

*And When I Die* and Other Prose

A Thesis Presented for the  
Master of Arts  
Degree  
The University of Tennessee at Chattanooga

Ralph Brandon Buckner III  
December 2010

Copyright © 2010 by Ralph Brandon Buckner III

The Graduate School of the  
University of Tennessee at Chattanooga

All rights reserved.

Dedication:

The chapter of the novel, the short stories, and the essays would not have been possible  
without:

My family, for their love and for their neuroses.

And especially to my little sister, Shipley, I miss her very much.

## Abstract

This thesis consists of the first chapter of my novel, two short stories, and two nonfiction essays. These pieces explore the tensions of family, love, and sexual orientation. The most prominent theme that connects each work is the main character's search for control in his life. In the introduction to this thesis, I critically analyze three novels that focus on characters trying to regain stability in their lives after the death of someone close to them, and then I have discussed how these novels shaped my thesis in terms of theme, mood, and conflict.

## Table of Contents

Introduction	1
First Chapter of <i>And When I Die</i>	11
Windup	24
Almost Here	37
Shattered Machine	53
Blackout	64
Bibliography	75

## Introduction

In the introduction to my thesis, I will focus on three novels that portray protagonists coping with the aftermath of a loved one's death and the reconstruction of their lives. These themes resonate with my thesis as my protagonists search for a sense of control in their lives, either with dealing with death, love, or relationships. In *Death in a Family*, James Agee uses shifting points-of-view of family members who deal with the death of the patriarch. British author Christopher Isherwood pens a narrative of detachment to console his protagonist's grief in his novel *A Single Man*. And in her novel *Ordinary People*, Judith Guest offers a narrative of an upper-middle class family's long-term recovery from two traumatic events that destroy their ideal household. The three authors use point-of-view, tone, and syntax to show their characters' needs to understand the impact of their loved ones' deaths on their lives.

In Agee's autobiographical novel, *Death in the Family*, a family deals with the aftermath of the patriarch's sudden death. Agee uses third-person limited, but jumps from one family member's point-of-view to the next through the three sections of the novel. By varying point-of-view, Agee shows how a tragedy affects an entire family in powerful yet different ways. In the beginning of "Part I," the limited point of view is that of the son, Rufus, as he spends his last night with his father Jay. As Rufus walks back home with his father from the movies, he lists his father's habits and the differences that set that night apart from the rest. Before they head back home, the father and son silently sat on a rock: "Sometimes, Rufus had noticed, he would stroke the wrinkled rock and press his hand firmly against it; and sometimes he would put out his cigarette and tear and scatter it before it was half finished. But this time he was much quieter than ordinarily" (Agee 19-

20). Written in past tense, the narrative recounts the son's final experiences with his father. The chapter establishes their close relationship before the father dies in the car accident.

During their last night together, Rufus notes his father's different behavior: "They slacked their walking a little sooner than usual and walked a little more slowly, without a word, to the corner...As always, Rufus' father took off his hat and put it over the front of his bent knee, and as always, Rufus imitated them, but his father did not roll a cigarette" (Agee 20). By mentioning the change of the dad's walk and rolling of the cigarette, Agee uses the son's memories to foreshadow the father's death. Selective detail enables the author to construct a specific picture in order to shape the reader's reaction to the story. Rufus's recollection of his relationship with his dad also hints at the moments following his father's death: "...and by next morning, when his mother explained to them why his father was not at breakfast, he had so forgotten the words and the noises that years later, when he remembered them, he could never be sure that he was not making them up" (Agee 21). By using selective detail, Agee shows how Rufus preserves the final moments with his father, while forgetting the more depressing moments after his father's death. Agee does not explicitly show the father's demise, but alludes to it through the tone of the chapter.

In Chapter II, Agee switches limited point-of-view from Rufus to the father Jay as Jay is about to leave the house to tend to his own father. Before he leaves, Jay and his wife Mary have their last moments together. Agee increases tension by describing the early morning routines of the couple. For example, Agee describes Jay's attentiveness to his wife the night before he died: "He saw the rumped bed. Well, he thought, I can do

*something* for her. He...smoothed the sheets, and punched the pillows...He drew the covers up to keep the warmth, then laid them open a few inches, so it would look inviting to get into. She'll be glad of that, he thought, very well pleased with the looks of it" (Agee 29). The single deed becomes more significant after Jay's death because it is the last thing he does for Mary. The italicized part of the word "something" emphasizes the tucking of the covers, which will be Jay's lasting touch on his family, and in particular on his wife. This simple deed creates a comforting tone, which Agee emphasizes at the end of the chapter with Mary's response to her husband's deed: "She saw the freshened bed. Why, the *dear*, she was never to realize his intention of holding the warmth in her; for that had sometime since departed from the bed" (Agee 40). Agee projects the fear of Jay's death and his family having to live on without him when she notices the bed (Agee 40). With this image, Agee foreshadows Mary's future as a widow. Her husband's last good deed is one she will cherish the moment before death breaks her family.

This dread of Jay's death is further strengthened with Agee's use of onomatopoeia when describing the sounds of Jay's car backing out of the driveway and then leaving in the distance. The reader hears and sees these sounds filtered through Mary's thoughts and gains more insight into the family's routine that will soon be permanently altered:

"*Ughgh—Ughgh—Ughgh* (Poor thing, he must be simply furious) *Ughghwheek-Whughughyuh—UghwheekyuhuuughgyyughyuhyuhyaaaaaahhhhhhRhRhRHRHRH* (oh, stop it!) *R H R H* (a window went up) *R H R H R H R H R H R*" (Agee 38).

Onomatopoeia simulates Mary's longing for Jay to have a safe trip. Agee uses this device to awaken the reader's senses to the detail of Jay's car and the significance his departure.

The scene transitions from Jay's physical presence and last deed for his wife to the car driving away with a visual string of sounds on the page (Agee 39).

While the narrative in "Part I" highlights the romantic image of a strong family unit, in "Part II," the narrative brings the family's dread of death and the family unraveling to the fore. When Mary receives a stranger's call from Powell's Station about her husband's car crash, she tries not to think that her husband was seriously injured in a car wreck. As a devout Catholic, she turns to God, but her doubt in her Lord lingers with the question "How do I know?" about Jay's wellbeing plaguing her mind. The question reemerges after she plumps the pillows on her bed, an action that connects her to Jay's last good deed for her. She repeats the question in a single-line paragraph (Agee 107). In his essay "Practically An American Home' James Agee's Family Solitudes," George Toles states that "...Agee lives in his emotions and has no capacity to think about things in unemotional terms" (45). Like Agee, Mary lives in her emotions with that single question, "How do I know?" This question prevents Mary from distracting herself with her religion. Her doubt in her faith is also shown when she is unable to complete the Lord's Prayer: "'O God, if it be Thy will,' she whispered. She could not think of anything more. She made the sign of the Cross again, slowly, deeply widely upon herself... Thy will be done. And again she could think of nothing more" (Agee 108). The sudden loss of memory shakes Mary's usually firm belief in God. This instability reflects the novel's movements from a family's peaceful stable life to a broken world, where nothing, even the idea of God, can guarantee recovery from her husband's death.

