right back.”
“It’s that guy Ed,” I thought as I hurried out of the trailer. “He’s got something to do with this. I know it. Everything’s been different since I ran into him the other night.” When I got to his trailer I knocked, taking a minute to look around the yard. The gargoyle in the fountain was spewing clear water into a mossy, dark basin. The fish in the tiny pond were circling just under the water, as if impatient to be fed. The flowers twining up the railing beside me were tightly closed.

“Yes?” Ed asked, opening the door slowly and smiling.

“Uh, hi,” I said, suddenly at a loss for words. He was wearing what looked like a black silk smoking jacket over a pair of black pajamas.

“I’m working,” he said, by way of explanation. “It’s been a slow morning.”

“Oh.”

“I have something for you. I made it this morning.” He handed me an entire loaf of the lemon poppy seed bread. It was wrapped in clear plastic and still slightly warm.

I opened my mouth to ask him the first of about thirty questions, but he very deliberately began to shut the door.

“I’ve got to get back to work. Have a good day, Stuart.”

“Ed! Tell me what’s going on!” I pounded on the door. He did not answer. “Please! You have to tell me what’s going on! I know something’s up! Can’t you just talk to me for five minutes?” He ignored me.

I nibbled on the bread all through my shift that night. I’d finished about half of it and I was still feeling the painful, empty feeling in the pit of my stomach, so I moved on to other food. I ate a bag of pretzels, then a pack of mini frosted donuts and some beef jerky.
Looking at the beef jerky reminded me of my dream. I had a nagging feeling that it was a clue to my past life. I must have worked with meat somewhere. I knew there were four or five grocery stores in Ames, but I couldn’t remember which one I must have worked at.

"Is there a counter where they cut meat at Hy-Vee?" I asked Della once we’d both gotten home.

She shook her head. "They put it in packages for the cold case. Why?"

"Just curious." I rolled over onto my side, facing away from her.

"Are you all right, Stewey? You look different somehow."

"I feel fine," I said.

"You didn’t get shot again, did you?” Her cold hand found the spot in my chest where the holes were.

"No. Work was pretty boring last night."

"Stuart!" She jerked her hand away.

"What?"

"I thought I felt something move...in there." She cautiously slid her hand back, flat over where my heart would be. "Maybe not. Maybe I’m just imagining things."

We lay together in silence as the morning crept on. I thought I could feel something too, now that she’d mentioned it. It felt like my heart was beating, very slowly. I watched the clock. About once a minute there was a sluggish thump in my chest, followed by a strange rushing sound, as if blood was actually moving through my veins. It was so faint that I wondered if it was just some sort of hallucination.
The dream came on almost immediately. I was standing on a street lined with two-
story houses and several large brick apartment buildings, looking at an old white house with
a black Trans Am parked in the driveway. The lawn was almost completely covered in
snow, but some dead-looking clumps of grass still poked through. I shivered as I made my
way up the driveway.

Inside the house it was warm and messy. A pile of shoes and muddy boots sat beside
the door. I added my wet sneakers to the pile before walking into the kitchen. There was a
girl there, sitting at the table with the newspaper spread out before her. Her hair was held up
in a messy knot with two small pointy sticks. She was round-faced and pale, with dark eye
make-up and red lips. I knew she was waiting for me.

“I knew you’d be back soon,” she said. “Stewey, I’m sorry.”

“I almost forgot about you,” I said. “I can’t believe I almost forgot about you.”

I took off my coat and stood behind her, then wrapped my arms around her body.
She was the exact opposite of Delia - soft and warm. Just leaning against her like that, I had
a whole flood of memories - lying together like I lay with Delia, only different. This girl’s
breasts were too big to enclose with my hands. Her stomach was soft and forgiving and her
hands were warm on my skin.

When I woke up, I felt a strange sensation in my chest, as though some small creature
was knocking against my ribs and trying to get out.

“Jenny!” I heard myself say out loud, then gasped for breath. My chest throbbed.

“What?” Della asked. “Stewey?”

I didn’t turn around to look at her and I didn’t say anything, because there was a
fierce pressure building inside me. I was no longer in the dream, but the reality of it kept
expanding—everything that I had been made to leave behind when I died. Jenny and Mike and my job at Fareway and the house on Walnut Street. My mother and Seymour that cat and everything I’d ever owned. It had all been taken from me and yet, here I was, only miles away, working at Kum and Go and living in the zombie trailer park, acting like it was all quite normal. Today was pay day and I’d be getting two weeks worth of pay, a hundred dollars for eighty hours work. Even at Fareway I’d made eight dollars an hour. I would be here forever, working at a convenience store, with no hope of anything happening, ever. If I was lucky, I’d get shot at again.

“Why are we here?” I asked Della. “Why do we stay here?”

“Stewey, we don’t have anywhere else to go.”

“There’s a whole world out there!”

“A living world,” she said. “We can’t be a part of that world.”

“Why the hell not?”

“What made you come here?” she asked me gently. “You’re just like the rest of us. Once you were dead, no one would talk to you. You wouldn’t have been able to get a job without Phil’s help. Where else would you go?”

“What’s the point of working if I’m making a freaking dollar an hour?”

“I don’t understand,” Della said. “This is just how death is.”

“No,” I said. “Death is when you die and you don’t come back. You get buried and people cry and gather at your grave and you don’t come back. They don’t have to tell you to get lost. They don’t freak out and tell you that you’re scaring them and that they can’t talk to you. You leave this world once and you are done. This is not death.”

I saw Della’s face close and grow expressionless.
I stomped all the way down the gravel driveway to Ed’s trailer. I pounded on the door and instead of just opening it a crack this time, he let me in.

“Sit down,” he said. “Let me get you something to eat.”

I looked around the main room of the trailer. There was a large wooden desk against one wall. A map of Story county was pinned to the wall above it. Papers were piled all over the desk and on the floor beside it. A fat black cat was curled up on one of the shorter stacks, watching me with suspicious blue eyes. I sat slowly in the armchair closest to the door. There were two other chairs, closer to the large television set. The scythe I’d seen Ed with the first day was propped up against one of them.

“Here,” he said, handing me a glass of milk and a large chunk of lemon poppy seed bread on a flowered china plate. He sat down the arm of the nearest chair, absentmindedly twirling the scythe in his hand.

“The bread of life,” he said, pointing to the plate. “Produces the symptoms of life. But you have to eat it every day.” He sighed. “It can also sustain life in an already living person who, by all means, should be dead. I’ve been eating the stuff for the past 93 years. You can bet I’m tired of it.”

“I don’t understand,” I said, nibbling on the bread.

“I have to eat it, on account of my job. Things would be a mess if I didn’t show up to work. But I guess things are a mess anyway.” He looked at his scythe for a moment, thoughtful.

“What’s going on?” I asked him. “What are you doing to me?”

“I’m giving you your life back, Stuart.”
"Why?"

"Because I need your help." Ed put the scythe aside and leaned forward. "In case you haven’t noticed, Stewey, this is not the natural order of things. I’ve got an entire county to take care of and when people I take out come back, it doesn’t reflect well on me. My associates are starting to get impatient.” He cleared his throat dramatically.

"Who are you?" I asked him.

"You know who I am.”

"Some kind of mafia guy with supernatural powers?"

"It’s a little bit like the mafia,” Ed said. “But a lot bigger. Come on. Don’t you get it?

I looked from Ed to the scythe, then back at his pale face.

"The Grim Reaper? In Iowa? What are you doing in Iowa?"

Ed sighed. "Well, I’m one of many reapers. It’s not like one guy could handle the entire world. There’s people dying all the time. No one can be in hundreds of places at once. They have to break it down so it’s manageable. I work in District 16UIQ, which happens to be the entirety of Story County."

I just stared.

"It’s a lot of work," he said defensively. "Lots of paperwork, lots of driving around, weird hours. The guy down in Polk county gets an assistant, but did they ever offer me one? No.” He shook his head in exasperation. "Anyway, that’s where you come in. I’ve got a lot of shit to deal with right now. I really need to get to the bottom of this, find out who or what keeps raising the dead behind my back. And, as you can imagine, I’m not the best people person. I’m usually invisible to the living, unless they’re within a minute or two of dying. I
can make people see me, but they tend to freak out and clam up when they see me. So, I need you to do a little investigation, talk to some folks for me. In exchange, I’ll give you enough bread to last until...well, until you’re rescheduled to die.”

“When’s that?” I asked him.

“I’m not sure. That’s classified information. I only get my assignments on a daily basis, honestly.” Ed leaned back in his chair and crossed his ankle over his knee. “So,” he said. “Do we have a deal?”

“Well,” I thought. “It probably beats working at Kum and Go.”

“Sure,” I said out loud.

“Great. Give me a little while to work out the details and get some work done. I’ve got a big car accident tonight. Why don’t we talk the day after tomorrow?”

The thing about gas stations is that people quit all the time. It’s the kind of job most living people think nothing of simply walking out on. Before I died, I’d never considered quitting a job without giving at least a few days notice, but now I had nothing to lose. I thought about calling my manager, but I didn’t have a phone. I wasn’t even sure what the manager looked like. Sometimes he left notes on a clipboard by the register, but his handwriting was terrible and it was hard to make out his name or even what he was trying to communicate. And what would I tell the guy anyway? “Kum and Go just isn’t doing it for me anymore. I’m working for Death now!”

It turned out they didn’t need me anyway. They had a new guy who would be ready to start immediately, one who’d killed himself by leaving his car running in the garage. He’d been in his forties when he died and when I saw him walking down the driveway with Barb
that afternoon, I noticed the same dazed, blank expression I’d had on my own face for the
past few months. I had to feel especially bad for him, on account of him going through all
that trouble to leave this world forever and now being stuck like this. Looking back at the
handful of times in my own life when I’d considered suicide, I knew that any amount of pain
and sadness was better than an eternity of undead existence as a convenience store clerk.

All the next day I was afraid to let Della touch me, for fear she’d notice that I was
breathing or that my heart was beating or that my body was getting warmer. It wasn’t just
that. I looked alive, too. Not good, but alive. When I looked in the mirror the characteristic
pale-faced, gray-lipped, dull-eyed zombie was gone. But I looked older, too. My hairline
had receded about two inches since I’d died. My forehead seemed permanently wrinkled.
The gunshot wounds in my chest were healing into ugly scars. I imagined what Jenny would
say if she saw me. I thought about it a lot. The more I thought about Jenny, the more I
couldn’t stand to be around Della.

We sat on the couch in the trailer all afternoon and stared at the TV.

“I met that new guy the other day,” Della said. “The suicide? He said he’s working
at Kum and Go now. Have you worked with him?”

I hadn’t told her that I’d decided to quit yet.

“No,” I said. “He seems okay though. I bet you’d get along pretty well with him.
You’d make a good couple.”

“What do you mean? He’s forty years old.”
“He’s not too old for you,” I insisted. “In a few years, it won’t even matter. In fact, by the time you’re a hundred and he’s a hundred and twenty, the whole age difference thing will seem ridiculous to you.”

“I live with you,” Della said, sounding confused. It occurred to me that “breaking up” was not in the relationship vocabulary of the undead. Being happy with someone was irrelevant when you were numb to any kind of real feeling.

“Well, things change. I’m just saying.”

Della was as close to angry as I ever saw her. She gulped and looked at me accusingly, then relocated herself to the far end of the couch and went back to watching Trading Spaces. I couldn’t feel too bad for hurting her, because I knew she didn’t love me. She pretended to love me, because loving people is what the living do and pretending to be living is what the undead do. The living are afraid of being alone and so, out of habit, the undead avoid being alone. I’d moved in with Della three days after I met her. There was no need to get to know her. She was just the same as any other dead girl.

In the evening we went over to Barb and Dave’s for some formaldehyde moonshine. Della and I sat side by side in two of their rickety lawn chairs. The new guy sat on the bottom step, his eyes glazed over.

