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The Myth

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THE MYTH

BY

PAUL MESKE

THESIS

SUBMITTED IN FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF

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IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL, EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY
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Abstract

The Myth chronicles a few days in the life of a young man in search of his place in the world. Through flashbacks and discussions concerning choice and purpose, Adam tries to carve out a life for himself after everyone he knows melts away. Adam discovers many things about himself and how the people around him come to embrace their choices. In the end, Adam attempts to make his own choice and to land somewhere nice and peaceful.

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Preface

Literature provides people with varying forms of fulfillment. Some people turn to literature for an escape, hoping to dive into another world where the happy ending may be a possibility, but other people turn to literature to discover truth, digesting information from various intellectuals to form a complete view of the world. This story, The Myth, pictures a simple world full of different people searching for their meaning. The way the author views their journey may differ from the way a reader views their journey, but “[m]yths have no life of their own. They wait for us to give them flesh” (Lyrical, 141).

Throughout the writing of this story, the characters travel down various paths, each of their own choice. Discovering what the characters need to do and what they should do to realistically connect with a reader proves to be a challenge. The writer discovers how “one speaks in one’s own language, one writes in a foreign language” (Words, 164). The tactics an author uses to captivate a reading audience vary greatly from the way a speaker approaches a speech. During this process, the writer discovers how the use of a different tense, switching from first person to third person, and engaging with different characters, incorporating many sub-plots focusing on the protagonist’s history and family, offers the reader more of a chance to participate in the story. Early in the writing process, the story focuses more on the way Adam participates in the world, shutting out the majority of events that bring him to his current state. Through successive drafts, the psychology behind Adam’s actions becomes clearer through the incorporation of flashbacks. Even the stories that did not make it into the final draft influence the psychology of the main character. Choosing which storylines to include, and which ones to omit, proves to be difficult.

Choice plays a major role in the philosophy of existentialism, which takes an integral part in the formation of this story. Adam and Isabelle each make choices to arrive where they are when the reader encounters them. If Isabelle decides not to track Adam to his apartment, the end of the story may change. If Adam doesn’t decide to drive to the casino after work, he would never bump into Isabelle. One of the few constant trains of thought within existentialism states that “[m]an is nothing else but that which he makes of himself” (Kaufmann 349). Through this statement, existentialism places the entire burden of existence upon every human being’s shoulders. In The Myth, during one

of Isabelle and Adam's conversations, Isabelle tells Adam, "control probably scares you the most" (42). Adam stumbles around every corner with his own choices, whether or not they are the correct choices. Leaving his family behind, quitting his motel job, or abandoning Isabelle at a concert are all decisions he makes to bring about his current state. Yet, within existentialism, there lies the opportunity to make a new choice, an opportunity to change. Around every corner, Adam's control gives him the chance to change. This constant opportunity creates a sense of hope and a sense of despair. With so much power within an individual's hands, how does one expect to act upon anything with a clear conscience?

Both Jean-Paul Sartre and Fyodor Dostoevsky believe despair leads human beings to a better place. In Sartre's "The Flies" one of the characters proclaims, "human life begins on the other side of despair" (No Exit 123). Then, one of Dostoevsky's characters declares, "it's in despair that you find the sharpest pleasures" (Underground 8). These authors contest that only through despair can one hope to find truth in the world. Dostoevsky's experiences in the world, and his subsequent novels, illustrate the way hardship and misfortune can shape a person. Dostoevsky stands seconds away from execution, when a last minute pronouncement saves him from death, and then he spends four years in Siberia. Then, throughout his life he struggles with a gambling problem and "turbulent love experiences" (Hubben 55-57). All of these experiences work together to form an incredible body of work, and each work, one may argue, issues from a place past despair. Adam deals with many difficult trials in his life: the divorce of his parents, his inferiority to his brother, his abandonment of his family, and the death of his brother. Through each of these experiences, he continues to search for some semblance of

meaning in the world. His journey into the woods, and subsequent choice to continue with his life, represents a realization on his part of a light somewhere in the distance. Some of the misfortunes befall Adam of his own accord, an effect of choice, but many of the others occur because of the choices people make around him.

Choice offers the power to the individual; however, even though the “existentialist tells us that we are free, and that the meaning of the universe depends on us . . . he also admits that we enter into a situation which is already partly formed” (Murdoch 112). The earliest memory Adam reaches back for comes near the beginning of the story. The memory deals with the moment his father tells him his parents are getting a divorce. Adam’s world forms for him early in his development. The control he exerts over his own life exists over his own life, not over the people who surround his life. From a young age, Adam realizes how the choices of other people negatively influence his life, particularly the divorce of his parents. Another way to view the way choices of people influence an individual comes from The Stranger by Albert Camus. In this novel, Mersault fails to live up to the social expectations of his society. Frequent utterances from the narrator express some of his indifference: “It didn’t mean anything” (20), “I gave up the idea out of laziness” (66), and “it really didn’t matter” (69). The reader encounters these phrases, or a variation on these phrases, throughout the novel, many of them concerning the state of Mersault’s deceased mother. Society views his lack of feeling towards his mother’s passing as a reason to condemn him. In The Myth, the first funeral scene echoes some of these ideas by focusing on the way people attending the funeral participate in the social conventions. Judgment comes down on Adam in the form of his mother and is much lighter than the punishment Mersault

receives. Both protagonists, however, struggle with the gap between how they see and interact with the world, and how other people participate in the world.

Another important facet of existentialism, coming from Jean-Paul Sartre, concerns the idea of the Other. The example above from the first funeral scene draws a great deal from the idea of the Other, displaying how “human life is a ceremony” (Words 86). For every action one undertakes, the Other watches and evaluates. This constant scrutiny contributes to a feeling of dread people feel during daily life. In The Myth, several scenes draw from this idea. The first funeral scene and the second funeral scene mention this idea, but the bar scene displays all sorts of people acting for the sake of people in the bar. Adam sits in the booth and performs rituals which “[h]e doesn’t know if he does . . . for the people in the bar or for himself” (76). This scene, like many of the other scenes, relies on the idea of people acting for the sake of others. Concerning Adam’s actions, he displays how “shame is shame of oneself before the Other; these two structures are inseparable. But at the same time I need the Other in order to realize fully all the structures of my being” (Ego 198). If Adam sits alone, does he still perform his actions? Sartre believes human beings need the Other to recognize their own sense of self. There exist two sides to every action. On one side, the action displays an idea to the self, but the other side displays something for the Other to evaluate.

The meaning people apply to actions reflects the collective view of society. The way someone may read this novel relies on “the meaning of the world as a function of the consciousness of mankind” (Murdoch 111). Murdoch applies this idea to “mankind,” and not to literature, yet the idea carries itself over quite easily. The way a reader encounters a work forms around pre-conceived notions of self and society. By bringing personal

experiences to a piece of literature, a reader either finds something within the work to relate to, or the reader dismisses the work because of the gap between their expectations and the words on the page. Even in science fiction novels, readers need to connect with some aspect of a character or situation, which gives the extraordinary situation a sense of realism. In The Myth, characters often refer to other people watching over the action. Adam refers to the other people at the funeral and says, “Do you think these people care?” (24). This sentiment appears again while Dale and Adam talk in the restaurant. The idea of other people watching and evaluating courses throughout the story. With most of the mentions of other people watching comes a condemnation, treating the view of the crowd as an illusion; however, the idea of someone else watching and evaluating still enters into their minds, even if the view of the Other receives a condemnation. When trying to exist in the world, the self creates enough confusion without adding in the views of other people.

The use of memories to present Adam’s character does not make up the whole of his character, but merely presents different aspects of his character. Each chapter offers a new hope for Adam to change into something else, hopefully better. Within existentialism, there always exists the possibility for a person to recreate their character at any time, for good or for worse. In Irrational Man, William Barrett offers a view from Sartre that “the nature of consciousness is that it is perpetually beyond itself” (245). So, for every action, one never knows if the action is part of who they are now, who they may become later, or possibly even who they were. By delving into Adam’s self, confusion may result. Sometimes, the more one discovers about a person, the more remains hidden. Some of Dostoevsky’s characters’ “penchant for self-analysis makes them no more

plausible than their actions; on the contrary, it tends to increase our confusion” (Hubben 60). The actions and statements Adam makes throughout the story do not make understanding him any easier, because his thoughts and actions do not always make complete sense. The exchange in the casino with his boss concerning the killings in their town offers an interesting look into how Adam views people. He can’t understand how someone can act violently without consciously having some motive. A piece of him still yearns for some sense of order and logic, even within a society that may not have any order or logic. His brother’s death exemplifies the idea of an event happening in the world with no meaning. His brother never did anything to deserve how his life ends. Another example of the gap between Adam’s thoughts and actions centers on his situation with Isabelle, his actions concerning Laura and Cassandra. All of his actions towards these women reflect little of his desire for Isabelle, even though many of his thoughts revolve around her. All of the memories from Adam’s past, his present actions, and what may come in the future are all blueprints for the reader to construct an image of his life.

One reason consciousness never clearly defines itself comes from the fact that consciousnesses are “perpetual syntheses of past consciousnesses and present consciousness” (Sartre 39). The way someone combines each of these consciousnesses forms their own consciousness. With respect to Adam, the progression of his memories throughout the story reflects an idea of his present state of being. The exact state of his consciousness, in keeping with existentialist thought, can never truly be known; however, the memories do serve an important purpose in the story. In A Happy Death, Camus writes in the voice of the protagonist Mersault, “it’s good to have had love in your life

after all, to have had an unhappy passion - it gives you an alibi for the vague despairs we all suffer from” (114). Without offering the reader frequent glimpses into Adam’s past, the despair and listlessness he suffers from would have no “alibi” to speak of; although, simply because the reader views many scenes from his past does not necessarily mean the reader fully understands a character. Great literature always offers the chance for discussion and disagreements over meaning and purpose. To do this, the author needs to maintain a certain vagueness concerning characters and motivation, which when it comes to existentialist thinking human beings never lack. The idea for the killings results from a need to offer the reader some space to speculate on the motivations of characters in the story.

The two funerals in the story offer two glimpses into the psychology of the main character. The first funeral shows him reacting to the death of someone he never becomes acquainted with in his life. The second funeral displays him reacting to the death of his older brother, a person who paves out a life ahead of him he can never follow. At both of these funerals, Adam peers around and condemns the people who display emotions he views as fake. In “No Exit,” one of Sartre’s characters proclaims that he is “long in dying” (39). This proclamation relates to the way Adam views the two deaths in the story. He doesn’t believe people will mourn Ralph. The family members show up to offer their respect and then promptly move along with their lives. With his brother, he knows he will mourn him for the rest of his life, and the family his brother leaves behind will do the same. The parallel between Ralph, the first funeral, and Adam is an important one. In a way, after Adam leaves his family, his pursuit looks to be the

same as Ralph's, to leave nobody behind to truly mourn for him. As Adam's life progresses, however, he realizes the difficulty behind leaving no trace.

The rock from the end of the story symbolizes a connection Adam feels with his brother and also relates to the "The Myth of Sisyphus" by Camus. The funeral for his brother shows Adam connecting to a real death, or a death that means something substantial to him. The emotion from the situation causes him to black out; however, possibly for the first time he feels the pangs of existence and death. In The Brothers Karamazov, the Devil tells Ivan "suffering is life. Without suffering what would be the pleasure of it?" (780-81). Ivan's conversation with the Devil draws out many of the absurdities and desperate conditions human beings live within to this day. The suffering and despair spin around Adam his entire life. Some of the suffering stems directly from some incident outside of his control, but other times the despair burdens him of his own accord. Throughout the story, endless references to repetition and endless tasks populate Adam's world. When he first throws the rock away, a woman and his brother both bring the rock back to him. Camus writes in his essay, "One always finds one's burden again" (Sisyphus 123). With the references to the rock and repetition, the reader may question whether or not Adam truly moves on at the end of the story. By giving up the rock, he may not become a new person, but the hope lies in the action. He makes a choice to pursue Isabelle and accept the role his brother will always play in his life.

In a way, the ending may appear happy to the reader. Adam makes a new choice and decides to pursue one thing, even though in the past his decisions did not always stick. Relieving himself of the rock his brother gives him shows willingness to move on to something better. Many works end on a note that appears positive at first glance, but

upon further inspection merely show a brief change in character. One work that springs to mind is Sartre's Nausea. The ending of the novel finds the narrator contemplating the task of writing a novel concerning one thing and yet hinting at something "behind the pages, at something which would not exist, which would be above existence" (178). The creation of this piece of literature wouldn't solve any of his current problems, but in the future may help him look back on his "life without repugnance" (178). This ending may not strike all readers as a happy ending, but comparing the ending to the rest of the work changes the picture slightly. The protagonist in the story harbors some small hopes in his life, mainly concerning a past love, which never comes to much. His last hope, of writing this story, appears to be a hope that the entire story hinges upon. Perhaps the story may be the one Sartre writes. The ending for Adam concerns Isabelle and his acceptance of the memories from his life. A certain amount of acceptance seeps through the final pages; however, with any story, the ending certainly remains open to interpretation.

Reflecting upon the entire process, the final product appears to be something open-ended and debatable, which follows the line of existentialist thought. Existentialists believe in the value of the individual and the choice of the individual. The amount of weight individuals lend to their choices leads to despair and suffering, which manifests itself in many places throughout the story. The journey through Adam's life illustrates a modern absurdity that still reflects the absurdity of Dostoevsky, Camus, and Sartre. Though each of these men come from different times, each of them still feels the need to search for a meaning behind the contradictions of life. In the end, the search constitutes much of the goal.

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The Happy Ending

Adam scans the casino and shakes his head. People in the casino never change. Even with the killings in their small town, life continues in the same circle within these walls. The casino is special in that regard. Not all places receive the same faces day by day, as if nothing in the town has changed.

Electronic bells from slot machines mingle with popular music from hidden speakers, creating a constant murmur. The music runs on a loop, smoke floats through the casino like a heavy fog at sea, and people seem to materialize from nothing to appear

at the tables. A man standing in front of his table with thinning black hair, pushed towards the front of his head, a bushy black moustache, and a gray-tweed suit stares at the multi-colored chips in the gold tray. The man creeps around the casino like he is waiting to shoot down a ten-point buck, carefully dissecting the various games of chance. He peers at Adam, with his short red hair smashed to the right side of his head and sparkling blue bow tie, and nods.

Adam releases his hands from behind his back, claps them together, flips them palm up and palm down, flattens his greasy red hair, claps and flips his hands again, and puts his hands behind his back. The casino provides a script for every action the dealers need to perform in front of the cameras. During training, everyone complains about the rituals, but after the first couple of weeks, the movements become automatic, and then the habits sneak their way into the supermarket, the home, or any situation where money makes an appearance; it's the cameras, the Peeping Tom in the sky. He revels in the repetition, the simple meaninglessness of his tasks. The routine provides serenity.

A waitress crosses in front of his table. She wears black dress pants and a bright-blue dress shirt, unbuttoned just enough to offer the customers a healthy helping of her cleavage. Red lipstick directs attention to her full lips and away from her dull eyes and sickly white complexion. She shifts the tray to her right hip and bumps some of the chairs at his table into place. The chairs hardly budge when she nudges them with her slight frame.

He fixes his gaze on the third button of her shirt. His breath escapes in short gasps, and sweat trickles down from his armpits. He imagines the woman ripping open her shirt and jumping onto the table, gyrating her hips and licking her lips. He envisions

a version of himself, with perfect hair and perfect teeth, pinning her down on the table, refusing to let her move. She whispers in his ear, and the words come out in a high squeal.

“What are you looking at?”

“Oh, nothing. I, uh, just sort of spaced out. Sorry,” he stammers. “You weren’t supposed to catch me.”

“Supposed to? What does that mean?”

“I thought something else would happen. You were supposed to stop here and move along. That’s the way you usually work. I’m used to your routine.”

“You’re lying. You’re a horrible liar. That’s the best response you could think of.” She throws back her bright red hair with a wave of her hand and laughs. “Do you believe you need to anticipate how other people will act? You think you know strangers that well? That’s insane.”

“What are you talking about? You’re no stranger. We’ve worked together for some time now.”