As Agee's narrative examines his character's faith in God, Christopher Isherwood's novel *A Single Man* offers a narrative of detachment to show his

protagonist's self-isolation from grief and oppression after his lover's death. Isherwood's protagonist, a gay college professor named George living in the early 1960's in Southern California, must deal with the death of his longtime lover while trying to function as a closeted homosexual. In one early section, George discusses a conversation he had with his neighbor, Mrs. Strunk, in which he debunked her misconceptions about his relationship with his dead lover Jim: "But your book is wrong, Mrs. Strunk, says George, when it tells you that Jim is the substitute I found for a real son, a real kid brother, a real husband, a real wife. Jim wasn't a substitute for anything" (Isherwood 29). George's comments show how his grief cannot be acknowledged or understood in a homophobic society. In *Writing Fiction*, Janet Burroway states that "Simply labeling a character's emotion as love or hatred will have little effect, for such abstraction operates solely on a vague, intellectual level; rather, emotion is the body's physical reaction to information the senses receive" (31). In this manner, Isherwood creates tension between George and his students without stating George's feelings:

His neat dark clothes, his white dress shirt and tie (the only tie in the room) are uncompromisingly alien from the aggressively virile informality of the young male students...If it is really warm, they'll roll up their sleeves and sometimes leave their shirts provocatively unbuttoned to show curly chest hair and a St. Christopher Medal. (57)

By distancing himself from other people and his emotions, George avoids the impact of losing his one and possibly only chance at love. In his article "Christopher Isherwood: Myth and Anti-Myth," Paul Piazza states that "[George's] homosexuality, his education,

his pathetic mourning for Jim, his dead lover, actually intensify George's very human condition of loneliness." That loneliness soon accumulates so that George detaches himself from his own death, leaving a shell without any mournful value. Isherwood shows this detachment between his protagonist and the rest of the world. Whereas Agee's Mary and her family come together to deal with grief and loss, George builds a barrier between him and the world, only able to see how the other part of the world lives, breathes, and grieves. Isherwood's creates a protagonist living in his only world, alone and not allowing anyone to join him.

To detach the reader from George's own death through the last passage of the novel, Isherwood describes George as a natural machine breaking down: "All over this quietly pulsating vehicle the skeleton crew makes their tiny adjustments. As for what goes on topside, they know nothing of this but danger signals, false alarms mostly: red lights flashed from the panicky brain stem, curtly contradicted by green all clears from the level-headed cortex" (Isherwood 185). Isherwood correlates the physical signs of death with the mental signs of loss of control. In her article "Why Christopher Isherwood Stopped Writing," Katherine Bucknell states that "As has often been remarked, Isherwood's 1930s narrator is a bland, sexually neutral figure. This is partly because as a homosexual, Isherwood could not give a forthright account of himself in print until well into the second half of the century" (129-130). And like Isherwood, George cannot come out to the world as a homosexual; he loses his identity during his own death. The dying body is neither George, the man who secretly longs for his lover Jim, nor George, the college professor who never fit the heterosexual model of marrying a woman and reproducing. At the end of the novel, the narrative describes George's final moments

alive as he experiences a heart attack. As George's body starts shutting down, the narrator connects the origin of George's heart attack to his first encounter with Jim:

Let us take the particular instant, years ago, when George walked into the Starboard Side and set eyes for the first time on Jim, not yet demobilized and looking stunning beyond words in his Navy uniform. Let us then suppose that, at that same instant, deep down in one of the major branches of George's coronary artery, an imaginably gradual process began. (Isherwood 185)

By stating "you," Isherwood brings the reader in to share George's most vulnerable moments. By linking George's heart attack to this meeting, the narrative moves away from close third to a more omniscient view. With the dark, lonely tone, Isherwood puts the reader at George's deathbed, and in a sense, ensures that George is not alone during his final moments.

Unlike Agee, who writes about the idea of an afterlife, Isherwood transforms George into a dead object without an identity: "And if some part of the nonentity we called George has indeed been absent at this moment of terminal shock... This is now cousin to the garbage in the container on the back porch on the back porch. Both will have been carted away and disposed of, before too long" (Isherwood 186). This detachment reflects Isherwood, who progressively portrays George's life as one almost without value. He becomes the figurative emptiness he has been living with ever since his lover has died.

As with Agee and Isherwood's novels, Judith Guest deals with the aftermath of a tragic event in *Ordinary People*. She alternates the point-of-view from the patriarch of

the family Calvin to his son Conrad. The family tries to move on from the death of Calvin's other son Buck and Conrad's subsequent suicide attempt and then his stay at a psychiatric hospital. The family, including the mother, Beth, battles over how to recover from these events. Conrad and Calvin need to discuss the past and process their grief and sadness, but that need conflicts with Beth, who wants to forget the past. Guest does not give Beth a first person point of view, which prevents the reader from seeing what Beth is thinking. This exclusion helps portray Beth as the outsider in the family.

By allowing the father and son alternative first person narration, Guest allows the reader to become more intimate with Calvin and Conrad. For example, Beth's resentment is shown during the Christmas tree scene midway through the novel. She mixes her alcoholic drink, silently resenting Calvin for having to hear from her friend that her son quit the swim team without telling his parents. Beth does not initiate any conversation, but waits for either her husband or her son to recognize she is upset. When Calvin asks Beth what happened that day, she only "swirls the oily liquid, looking down into it. 'Not what happened,' she says. 'What I heard'" (Guest 108). By not allowing the reader inside Beth's mind, Guest creates a distance from Beth and her issue with family. Her husband picks up on this passive resentment, but unlike Beth, his thoughts are conveyed in the scene: "Something is wrong. The lunch that day? He should have told her, probably, but he hadn't thought anything about it. Just a lunch. Nothing to tell" (Guest 109). By showing Calvin's thoughts, Guest allows the reader to become more sympathetic to him than Beth.

Like with Calvin, Guest ensures the reader sides with Conrad during this confrontation as well. When Conrad states he would have told his mother if he thought

she gave a damn (Guest 109), he is expressing himself in a way that Beth does not. Beth counterattacks by revealing she cares more for her appearance than how her son feels: ““And how did I do that? By making you look like a fool in front of a roomful of people? Did you have to sit there, getting those looks? Poor Mrs. Jarrett, oh the poor woman, she has no idea what her son is up to, he lies and lies, and she believes every word of it—” (Guest 110). Since Guest does not allow the reader to see Beth’s thoughts, the reader does not see any maternal affection from her toward her son. This allows Calvin and Conrad to be sympathetic characters, while Beth is an enigma who presents herself as someone who cares only for her own well being. She reveals her selfishness through her verbal assault on her son: “I can’t stand this, I really can’t! If it’s starting all over again, the lying and the disappearing for hours, the covering up—I won’t stand it” (Guest 110). Beth projects her own problems onto her son and husband. Guest’s use of limited point-of-view portrays a fight over control of the family between a traumatized, thoughtful son and the mother who has shut herself off from her family and the reader.

Each author analyzed in this introduction uses different narrative strategies to portray death and grief. For Agee, the different perspectives of loss are shown through the changing narrative points-of-view. For Isherwood, the narrative detachment reflects the protagonist’s own emotional detachment from the world. For Guest, the narrative pits family members against each other while limiting point-of-views position the reader in the dynamic. All three authors have created stories that relate to humanity’s need for control in their lives during traumatic situations they do not understand.