“Stewey,” Barb said. “I heard you missed work. Phil came to find me so I could cover for you.”

“Oh,” I said. “I forgot, I guess.”


“Hi.” I waved at him. He nodded miserably.
The first time the moonshine came around, I took a big swig and nearly spit it back out all over myself. I had never realized just how bad the stuff tasted. I spent the rest of the evening nervously fake-drinking from the bottle. No one noticed, but back in the trailer I was as sick as I can ever remember being when I was alive.

“What’s the matter?” Della kept asking me. “What happened to you?” She was standing in the bathroom doorway. You would think she’d never, even when she was alive, seen someone puking.

“You’ve been acting funny,” she said. I spit into the toilet and wiped my mouth on the back of my hand.

“What?” I asked her weakly, as I sat up and felt my stomach lurch again. “Do you think I’ve made a deal with the devil or something?”

“I don’t know, Stewey.”

I moved in with Ed the next day. It was a temporary arrangement.

“We’ll get you a car first,” he said. “Then a place to live.”

Ed was busy. When he wasn’t out harvesting souls, he had a lot of paperwork to fill out. He told me not worry about my job just yet, because I needed some time to recover. This was probably true. I was tired all the time and when I slept I had long, vivid dreams. I thought about Jenny and my old friends a lot.

In the meantime, his trailer was comfortable. I slept in the small back room and sometimes Ed’s big black cat, Fluffy, slept by my feet. We ate the bread of life three times a day and other things as well. One night, while he was out harvesting souls at the hospital, I made a pot roast.
Note: These are the first two installments of a three-part collection. In the third part, Stewey helps Ed with some detective work, including digging up a grave and visiting the funeral home. They find out that some of the employees there are being bribed to bring non-disfigured bodies back to life as a larger plot to create a stable working class. They discover that the masterminds behind the plot are a group of powerful and wealthy residents of Ames, most of whom work in property management. Meanwhile, Stewey is reunited with Jenny and attempts to win her back.
If you never make it out of this town, it’s my dad who gets you in the end. He got Mike and he could get me too.

He woke me up at three in the morning to go get the body. Dan, his apprentice, was on vacation, visiting his wife’s family in Omaha. So, it was suddenly my job, as the only son left at home. He didn’t tell me who it was until we were almost in Ida Grove.

“Hey, Jacob, didn’t this guy go to school with one of you kids? You or Chris? Name’s Michael Barker.”

There was nothing I could do. I pretended to look out the window. Round bales made shadows against the fields out there and the county highway was very dark. Maybe our headlights were the only lights at all. I felt a strange numbness, like the trances I used to go into as I was nodding over my textbooks, reading every line but understanding nothing.

Mike had killed himself. The medical examiner had been notified and he didn’t care. He didn’t want a postmortem. Anyone could see what had happened. Mike had slit - or rather, hacked – his wrists open with a hunting knife and bled to death in the downstairs bathroom of his mother’s house, while she lay sleeping with the TV on in the room above.

I should have said I wouldn’t do it. When we got back from the hospital morgue I should have helped wheel the cot into the basement and nothing else. I should have gone upstairs and back to bed. But I’ve gotten bad at saying no to my dad. The way he sees it, if
I'm not in school, if I'm living at home without a real job for months at a time, I should be working for him.

The whole town had known I was back in Iowa in less than a week. My dad went around telling people I just hadn't liked Boston, that I'd be going back to school soon, somewhere closer to home, but everyone knew the truth: I'd had my chance to get out and I'd failed. I was back for good. Everyone knew there were no jobs for me here, but the fact that I was helping my stepmother with her catering business was becoming a joke around town. Our next-door neighbor, Greg Wright, elbowed me in the post office line one morning and asked me if I planned to make a career out of constructing finger sandwiches for luncheons or what. Behind the counter, the mail lady guffawed and muttered something to herself as she weighed a package. My dad tried telling people I was working for him and just helping Lillian out once and awhile. This was not true. I'd rather have spent twelve hours a day in the kitchen with her than two hours in the basement with my dad and the newest dead members of our community. Still, I knew Mike's mortal remains were not the ones to raise a fuss over. It was too hard to make up a story about why I didn't want to see this particular body. There was only the truth and I knew the truth wouldn't help as long as I lived in this town.

The people at the hospital had done a shitty job of cleaning him up. Even Mike's face was a mess. His eyes were half-open under blood-speckled lids and there was blood splattered over his chin, over his lips, into his half-open mouth.
We cut the clothes off of him. His body was familiar and, yet, not familiar. His bare chest looked rusty, the wide patch of curly chest hair already flaking bits of blood. His nipples stood out absurdly. He had no jewelry to inventory.

Dad walked around the prep table, casually taking instruments from the cabinet. He handed me the disinfectant spray and a plastic-wrapped sponge.

“So, Jacob, what’s been going on? We haven’t talked much lately. Is everything all right?”

I touched one of Mike’s hands. It was like one of those hard rubber replicas of a hand, the kind people leave sticking out of car trunks around Halloween. The fingers were splayed wide as though they’d been molded that way. I sprayed the sponge and used it to wipe a thick streak of dried blood from the palm.

“Everything’s fine,” I said through gritted teeth, praying silently for my dad to stop looking at me, to stop trying to talk to me. I didn’t know why he even bothered. He wouldn’t have understood anyway.

Dad was looking over my shoulder.

“I can’t believe they left the body in this condition,” he said, sighing. “Even if they have been short-staffed, you’d think they would have been a little more conscientious. Makes more work for us.”

I concentrated on the hand, scrubbing harder with the sponge.

“It’s nice having you around to help out, Jake. I could never get your brother to come down here.” I think he was trying to make me feel better. Ever since I came home he’d been pointedly comparing me to Chris, telling me that of course he was proud that Chris was
teaching and working on his Ph.D., but that he knew I'll find my thing too, eventually. The
thing was, everyone knew options were limited in this town.

"You'd be a good funeral director," my dad continued, walking around to the other
side of the table and casually tugging at one of Mike's eyelids. "You're not bad at this.
You're becoming very professional. And it's not a bad deal. When you get married and start
to think about having a family, you'll realize how nice it is to have your own business and
your own place to live."

I looked down at the body between us. The hands were clean now, but there was the
whole rest of it. I moved my attention to the upper arms, leaving the wounds on the wrists
for my dad. I willed myself not to look at the face again.

Mike and I were not alike. We were people brought together by circumstance, not
affinity.

Sometimes after he got off work at Jubilee I would meet him for a few beers. There
was the only bar in town and no one knew its name. From outside all you could see was a
flickering neon Budweiser sign. No sign, no hours posted, nothing but two long dirty
windows you couldn't see in through or out of. Mike and I were just two guys, passing the
time in our hometown, the Popcorn Capital of the World. The grocery store's assistant
manager and me, the guy who went east for awhile but came back after he flunked out of
school. I was not yet twenty-one, but the bartender didn't care. No one thought it was odd
for us to drink together. We were the only guys under thirty in the bar, which was quiet and
dark inside, with scratched-up fake wood paneling and a broken jukebox in the corner. We
hardly even looked at each other. I never touched him in the bar.
When we left we wouldn’t leave together. I would give Mike a head start, have another beer or buy a pack of gum at Casey’s before I set out. It was only about a mile to his mom’s house, past the grain elevator and the old bank.

That elevator made me feel so insignificant, making my way along the dusty street. Smaller than I ever felt in Boston. In the dark it was impossible to see where it stopped and the night sky began.

Mike’s mom’s house was on the edge of town. Out past the popcorn cribs and the car dealership there were miles of corn, soybean fields, stock yards. The casement window over Mike’s bed gave a mole’s eye view of the fields and the highway.

Mike would check to see if his mom was awake. She never bothered us in the basement, but he was always afraid she might. He would lock the door, dropping the hook in the eye so slowly you’d think he was afraid she’d hear it from all the way up on the second floor.

Mike had never been with another guy. The first night I went home with him we got so we were sitting on the bed and right there, naked, pushing his hair back to reveal a crooked receding hairline, he said, “I don’t know what to do.”

“It’s pretty simple,” I said. When I tried to kiss him he took my shoulders and flipped me down on the bed, face first. It was an old high school wrestling move, maybe. His fingers were cold and they dug into the skin around my hip bones.

He didn’t have a great body. He was thickening around the middle and his feet splayed to the sides. He was not short, but next to my six feet four inches he complained that he felt small. He was a warm body to me and I was a warm body to him. I counted him as.
my only friend in town, aside from my stepmother. I don’t know if he counted me as anything.

I would leave right afterward, most nights. Mike was not a guy who cared for sleeping together in the same bed. I would walk home and play Grand Theft Auto until the sun rose.

Sometimes Mike and I actually had good conversations. I had always secretly thought he was kind of dumb. When we got together, we drank, and he had a tendency to start speaking in vague monosyllables soon after his third beer. One night we skipped the bar and went for a drive in his mother’s Buick. We drove and we talked about living at home, not leaving this town. I told him how it felt like I was all dead inside, like every day was the same, like nothing was good and he said he knew what I meant.

“I get up in the morning,” he said. “And I get dressed for work, because that’s what I always do. Then I figure I might as well go to work, since I’m dressed. Some days though, I wonder why I even bother. Anyone could do my job. They don’t need me for anything. The same people are going to come in every day, the same items are gonna need to be ordered and stocked every week. I tell myself I’ll get out of here some day. One of these days, I’m just gonna disappear.”

“I tried to leave,” I told him. “It just didn’t work out so well.”

We didn’t talk about it again. I never talked about Boston with him. That was as close as I ever came.
I left the prep room while Dad was hunting through the drawers for his instruments. He needed to put sutures in the jagged knife wounds.

"Everything will just leak back out if we don’t take care of these now," he said. "But it doesn’t need to be pretty. He’ll have a nice suit coat. No one will see a thing."

I was quiet, climbing the stairs three at a time. I took a shortcut through the display room and out the back door. I took the old hearse and I drove the same route Mike and I had driven that night in his mom’s Buick, the night he told me he was going to disappear someday, up and around Storm Lake. The road was deserted. I felt like crying, but I did not cry. I didn’t even think that I could.

In the beginning, Mike was the one who found me, strangely enough. He knew just who I was, though I only had vague memories of him as the high school bully who’d once beaten up my big brother Chris, who really wasn’t very big at all, in the school parking lot. He was working at Jubilee the day Lillian sent me in the buy sixty pounds of flour. He offered to help me load the bags of flour from the cart into the car.

"I thought you might have brought the hearse," he said, looking at Lillian’s red Oldsmobile in disappointment.

"My stepmother doesn’t like to drive the hearse," I said. "She says she’s allergic to the upholstery. She says it’s moldy."

Mike adjusted his store issue bow-tie and slid the first ten pound bag of flour into the trunk. Then he looked nervously around the empty parking lot and stepped a little closer to me.
“Jake,” he said in a low even voice. “Meet me for a beer later, all right? I need to, uh, talk to you about something.” I think he tried to wink. It was such a clumsy gesture that I wanted to laugh, but I didn’t. I felt a little sorry for him.

“How about seven?” I said.

“Seven-thirty,” he said. “I get off work then. But don’t meet me here. Meet me at the bar.”

He never told me how he knew. I couldn’t figure it out. I knew that people here liked to talk, but they didn’t have proof of anything. I’d never been with anyone in town. I never thought that I would risk it, but after the first two lonely months back home, I was desperate too.

He said something else to me the night we went driving around in his mom’s car instead of drinking. He said, “I’d rather be dead then have anyone find out about this.” Then he said, “You have to promise me you will never say one fucking word.”

“I promise.”

Mike always had this idea that he and I were not alike, that we did it for different reasons, that I was obvious and he was not. That I was a fag and he was just in it for the convenience.

