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slumber 101

Slowly, slowly I am dying while each brain cell
terror-crying
Knowing their last breath is coming with each
passing minute of bore
As I sit and try to waken eyes whose nerves are
quickly shaken
Begging for sleep, my mind they've taken to a
land it knew before
Head on desk, attention flying to a dream I've
seen before
Notes are taken nevermore
Following my fellow masses, fading in three-
credit classes
We paid our dues as best we would and just can't
take it anymore
Puddles on our textbooks drooling, we've no
more energy to try fooling
Professors who are quickly ruling lives will not
amount to more
Than flipping burgers, making fries, and sweeping
up McDonald's floor

This is our future, nothing more
I don't care, I've not the time to, and who decided
it's a crime to
Take a nap when I am tired and about to hit the
floor
Just because my loans are paying for this class in
which I'm staying
The cashier's office isn't saying they're expecting
anymore
Than sitting in a desk, and when my time’s up,
walking out the door
Wasting time forevermore

Maybe someday I’ll sit upright, bending to
professors uptight
Insisting that their class alone will save my soul
from welfare’s door

Until that day I’ll just keep staring blankly into
textbooks daring
Those beside me to start caring if I did the
homework chore
As I’m earning nevermore

For those who are confessing meekly their best
sleep comes three hours weekly
I promise you will someday reach that glorious
graduation door

If for your life you can’t remember what you slept
through last September
Come and be the next new member of those
who’ll probably be here for
At least six years just trying to recall what they
first came here for
This is our goal and nothing more

Margaret Bendorf

goodnight

Hey,
Comes the soft voice next to me,
Sugar in the ears as she speaks her sweetness,
I lie in my bag
Army green pillow propped under my head
Not two feet from the fire,
And wait in anticipation
For the continuation of her exclamation
That turns out to be
Nothing more or less than
Goodnight.

Jared Berg
summertime warriors

Nestled within the trees,
Invisible to the untrained eye,
A long day's work of
Drilling, sawing, sweating
Lies complete.
Now stands a castle,
A creation crafted from wooden imagination
Where hundreds of children,
This summer and those that follow,
Will lead their forces,
Armed with sticks and twigs,
Into battle against branches, leaves
And other imaginary enemies.

Jared Berg

sheets of seduction

Let s unwind and intertwine
Under this afghan of affection,
This shawl of temptation.
To see how beautifully our bodies blend
Together
Sprawled upon the bed,
Like two lost pieces
In an ancient human puzzle.

Jared Berg
amber breeze

Blowing in the amber breeze
A cattail dances above a pond,
Where her invisible partner
Struggles to keep step
With his own song.

Jared Berg

the glass is half empty

the glass is half-empty
The raw echoes inside
my hollow body cavity
fill me with remorse and shame.
I'll open my arms,
and whoever falls in-
it's your lucky night.

I want to be touched, desired.
I want to be taken advantage of.

I'm scared,
and guilty,
but at least I'm filled with something.

Use me.
Abuse me.
Make me regret it.
Make me cry.
If you won't,
I'll find someone who will.

Chrissy Eide
autumn stroll

Gray mist
swirls in the air,
settles on my eyelashes
and smudges my world,
hazily distorts all things
surrounding me.
and us.

Hand entwined,
making our way across
a picturesque autumn campus,
in-step and in-sync.
Smiles radiate
and mirror the shine
in your eyes.
and mine, also.

Breathe deep, sweet.
Take in the scent of my hair,
the curve of me
pressing against you.

Puppy love,
adoration but not too many
promises.
You make me forget me,
and I like that.

Chrissy Eide

me, regarding you

me, regarding you
my butterflying belly
has this built-in insistence
for fluttering around,
rumbling and soaring
every time you
make a sound

and i sit at the
phone, and i
cradle its chaos
in shaky hands
between stutters
and ums.

and the sands of time
do spill forth
more fluidly
than the muddy, sticky
muckiness of me

see, i meant to
tell you everything,
but most of it
got stuck in my throat
(i choked . . )
or was left
where i wrote it
in a scribble,

i end up
wrestling, in a
fit to pin it down
and put it
away
and now and then
it gets buried
in the clutter
of my life
accidentally
but it's all
there (somewhere
beneath), and
I'm prepared
to excavate
if you're prepared
to see

Darci Holzkamp

a wrinkle in time

Time,
changeless in passing.
Youthful minutes swept away as specks of dust
before the wind
no deals made with the flesh
change for nothing stays the same.
Each moment, from this day to the tiniest of
moments
the clock tick, and the time for that tick
recorded, but for one moment
caught in a wrinkle, and
overlooked with the passing.
Changeless as time, that moment, when
I first saw you.

Joseph Pikul
coffee

The best part of waking up?
I fondle your surfaces
smooth
cylindrical
cold to the touch
plastic snap cap
about 2 pounds
In hand, my Ekco Miracle can opener
The cutting edge enters, you exhale
I turn the drive,
follow your curves,
to come full circle
Your top, I always fumble with that,
finally discarded, and
with cupped hands,
I cover your rich, brown naked grains,
and breath the sensual delights of your scent
That, is the best part

Joseph Pikul

house keeper

Through cracks in your polished veneer
my words sifted in
to lie underfoot as grains of dust
each different
you never did understand where they came from
but diligently swept them to a corner out of sight
as a good housekeeper should
into that corner
where I was kept buried to the neck
under words
while storm waters crashed over me
taking my breath away
only the wind heard my cry to
stop sweeping

Joseph Pikul
dirt on her sheets

She eats raw onions,
And the saliva from her mouth oozes down her chin.
She drinks straight whiskey,
And if she spit into my mouth I would be drunk.
She doesn't like showers,
And the stink gods claim her as the chosen one.
She sleeps in late,
And lets me know by snoring.
I grow onions,
Buy the best whiskey,
Don't buy soap,
Never set the alarm.
She puckers her lips (onion in hand),
And my yearn to smother hers.
She spits on the ground,
And I feel like getting drunk.
She lifts her arms to scratch her head,
And I breathe her in, deeply.
She sleeps filthy and smelly,
And I want to be the dirt on her sheets.

Luke Geiver

the breaking point

Imperfect impurities
Left alone
Don't believe
The pains inside
It's hard to breathe
One more step
Next to fall
Bottom's out
Designs explode expound
Time is ticking dearly for this here time bomb
It's all over point down to sub-zero grounds?
It's time to call your girly girlfriends
Screaming loud for an ultimate makeover!
Try to create this perfect face
No frown - no smile just another plastered wall
Trying to be someone as imaginary
as the tooth fairy
Now just to accomplish the impossible
Oh I say what a self-hating game
Now when we fall
Pick up the pieces just one by one
Of a broken dream - a broken heart - a broken life
that won't bear burdens to relieve
A fantasy I do believe
Crashing down before our knees
Bitter tears trickle down with mascara creaming
the face (our heart).

Hannah Schumacher

https://openprairie.sdstate.edu/oakwood/vol2/iss14/1
briefcase rush

When I look this way
You know I’m not really here
A block goes up
I’m not going to talk
Stems of emotions
Pour through my soul
Raining a storm
Lost in thought
My body ignites
Platformed and plastered
Bound by a curtain
Enclosed in a case
Yes, and
Only on display
You won’t hear a resonance
Muted out words
It’s a silence barricade
Losing to fear
Because I can’t let go
I can’t let out
Building up pressure
To stir up this storm
And I look this way
My eyes just swell
Dislocate
Prison ate
Silently alone
Surrounded by people
I stand alone
Like the millions of others
Just doing the same
We are all on a mission
A mission to hate

We hate ourselves
Genuine poisonous destruction
Taken out on others
Because we’re never good enough
(acceptance not there)
No longer able to communicate
We stabilize our loneliness
By standing separately
And being alone
Our emotions will flow
Because we are afraid
Hidden amongst the rest
Lack of identity crisis on our hands
A true self lost
Buried in a treasure
Grass, Moss, Dust
We are driven
Driven by a billion things
Maybe more
Don’t know
Can’t know
Because we have defocused ourselves
To power driven people
Standing over
Fear impacted people
Causing a cycle
Of money-driven eyes
(so helplessly greedy)

Hannah Schumacher
once in a blue moon
(part one)

Protection.
The fury of the seas,
the calamity of time,
the turmoil that is life;
all held at bay
when I was wrapped in arms and legs
belonging to him.
Security.
I wear these scars
on my heart and on my sleeve
for all to see
this rugged past.
He holds me tight,
whispers he'll hold me
forever.
Spontaneity.
First date,
first kiss,
first sunset.
All so new,
but still so real.
I trust him entirely,
and I believe his promises.
I'll never let go.
I believe.