In connection with my thesis collection, each one of my pieces delves into the idea of control. In my three fiction pieces, the first chapter of my novel and my two short

stories, my characters acquire control in different ways for various reasons. In the first chapter of my novel, *And When I Die*, seventeen-year-old Xander Bourbon returns home for his grandmother's funeral after spending his summer vacation at a reparative clinic. His father, Graydon Bourbon, sent him there after Xander's older sister, Rose, caught Xander kissing a boy in Graydon's funeral home. He returns not knowing how to be who he is or find any middle ground with his family. In the short story "Windup," a miserable, middle-aged man named Herald receives a gift of magical star-shaped stickers that enable him to gain complete control over anyone he wants. Herald's story asks how much control a person needs to be satisfied with life. In my second short story "Almost Here," Jaleesa invites her gay friend Martin to play a midnight round of gooney golf. But unknown to Martin, Jaleesa also invites Martin's ex, Jacob, and Jacob's new girlfriend, Carmen, in hopes of Martin and Jacob patching their relationship back up. Martin quickly understands why Jaleesa orchestrated the event and decides whether or not he wants to reconcile with Jacob. In the story, the theme of control centers on the character's expectations and whether or not they will come true.

Unlike my fictional pieces, which are told in third-person limited point-of-view, my two nonfiction essays are told in first-person. In "Shattered Machine," I recall my need for control during a hostile car ride to Atlanta with my father. During the drive, I explore how I tried balancing the tasks of driving the car and withholding my homosexuality from my father. In "Blackout," I deal with the death of little sister, Shipley, by having conversations with figments of my imagination. I wrote the essay to show how I am processing through my grief. In both essays, I demonstrate my need to control my surroundings.

## First Chapter of *And When I Die*

After Xander finished putting on the dead man's suit, he looked around the embalming room for a mirror. He couldn't find one. Not really surprising. Most people who got dressed in there didn't care about how they looked. He envied their apathy. The jacket he wore was the color of mud, the tie had cartoon faces of children hand-painted on it, and the slacks were three waist sizes too big. The name of the suit's last owner was Teddy Levaline, and his body lay on the metal slab three inches from Xander. The hairless top of Ted's dome-shaped head gleamed under the fluorescent lights. The cherry-brown hair on the sides of Teddy's head had grown into a mullet that dangled off of the slab's edge. Teddy's left arm sported a massive Confederate flag tattoo floating on his lumpy skin. Under the flag, the motto "Suck My Dixie" was inked.

"I had my first kiss in here," he said to the corpse. "It didn't smell as bad as it does now." The body didn't reply.

Three months ago in early May, just before his junior year of high school ended, Xander had taken Zeth Calvin to see this very embalming room, which was part of his father's funeral home. "I don't want you to getting in trouble for this," Zeth said as Xander pressed the combination into the key pad.

"No one really cares," Xander said, opening the back door into the side hallway. "We're not breaking in to steal some embalming fluid."

"Aren't we?" Zeth asked. Xander focused on the keypad on the door that opened to the embalming room. He screwed up twice on the code before he could open the door. "Well here it is." Xander held the door with one hand and displayed the room with the

other. Inside was a white, unzipped body bag on top of a mortuary cot, with an old woman sticking out of the opening.

“Neat” Zeth walked past Xander to the embalming machine on the countertop. “What’s the point of this thing again?”

“To keep the body fresh for the Visitation,” Xander said and walked around the body bag.

“So people endure all the crap the world gives them,” said Zeth, “just to become antlers hanging above their family’s fireplace.”

“They get buried, usually the day later.”

“But what’s the point? The person’s dead. They don’t know they’re being preserved like meat from the deli.”

“I don’t take that much thought into my dad’s business.”

“But what about her?” He walked over to the lady in the bag. “Do you think this is how she desired her body to be used as an exhibition?”

He leaned on the wall and tried not to stare at Zeth’s sallow cheekbones. “The people come in and tell Dad how they want to be presented.”

“To their family. To their friends. To society. Not how they really were in life.”

“What do you mean?”

“Everyone has secrets that define who they truly are”

“True.”

“So this woman—do you know her name?”

“No.”

“Let’s call her ‘Marge.’. So Marge here will probably be portrayed as the perfect wife, mother, grandmother, even great-grandmother by the looks of things”

“Ah.”

“But what about her secret addiction?”

“To?”

“Gawky teenage delinquents.” Zeth bent down and gave Marge a lingering kiss. Xander shivered. Zeth looked back at him.

“See,” Zeth said, “You were shocked by her secret.”

“I wasn’t.”

“Liar.” He chuckled and started walking toward Xander. “Your family’s business is built on lies people depend on.”

“I’m not my family,” Xander said

“So does that mean you’re going to tell me your deep dark secret?” Zeth stood in front of Xander. He was moving his eyes over him like he was searching for something.

“Please stop probing me like a frog in biology class.”

“Do I make you feel trapped?” He backed Xander against the wall.

“Yes.”

Zeth frowned. “Sorry, I get caught up in my own—”

Xander kissed him. At first, their noses couldn’t find a comfortable nook. He thought he would taste the cold aftertaste of the lady in the bag. Instead, a peace settled within him, an unknown familiarity he hadn’t experienced. But now, more than ever, he never wanted to lose it.

“You’re not allowed in here boys.”

When Xander heard his sister Rose walk in, he knew he'd just lost that peace for a long time.

Now, three months and one reparative clinic later, Xander was back in the embalming room with a different dead body and alone in an ill-fitting suit. The door opened and his mother walked in.

"What are you doing in here?" Alice asked and walked over and hugged her son. "I've missed you." She wore the only black pant suit she owned, reserved for funerals and PTA meetings.

"Missed you too Mom," said Xander. "Just needed a dressing room." He welcomed her embrace. The scent of her hairspray offered relief from the formaldehyde.

Alice stepped back and studied him. "What are you wearing?"

"Sam said we didn't have time for any unnecessary stops." He fidgeted with the tie. "I think my Air Jordan's and cotton socks give the ensemble panache."

She pushed her son's hands away from the tie and straightened it. "A decent suit for your grandma's funeral was unnecessary?"

"I guess he was scared of Dad whipping his ass for being late." Sam was a junior executive at Xander's father's funeral home, the Graydon Bourbon Funeral Home. The title was thin. Sam mostly did the chores and errands Graydon, Xander's father, did not have the inclination for.

"Xander."

"Sorry." He playfully smacked his mother's hands away. Then he glanced down at the tie. "Who are these kids?"

“His grandkids I think,” Alice reached back for the tie. “The widow gave it to him for their last anniversary.”

“Sweet.”

She squinted, shook her head, and took it off his neck tie. “Much better.” She placed the tie on the counter next to her son. “So. How are you?”

“Glad to be home.” He spun a small case of Naturo Plasto Wax on the silver table like a nickel.

“How was it? Up there?”

“It wasn’t camp, if that’s what you think.”

“I didn’t think. Did you have a good time? Make any friends?”

Xander opened the cabinets, searching for a nook to crawl into. One of the cabinets had a hand mirror taped to the inside of the cabinet. Xander ignored his reflection while turning around. “I’m just glad to be home.”

“I’m glad too.” She hugged him again.

“I guess I’m ready to greet the masses now,” he said.

“I have to tell you something first.” She looked down at the stiff on the slab.

“What?”

“Your father got you a date.”

“Excuse me?”

His mother reached for the box of tissues next to a spray bottle of Restor-Skin.

“Your dad thought you would need a companion to help you with your grief.”

“I feel more grief for the fact that this will be the last suit dead Ted will ever wear.”

“Your dad has me. Your sister has Jack. He thought you deserved some personal support too.”

“Dad just doesn’t want any single people on the dance floor when the spotlight’s on him.”

She turned back around and faced him with a tissue over her mouth. “This is difficult time for your father Xander.” She sniffed and tossed the tissue into the trashcan. “Now’s not the time to cop an attitude.”