Being dead and being found out are not mutually exclusive situations. Mike was dead and Mike was not found out. I didn’t even know who I would tell if I wanted to.

When I got home my dad was sitting in the living room with my stepmother beside him. The TV was on.
“I was going to call the cops,” he said. “Tell them you stole the car.”

“What’s the matter, Jacob?” Lillian had one hand on my dad’s knee.

“Nothing.” I went straight up the stairs to my room. I locked the door and lay facedown on my bed, but I stayed quiet, listening for their voices. It sounded like they were arguing. I heard my dad say, “He’s always been like this. Chris was never like this. I don’t understand.”

I was with this guy Ben at Boston University. We never went out. We just lay on his bed in his single dorm room and smoked cigarettes and fucked and drank, mostly. One night, we were in his bed and he was sleeping and I couldn’t sleep. I could hardly breathe. I had been feeling like that on and off for weeks, but right then it got so bad I thought that I was just going to die. My heart was beating too fast and my mouth was dry. My chest ached and my hands shook uncontrollably. I thought, “My whole life is going to be this way—pointless and empty and miserable. It’s never going to change.” I got up and I went to the window. Ben’s room was on the sixteenth floor. I could see half of Boston from the window. It was bright with so many lights that I felt lost. The street below was empty and inviting.

The window would only open six inches. They were all like that. I went in the lounge and I went in the bathroom and those windows didn’t even open at all. I took the elevator up to the top floor. My eyes would not focus and I could hardly even see to push the buttons. Of course, the entrance to the roof level was locked.
At first I thought Mike got the better part of the bargain. He had beaten me to the punch. It could have been me, but it wasn’t me. I felt like this made me even more of a failure. I couldn’t even find a stupid window to jump out of.

That first morning, with his body in the basement and me in my bedroom, I remembered how I’d felt back in Boston, like something inside of me had collapsed and all the other parts might just go down like dominoes at any minute. Even though it made me shiver all over I played a little movie in my head of every way that I could possibly find to die in the house, and in the town, including suffocation in a corn crib or laying myself down on the train tracks. I thought about the chemicals in the prep room, what they would do to someone who wasn’t already dead. I thought about taking the hearse and crashing it into the grain elevator. It was a good half-mile straightaway from here to there. The hearse could go pretty fast.

I thought about going downstairs to look for Lillian. What would I say to her? “I don’t want to be alone. I’m afraid. I need to explain something.” Something about Mike. Something about me.

“You knew him, didn’t you?” Lillian was speaking to me through the door. “Was he a friend of yours?”

I was still lying on the bed, waiting for the afternoon and the evening to pass. My dad had yelled up the stairs at noon, telling me to get up. Lillian had been at my door twice already. I could hear her leaning up against it.

“Jake, open the door.”
I wanted to. I thought of her out there and my hands began to tremble. I clamped them between my knees. I heard Lillian sigh and walk away.

After trying all the windows in that dorm in Boston, I'd gone down and got back in bed with Ben. I was still shaking and sweating. The bed was so small that I was pressed up against his back, but he didn't wake up. I was afraid to leave and go back to my room, so I lay awake all night and in the morning, when he went to class, I went and played video games till dinnertime. I met him for dinner in the dining hall. I watched him eat and I wanted to say something about what was happening to me, but I couldn't even begin. I took my plate to the dish room untouched and I sat up all night with more video games and cigarettes.

In five weeks they kicked me out. No one asked me why I had stopped going to class. No one asked what had happened, not even my dad. I got on a plane with my two suitcases and I flew back to Iowa. By the time the plane had landed I couldn't remember what Boston had looked like at all.

"Well," my dad said. "You're back."

In Boston, no one knew where Iowa was. They confused it with Idaho and Indiana. People laughed when I told them about the town I'd grown up in, how it was known for nothing but producing more popcorn in the past century than any other town in the world. Ben, who had lived just outside Boston his whole life, had confided in me that when he heard this he pictured an endless field with a train stopped in the middle so every person in town could pour buckets of popcorn into the open-top cars. I couldn't help but think of that as I followed my dad out of the airport.
On the highway, with Des Moines behind us and empty country up ahead, I knew for sure nothing had changed. It was mid-April, but the fields were still bare, gray and speckled with dirty snow. My stomach hurt like I’d been punched. My knees trembled, pressed up against the underside of the dashboard. I watched out the window for the sign on the way into town, the one that proclaimed “Popcorn Capital of the World!” in block letters. “I’ll never make it out of here alive,” I said to myself. Somehow, that was a comforting thought.

I laid on my bed for a long time, well past when it got dark. Then I got up and went downstairs. I sat at the kitchen table, twisting the hem of my T-shirt around my fist. Lillian looked at me over an enormous pile of popcorn.

“You’re still with us,” she said. “I thought you’d never come out of there.”

“What are you doing?” I asked her. “Is this for a catering job?” It looked as though she’d popped twenty bowls worth of corn and dumped it all out across the table.

“It’s for the church,” she said. “They wanted popcorn balls for the fair next weekend. I was hoping you’d help me.”

I picked up one of the popped kernels and put it in my mouth. It was flavorless and chewy. I had trouble swallowing.

“Jake,” Lillian said, still watching me. “What’s the matter?”

“Where’s my dad?”

“He’s downstairs. He was waiting for you this morning.”

“Why does he expect me to work on the bodies?” I asked her. “I don’t like it. I’m sick of it. I don’t want to spend my life pumping dead people full of chemicals.”

“Then you should tell him that.”
“What if it was me down there?” I asked her. “Not Mike?”

“Don’t say that, Jake.”

“Would Dad work on my body?”

We both knew the answer to that. He worked on my mom’s body, sixteen years ago. He brought her home from the hospital, embalmed her himself, open casket and everything. He brings it up sometimes, casually, like it was just another day in the life.

“I would have left a note,” I said. “Mike didn’t leave a note. He could have at least left me a note.” I had to stop. I covered my eyes with my hands and leaned over the table. My palms were warm and damp. “He could have said something to me.”

I wanted Lillian to get up and put her arms around me, even though I knew it wouldn’t make me feel any better, really. When I looked up she was still sitting there, hands in her lap, and I was afraid of what she might say.

“Jake, you should have said something to your father. He never would have made you work on that body if he knew.” Lillian sounded calm and matter-of-fact.

“If he knew Mike and I were friends?” I asked cautiously.

“If friends is what you want to call it.” She raised her eyebrows. “Jake, don’t look so horrified. It’s all right.”

“Who told you?” I asked her. “What did they say to you?”

“No one told me anything,” Lillian said. “I’ve known you for six years, haven’t I?”

I swallowed hard.

“You haven’t talked about this with my dad, have you?”
"Your father doesn't really like to talk about that kind of thing," she said. She looked down, as if she could see through the kitchen floor, through the chapel and its polished wood floor, into the basement where Dad was working on Mike.

"Did you really love him?" she asked me.

"No." My face got red. "It wasn't anything serious."

"Well, I'm sorry it happened this way," Lillian said.

I didn't want to go downstairs, but I knew I had to.

I found my dad sitting on a stool, regarding Mike's body from a distance of three feet. He'd done the make-up himself. It made Mike look pale and more feminine, somehow. There was no trace of stubble on his face. His lips were pink. His hair was messy, but he was neatly dressed in clean pants and a white shirt.

"The jacket's over there," Dad said. I picked it up from the counter. It was a navy blue one Mike had worn to work sometimes. I took the scissors from the drawer and made an incision at the back of the collar, cutting as straight as I could down the back of the jacket. I took the left side first, fitting the sleeve over Mike's arm and tucking the back underneath him. When I was done it looked just as if he were wearing a whole jacket.

"Looks good," my dad said. He cleared his throat. "I talked with his mother today."

"Yeah?" I knew what brand of cigarettes Mike's mother smoked and what time she went to sleep at night, but I had never met her.

"She said she had no idea why he would take his own life." My dad is good at using phrases like "take his own life," "passed away" or "no longer with us." It must be all the years of practice that make it sound so natural, coming from him.
“There were probably a lot of things Mike never told her,” I said. “There’s plenty of things I’ve never told you.”

He sighed.

“Do you think I don’t know, Jacob? There are just some things people don’t talk about. That’s just how it is.” He reminded me of Mike, at that moment. Mike, in his basement bedroom, with the lights out, telling me that he didn’t want to talk, that he had nothing to say about what went on between us. That it meant nothing, really.

I was still standing over Mike’s body. I looked at his hands. They’d been carefully placed one on top of the other. The pose was casual, but his skin was like hard wax. I wondered if Mike had considered that I might be the one who got his body, the one washing his pale, imperfect skin, and dressing him up in his old clothes. I guessed those weren’t the things on someone’s mind when they were preparing to slit their wrists with a hunting knife.

Mike didn’t have to live here anymore. Mike didn’t have to keep secrets or lock the basement door. He would never have to walk home from the bar under the shadow of the grain elevator again. But he was here before us and we’d seen everything. He wasn’t taking my secrets to the grave with him and he wasn’t taking all of his own either.
All Ames knew on this particular morning was that Ashley was in labor with their second child, maybe in some stuffy room at the hospital, and he was out with Kate, in the truck. They had been parked for nearly half an hour. Ames’ cell phone was lying face down on the floor of the cab, by Kate’s feet. He’d set it on vibrate and whenever his wife called it jerked itself around in a little circle on the mat.

It was February. There was a pale pink stripe separating the sky from the dead brown fields. It had been warm for two weeks, but it was getting colder. The dirt roads were muddy, not yet frozen all the way down. The road they were parked on looked like any other road to Ames. He was always afraid of getting lost out among the fields. Kate laughed at him for that – how could you get lost in a grid? she asked. But the grid was not perfect and the roads were not marked and for all of his twenty-two years living in this part of Iowa, sometimes Ames suspected that the roads moved around each other, switching places. Farms would crop up twenty miles from where he knew they belonged. Beans would sprout from fields he had always known to be planted with corn. Kate said he had a bad sense of direction.

Kate had Ames’s earlobe in her teeth, gently pulling at it. She was trying to get his attention, but he was staring at the floor of the truck, seeing the neglected phone and Kate’s muddy camouflage snow boots and the dirty rubber floor mat. Kate jerked harder on his ear and Ames squeaked in pain.

“What are you doing?” he asked. “You’ll leave a mark!”

“What’s the matter with you?”
He could not say he was thinking of Ashley.

"You're a terrible husband," she said. "You're a terrible father. There. All right?"

She laughed.

"Look, I only drove out this morning because of the stupid wallet. I'll come see you on Friday. We can mess around then. I've got to go."

"It's not even noon," Kate said. "It's early. Besides, you barely have enough gas to get you back to town. You're almost on empty."

"Fuck."

"I'll give you a couple gallons at my place," she said. "If you're nice to me."

Ames had called in to work that morning at five AM. There was, of course, no one in the feed store yet, but he left a message. He wondered if they could hear the noise in the background – Ashley crying, the first baby crying. Ames was irritated – he'd been out with Kate until almost midnight the night before and he'd barely had any sleep – but he knew he had no right to complain. Ashley was down on the floor in the bedroom, her head half under the bed like she was hunting for dust bunnies, her knees drawn up as close to her belly as they would get. Ames got up and walked the house front to back, over and over, holding the first baby against his shoulder. The kid was almost two. He could not remember its birthday. Sometime soon. A cold time, before spring.

Ames didn't realize that his wallet was missing until they were at the hospital. When they asked for his health insurance card he handed the first baby over to Ashley's mother and began to dig through his pockets. It was not there.
“I’ll go check the truck,” he said. It was not in there. It had been in his pocket the night before, when he got into Kate’s truck and they drove out into the dark fields.

“I left it back at the house,” he lied to his mother-in-law. “I’ll have to go get it.” She rolled her eyes.