Chrissy Eide

late night drive (part two)

Blurred and nebulous
images sneak past in the night.
My eyes burn, my mind wanders
far away from this car and this road
and these thoughts.
It's not emotions I have...it's them that have me.
Speeding past bridges and mile markers,
I wish I could drive away
from this problem; this wanting
not to be hurt,
wanting not to hurt him.
Wanting to ignore pain and
numb this longing
in order to avoid heartbreak.
The harvest moon
shines in a velvet backdrop,
leading me home.
Orange accompanied by the starry skies-
a million tiny Christmas lights,
all shining for me.
Each of them- a path
leading me to life.
The same moon
shone down a few days ago,
though it seems like
seconds ago, years ago.
You and I,
falling in love,
witnessed only by
that moon,
those stars.

Chrissy Eide
love at all the wrong times
(part three)

My heart is torn in twos and threes,
is being ripped apart
where there are no seams.
I don t love him, I confess,
and says he s fine-
but the pain in his voice betrays him
as he tells me, Sweet dreams.
I want to love him
I want to be okay in his arms,
his eyes,
his love surrounding me
and filling the cracks
in my weary, trodden heart.
But try as I may,
love exudes me
this one time it should not.
I cannot fall,
cannot desperately plunge
into the promise of protection and security
and whispered devotions to each other s hearts.
It would ve worked this time.
I wouldn t have been hurt this time.
He would ve loved me,
said it and meant it,
and resounded it this time.
He promised;
I tried to believe.

blue jolly ranchers

a smile
that would light up
a million Christmas trees,
sparkle brighter than
a million fireflies,
fades in my memory.
The horizon fades
into dark sky.
Whoosh of tires and
rhythm of rain and
clunking of wipers
keep me awake.
the bitter aftertaste of
Jolly Ranchers and Doritos
lingers,
like the scent
that I breathe to survive.
The blues of my
teeth
and tongue
match the evening around me.
The blues match
my feelings,
and I struggle to stop the fading.

Chrissy Eide
pizza hut, 6:47 p.m.

Discontent and feeling awkward,
she tries to relax in the booth,
dangerously close to tipping,
smashing
against the wall,
against the table,
sending flatware and flat soda
in all directions.

His nervous laughter,
nervous tapping
drum away seconds,
but still the minutes drag.

Small talk
becomes a large burden,
and sighs
and moans
cut through the grease-laden air.

Why must life change?
The feelings remain,
but in place of
relaxed,
in place of affection
and grinning
and vows of devotion,
all that remains now is
hidden love
and painful smiles.

Chrissy Eide
tidal wave

Shipwrecked in the crystal blue sea of your eyes
Waving my white flag, I surrender
You capture my all
And I never want to leave
These calming waves
If only you knew their depth,
I softly whisper
Trying not to stare for too long
Failing miserably
You saw me
Do you know? Can you tell?
Surely my gaze gives it away
Penetrating as deep as I am able
I'll reach your heart someday
The lighthouse I see only by faith
I have to
Refusing to believe that I may never
Have you
Hold you
That hope alone keeps me afloat
As I fight these tidal waves and watch her
Have you
Hold you

Margaret Bendorf

burning embers

Some days are so inferior
Others just as well
So self-conscious
And then self-confident
Why such a mix of constant emotions?
Perhaps I need to grow up
Then why all of the comments
You are so mature for your age
You've got so much going for you
Why do I feel so far behind?
I'm too good for him
And not good enough for him
But why shouldn't I be good enough?
I thought I had so much going for me
How can people be so acrylic?
Fake, Transparent
Just when I want to retire from the quest
The floodgates open
Half of the fish are dead and the
Smell makes the others appear just as
Grotesque and uninviting
I can't see past that I want to
See the smiles and sparkling blue eyes
I may need to look in places other than murky water
Reach out a quivering hand and feel the
Warmth of a soul
We may just match
Strike the sulfur and create a flame
Please see me like the others did
Leave your perch, Phoenix
Rise above the ashes and sweep me away

Heidi Burns
we knew cool

Summer, it was but a moment ago
and a carbon copy of the summer before
days lasted forever
we were cool, barefoot and tan
skinny dipping at Gray Rock, our swimming hole
they said they spied on us, then giggled
girls, who cared anyway
boys, we knew cool
bikes, three speeds, chrome fenders
generators and two tail lights
flip cards on the spokes
canvas sneakers that gripped
jeans and tight-fitting T’s, white
sleeves rolled up
no plan for beyond that day
each day like the last
till, one day,
the copies stopped.

Joseph Pikul

blinders and earplugs

I listen.
Everything you say turns the wheels
But when I mutter a tiny tidbit you merely
Chuckles, reminiscing about something so
Trivial that it makes the harpoon in my temples
strike over
And over
What?

Nothing. It’s not important.
Who the hell do you think you are?
Newsflash. I don’t give a rat’s ass about
Any of it you say it just to
Hear yourself speak.
But thank you
Thank you for making me feel so
Damn inferior.
Kudos you’ve done it again.
Right after I vent and tell you that my
Future is bleak in my own eyes,
You rub it in my face that mine will
Never be better than yours.
No matter how hard I try.
I’ve worked since I was legally able,
Put up with a lot more than you.
Quit sucking it dry.
I hope you learn the value of more than just
Prejudice and delusions of grandeur.
I never thought I would label my confidante
Spoiled
Rotten.

Heidi Burns
gatsby

When jazz was new and beer was brewed in bathtubs,
Gatsby lived on Long Island.
Flappers flocked in jewel-toned gowns to
Admire his weathered visage and to
Carelessly sip mint juleps with strangers
in the halls of a lonely palace.
His fat wallet bought string quartets and
silken shiny shirts in every hue.
What price for love?
He wondered,
Staring at the green light
on her dock across the Sound.
Neighbors talked.
He killed a man once,
they said.
His rich blue eyes
siphoned through the crowds that
stalked across the marble floors and
spilled wine on the immaculate carpet,
Looking for her.
One night she came and
admired the silk and danced to the strings and
left
drunken on his money and married.
And Gatsby died,
Shot in a pool of blood in a crystalline pool.

Dani Johannesen

then came winter

Spring, just a few more days, hang on,
maybe tomorrow will be better, maybe
but the maybes ran out
that February day
just when spring was so near
summer passed without you knowing, now
birches stand naked, and
the little boy no longer sits
fishing from his bench
leaves crunch, your car enters, and
the garage door rattles a hollow sound
closing down
just another day
you fumble with the key
stumble in the dark
from the start,
you always hated winter
yellow light spills from a kitchen window
the TV flickers in an empty room
survivor again
lights grow dim
your house, still home, a shadow of the past
you find your way
to an empty bed
to curl between the sheets
on the left, alone again

Joseph Pikul
a conversation
Michael Bimstiehl

Why do gay people get married? he asked.
Huh? I replied, aroused from near unconsciousness.

Why do they marry
He was staring forward, deep in thought, loosely gripping the wheel with one hand. His glasses reflected the passing scenery. I looked out the window; the landscape was blurred into a combination of greens, blues, whites, and a little hint of pink as the sun began to fall towards the flatness of the horizon. I rested my chin on my hand and looked out at the sky.

I don t know, I guess they love each other. Why do straight people get married?

The sky can be really beautiful sometimes, I thought.
Oh, no, I don t mean it like that. I mean why do gay people marry straight people sometimes?

I don t know, I guess people just want to be accepted, that s all.

I know, I mean, I understand that people want to be accepted. But why can t people be accepted for what they are? I just don t understand sometimes. Why do we always have to be what other people expect?

I m not sure. I could see my reflection in the window, faint and transparent.

It s not like gay people choose to be gay, I mean, I don t think it s like that anyway.

I hadn t decided whether his questioning was directed towards me, a creator, or no one in particular.

Why would anyone choose to be gay in this world? I mean, who
would choose to be the butt of jokes, the object of hatred. Logic tells me that choosing to be gay wouldn't be a smart choice, right?

Sure, I mumbled. Why do people always have these kinds of conversations; why is this kind of shit always the subject? It's funny that we always think about all of the injustices in the world. It really is funny. My mouth almost formed into a smile as I started thinking; it's funny how every drunken conversation leads to questions of gods, politics, or inequity. I mean, come on, when you are drunk you are supposed to be happy, right? Why can't people just be happy? Why can't he just enjoy the sunset?

No one even cares about anyone else. No one cares about anyone but themselves. Jesus, look at our history. He continued. Think about how depressing the history of humanity is.

I didn't really want to think about that. I mean, who wants to think about something like that?

Wars, he went on, why are there always wars? I mean, God, someone is always fighting someone for some bullshit reason. Whether for religion, for money, for land, people are always fighting for something. Great military leaders are heroes? Well, not to me. Murderers aren't heroes to me. If these wars are so God damned important and necessary, then why don't they ever change anything? History continues to repeat itself, over and over and over.