“So who’s my chaperone?”

“Rudy Malona.”

“Meth-head Malona?”

“Don’t call her that.”

“You’ve called her that Mom. Many times. Hell, I got that nickname from you.”

“Keep your voice down. There are a lot of people out there.”

“Why didn’t you call Kat?”

“She’s on a road trip.” She walked over to him as she talked. “Her mother said she should be coming home today. Or three days. She wasn’t sure”

“So you and Dad thought crank house Barbie would be a better solution than me standing out there alone?”

“Play nice for tonight and tomorrow and I promise you that your last year in high school will be drama free.”

“You can’t promise me that.”

Alice placed her hand over her son’s hand. “Not playing won’t make it any better.”

“Because God knows I’ve had the best summer ever.”

“You could’ve had it worse, believe me.” She pinched her bridge.

“What do you mean by that?” Xander searched his mother’s face. Then he asked, “Where’s Zeth?”

“Xander.”

“Where is he?”

“I think at some military school in Georgia,” she said.

“No.”

“I’m sorry.”

“No,” he said and glanced over at the cabinet mirror. His eyes look sallow with ashy rings around eyelids. His cheeks also looked red and puffy. And he was wearing a dead man’s suit. “I can’t do this.”

“Yes you can.”

“Look at me Mom.” He flapped his jacket, sending whiffs of cheap polyester up his nose. “I look ridiculous. Get me my good suit, at least.”

Alice nodded. “You’re right. I’ll get Sam to go to the house to get your suit.”

“Thank you.” He watched her leave through the mirror. He closed the cabinet and then lay on the only unoccupied embalming table in the room. He stared at the fluorescents on the ceiling until he got a small headache. Then he glanced at dead Ted.

“What would you think of me?” he asked. What *would* people think of him? That line of strangers in the halls, the acquaintances he had accumulated during seventeen years of living, and his family. There were alive and outside, waiting for him.

He couldn't think about that. The crowds. He was either going to cry or shiver. He needed to think of something else. Like the first time he met Zeth. He remembered being at his school when the students had a thirty-minute free period in the school's courtyard. The idea was for the kids to have enlightened conversations about current events and their own future. In reality, they smoked or made-out behind the giant magnolia trees. Xander spent his free time wandering around the campus, hoping time would pass by quickly. Kat always had a different free period, so he was alone. As he walked down the pebble path, he saw Zeth Calvin sitting on a wooden bench, smoking a cigarette with only a rose bush barely hiding his act. His thin lips blew wisps of smoke out in the air. When he turned to his side to flick the ash on the rose bush, he noticed Xander.

“You're that kid that hangs around corpses,” Zeth said.

“My dad owns funeral homes,” Xander said.

“And freaky things go on over there.”

“Not really,” Xander said, walking closer.

“So no necrophilia? No mob hits? The employee who jerked off to the fumes coming out of the crematory.”

“People love sensationalism.” Xander always got a thrill when he made up gory funeral home stories to his other classmates. The guys always listened with open mouths while the girls squished their noses and walked away.

“So you're nothing but a liar.” Zeth blew a puff and pushed back a strand of his jet black hair.

“A big, fat one.”

“You're not fat.” Zeth grinned.

Xander sat next to him on the bench. “Actually, my family’s pretty boring.”

“Probably because they’re liars too.” Zeth leaned back until his hair tangled with the thorns. “All the good stuff’s locked away.”

“We don’t lock anything,” Xander said and rubbed his hand on the bench’s iron arm. “We bury our secrets in the ground and let the insects devour them for us.”

“Now there’s the dark and emo Xander people gossip about.”

“People gossip about me?” Xander asked.

“You find that pleasing?” Zeth smiled.

“I’m not Goth. Just because my father sucks blood from corpses and money from their mourning families, doesn’t mean I’ve bought my entire wardrobe at Hot Topics and listen to nothing but Linkin Park and Evanescence.”

“But still.” Zeth said. He snubbed his cigarette on the bench between him and Xander, “An embalming room is quiet a treasure to show off. Ever brought a girl there to make her squeal?”

“No.” Xander glanced down at his lap.

“I wouldn’t mind seeing it.”

“Curious?” Xander asked.

“Getting there.”

The school bell rang.

While lying down, Xander heard the door open. Looking away, he assumed it was his mother again.

“Will you get up?” Xander’s sister Rose was wearing a slim pale yellow dress. The color was off-putting for a Visitation, but it was Rose’s signature color. And as long as it was couture, it had their dad’s approval.

“I’ve missed you too.”

“You’re wrinkling the suit.”

“I doubt this suit can wrinkle.” He pushed himself up to where his feet dangled at the edge of the table. Rose closed the door. “Dad wants you out there.”

“I want a new suit.”

“Sam’s on his way to the house.”

“And he couldn’t take me.”

“Like I said, Dad wants to see you.” She tapped her high-heel boot with each beat in her voice.

“Well he can wait, too.” He stood up and put the two tables in between him and his sister.

“Well sometimes you just have to deal.”

“I know that.” Xander rubbed his face and then took the jacket off.

“Be careful with that. The widow took hours choosing that suit.”

“Shut up.” He tossed the jacket on the table. “Why did you do it?”

“What are you talking about?”

“Why did you tell Mom and Dad it was Zeth?” He shuttered to keep his emotions in check. “You didn’t have to. Why ruin his life too?”

“Because he was going to ruin ours,” Rose said. “I thought that after this summer, maybe you could understand the danger of having someone like him in your life. Near our family.”

“He was my friend.” Xander couldn’t keep his tears back. They made him feel so small.

“He was a bad influence. And I wasn’t going to let you become that.”

“You are such a hypocrite.”

“And you’re a selfish brat,” she said. “Never once do you put this family above yourself. Fine. Go on. Make a scene out there. Make two. Hell, perform a whole Shakespearean tragedy. And then the only thing Mom and Dad and the entire community will learn is what a drama queen you are. And then Dad will send you away again, but this time, my dear loving brother, you won’t be coming back in two months.”

“You’re lying.”

“Call my bluff. You might even get lucky and wind up in the same military school as your ex.”

Xander glanced down, defeated.

“Now come on.” She grabbed her brother’s arm and dragged him towards the door.

He yanked his hand away from her and wiped the tears that were about to fall over his eyelids. “I’ll behave, but not until I get a suit that doesn’t make me look like a thresher salesman.”

She walked back to the door and pulled it open. “He’s not the monster you think he is.”

“I know.”

“Then why are you shaking in a dead man’s suit?” She walked out before Xander could respond.

Twenty minutes passed, Xander was still in the embalming room waiting for his suit. The door opened, first showing a hand with a black suit on a hanger. Then the hand revealed to be attached to Graydon Bourbon.

“Hey son.”

“Hey Dad.” Xander’s legs were walking to his father, because he had to. His arms wrapped around his father’s neck

“I’m sorry.”

“I know,” Graydon said and handed his son the suit. “I’m glad you’re here.”

“Thank you. I just didn’t want to go out there wearing this.”

“You’re right. Sam should have stopped at the house.”

“He knew you wanted me here.”

“And it helps.” His father was skinny. His features, especially his head, were skeletal. His curly hair was snow white. His summer tan did not even lighten under the lights.

“How have you been?” Xander asked.

“Not great. I had been going through some dark times. But I’ve been praying.”

“Good.” He glanced at the new suit. “If you give me a sec, I’ll change and be out there.”

“Sure.” He grabbed the door knob but didn’t twist it. “You’re mother told you about Rudy?”