As he drove up to the rundown farm house Kate shared with her brother everything seemed a lot less crowded around his head. Kate was in the barn, cleaning stalls. When he poked his head through the door she smiled and pulled the brown leather wallet from her back pocket.

“It was on the seat of my truck,” she said. “Must’ve fallen out of your pants.”

For a second Ames wondered if she was lying, if she’d taken it on purpose. Then, smirking, she propped her pitchfork against the wall and asked if he wanted to go for a drive.

Kate and Ames had been fucking each other in the cab of Ames’s truck for longer than he had been married to Ashley, since senior year of high school. Ashley and Kate were first cousins and had known each other their whole lives. They looked a little alike, with brown hair and freckled faces. Kate was shorter, thinner and meaner. Sometimes Ames thought that some combination of the two would be the best thing, a girl he wanted as much as he wanted Kate, but who also really loved him back like Ashley did, not this half-love, half-hate that was all he could get from Kate.

Kate hadn’t always treated him like she did now. In high school, when they used to date for real, not just sneak around, things were different. Ames had thought Kate was just plain amazing then. He remembered sitting on the fence with her in the summer, watching the wind blow through the field out behind her father’s house. Her thin muscled arm, brown
from too much sun, brushed against his and Ames shivered. They trained Kate’s palomino
together, the summer between freshman and sophomore year. Ames was not afraid to get on
a green horse and ride it in circles, but Kate could walk into the ring, fix her eye on that horse
and make it do whatever she wanted.

It took two years for Ames to realize how much like that horse he was. Even after
she’d left him for some college guy who was working as a vet’s assistant, he’d do whatever
Kate asked. Even when he started to take Ashley out. Even when the vet’s assistant moved
away and Kate came knocking on Ames’s door, telling him she’d been wrong, she wanted
him back. She told him they could have what they’d always talked about having – the
horses, the farm, no kids, just dogs. Ames remembered thinking this over for three days. On
the third day he took Ashley out in his truck, out on one of the very roads he would later
drive with Kate. In the dark there Ashley unbuttoned her shirt. She wasn’t wearing anything
underneath and when he put his head down, rubbing his lips against her bare breasts, Ashley
said, “I love you. I want to stay with you forever.”

Ames thought of Kate standing in the ring, one hand raised, the horse trotting slowly
towards her. It wasn’t fair that Kate should always get her way with everyone. Ames didn’t
want to be like that horse forever.

It was only three weeks from the day Ames proposed to Ashley that he went out in
the truck with Kate. They drove around for an hour and Kate called Ashley every name she
could think of. She told Ames he was dumb, that he’d regret this, that he’d made a mistake.
She told him she hated him. When he stopped the truck, lost and tired, she crawled across
the seat, dug her short, sharp nails into his shoulders and kissed him. She pulled off her shirt
and his shirt and, with a growing sense of unreality, Ames went through with it, stupidly thinking that it would never happen again, that this was the last time.

Ashley never mentioned Kate. After four years in such a small town it seemed that everybody would know, but no one said a word. The giddy feeling Ames had in the beginning faded. He began to forget that he was doing anything wrong. He worked and he gave Ashley money and paid the rent and one or two times a week he said that he was going out with his friends, then drove out to Kate's house.

Ames figured that Ashley would be in labor all day, maybe all night. He knew she assumed he was out drinking and she would be cursing about this in that stuffy hospital room, but Rosie, his mother-in-law, would assure Ashley that laboring women made their men nervous and maybe he just needed that drink to steady his nerves. This was the kind of thing Rosie would say.

Ames thought that he loved his wife, but he could not remember a time when he had wanted to touch her. There must have been a time, because it was all there in the pictures: Ashley stuffed into her mother's old wedding dress like the buttons might just pop off any minute, Ames's hands grasping her at the waist, his fingers making dents in the soft areas between the fake whaleboning. Ashley looked calm, smiling, but Ames read fear in his own expression. He had been one year out of high school and six months away from becoming a father.

It wasn't that he didn't touch Ashley at all anymore - he did. But it felt like less and less all the time, until the weight of her hand on his when he was walking out the door to work and she was talking to him felt like nothing. Maybe his nerves were slowly dying, he
thought. All day at work he heaved sacks of grain and fertilizer and dog food onto pallets and shelves and into the backs of pick-up trucks. When he had first started, over three years ago, he'd come home sore and limping. Ashley worked all day at the grocery store and they'd sit and trade work stories, complaining that their feet hurt and their hands had been cold all day. Now she stayed home and he had nothing to say about work, every day the same. His back and his shoulders didn't even hurt him anymore. It was as if his body was no longer a part of him. The mirror in the bathroom showed nothing from the chest down. When he got out of the shower he'd wipe the condensation from the mirror and stand on the closed toilet seat, contorting himself to see everything in the mirror. Sometimes he saw bruises on his back, and scratches. He could remember Kate in the truck, the feeling of her nails in his flesh, a sharp feeling, something he could be present with.

Ames kept a flask of cheap whiskey behind the seat in his truck. He did not like to drink, but when he'd been out with Kate he'd take a swig from the bottle, just enough to get the scent on his breath. Every guy in town over the age of sixteen had a drinking problem. No one but Ames had a problem like Kate.

"She's the one who got herself into it," Kate said of Ashley.

"She didn't do it by herself," Ames said quietly, with his chin in his hand, the other hand massaging the earlobe Kate had nipped and twisted.

"Yeah? Well, I use something called birth control."

"She was nursing the other one," Ames said in his wife's defense.
“Yeah, whatever.” Kate seemed to shudder at the thought of this. “It makes me think of a sow, on her side, all the squealing, dirty little piglets. I wouldn’t do it.”

Ames imagined this second born as a piglet, pearly little feet still unstained, a mouth full of sharp teeth.

“I have to go back,” he said.

Kate took Ames’s face in her hands. She licked her lips until they shone and rubbed them against his. Her saliva was cold. Outside, the sky was gray and heavy, like it might snow. Kate pinched the skin on Ames’s neck between her nails and he let out a sigh. She grabbed the skin with her fingers and twisted.

“We can’t do this again,” Ames said. “Stop it.”

Kate, kneeling on the seat, grabbed him by the shoulders. Ames let his body relax. Something inside of him felt loosened. Kate pushed him and the back of his head hit the window. She leaned over him and reached for his belt, to unbuckle it.

“Kate, no. I really got to get back.”

“Like hell you do.”

“It’s late. It’s getting cold in here.”

“Then turn the fucking engine back on.” She started to unzip his blue jeans.

“Stop it.” He raised a foot to push her off of him and she was on him in a second, landing one knee right in his groin, her elbow hitting him hard in the mouth. He yelped and drew his legs up.

“I...just...need to get back.” Ames said after a minute, trying to catch his breath.

“All right?” He licked his lips and tasted blood.
“Fine. Let’s go then.” He could tell she was angry. Her eyes were narrow and her mouth very hard.

When he turned the key in the ignition the truck started with a rattle. It was cold enough that it was idling high. He put the truck in drive and pressed the gas pedal. The tires moved a few inches, not even one rotation, and then spun in the mud. Ames threw the truck in reverse, hitting the gas again.

“You don’t know what you’re doing,” Kate said. “Let me try.” She opened the door and jumped out. “Fuck! It’s deep!” She stomped around to his side, the mud sucking noisily at her boots.

The truck wasn’t going anywhere. Kate rocked it, swearing, and Ames crouched down in the road to look. The tires were more than half sunk in the mud.

“I’ll call someone,” he said, hopping back into the cab. “I’ll call my brother. He’ll pull us out.” He felt around on the floor. The phone was not there.

“Do you have my phone?”

“Maybe it fell when I got out.”

They both looked at the ground by the passenger side door. The mud was deep and soft and cold. Both of them dug through it till they were brown to their elbows and their fingers were numb.

“Did you kick it out on purpose?” Ames asked.

“No. The last thing I want is to be stuck out here with you.” Kate made a face like she was going to spit. “I’d love for you to get back to your trashy little wife, be one big happy family.”
“Who lives over there?” Ames asked, pointing across the fields where he could see a few trees and the peak of a roof.

Kate rolled her eyes. “That’s my parents’ house, dumb ass.”

“Really? I thought they lived south of town.”

“We are south of town.”

“Well, let’s just go up there and get them to pull us out.”

“That’s not gonna look too good. Aunt Rosie called my mom at fucking six AM to tell her the grandkid was on the way.”

“Well, I’m gonna go. We stay out here, we’ll freeze.”

“Give me your gloves,” Kate demanded, grabbing them off the dashboard. “I’ll walk up the road a little and you come pick me up when you get the truck out. That way they won’t see me.” She peered out the back window. “About half a mile down there’s a road with an old barn on it. The road’s Rural Route 4. It’s the first right. The barn’s got the name “Moore” painted on it, in green, peeling off. You can barely see the ‘M.’ I’ll be there, by the barn.”

“Okay. I’ll hurry,” Ames said.

“You sure as hell better.”

It took him almost twenty minutes to reach the driveway. The house was familiar when he got up close, though he hadn’t been there in years. It was old, with gray trim and shutters and a cockeyed look to it, as if it were slowly sinking. Kate’s dad worked on cars and what had once been a cow barn was now just a big garage, with spot lights and heaters so he could work all night if he wanted to.
Even before she asked him why he was there, Kate’s mother congratulated him on the birth of his daughter. He looked at her blankly.

“Why is your lip bleeding?” she asked him. “Have you been in an accident? Or—” her eyes narrowed, “A fight?”

Ames touched his mouth. “No, no, I just, um, fell. Trying to get my truck out of the mud.”

The story came together for him, as he stood on the Garfield the Cat doormat, peering into the kitchen, where Kate’s mother was unloading the dishwasher. He told her that he’d been delivering something for work. He thought he’d take a shortcut home and get back to Ashley as fast as he could. But he’d gotten stuck in the mud. Twice. The first time he’d gotten himself out with the use of some old boards he’d been carrying in the truck bed. He’d left them in the mud. Now he was stuck a second time and he needed help.

“If you don’t mind,” he added politely. “I would really appreciate it, Mrs. Conner.”

“Aunt Susie,” she corrected him.

Ames nodded.

Neither Kate’s mother or father was particularly small. When the three of them climbed into the big silver Dodge truck, Ames squished himself against the door and tried to take up as little room as possible.

“Worst possible day for this to happen to you,” Kate’s father remarked. “I can’t believe George had you working.”

“I thought Rosie said you called in,” Kate’s mother added.
“Well, ah... I did,” Ames took a deep breath, willing himself not to blush. He’d always wished he was a better liar. “But then I thought it would be okay to go in for an hour or two. I thought she’d be longer having the kid. Last time it took forever.”

Kate’s mother looked at him funny. “Six hours ain’t forever.”

“Oh. Yeah.” Ames tried to laugh.

“I remember it. March third. Rosie was so excited. Her first grandchild.”

“It was a good day,” Ames said lamely. “A day to remember.”

The truck came out of the mud on the second try. Ames waved as Kate’s parents drove off.

“Thanks...Aunt Susie, Uncle Dick...” He said this to himself, grimacing. He drove away slowly, afraid of getting stuck again. He looked for the turn he thought would take him to the old barn and to Kate. After a few miles the road was dry and very narrow, with deep ditches on both sides and he began to suspect that he’d missed it. Kate couldn’t have walked this far. He had to go another mile to find a place to turn around. He backtracked and this time he saw what he thought was it – a gravel road on his left, marked only by a small pile of rocks. He followed that road, looking for the barn. He knew he’d gone too far when he saw the grain elevator lurking off to the right. He turned around again. The sky had gotten darker and a few big flakes of snow drifted past the windshield.

Ames took one turn after another. He was driving faster now. The fields all looked the same. There were no houses or barns. He started to think of Ashley, to think that being with her, holding the new baby, would be a nicer and warmer thing than to be lost out here, looking for a girl who, at this point, would be mad enough to kill him even if he did find her.
He turned onto a new unmarked road, feeling sure that this was the way back toward town. He’d made it about a mile and was doubting his choice of direction, when the truck shuddered and died, out of gas.