I could see he was angering himself. His face was getting red and beads of sweat were forming on his forehead. People get so agitated about this kind of thing, but when do they ever do anything about it? That's what is particularly funny to me. It's almost as if it is his role in life to be disgusted by the plight of humanity, and then sit idly by. I mean, Christ, no one is ever happy about anything. It's not like every single thing in the world is so damned terrible. No one finds beauty in anything. And who cares if history repeats itself, we'll probably only be around for one recurrence anyway.

The world is in such a sad state, he declared. Such a horribly sad state.

His eyes were beginning to water behind his thick glasses.

Jesus Christ! What do you even mean? How is your life so damned horrible and sad? I mean, what do you even do? The only thing that makes your life so bad is that you think so negatively. Look outside of your miserable head sometime! I mean, look at the sunset or the fields or some trees or something. Can't you find beauty in anything? Jesus Christ!

The sunset is pretty tonight, he admitted. I wonder how many more sunsets I'll see.

I ignored him and laid my head against the inside of the car door, trying to fall asleep as we continued to drive.
the endless white
Jon Stacey

It was the Great Depression. Work was hard to come by, and since I didn’t have any money, I resorted to hunting for food, despite the bitterly cold winters. On one January morning, I was out hunting jackrabbits. I fired at one, but it bounded behind a hill before the buckshot struck. I followed and tried to fire again, but the terrible coldness had jammed the shotgun. The jackrabbit lounged at the bottom of the hill as if mocking me while I desperately tried to clear the mechanism. By the time I succeeded, the little beast had gone into its burrow.

By then, the sun was rising, though I couldn’t see it. The sky was dull white from the clouds of frost high in the air. It matched the snow-covered ground. Everything I looked at was white. The infinite whiteness camouflaged the fast moving storm until I was engulfed in a torrent of flakes and battered by a fierce wind.

I knew the dangers of being caught outside in a blizzard and hurried back in the direction I had come. Thankful I had dressed warmly, I tugged the scarf over my nose and mouth as I followed my footprints back to safety. But the storm had set itself against me. The wind picked up the loose snow on the ground and within minutes had obliterated all signs of my previous passing. I was lost.

The world around me vanished into an endless vision of white. I marched onward, in defiance of the storm, fruitlessly hoping to find some sort of shelter. Once, I came upon an old dead tree, creaking in the wind. Its trunk was sun-bleached and nearly as white as the snow pelting it. I considered huddling on the downwind side of the tree, but the tree looked too much like a twisted human skeleton. I took that to be an omen and kept walking.

I walked for what seemed like hours, with the blizzard growing stronger with every passing minute. The unceasing whiteness started to play tricks on my mind, and I became convinced that I could hear voices in the wind. As the storm’s intensity grew, the voices became louder. Then, when the winds were at their worst, I saw them.

Two grey shapes came toward me out of the blowing snow. Two grey shapes that seemed to appear out of nowhere. I called out and hurried to the forms, stumbling in deep snow drifts. The two grey shapes wailed and rushed toward me as well, materializing into two small children with out-stretched arms. When they reached me, both threw their arms around me and sobbed. It was a boy and a girl, the girl a few years older than the boy. They were terrified.

Please help us, mister! the girl sobbed. Snow and frozen tears clung to her eyelashes.

We can’t find our way home! the boy wailed. We are lost!

I knelt and embraced them, trying to give comfort. I wondered what events left these young ones trapped in this terrible blizzard. I will help you, I swore. I will get you home.

Smiles warmed the children’s faces, and the boy pointed off into the swirling white of the storm. Our home is that way. Ma is waiting for us. The stones point the way.

For the first time, I saw two grey boulders half-buried by snow. Together, they marked a line to the children’s home. Why hadn’t I noticed those stones before?

But we lose our way every time we try, the girl wept.

Hold my hands, I said. I will take you home.

Hope lit their faces and they grasped my hands tightly.

We plunged into the white wasteland. The storm seemed angry now and the wind lashed us with stinging ice and stole our breath away. We marched on through ever deepening ice, stubbornly keeping a straight path despite gusts that threatened to push us off course. The children clung to my hands, never once letting go.
After what seemed like an eternity, the storm seemed to part before us, revealing a small house. The tan color of the new wood walls stood out from the overwhelming white of the blizzard like a beacon. The door was open and a woman stood in the doorway, wringing her hands.

"Ma! the boy cried.

We're almost there, I yelled in triumph.

I took step forward, and tripped on a rock hidden beneath the drift. Instinctively, I tried to catch myself and let go of the children's hands. They screamed, loud and piercing.

I pushed myself up out of the snow and reached for the girl, but she had disappeared. An eddy of sparkling snow swirled in her place. I looked for the boy and he was gone as well. The snow spiraling where he had been was swept back into the storm. Their screams persisted, but grew faint and distant until they finally faded into the roar of the wind.

I tried to call for help from the woman, but the sound caught in my throat. The house had changed. It had looked newly built a moment ago, but now it was run down and weathered to a dull grey. The windows were broken out and the walls had holes. The roof had collapsed and the door hung from a single hinge. The woman was gone.

Confused, I tried to look for the children again and happened to look back the way we had come. Only my own footsteps marred the surface of the newly fallen snow. The children left no sign of their passing.

They were gone and I was forced to seek shelter in the abandoned house before I succumbed to the cold. I managed to light a small fire in the crumbling fireplace and fell asleep near it. When I awoke, the blizzard had ended and the sun was bright in a clear sky. I was ten miles from where the storm had descended upon me.

I learned the children's story a few days later. They had been sent home from school when a fast moving blizzard swept in. They, along with many others, died in what became known as the Children's Blizzard. The children's bodies were found only a thousand feet from their home. Their mother died of heartbreak a few months later, and their father, after losing so much, abandoned the homestead and went further west. All of this happened two decades ago.

Twenty years have passed now and I understand what has happened to the children. Their spirits are lost within the endless white. They appear during every blizzard, desperately trying to find their way home where their mother waits. Only when the children get home will all three finally be able to rest. Yet they can't find the way on their own. They need someone else to lead them, someone still living. I almost succeeded, but by letting go of their hands, I allowed the blizzard to reclaim them. It has been twenty years, and now I know what I must do. I know where the stones are. I have rope and a compass, and I have walked the path many times. I will lash our hands together so we cannot be separated. A blizzard is moving in tonight, so I shall wait at the stones for the children to appear. This time, I will not fail to lead them home.

I leave this note to explain my sudden disappearance, should I fail to return.
death on call: a novelette of mysterious scandal
Heidi Burns

Walking swiftly in the hallway of St. Andrews Memorial Hospital just prior to the noon hour, Dave Mackey looked down at his black loafers, noticing their need for polishing. The sounds of the shoes on the flat carpet floors was interrupted by the familiar voice of Nancy, the head of physician recruitment at the hospital.

Hi Dave, she chirped. It's a busy day for a Tuesday isn't it? She noticed his brisk pace.

Yes, Nancy, he replied with a chuckle. And the day has hardly begun. With a sign, he turned into his office, closing the door behind him quietly. The tall, lanky man walked behind the desk, opening the blinds of his window as he passed them. He glanced out the window to see an ideal fall day. Sitting in his plush leather Porsche office chair, the vice president of finance at St. Andrews opened the files sitting on his desk. The feeling of the racing-style seat reminded him of his self-acclaimed driving skill, giving him a feeling of motivation and aggressiveness toward the day's obstacles.

Let me try to take a whack at this budget problem, he said quietly to himself. Taking in a deep breath of the stale office air, he scanned the various copies of order forms for pain relievers. Something caught his eye. The numbers for Vicodin, Valium, Percoset, Darvocet, and Morphine seemed to jump off of the snow-white paper. There were many more orders for these drugs in comparison to the other pain relievers and medications.

I guess the citizens of Chicago aren't as healthy as they were a few months ago, he inferred. Then he noticed something additionally the order forms showed only the names of patients and dates of order. Clanking of metal hangers from behind his closet doors made every hair on his body stand at attention. The contraction of his stomach and the release of adrenaline made him suck a short breath in through his thin, pale lips. Dave's reaction caused him to brush his left hand quickly against one of the papers. The crimson color of blood stood out on his fair skin. He grabbed a tissue out of the brushed aluminum tissue holder and pressed it against his thumb. I am getting too jumpy for a Chicago native. Dave told himself, focusing his attention back to his files. He muttered, thinking out loud, in the atmosphere of the fluorescent lighting mixed with the warm sunlight of a spring day.

Why is there no documentation of patient conditions or the physician who ordered the medication?

He sighed with frustration and disappointment.

I thought this was company policy... he trailed off.