“So, that makes you think you know someone. I’m not the person outside of this place that I am here. Are you?”

“I guess. I was playing out scenarios in my head. I was preparing myself. What else should I do?”

“That’s all, huh?” She releases a sigh and taps her foot. “Coffee, cocktails, soda.” The words float from her lips without a hint of emotion. She spins on her heel and resumes her duties.

Frustration. The right words and actions never come when he's in the presence of a woman. Babbling about incoherent thoughts, staring at all the wrong places, and trying to explain his mistakes creates more misunderstandings. Words spill from his mouth before his mind can hold them back. His friends could never help him, and his family is no longer a part of his life. His family started treating him like a terminally ill relative after his father left. When he would pass by, everyone would whisper around him, or try not to look at him, fearing they would catch something, like he was a disease. He lost all respect for his family the day before his eighth birthday, and after that his family only accounted for despair and depression. His eyes wander over to a television in the corner and his mind drifts to that day in October.

The theatre hushes. No one dares to make a single sound, as if they may influence the outcome on the screen. He stares in silence, his eyes burning from an inability to take them from the action. An intimate connection exists between him and the hero of the story. If the hero falls from the cliff, he would fall with him. At the last second, a hand reaches over the cliff and lifts the hero to safety. A collective sigh escapes from the crowd. The hero travels down the mountain with his rescuer, grinning. Adam lifts his tiny face, peeking at the reaction from his father. The smile on his father's face reassures him.

Their Sunday routine ends at the movie theatre with a double feature and a giant tub of popcorn. The movie ends, the lights come up, and a buzz builds in the crowd. All of the families gather their belongings and head for the exit. His father lifts him from the seat and carries him from the theatre.

“Do stories always have a happy ending, Dad?” He stares into his father’s brown eyes.

“Well, son, in a lot of stories the characters don’t have a choice. Their actions come from the different ways they were brought up. It has to do with destiny and environment.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Well, son, I’m not sure if it’s something you will be able to understand until you get a little bit older and have had more experiences. Honestly, I’m not sure if I understand or believe in destiny. I wish all stories could have happy endings, kid. I’m not sure if this story did.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, what does Chuck have to go back to? He’s in for more of the same. He’ll probably end up in the same situation down the road. It’s what he is meant for, son. You know how He-Man constantly gets the best of Skeletor. Well, it’s fate. Some people are meant to lose.”

He checks his father’s eyes, seeing a sadness that doesn’t fit with his normal jovial self. “A sensitive young man.” His mother’s favorite phrase for describing her little boy. He senses sadness in other people the way a mystic senses the future. His father’s preparing for a big announcement. He can tell.

“I want to walk, Dad. I’m too old for you to be carrying me around.”

“I don’t want to lose you in the crowd. Somebody could come along and snatch you up.”

“Why would somebody do that?”

“I don’t have an answer for that, Adam. Well, not an answer that would make you happy.”

His father places him on the ground and groans as he straightens himself out. He latches onto his father’s blue jeans. The material feels rough in his small hand. He rubs his other hand on his blue jeans, testing the denim. He shuffles along next to his father, dragging his feet along the red and black carpeting.

“Let’s sit here for a minute.”

They take a seat on a brown bench. His father’s brow wrinkles. Every Sunday, Adam waits for this time. They shop for toys, eat ice cream, and take in a couple of films. His older brother, Harold, never comes along. His father never asks Harold to come with them, and Adam takes comfort in the fact that he has a special day.

“Do you know why I take you out on Sunday?” His father removes his silver-rimmed glasses and wipes them with his white t-shirt.

“No.”

“Well, you’re going to be grown up sooner than you think, son. I want you to look back on these times and think fondly of me, because soon enough you won’t want to do this anymore.”

“I don’t think that will happen.” He swings his legs under the bench.

“Yeah, your brother said the same thing when he was your age. He won’t talk to me now.”

The words hit him in the chest. His legs stop swinging and he whips his head up towards his father. This outing was something special for him. One time during the week to be special.

“You took him?”

“Of course I did. Is there anything wrong with a father wanting to spend time with his sons? Harold never appreciated our time together like you do. Now, he’s busy with his after-school activities and homework. That boy is very committed.” His father pauses. “Listen, bad things happen in the world. You can’t look in any direction without seeing something out of place.” He scratches at the side of his temple. “Sorry, I have a hard time getting things out sometimes.”

Adam stares at his new loafers, thinking of the smell of leather as they came out of the box. A wave of warmth washes over him and his vision blurs. Static builds in his head, and a queasy feeling grabs at his stomach. He squints his eyes and tries to shake this unpleasant feeling.

“I have to tell you the truth, Adam. Our family, well, it’s not quite working the way it should. Your mother and I have been trying to work through some grown-up issues.” His father takes a deep breath. “Well, we’re going to try spending some time away from each other. We think it would be best.”

Adam drops his head in his hands and shakes his head from side to side. This isn’t the way things work. Don’t his parents know they can’t do this to him? Up until this moment, their family had been perfect; his life had been perfect. He participated in the usual childlike activities: tag, whiffle ball, hide and seek, not eating his vegetables, and avoiding bathing like the plague. His family can’t break up. His life would change forever.

“You can’t do that! I won’t let you do that!”

He jumps up from the bench and races towards the door, swinging his puny arms out at wide angles. He pumps his pudgy legs and shoves open the glass door with all the force he can muster. The warm air outside of the theatre invades his lungs. As his foot hits the pavement, a hand grabs the back of his shirt and stops him.

“Let me go!”

“You can’t run away, Adam. You have no place to go.” He turns around and flails a leg towards his father’s shin. His father tightens his grip on his shoulders.

“You’re trying to ruin my life. Why would you do this to me?”

“This isn’t about you, Adam. This is about your mother finding a way to be happy without me.”

“So, it’s her fault.” He shifts his eyes to the ground and sees a picture of his mother, smiling up at him, wrinkles forming around her eyes. His father must be playing some kind of joke on him. How could he do this on their special day? “Can we go home?”

His father lifts him up and carries him to the car. The picture of his mother follows him along the ground, gradually aging in front of his eyes. Her grin transforms into an evil sneer, her teeth blacken, and her eyes roll back in her head. Tiny sobs slip out from him as he buries his head in his hands.

The television in the casino fades to black. He turns his head to see the replacements filing into the pit, which is sixteen tables of blackjack, poker, and craps, eight tables facing each of the east and west walls. His side faces the slot machines, and the other tables face the cashier cage and the snack bar. A tap on his shoulder signals his

break. He takes his hands from behind his back, claps them together, flips them palm up and down, and leaves the pit.

“Fifteen minutes, Adam,” Sharon, his replacement, says to his back.

He winds his way through the casino floor, by the slot machines, video-poker machines, and the bar. Alex Trebek entices people to play “Jeopardy,” in slot-machine form, and the theme from “The Addams Family” outplays the music the casino filters in to distract people. The slot companies play on the recognition and nostalgia factor by taking old television shows and transforming them into an interactive experience. At least the noises from the nostalgic machines are more enjoyable than the old-fashioned bells of normal slot machines.

He reaches the employee door, heads up the narrow staircase, and slinks into the break room. Two long tables reside in the room, resembling tables from a grade-school cafeteria that are only a couple of feet off the ground, with gray plastic chairs surrounding them. A small television buzzes in the far right-hand corner, a line of beige lockers sit along the left wall, and an orange counter for food preparation lies along the right wall. The walls in the break room display a dull brown from the smoke. Each day a new layer of smoke seems to make the room smaller and smaller.

He plants himself in his usual chair, in the corner across from the television, and sighs. Two of his fellow dealers set up a quick game of cribbage. Sam, the dealer sitting two seats in front of him, has a thin black moustache and long black hair pulled back in a ponytail. Sam leers at Ellen, the dealer sitting across the table with blonde hair just above her shoulders and a thin face and figure, and searches her face for a reaction to her cards. Ellen adjusts her sparkling bow tie and grins.

Two cashiers play solitaire. Clarissa, a young girl with black hair in pigtails, flips her cards over slowly. She clicks her tongue on the roof of her mouth and squints her green eyes to try and make the cards into the ones she wants.

He misses those green eyes. He tries to recall what lies beneath her costume but can't quite remember the right shape. A small portion of light brown skin pokes out of her shirt. He licks his lips and static builds in his head, trying to force his thoughts onto something else. He got rid of her before the relationship started going anywhere. She lasted longer than some of the other women in his life, though. The day it ended played out like a rerun of his past ten relationships.

“Adam? What are you thinking about? You have a strange look on your face.” The words escape from her like an accusation.

She reclines in a black chair within his tiny apartment with papier-mâché walls. When the neighbors cook bacon, the aroma filters through the walls. He gazes at her from the couch, eyeing the outline of her breasts under her thin pink shirt. He pushes his head deeper into the couch, focusing on the music seeping through the walls. Meatloaf, maybe, or some other rock balladeer strains their vocal chords to entertain his neighbor with another song about sex and sadness. The two often do go hand in hand.

“Does this relationship seem like a good idea to you? Does our relationship fulfill you?” he asks.

Her glassy green eyes stare at him. She sits, twirling her ponytail around her pointer finger. This is the start. The first seeds dropped. Up until a few minutes ago, she might have thought their relationship was flowing along smoothly, progressing towards

who knows what. Now, the doubt drops in. His doubt, an easier emotion for him to deal with than hope, overwhelms him at times.

“Fulfill me? What is it supposed to fulfill? I want to have a good time.”

“So, this is just a good time for you? Do you see us having any kind of a future? Something other than just lying around my apartment screwing around?” He sweeps his arms in the air.

“No, you don’t. You’re fine with this.” She sweeps her delicate arms in the air and flops them down on the chair.

“Really? You think so?” He swings his legs to the ground and stands up, stepping closer to her, attempting to feel a sense of power by looming over her.

“I think I know so.” She stands up and peers down at him.

Small. The feeling lives in him, influencing every action and playing an instrumental part in his life. Starting with his parents, then his schoolmates, his teachers, bosses, and girlfriends push him lower and lower, shrinking out of sight. This woman believes she can push him around and make him obey her. Her big green eyes, the eyelashes fluttering like the blades of a fan, steal a piece of him.

“You don’t know.” He shoves his lips near hers, contemplating a final kiss. “Do you take me seriously? Do you believe you could spend the rest of your life with me?”

“Are you asking me right now? Do you want to hear an answer?”

“Why the hell would I ask you if I didn’t want to hear the answer, Clarissa?”

“Well, Adam, it’s been a nice couple of weeks. Sorry you had to spoil it like this. Guess I’ll see you at work.” She grabs her coat from the back of the chair and heads towards the door. “You know, you should try to trust yourself a little more and let things

happen to you before you have a chance to sabotage them. Just a little friendly advice.” She slams the door and rattles everything in the apartment. In the end, every relationship ends the same.

Frank, an older man with thinning gray hair and a protruding stomach trying to force its way out of his purple shirt, sits across from Clarissa and flips his cards over quickly, barely taking a second glance at the cards.

Two security guards talk about football, and Adam stares at the television, shaking fuzzy images of Clarissa’s body from his head. A picture of a young woman pops up on the screen. Her body was found early this morning, stripped of her clothes and hair. The newscaster discusses how the death impacts the friends and family of the young woman. He fails to mention how another death like this affects the town. The count reaches an unhealthy twenty-five. As he strains to hear more, the voices of the security guards drown out the television.

“I put down five-hundred bucks on the Lions last night,” the security guard, Sean, says. He runs a hand through his blonde spiky hair and sips his coffee from a small Styrofoam cup.

“What was the spread?” the other guard, Dave, asks. Dave picks up his cigarette from the ashtray and takes a long drag. The smoke hovers around his face, which looks overdue for a shave.

“Ten and a half.” Sean pauses and puts down the Styrofoam cup. “So, I figured they could cover that easy against the Bears. So, the Bears are down by sixteen points and driving down the field.” Sean gets excited and waves his arms around in the air.

Adam glances over at the security guards and scowls. Why do they have to be so loud? An important event is taking place in their town. What could be more important? Sean bangs his fist on the table and sends his coffee flying. The cup falls to the floor and the coffee streams towards his feet.

He gets up from his seat and slides out of the room. The other dealers' chairs screech across the floor, as they head out behind him. Another short break. He squeezes down the stairway and opens the door to the casino floor, heading towards the pit, making sure not to bump into anybody on the way. He studies the carpet, which is sky blue with dark gray stars, and then glances up at the ceiling. A layer of smoke hovers near the low maroon ceiling. Black bubbles bulge from the ceiling and the cameras behind them capture every movement, watching and waiting for someone to make a mistake. He approaches Sharon, taps her out, flips his hands up and down, clasps his hands behind his back, and resumes his post.

He searches the casino for something to fix his gaze on, without losing sight of the chips in the gold tray, to take his mind off of the murders. The red and blue lights, from a patriotic slot machine, direct him to an old man with short gray hair and a black windbreaker. The old man hunches over the screen, his back curved like a hockey stick, and yanks the lever. Nothing. The old man plays again, and again, and again. His posture doesn't change, and his wrinkled features remain in a state of constant tension, willing the machine to pay him. As the reels spin, he journeys from excitement to despair in a matter of seconds. A quick trip up and down the mountain.

The grimace on the old man's face appears uncomfortable, like he needs to relieve himself. Many people take on expressions of painful uselessness while playing the slot

machines. At his age, he may not have a choice whether or not to play. He may be the last of a long family line, waiting to wipe his history from the planet, throwing away the final dollars in his possession and preparing for death. He plays again and gets one red seven, a second red seven, and a third red seven. He leaps from his seat and howls like a wounded dog. His lips pull back from his teeth, making them look like they may jump out of his mouth, and the light above the machine paints his skin red, white, and blue. Midway through his leaps, he lurches towards the machine, grabbing the arm of the machine to keep from falling.

“Hello.” A man with a bright orange jacket stands at his table. The man’s hair is light brown and hangs below his shoulders. The patchy stubble on his face shows small hints of gray.

“How are you doing today?” He shifts gears immediately, changing from observer to dealer without a thought.

“Well, I guess we’ll see. Won’t we?” The man throws down a hundred-dollar bill and takes a seat at the table. He props his elbows on the red padding around the green felt.

The circles on the table, where the customers place their bets, are white, and the name of the casino and the casino’s rules for the game appear in red letters. The Peninsula, the name of the casino, occupies the middle section of the table. He flips the bill face up and counts out twenty red chips.

“Change one dollar,” he announces.

“Change a dollar,” the pit boss, Jack, responds.

He pushes the chips towards the man and shuffles the cards. He could do this with his eyes closed. The way the cards barely rise up from the table and blend together is simple and somewhat exciting. The simplicity and repetition of the movements provide him with a unique sense of stillness. He doesn't have an opportunity to think about anything except the cards. He relishes the mindless task of moving the cards from one area of the deck to another, endlessly shaking up the order. Stack the cards, part the cards, riffle the cards, wake up, wash, go to work, go to work, and wait for something new to come along.

He grasps the cards and stacks them in one pile in front of him, flips the cards on their side, straightens them out, grabs the yellow cut card, tosses it to the man, and the man parts the cards straight down the middle. He shifts the cards around, cuts out two decks with the cut card, and moves the shoe to his side. The man places a wager.

"All bets down." He sweeps his hand across the table and deals. "Twenty, and the dealer shows an ace. Would you like insurance?" The man waves it off, and Adam checks to see if a ten hides beneath the ace. The red light shows, indicating a ten card, and he flips over the blackjack. He collects the man's money and continues.

"Hell of a thing with that new body they found. I was just watching it in the bar."

"What did they find?" Adam asks.

"Well, it looks like the girl was just lying there, letting the guy do whatever he wanted. No sign of a struggle, and they found her resting her head on a feather pillow in the middle of the woods. The damndest thing. He must have drugged her."

"Strange. How do they know she didn't fight?"

“All of the blood was in one place, collected underneath her. She was pretty much bled dry. Disgusting.”

The man wins some hands, loses a few big bets, and bets more to make up for his losses. Each hand brings the man closer to what he wants, either to lose some of his hard-earned money or take money from the casino. With every customer, like every relationship, comes a fresh opportunity for a life-changing experience. The customer's lives could change for the better, and they may reward him for dealing out the cards. On the other hand, customers could become lifelong enemies, hating him for helping each one of them play a game of chance, releasing their frustration from other aspects of their lives on him.