Ames leaned on the steering wheel, licking the cut on his lip. The dried blood tasted salty and metallic. By now a thin layer of snow was settling on the gravel road. It was cold in the truck. He wondered how long it would take to freeze to death out here. How far from home was he? He thought he saw a glow on the horizon and dark shapes against that glow. He squinted to make out a water tower or grain elevator that might give some clue as to what he was looking at, but it was snowing steadily and he couldn’t see.

Ames fought the panic that was rising in him by examining the contents of his glove compartment. His insurance and registration were buried under a pair of small screwdrivers, a pacifier, one of Ashley’s hair scrunchies, a few gas station receipts he should have thrown away. Ames idly wondered if he could burn them. He didn’t have a lighter anyway. Instead he pulled the eight-dollar flask of whiskey from behind his seat. He leaned back and watched the snow fall, taking small sips so his throat would not burn and so that the whiskey and the warm feeling it gave him would last. It began to get very dark. He got out of the truck every once in awhile to stomp his feet and brush the snow from the windows. Someone would come along eventually, he thought.

There was hardly half an inch left in the flask when a truck pulling a stock trailer came clanking up the road. Ames opened the door and waved both hands. His toes were numb in his boots.
"What’re you doing out here?" the man shouted as Ames jumped out into the snow.

"You wanna freeze to death?"

"I ran out of gas," Ames said.

"Broken gauge?"

"No. I just thought I could make it."

The livestock guy snorted, then gestured for Ames to get in beside him. He explained that he was pulling three cows and none of them looked too good. As they rattled down the road toward what the livestock guy promised was a decent-sized town, Ames could hear one of the animals moaning. It was a pitiful noise. He pressed his feet against the hole where the heat came out and sat on his bare hands.

"My wife had a baby this morning. I missed it," he said. "I never got home."

The livestock guy didn’t so much as grunt. This frustrated Ames. When they rolled into the town, which was little more than a farmer’s co-op with fifty-odd pre-fab, vinyl-sided little houses plopped down around it, he thanked the guy and got out.

"It’s only just past eight. Gas station’s right up the street there. Should be open still."

"Great," Ames said, under his breath.

It had stopped snowing. The gas station parking lot had about an inch of powder on it and not one tire track. The sign on the door said they closed at eight. A stoop-shouldered man in coveralls was sorting through receipts at the counter inside. Ames knocked on the window.

The owner was not friendly, but he couldn’t very well turn Ames away. He told him to wait and he’d get his daughter to drive out with a gas can because he sure didn’t have time
to do it. Ames bought a Snickers bar when he paid for the gas. Then he got into the man's truck. It was so old and beat-up it seemed miraculous it was running at all.

"Has this town always been here?" he asked the daughter, nearly shouting over the rattling exhaust system. She was young, but evidently old enough to drive. She was pretty, but her eyes were swollen and her red hair was unbrushed and frizzy. She looked at him with disgust.

"Well, of course it's not always been here. No town has always been there."

"I guess not. It's just that I'm from around here and I've never been to —"

"Walumot."

"What the hell kind of name is that?"

The girl shrugged and Ames unwrapped his candy bar, watching the empty fields roll by. He was disappointed that there could be a place he had never heard of, had never seen, so nearby, and that it was so nondescript, maybe even worse than his town.

"What were you doing out here, anyway?" the girl asked him. Ames figured he would never see this girl again, so he leaned his head against the window and he started with Kate. Everything had to start with Kate.

The girl listened to the whole story without so much as blinking.

"I cheated on my boyfriend once," she offered. "He still doesn't know."

"How old are you?" Ames asked.

"Thirteen." She smirked.

"Oh."

"Is that your truck?" she asked him, pointing down the road.
The truck had a good four inches of snow on it. It was hard to tell if it was his or not. But it had to be. Ames wouldn’t let the girl pour the gas in. He did it himself and then he gave her five dollars, the last bill left in his wallet. She looked at the money scornfully and shoved it into her pocket.

“Well,” Ames said, brushing the snow from his door handle. “Thanks.” He opened the door and rummaged under the seat for a scraper.

The girl cleared her throat. He looked up and in the dim glow of the old truck’s headlights he saw that she was standing squarely in front of him, a revolver pointed at his head.

“What are you doing?” Ames stepped back, bumping into the truck and dropping the scraper.

“Start the engine.” She began to sidle around to the passenger side of his truck, still holding the gun on him.

Ames’s heart began to pound.

“What are you doing?” he asked again. “Is that thing loaded? Do you even know how to shoot that?”

She cocked it, shifted her stance and fired. The back window of her father’s truck exploded.

“Jesus Christ!”

“Drive me to Cedarville,” she said. “We’ll fill the tank up there.”

“What about your father’s truck?” Ames gasped, still shaking.

“My father’s an asshole. I don’t give a damn about his truck.”
Ames had never been to Cedarville before. The gas station was open all night and the plowed parking lot was illuminated with bright lights. The girl held the gun in her lap, the barrel resting on her skinny thigh. If she pulls the trigger, Ames thought, she’ll get my knee. We’ll crash. He swallowed and steered into the parking lot.

"Fill it up. Pay at the pump," the girl demanded. "And get me a pop out of that machine." She scraped a handful of change from his ashtray and thrust it at him. Ames looked over his shoulder at the bright convenience store, the silhouette of someone at the counter.

"I’ve got five more bullets. And a lot more in here," the girl said, jiggling her sweatshirt pocket so that it rattled. "So don’t try anything."

"Someone’s gonna think I’m kidnapping you," Ames hissed when he got back in the cab.

"What? You don’t think I look older?"

"Not really." He started the engine. "Is that your gun?"

"My dad gave it to me for my birthday," she said. "It’s pretty nice. It’s almost as heavy as his. Hey, you could just tell them I’m your niece. Or your daughter. You’ve got kids."

"They’re not as old as you. I’m only twenty-two." Ames looked over at the girl. The gun was in her left hand, resting on the seat beside her army green satchel. "I wouldn’t buy one of them a gun."

"Well, you don’t sound like such a great dad anyway. Though you’re probably better than mine."

"How’s that?" Ames asked.
"When my boyfriend still lived here he'd never let me go see him. He makes me work for no money all the time after school and on the weekend. And he beats us with his belt."

"I wouldn't do that," Ames said.

"At least my dad never snuck around on my mom."

"No?"

"Well, she’s dead," the girl said. "Maybe he would have. Hey, turn here."

"Where are we going?" Ames asked.

"We have to get on the interstate. We’re gonna go pick up my boyfriend."

"Where’s you boyfriend live?"

"California. When he got out of jail he went to go live with his aunt."

"California?" Ames choked. "It’s gonna take more than a tank full of gas to get to California."

"No shit."

They were on a straightaway, following a dark two-lane highway, when the girl got tired of switching from country station to country station and started to dig around in the crevice between the seats instead.

"This is where there’s always money on the school bus," she said. "In this crack. I found three dollars once." She pulled out two dimes and a penny, then dug her skinny arm in deeper. "What’s this doing down here?" she asked.

Ames looked over. It was his phone. The girl eased it out and examined the display.

"Is this yours?"
"I thought I’d lost that this morning."

"You have messages."

"I bet I do," Ames said. "Fuck."

The girl giggled and examined the display again.

"Ashley’s your wife? She called you like twelve times. Then, Kate just called you. I bet they’re together. I bet you’re in big trouble." She punched one of the buttons and held the phone to her ear. After a moment she made a disappointed sound. "Your battery just died. Do you have a charger?"

"At home," Ames said.

"Too bad." She threw the phone on the floor. "I was thinking you should call them."

At eleven they stopped at a McDonalds and went through the drive-through. The bucktoothed teenage boy working the window did not notice the girl’s gun, which she held against the seat, level with Ames’ hip. He handed Ames a warm paper bag with two leathery hamburgers, three greasy envelopes of french fries and an enormous cup of pop. Ames parked at the edge of the parking lot and watched the girl stuff fries in her mouth. Right next to their parking spot was a pay phone.

"Can I call my wife?" he asked. "Just to see if she’s all right?"

The girl looked thoughtful as she took an enormous bite of her hamburger.

"You tell her where you are or anything and I'll shoot you, I swear."

"Fine." Ames took a handful of change from his pocket and got out of the truck. The girl followed him, the gun in one hand and the half-eaten hamburger in the other. Ames dialed Ashley’s cell phone number, wondering if she was even awake. He jammed coin after
coin into the phone until it clicked one final time, connected and began to ring. Ames chewed his lip, thinking of what to say to Ashley. But it was not Ashley who answered. It was Kate.

"Where the hell are you?" she demanded.

"Uh, I'm —" Ames paused and the girl jammed the gun into his side. "Where's Ashley?"

"Ashley doesn’t want to talk to you," Kate said. "But I think you owe me an explanation."

"Is the baby all right?" Ames asked.

"What the hell do you care?" Kate asked. In the background Ames heard muffled conversation.

"Look," Ames said. "I got lost. I'm sorry." He looked at the girl, who was holding the gun against him still, but shivering from the cold.

"That's a shitty excuse, Ames." Kate coughed. "Ashley says you can fuck off. She says she'll change the locks if you come back."

"What did you tell her?"

"Oh, I told her plenty of things."

Ames sighed and dropped the receiver from his ear. The girl grabbed it from him and slammed it back on the hook.

"You satisfied?" she asked. "Let's go. It's freaking cold out here."

When they'd climbed back into the truck, she said, "They're really mad at you, aren't they?"
It was nearly two AM when they pulled into the rest area. It didn’t have a bathroom or even a telephone, just a small slushy parking lot. Ames thought they might be in Nebraska, but he wasn’t sure.

“What road are we on?” the girl asked him.

Ames massaged his temples as if he had a headache. He was scared and didn’t want to admit it to himself. He kept telling himself that this situation was funny, that it wasn’t serious, that this girl was just fooling around. The further he got from home, the less convinced he was.

They’d found a road atlas under the seat. It was probably older than the girl was. Somebody, not Ames, had circled the names of several cities in black ink.

“Well, where are we?” the girl asked. The gun was pinched between her knees, barrel pointed at the dashboard.

“Here,” Ames lied, pointing to a red line that looked as though it were headed west.

“We’re right here.”

“No we’re not. We’ve driven further than that.” She glared at him. “You don’t know where we are. Do you even know where California is?”

“I know where California is. I’ve just never been there.”

“You’ve probably never been out of Iowa,” the girl sneered.

“I’ve been to Omaha.”

“I haven’t been anywhere.”

“Is that why you’re so desperate to get out?”

“Well, I don’t want to stick around and marry some dumb townie guy like you, have fourteen kids and work in the gas station my whole life.”
 Ames stared at the map. His eyes were blurry from lack of sleep. The colored lines seemed to crawl all over the page.

"Give me your wallet," the girl said. Ames handed it to her.

"What the hell kind of name is Ames?" she asked, examining his driver's license.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"I'm not telling you." She tossed his driver's license back to him, then slid the wallet into her back pocket. Then she picked up her gun and pointed it out the window, squeezing one eye shut as if taking aim. "I should just leave you here. I can drive, you know. I don't need you."

It wasn't the prospect of spending the rest of the night alone on the side of some unknown road that scared Ames, it was the thought of going home, of what was waiting for him there. He started to imagine what he could do in California. Lose the crazy thirteen-year-old. Go work on a ranch, get some money. Send some to Ashley, just enough to make him fell better. Then meet some girl who hadn't known him his whole life.

"Please don't leave me here," he said.

"It is pretty cold." She leaned her head against the window, still holding the gun.