He reached over to juggle the mouse of his computer, waking it from its mechanical slumber. Within a few clicks of the mouse and rapid typing on the beige keyboard, a look of confusion spread over his face.

This can't be right there's no record of these patients ever being admitted to St. Andrews. Well Dave, he advised himself, you'd better write an email to George.

Thursday rolled around, as did the gossip, which ran like wildfire at the nurse's station in the acute medical unit. Nurses were chatting busily with each other in hushed voices between exams. A tall woman with skin of porcelain and hair of long chocolate locks adjusted her nametag, which was clipped on to her cobalt scrub shirt. The tag read Cheryl J, Registered Nurse.

Peggy, she whispered to another nurse, what's all the fuss about today? This place is buzzing around like a beehive. You'd think JCAHO was inspecting today.
I hear it's a really big deal, the stout woman answered, tucking her bobbed flaxen hair behind her ears.

Supposedly there's a thief in our midst.

Cheryl hustled the woman and pulled her gently into an empty patient room. Although Peggy had a reputation for over-dramatizing, Cheryl looked at her with a look of concern. Peggy continued:

We're ordering enough Morphine and Vicodin to make a wounded elephant happy. It's like we're stockpiling drugs now. But then about half of the supply disappears within a couple of days. No one can figure out what's going on or what patient needs all of this. Then, she continued on with excitement in her voice, there is a rumor about Dave Mackey not showing up for work the past couple of days. He's usually addicted to work. If you ask me, I think he had a lead to the thief. Either that or...

Oh Peggy, you watch too many soap operas. I'm sure it's nothing to be worried about. We'll get all of this figured out soon enough.

Maybe Oncology has more patients than usual. But until then, let's just get on with our patients, okay? A patient in your pod has their call light on.

Looking disappointed with Cheryl's response, Peggy nodded. The nurses exited the room and went their separate ways.

Outside the hospital campus and down the block on Virginia Avenue was police station number three. Parked in front was a stealthy black Jaguar XK-8 convertible, which bore license plates reading: PREZ. In the next parking space resided another mechanical feline. The flawlessly clean Mercury Cougar sported dual exhaust and evidence of an owner with an eye for detail custom taillight covers, aftermarket alloy wheels wrapped in performance tires, and decals trimmed the sleek body of the car, making it a flashy addition to the bland scene of the police department. Its lowered suspension gave the car a menacing and sly look. Exiting the Jaguar was the president of St. Andrews, inconspicuously looking around the building with shifty eyes. He then looked over his shoulder and remotely locked the convertible, despite its top having been removed. The car's parking lights flashed with the chirp of the alarm system, confirming armament of the car. He pushed hard twice on the door of the station before reading, Pull on the handle, and awkwardly yanked open the heavy door. Entering the dark station, he immediately spotted the open door of an office. Weaving through the bustling matrix of fluttering papers, ringing phones, and a woman cursing to herself after spilling hot coffee on her already toffee colored pencil skirt, the man approached the door of the office.

Reagan, the man corrected himself with a nervous chuckle, Officer Johnson I'd like to have a word with you when it's convenient I mean when you peel yourself away from the pages of the latest issue of Motor Trend.

A chair spun around in the open office facing the man, revealing an attractive young man in a police uniform.

Hey, the man replied, you're not always right about me, George. I was reading Sport Compact Car online. And this isn't the hospital call me by my first name.

He motioned for George to come into his office.

Come in take a seat and tell me what's up.

George stepped inside and sat down in one of the two wooden chairs.

Listen, he started, before I start, I want you to keep this quiet. This is a very serious business and I want anyone who I do not speak with to stay out of it. Is that going to be a problem?

Of course not, George, Reagan assured him. You've been my friend since I was in college. I'll keep whatever this is as quiet as I can I'll even do some undercover work if I have to, he said with a smile. Maybe I'll even have to put forth my impressive womanizing skills.
Reagan polished his fingernails on his uniform. Noticing a serious and worried look on George's face, Reagan soon sat forward in his chair and folded his hands on the desk, listening attentively.

Okay, as long as I got that off my chest first...

George hesitated as his respirations quickened and a bead of sweat rolled from his hairline into a bushy brow.

You know, I never thought I would come to you to have myself protected before. I feel odd asking for surveillance on my house and car but I really can't risk it.

Reagan got out a notepad and a pen and started to write. He scribbled randomly with increasing pressure, eventually tossing the pen over his shoulder and reaching for a pencil.

Let me start from the begining. Isn't that what you ask most people to do?

Yeah, I guess so, Reagan replied. Just make sure to give me first and last names.

George exhaled with a nod toward Reagan, wiping his glossy forehead with a wrinkled handkerchief.

All right, I came to you personally because I have known you for awhile and trust you with this information. It all began a few months ago when I received a few email messages from the president of finance. He

Name?

Oh yes Dave Mackey, George continued, president of finance. It is hospital policy for any deficiencies to be reported to the employee's supervisor. He had merely written the emails to inform me of the status of the hospital's budget and a few outstanding numbers on narcotics orders. Sometimes we have points where more patients come in than normal. In oncology, for example, more cancer patients come in the pain is pretty rough on some people; but it gets our

drug suppliers more business. It's a constant roller coaster but these numbers were abnormal.

Okay, Reagan interjected, so why are you getting the police involved? Don't get me wrong, Georgie-boy, I do love you help you. I am just wondering what all this has to do with me. Don't you have some sort of high-tech surveillance or hospital security? You always were a techie... he trailed off.

Well, George carried on. One of the housekeepers Reina Diaz came to me on Wednesday and led me to Dave's office. His fountain pen and his clock were tipped over and his computer was left on. He hadn't come to work on Wednesday, but an email message, addressed to me through the hospital's inter-office email system, was left open and unsent on his computer. All it had was a Microsoft Word attachment.

Did you open the attachment? Reagan questioned.

Yes I figured since it was addressed to me, I could open it. Anyway, when I opened it, I found a document containing some typed notes of his. They had the climbing numbers of narcotics orders as well as personal notes and thoughts of his. Apparently, he thinks that we have a dishonest employee who is stealing narcotics for personal use or for sale to make some extra cash.

Personal use? Just how much of the drugs are being stolen?

Hmm scratch the idea of personal use of the drugs. George rubbed his receding hairline. That's a lot of morphine for just one person. We're talking cases of these meds. Even half that amount of Vicodin taken within a month's span could be lethal.

So you think someone is taking the drugs and selling them? Reagan continued his notes in his trademarked chicken scratch on the yellow legal pad.

That's the only thing I can conclude from this situation. But getting
back to the thing about Dave—and this is what makes me nervous—he hasn’t showed up for work for three days.

George stopped. Looking up, Reagan showed a look of concern.

So I guess we need a missing persons report, don’t we? Reagan said.

If that’s what you do about a situation like this, yes. But remember, I want this to keep very quiet. The last thing we need is the whole city of Chicago worrying whether our hospitals are safe or not. I am not a nervous man, Reagan. But something like this happening in my hospital just can’t be ignored. On the opposite end of the spectrum, it can’t be blown out of proportion in the beginning either.

Right, Reagan responded, we don’t want a panic. Cops hate dealing with that.

So I was thinking that some surveillance might be in order. I don’t know what happened to Dave, but I don’t really feel like mysteriously disappearing anytime soon and I want to make sure no psychopath is sneaking around my house or my car.

Reagan smiled with a look of approval.

You’re pretty protective of your Jag, aren’t you? I don’t blame you. It’s a flashy car.

Hey, George defended himself, now I’m not just being anal-retentive about my car. There are nutcases out there who put bombs in cars. It’s happened before in Chicago I don’t want it to happen to me.

Reagan refrained from writing and traced the letters of the name Reina on the legal pad with his sharp pencil.

So, Reagan began, we need surveillance around your private home and vehicle and a missing person’s report?

One more thing, George added. Reagan looked up from the legal pad with curiosity. I want a private investigation in the hospital. I know this is risky business but there’s someone very smart behind this—ordinary junkies don’t steal thousands of dollars of prescription narcotics. I want you to go undercover, Reagan.

Reagan looked squarely at George and took a deep breath.

The last time I went undercover, it turned out to be a false lead, George. I made a fool out of myself. I know what you’re thinking—live and learn, right? Well, I just don’t want to blow this for you. I can get someone else in the department someone better to go undercover.

You’re the only person I trust with this deal, Reagan. If I wanted someone else to do it, I’d go to the front desk of the police station. You’ve always figured things out. Remember when we took that road trip to the SEMA show? I thought your motor blew up but you diagnosed the problem in the middle of the desert. You figured it out.

That’s my car, George. This is a little more complicated. We might be in for a major drug bust.

I’m just trying to make a point here. Will you help me? Will you help St. Andrews?