“Are they close to catching this person?”

“No idea.”

A part of Adam wants this man to win, but the disappointment on the man's face fascinates him. The reactions from the customers normally correspond to what kind of money they play with. If it's money they can't afford to lose, the reactions are intense. If they play with money they can lose, they relax and enjoy the game. A wry smile creeps onto his face as the man reacts to the cards.

“Ouch. Do you think you could avoid twenty-one for a couple of hands?”

“We'll see,” he responds. “That's another twenty-one.”

“Well, that's enough for me.” The man throws up his hands and backs away from the table. “Stay safe.”

“Thanks for playing.”

The man walks away, and Adam flips his hands up and down and puts them behind his back. There was nothing the man could do. The cards were against him. The only thing he could do was roll away.

“All right, are you going to be nice to me today?” This customer, Sam, wears an awful brown toupee, a thin moustache, and brown glasses that consume half of his face. Sam is a regular. He throws down two hundred-dollar bills.

“Change two dollars,” he yells out. A silence follows, and Sam starts to tap his fingers on the red padding around the table. “Change two dollars.”

“Hey, Jack, did you hear that?” Sam snarls towards the pit boss.

“Change it, Adam.” The pit boss, Jack, swaggers towards the table. “How are you doing, Sam?”

Jack is around forty years old and wears enough cologne to saturate a village. The scent of morning dew drifts towards Adam’s nose. Jack smooths down his Mickey Mouse tie and straightens his blue suit. He uses the insides of his wrists to hike up his pants and remind himself to puff out his chest.

A fake man. That’s Jack. He wouldn’t know how to be a real person if someone provided him with an instruction manual. The confidence Jack exudes digs into Adam’s skin. A carefree arrogance and self-righteousness drips from his pores, drenching all those around him. Problems slip and slide from his skin.

“I’m doing fine.” Sam barely lifts his head from the cards, and Jack continues to try and engage him in friendly conversation. That is the job. Jack keeps people in the casino for as long as he can and gets them drunk enough, or frustrated enough, to give

away their money. If the customer doesn't drink, he attempts to distract, or frustrate, them with friendly blather.

"How's work? You still over at the same firm?"

"Yes," Sam answers. Adam deals, and Sam raises his bet as all the cards fall his way.

"Did you hear about the snow coming in tonight? Should be quite a storm, eh? I feel bad for all of those police officers out there scouring the woods for more victims."

"That's too bad for them," Sam replies.

Jack fidgets with his tie and hitches up his pants. "Well, good luck. Adam, watch your chips. There may be power problems with a storm coming." He pats Adam on the back and returns to his station, in the middle of the pit watching the tables.

Sam keeps talking at the table to a minimum. Adam doesn't mind because he occupies himself with dealing, counting, watching to make sure Sam doesn't cheat, and acting like a dealer. The cut card comes out of the shoe, indicating the last hand.

"Ah, you're kidding." Sam scowls at his cards. "Damn, the step-mother hand, a seventeen against a ten card. You want to hit it so bad, but you just can't." He waves his hand over the cards, and Adam flips a six from underneath his jack of clubs. He draws a queen of spades for twenty-six. "Wow, that was quite a shoe."

"Yes, sir. You should've seen it before you sat down. It was ugly."

"Yeah?" Sam replies. He gets up to walk around.

"Hey, Adam." Jack sneaks up behind him and props his hands on the edge of his table, drumming his fingers on the felt. Jack shows off his gold rings every chance he gets. "So, Sam is doing pretty well. Why don't you use the alternate shuffle," Jack

dictates. He snuffles and hitches up his pants. "It is quite a damn shame, though. How can something so bad happen in a town so small? I don't understand senseless violence."

"Well, sir, maybe it's not senseless. Maybe there's a point to it all."

"What did you say?"

"Well, maybe there's a point to it all that everybody is missing."

"What's that, smart guy? People are dead. Lots of people are dead. What kind of point could there be?"

"I don't know. I was just guessing that if someone took the time to do what this person has done, there would have to be a point. There has to be a purpose."

"Sure, alternate shuffle, chief." He slaps Adam on the back, disrupting his shuffle and scattering cards across the table, and returns to his station to scribble some notes on a clipboard.

The alternate shuffle attempts to swing the cards back to the casino's favor. By all logic, the shuffle shouldn't work, but normally the cards swing against the player. Sam returns to the table and everything goes wrong. Adam makes every hand into twenty-one. Sam shuffles his chips, counting them to see where he stands, and sweat appears on his forehead, even though the casino remains frigid to keep people awake and gambling.

Sam wipes his forehead and rubs the mixture of grease and moisture into his pants. He grabs at his hair, and for a second Adam envisions him ripping the toupee from his head and tossing it across the casino; no such luck. Sam throws down a desperation bet, about a hundred dollars, and gets an eleven. He digs in his pocket for more money to double down. Adam shows a king of diamonds and checks for a blackjack.

“Son-of-a-bitch.” Sam slams his hand on the green felt and storms away from the table.

“Thanks for playing.”

Even when a player loses, he thanks them for their patronage. It’s more of an instinct than anything. The players don’t always see it as a kind gesture. He flips his hands up and down, pats down his red hair with his right hand, claps and flips his hands again, and puts them behind his back, stretching some tension from his lower back.

The music in the casino, which runs on a loop and rarely changes, provides a distraction during the slow times. The music hypnotizes. Even when he deals, the rhythm of the music influences his pacing. The customers disappear. The music takes him to different places and different times, spinning him along a path with no real end.

The music adds to the distractions in the casino. The drinks, artificial air, lack of windows, hidden clocks, and scantily clad waitresses keep people in the casino from controlling their emotions. Everything in the casino contributes to distraction and time. The longer the customer stays inside, the more of an edge the casino holds. It is all about creating an illusion of comfort.

The old man still sits, hunched towards the machine, dropping in his five-dollar chips. He may even leave a winner if he finds a reason to leave, but that isn’t very likely. The special attention people receive in the casino can be difficult to walk away from. Watching the old man, and thinking about the casino, reminds him of a funeral he attended before he left home.

He expected more from a funeral, but it all boils down to numbness. Only a few more years. Sixteen is the turning point. He plans on putting in two more years for this

family experiment. His mother will be more excited about his leaving than he will. His eyes travel over to her, dressed in a plain black dress, putting on quite a display for her cousins. Her thin mouth and blue eyes tremble with her tears.

The smell in the cramped funeral parlor invades his nostrils. The funk is a mixture of death chemicals and body odor from his closest family members, most of whom only acknowledge him with a nod of their heads. The hairstyles all appear closely cut and neatly shaped.

“Adam, you sit over there and don’t even think of moving. Do you understand?” His mother brushes past him with her instructions.

“I understand. I’m not a child.”

Where would he go? None of these people have anything to say to him. He knows obligations need to be fulfilled. Respects need to be paid and people need to be hugged. He can go through the motions without upsetting the elders. Putting on a show requires too much effort, though.

He approaches the casket, setting his gaze on the dead man’s wrinkled forehead, and plays with random coins in his pocket. He could flip over the casket. That would cause a commotion. What would his mother think of that? If something bad happens in the privacy of her own home it’s okay, but anything that happens where everyone can see it is a disaster. It’s amazing she let anyone know her marriage was a sham.

He kneels in front of the coffin, which is a deep shade of black, and takes a look around. The white lining of the coffin contrasts sharply with the exterior. The man wears a blue pinstriped suit with a black tie. The powdery make-up on his face cracks around the corners of his eyes. His bright pink lips twist up into a grimaced smile. Who

was this man? Ralph, a cousin of his mother's sister's husband, isn't a part of Adam's life. He doesn't look like anyone he ever knew. This man moves along to another place and all that remains is the way people remember him here. He can't think of one memorable moment, except the present one.

He lifts himself from the kneeler and walks to the back of the room. The procession to the coffin continues, each person taking a moment to reflect over the deceased. His mother heads his way.

"I thought I told you to stay."

"Am I a dog?"

"This is not a day for you to act like your father. I want you to do what you're told. Be more like your brother." Adam glances over at Harold, the basketball all-star. "He is conducting himself in the proper manner."

"Is that what happened? You got rid of my father because he wouldn't listen to you?"

"Well, there was more to it than that, but you wouldn't want to hear about that." Those words strike something inside of him. He stores them away. "This certainly isn't the time or place for that conversation."

"What? Do you think these people care? They're just as phony as you are. I could pick out seven people who may care, and each one of those people appears to have themselves under control. What's your problem, mother?"

He rocks back and takes aim at the weakest part of his mother's defenses. "A sensitive young man?" Not anymore. His mother doesn't use the phrase these days. She

utilizes many other less flattering phrases. His sensitive intuitions become ammunition for tearing apart the people who are closest to him.

“Well, that’s enough for today, son. Take a seat over there and don’t speak. I’ll come and get you when it’s time to go. Understand?” His mother twirls around on her heel and returns to her grief.

He turns around and struts out the door. The gentle murmur of the funeral parlor sticks in his ears. Sobs, wails, and generic consolations drift in and out of his mind. They won’t mourn him. They won’t realize he is gone. A grin spreads across his face.

He plops himself on a curb outside the funeral home, kicking his shoes into the middle of the street and flinging his tie after them. Ridiculous. All of this pomp and circumstance for someone his family couldn’t stand. He picks up a rock and throws it across the parking lot. A woman walks across the parking lot, picks up the rock, and approaches him.

“I think you dropped this.” She places the rock in his grimy hand. He tosses the rock again and watches it skitter across the parking lot. The door behind him slams.

“So, you had enough of that crap, too.” Harold walks past him and picks up the rock in the middle of the parking lot. He lobs the rock in the air, catching it in the pocket of his black suit coat. Clothes fit Harold differently. His finely pressed white shirt, thin black tie, and perfectly cut suit display his confidence. Fake silver-rimmed spectacles also offer a sense of his intellect. “You should use a little more shoulder when you throw.” He fakes a throw towards Adam.

“Thanks for the tip. You’re sick of this, too?”

“Oh, I can’t stand these things. Way too much canned sadness. It gets old when it’s someone you never cared about, and most of your family never cared about either.” Harold brushes his hand over his short red hair. “I think they’re all here to see who gets what.”

“That’s about right.”

“Yeah, Adam, but you can’t show that in there. You have to try and play along.” Harold digs out the rock and tosses it to Adam. He tucks it into the pocket of his blue dress pants.

“That’s not really for me, Harold. I’m out of here soon. Who cares who I offend?”

“Just keep it in mind, little brother. It will be a shame when you leave. You’re just starting to get interesting.” Harold walks past him and taps him on the shoulder.

Useless recollections. The lights in the casino cause his eyes to water. A woman with long brown hair and an extremely low-cut red shirt saunters up to the table.

“Hi, Adam. So, this is your other job, huh.” Laura, his boss from one of his other jobs, releases a chuckle and glances around. “How quaint. Will you help me play?” She takes a seat and sifts through her purse. Her thin brown eyebrows match the shade of her hair, and her gray eyes give her a mischievous appearance. She delicately moves some loose strands of hair from her face.

“I’ll do what I can.” She tosses a hundred-dollar bill on the table, and he counts out twenty red chips. “Change a dollar.”

“Change it,” Jack shouts.

“So, you are working tomorrow morning, right?” Laura bats her gray eyes at him and rests her bony arms on the railing.

“Yeah, I’ll be in at eight. Is Lenny here?” Lenny, Laura’s husband, owns the motel where he works.

“He is around somewhere.”

She waves a slender hand towards the other section of the casino. He wishes her husband would disappear with that wave of her hand. Lenny does not deserve this woman. Laura shows up at work with bumps and bruises all the time. He never asks her about them, and Laura never discusses them. As he thinks about Lenny, static slices through his head, bringing on a headache.

He pushes the chips across the table and reaches for the cards. Laura picks up a chip, turns it over in her hand, drags a finger over the top of the chip, and places it on the table. He grasps the shoe and tries to extract a card, but his hand slips. After two attempts, he grabs the card and places it in front of Laura. She pouts at her six. He gives himself a card, places a ten next to her six, and flips over a jack for himself.

“So, what do I do now?” Laura leans over her cards and purses her lips, which he focuses his gaze on, avoiding her eyes.

She aims her stare at a spot above his eyes where a lone bead of sweat waits to drip down his face. A toothy grin spreads across her face, and he re-directs his eyes to the cards, sneaking a quick glance at the top of her lacy red bra, which peeks out above her shirt. A tingling shoots through his hands and he momentarily forgets what he is doing. One thought in his mind revolves around ripping off all of Laura’s clothes, and

another image flashes through his mind of his hands around Laura's neck, holding her down and kissing her. The two images blur together and pressure squeezes his brain.

"Well," the word squeaks out, "you have sixteen, and I have a ten card showing." He darts his eyes to the jack of hearts on the table with a twisted smirk on his face. "If you take another card you could bust, but most people would take a hit. You'll probably lose if you don't."

"Oh, let us see." Laura flutters her eyes at him and runs a hand over the collar of her shirt, shifting her gaze to the wall, allowing him time to follow her hand left and right and right and left, which causes a warmth to rise into his ears. She glances up and catches him watching. "Okay, give me a card."

"That's twenty-one." He flips over his hole card. "I have twenty." He reaches a hand to the chip tray and removes a chip. "There you go."

"Well, that was easy. Is this supposed to be difficult?" Laura picks up the chip and squeezes it in her hand. She tosses the chip from one hand to another and places it on top of her other chip.

"It usually doesn't work out that nicely." He focuses his attention on the chips in the circle, trying to keep the cards coming out of the shoe.

His first girlfriend was a spitting image of Laura. Their features, mannerisms, and sense of humor are almost identical. His first girlfriend, April, taught him an important lesson about trust and anger. When he found out she was cheating on him, he went after the guy. He wasn't up to the physical level of the man who stole his woman and spent two weeks in the hospital for his mistake.

“Well, that’s blackjack.” He takes three chips from the tray and places them next to Laura’s bet.

“Now, Adam, you do not have to be that nice to me.” She scoops up the chips and stacks them in front of her.

“Well, I’m only nice to the people I like.” He lets out a laugh, which resembles more of a snort or cough, and reaches for the shoe.

“That is sweet.” She stacks up five chips in the circle and giggles. “Come on, let us do it again.”

A tap on his shoulder causes him to jump.

“Well, it looks like Sharon is going to be taking over. This woman has never played before.” He looks down at the table, wishing that Sharon could have taken longer to get to the table.

“Oh, I’ll help her out,” Sharon responds.

“Good luck, Laura. I’ll see you tomorrow.” He claps his hands, flips them up and down, and heads out of the pit.

He hurries up the stairs and checks the clock. That’s what he thought, five o’clock. He grabs his dark-red windbreaker from a locker and travels downstairs.

Outside, he digests the fresh air, savoring the release from the stale casino air. A light dusting of snow covers the ground. In between the aisles of cars the plowed snow comes up close to his knees. Now, the snow drifts down at a slow pace, floating down leisurely like a man swinging in a hammock on his one day off in a month. He makes it to his gray bug, fishes out his keys, and opens the door.

The car groans as it backs out of the space, and he turns up the radio to drown out the noises of the car. The car weaves out the winding entryway of the casino and stops at the stop sign by the highway. He could go left and home, or right and to the casino down the road. He takes a right and pushes the car to sixty miles per hour.

As he drives down these roads, he envisions a deer smashing into the fender of his car, antlers crashing through the windshield, driving into his chest. The vision brings a smirk to his face. Horrible things appear more real than fantastic things. His father and brother helped him realize that. Hopefully, today will be forgettable.

Hope

The sun sets and visibility decreases. He unfastens the clasp on his bow tie and tosses the tie in the passenger seat with the CD cases, empty packs of cigarettes, and black socks. Keeping one eye on the road, he takes a hand off the wheel to try and shake his arm out of his jacket. He gets one arm free and switches hands on the wheel. The casino appears on the right, lit up by hundreds of tiny flashing bulbs to attract people from miles away.