“Yeah.” He didn’t know what else to say.

“Be kind to her Son,” Graydon said. “She hasn’t been as blessed as we are.”

“It’s cool,” said Xander. “Rudy and I have been friends since diapers.”

Graydon smiled. “It’s going to be a good year.”

“It will be.”

“A new year. A new start.”

“Yes it will.” Xander said flatly.

Graydon nodded and twisted the door knob.

“A new start,” Xander said to the corpse. He puckered his lips and gave Teddy a big smack. “Yeah right.”

## Windup

Herald had been momentarily blinded by the prism lights shining from the mall's ceiling when he stepped into crusty puddle of vomit on the dirty tile floor.

"Christ!" Herald shook his left foot in the air.

"He's not here, and watch where you're stepping," his wife Miriam said while combing through her purse.

Herald grunted. "Just tell me the name."

Miriam smoothed a piece of paper in her hands. "The game is called Robo-Slave Destruction."

"Catchy," Herald said. He was in front of a toy store called Betty's World. Rainbow colors outlined each glittery letter of the name.

"It's what Jacob wants."

"It's your sister's brat. Not ours."

"Just do it, so I can go."

"Dr. David Monty?" Herald was transfixed on the store. "Haven't you've seen him enough?"

"Therapy helps me," Miriam said. "Now I'm letting you buy some new clothes."

"Only because my old ones are shrinking."

"You're getting fatter."

"They've shrunk," said Herald. "You can't wash them right."

"Take the paper. And keep the car keys. I'm taking the bus, if I don't miss it."

"Fine." Herald snatched the paper from her skeletal fingers. Miriam had a rail thin body with drooping breasts like a pair of hacky sacks. He watched her leave. He was

astonished by the choices he had made that led him to his current existence. When he was eighteen, one of the top universities recruited him for their football team. The naïve farm boy from Wisconsin had no idea the beautiful storm he had walked into. Professors wrote his papers, drugs came in an endless variety, and women made sure he never slept alone, when he actually went to bed. But as soon as he started to enjoy the thrill of losing control of the car, the impact of the crash hit him out of nowhere. Fueled by alcohol and a few unknown pills, Herald lost a huge game for his school, and out of anger by the booing stadium, he attacked like a raging bull without a specific target. His emotions blasted his body like a rocket into outer space. But instead of orbiting the stars and planets in the sky, Herald flew right into the stadium wall, knocking him into his own little universe.

When he had come out of his coma the following week, his world had turned against him. The college that adored him kicked him out for drug and alcohol abuse, the family that praised him at their little farm in Wisconsin disowned him out of pure humiliation, and the women who slept with him wouldn't give him a passing glance. The next chapter of his life had taught him what a bitch reality can be without the fame and admiration. He had to work day and night just to make a decent living. He had to learn to write and comprehend well enough to pass community college with a major in business accounting. And unlike the "babes" at his previous college, the woman that gave him the slightest attention was Miriam. She used to enjoy hearing his quarterback stories, giving him an iota of the admiration he took for granted. With his choices severely limited now, Herald decided to settle on her. But as years passed, their mutual affection turned to disdain. Miriam could care less about his past, and his sexual life consists of fantasizing

about his boss's secretary, Shelly, or begging his wife for a birthday BJ. Herald had thought of divorce, but with no more choices and no way to turn back time, he didn't even know if he could start over. If he had realized his life had ended this way, he would have gone all the way with the drugs and booze until his body keeled over. Good or bad, at least the down slope into Hell would have been better than the mind-numbing merry-go-round he rode on now.

Herald walked into Betty's World. He inhaled a suffocating smell of baked cookies and candy apples and took in the range of antique toys. They were all with key rotators on their backs: animals, ships, cars, fire trucks, music boxes, airplanes, and trains, each one with a tin body and a hand-painted smile, cartoon white teeth, and sparkly blue eyes. He picked up a tin doll with a blond ponytail made of thread and red crayon cheeks. While twisting the little rotator key on its back, Herald glared at the doll's bowl mouth and star-encrusted eyes. They seemed to mock him. He kept winding it over and over till the key snapped and dropped in his hand. Then he shuffled the doll back on the shelf and put the tiny key in his pocket.

As he was about to call for someone, the back door opened and a boy came out. He had on jeans and a t-shirt, both black with red calligraphy symbols drawn on them. White blush covered his whole face except for a red star-shaped sticker on his right cheek. He had a goofy smile and glazed eyes.

"Hey," Herald said. "Do you sell video games?"

The boy passed Herald without saying a word and exited the store. Then the backdoor blasted open again. A huge woman came through, waving her hands like a cheerleader on crystal meth.

“Hello!” she yelled. “And welcome to Betty’s World! A world where nothing goes wrong and everybody has a smile on their faces! I’m Betty! And who are you?” The woman wore a tight, pink t-shirt with a yellow sun smiling over two purple clouds. The stretch marks on her exposed belly connected her neon green biker shorts to her undersized shirt. Her pale arms glittered. Each arm had a huge blue vein that soared like a comet. Two deflated breasts rested on her tummy while her tight shirt revealed a deep crevice of cleavage. Pimples scattered all over her face, rainbow colored pigtailed stuck out of her skull, and a full set of braces covered her teeth.

Herald scrambled for the piece of paper. After a moment, he found it in his front pocket and placed it right in front of his face. He was trying to distract himself from the colorful wreck standing before him. “Do you have a video game called Robo-Slave Destruction?”

“Sorry,” Betty said, “I don’t sell those games in my shop. They’re filled with nothing but death and sex. Children need simple toys that give them hope for a bright and peaceful loving world!”

He thanked her and headed for the entrance.

“Aw, please don’t go,” Betty said, “Nobody leaves my store unhappy.” Her squeaky voice sent tingles up his spine.

“Listen,” he said, “I’m tired. I’m forty years old, and I have to find this damn game before I walk out of this God-forsaken mall.”

Betty pouted and walked over to hug him. Herald was off-taken by her touch. Being five feet to his six, she raised her huge arms to circle Herald's neck, squeezing his head between her fat. He felt like he was being crushed between two glittery, milky waterbeds. Her hair smelled like paint, reminding Herald of his chemical sniffing days in college when he reigned supreme as the star quarterback. It almost made him sigh.

"All right now," Betty said when she let go, "Don't we feel all better!"

"Actually yes,"

"No one can resist a Betty hug."

"So," Herald said, "Where's a store that would sell the game?"

Betty patted her chin with her left index finger and cocked her head to one side.

"You aren't the first visitor in Betty's World who wanted to buy that bad game. But I turned their frowns upside-down."

Herald moaned. If he came home with the game, Miriam might give him some tonight. Mediocre as it was, he missed it. He missed many pleasures.

"Aw," said Betty, patting Herald's round back, "Please don't cry. Come with me, I have a secret to show you." Before Herald snapped out of his self-pitying daze, Betty led him to the back of her shop where a single bare bulb flickered from the small ceiling fan. Stacks of brown cardboard boxes packed with toys covered. Betty skipped to a table, situated between two columns of boxes at the corner of the room to where a couple of life-size mannequins leaned against the wall. The male one had on loose jeans and a faded shirt while its female counterpart had on a skimpy skirt with a white tank top and a gold-ring pierced in her belly. Each one sported a hideous smile, wide, toothy. Their vacant eyes almost popped out of their sockets.

“Here we are!” Betty held a little white booklet.

“What’s this?” Herald stepped back an inch.