There was a moment of hesitation. Reagan’s watch beeped, signaling five-o-clock. Reagan took another deep breath and exhaled, slumping down in his rickety office chair.

Okay, he agreed, you drove me into this. But I can’t guarantee anything.

Over the next few days, more undercover police officers were given assignments to watch the black Jaguar and George’s half-million dollar estate. Monday rolled around and Reagan was admitted to St. Andrews as a patient suffering from chronic back pain.

Lying in his hospital bed, Reagan kept a watch on the nurses around him. Okay, he thought, Betty Ann and Sharon come in and pretend to give me pain medication. They are the only ones who know about this and are the least suspicious. He silently chuckled to himself.
don't know how they could ever be suspicious. There's not much going on in the heads of those ladies they couldn't be the brains behind the operation. Reagan looked at the clock on the wall. Eight fifty, he told himself. Probably not too much going on this early in the morning. He soon spotted a tall brunette at one of the computers at the nurse's station outside his window. She was sitting at one of the computers, constantly looking over her shoulder every time someone walked behind her. It's as if she's hiding something, Reagan thought. The woman looked nervous at times, but calm and cool when she talked to other nurses. They seemed to look at her for answers, as if she was the mother figure. Why was she so nervous? Reagan decided to let his investigating skills and creativity take charge.

Nurse, he called softly, can I get someone in here please?

Betty Ann walked by his room and whispered to him.

Psst use your call button, she said with a wink. That will get her over here.

Betty Ann gave a smile and crept away to another room. Great, Reagan thought, she's trying to play matchmaker with my aide. The woman finally stepped into his room. Her soft voice and kind eyes matched her position of aide to those in need.

Can I help you with something? she asked Reagan.

Yeah, this bed can I recline in it a big? I'd like to just lay back and catch a little shut-eye.

Surely, she said. The woman glided across the floor, toward his bed. Reagan read her nametag. Next to a small picture of the woman was her name and title Cheryl J., Registered Nurse. Reagan repeated the name in his head over and over, a strategy he had learned from various meetings when he had no paper or cocktail napkins to jot down names. Cheryl found the control and moved his bed down to a comfortable level and asked if he needed anything else.

Just someone to talk to me for awhile, if you have the time.

Reagan hoped to squeeze some information out of her before the end of the day. Looking over her shoulder, the woman saw that a nurse was manning the station.

I suppose I could chat for a moment.

The woman took a seat in the padded chair beside the bed. Reagan smiled, knowing he could pick up her personality traits, possibly even creep into her personal life and find out where she lived. The two of them talked about copious small-talk topics in the crowded room. For the weather, sports, and current events to birthplaces, hometowns, and childhoods. Reagan took countless mental notes and took care not to give out any truthful information about himself. Eventually, Cheryl left the room to let Reagan drift off. Something caught his eye, however. The nurse had taken his chart out of the plastic holder and shuffled it and glanced accusingly back at him. Noticing Reagan's eyes on her, she flashed a phony smile at him and replaced the chart. She then went back to the computer at the nurse's station and began feverishly typing, sometimes pausing to read deeply into the computer screen. There was something villainous about her. Reagan's eyes began to feel heavy. I suppose I small nap wouldn't hurt, he thought.

The deafening ring of the plain beige telephone beside the hospital bed jerked Reagan awake from his slumber. Answering the phone, Reagan heard the only voice he expected to hear on the other end of the line.

Reagan, George whispered. Reina's dead.

Reagan laid within the stiff sheets, staring out the window in frustration. Early this morning, near the laundry room, her body was found in one of the bathrooms. She had tied a rubber band around her arm and shot herself up with sixty cc's of Demerol. I've talked to a
few people who worked with her. Some say she was a saint, others swear she was nothing but a drug addict. You want to go to her house as soon as you’re discharged? Maybe poke around a bit and see what we can find? There was a pause. Reagan? Did you hear anything I said? I said—

I heard you, Reagan interrupted. I just think that’s way too easy. There has to be more to this.

Don’t you get it? Reina Diaz exposed herself and them committed suicide. It’s that simple.

Then where is Dave Mackey? Where is your president of finance? You think he just took a bunch of personal days without notifying anyone?

Reagan lowered his tone of voice to a whisper.

Aren’t you the least bit concerned about where he is?

Silence answered the inquiry.

We’ll have to do something else. Just let me stay here for a couple of days and we’ll see what develops. I can’t let this go. It just seems too simple.

Okay, George answered, finally. But there is one more thing. Another nurse found a crumpled piece of paper with addresses and amounts of drugs on them in a trash by the laundry. I didn’t really think anything of it when I found out about Reina’s death, but it might be a lead if you’re still interested in pursuing the case. 8650 Vienna Lane was one of the addresses, Reagan. That’s my house. If Reina didn’t do it, then someone else is trying to frame me for this.

Cheryl entered the room and waited patiently while Reagan finished his phone call.

Yes, Reagan answered in a perky voice, Mom, I’ll be fine. I really am feeling much better. You can make that big turkey dinner for me that you promised in a couple weeks, when I fly up there. Yes, yes, the pain is gone. The doctor says I don’t need surgery. I’ll be fine mother. Yep—bye-bye now.

The telephone made a click noise as the undercover policeman set the receiver down on the base, hanging it up. Reagan looked up with a smile at the nurse.

Mothers—they always want to feed you, right?

Actually, she began, I was wondering if you’d like to join me at my home for dinner when you are discharged. I know it seems odd, being that I’m your nurse and all, but I figured well, you said your mother lives in Boston and you have no relatives in Chicago.

Reagan was confused. Her innocent smile and charming looks were too much for him to swallow. Yet, his instinct told him to continue with investigation.

I’d love to.

The next day, Reagan had one of his other officers come to pick him up, posing as an old college friend. Cheryl was heading the paperwork.

Here, Reagan interrupted her, I’ll give you my cell phone number. My house phone is not working properly, so this will give you a chance to drag me over to your place for some mac and cheese.

The woman giggled a little, handing him a post-it note with St. Andrews Memorial Hospital printed in navy blue and black lettering at the top. Reagan wrote down the number of his police-issued Nokia, which was tapped and ready to relay all calls to a machine, recording every word.

Later that evening, the cellular phone rang twice before Reagan pressed the send button.

Hello?

Michael?
The woman's soft voice on the other line was almost soothing, but still sent Reagan's stomach into the back of his throat. He had to remind himself how dangerous it all was. Sweaty palms and a racing heart rate soon adjoined to that familiar feeling of butterflies within his gut.

You got him.

Reagan had trained himself into answering to his middle name. The two arranged the time of the meeting to be seven thirty, allowing time for Reagan to travel to her house on the Southeast part of Chicago. He decided to take a taxi, leaving his beloved Cougar nestled within his garage.

Opening the door leading out to the garage, he poked his head into the blackness, seeing only the glint of the light spilling out of the doorway and onto the glossy black paint. Reagan pressed the lock button on his keyless entry and watched the amber parking lights flash once, then closing the door behind him and locking it as well. The taxi driver honked the cab's horn as Reagan put some fresh lettuce and chunks of apple in his turtle's tank.

Bye Raphael you be good while I'm gone. Don't go causing any mayhem in the quiet city of Chicago.

He smiled at the small creature that stretched out its neck and eagerly moved toward his dinner. Stepping outside of his apartment and locking both doors upon his exit, Reagan briskly trotted to the taxi and took a seat in the back.

800 Chickory Lane, please, he requested.

As the taxi driver slowly drove away from the apartment, Reagan glanced back for a moment. The garage was like a safe haven, holding his most prized possessions. He looked forward again, reached down toward his chocolate Doc Martens and adjusted the bulge under his sock, sheathed in the smooth khaki fabric, suddenly feeling guilty.

The cranberry and amber colored leaves fluttered from the trees and down the sidewalk as Reagan inhaled a deep breath of musty cab air, coughing slightly. The crispness of the season and the given situation caused him to reminisce as he tuned out the awkward teenybopper song blaring from the front seat. Eva White Reagan had taken her on a date out of sympathy during his senior year in high school. He could still remember the scent of lavender and the softness of her auburn mane. The feeling of shame further swept over him as he mused over his misjudgment of the timid girl. She was the epitome of personified perfection. Images of lust and intimacy flashed behind Reagan's closed eyelids and the feeling rushed over him like rip tide, carrying him into the sea of remembrance. Misjudgment led to guilt. Guilt led to pity. Pity led to her anger and malice. Her haunting gaze was embossed in his memory as the tears were on her headstone.