He knows why he gambles. Even with three different jobs, gaps of time appear that need to be filled by some activity. Fits of sleep come at the end of long stretches of wakefulness, only when his body refuses to continue moving. At times, he contemplates a fourth job to fill more hours. The car comes to a stop, and he removes himself from the seat.

The warmth of the casino sinks into his bones. The bells and dull roar of the people makes his skin slimy. The bright blue carpet mixes vibrant yellow circles, red triangles, and white crescent moons. Stuffed grizzly bears guard the entrance, the walls are a light shade of brown, and plaques with captured fish line the walls. The contrast between the log cabin walls and the multi-colored carpet gives off an awkward vibe.

A waitress crosses in front of him. She wears a short red skirt, black tights, and a black top. The distraction techniques of the casino work their magic. Cigar smoke mingles with cigarette smoke and cheap perfume. The racing lights around the tops of the slot machines, like the neon lights advertising the different sections of the casino, burn into the retina. The intensity of the lights makes up for the lack of windows; the casino provides a perpetual daylight.

The dealers wear bright-pink ruffled shirts with black bow ties. He scans the tables and spots a lonely dealer with a partially empty tray. The dealer, a young-looking guy with black hair and a goatee, stands with his lips pressed tightly together, like he is concentrating on intimidating the customers, or maybe he wants to look scary so he won't have to work. The few angry dealers at Adam's casino attract the most customers. This one, Bob, has pale skin, and his brown eyes appear bored.

Adam throws down a hundred dollars, and the dealer changes it without saying a word. His hand shakes as he places two red chips in the circle. A rush creeps through his body, starting in his fingers and toes, steaming straight towards his heart. Warmth comes with the rush; warmth and a sense of childish irresponsibility bring a grin to his face. After he places the chips in the red circle, he turns his right hand palm up and down, instinctively brushing off for the cameras. He glances at the pit boss and the dealer to see if they noticed. The pit boss keeps his eyes on his clipboard, and the dealer focuses on the table.

Bob deals the cards, and Adam receives one blackjack on the first hand, a second blackjack on the second hand, and a third blackjack on the third hand. For the first three hands, he doesn't make a decision. With each blackjack, he raises his bet. Bob flings the cards out of the shoe like he is throwing a Frisbee. His arms move quickly and the rest of his body stays frozen in place. The fourth hand wins. The fifth hand wins. The sixth hand wins. As Adam wins, Bob deals faster and faster, willing the cards to turn against him.

"Can I get you a drink?" A waitress sneaks up behind him. "Adam, how are you?"

"Isabelle?"

He glances down at her black tights, hugging her thin legs, and then up into her face. Her brown hair curls around her face, and the make-up on her face emphasizes her full cheeks and long eyelashes. Her blue eyes twinkle from the lights in the casino.

The last time he saw Isabelle was at a concert a year ago. One minute, he was standing next to her enjoying a nice night out with a small group of people. All of the

people in the bar were swaying to the music, which didn't provide much inspiration for dancing, and bobbing their heads. In the middle of one particularly depressing song, he left her in the middle of the swaying mass. After he left, he went to the forest to think. Leaving her was one of the hardest things he ever did.

"What are you up to these days?" Her blue eyes open wide.

"I'm working up the road as a dealer." His eyes drift from her face to her chest, which appears much more ample than he remembers. "What are you doing working here? I thought you were planning to get away from this place?"

"I couldn't go. You know, with everything that happened I couldn't afford to move away from my family." She peeks at the dealer, and her face flushes.

Her ultimate goal was to leave this place, but sometimes life has other ideas. Isabelle played bass in a band with two of his old friends, Valerie and Dale. He introduced Isabelle to Dale, and they hit it off immediately. A mistake. His mistake. He wishes he could take it back.

"What are you still doing here?" she asks.

"Where else would I go? I'm supposed to be here. There's nothing out there for me."

He remembers when all Isabelle talked about was getting away from here. She went to school for psychology, which she excelled at with ease, and wanted to counsel teenagers. He thinks she fell for Dale because he had plenty of mental problems. Eventually, the problems caught up with them, and she got pregnant. Adam wanted to help her. He wanted to be a hero, but heroism was more of a Harold trait. She probably didn't need to be saved, anyhow.

The pit boss, a heavy man with a black goatee and a few brown hairs struggling to stay on his head, gives Isabelle a signal. She nods at the pit boss and turns her attention back to him. "Can I get you a drink? It's on the house." Her voice goes up on the last word, daring him to refuse.

"Sure, I'll have a Manhattan."

She runs her hand over his shoulder and turns to leave. His eyes linger on his shoulder, imagining her hand touching him gently. Her long fingernails, painted a light pink, and slender fingers massaging his shoulders brings a smile to his face. Then, his vision blurs and static runs through his ears. He shuts his eyes and rubs his temples. She returns with the drink, and he has over a thousand dollars sitting in front of him.

"Here you go." She sets the drink down, letting out a small whistle underneath her breath. "It looks like you're doing pretty well."

"Beginner's luck," he responds, tossing a twenty-five dollar chip on her tray. Isabelle keeps the tray against her hip.

"Have you talked to Valerie, lately?"

"No, not really. I heard she was going to New York." He shuffles some of his chips with his right hand.

Valerie. The girl he passed Isabelle over for. By blaming Valerie, he shifted the responsibility away from himself for a while. He always understood who was responsible, though. He knew it was his fault. He could only blame himself for his mistakes. Still, the displacement helped.

“She didn’t tell me that.” She studies the floor, wrinkling her forehead. “She told me she might move down-state with her aunt. Who knows? You could never guess what that girl might do.”

“What do you mean?”

“She’s just a free spirit, to put it nicely. You know. You went out with her.” She glances around the casino. “I heard she’s been hanging around with Dale. Now, that’s a dangerous pair.” She moves the tray to her other hip.

“Valerie’s been hanging out with Dale?” He feels a slight pull at the side of his eye and shifts his gaze to the ground.

For the last four months, he has rekindled one friendship: Dale. The only person, from what seems like another life, whom he visits with on a semi-regular basis. He views Dale as a threat, or a question mark. The fluctuations of Dale’s personality put him on edge. Dale doesn’t have a switch to stop him from saying every little comment that streams into his head, no matter what the consequence. Dale tracked him down to offer him a job opportunity after they hadn’t spoken for two years. He can be a handy person to have as an acquaintance.

“Valerie has been hanging out with Dale for a while, I think. Have you seen him, lately?” She peers down at her open-toed high-heels, and he catches a slight twitch at the corner of her mouth. She always twitches when she thinks she has said something she should have kept to herself.

“I saw him yesterday. We’ve been hanging out for the last couple of months. He hasn’t mentioned anything about Valerie.” He shifts his eyes to the dealer, who appears anxious to take back the casino’s money. “I’m having breakfast with him tomorrow

morning at Joe's. Best breakfast in town." He releases a nervous laugh and covers his mouth.

"Well, if you need anything else, I'll circle back around. We should get together some time."

"Yeah, we should." She leaves the table, and he watches her weave through the customers. He glances at his chips, his drink, and then to the place where Isabelle had been standing. "Could you color these up?" he asks the dealer. Bob takes his red and green chips and gives him a stack of one hundred-dollar chips without saying a word.

"Thanks."

He grabs his drink and heads towards the cashier cage to make the chips into real money. Isabelle tracked him down. All the time he spent running away, and she tracks him down here. He told her what it was like growing up in his household. The way his parents bickered about who would watch over him. The screaming matches about what would be best for him. What the house was like before and after his brother was a part of it.

Isabelle listened. Her simple act of listening helped. A part of that caused him to run away. The honesty shook up memories from his past. Even now, those memories force their way into his daily life, causing brief splits with reality. He wonders if his memory wants to teach him a lesson, or simply haunt him.

He cashes in the chips and shuffles to the bar. The noises of the casino run through his head. The music and the bells dance together perfectly. He turns towards the entryway and witnesses large flakes of snow falling outside. The drive could only get worse the longer he stays, and the lure of the tables is strong. He seats himself at the bar,

separate from everyone else, and darts his eyes around the casino, attempting to lock eyes with Isabelle. Alone at the bar, nervously shifting his gaze, he resigns himself to not seeing her. It's not meant to be. He runs his finger around the rim of his glass, tracing the circle over and over again. Maybe now he is ready for Isabelle, and she is ready for him. A second chance. He reaches into the right pocket of his pants.

Easy Answers

Whiteness splashes him in the face, like the first blinks after a quick peek at the sun. It hurts his eyes. If only he could close them for a minute. Only one car made tracks in the snow ahead of him. He tries to stay close to his side of the road, but the lines are no longer visible. Images of the car sliding out of control and slamming into a tree race through his head. He smiles.

If he grabs the wheel any tighter, he may rip it right off the car. His hands ache from the exertion. He turns on the high-beam lights, but they make visibility decrease even more. A set of lights flashes ahead in the road, and he squints his eyes to try and see through the snow. He spots a car and taps the brake, bringing the car to an unsteady stop.

The wind whips against the car door as he forces it open, and snow funnels inside, spraying him in the face. He squeezes his body out of the door and lets the wind blow the door shut behind him. The snow swirls, and he pictures himself being lifted up from the ground and tossed into the woods. Snow sneaks through his gloves, and the cold forces itself on his hands. It stings. The person in the car wipes some moisture from the window and opens the door. He turns his head back to the road, scanning for headlights.

“Do you need some help?”

“Yeah, I lost control and spun off the road. I don’t have any way to call for help.” Her voice sounds familiar, but she wears a purple scarf around her nose and mouth.

“I could give you a ride. My car is right up there.”

“That would be great. What’s your name?” She sticks out a gloved hand towards him.

“Adam. What’s yours?” He grabs her hand.

“Isabelle. Is that really you, Adam?” She grips his hand and pulls him close.

“Thanks for stopping. You saved my life.” She releases his hand and grabs him by the shoulders. She wraps her arms around his waist and hugs him. “I wouldn’t have thought you would stop to help some stranger in the middle of nowhere.”

“Well, I wouldn’t have thought so either. Sometimes, fate surprises you. Come on, I’ll take you to my car. We can talk about my character later.”

They reach the car, and he opens the door for her, grabbing the assorted objects on the passenger seat and tossing them in the back. Isabelle unwraps her scarf and puts it in the pocket of her jacket.

“Sorry about the mess.”

“That’s fine,” she says, a smile crossing her lips, which causes him to blush.

That smile. That knowing smile. She knows everything. Even after all this time, she probably still knows more about him than he does.

He opens the door and slides into the seat. He glances over at Isabelle and struggles with a smile. The smell of the car pierces his nostrils, a mixture of smoke and body odor. The car starts on the first try, and the tires find a grip in the snow.

“Do you mind if I smoke?” she asks.

“No, go right ahead.”

She takes out a pack of cigarettes and pushes in the lighter. The lighter clicks, and she grabs it, like a life preserver. She lights the cigarette and sighs with her exhalation. She opens the window, a crack, to let the smoke filter out of the car. The air from the window causes the temperature in the car to drop.

“So, where do you need to go?”

“Home, I guess. I don’t know if I can do much about the car. The weather is pretty craptastic tonight.” She takes another drag of her cigarette and flicks some ashes out the window. “I live on Third Street with my parents. They help me with Sebastian. Where are you hiding these days?”

“I’m still living off of Walter. Do you remember the place I had with Val a few years back?”

“Oh, that miniscule apartment. Why would you stay there? That’s probably why you two broke up. Two people shouldn’t live in a place that small.” She takes a drag of her cigarette and blows it towards him. The smoke smells sweet.

“Well, it’s only me now. How is Sebastian? He’s about two, right? Does Dale help you out?”

“No, after I dumped him he didn’t show much of an interest. He didn’t show all that much interest before I dumped him, either. Prick.” She tosses her cigarette out the window and rolls it up. “Are you feeling all right, Adam? You look tense.”

“No, but that’s normal.” He cringes as the words escape his mouth.

“What’s wrong? It’s not still Valerie, is it?”

“It’s not that. Have you heard about the killings around here?”

“Come on, who hasn’t. We haven’t had anything like that happen around here for as long as I can remember. Usually, the news covers some sappy feel-good story about squirrels who received heart transplants or something.”

“Yeah, I know. There’s something about those killings that is eating at me. I’m not sure.”

“What do you mean you’re not sure?” She shifts her position in the seat and turns towards him.

“Right now, my life is my work. My work defines me as a person. Outside of that, there isn’t any substance. When I’m not working, I’m sleeping or drinking. I want something more meaningful to define me. I read all of these books about people traveling around the world, experiencing fresh and exotic things. I want that. I want new and exotic. All I have is static.”

“Are you saying you want to kill people to make a difference in the world?”

“No, you’re not listening.”

He turns his head towards her and opens his mouth, but the car loses its grip in the snow. A sense of uselessness paralyzes his body, and the car spins. He steps on the brake. The wheel feels like it may jump right out of his hands, and Isabelle releases a small shriek. He tries to remove his hands from the wheel, to let the car go where it pleases, but his hands stick. The car slides to a halt on the side of the road. A rush of pleasure courses through his veins.

“So, static, huh?” Her tone would never suggest she had just been out of control.

“My life spins around in this circle, endlessly repeating itself. With this new inconvenience, all the people in my life have changed.”

“People are dead, Adam. That’s not an inconvenience.”

“I’m not trying to minimize the horrible events that seem to be happening almost daily now, but how it is impacting the people in our area. It’s not just me. These killings are influencing our town.”

“But, then, why are you upset?”

“Why shouldn’t I be? I have no control over any of this. You don’t, either.”

“Everybody feels like they don’t have control at times. Make your own way.”

She takes a breath and touches his shoulder. “I can’t say I understand exactly how you feel, but my life is similar. I’ve lived in this small town my entire life. I’ve seen the change in people. I’m not sure it will stick, though. Once this blows over, the town will go back to the way it was. You can’t let it beat you up. Why not try to stand up and start something of your own? I don’t know. Start a family.”

Family. That word stings him. For the majority of his life, that word always seems to be spinning around near the back of his head. Family takes on all kinds of meanings for people. Some people see it as an uplifting word, a spiritual word, or a meaningless word. For him, the word is a curse he tried to erase from his life and memory. Erasing them from his life was much easier than erasing them from his memory. Isabelle adds to the confusion. Thinking about her with her little boy makes the hole inside of him feel larger.

“Yeah, that’s no problem at all. I could have my pick of the litter out there. I’m quite the catch.”

“Oh, come on, Adam. Find what you want and go get it.”

“What for? What would that achieve?”

She stares at him with a forced smile on her face. “Nothing.” She throws back her head and laughs.

“Nothing?”

“What do you expect to find? Nothing can solve all your problems. What do you want to feel comfortable with anyway? Wouldn’t it be boring to be comfortable all the time? All super-cool and unfazed by the world. You have to understand pain to experience joy. Don’t let the world beat you.”

“Is that what they taught you in your psychology classes?” He raises his eyebrows and stares at her.

“You control your actions. You control your destiny. You know you do. Your control probably scares you the most.” She laughs, which sounds desperate and calm at the same time, and taps him on the shoulder.

The laugh rings in his ears, reminding him of his mother's laugh. After the divorce, her laughter was infrequent at best. Her laugh before the divorce, though, was like wind chimes on a fall afternoon. Nothing else in the world brought a smile to his face like his mother's approval. He never gave his mother much reason to laugh after his father left. One time in particular pricks at his mind.

"Adam, do you have any idea what you've sold!" His mother howls up the stairs. "You're not the only one in the world, you know. Do you understand?"

"Yes, I understand!"

His room is a mess. Papers, clothes, magazines, candy wrappers, and tissues lay scattered on the black carpet. He told his mother he was leaving for college and never coming back. That's not what she is yelling about. She's yelling because he sold something that belonged to her father, or she thinks he sold it. His mother was connected to her father in a way he could never understand. Their family stayed together. His family couldn't manage that.

His mother pushes and pushes, as if trying to make up for tossing his father away. Nothing she could say could ever put his father back in that house. Still, it's time for him to move away. His father has been gone for ten years.