“My present to my hero!” she said and shoved the booklet up to Herald’s nose.

He opened it up and saw that it held numerous tiny, sparkly star-shaped stickers, each one a different color, all with a smiley face. Herald remembered the gothic kid having one of these on his cheek earlier.

“Thanks,” he said.

“Don’t you want to know what they are?” she asked.

“Stickers?”

Her mouth pinched like she had sucked on something sour.

“Much more,” she said in a low whisper, “These are my ‘Happy Stickers!’

Guaranteed to put a smile on anyone’s face!”

“Okay,” Herald said.

“Don’t you believe me?”

“Yeah, I put one on and it will make my day bright and sunny.”

“No! Not for you!” Betty said. “*Give* one to someone who needs to find the joy in their lives.” Betty’s eyes moved toward the mannequins. Herald shuffled closer, raising a hand to the male’s face, expecting plastic. He touched the cheek, feeling flesh. He went stiff.

“Say hi to our hero!” said Betty from behind.

“Hi hero!” they said in unison, the ceiling light reflecting on their teeth.

“M-Mother...” Herald whispered,

“You like them?” Betty skipped over to the kids and raised both their right hands. Each one had a star sticker attached on its palm?

“How?” Herald said.

“I told you! The stickers!” she said and grabbed the girl’s lifeless hand up in front of Herald. “They hurt my toys. People who hurt other people are not happy with their world, so I created my Happy Stickers. When someone wears one, they see the world in a whole new light.”

“What do you mean?”

“See for yourself.”

Betty ordered the kids to jump up and down. They did so in perfect rhythm. Then she ordered them to tap their noses and rub their heads while jumping. They performed without hesitation. After a second, Betty finally told them to stop and took both stickers off the kids’ hands. Their whole bodies relaxed while their eyes winked like they had come out of a trance.

“Where am I?” the girl asked, rubbing her bare arm. The guy stood silent.

“You two just took a short nap in the back of my shop after helping me clean up,” Betty said. “Doesn’t helping people make you feel good?”

Both kids’ faces lit up “Yeah it does,” said the boy. The girl nodded.

“I bet your parents are missing you.” Betty said. “Go on, and remember to find happiness in your life!”

The kids waved to Betty as they left. Herald glanced at the white booklet still in his hand. He smacked it with his palm before sliding it in his back pocket. He smiled, hugged Betty, and received another high from her hair in the process.

“Thank you,” he whispered.

“Aw, you’re welcome,” she said. “But remember, happiness is addictive.”

“I’m hoping so,” Herald said as he left the room.

For three weeks, he was king, of his small world. At work, Herald got promoted from assistant manager to vice president of the glue factory. His coworkers wondered how he stepped up so high and quickly, but he just explained he had “put a smile on the president’s face.”

The night he came home without the video game, before Miriam had the chance to scream, he gave her a quick hug and latched on a smiley star on the back of her scrawny neck. Afterward, Herald got whatever he wanted: home-cooked meals, a house cleaned daily, and sex every night before Letterman. Every day felt like college again. No going downhill, mourning the loss of his youth, his vitality. All his bad choices, his occupation, his lifestyle, his wife, evaporated with the primal indulgences he delved into. Sex, drugs, money, cheap dreams came true with each stroke of the clock. With each rise and fall of the sun. Harold finally had it all.

But.

The fear of losing the power again terrified him. He would never go back to the reality he endured all these years: a man without choices. A man without any control over his life. He bought a gun to protect his stickers. Herald would kill anybody who dared take him from paradise.

He bought hallucinogens from a couple of teenage losers working part-time at the factory. Then his life turned into a twenty-four hour rave, senses going wild and the

orgasms higher than his sexual conquests in college. He fulfilled his next fantasy by bringing in his secretary, Shelly. With her blond, barely legal body and Miriam's middle-age but virile carcass meshing together with Herald in an ecstasy-induced fog, their nights harkened back to ancient Greek orgies. He thought of divorcing her, but forcing her do things with her knowing sounded better to him. Maybe he'll leave her after he was tired of playing with her.

He was happy, more than happy. Betty happy. And when dawn came, everyone had a smile on their faces. After the stickers came off, the girls had no idea of what they had done, only that they could not believe how good their lives were. Miriam had stopped taking her anti-depressants. She had no idea where the uplift in her mood came from. She figured her therapy with Dr. Monty was working. Herald only smiled

He was one happy God.

Herald had had Miriam, and later Shelly, praise him constantly. They called him an Adonis, a master in the bedroom, and other ridiculous testimonials.

"Herald, the titan that I will always bow down to," Miriam said.

"Herald, the lover that surpasses all lovers," Shelly said.

He taped them for when he they weren't around. Their verbal cuddling warmed him like a baby's blanket. He replayed the tapes constantly. He made employees at his factory stay in his office all day, just so they could praise him, prolonging his high for as long as possible. He didn't care that none of his followers' comments meant anything. He pretended, and kept on until he felt satisfied enough to whisk them back to their dull, boring lives, powerless to change a thing that displeased them. He never felt completely satisfied. It thrilled and petrified him.

The day of his nephew's birthday, three weeks after he'd been to Betty's World, Herald saw the front door opening with Miriam holding bags in both her hands.

Maybe they could have sex tonight without the stickers. "Honey," Miriam said while dropping her bags on the floor except one, "Remember three weeks ago you were supposed to get Jake's game?"

"Uh, yeah, I forgot it," said Herald.

"I knew you would," Miriam said in a playful tone. "That's why I took a quick trip to the mall."

Herald gripped the arms of the recliner. "I thought they were sold out over there."

"They were, so I had to buy something else." She jiggled the bag with her wrist.

"What? Another game?" The seams of the recliner started to rip.

"Actually, I went inside that store called Betty's World. Why didn't you tell me it was such a fascinating place?"

"I didn't think it was that great." The white cotton of the recliner's arms stuck out from the broken seams.

"I found the cutest toy soldier I'm sure Jake will love." She walked over and opened the bag. She pulled out a miniature tin man wearing a painted white toga and brown sandals on its feet. It carried a small trumpet in one hand and a little sword in the other. It had a wide smile, a pair of deep blue eyes, and a rotator key on its back. Herald couldn't take his eyes off it. It wore a sadistic smile, like it had arrived to execute him on sight.

“What’s wrong?” asked Miriam from behind the recliner. “You look funny.”

“I’m just not feeling well,” Herald said, feeling his grasp of the soldier slip from his sweat.

“Oh, sweetie,” Miriam said “Let me make you happy.”

Miriam started caressing Harold’s neck, but the painted face still had his attention. Then, he felt something latch on to his neck and all his muscles clenched in intense pain, before fizzling into tiny bubbles rising into his brain. He dropped the soldier from the side of the recliner “It worked,” Miriam said with her beautiful brown eyes widening enough to engulf Herald like chocolate pudding. She bent her knees like a lady and picked up the toy. He saw her mouth transform into a magnificent smile that he wanted to match.

She gleamed at her husband: “Congratulate me.”

“Congratulations sweetheart,” he said.

“Why thank you darling,” Miriam said. She held the toy in both her hands like a cherished keepsake. “I’m so glad you care for my happiness.”

“I always will.”

“Have you ever cared for me Herald?” she said asked.

“It’s my only reason to live baby cakes.”

“Of course it is.” Then she looked solemn, and it hurt Herald, making him want to strive even harder to please her. But then she sparked right back up like she had ignited a stick of dynamite.

“I have to leave you,” she said.

“O.K.”