The canary Crown Victoria came to a violent halt, snapping Reagan awake from the unfortunate and unforgotten tragedy. Upon arriving at Cheryl's house, Reagan took a deep breath before strolling up to the quaint ivory house, filling his lungs with the strength to possibly open his heart and mind. The warm glow of the porch lights was almost inviting. Reagan ran the doorbell. Cheryl answered the door in a long floral skirt and a periwinkle blue sleeveless blouse. Small sections of her coffee-colored hair grazed her jaw line and collarbones, accentuating the French twist that held the rest of her tresses.

A familiar, yet distressing feeling returned to Reagan. I need to keep my guard up, he thought. I can't let her get me into a trap. He shot her a charming smile and stepped inside.

I hope you like seafood, she said to him, filling the Waterford glasses with ice and water.

I made angel hair pasta with shrimp and creme sauce. But desert is a surprise.

She looked up at him with a seductive smile and set the water glasses on the eggshell linen tablecloth.
I love seafood. In fact, he continued with his artificial life story, when I lived on the West Coast, I used to go fishing for lobster with my uncle. They get pretty big out there.

Cheryl disappeared into the kitchen doorway, returning with a large steaming bowl of pasta and shrimp. Reagan continued:

Have you ever been to Washington?

No, she answered. Only passed through Los Angeles on my way to Honolulu. I spent a few years there nursing at one of the hospitals.

Why did you move back to Chicago? Reagan questioned, hoping to pry into her personal details.

It just got too expensive to live in Hawaii. Chicago is a treat compared to Honolulu when you figure apartment costs and groceries, among other things.

Other things? He pried further.

She looked up at him and smiled, merely nodding her head and picking up her silver fork. He decided not to press his luck. Her smile and charismatic qualities began eating away at his police tactics like acid to a piece of driftwood. Cheryl took the first bite of the creamy pasta and sauce. Reagan mimicked her, complimenting her on her culinary abilities after letting the mouth-watering cuisine slither down his eager esophagus.

This is delicious. Let me guess, he looked up in the air, savoring the taste left behind in his mouth. Garlic, parsley, and is that brown sugar I taste?

Very good I didn t expect you to investigate my cooking. But you have good taste buds, I see.

Cheryl smiled once again. It was an honest smile the kind of smile you would get from the recipient of a genuinely appreciated gift. There was something about her that made Reagan give second thought to his internal accusations of her being dishonest, sinister, and most of all a thief and a drug dealer. She resembled his sister in her hospitality, kindness, and natural desire to take care of everyone in her presence.

The clinking of the silverware on the ivory plates was the only sound that accented the soft Chopin in the background. Occasionally, they would glance up and catch each other s eyes, smiling at each other. The only conversation made during the meal was a compliment, made my Reagan, of the arrangement of the cropped Intuition roses, bunched together in a petite, antique porcelain rose bowl in the center of the oval table. Politely finishing his meal, Reagan wiped his mouth with the soft cloth napkin and folded it beside his unused knife.

Are you finished?

Cheryl asked, noticing his cleaned plate. Her sculpted eyebrows rose, expecting an obvious answer from Reagan.

Yes, he said, and it was delicious. Kudos for learning how to cook like a master chef.

He handed her his plate, gently and carefully. She took the plate and the compliment as if they were one.

Thank you, she said with the same honest smile Reagan had admired before. But wait until you try the dessert. You re going to love it.

She disappeared behind the swinging door of the kitchen. Reagan looked around the dining room, admiring a Monet replica that was centered on the butterscotch wall to his left. His feelings were not unlike the mixed pastels in the painting. Maybe I am bound to fail again, he thought. It s no big deal though—I can t make her confess to something she obviously knows nothing about. It probably was that Diaz lady; I ll see about that later. I ll just have a nice evening with her and go home to my turtle. He smiled to himself. Maybe I ll give her a call next weekend. His smile soon faded into a frown when a feeling of guilt swept over him like a Pacific wave. I am horrible
have lied to this honest woman. And just when she reaches out to a
guy she thinks is a patient, I turn out like every stereotypical male
out there—lying to get into a woman's life.

The kitchen door creaked slightly as she reappeared, carrying a
covered silver cake platter. Her smile had changed slightly.
Something was different, though Reagan couldn't put his finger on it.

Ready for dessert? she asked.

I'm always ready for dessert, he replied, sitting up straight in his
chair. She set the platter down on the tablecloth.

Reagan?

Yes? His heart sank into the depths of his stomach. She had used his
birth name. His eyes grew wide as pomegranates.

Well, well, well, it looks like Michael Robinson never checked into
St. Andrews, did he?

Reagan answered with silence.

I've got to hand it to you, Officer Johnson. You gave it a nice try. But
I'm not stupid. You think one little rookie cop is going to ruin me?
You think you can just waltz in to a hospital and put on a charade;
You horrible man.

Cheryl looked at him with disgust, which turned into a sly smile.

How did I know who you were? I tapped your room phone, Reagan.
You took a pretty hard nap after our chat.

Where is Dave Mackey?

Oh he's in the basement—yeah, duct tape, rope, the whole nine yards.
He's till alive, but I'm not quite sure what to do with him yet.

The vixen twirled the cake knife in her hand before slamming it on
the flawless table. Reagan never flinched.

If you're wondering about the drugs, yeah, I took my share of the
extra that came in for those false patients. Morphine, Vicodin, Valium,
Oxycontin, Demerol—it's so amazing how much junkies spend on that
stuff. Everyone was so focused on losing the drugs, they didn't even
notice the missing syringes and needles. Health care facilities really
need to crack down on security. Don't you agree—
she paused, Reagan?

Yeah and they also need to start screening their nurses for criminal
activity before they hire them.

He was cut off.

Oh please, have some sense. The healthcare industry is too starved of
nurses; they won't pay attention to detail. Besides, I'm a saint in my
books. You know, I might just decide to switch professions. I might
just become a cop someone needs to take your place. I've had it
with liars, Reagan. I almost trusted you. Oh well, she shrugged, one
less lying son-of-a-bitch to deal with.

She reached for the top handle of the silver cake platter cover and
lifted it off, revealing a glinting silver and black handgun, adorned
with a silencer.

Did you kill Reina Diaz? he questioned, with a steady voice.

Of course I did. That nosy woman just couldn't keep her nose out of
other people's business. Why does everyone insist on being so
gossipy? It doesn't matter now, though. No one's going to know.

She slowly started to reach for the handgun.

Reagan started to breathe hard, hyperventilating. His right hand
reached up and clutched the tablecloth, wrinkling the freshly pressed
linen. Now coughing violently and wheezing, he bent down
on the floor.

You have asthma? Her nursing instinct kicked in.

Oh this is just perfect. I have to save your life before I take it.

Reagan reached into his left sock with his other hand and pulled out a
small straw, drawing it up into his mouth. Suddenly, he whipped himself up and with great force blew the tranquilizing dart toward the unsuspecting woman. Hitting her squarely in the neck, the tiny dart stuck out of her flesh like a distant white flag on a golf course. She fell to the floor instantly.

Reagan looked around him.

I can’t believe that actually worked, he said aloud, almost startled by the sound of his own voice penetrating the silence.

And the chief thought we’d never use them.

Walking cautiously toward the woman, he bent down to check her pulse. Normal. She’ll be fine for a couple of hours. He took the gun off the platter, checking the clip which revealed a full round. Now time to call for some back up.

Suddenly, he heard a thump coming from the basement. His senses heightened once again, eyes growing wide and ears listening for another noise.

This is like a bad horror movie, he said aloud.

He briskly strode over to the small CD player, switching it off and leaving him in complete silence. He heard the noise again. Dave Mackey, he thought. Either that or they’ll find me chopped to bits in the morning. Finding the way to the basement, he cocked the handgun and assumed the position of the policeman he really was.

Opening the door, he flipped on the light switch. Moving down the stairs swiftly, he held the gun out with both hands and circled around him, making sure an attacker didn’t await him. Cardboard boxes filled with bottles of injectable drugs, syringes, and extra needles were neatly stacked along one of the walls of the unfinished basement. The sound of a heavy book dropped against the concrete floor behind

Reagan and startled him, causing him to turn around and point the pistol in that direction. The dimly lit room at the end of the hallway looked ominous, but Reagan knew he had to fulfill his mission.

Walking slowly toward the doorway, Reagan’s heart thumped wildly under his black silk shirt. Holding the gun in a steady hand, he flipped on the light to the room. There lay Dave Mackey, hands bound behind his back, duct tape over his mouth, and still in his suit from the week before. His hair was ruffled and his eyes gave evidence of just waking from a chemically induced sleep. Reagan rushed to his side, setting the gun down behind him. He carefully peeled back the tape, letting the tortured man speak.

Are—are— Dave struggled with forming words, looking down at the used syringe on the floor next to him.

Are roo a crop? He looked hopefully into Reagan’s eyes.

Yes, and don’t worry, Reagan assured the tormented man, the woman who did this to you is out cold for a couple of hours.