This room provides a release. It's a release he seeks everywhere he goes. Comfort. A comfort he agonized over for years and years, carefully moving and arranging each stick of furniture. Now, everything is perfect. Every inch of wall space is covered with posters of Marilyn Monroe, *The Godfather*, and *Star Wars*. His fantasy girl, fantasy family, and fantasy galaxy. Sitting in the middle of the room, legs folded

underneath him, he stares off into space, relishing his crafted comfort for a few more moments.

The news came yesterday. Every single college he applied to accepted him, most of them offering a free ride, but the reply from his first choice came yesterday. His family would have to travel across the entire United States of America to see him. That's the reason he stole his grandfather's Jaguar.

The crime is not as bad as everyone makes it out to be. Nobody drives the car. The damned thing sits rotting in a garage. The car meant more to his grandfather than anything else in the world, even his family. Adam wanted to discover what would happen if he took away something that everyone in his family attached an enormous amount of value to.

"Adam?" His mother's voice slices through the door. "Could I come in and have a word with you?" She opens the door, without waiting for a response, and plants herself on the bed.

His mother is a tall woman, a fact that bothers him to no end considering his own height, with a thin face. Her cheekbones jut out at sharp angles, giving her an ominous appearance. Her clothes are spotless, her black hair sits perfectly atop her pointy-head, and her nails are manicured on an almost daily basis.

"What do you want me to do here, Adam? You know I could call the police. At this point, I'm not sure what's stopping me." She stares down at her nails as if she were discussing nail tips.

"So, call them. I can't get the car back. Why don't you think of it as a down payment on my departure."

“A what?”

“A freaking going away present. Once I leave this house, I am never coming back. You know that.”

“Do you believe you can make it out there by yourself, son? You’ll have to get a real job, arrange your finances, and clean up after yourself. You think you’re ready for that?”

He glares up into his mother’s cool blue eyes and offers her a toothy smile, daring her to believe he can’t make it on his own. It’s a good front, almost believable. Truthfully, he doesn’t know how he will make it on the outside. All of the little things he should’ve been learning in his youth slid off his brain. His progress halted the day his father took him to the movies for the final time. Every positive aspect of his personality turned into a negative.

“I’m not going to call the police, Adam.”

“I know.”

“Excuse me? This is not the time for you to be talking back to me, young man. I am doing you a favor.”

“When have you ever done anything for me? Why did you even have children in the first place?”

Her hand comes towards his face so fast he can barely react when it makes contact. The fire in his mother’s eyes makes him want to say it again. Maybe she can understand pain.

“You’re not welcome in this house. From this day on, you don’t exist.”

“Well, I guess that’s something else I’ll have in common with my father.” He rubs the side of his face, which turns a bright red, and smiles. It will be easier this way. If she forgets about him, it will be easier for him to forget about her. “Good-bye.”

The door slams.

The walls continue to rattle for a few seconds after his mother’s departure. Stealing the car was a necessary evil, and causing his mother to hate him was another. She needs to be secure in her abandonment of her son, accepting of the chasm that has existed between them for all these years. This final act secures the deal and allows her a feeling of resolution. Let her worry about the son she truly cares about, even if she cares about him for all the wrong reasons. Another knock on the door.

“Adam?” He stares at the door, imagining his brother’s concerned brow wrinkling in anticipation.

“Come in, Harold.”

His older brother waltzes into the room, plopping himself down on the edge of the bed. The former basketball star, now moving towards becoming a doctor, possesses every positive trait Adam lacks. His ample height, wit, and purpose force Adam into the eternal background of his mother’s mind.

Harold removes his yellow-tinted sunglasses and glares at him. His blue eyes display his disappointment without a single word. The doctor in a navy blue tracksuit, snow-white sneakers, and an orange headband judges him. His thin orange eyebrows knead together forming slight crinkles leading to his perfectly cropped red hair.

“What’s with the outfit, Harold? Did you run here?”

“Very funny. You know I can’t run. What are you doing, kid? What’s the point of all this senseless anger? You know, I could’ve gotten all pissed off when I blew out my knee, but that wouldn’t have been very constructive.”

There’s always a story with Harold. No matter what the occasion, he can find some significant event from his life to compare the present moment to. The knee incident happens to be a favorite. In his freshman year of college, he was finishing off a fantastic year when an opponent dragged him down from behind and ended his career. The lesson: don’t let life sneak up on you and pull you down.

“Go home to your wife and kid, Harold. This has nothing to do with you.”

“Who does it have to do with, brother? You’re a part of this family. I’m a part of this family. You can’t do this to Mom.”

“It’s done. She doesn’t need me. I’m going to go out into the world and find someone who does need me, someone who wants me.” Adam gets up from the floor and peers down at his brother. “I haven’t been wanted here since the day I was born. Mom already had her perfect little boy.”

“You don’t remember anything positive, do you, Adam?”

“What’s there to remember? It’s just one crappy moment after another. Who cares?”

“You should. Who’s going to care about you out there.” Harold leaps off the bed and waves his arms, stepping up into Adam’s face. “Nobody cares about whiny and incompetent brats.” Harold’s blue eyes pierce through his dull eyes, leaving him with a rock in his belly. The heaviness makes his eyes water and his tiny hands turn to fists.

Harold aims his words at Adam's weakest points, reversing the role Adam plays with his mother.

The brothers stare at each other, breathing slowly, waiting for the other one to buckle and break the silence. His entire life spent under the shadow of this man, this human being who is so unlike him they couldn't pass off as neighbors. He gets the girls, the grades, the athletic ability, and the gifts of forgiveness and forgetfulness. Both of those last two came in handy after the divorce.

"I don't care! Why should anybody else?" His brother drops his head.

"I hope you learn something out in the world. Good luck, brother."

"Adam?" Isabelle nudges him with her elbow. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah." He glances at Isabelle and turns back to the road.

"I'm happy you picked me up tonight."

"I'm glad I picked you up, too." A smile crosses his lips. She smiles back. "Do you want to go for a drink?"

"Sure, we could go to Pap's. I think they have a band playing tonight."

"Excellent."

He taps the accelerator and gets the car moving. The snow lets up as they roll down a hill into town. He peeks over at Isabelle and warmth spreads down his legs. The whiteness fades away, and he closes his eyes. This must be right. They reach the bottom of the hill, and he smiles.

Meaningful Discourse

Banana pancakes. The thought of them makes his mouth water. Maybe the pancakes will satisfy him. He closes the door of his bug, and the warmth smacks him in the chest. It should be cooler, but the rising sun burrows into his body. He spots Dale in his black Corvette across the parking lot. Dale lifts his small frame from the car, moving slowly like an old man, squinting his tiny black eyes to combat the sun. He wears tight black jeans, a black leather jacket, and leather driving gloves. Adam throws a wave across the parking lot, and Dale returns it with a military salute.

“Well, it’s this pit again, huh? Do you have to do the same things over and over?” Dale shoves his gloved hand towards him.

“Oh, so this place isn’t good enough for you?” He shakes his hand, and Dale grinds the bones of his hand together as he shakes it. Dale releases his hand and places his hands on his hips, sticking out his chest.

“Well, I guess they have some of the best grease in town.”

“So, how’s the new band?” he asks, rubbing his hand.

“Good. I’m not going to make the same mistake and date any of the girls, though.” Dale spits onto the gravel and glares up into the sky.

“Have you talked to Isabelle?”

“Are you kidding?” Dale lets out a small snort. “Have you talked to her?”

“Yeah, I saw her the other night.” Dale peers at him with a small smile across his thin lips.

Dale and Isabelle dated three years ago. Isabelle caught him with two girls in the back of their van. Dale knew Isabelle was pregnant, but a child would only restrict a rock star. Dale wanted to live the life, free of complications or restrictions.

“I always thought you should’ve been with Isabelle, and I should’ve been with Valerie. We got it backwards, mate.” Dale runs a hand through his short hair.

“What are you talking about? You didn’t want to be with anybody back then. You wanted freedom.”

“That’s something you don’t want, pal. Let’s go eat.” Dale struts towards the door.

Why wouldn't he want freedom? Normal people want to be free, or control most aspects of their lives. He is no different. Sure, a part of him wants to find someone to settle down with, but that person wouldn't restrict his freedom. Before his family split, their lives were perfect.

The walls in the diner are maroon and black. There are six booths in the establishment, four small tables, and a long counter with red stools. Dale saunters over to a booth in the corner, removes his leather gloves, and drops into the booth with a sigh.

"I hate this damn place."

"Come on, it's not that bad." Adam sits down and grabs a menu from behind the napkin dispenser. "You used to make us come here after every road trip for your egg spectacular."

"Well, people change, man. Most people do, anyway. I haven't been here for at least a year." Dale grabs a menu and flips through it.

The one waitress in the diner approaches the table. She wears a red and white apron, a short black skirt, and a blue dress shirt. Her black hair sits in a bun on the top of her head, with little strands flaring out at the sides.

"So, boys, what do you want?" she asks, staring at her notepad, not even glancing at her customers.

"Could I get the egg spectacular and a cup of coffee," Dale demands.

"I'll have the banana pancakes and some coffee."

"Okay, that will be up in a couple of minutes." She turns away from the table and returns to the counter.

"Well, she's a cheery one."

“Eh, she’s probably just bored with her work, or with life. Whatever.” He stares out the window. “Do you miss it, Dale?”

“Miss what?” He reaches into a pocket of his leather jacket and pulls out a pack of cigarettes and a black lighter.

“You know, how things were back when we were friends.”

“Hell, dude, things are about the same.” Dale chuckles and lights a cigarette. “I miss a part of it, but my life hasn’t changed much. You still think about that?”

“Yeah, that wasn’t a bad time in my life. Well, until it ended. Valerie and I had a good thing.”

“Oh, come on, A. She treated you like crap.” Dale sucks on the end of his cigarette and laughs on the exhalation. “She walked all over you. You miss the group, the stability it provided. Valerie was just a part of that.”

He squints at the window and tries to remember Valerie. She never provided stability for him. A pain stabs him in the stomach. A memory of his first crush rushes him.

“Adam, are you okay?” The woman’s gentle voice bounces off the gray walls of the classroom.

“Yes, I think so.” He glances down at his light brown desk with a notebook, two pencils, and an eraser arranged side by side. “Yeah, I’m okay.”

“Well, then, I’ll continue.”

The teacher spins around to write cursive letters on the blackboard. As she writes each letter, she turns around and selects someone in the class to name the letter. Mrs.

Murakami wears a short black skirt, a green shirt, and a multi-colored scarf. He imagines her flawless brown skin would be smooth to the touch.

He watches her skip back and forth in front of the blackboard, almost dancing on air across the classroom, picturing her speaking directly to him. Her gray eyes bounce around the room and stop to stare directly at him. A tingling sensation shoots through his hands and feet. His vision blurs and a voice comes from miles away.

“Adam, could you come up here and write some words in cursive?” She holds up the white chalk in her dainty hand and stares at him.

“Sure,” his voice squeaks out. All of the blood rushes to his face and lights him up like a neon bulb.

He drags himself to the blackboard, attempting to ignore the eyes that dig into his back. His hand shakes as he picks up the chalk and writes. His hand continues to move as a warm sensation travels down his right leg, pooling around his sock. A smell, a familiar smell, moves its way towards his nostrils. He drops the chalk and runs out of the room.

“Adam! Where do you think you’re going?” Mrs. Murakami yells.

He reaches the door and races down the dimly lit hallway. The clicking of heels follows him into the boy’s room. He throws open the door to a stall and plants himself on the seat. A soft knock on the bathroom door and he jerks his head up.

“Adam? Are you okay?”

“Yes, Mrs. Murakami. I had an accident. I’m sorry I ran out.”

“That’s okay. Do you need any help?”

“Yes.” He opens the stall door and peeks up into his teacher’s eyes. He meets her eyes and turns away.

“Well, let’s see what we can do here.” She grabs some paper towels from the dispenser and wipes at the stains on his dark pants.

“I’m sorry. I don’t know what happened. My head got all fuzzy. I don’t mean to. I get nervous.”

“That’s okay, Adam. Do your parents know?”

“No, they have too many other things going on in their lives. They hardly know I exist.”

“We need to get back to class. Why don’t you stay after school for a bit today.” She smiles, and he smiles back at her.

She walks him down the hall, leading him by the hand. He slinks back to his seat, attempting to shield his crotch from his classmates. He runs everything that happened through his head. The pictures in his mind turn to fuzz, loud and screeching fuzz. Mrs. Murakami continues the lesson on cursive. Her voice calms his nerves and brings him to the brink of sleep.

“What happened, Adam?”

“What, Billy?”

“Why did you run out of here like that?” Billy, the one kid in the class who talks to him, has sandy blond hair and bright blue eyes.

“I needed to go to the bathroom really bad.”

“Hey, are you going to your Dad’s after school?”

“No, I can’t. It’s only Thursday.”

Mrs. Murakami finishes the lesson. All of the kids grab their jackets from the hooks in the back of the room and stream towards the door. He remains in his seat and twirls a pencil between his fingers.

“Hey, are you coming?” Billy stops at his desk.

“No, I have to stay to talk with the teacher.”

Billy dashes out of the room without a second look back. Traitor. He won't even wait to see what Mrs. Murakami has in store. He gets a new friend every year. The teacher forces someone to go out of their way to make friends with him. Every year, one friend drops out and another friend drops in. He doesn't know if he wants a friend, but the kids never give him a chance to decide for himself.

After the children clear out, silence weighs on the room. Pressure pushes down on his shoulders and chest, taking away his breath. Small gasps. That is all he can manage, and even that is a struggle. It wasn't always like this. He wasn't always like this: weak, afraid, struggling, and insecure. He can't remember when things changed.

So, what's the problem? For him, well, there is no problem. Things are the way they are, and nobody can change his destiny. Somehow, the words seem familiar, maybe something his father once tried to tell him. This condition of being, maybe not in so many words, but in some sense. He doesn't even get those words, but they're going to spin around in his mind for a while.

“Adam.” Mrs. Murakami sits, with her hands folded, and stares into his eyes.

“Are you still with me here? Do you understand what I've been trying to say? You need to get some help.”

“Help?”

"I know what's been going on with your family. I think it's having a negative influence on your work and relationships with your classmates."

"I don't understand."

"That's part of the problem. You're still a little young to try and deal with everything that is going on around you. Can you talk to anyone?"

"My brother, maybe."

"Oh, Harold, he was a great student. Far ahead of the other students. You should talk to him."

"Thanks, Mrs. Murakami. I think I'll go home now. Thanks for your help today."

He collects his things and heads out the door. The wetness in his shorts provides him with an awkward comfort. He heaves himself against the door and blinks his eyes to adjust to the blinding light. After looking directly into the sun, his vision becomes spotty. Mrs. Murakami told him his brain and his body were out of sync. She told him he needed to keep certain feelings under control. His mother constantly tells him that at home.

He strolls into the field behind the school and plants himself in the middle, glaring up at the specks of clouds crossing the dark blue sky. The clouds struggle to break from the sky, reaching out for him. He takes a deep breath, inhaling the green of the grass and the black of the dirt. He closes his eyes.

"You liked the routine of it all. It's why we come to this place. It's a comfortable setting," Dale says.

“What?” He glances around and gathers himself. “Well, there are no comfortable settings. It’s more like a familiar setting,” he retorts. “How do you know what I wanted? You didn’t know what you wanted.”

“I got exactly what I wanted,” Dale replies. “Did you see the girls that Isabelle caught me with? They were gorgeous.”

“You gave up your child, Dale. Was that worth a fling?” He turns his head to the window.

“Well, Adam, I didn’t stay with somebody because other people wanted to be with her. I certainly wouldn’t stay with someone because I was obligated to. Come on, Isabelle wanted to get pregnant.”

“What?” He avoids eye contact with Dale. “You have no idea. What is wrong with you? Why are you talking about this here?”

“What? Do you think these people care?” Dale waves a hand towards the man at the counter wearing overalls, a woman at a table feeding her baby, and an old man drinking coffee and smoking a cigarette in a booth. Those words. Those words rolling around again. Do these people care? “They don’t care.”

“What do you want me to say?”

“Come on, Adam, just think about it. Really, just think about it and then forget it. That’s the best thing you can do. Move on. Don’t pawn off your problems on somebody else.”