"I don't want to go back," he said. "What do I want back there? I'll get us out of here. Let's make a deal. You stop pointing that gun at me and we'll be partners. I'll get us a hotel room somewhere, we can get a good night's sleep and some breakfast before we hit the road again."

"I'm not gonna be your new girlfriend," the girl said, setting the gun on the dash.

"You're too young for me," Ames said. He felt less afraid now. "When we hit California, we'll split up. We won't tell anyone where we came from."
“Maybe.” She chewed her lip. “First, don’t touch my gun. Second, don’t get us lost again. Third, if you tell on me, I’m gonna tell them you’re a fucking liar and you kidnapped me. Okay, Ames?”

He sighed. “Okay.”

“Can I drive?” she asked.

“Fine.”

She took the gun with her when they got out of the truck to switch places.

“Will you tell me your name now?” he asked. “I don’t let people I don’t know drive my truck.”

“It’s Bonnie,” she said, climbing up into the driver’s seat.

Ames was quiet as she pulled out onto the road much too fast and wove between lanes. He was willing to bet she’d never driven on a real highway before. He fastened his seat belt and, map in hand, looked out the window. He was waiting for a sign that would tell him what road they were on.
Sarah cuts Tom’s hair and the kids’ hair every two weeks. She gives them all the same haircut, even Annie. It’s what an old-fashioned barber might call The Regular. I think of it as some kind of regulation military haircut, like Sarah’s building an army up here in the woods, in this little town over-run with snowmobiles and pick-up trucks.

And it’s not long before she’s after me to join her army. The day after I arrive, a snowy, blustery Wednesday, I’m doing the dinner dishes and watching Sarah attack Caleb’s blond head with the clippers. He’s the last one in line and he’s putting up a good fight for a two-and-a-half-year-old, but Sarah has him pinned between her knees.

“What?” she asks. “I have better things to do than spend the morning brushing snarly, knotted hair. Annie and Caleb hate to have their hair brushed. It’s much better this way.” She blows the fine shreds of hair off Caleb’s neck. “You want me to do you next, Abel?”

“Not really.”

“You’re looking a little shaggy.”

“Only by your standards.”

“I’ll get you one of these days,” she says, waving the clippers over Caleb’s head. He screeches and I cringe.

When she’s done we sweep the clippings from the kitchen floor and carry them outside. She throws them out onto the hardened snow.

“I guess birds don’t make nests with pieces that small. But it’ll snow more tonight, they’ll be covered up.”
"Maybe very small birds would like them," I suggest. Sarah throws her arm over my shoulder. She is an inch shorter than me in knee-high, fur-lined hunting boots. Her hair is dark like mine, but long, always long. She wears it pulled back in a sloppy braid.

"It'll take forever to dig your car out now." She gestures to an oddly shaped pile of snow beside the barn. A crooked antenna pokes up at one end. "Good thing you made it here before the snow." She leans her face against mine. Her cheek is soft and cold. "You can stay as long as you want," she says.

"Are you sure?"

"You're my little brother," she says. "You can stay."

"Is it okay with Tom?" I ask her.

Sarah laughs. "If it's okay with me, it's okay with Tom."

Tom is upstairs, trying to put the twins to bed. I can faintly hear one of them sobbing and wailing for Sarah.

"Maaaaamaaa!"

Sarah sighs and stomps back inside.

"I'm coming!" she hollers. To me she says, "Jesus Christ. I can't leave Tom alone with them for five minutes." All the way up the stairs her boots clomp and leave little puddles of melting snow. Tom comes down the stairs a minute later. He gets a towel and begins mopping up the little puddles of water from the steps.

This is how it has always been. Even back in Virginia, when we were kids, living in the religious commune where our parents first met, Sarah was the boss of me and every other kid around. She's only fourteen months older, but she makes every minute count. This is
what Tom and I have in common – Sarah overwhelms most of our lives and will continue to do so forever, conceivably. And it’s not so bad. It’s much easier that way.

Tom married my sister five years ago, four months before Jake was born. He owns the house, the snowmobile shop and the two trucks. It was a good thing for Sarah, who was a three-times college drop-out living outside Burlington and starving. But I never would have expected her – my sister, the person I’ve known best in the world for years and years – to find someone like Tom. He isn’t good-looking – his eyes are watery blue and his arms and legs are too long, with knotty muscles. Even as I’ve gotten to know him better, he seems utterly unconnected to Sarah in every way, like they just happen to occupy the same house at the same time and sometimes, as a function of that coincidence, I see them touch each other. I’ve hardly ever heard them have a real conversation about anything other than food or the kids or trail conditions. Once, sharing Jake’s bedroom, I heard them through the wall, bedsprings and everything. Jake slept on, but I couldn’t sleep through that. I lay there barely blinking or breathing. I knew I had no reason to be shocked – where did I think those kids came from anyway? I couldn’t really believe it though. Even on their wedding day, as they stood at the plain wooden alter, clutching each other hand in hand, I’d wanted to believe I was reading something else in Sarah’s face, some ulterior motive.

Later, when we’d escaped to the back steps of the reception hall, I asked her if she was happy. It was disgusting – her face softened and flushed and she smiled a dazzled, spacey smile, unlike any expression I’d ever seen on her face. I gave her a joking shove and she shoved me back. I lost my balance and fell into the metal stair railing. Blood splashed from my nose onto my white shirt. I went inside with my hand over my face, blood dripping out from between my fingers. Sarah told Tom she’d hit me and he believed her.
The snowmobile shop belonged to Tom's father before him. Tom's father loved snowmobiles and he loved to drink. That was how he died. And there was nothing unique about that because this little Vermont town is full of snowmobiling drunks, tearing up the trails between the bars all winter. Tom laughs when he talks about it, how it's just the way his father would have wanted it and how he must have died happy, doing his two favorite things.

Sarah says at least Tom's father had something to leave him once he was gone and I guess this is true, because our father, wherever he is, will surely leave us nothing. We were nine and ten years old when our mom left him and the commune, sneaking us out in the middle of the night like refugees crossing the border. We headed north, back to the outside world and the state of Massachusetts, where Mom's first husband still lived. After a few years, we sent a letter to the commune, but it came back marked "Undeliverable." The population had dwindled and the land was abandoned. We wouldn't even know where to begin looking for our father.

This town is so far north it's almost in Canada. There is more snow than I've ever seen. On Thursday, my second morning there, I borrow Sarah's black and yellow Ski-Doo and follow Tom and Jake through the dim sub-arctic gloom to the elementary school. I can't believe they won't just give up and cancel school in weather like this. The parking lot in front of the school hasn't even been plowed. The road has a good foot and a half on it. From a distance it appears that the brick school building is in the middle of a large field and this field is the site of a massive snowmobile expo. All around us people are lifting their kids
down and helping them off with their helmets. Even Jake’s kindergarten teacher, a tiny woman he calls “Miss Beeswax,” has a neon green helmet tucked under her arm as she collects the smallest kids by the front steps.

Tom and I sit on our machines, waving goodbye to Jake until he disappears into the school, his Spiderman lunchbox clutched in his mittened hand. Then we pilot back to the woods. We go faster. Trees whoosh past very close to my head and I want to tell Tom to slow down, but he’ll never hear me. My hand hovers over the brake, but I know if I slow down now I’ll fall behind and I’m not sure if I remember the way back to the house. I lean forward, opening my eyes so wide I’m afraid they’ll freeze over. Tears stream into my ears.

The first time I tried snowmobiling, two years ago, Sarah did not want me to go. She said she was sure something terrible would happen to me because I’m magnetically attracted to disaster and something always happens to me. To be fair, this is true. In every place I’ve ever lived I’ve very quickly reached the point where I could go to the emergency room any time of night or day and be greeted by name. But now Sarah has let up. She settles for standing by the front door, yelling, “Be careful! Watch for ice!” across the yard.

As I fly down the trail after Tom, I am getting nervous. All I can do is trust him. We’re close to home, by my estimation, when Tom veers off into a small field. We park out in the open there. The sky is as white as the ground. My hands are shaking and I stumble when I try to get off, landing on my knees in the deep snow.

“Too fast for you?” Tom swings down and helps me to my feet.

“No, it was okay.”

“You’re doing fine.” He takes off his fat gloves and reaches inside his snowsuit. He pulls out a crumpled little bag and starts rolling a joint. He’s expert with frozen fingers.
We crouch between the two snowmobiles and we smoke. It’s not yet nine o’clock and we haven’t had breakfast. The sky over the field is dense snowglobe glass.

“So, where’s Brian?” Tom asks. I can’t believe that I’ve been with Brian so long that even Tom asks after him. I’d always assumed Tom was a secret homophobe, kept in check by my sister.

“He’s in Finland. Visiting his grandparents.”

“Hmmm. What language do people in Finland speak?”

“Finnish.”

“Oh, right.” He laughs – the silly farm boy laugh Sarah hates, the one that’s high and rough at the same time. “Does Brian speak Finnish?”

“Not very well.”

“Do you miss him?” Tom crushes the end of the joint and drops the leftover half inch in his pocket.

“I don’t know. We haven’t really been getting along.”

“I know how that goes,” Tom said.

I squint out at the field, imagining myself floating over the snowdrifts, up through the tall pines on the other side.

“Hey,” Tom says. “Don’t, uh, tell Sarah about…” He makes a gesture with his pinched thumb and forefinger, bringing them to his mouth.

“Oh,” I say. “No. I won’t.”

“She’s pissed at me enough as it is,” he says.

“Why?”

Tom shrugs.
“You know how women are —” He stops himself and laughs. “Well, maybe not. But, yeah, it’s just been a rough year.”

“Okay.” I’m too stoned to ask him what he means by that.

“Ready?” Tom asks.

I have to concentrate to stuff my numb fingers back into my gloves.

“We’ll go slow,” he says. “We probably shouldn’t have done that. You look pretty messed up.”

“I’m not. I’m fine.” My hands don’t shake now. When we start off it feels incredible, like the trail is rolling forward and the trees are marching backwards and I’m buoyed between the two. Snowflakes fall from the trees like confetti. I think I can hear Tom laughing.

My last check from Eastern National Auto Rental was for one hundred and thirty-three dollars – vacation pay that had been processed just in time for the new year, despite the fact I’d been fired back in October. I signed the check over to Brian. He put it in his briefcase. He said he would go to the bank on his way to work in the morning. In the meantime, we went grocery shopping. Christmas decorations were still up everywhere, a week after the fact. We drove through downtown Greenfield and there were wreaths with bedraggled red bows hanging from every lamp post.

“I bought a plane ticket today,” Brian said. “I’m going to use some of my vacation time, go visit my grandparents and stay for awhile.”

“When are you leaving?”
"On Tuesday. I got a pretty good deal on the ticket." He coughed. "I asked Stacey from work if she could check on the house a few times while I was gone. She can water the plants and make sure the pipes don't freeze and all that."

"What about me?" I asked. "I can do that. Seeing as I actually live there."

Brian looked confused.

"Well, if you want to stay you can. I didn't think you'd want to. You don't have a job or anything."

"Where do you think I'm going to go?"

"I don't know. Go stay with your mom awhile or something."

My mom lives in a tiny cabin in northern New Hampshire with my step-father, Pete, a former tax accountant who's gone "back to the earth" and taken her with him. They don't believe in electricity or running water (or rather, Pete doesn't believe in those things and Mom has a habit of becoming whoever her current husband wants her to be). Just one snowed-in winter day in that close, quiet space with them is enough to drive me insane. And, after three years, Brian knows that.

We rode the rest of the way to the grocery store in silence. We shopped and went home. Brian drank a beer. I tried to paint and got frustrated. We went to bed. The bedroom was cold, but we took off our clothes anyway. Under the covers he grabbed me roughly, pushed me onto my stomach so that I couldn't turn my head, and climbed on top of me.