The man exhaled and formed a few more words through his drugged state.

Juss get me the hell out of here.

Reagan smiled, knowing his success. It was truly an honest smile.
the unanswered answer
Heidi Burns

Thank you for being honest. No excuses. That is what I like to hear. We are all busy with our lives because we purposefully fill up our schedules. God forbid we should have a quiet Friday night when no one calls us in planning to go out and cause mayhem. Then why, I ask myself, is it that everyone gets so defensive about their apparently overwhelming schedule and obligations when one of their friends or acquaintances confront them about their neglect of a true friendship. I believe that a person can call someone for the sole reason to confirm that they are still alive and well. At least, then, that person can obtain the peace of mind that the blood of friendship is still flowing through your veins as well as the other person's. That is, if they hold up their end of the bargain. If people continue to follow this pattern of grace, their friends presence only when those friends are available to listen to mindless ranting and complaining, a blockage may occur, inhibiting the flow of warm, fluid friendship. In a manner of thinking, this is precisely how hearts are truly broken. Silent but deadly, ignorant and self-serving behavior kills.

even closer to a snowflake
Heidi Burns

I am sorry as well. But I am glad that you realized your love for that special person that shared your heart for so long. Even as I write this, I feel good about feeling misguided and toyed with. I suppose that minute masochistic side of me dulls the pain by reminding me that pain can also equal pleasure. I now may take pleasure in knowing that it was not your intention to bestow such feelings upon me, but if you both are able to feel the happiness of a sincere relationship because of all this chaotic misguidance, then the situation is all for the better. Others would have rather been spared the confusing and wonder. I will use this opportunity to learn more about myself and others in the process. Sometimes we need to look beyond our initial apparent need for personified anesthetic and see that, in truth, our essential need is that substance that causes the sting of a broken heart in the first place. Even with tears behind your dashing mask of flattery, I commend you. I can already see honesty's brilliant radiance overtaking the sinister lies you may have told that drove her away. If underlying guilt of a guiltless rendezvous facilitated the demise of your deceitfulness, I am further grateful for the chance to help in the transformation. I raise a virtual half-full glass to you for good luck and strength, for you are well on your way.
I remember him bloated and pallid, floating gently dead atop our aquamarine swimming pool. He must have been there for hours. I remember his rich blue eyes the eyes I had gasped at when he was born wide open and empty. His usually tousled blonde hair lay wet and plastered against his forehead, and the dead blue of his lips was especially prominent against his pasty flesh. His tiny red flip flops sat at the edge of the deep end of the pool, directly in front of the giant, inflatable green alligator that bore a toothy, mischievous grin. The temperature was pleasant and an inconspicuous breeze seemed to randomly float amongst the leaves of the Aspen. It was an otherwise perfect day.

I remember the first conversation I had with the man I would marry. He sat down next to me on the first day of Metaphysics my third year at the university. It seems funny now that we met in a class about questions of being and the origin of life. Maybe not funny, but sad. He wore low top navy blue Converse sneakers and equally low socks; when he sat down I could see his ankles. I deliciously wild head of thick blonde hair swarmed above his forehead and partially hung over his black thick-rimmed glasses, tamed by a ragged Red Sox hat. His face was not attractive in the conventional sense, but it knew things. A pair of faded jeans hung from his skinny frame. I immediately noticed the outline of a pack of cigarettes in his back left pocket as he turned to hang his jacket on the back of his chair; I guessed they were menthols by the smell of him. Menthols and coffee and maybe a shower. He smiled at me and said:

I m Adam.

His smile was gentle and his eyes were a diamond sharp blue.

Abra, I replied.

He paused.
Abra. Like the independent girl in that book by Steinbeck, he said.
I remember being impressed that he knew *East of Eden* and that he
remembered Abra.

Yeah, I replied. Just like her.

I remember the night we talked about dreams on the dilapidated patio
of my studio apartment. It overlooked a used car dealership and a
towering street light. He sat in one of my white, wavy chairs with his
socked feet resting between the wrought iron bars of the railing. A
forgotten pumpkin from Halloween sat rotting into the wood. The
smoke from his cigarette snaked quietly into the night, and I asked
him about his dreams. A comfortable silence followed. He struggled
for a minute, but I sensed that he knew what he wanted to say. He
said he didn’t care about money. He said he cared about art and
writing and ideas. He said he had always felt like there was something
more, that this life was about something. Finally he said:

I want there to be a day when, because of something I’ve written or
something I’ve done, someone is shaken in his or her comfort in
existence. I want to use my life for something. I want to be
remembered.

That night he told me he loved me for the first time. We slept in my
bed under curtains held up by duct tape, under mismatched sheets and
sharing a pillow. He felt like home to me, and I wanted him forever.

I remember when he began writing. At first it made me love him
more. He wrote short stories about characters he invented while
walking through the city each day. We sat on the couch watching
baseball at night, the coffee table cluttered with Eliot and Fitzgerald
and his black and white composition notebooks. He sat there
muttering to himself words about beauty and thoughts about God, a
pencil in one hand and a Menthol in the other. He got up in the
middle of the night to write down ideas. He read to me from his
journal each night:

*We got married. I cannot believe that she is mine forever. I will never
want for happiness. Had a great idea for a character today while
pressed against the window of a subway car. Want to take Abra to
Fenway. She said once that she wanted to go and I think a baseball
story would be good. I can imagine her sitting next to me in the cheap
seats out in right field helping me keep score under an October moon.
I love that about her. Sometimes she looks at me and its enough. I put
down the pencil sometimes because its enough.*

I remember growing older. He began to publish things. Our bank
accounts swelled and things began to change. Sometimes he spent the
night in his office at the university, but he would always send flowers.
I remember a poem he wrote about the smell of a flower and the
smell of a funeral. Something about them being the same. On the
nights that he was home I fell asleep to the sound of his typing. I
asked to read some of his work, but he said that I wouldn’t
understand. Occasionally I paged through the things he left around
the apartment:

_Abra bent down to smell the rose, brushing its petals with her
fingertips as if the whole of it were a beautiful mosaic of sharp red
glass. Poetic. Tomorrow I will send her an iris._

We bought a house on Washington Avenue. He liked the immaculate
swimming pool. He said it would be a good place for inspiration.

I remember when he won an award and we went to a banquet. He
gave a speech. He said something about words being able to change
the world. I looked at him on the stage and felt completely alone. His
hair was cut short and conservatively, his eyes hidden behind tiny
eyeglasses. He wore a black three-piece suit, double breasted, and a
He thanked his wife for inspiring him, and I wanted to laugh. Staring
into his cold eyes as he acknowledged me, I didn’t feel like his wife. I
felt like his character.

I remember when our son was born. I had hoped things would get
better, but he was gone when I went into labor. I called the
ambulance. My water broke in the kitchen. I sat in the wet puddle examining the hexagonal pattern of the linoleum and thinking about what I had said to him that night on the patio about my own dreams, and wondering what he might write about this scene. A paramedic came to take me to the hospital. I loved our son instantly, and instantly felt old and alone and abandoned. The doctor handed him to me, wrapped in a blue blanket.

Congratulations, Abra, he said with a smile.

His was tiny and warm, his soft pink skin gathered in folds around his wrists. He stared up at me with Adam’s diamond sharp blue eyes, and I felt like a human again.

He arrived as they were rolling our son down to the nursery. He gave me an obligatory kiss on the forehead and suggested that we name him Kenneth after his dead grandfather. I agreed, but he was gone when they came with the birth certificate. I penciled in SIMON JAMES.

I remember when he finally took me to Fenway. We sat in the box seats behind home plate, next to executives and the men with the radar guns. Simon was five and wanted a foam finger.

Not in the box seats, Adam told him.

I remember remembering sitting on the couch with him when we were still in the university, and watching the Red Sox on television. We drank cheap beer and ate popcorn, and kept score in those composition notebooks.

I remember that perfect summer day a year later. He was at home, in his office, and I asked him to watch Simon while I went downtown for a birthday gift. I came home. I heard Adam fumbling around in his office, and I knocked on his door.

Where’s Simon, I asked him.

His room. Watching something on TV, he replied.

I heard the television on in Simon’s room, but it sounded like a news program. I walked down the hall to find the room empty. His clothes were laying in a heap on the floor, his socks and tennis shoes tossed haphazardly toward his closet. I turned off the television and went downstairs, through the kitchen to the patio doors that led to the backyard and that swimming pool that Adam loved so much. It was there that I found our son.

I called the ambulance to take him away. The pushed his body to the edge of the pool with the long pole and net that we used to collect debris. A chubby paramedic fished him out of the water and laid his cold body neatly in a body bag. Adam gave them the number of a funeral home.