“Dale, you don’t know what you’re talking about. You don’t know what I feel. Hell, I would wager you don’t know what you feel. You don’t know who you’ve hurt.”

“Well, if you don’t want to listen, or if you only want to hear what you want to hear, I can’t help you.”

“Are you okay over here, boys?” The waitress puts their two plates on the table. “I would appreciate it if you would keep your voices down.”

“Well, I would appreciate it if you got us our damn coffee,” Dale shoots back.

“Just a second.” The waitress walks around the counter and grabs the coffee pot. She flips over the stained mugs on the table and fills them. “There you are. Enjoy your breakfast.”

They eat in silence. Adam stares at the clouds out the window, and Dale scowls towards the waitress, who refuses to come to the table and refill their coffee. He glances at the dent in Dale’s nose and thinks about caving it in even more. He sees himself lifting Dale up and throwing him onto the floor, beating him senseless with his fists and feet. He doesn’t know Adam.

“So, how is the casino working out for you?” Dale asks.

“It’s not bad.”

“Which job do you got today?” Dale asks, reaching in his coat for a cigarette.

“Good morning. This is the Bedtime Lodge, how can I be of assistance?” He switches from his normal tone to a computerized voice.

“Do you think you’ll last there?”

“I think my boss’s wife wants to sleep with me. I think she wants to sleep with everybody, though.”

“Well, what’s wrong with that, man?” Dale snorts through his nose. “What does she look like?”

“That’s not the point. I think it would be more about sticking it to her husband than sticking it to her.”

“Where’s the harm in that? Do you need the job?” Dale pauses to give him a chance to respond. “It’s not healthy working three jobs. You should go for it, bro.”

He looks down at the remains of his pancakes, a pile of brown mush on a dirty plate. Disappointing. He nudges the mush with his fork. The work. If he decides to sleep with Laura, he would have to leave. He may need to leave anyway. The environment, with her in it, doesn’t provide the escape it did when he started. Having to interact with Laura on a daily basis causes discomfort. Whenever the sense of security dips at a job, he moves along. The work fills a need. The work becomes pointless when it stops filling that need. Money doesn’t figure into his calculations. Money hasn’t been a problem for some time.

“Just have sex with the woman.”

“Why should I do that? Is there love involved?” He puts down his fork and runs a hand through his hair.

“Oh, so you want love? That’s sweet.”

“All right. That’s enough. I’ll see you around sometime, Dale. We’re done here.”

“Don’t worry about the check. I’ll take care of that.” Dale pulls out a wad of bills tied with a rubber band.

“Sure. Thanks, Dale.” He gets up from the booth and wanders out the door.

Maybe Dale is right. Maybe he should pursue something with Laura. He kicks the gravel as he walks back to his car. Dale was right about Isabelle and Valerie. They

should have traded mid-way through their relationships. He wanted to pursue something with Isabelle, but Valerie wouldn't allow that to happen. Isabelle wanted the same thing. She must have. He kicks the door of his car and leaves a dent.

Youthful Rebellions

The stench follows Lenny wherever he goes: moldy cheese, tuna, and rotten cauliflower flows from his pores and his mouth. Lenny leans over him to show him his mistake.

“Do you see what you did here?” A speck of food flies from Lenny’s mouth and lands on his middle finger. He adjusts his stool to try and avoid Lenny’s odor and his lunch. “You need to change the number of guests and the number of days. Then, you have to go back and change it in the book. Do you understand?” He examines the food on his fingers, not hearing Lenny’s words.

“Yes, sir. I’ll do that right now.” The boss backs away and his scent travels with him. He slides a hand through his fake black hair and snuffles.

“Good. After you finish, go and set up breakfast and take out the garbage.” He pauses to straighten his white silk shirt and admire the shine on his shoes. “Also, make sure you put all the on-line reservations in the book. Understand?” Another piece of food flies from his mouth. Adam follows the food, spinning and twirling like a ballerina, across the room.

“Yes, I understand.”

After every instruction, Lenny asks if he understands. Every day he goes through the same speeches, or sermons, and finishes them the same way. Each day plays out like the rerun of a television show. His small nuances strike Adam as familiar and unsettling. They remind him of the way his mother instructed him.

Lenny hitches up his brown pants and exits through one of the three doors in the office towards the parking lot. The other doors lead to the swimming pool and the rooms. He watches him strut out the entryway of the motel. The entrance resembles a summer camp, with the swinging screen door and lengthy wooden corridor. The log cabin-type walls that surround the office and the entryway increase the effect. They’re playing off the little-town atmosphere. A cozy little motel that makes you feel like you’re in the middle of the woods without sticking you in the middle of the woods. It’s a controlled and sterile seclusion. Lately, fewer people have been searching for a secluded place in town.

He fixes the mistakes in the computer and heads out the door towards the pool and kitchen. He reaches the refrigerator and gathers breakfast: bread, butter, cheap

muffins, stale donuts, orange juice, and milk. He grabs the food, walks towards the serving area, and, like clockwork, the phone rings on his way through the office. He drops the food on the brown ledge, which encloses his workstation, and reaches for the phone.

“Good morning. This is The Bedtime Lodge. How can I be of assistance?” The words spill from his mouth like beeps from a computer.

“I was wondering if you allow pets?” the deep male voice asks.

“Yes, sir.”

“Thank you,” the voice replies and hangs up.

He grabs breakfast from the counter and heads towards the serving area. The serving area consists of a small tabletop where he squeezes together the breakfast offerings, and three small tables with folding chairs in a hallway that connects the old end of the motel to the new end. The old end of the motel contains the smoking rooms and the rooms for people with pets. The newer rooms are closer to the entrance, and Lenny saves those for non-smokers and people without animals to keep a fresher lobby. Before the addition, the motel resembled something out of a cheap horror movie. He tosses the bread and muffins on the counter and returns for the milk and orange juice.

“Adam, what do you think you are doing?” Lenny stands in the doorway of the office with his arms crossed in front of him. His eyes, which normally look as if he applies mascara in the morning, are wide open. Lenny leaves his mouth open, waiting for a response.

“I’m getting breakfast out.”

“Oh, I see. So, why is the door to the office open, and why did you leave the beeper for the front desk?” Lenny blinks quicker whenever he is upset. It’s hard not to laugh because the blinking makes him look like he could start crying at any moment.

“The breakfast area is right down the hall, and I never bring the beeper or close the door.” He focuses his attention on Lenny’s pointed black shoes, trying not to glance at his face.

“Oh, I see. How easily did I get in here while you were gone?” He uncrosses his arms and drums his manicured fingernails on the doorframe. “Adam, would you please shut the door whenever you leave this area and take the beeper. Do you understand?” That damned phrase.

“I understand.”

“Good, now finish putting breakfast out. I will be back later.” Lenny turns around and marches out of the office, high on his sense of power. Everything needs to be exactly the way Lenny wants. He snatches away Adam’s power to choose. He takes away his power to do anything.

There hasn’t been another person working at the front desk for a couple of weeks. The environment is not very healthy. Maybe Dale was right about keeping this job. The comfort here threatens to evaporate completely. He pictures himself standing up to Lenny and telling him how to treat a woman. That would be the way to quit, but he will probably just leave.

Lenny works every day behind the desk to keep things in order, attempting to control every aspect in his motel and let everyone know who is in charge, and Laura, his wife, treats the employees like human beings. She makes people feel like individuals,

and not machines to carry out the small tasks for Lenny's gain. Lenny deserves to be alone in his mansion with only his money and arrogance to keep him company, but he would still be happy with only himself to keep him company.

He travels back to the kitchen and grabs the milk and orange juice. On his way through the office, he grabs the beeper, locks the door, and twists the knob to make sure it doesn't turn. After dropping off the food, he gathers the garbage and drags himself to the dumpster in back of the motel.

Before he took this job, he envisioned motel clerks sitting behind a desk all day, answering phones, taking reservations, handling complaints, and staring into space. Much of his day is still reserved for staring into space, but the small tasks get repetitive and stale. He wants to take the trash to a different dumpster, place it outside the dumpster, pile it in one of the vacant rooms, or put it in the parking lot.

His workspace shrinks as the day moves on. It isn't very large to begin with, but as the day moves on the room encloses him in its log-cabin grip. The stool behind the desk doesn't help. He spends half the day trying to find a comfortable position to sit and do paperwork. Most of the time, pushing the stool up against the wall provides a pleasant backrest, but the customers give him funny looks when they see him sitting in the corner. Lenny slithers his way through the entrance and swings open the door to the office.

"You know, Adam, something has been bothering me the last couple of weeks." He takes a dramatic pause to emphasize what he is going to say, carefully choosing the most poignant words. He leans against the doorframe and twitches his nose. "You seem like an intelligent individual, so why do you fail when it comes to the simplest tasks? Every single day there is one small thing you forget, or refuse, to do. How did you make

it through college without being able to follow directions?" He raises his dark eyebrows and peers at him.

"I just did."

Lenny takes a deep breath and spits out, "I guess you are here, then, because you refuse to follow directions. If you could follow directions, you might be doing something with yourself." Lenny takes a breath and peers out the window. "Adam, what the hell is the garbage doing in the middle of the parking lot?" Lenny crosses his arms and wheezes through his nose.

"What?" He searches Lenny's face for some sign of a smile.

"There is a garbage bag sitting in the middle of the parking lot. Do you see it out there?" He peeks his head out the window and spots the bag. Lenny's eyes blink at an alarming rate. "So? What do you have to say?"

"I don't know." He smothers a chuckle and gazes up at the ceiling. Lenny seems genuinely upset, but Adam can't help but laugh.

"Go pick up the bag, bring it to the dumpster, and then come back inside. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir." He gets up from the stool and brushes past Lenny on his way to the parking lot.

The sun creates awkward warmth in the entryway. He pushes open the screen door and listens to the hinges creak as the door slams behind him. As he picks up the bag, the weight surprises him, and he drops it to peek inside and see if the items look familiar.

There is something familiar, not just about the bag, about where he found the bag. He dropped the bag in the parking lot on purpose. It was meant to happen. The action is important somehow. Lenny can't control his actions. There may be other forces influencing his life, but Lenny will not be one of them. The screen door stands before him, tempting him to turn and walk away from this place right now.

The screen door bounces him back to another door he never wanted to walk through. The smell in the funeral parlor hasn't changed since the last time he attended a departure. The faces of the people inside all display sadness, but he senses something underneath the dull eyes and running noses: a hint of satisfaction.

He approaches the casket, focusing on the placement of each step, and tries not to knock anything over since his eyes are failing him. His stomach bubbles from the cocktails he gulped down earlier in the afternoon. His brother was much too young to die. He never displayed signs of being sick or unhealthy. His life revolved around following the right path and keeping himself in the best shape possible. Then, he was gone.

He kneels in front of the coffin, interlacing his fingers and staring hard at the pale forehead of his brother. His short red hair rests on a shiny white pillow. The murmurs of the other people in the room screech through his head. Louder and louder until everything melts away.

He wakes up with a cold towel across his forehead and a familiar face in front of him.

"Mom?"

"Are you all right, Adam?"

“What happened?”

“You passed out and hit your head on your brother’s coffin. Then, you threw up all over my new husband.”

“Your what?” He attempts to sit up, but the banging in his head knocks him straight back down on the couch.

“You’ve been gone quite a while, Adam. Did you think nothing would happen without you? Look what happened to your brother.” At the mention of his brother, a small sparkle seems to float through his mother’s eyes. “Why did you leave, Adam?”

“Are you trying to blame his death on me? Where’s Dad?”

“He didn’t come.”

The words strike him like a freight train. Darkness washes down on him for the second time that day. When he opens his eyes, the room is empty. His eyes dart around the tiny space.

“Mom?” No answer.

Outside the motel, glaring up at the gray sky, he smiles. Things could always be worse. He struts back into the motel. He will quit today.

“So, what is wrong with you?”

“Tired, I guess.” He leans up against the wall and picks out a square in the brown carpet to focus on.

“Hey! I am talking to you. Look at me when I am talking.” Lenny snaps his fingers, and Adam jerks his head up to meet his dull blue eyes. “Now, what is going on here?”

“Umm, there is somebody behind you.” He raises a finger to the man in a Nascar cap with a confused look on his face behind Lenny.

“I am sorry, sir. How may I be of assistance?” Lenny slips into his salesman mode to deal with the customer. His voice takes on a tone that doesn’t resemble anything Adam hears from him.

The worst part of seeing Lenny with a customer is the fact that Adam knows he himself acts the same way. He imagines lashing out at Lenny, ripping his expensive toupee from his head and stuffing it down his throat. Watching Lenny with this customer, a tingling shoots through his chest and his head clouds.

“I just wanted to check out.”

“Oh, and your name, sir?”

He goes through the motions with the customer. He gets his name, runs his credit-card number, offers him a receipt, and smiles through the whole exchange. Everybody is special when they come into this place if their money is good.

“Thank you. I had a very pleasant stay, and your clerk was extremely cheerful and helpful. I’ll see you next year.”

“You bet. Thanks for staying with us.” Lenny flashes all of his teeth for the man and offers him a half wave and a wink as the man heads out the door. “Now, back to this trash issue. Do you have a problem finding the dumpster, or are you deliberately trying to make this place look like a dump?”

“I’m doing my best, sir.” He gazes down at his worn brown shoes.

“Your best? Look, if this keeps happening I am going to fire you. That is it. Plain as pie. Understand?” He jams a finger into his chest. “Understand?”

He wants to scream at him, to tell him that it wouldn't take a damned genius to understand, or to tell Lenny he doesn't know a thing about him.

"Yes, I understand."

"Fine. Laura is coming in to take over for you when your shift ends. Try to keep everything in order and write down any messages." Lenny adjusts himself to leave the building by pulling up his pants, fixing his hair, and sticking his nose in the air. He struts out of the motel.

"Good afternoon, sir. How can I be of assistance?" Another faceless customer appears in front of the desk. This one wears a bright blue and pink parka and round brown glasses.

"Yes, I have a reservation under Majors."

"Majors?" He looks to the computer, which hums back at him. The computer spits out the information. "Ah, yes. Two nights, non-smoking. Does that sound right, sir?"

"Yes." The man taps his fingers on the counter.

"Would you like to pay now or when you check out?" His voice quivers.

"Later."

"I need you to fill this out for your vehicle."

His hand shakes when he reaches for a pen. The man across from him doesn't notice, focusing his attention on the form in front of him. Adam stares down at his hand, attempting to control his body.

"Here are your keys, sir. Your room is right down this hall to the left, and breakfast is served from seven to nine o'clock in the hallway past your room. Is there

anything else I can do for you?" The same words, in the same tone, with the same level of enthusiasm come from his mouth every time. A finely tuned routine.

"No, that will be fine." The man grabs the keys, hands him the form, and heads out the door.

"I hope you enjoy your stay," he says as the man leaves.

Does he believe that? Will he feel personal satisfaction if the man enjoys staying here? If nobody stayed here he wouldn't have to do anything all day, and Lenny would lose his fancy car, house, and wife. The thought entices him. Here comes another one.

"Good afternoon, sir. How can I be of assistance?" This one wears a gray hooded sweatshirt with "Ohio State" across the chest.

Laura saunters in at four forty-five, always fifteen minutes early. She takes off her full-length fur coat to reveal a black shirt and a short red skirt that displays her tanned legs. She comes around the counter and reaches over him to grab a pen. Her scent travels towards his nose: a combination of vanilla and lilac. Her eyelids are a light purple, and bright red lipstick emphasizes her lips. She takes out the expense log and writes, leaning over the counter, displaying her cleavage.

"So, Adam, how are you? I heard you had an exciting day." She continues to write, and he focuses on the computer.

"It was like most days."

Something about this woman: her smile, her body, her scent, or her artificial nose. Something is uneven, too perfect. Beads of sweat gather on his forehead. He shifts his gaze to Laura's legs. Her legs are flawless, without a dimple, cut, or trace of

hair. So smooth. He dreams about kissing his way up her legs, taking in every inch, appreciating her delicate skin.

“Oh, Adam, it wasn’t like most days.” The words slide off her tongue. “I heard you are having some problems with the doors and the garbage.” She pronounces garbage with an accent, which makes the word sound sexy.