“I’m going to take the initiative. That’s what David says. I need to start fresh and break all restraints.”

“You do that honey.”

“David has opened my eyes Herald. He’s not just some mere therapist who listens to people’s problems and just nods. He’s a healer, a savior. The knight in shining armor I never had”

“You deserve better.”

“You’re damn right I do. And I found it the moment I walked into David’s office. I thought it would never be. Every time I’d weave a beautiful image of the two of us together in my mind, I’d remember that damn picture sitting on his desk, right next to his “#1 Dad” mug. His son, his daughter, his fucking perfect wife. All of them smiling like idiots, completely unaware of how life can drain every ounce of happiness away from you. They looked so”—Miriam smiled like a wicked gypsy—“untouchable. But thanks to the lovely demented Miss. Betty, I can be the one smiling in the photo, silently laughing at all the saps who wish they had my life.”

She glanced at her watch and walked out of the room. He felt a lurching in his stomach for her to come back to him and command him to do anything that would bring a smile on her angelic face once again. A few agonizing moments later, she came back holding the handgun he’d kept on the top shelf of the closet. “Sadly Herald, time isn’t on our side. If David and I are going to have a fresh start, we need to cut off all the chains keeping us from going forward. He’ll get rid of that blasted photo, and the family in it. And I’ll relieve myself of you as well.” She gave Herald the gun.

“I’m now going to leave Herald. Through the front door, into the car, and out the driveway. And the moment you can’t hear the engine anymore, you will place the exit hole of the gun in your mouth and pull the trigger. Understand?”

“Perfectly,” Herald said, wishing she wouldn’t leave him in his final moments on this earth. He then saw her walk away with the toy soldier in hand. She stopped and turned around. “Good-bye.”

“Good-bye my love,” Herald said.

His wife walked out and closed the door behind her.

He couldn’t believe the blessings that had rained down upon him in his life. He just needed a person like Miriam who had the grace to make sure he’d die a happy man.

Herald could hear the car engine, a roar that sounded like a large lion with a silky golden mane. But soon the roar started fading away, like a sign of dark clouds drifting off and a new dawn replacing them in their wake. When the sound finally vanished, he looked at the gun in his hand. The handle had a comforting feel. He tasted the tip with his tongue and then inserted the slide into his mouth. The sensation reminded him of his days as a child sucking the cold erect nipple of his mother’s breast.

## Almost Here

Martin twisted the rubber grip of his putter and shuffled his stance for the fourth time in less than a minute. He was never good at miniature golf. In the past five holes he'd either singled or doubled bogeyed.

Playing a midnight round at Happy Endings Putt-Putt Land had been Jaleesa's idea. She was dating the guy whose job was to pick up the stray golf balls around the fairy-tale themed course, and he'd given her the key to the grounds so they could play after hours. The invitation had sounded promising to Martin when they had lunch at Witherspoon's Deli. No lines of screaming kids or drunken couples, only the stars, cheap faux Victorian lamp posts, a chorus of crickets, and a cloying menagerie of storybook lawn ornaments to keep them company. But Jaleesa had been on her cell with a "friend" since she'd birdied last hole, and now Martin wondered why he had come.

The golf course was on the edge of Anderson County, Tennessee, between the I-24 and Verne's "Boiled Onions and Pecans" Parlor. The county was also home to Anderson College, where Martin and Jaleesa were juniors; he majored in art history, she in theater. For the past three years, they survived the small county by being best friends and reminding each other that their futures dwelled in bigger worlds outside of these tall grass borderlines.

"Get off that phone," Martin swatted a mosquito that had landed on the back of his hand. "This is 'me' time, remember?"

He studied the three chubby fiberglass dwarves standing between him and the hole. They wore sharp black suits and had ash-grey hair tied in pony tails. All three held SIG P228 firearms in their hands and posed side-by-side like Charlie's Angels.

“What?” Jaleesa continued, pressing her free hand over her other ear. “That’s just the jilted queen.”

Martin conked the ball a little harder than he intended. It sped down the felt, bounced off one of the dwarfs, and flew over the wooden frame. He exhaled and wiped the sweat off his forehead with his shirt’s sleeve. The night would’ve been better spent with a bowl of Count Chocula soaked in cheap tequila.

“Is it my turn?” Jaleesa snapped her phone shut. Her stiletto leather boots clicked the pavement as she swung her putter like a gentleman’s cane.

“Who were you talking to?”

“Where’s your ball?” Jaleesa asked.

Martin glanced at the patch of tall grass a few feet out-of-bounds.

“I distracted you. Take a mulligan.” She wore hip hugger shorts and a brown leather vest. The nearby lamp blanketed her ebony skin with a diaphanous sheen. Just because he was gay doesn’t mean he didn’t appreciate her beauty. Sometimes she made him feel like a diabetic at an ice cream parlor.

“No pity do-overs,” Martin said. He walked over to the tall grass, picked up his ball, and then dropped it back onto the felt. Using less force, he sent the ball rolling under a dwarf’s legs. It brushed the lip of the cup but didn’t drop in.

He picked up the ball and leaned on the glass casket facing the cup. Inside, a replica of Snow White, wearing sunglasses, lay with one arm over her belly and the other balancing her apple martini. The four remaining dwarves, also wearing suits, stood on small toadstools. Each defended corner of the casket in a karate stance.

Peering through the strands of weave dangling in front of her eyes, Jaleesa wacked her ball, knocking it off another dwarf and over the wooden border. It sunk in the toilet-blue pond a few feet to the left of the tall grass. “Bad swing.”

“What did I say about pity?” Martin said.

She walked over to the pond, where a plastic frog lay on a lily pad drinking a jug with XXX carved into it.

She scooped up her ball with her putter.

“Can we go now?” Martin asked.

“Not till your heart is healed.”

“My heart is pumping one point two gallons of blood every minute. It’s doing well enough for me. And now it’s one point four because I suck at putting.”

“Just try one more time,” she said, shaking his arm.”

“Fine.”

They walked over to hole seven. It was rectangular, stretched about ten feet with a loop-de-loop standing halfway on the felt. He placed his ball on the mat used as the tee. Humpty Dumpty leaned over the ledge of the loop-de-loop, a cigarette in his clenched mouth, a white scarf over his eyes. Martin gripped his putter, focused his energy into his hands and swung. When the ball rolled up and down the loop-de-loop, Humpty Dumpty fell off the ledge and hung in the air by the black cord attached to his back. The ball decelerated but had enough momentum to go into the cup. Martin smiled at his pitiful accomplishment.

“I told Carmen my reservations,” Jaleesa said, placing her ball on the mat. She slapped her ball with her putter. It rolled through the loop-de-loop, causing the egg man

to drop again, and stopped a few inches from the cup. The black cord had pulled Humpty Dumpty back onto the ledge, preparing him for another fall.

“Well now you can tell her the real story,” Martin said. Carmen was Jaleesa’s roommate and Jacob had broken up with him to date her. “The whole, big, you’re-gaydar’s-off-because-you’re-dating-a-scared-closet-loving-fairy truth.”

“She’ll have a breakdown.” She picked up her ball. “She’s twenty-three and still wants to show off her My-Little-Pony collection to all our guests.”

“I guess when you’ve been sheltered your entire life, it’s a little difficult sorting out the storybook fairies from the real ones.” Martin usually kept his inner bitch on a tight leash, but Carmen’s cutesy, naïve temperament infuriated him. Jaleesa and she had met in an advanced cycling class at the gym and clicked. Four months ago, Jaleesa moved into Carmen’s condo, and Martin had been struggling to tolerate her since.