I remember that night. The typing across the hall ceased, and I heard him fumbling around on the table where he kept his keys and cigarettes. I heard him leave the office, go down the stairs, and open the patio door. I went to his office and unlocked the drawer where he kept the loaded gun. I sat down in his leather desk chair and looked around the room. Above the teak desk hung The Persistence of Memory in a smart black frame. There were no photographs. His degrees and diplomas hung neatly on the wall, above the mahogany bookcases and office equipment. I wondered what I had done wrong.

I remember the tears streaming down my cheeks, dripping onto this notes and into the keyboard. I thought about my dead little boy, and how he had never known his father the man I had fallen in love with talking about dreams on a patio one November night when we were young. I wondered if I had ever known his father, and wished that I could remember what I had told him about my own dreams. I wished he had asked me more than once. I hated this man whose leather chair I sat in, whose name was engraved in plaques and written in calligraphy on certificates framed in ebony.

I took the gun and walked down the stairs, through the kitchen to the patio doors that led to the pool. A gentle rain fell from the dark
heavens. Adam stood next to the deep end, staring off toward the East and smoking a cigarette. He turned when he heard me come through the doors. I raised the gun and pointed it at his head. He froze. My hands shook and my throat contracted in pains as my eyes spilled over with tears for the three of us.

Today I was shaken in my comfort with existence, I said.

He looked at me blankly.

What? he replied.

He didn't remember. I pulled the trigger and the bullet hit him squarely between his eyes. He fell backward into the pool with an enormous splash and disappeared for a moment before floating to the top. The neat hole between his eyes was misleading. The back of his head spilled out into the pool in a mass of blood and matter. His eyes lay wide open and raindrops fell violently onto his irises. His body drifted toward the center of the pool, nudging the giant inflatable green alligator with its toothy, mischievous grin. I went inside to call the ambulance. Now we were all dead.

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**Snare**

Hugo Petersen

As far as I can tell I'm currently in a hostel well within East Germany. Probably just outside Hanover. It is here that he receives reports from returning field agents and interrogates captured Russian and East German nationals. With that ever-present pack of Kools in his shirt pocket, the room hangs heavy with the smell of smoke, sweat and fear. His penetrating eyes show that he has given up such ideas like mercy long ago, his thick reading glasses the only thing mercifully tempering his gaze. Despite the murky haze, a gold ring glistens through the darkness speaking of a distant promise. It is hard to imagine this calculated man being a husband or a father. The kind of world that carved deep lines into his face now shares these small fragments of decay with the passing of many souls. His questions come clear, direct, and firm. There is no need for him to include threats; he is providing all the prompting necessary. The fresh scent of iron and the lingering sight of crimson are only seconds away. The only hope now is that the tender blackness of unconsciousness will come sooner rather than later. I will not talk.
burnished mail
Hugo Petersen

The early morning sky was overcast. Mist still hangs over the islands of snow that huddle in the shadows of a thick wood. The soldiers night camp was always cold and wet, or hot and muggy. Either way, it was always miserable no matter what time of the year.

Wolff.

I heard my name resonate through the cold and moist spring air.

Wolff.

After the second call, I turned to see who was interrupting my only chance at solitude before the long day's march. It was Mac Neal, an insane Scot, who though a series of mishaps joined our party three months earlier, seeking to survive the winter. Mac Neal was a short but surprisingly strong man for his size, with a face that has probably scared many an unsuspecting barmaid. Normally, he does not talk to me unless I am translating his ramblings to the rest of the camp, whose ears are not trained for his heavy brogue. I was sure I would end up in the middle of whatever dispute was left over from the night's campfire drinking. Though my dismay at seeing him this early in the morning, I could not help but note that he seemed quite walted down in his dew-soaked woolen clothing. He must have just slept where he passed out last night. Wouldn't be something new.

Don't you just look pretty in your chain-mail, Mac Neal blurted out.

He was obviously feeling the effects of the night's revelry as he sat on his mossy log beside me.

And you look like a soggy old dog that has seen better days,

I said with a snicker.

Why don't you prepare to move out before you recount to me the stupidity of last night, I said, putting on my battered helmet.

Sorry to say, but I am not quite so willing to go running into a rain of arrows for Old Buzzard Nose, he blurted out, making no point to keep his voice relatively low.

Bothering to live all winter makes no sense if I get killed before summer, but I suppose taking a few Brits with me to the underworld will have to be solace enough.

At this moment, I was grateful that his voice could not be understood by many around us, but still not everyone in the camp would approve of his whining tone this early least of all La Hire. Not half of them could even understand his words, but still I looked around to see if Mac Neal was noticed.

The number of nationalities present in the camp continued to strike me as odd. There are Franks, of course, but the Germanic tribes, Spaniards, Burgundians, and Vikings such as myself made up the bulk of this so-called army.

I'm not being paid to sit around and twirl my hair. I was paid to kill English, I said with resolve.

I fight no matter who in Valhalla likes it.

With that, Mac Neal stormed off before I could say anything more. I was just glad some other poor soul would be forced to deal with him.

Lord de Graville, nicknamed Old Buzzard Nose for his extremely pronounced, beak-like nose, was the financial backer of this mixed band of mercenaries. La Hire, the leader of Graville's rabble of men, emerged from the only tent with standing room. La Hire was a foreboding man that led his soldiers with shouts and curses. He was one of the few men to have plate-mail armor, even though he only wore his breastplate. He did not fight on horseback.

Alright you sickly cows, it's time to meet your Maker. Get out of here and try to line up if you have any brains, La Hire announced with his normal lack of grace. The camp filled with the clattering of metal, along with the murmur of several different languages. The gaggle of

https://openprairie.sdstate.edu/oakwood/vol2/iss14/1
men stumbled about. Many of them were still drinking despite the dawn.

At least I know French, I told myself.

Once the mob started to form some resemblance to a formation, La Hire began to utter his orders for the day:

We are to pack up and set out for Chalon. Get ready to earn your keep, as there shall be a bloody battle ahead of you ugly swine. There will be many Brits to meet your blades. We shall be in Chalon before nightfall.

I set back my sturdy lean-to, which has served me well for several seasons with minimal repairs. I collected my meager belongings and was ready to leave before much of the hung over men reached their raged shelters. Sitting there, I had time to think of the sea and how long it has been since I have smelled its briny scent.

I have been in France far too long, I told myself.

The weighted down men started a slow march after an ear-ringing shout from La Hire that echoed through the dense wood. La Hire still walks with the men though he can afford a horse. This sets him apart from nearly all knights. I would swear he has good Viking blood flowing through him, but that idea quickly vanishes once he sets foot atop a boat. Even simple river crossings on barges make him ill.

It is a full day’s march to Chalon from Patay and I hope we get a good night’s rest when we arrive. I can trust myself to inner battle after holding my belongings all day, but being able to trust all my comrades to do the same is quite another matter. Many among us are hardened from battle, but there have been quite a few new additions to Lord de Graville’s army since last fall. The scatterbrain Mac Neal is the only one that I consort with, at least until the spring wheat is weeded away by summer. One must be hard and lucky in order to survive these days of war, but I think Mac Neal is crazy enough to do it.

The worn, dirt road to Chalon is muddy. The spring thaw has turned that world into mud. There is no way for carts to be pulled through it, and men can barely trudge though it. Mud is the woe of every soldier, especially the British longbowmen in battle. When the battlefield is mud, the longbowmen have that much more time to choose their target. When summer hits, the knights at least stand a chance of getting to the bowmen, but that is months away, and until the earth becomes solid again the battlefield belongs to them.
thoughts on a stroll
Heidi Burns

What are the chimes for? It seems more ominous than encouraging, adding a trudge in my step rather than a spring. The weather is not bad. I would say that it is fairly livable for big game road kill season.

Flashback my sister is in the hospital and my mom will not let me see her because I have school in the morning. Katie's car is totaled and it is all downhill from there. They drove to the scene to find the buck, only to see him decapitated by an envious hunter.

A guy I recognize from a party struts by, reminding me of my Iguana when he puffs out his chest in fear and defense. All but the scales. Easy, boy, for mating season is almost over.

A Buick stops short in front of me, avoiding a girl clutching her cigarettes as if her whole world will crumble if she drops them. I recognize you. Your ignorance to students transcends your office in the campus streets. Move it along and watch the lead foot.

Almost there. I see myself in the glass door ahead of me and wish I hadn't. I have confidence as long as I do not see everything in full length. I sigh, realizing that I would rather have chicken legs than be plagued with obesity.

I wonder if he knows that his hat is falling apart. I wonder if he realizes he never called me. Why did you even ask for my phone number?

There comes a point when we must stop asking ourselves the age-old question of why things happen. They simply happen, perhaps to test our degree of tolerance for human drama.