“No problems.” He buries himself in the computer, searching for something to distract him from her, typing and re-typing phony reservations.

He takes a shaky hand to his forehead and wipes away the sweat. The names in the computer blend together, and pain builds in his temples. Laura places the toe of her red high heel on the back of his stool and spins him around to face her.

“Come on, Adam. You do not have to play with me.” Her gray eyes dig into his mouth, paralyzing his body. She sticks the toe of her high heel in between his legs and stares down at him. “Tell me what is bothering you, Adam.”

“Nothing is bothering me. I had a bad day.”

“Well, you know you can talk to me any time.” Laura closes the expense log and brushes his arm as she puts the pencil back on the desk. “I just hope you can stick around a little longer. You are a nice guy.” She removes her foot from the stool, touching the inside of his leg as she moves.

She pushes herself away from the desk and gazes outside. He catches himself staring at the side of her face that she displays for him. Her nose appears to be too perfect for her face, and her lips are fuller than when he started working in the motel.

Do normal people change as much as she has in a matter of weeks? Is that natural? He may be taking pieces of people he used to know and comparing them to who

she is now. It's hard not to compare people from the past with people in the present. He shakes the thought from his head. This woman is a tease. A fake.

"You looked cute in your dealer outfit yesterday. I was a little disappointed you had to leave." She licks her lips. "Are you busy tonight? There is a good band playing at Pap's."

"No, I'm not busy." He glances at the clock on the wall for help.

"Oh, you should stop by. I will be there once I get off." She keeps her eyes on the parking lot, staring at a couple wrenching their luggage from their Pinto.

"I can't work here anymore."

"What? Why not?" She turns from the window and searches his face.

"I need to quit."

She creeps closer to him, moving her face inches from his. He loses himself in her eyes. His head moves closer to hers against his will, and a tingling shoots through his hands.

"I need to leave now." He pulls his head back and leaps out of the stool. "I can't be here anymore."

"Well, if that is what you want. I will not stop you." She wrinkles her forehead. "Maybe I will see you tonight."

She gives him a wink and grabs his side as he walks past her. Her fingers feel like they reach through his clothes.

The air outside bites into his skin, and his windbreaker doesn't keep out the cold. He peers into the sky, noting the absence of clouds. Purples, reds, and greens dance across the sky. He reaches into his pocket for the keys to unlock the door of his gray bug.

The motel looks different from the outside, and he can see Laura sitting at the desk checking over his work. The thought of going to Pap's makes him nervous. Something inside of him relates the place to Isabelle and only Isabelle.

Timely Decisions

Sitting in Pap's, he stirs his drink. The people here play in their separate spheres, and he refuses to enter their worlds. A couple at the end of the bar has been laughing non-stop for the last five minutes; the woman, however, appears to be running out of steam. Her laugh cuts the man off mid-way through his witty comments. Adam studies them and scratches his head.

The bar draws a diverse crowd because the environment isn't threatening. The lights remain dim, the outside of the bar offers an old and rustic vibe, and the interior resembles a hunting lodge with high ceilings and mounted deer heads surveying the customers.

A group of four people, each about thirty-years old, sit around in work clothes, telling stories from their day. They pair off, each of the men inching closer and closer to the two women. The men wear identical suits, one with a red tie and the other with a black tie, and the women wear the same dress in red and black. They probably decide beforehand who each of them should pursue, according to the colors.

Adam acts as if he is waiting for someone when he sits in a booth by himself, or at the bar. Every so often, he turns his head to check the door, taps his watch, and then releases a sigh and drums his fingers on the table. He doesn't know if he does this for the people in the bar or for himself.

A band sets up their equipment in the corner across from his booth. A man with long brown hair, in a ponytail that reaches to the middle of his back, sets up a drum set. Another man, with a scar on his right cheek and short red hair, tunes a bass guitar. A woman with a guitar case rises from the bar and joins the men in the corner. Her light brown hair drops down just below her shoulders. The air about her seems calm, and her hair sways back and forth as if a breeze were blowing around her. Her light red dress flows around her, refusing to reveal much of her slim figure.

The woman sings. Her voice and face remind him of someone, or his image of someone from the past. Her voice is light, and yet powerful, and she sings with her eyes closed, like she is searching for the notes under her eyelids, or she doesn't want to see people staring at her. The guitar moves with her body, and the drums and bass intensify her emotion. He loses himself in her voice. He detaches himself from the bar and returns to the woods.

Alone, in the woods, he sees himself lying on a rock. The ringing refuses to quit in his ears, even though the concert has been over for hours. The cold gnaws away and settles into his body. There is a slight resistance, but he doesn't want to fight anymore. He journeyed out here for a reason. After leaving Isabelle at the club, nothing matters.

The crackle of the trees shakes him awake. He watches the limbs of the trees fight a battle neither side can win. The branches sway back and forth, giving space and taking it back. The stars peer down through the branches. All of them laugh, joke, and toy with him, musing over his fate. His bones creak as he lifts himself from the rock. His legs ache from the cold.

"Hello." The heat comes from his chest, moves up through his throat, and escapes.

His legs feel like shards of glass, pieced together by an infant. He takes the gloves off his hands to see if his hands are still there. They are red and blotchy, and the air makes them tingle. He reaches a hand to his face. He slips his gloves onto his hands and slaps them together a couple of times. As his hands come together, he can almost see pellets of water fly from his arms and hands.

His eyes adjust to the darkness, picking up a path among the trees, which appears to shift and change with every turn of his head. Gazing up into the trees, the branches wrap around each other in a warm embrace, mockingly. His legs move without his permission. His legs separate from the rest of his body. The trees shake around him, and a smell finds its way into his nostrils, a mixture of perspiration and cotton.

Another step and the trees blur past him, each one fading into the last, like driving past billboards on a highway. Where was he going? He can't run away from this. Finishing his life out here will make the pain stop.

He continues to walk, with a determined stride, as the question lingers in the back of his brain. The woods crack under his feet. He darts his eyes to the ground, focusing on the placement of each step. His legs move faster and faster, turning his walk into a jog. The ground sparkles. Tiny flashes of light cloud his vision, making his head feel like it may lift from its axis.

He stops. His breath fills his head and pushes its way out of his ears and nostrils. The cold disappears.

The forest pushes him towards his car with a brisk wind at his back. The trees shake against each other, the crack of the sticks beneath his feet pop like firecrackers, and the rustle of his coat sickens him. Everything seems alive in a way they refused to be minutes earlier. The woods smell more like winter. Wind whips around his face. He puts his key into the car door and stops.

"Damn." Back again.

The woman stops singing, and he opens his eyes. Some of the people in the bar applaud, some of them continue talking, and he sits and ogles the woman. She opens her eyes, glances at him, and starts another song.

"Can I get you another drink, Adam?" Isabelle stands between him and the woman. She smiles. Her cheekbones stand out, and her nose crinkles.

"Could I have another rum and coke?"

“Sure.” She rests her arm on the booth above his head. “She is really good, isn’t she? I wish I could sing like that. Her name is Cassandra. I think they come from downstate somewhere. The manager says they should be playing about once a month.” She puts a hand on her hip and slides the other one through her brown hair. “So, are you stalking me now, Adam?”

“What? No, I just stopped in for a drink.” He lets out a forced laugh. “I didn’t know you were working here, too. Why didn’t you mention it when we were here on our date?”

“Was that a date, Adam?”

“I kind of saw it that way.” He stirs the ice in his glass. “How many jobs do you have?”

“Just the two. How many do you have?” She leans on the table and sets down her tray.

“Well, as of today, two. I quit one of them.”

“That doesn’t sound like you. I’m proud. Are you taking control of your life?”

“But, I quit my job. You think that’s control? I want control and I usually throw it away. Control is too much.”

“You can change. We all need to change sometimes. I wish I could do something new with my life. I’ve been stuck here for the longest time.” She sighs and straightens her shirt.

“Are you okay, Isabelle?” He notices a glazed look in her eyes.

“No, I’m stifled by this place. That night we went out was one of the few nights I have to myself. I try to spend as much time with Sebastian as I can. My jobs take up so much of my time.” She stares at a spot on the floor.

“You made a great choice, though. You stood up for yourself and got rid of Dale. You started your own family.”

“There wasn’t a choice involved. Well, a small one, I suppose. There never was a question about keeping Sebastian.”

“I don’t understand. I always thought you had the perfect life. You have a little someone to go home to.”

“Oh, I love my little guy. There’s so much more I wanted to do, though. I don’t know if it can happen now.”

“I envy what you have. I don’t think I’ll ever have the chance to have a family.” The words bounce around in his head, stifling the conversation.

Isabelle could be his chance for a family. She doesn’t appear to hold a grudge over how he left her. She didn’t sound worried about him declaring their night out at the bar a “date.” What about Laura?

The space in the back seat of Laura’s car allows her to maneuver into strange positions. He watches her struggle out of her red dress, exposing a lacy black bra, barely restraining her breasts. He reaches out and gropes them, caressing the slightly rough material. She slips on top of him and unzips his zipper, positioning herself on top of him and sliding him into her. Her eyes roll back in her head, and she releases a moan.

“You can take my bra off if you want.”

He reaches around her and unclasps her bra. Her breasts spill out and land in his face, staring him down. He grabs her bony arms and tosses her down on the leather seat, pinning her hands down behind her head.

The streetlight casts a bar of yellow across her gray eyes, displaying a mixture of delight and a hint of fear. He thrusts faster and faster, his muscles burning from the exertion. His head fills with tiny flashes of light. Laura screams and moans, each of which sound more and more like expressions of pain.

“Come on, Adam!” She moves faster and faster. “That’s it. Keep going.”

He peers down at her and squints his eyes to try and turn her into Isabelle, wishing she could be her. The smell of the leather seats shoots into his nostrils. The moaning stops, and he continues to move in and out of her.

“Oh, Isabelle.”

“Stop!” Laura squirms beneath him, trying to free her arms from his grip. He continues to move in and out of her.

“I’m sorry. I have to get back to work. I’ll be right back with your drink.”

Isabelle turns around and heads toward the bar.

That vacant look. She wants control? She is one person who he thought controlled her life. He reaches into the pocket of his pants and sighs. The music picks up again.

He turns his attention to the woman, Cassandra, who still hasn’t said one word to the audience, and listens. She moves from one song to another without mentioning her name, the name of the songs, or what products she is selling. She starts another song, without the accompaniment of the guitar, and the bar hushes. He imagines all of the eyes

in the bar attaching themselves to her, or to the invisible notes that float from her thin lips. She pauses for a breath, and the bar breathes with her.

He closes his eyes and savors every note streaming from the woman's mouth. Her voice brings him back to his younger days when his mother used to sing him to sleep. He wouldn't let her stop until she kicked his father out. After his father left, she stopped singing, and sleep came in small intervals.

As the song moves on, he scans the bar. The other people in the bar are not paying attention to the music. Everyone engages in their own activities: a couple at the bar pokes each other and giggles to themselves, another couple talks with serious expressions on their faces, looks which indicate their conversation concerns something of global importance, and the group of four thirty-year-olds, broken off into pairs, talk in whispers. They all separate themselves from the music. A scowl crosses his face as he observes the people. They don't appreciate the music.

The bartender fills a glass with beer and rocks his head back and forth, trying to capture the beat of the music and failing miserably. Isabelle stands at the bar staring at Cassandra and singing along. Her mouth forms the words and attempts to capture their meaning and movement. As he watches her, warmth spreads through his chest and head. Cassandra stops singing, and the bar vibrates with noise. The sounds collide in his head.

Isabelle shakes, as if she woke from a dream, and glances around to check if anyone was watching her. She appears afraid, and he shifts his eyes back to his drink to avoid her. The band starts another song with a quicker tempo.

"Here you go, Adam." Isabelle puts down the drink and grabs the empty glass. She takes out a rag and wipes down the table.

“Did you enjoy the last song?” He shudders the moment the words leave his mouth.

“Yes, I did. Why?” She adjusts her black shirt and looks at the ground. His eyes find their way to her blue jeans, which cling tightly to her thighs and flare out at the bottom.

“I really enjoyed it myself. The music made me think about my parents.” He takes a drink and peers into the glass, wishing he could dive into it to escape her gaze.

“Was that a good thing?”

“I’m not sure. I have to stop thinking about them. There isn’t anything I can do to change the past. My life isn’t their fault.”

“So, how was your breakfast with Dale? Did he talk you into quitting your job, or was that your decision?”

“No, well, not exactly.” He stops for a second and gazes at the ceiling, thinking about the question. Maybe Dale did play a part in his decision, but he was meant to leave that job. “He might have mentioned it, but I wasn’t happy there.”

“Are you happy at your other jobs?”

“Most of them accomplish what they need to. I don’t know that they make me happy, but they kill time. Are you happy at your jobs?”

“No. I guess you don’t need a real reason to quit a job. Well, something you don’t want to be doing.”

He glances down at his drink and taps the side of the glass.

“Well, if you need anything, let me know.” She flashes him a smile.

After she leaves, the familiar signs of drunkenness descend upon him. The bar blurs a little and then becomes too clear. The faces in the bar blend together, and Cassandra sounds different. She doesn't sound bad, but he can't listen the way he was before. Cassandra finishes her song and puts down the guitar. A silence settles over the bar. The people adjust to the silence and resume their conversations.

"Hi. Could I sit down?" Cassandra stands next to him with a plastic cup of water in her hand. Her green eyes sparkle under the dim light above the table, her brown eyebrows are arched, and her lips are thin and a light shade of red.

"Sure." She sits down across from him and smirks, without showing her teeth, and he searches for something to say. "I enjoyed your set. Your voice is amazing."

"Thanks. This is my first time here, and I was pretty nervous. Could you tell?" She stares at him and lifts her eyebrows.

"No, you didn't seem scared, or nervous, I mean." He glances down at his hands, which are sweating, and wrings them together. "You were perfect."

"Thank you." She reaches her hand across the table and touches his hand. Her voice is light and free from any tension. He inspects her soft white skin and almost pulls his hand away, scanning the bar for Isabelle. Her green eyes appear to see through him.

"Did you see that slut at the bar?"

"Excuse me?"

"There's this woman at the bar in a red dress, which shows way too much of her artificial skin, flirting with about five or six guys. Do you see her over there?" Laura sits at the bar. "Throughout our set, her laugh drilled into my ears."

"Some people have no respect." He takes a big drink and glances back at the bar.

She's right back on the prowl, searching for someone else to hold her down. How does Lenny allow this to happen? Someone around town must know him and tell him his wife cheats. Does he care?

"I know. I mean, what do those guys see in her? She is completely artificial. Does she really think it's necessary to be tan in the winter?"

"So, are you playing some more?" he asks, attempting to sidetrack Cassandra from her tirade.

"Yeah, we're doing another set in a few minutes." She takes a sip of water. "Are you staying?"

"Sure, I'll hang around."

"Good. I'll talk to you later." She gets up from the booth and returns to her guitar. He turns to the bathroom.

After the piss streams out of his body, he approaches the sink to wash his hands. In the spotty mirror, he sees his red hair, pushed all to one side, making him look like a little kid. His nose is too small for his face, and his brown eyes are too far apart. As he stares at himself, he appears worse and worse, almost disgusting.

He heads out of the bathroom and towards the booth. Cassandra sings, but the bar is different now. The people shout at each other, and the glasses make more noise than the band. The conversations from the bar drill into his head. His eyes drift towards the bar and see Laura, surrounded by the group of men in black suits. She turns her head towards him, and he turns away.

Isabelle checks on him, and he gets her to leave quickly, or maybe she leaves quickly on her own. He can't tell. She turns away from him with an expression he can't recognize: disappointment, bitterness, or anger.

After Isabelle leaves, the bar quiets down. Still, he can't hear Cassandra sing. He stares at her, and she stares back, but the words coming out of her mouth make no sense. Her music doesn't sound the same with her looking at him. She closes her eyes and the music moves. He shuts his eyes and absorbs the music.

He opens his eyes to see a cloud of smoke hovering above the bar. The smoke gathers near the ceiling and rolls towards the ventilation system. He reaches for his glass and feels the drops of water dripping down the side. He releases his hand from the glass and puts it to his forehead. The music stops.