Those final few days passed in a heavy, gray way. Leaves were rotting on the lawn. A good northern wind picked up and froze the muddy water in the potholes. It snowed one day and rained the next. Brian went to work and came home. One night he went out with people from work and left me home alone. I was supposed to be painting and looking for a
job. I read the Gazette and the Recorder every day. Not even Yankee Candle was hiring. The Help Wanted section was filled with ads for some mysterious home business. "Send ten dollars to this address for more information," they said. All the addresses were different.

"If you didn’t have a completely useless studio art degree, I might be able to find you something," Brian said, exasperated. I went into the front room and sat on the floor where my paints were. I stared at the whitewashed canvas and didn’t pick up the brush. I called Sarah.

"I still don’t have a job," I said. "I’m broke. I’m not even painting." My voice was threatening to break. I knew she could tell, even over the phone. I didn’t say anything about Brian.

"Come home," is what she said.

Saturday morning starts a new cold snap. A colder snap. It’s too cold to snow now. The sky is obscenely blue, middle of May blue, swimming pool blue. The dry air smells like nothing. I’m afraid my spit will freeze.

Tom is up, washing our breakfast dishes and drinking beer from a coffee mug. He has someone watching the shop, the high school boy who knows everything there is to know about snowmobiles and works every weekend while Tom is supposed to be spending time with his family.

Jake follows me from room to room, asking questions.

“What’s the name of the language we speak? What day of the week is it? Will you play a game with me? Uncle Abe, what is Ontario?”
I feel like I’m on a game show, answering him as I collect articles of outerwear from the pegboard by the door, my duffel bag and three different closets. I can’t discern any particular system of organization in my sister’s house, but she seems to know where every single thing is.

Sarah and I are going out on the trails. I ask Tom if I can borrow his snowmobile and he tells me I can take it anywhere I want to. He tells me he knows I’ll appreciate the clear mechanical superiority of the Polaris over the Ski-Doo and Sarah snorts.

My sister and I put on strategic layers of clothing, long underwear with technical names, then polar fleece, then wool, then more polar fleece. Sarah is wearing Tom’s snowsuit. It’s tight around her hips and stomach, but sleeves dangle to the tips of her mittened fingers. She has to pull her scarf away from her face to ask me if I’m ready.

We take a different trail than any of the ones I’ve been on before. It is wider, looking out on a frozen creek and a tiny frozen waterfall where the thick ice is blue at the core. Everything is bright. The Polaris is quieter than the other machine and it steers more sharply. I cut an almost square corner at the first turn on the trail.

I don’t know how far we go. It seems that we have been riding forever before we stop, take off our helmets and find that the air is cold and sharp in our lungs. Sarah sighs and says we should turn around, that the kids must be driving Tom nuts by now and that she’s hungry anyway. I’m nearly frozen to death, so I don’t protest. I tell her that I’ll follow and she takes off, nearly out of sight by the time I build up any speed at all.

In my hurry to catch up, I don’t cut to the right of the trail where Sarah does. I take the side that’s clean and well out of her tread. It is so clean it’s shining in the sunlight that comes through the tops of the trees. I start to skid, like you would in a car, when things
move the wrong way beneath you and everything inside of you seems to lurch upward, your heart in your throat, your stomach where your heart should be.

For a moment I can control it. I let up on the throttle, easy. Then I steer to the right, hard, because I see the ground sloping steeply to the stream bed on my left. But it doesn’t work. I am sliding sideways over the icy ground. I go over the side of the trail, me and the snowmobile, and then both of us roll over again and again, not quite together.

Sarah has cut her engine. It is so quiet. I’m staring up the hill at her. She’s moving towards me and I’m waiting. I’ve gotten used to that moment, after you’ve fallen or something, wondering if you’re still intact, if you can sit up, stand up, walk away. I don’t even try this time. All the sensation in my body seems to gather in my jaw. I have my mouth clenched shut so hard I can barely breathe. The rest of my body has gone cold. And then Sarah is nearly on top of me, skidding through the snow in her hunting boots. She’s not crying or screaming or even breathing heavily, so I think maybe everything’s all right. But when her face is close to mine and I loosen my jaw to say something to her, it suddenly hurts horribly everywhere – my legs, the back of my head, mostly my legs. The pain has a savage gravity all its own – I’m pinned to the ground there, dizzy, like on that carnival ride that spins you until you slide up the wall, almost crushed. Sarah tells me to be quiet. She tells me twice, her voice harsher the second time. I don’t know that I’ve made a sound. She tells me not to move, to wait. I stare at the bright sky through the shock of bare branches above me and I hear Sarah’s feet striking the hard snow. It crunches like dry bones and then I hear nothing and I think she’s left me, she must have left me.
The drugs they give me in the hospital make me feel like I’m on a boat, but it seems my sister is not on this boat. She is anchored to the chair beside my bed. It seems like she’s been there a long time. I’m staring at the splotchy ceiling tiles to keep from getting seasick and I can see my toes up there. This is a weird position to be lying in. I ask Sarah what time it is and she tells me it’s eleven in the morning. I’m not sure what day it is. When I try to sit up she puts her hand on my chest.

“Hey, don’t do that.”

“Sarah?” My voice cracks like I’m thirteen years old. The inside of my mouth is so dry.

“What?”

“I thought you were going to leave me in the woods.”

“You said that last night. What kind of person do you think I am?”

“I’m sorry,” I choke. “I don’t know why I thought that.”

“Listen. I’m going to go home. I’ve got to pick Jake up. I’ll be back later.” She stands up, one hand on the small of her back like it’s hurting her. “Do you want me to call Brian?”

“He’s in Finland.”

“Well, they have phones in Finland, don’t they?”

“Don’t call him.”

She comes back holding one of Jake’s stuffed lions.

“Look,” she says. “Jake said to give this to you.”

“What’s its name?”
“I don’t know. I didn’t ask him.” She takes off her coat. Underneath she’s dressed like a hobo, in one of Tom’s quilted plaid shirts and a big pair of pants held up by what looks like a piece of clothesline. “I had a hell of a time getting a hold of Tom to watch the kids. I called the store like five times and he wasn’t there.”

I look up at her and we both seem to be rocking with the waves now, the floor pitching this way and that. I feel like I might throw up.

When the doctor who did the surgery on my legs comes in to see me he asks if I travel by airplane often. I tell him I don’t.

“Well, good,” he says, smiling. His beard is brown and neatly trimmed, with one wide stripe of white hair right down the middle. “You’ll have trouble getting through those metal detectors after all the hardware I put in you.”

I don’t laugh. I’m too tired and dizzy to even respond.

“It’s a joke,” he says. “It’s not true. You won’t set off any metal detectors. In fact, my wife has three pins in her left elbow and she has never set off a metal detector. But still, I don’t think you’ll be flying anywhere too soon anyway.” He writes something down on a piece of yellow paper. He looks up again and adds, “I didn’t perform orthopedic surgery on my own wife. That would have been unprofessional.”

I look over at the chair where I thought Sarah was sitting, wanting to see her roll her eyes at me over this dumb doctor, but she’s not there anymore.
At some point in the next week they stop giving me the drugs they were giving me and the new ones don’t work. I don’t sleep. I don’t do anything but hold Jake’s lion and fix my eyes on stains on the ceiling. When my mom comes to see me, I’m crying.

“What’s the matter?” she asks.

“It hurts! It just hurts so much!”

She looks at the casts they’ve put on my legs.

“Well, what do you expect?” She sits down and she squeezes my hand a few times, but she seems distracted. She tells me that she and Pete are spending the night at Sarah’s, that it’s good to see the kids. She gets up and leans over to kiss my forehead. “Pete and I will come see you tomorrow. Maybe you’ll feel better then?”

Sarah comes in when Mom goes out.

“I drove her here,” she says. “But I thought maybe you’d want to talk to her alone.”

“Not really.”

“So, I called Brian. I’m sorry. I just thought I should. I found the number in your notebook, in your car.”

“What did he say?”

“He said to tell you he’d call when he got back. We didn’t talk very long. It costs a fortune to call Finland.”

“Yeah.” I’m crying again. Sarah hugs my head to her belly.

“You’ll be home soon. It’ll be all right. I can take care of you till Brian comes back.

You can keep me company.”

“He doesn’t want me anymore,” I tell her. “It’s not just that he’s in Finland. He doesn’t want me to come back to Greenfield.”
“It’s okay, Abe. You can talk to him when you get back.” I can tell Sarah doesn’t believe me, she just thinks I’m rambling deliriously.

The bed Brian and I shared in the old house in Greenfield had a huge dent in the middle. No matter where we started out, we’d end up smushed together in the middle. The night before he left I was curled against him, but he was talking and staring at the ceiling. In between the words there was a silence I found easy enough to interpret. It was over and it would be over still when he returned. I shifted to the edge of the bed, tired and wanting to be alone with this heavy sadness I was starting to feel. In the morning we were crushed together again in the dent, his shoulder wedged under my chin, his body limp with sleep and hard to push away.

It was Tuesday. I drove him to the airport. I didn’t leave him standing on the sidewalk — I paid two dollars to park the Towncar in the garage and walk him inside, right up to the front desks and the baggage check, then the metal detectors and the guards in army fatigues. He pushed me into the corner, into the tight space between one of the blue carpeted walls and the drinking fountain. He kissed me very lightly, not quite on the lips. It was not romantic kiss, not one worth hiding behind a drinking fountain for. Anyone who had seen it might have assumed we were brothers or best friends. After kissing me he pressed four twenty dollar bills into my hand.

“Gas money,” he said.

My stomach tightened when he picked up his backpack and walked through the metal arches, heading for the first of three connecting flights to Finland.
At home, in our rusty red farmhouse with white trim, I packed two duffel bags. I thought that I would miss that house, with its tight complicated rooms and sloping floors, scarred naked wood everywhere you looked. There was a bright, cold front room with tall windows where I'd painted and an old kitchen with yellow walls. And there were two months worth of rent and bills that I owed Brian, everything since I lost my job.

I set the thermostat on fifty and got back in the car. It was only four hours to my sister’s house from Greenfield, straight north. This time those four hours seemed very long. I was tired of being alone with my thoughts even before I crossed the Vermont border.

It seems like I should feel different when I finally get out of the hospital, but I don’t. I’m hazy and nauseous from drugs and from sleeping both too much and not enough. And I can barely move. I can’t get myself out of bed or even really sit up. My arms feel weak. It takes both the nurse on duty and Tom to lift me off the bed and into the wheelchair and then from the wheelchair to the truck.

At home Sarah and I lie awake in the room she has always called her “study.” It’s really just a little room where she hides the TV and some piles of old newspapers, but now she’s put the bed in there for me and unrolled a sleeping bag on the sagging brown couch for herself.

Sometimes when I can’t sleep Sarah and I play this certain game. One of us asks a question and then she turns the radio to any random station that will come in. The magic radio oracle’s answer to our question is the first thing we hear.

“What should I make for supper tomorrow?” Sarah asks the oracle at three in the morning. She spins the dial until she finds a signal. Billy Idol is singing “White Wedding.”
“That is so unhelpful,” she says. “It’s your turn.”

“What am I going to do when I get better?”

Sarah spins the dial.

“Come on down to Mike’s!” the radio exclaims. “Great service, great deals! Your car will thank you!”

“Apparently you will have some kind of fling with this guy Mike.” Sarah giggles.

“Is Brian going to call me?” I ask the radio oracle.

The signal we land on is weak, but Sarah moves the antenna back and forth and we hear Elvis coming over the airwaves, singing “...you ain’t nothing but a hound dog.”

“Great,” I grumble.

She shrugs and turns the radio off.

“Is that pill working yet?” she asks me.

“Not yet.” It hurts less than it used to. I stay very still and breathe slowly.

Sometimes I imagine that I can feel my body putting itself back together.

Sarah lies down on her side, hands pinched between her knees, her head near my head. We look at each other in the dark.