Cassandra puts the guitar in its case and closes the lid. How long did she play for? It only felt like one song. Did he miss something? He watches her approach the bar and then she spins towards his table. He wipes the palms of his hands on his jeans.

"So, did you enjoy the second set?" She sits down in the booth, resting her guitar case next to her.

"Yeah, it was almost better than the first."

She chuckles and pushes some of her brown hair out of her eyes.

"I agree. I like the first set more than the second. I have more to play, but they won't let me." Her eyes turn towards him, and he meets her gaze. She smiles and tiny dimples appear in her cheeks.

"I'd like to hear it sometime." He fidgets with his glass, and she grabs one of his hands. She flips his hand over, palm up, and inspects the lines with her finger.

“So, what do you do for a living?” she asks. Creases take shape in her forehead as she attempts to make sense of the lines in his hand.

“Well, I’m sort of in between jobs right now. It seems like you do something you’re passionate about, though. I envy that.” He watches her finger trace the lines of his hand, causing a sensation to run up his entire arm.

“Well, this is only a weekend gig. This gets me away from my other job on weekends.” She drinks her water, and he scrambles to find something to say. Silence.

“So, what is your other job?”

“I work at a café. It’s a relaxed atmosphere. I like it.”

He scans the bar, searching for Isabelle, but she doesn’t seem to be around. “Do you have to drive back tonight?” Cassandra continues to caress his hand. Maybe Isabelle won’t notice him leaving with this woman. What’s the harm in it? Isabelle isn’t technically his girlfriend.

“No, we’re going back tomorrow. Do you want to take me to your place? You know, some place without all of these people. We could talk some more.”

“Sure.” He searches the bar, trying to find the easiest way to leave without Isabelle seeing him with this woman.

“Let’s go.” She grabs her guitar case and gets up before he can search the bar and locate Isabelle.

They reach the stairs and he lets her go down the spiral staircase first. The warm air in the hall causes his face to flush, and the stairs spin more than usual. At the bottom of the stairs, he pushes open the door for her. Outside, the cold air smacks him in the chin.

They reach her car, and he slides into a faded, red-leather seat. She tosses her guitar in the trunk, gets in the driver side, and latches her safety belt.

“It’s not much, but I like it.”

“Oh, it’s nice,” he responds.

She starts the car, and they head towards his apartment. He sits silently, mulling over the actions of the evening. He peeks at her, driving the car with a slight smirk. The side of her face, slightly green from the glowing electronics in the car, concentrates on the road. What is she thinking? She meets a random guy, sitting alone in a dingy bar, and picks him up and goes home with him. Who would do that with all the murders going on? For all she knows, Adam is the one who lures innocent girls to their death in the woods.

Her eyes remain focused on the road, squinting to see what lies ahead. This woman isn’t good for him. Isabelle deserves a chance. Cassandra doesn’t deserve a chance. This won’t even be a relationship.

“You shouldn’t come home with me.”

“What? That’s the first thing you say. I thought you had gone completely comatose over there. Why shouldn’t I come home with you?” She eases up on the gas and lets the car coast.

“This shouldn’t happen. You know, I could kill you so easily without anyone ever being the wiser. Don’t you know what has been going on around here?”

“What?”

“Someone has been killing girls and dumping them out in the woods. He does something different with every girl.”

“So, that’s why I shouldn’t go home with you. Because of some maniac. That doesn’t make a whole bunch of sense.”

“Well, there’s someone else, too.”

“A girlfriend?”

“It doesn’t matter. I told you what I think. This shouldn’t happen.”

“Nothing has happened yet! Oh, boy. I picked a fine one out tonight. So, do you want me to drop you off here, or what?” She pulls the car to the side of the road and turns towards him. “What do you want here, Adam?”

“I want somebody else. I’m sorry. I’ll walk from here.”

“Okay.” She shakes her head and turns towards her window, tracing a stick figure with her pinky finger. “Bye.”

She drives away, leaving him miles from his apartment.

“I guess I should have just told her it was two miles up on the left.” He drops his head and shuffles up the hill toward his apartment.

Happy Home

Before, he knew the smell lingered in the apartment, but something didn't let him smell it. It's decay, or waste. Nothing can be done now. His hands feel ice-cold, and sweat dangles under his arms like a high diver inching closer to the edge of the board, waiting to jump.

Silence. Everything silent. He sits on his black sofa and listens, staring at a crack in the ceiling. The crunch of gravel shakes him awake. Footsteps, a door slams, and a knock on the door. He pulls open the door, and the figure outside wavers from side to side.

“Isabelle?”

“Yeah, I’m a little drunk, Adam. Do you think I could come in?” She stumbles towards him and steadies herself in the doorway. Her breath hits him in the face. She smells like someone dumped a bottle of gin on her head. He helps her in and drops her on the recliner.

Her eyes are barely open and the expression on her face mixes amusement and concern, a half-smile with her eyebrows drawn towards her eyes.

“I hope I’m not bothering you, Adam.” The words slip from her mouth, sounding like one long word. “I stopped by to see how you were doing.” She props her arm on the arm of the chair and points a finger at him. “How are you doing?” She emphasizes the word “you,” and drops her hand to the side of the chair

“Are you okay? Do you need some water or something?” He steps towards the kitchen.

“I’m fine. Water might be nice.” She lifts herself up and tries to sit up straight and open her eyes.

The smell of cigarette smoke slithers into the kitchen. He grabs a glass of water and drops it in front of her. The smoke surrounds her like a protective shield. She makes a loud sucking noise as she inhales the liquid. Some of the water drips down the side of her mouth and onto her black shirt and faded blue jeans. As she gulps down the water, her cigarette drops onto the seat of the chair.

“Oh, sorry about that.” She drops the glass on his makeshift coffee table, a trunk covered with a blue sheet, and sits back in the chair. Her cigarette smokes in a dirty-blue bowl on the coffee table.

“Don’t worry about it. The chair could use some more character.” He stamps out the cigarette in the bowl and leans back on the couch. “Isabelle?”

“Yeah?”

“Do you ever feel like you do the same things over and over again?”

“No, not really. I have new challenges every day,” she responds.

“Do you ever fear having too much control?”

“I don’t feel like I have any right now. Did you bring that singer home with you, Adam?”

“You saw that, huh? Well, no, she didn’t quite make it all the way here. I was thinking too much about you.”

“Me? Really?”

Isabelle drops her chin to her chest and glares at the brown carpet. She takes her hands to the side of her head and turns her head from side to side, as if trying to get rid of a thought. She leans over and jumps up from the seat, her blue eyes wide open, and races to the bathroom.

He leaps from the couch and follows her. He watches her empty her stomach into the toilet. The retching noises spin his stomach in circles. Strands of spit dangle from the sides of her mouth as she steadies herself over the bowl. He grabs her hair and holds it away from her face. She gags and spits some phlegm into the toilet. He reaches over to flush it, and she rests her arms on the side of the bowl, taking deep breaths with her head turned to the side.

“I’m sorry,” she whispers.

“Why? Everybody gets sick.” He tries to sound encouraging, and she forces a smile.

“You don’t have a scrunchy or something? Do you?” She spits into the toilet and offers him a smile.

“Do girls still wear those? No, but I could find you a rubber band. Can you handle your hair?” He chuckles at her attempt to smile.

“Yeah.” She reaches a hand back for her hair, and he lets go.

After searching through the drawers in the kitchen, he finds a rubber band and heads back to the bathroom. Isabelle kneels on the floor with her hair to the side of the toilet, her cheek resting on the rim. Lucky he cleaned that today.

“Here you go.” He hands her the rubber band, and she lifts up a shaky hand to take it. She detaches her head from the bowl and wraps the rubber band around her brown hair, securing it behind her head. “Do you need anything? Do you want some more water?” He leans against the doorframe and crosses his arms.

“The couch might be nice. Could you help me up?” She reaches her hand out to him, and he scrambles to grab it. He helps her to the couch, and she lies down on her side. He goes to the kitchen for a bowl and a glass of water. “Adam,” she calls.

“Yeah,” he replies, extracting a glass from the brown cupboard.

“Are you happy here?”

He walks over to the couch and puts the glass of water and a plastic bowl on the coffee table.

“I’m not sure. There are moments when I’m close to happiness. Recently, with this senseless violence around, it’s hard to feel good. Are you happy?”

“No,” she responds. “Well, sort of. I couldn’t see myself without Sebastian, but we couldn’t make it anywhere else. Even if I had the chance to leave this place, I don’t know if there is anywhere I could be right now.”

He stares down at Isabelle, lying on her side with her eyes closed, and tries to think of someplace he would rather be. A part of him wishes this could be the place for him, but a sense of instability surrounds everything.

“Why did you leave with that girl, Adam? I wanted you to leave with me.”

“You’re drunk. You don’t know what you’re saying.”

“That’s crap. I know exactly what I’m saying. You always had the most potential in our little group. You never tried to do anything with it.”

“Potential for what?”

“Look at your brother. Look what he has done with his life.”

“He died.”

“He what?”

“A few months after I stopped talking to you he died. His body just quit on him one day. He had potential.”

“I had no idea. I’m sorry, Adam.”

“Yeah, my mother wasn’t. He left her a ton of money. He left everyone a ton of money. I don’t know what he spent money on. My mother really cashed in on him.”

“Did he leave you anything?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m sorry, Adam. I can’t believe he’s gone. That’s horrible.”

Isabelle's breath slips out in small gasps, and her eyes dart back and forth under her eyelids. He walks over to her and covers her with a blanket. He leans down, slowly, and kisses her on the lips, tasting a mixture of vomit and gin. He falls into the recliner and stares at the ceiling.

Simple Reminders

The gasoline stench, stale hot dogs, and fresh body odor makes sense. An odd comfort resides in this gas station. The comfort hasn't quite reached him, but the comfort is coming. It's on the way.

The yellow walls bounce the fluorescent light off the dull gray floor, and the white ceiling tiles are full of holes. The counter faces the bathrooms, and he needs to turn away from the register to watch the pumps. With nobody in the store, the buzzing of the lights sounds like a horde of flies. The impulse items at the counter spin and light up

to entice the customers, or their children, to throw another couple of dollars away. How long will a child be amused with a pen that lights up, swirls around, and plays “Joy to the World”? The cheese in his sandwich has gone bad. It flips over in his stomach and poisons his body.

The coffee washes away some of the taste. He never drank coffee before he worked here. Now, he can't make it through a shift without a cup. His body reacts awkwardly to the caffeine. Sometimes, things in the store cross paths with each other, like they're dancing. Other times, he finds himself grinding his teeth and bouncing around. The customers never notice. They are all rushing somewhere else.

He tosses the sandwich into the knee-high trashcan by his feet and brushes off his hands. He doesn't know why people continue to buy sandwiches from this place. One woman comes in every morning, at exactly five-thirty, and buys the pre-packaged cheese and lettuce sandwich. He expects her like clockwork. Her light brown hair is always pulled tightly, so tightly it looks like her face may never wrinkle, behind her head in one lengthy braid, and her make-up gives her a cheery expression. She marches in with her arms held tightly at her sides, takes out exact change for the sandwich, and mumbles something as she heads out the door. One day he tried the sandwich and it was the worst thing he ever ate in his life. She must enjoy it for some reason. Or, maybe she enjoys the routine. She may not even eat the sandwich. If she didn't show up, if she didn't buy the same sandwich, and if she didn't recite her lines perfectly, he wouldn't be surprised. He's waiting for that day. That will be a fantastic day.

A black car pulls up to the pumps. An old man with thinning gray hair, a hunched back, and sky-blue pants eases his way out of the car. He fumbles with the gas pump and

appears upset. The features of his face crinkle together in an expression of worry, anger, and exhaustion. The man leans against the car, staring at the numbers running up on the pump. The numbers stop running, and he removes the nozzle and returns it to its proper resting place. He approaches the store and opens the door with all the force his tiny frame can muster. Adam expects the door to push him back. He can see the old man being flung back from the door and flipping end over end out of the parking lot, but it doesn't happen.

The man reaches into his pocket and takes out a twenty-dollar bill. He places it on the orange counter, without saying a word, and fixes his gaze on the bill. Adam reaches for the bill, opens the register, and counts out the man's change. The old man doesn't move his eyes; he keeps them fixed on where he put down his money. The old man takes his change and turns to the door.

"Thank you," the old man mumbles.

The old man pulls the door open and creeps back into the night. He keeps his eyes on the ground and shuffles to his car. As he watches the man, he thinks about himself growing old. He sees himself standing behind the same counter, back arched, hair grayed, features wrinkled, counting out change.

A white car pulls into the station. The car looks familiar, but he can't quite place it. Isabelle steps out. Her brown hair is pulled back in a ponytail, and she wears a pair of blue jeans and a red corduroy jacket. His stomach churns, and the hairs on his arms stand on end. She gazes at the moon with her mouth slightly open. The grin on her face makes him smile.

She finishes fueling up her car, replaces the cap, and returns the nozzle to the pump. As she walks towards the store, she sees him. Her eyes widen with recognition or sadness. He's not sure which. She pushes open the door and enters the store.

"Adam, how are you?" she asks, pushing some loose strands of brown hair behind her ear.

"Oh, I'm all right. How are you?"

"Okay. I'm kind of tired, though. You didn't tell me you worked here."

"I've only been here for about a week," he replies, shifting his weight and trying to find something to do with his hands. He shoves them in the pockets of his blue jeans and tries not to stare.

"How is it?"

"Pretty boring. There isn't much business this early, or late. Especially now, people aren't venturing out as much this late." She glances down at her feet, and he sneaks a peek at her face.

"So, it's a good shift, huh?" She drags her foot across the floor, moving a Styrofoam cup from side to side.

"It's fine, I guess. I could go for a little more action, though."

She looks up and catches him staring at her. She smiles, without showing her teeth, and blushes. Somehow, this light, which makes every customer appear awkward, transforms her into perfection.

"No, you wouldn't want that. You would have to deal with more problems. You probably only get a few weird people at this time of night." She turns her eyes to the pens on the counter.

"I guess so. I get some drunks, kids trying to get drunk, and stoned teenagers."

He takes his hands out of his pockets and leans on the orange counter. Isabelle reaches into her pocket and pulls out a crinkled ten-dollar bill. He reaches for the bill and his middle finger touches her hand.

The buzzing of the lights stifles their conversation. She stares at the counter, and he can't help but stare at her. A bug scuttles across the counter, and she brings her palm down on top of it, crushing the tiny innards of the unfortunate pest. She wipes the bug on her pants and looks up at him.

"There is something sexy about that," he mutters.

"What?" She smiles.

"That is refreshing. I wouldn't have expected that from you."

"Why not? Is it because I'm a woman?"

"No, I just thought you would do something else. You put the bug out of his misery." He shifts nervously behind the counter, searching for something smart to say.

"Do you know what I think?"

"Why would I know what you think?"

"You shouldn't try to know that. You should make sure you know what you think." She leans across the counter, peering into his eyes.

"Do you remember last night? Do you remember what we talked about?"

"No, not really. I'm not even sure how I made it to your apartment. Did you get the note I left for you on the counter? I'm sorry I had to leave so early. I should've made it home in the first place."

“That’s okay. I got the note.” He gazes down at his jeans and picks at a brown stain. “Isabelle, I need to tell you something.” He takes a deep breath. “I want to take control and not be afraid anymore.” He locks eyes with her. “I want to give you something, Isabelle.” He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a rock. “This is something my brother gave me years ago. I always try to have it on me. After he died, it meant even more to me. I want you to have it.”

“If it means that much to you, I can’t take it.”

“You mean that much to me.”

“Really?”

“Yes.” He leans across the counter and kisses her. She backs off and then wraps her arms around his neck and kisses him.

“Wow, Adam.”

“I’m sorry. I’ve wanted to do that for a long time.” He runs his hand over her head and sighs.

“Well, I should probably let you get back to work. Will you call me when you get off?”

“Sure.”

He watches her walk out the door, her head bouncing back and forth, as if she were listening to a pop song. She tosses the rock into the air and catches it. She climbs in her car and drives away. This could be something new, he thinks, a whole new something.