“You know,” she says. “Sometimes I wish I could leave Tom. Sometimes I would rather not have him here at all.”

“Hmmm?” I’m starting to get drowsy, but I want her to know I’m listening.

“Abe.” Her nose is nearly touching my cheek. “I’m glad you’re here. I’ve been so lonely. Sometimes I thought I couldn’t stand another day of this.”
I draw some pictures during the days. I know that later they’ll look all wrong to me. The straight lines are wavery and the colors are weird. When I can get up Sarah pushes me into the living room and I play with the kids. Jake was afraid of me when I first came home, but now he’s thrilled to have someone around who has nothing better to do than play Candyland and Memory all day.

I notice that Sarah and Tom are barely speaking. He comes home from work and sometimes he stands behind her, reaches his arms around her belly and buries his face in her neck. She puts her hands against his legs as if she’s feeling his pockets for spare change. They stand there embracing each other backwards, but neither of them says a word.

Sometimes he doesn’t even come home from work. Sometimes he doesn’t come home until well after everyone’s in bed. The door rattles open and we hear him clumsily removing his boots. Sarah doesn’t get up and she doesn’t say anything.

“You need to get better at holding back,” she tells me one night as she’s lying on the couch with Caleb, dead asleep, flopped across her stomach. “Don’t let yourself get pushed around by guys like Brian. You should never just let someone have everything. That’s when they can hurt you.”

“What do you hold back from me?” I ask her.

“I don’t. That’s different.” She touches my face. “You wouldn’t try to leave me with nothing.”

“Neither would Tom.”

“Maybe not. But he hasn’t been through the things that we have together. Sometimes I think he doesn’t know me at all. He just wants me to be here, cooking him dinner and taking care of everything while he’s out drinking and acting stupid with his
friends.” She rests her hands on Caleb’s back. “Anyway, everyone needs someone to be honest to, someone they trust.”

“Yeah, I thought I had that.”

“You have me.”

In my head I do math. It’s a ridiculous amount of time until I get the casts off my legs and how much more time until I’m able to walk again? I don’t want to think about it.

It’s been five days since Brian was due back from Finland, but he hasn’t called.

“Why don’t you just call him?” Tom asks.

“I don’t think you should call him,” Sarah says.

So when she takes Annie and Caleb with her to the grocery store I call him. I can hear Jake practicing in the other room, banging out a sloppy rendition of “My Bonnie Lies Over the Ocean” on the old upright. Brian is surprised to hear my voice. He stammers. He tells me he just got back a few days ago and that he’s been busy. He asks how I’m doing and then he says he’ll come up on Saturday and we’ll talk.

The night before Brian is supposed to come Sarah decides that she has to cut my hair. I’m in no position to object. She makes me lean over sideways in the wheelchair to get my head in the bathroom sink and wash my hair. She uses kitchen shears to trim everything away from around my ears and to get the fringe at the back of my neck. She clips the top. It’s not as short as everyone else’s, but it’s short enough that the front won’t lie flat and my ears stick out.
Brian doesn’t seem to notice the haircut. He says I look too skinny and he stares at my casts and sits uncomfortably on the edge of the couch.

“I think I found a roommate,” he says, pushing his thick blond hair back. He’s wearing a too-tight navy blue sweater that I’m pretty sure is mine.

“You’re getting a roommate?”

“Well, yeah. I mean, she’ll have that room we used as a guestroom. She’s a grad student who doesn’t want to live too close to campus. She likes the house.”

“Oh.”

“I brought some of your stuff.”

It’s more than some of my stuff, it’s almost all of it. Boxes of paints, clothes, books, CDs, shoes.

“Well, those should be very useful,” I say when Brian drops a pair of worn-out running shoes onto the pile. He laughs uncomfortably. When he’s leaving we hug each other. He leans close over me and I feel his lips brush the side of my head, my ear - a very tender gesture that seems utterly misplaced. I push him away.

“Look,” he says. “I’m sorry. We’ll talk about this another time. I just think I should go. You look tired.”

“I don’t want to talk about this another time.”

“This was going to happen at some point anyway. You know that.” He tries to touch me again. “I just can’t take care of you anymore.”

I brush his hand off my shoulder.

“You’re wearing my sweater.”
And this is how he leaves: throwing the sweater at me, walking out the door into the
ten-below-zero morning wearing nothing but a T-shirt. I watch him from the window. His
tires spin in the packed snow as he backs out of the driveway. I reach over and pick the
sneakers up from the pile of stuff. My hands are shaking and the little plastic ends of the
laces click together. I throw the shoes across the room. One of them knocks the pepper
grinder off the dinner table. I take a few books off the pile and hurl them at the wall. I pick
up one of the smaller boxes by one flap. It’s full of half-used tubes of acrylic paint, two
battered pads of watercolor paper, a few crumpled t-shirts, a pair of flip-flops, a ceramic mug
in the shape of a jack-o-lantern. I throw that across the room too. The paint tubes scatter
everywhere. The mug cracks into three pieces and they go skidding under the woodstove.

“Jesus Christ! What are you doing?” Sarah comes thundering down the stairs with
Annie on her hip. They both look at the stuff on the floor, then the rest of the boxes.

“Did Brian—”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

Sarah squats and starts picking things up off the floor with Annie still hanging off of
her.

“Don’t you want this stuff?”

“No.”

“What about the paint?”

I have to do some maneuvering to wheel myself around them and the junk on the
floor, but I make my escape. I go into the study and slam the door. It’s dark and I can’t
reach the string to turn on the light. I stay there with my head in my hands. Sarah comes and
yells at me through the closed door.
“Abel, I’m talking to you!”

“Leave me alone!”

“I told you not to call him. You knew this would happen!”

“What was I supposed to do? Never talk to him again?”

I hear one of the twins crying in the other room. Sarah shuffles away.

At night Tom is helping me get into bed. He says, “I put some of your stuff in the barn. I hope that’s okay.”

I tell him it’s fine.

“I didn’t put the paint out there. I thought it would freeze. I put it next to the piano. If you want it.”

“Not really.”

“Suit yourself.” Tom walks to the window and pulls the curtains back. It is snowing again. “Supposed to be a big storm,” he says.

“Do you ever get tired of snow?”

“No.” He looks very serious. “I could never get tired of snow.” He lets the curtain fall back over the window. “I’m sorry about Brian,” he says a little stiffly. “Seems like kind of a jerk.”

“He didn’t used to be,” I say.

“Well, people change.” Tom smiles a small, closed smile. “I’m gonna take a ride down to the bar,” he says. “I’ll see ya tomorrow.”
When Sarah comes downstairs she stands at the same window and looks out. Then she lies down beside me on the bed and she talks about the twins, who have begun to speak to each other in the dark of their room, but won’t utter a word to anyone else. She talks about the road and the need to plow tomorrow.

Then she says, “Tom took the plow.”

“Well, I guess it would have been hard for him to get out without it.”

“Yeah, well, I can’t get out at all now.”

“He’ll come back,” I say.

“I wish he wouldn’t.” She sits up and, calm as ever, she says, “Should I tell him I want him to leave?”

“Don’t ask me that.”

Sarah reaches for the radio. She spins the dial and before she turns it on she says, “What do you think, radio oracle?”

There’s nothing but static. The wind has picked up outside and there’s no signal anywhere. Sarah gets up and stomps out of the room. I hear her upstairs. She’s opening the doors to the kids’ rooms and looking in on them. She comes back and she’s crying. I haven’t seen Sarah cry since we were little. Her face is very red. She lies back down and she lets me put my hand on the back of her head.

“I bet I’d get to keep my snowmobile,” she says, sniffling. “I bet I would be really happy. This has been going on way too long. It’s like it’s been over for months. I don’t even have anything to say to him.” She sits up suddenly, jolting the bed, and I wince. “You know, I do every fucking thing in this house. He’s never even here. And you’d stay here. Wouldn’t you stay here?”
I want to tell her that I don’t have a choice, but I’m afraid to.

When Tom comes home late the next morning, Sarah asks him where he’s been. I’m still in bed, but I can hear them clearly through the open door.

“I had to stay at Mark’s,” I hear Tom say. “It was snowing pretty hard. I wasn’t in any shape to drive.”

“Who’s fault was that?” Sarah asks him. Then she says, “Put your boots on. I want to talk to you outside.”

“It’s fucking freezing out there!” Tom exclaims. “I just got home.”

“Lower your voice. Annie and Caleb are asleep.”

“Where are you going?” I hear Jake ask them.

“We’re going for a walk,” Sarah says. “Go see if your uncle’s awake.”

Tom doesn’t come back with my sister. I hear her unzipping her jacket and banging her boots against the side of the house to get the snow out of the treads. I hear her telling Jake he can’t watch television until he cleans his room. When she comes in to help me get out of bed she’s quiet.

“Where’s Tom?” I ask her.

“Beats me.”

I ask her again that night.

“What, did you kill him and hide his body in the woods?”

“Should have,” she says. “It’s still snowing out there. No one would ever find it.”
I feel some sympathy for Tom. As I’m lying there, trying to sleep, I miss Brian and the house in Greenfield. I imagine myself in bed there, the warmth of Brian’s body against mine. I wonder if Tom will miss my sister so much, if he will wish he were here now that she’s made it clear how unwelcome he is.

I know I shouldn’t miss Brian. I know that if I tell my sister she’ll swear and say he was never good enough for me, that I never should have settled for him. But this is not true. Brian loved me for a long time. It seems as though his love for me is important and wholly separate from whatever it was that caused our relationship to begin slowly lurching towards its doom.

For a long time Brian loved me and, yet, he did not love me. He started to spend more time with people from work, to go out at night without inviting me along. He started to be distracted even when he was home, disappearing into books and magazines. It wasn’t that there was someone else, he just started to disappear into the rest of his life. After all my college friends had gotten jobs or married each other and moved away or stopped calling, I didn’t have a rest of my life to disappear into. I lost my job and all I had was Brian and the house and my paintings, which weren’t getting done anyway. In the end the only time Brian ever seemed to spend with me was in bed. And for most of that time he was asleep. I didn’t want to need him so much, but the further away he got, the worse it was. It filled me with an ache that seemed like it might never go away.

It snows hard for five days and on the third day even Jake’s school is closed, because the cafeteria roof has collapsed under the weight of the snow. I start painting because I have nothing better to do. Jake and I paint all sorts of things and by the time he’s lost interest
we've used up most of the brighter colors. So I paint snow. I had never before noticed that there were so many shades of white. There's a lifetime's worth of paintings, a comprehensive study of snow. Snow in the woods, on the roofs of houses and barns and cars, snow piling up on frozen ponds, snow at night when the moon is out or the moon is not out, snow that is pure pink in the early morning, dry snow blowing across the road in the bright light of day. As if anyone in the world wants so many pictures of snow.

I figure that this is where I live now, a place where, from any of the first floor windows, snow is all you can see.

When Tom comes back he's unshaven and dressed in a black snowsuit. He doesn't take it off when he comes in the house. He hugs the kids and he fills three grocery bags with things.

He tells me he likes the paintings. He asks if I'll do one of the shop for him. I tell him I guess I can. He grabs my hand like we have a secret handshake and he says he has to go.

Sarah steps out after him. From the window I see them standing in the driveway, five feet apart. The sun is bright and I can't tell if they're glaring at each other or just squinting. Sarah's thumbs rest in her belt loops and her shoulders are squared. Tom's got a good six inches on her, but she looks big and strong and sure and I don't feel so bad trusting her with all of our lives.
Colette Rose Ryder-Hall was born January 14, 1980, in the fair state of Massachusetts and spent the first eighteen years of her life on Cape Cod. She received a Bachelor of Arts in Animal Agriculture and Creative Writing from the University of Massachusetts in 2003 and climbed many small Western Massachusetts mountains. In August of 2003 she drove to Ames, IA and took up residence there, though she remains a sailor in love with the sea.