He walked over to hole eight, which was crescent-shaped. In front of the cup, the three little pigs, their mouths opened, lay skewered with a silver rod held by the wolf, which was licking his lips. Martin placed his ball on the mat and hit it into one of the pigs’ mouths. It didn’t come out. He walked to the other side of the pork figurines and lay down peering into their carved-out asses.

“Maybe it’s constipated,” Jaleesa said.

“Shut-up.”

Martin reached in with his hand and tried grasping for the ball. He poked at it in hopes it would loosen out of the tight wedge. “I think I almost got it.”

“Having a problem?”

He looked up when he heard Carmen's voice. Her stringy fire-red hair was tied to the back of her head. She wore a pastel tulip-printed mini dress and pink Converse high tops. Beside her stood Jacob, wearing Nikes, tattered jeans, and the "Ford Pinto" tee Martin gave him for their one-year anniversary a month ago. Both he and Carmen carried putters and matching pink golf balls. The perfect college couple, Martin thought, and the queer who can't stand the sight of them.

"What are you two doing here?" Martin asked. His hand was still in the pig's ass. He frantically jabbed his finger at the ball, finally making it spill out into his hand.

"We were having barbecue at Chonkey's All-Nite Diner when Jaleesa called us and said that you needed some friends to get you through your post-breakup meltdown," Carmen said.

"I said he was hurting from splitting with his boyfriend. Watch the hyperbole."

"Why did you call them?" Martin stood up, feeling the urge to transform his putter into evidence for the prosecution.

"I thought they could help."

"Did I ask for help?" If his voice ascended any higher, he would have sounded like his mother during one of her hot flashes.

"You bottle up Martin," Carmen said. "We're only here to provide a safe circle so you can let it all out." She flapped her hands in front of her chest while she said this.

Jacob leaned away, possibly to avoid getting hit by her flailing arms.

Martin stared at Jaleesa, who was engrossed in her own private thumb wrestling game.

“We were worried about you,” Jacob said. His shaved head glowed with the white, jagged scar from when a tetherball pole fell onto his head in sixth grade. Martin remembered Jacob letting him count the ridges one night in bed. Eight and a half.

“Well thank-you for your consideration. But why don’t I leave and the three of you can play a round on my sob story,” Martin said.

“Wait.” Jaleesa grabbed his arm before he could walk away. “Just talk to us.”

“What for?”

“Anything’s possible.”

He stared into her eyes, tamping down the faint hope swelling within him. “Fine.” He stepped aside to let Carmen have her chance with the three little pigs and their irritating bowel movements.

Hole ten was flat and had a woman’s giant red stiletto placed right in front of the cup. Miniature kid figurines, wearing rags and underwear, stood and sat all over the felt. Out of bounds, the old woman had styled her spider-web hair into a bobcat weave and lay on a lawn chair while a cameraman stood next to her, recording the entire setting. Jacob swung his ball, sending it around a baby sucking on his turquoise blanket. It stopped a few feet from the stiletto.

It was Martin’s turn. He put his ball on the mat and swung hard. It went airborne and cracked a piece of the old woman’s cheap earring.

“Crap,” he said.

“No big,” Jaleesa said. “I’ll call Keller after this. He’ll tape it back together when he comes to work tomorrow.”

Martin went to retrieve his ball, avoiding Jacob's eyes. He heard Carmen continuing the conversation

"Getting serious?" she asked.

"Please, the man earns a living picking up balls on a putt-putt course." Jaleesa dropped her ball on the mat and did two practice swings before making contact. "That's one step above picking up trash on the side of the freeway."

"True," Carmen said, watching the ball roll into a hole in the foot of the stiletto, up the shoe, and then down the curvy heel.

"All I care is that he rides a Harley and worships Zeppelin."

"You shouldn't use him," Carmen said.

"I'm allowed to have some fun ok?"

"Guys, tell her she shouldn't mislead this guy."

Martin swatted his putter between two kid figurines like a pendulum. "I think if you're scared of the truth, then you shouldn't hide behind other people's fairytale delusions."

Jacob tapped his ball and then looked up. "But you also shouldn't judge people's motives without having half a brain to check the whole story first."

"That's your opinion," Martin said.

"That it is *dude*."

"Are they talking about the same thing?" Carmen asked Jaleesa.

"Maybe." The girls followed the boys, who walked on opposite sides of the hole's felt.

“Tell us about your mysterious ex,” Carmen said, as she scoped out hole eleven. It was oval shaped with a stream running through the middle. Two narrow bridges crisscrossed each other over the water. Small swans gazed in amazement at the Ugly Duckling posing on a hill in front of the hole. He wore a long sleeved lace dress, black strappy sandals, a thick rhinestone necklace, a pair of rainbow bejeweled earrings, and pancake blush. His left wing was on his hip and his right was holding the back of his head.

Martin looked over at Jacob, who was spinning the putter frantically.

“He’s a good guy,” he said, watching the spinning putter relax a little.

“I’m getting annoyed by these crickets,” Jaleesa said. “I’ll be back in a minute.”

“Where are you going?” Martin asked.

“To drown out those crickets.” She ran off to the entrance building on the other side of the course.

“Tell us some dirty secrets.” Carmen hit her ball across one of the bridges. It curved around the Fab-Drag Duckling and stopped about two feet from the cup.

“Nothing worth going public with.” Martin set his ball on the mat.

“Please let it go,” Jacob said.

“Sweetie, he needs to release his feelings.”

Martin sucked air through his teeth and hit the ball. It flew over the stream and landed behind the Drag Duckling’s glittery feather-duster body. At that moment, REO Speedwagon’s “Keep on Loving You” blasted through the speakers hanging on the wooden poles all over the putt-putt course.

“Can’t she play anything from this century?” Carmen asked. She picked her ball out of the cup and stepped away from the felt. Martin watched Jacob place his ball on the mat and prepare his swing.

“He’s terrified of his parents,” Martin said. Jacob jerked his putter and sent his ball ricocheting off the wooden border and into the stream.

“Really?” Carmen asked.

“Oh yeah. His father is a big businessman who believes he grew the perfect All-American male. One sniff of his son being a fudge packer and my ex’s well will dry up for good.”

Jacob whacked his ball again, splashing water all over him. He only managed to send his ball a few inches out of the water.

“What is wrong with you?” Carmen asked.

“We’re leaving,” Jacob said and started walking away.

“What’s going on?” Jaleesa asked, coming back to the group. She grabbed Jacob’s arm before he could pass her.

“This was a mistake,” Jacob said.

“Hold on,” Carmen said, stomping her foot. “So we know him?”

Jacob stood with his back to them. He failed to remove Jaleesa’s hand off of him.

“No,” Martin said. “He lives in Grimm County.”

“Really? Hey babe!” Carmen yelled. “Doesn’t your ex live in Grimm County?”

Jacob turned around, his eyes averted to no one in particular. “Yeah.”

“What was her name?”

“Enough of the big, bad past.” Jaleesa clasped her hand on the back of Jacob’s neck. “Let’s continue.”

Rapunzel’s tower sat at the end of hole twelve with the thick, cut braids of Rapunzel’s mustard-yellow hair placed all over the felt. The imprisoned princess stuck her bald head out of the tall tower, smiling and listening to the mp3 player in her hands. Carmen had been spending her usual three minutes at the mat strategizing over the best route through the clumps of hair. She conked her ball slightly to the left, causing it to turn a dogleg right off of a braid’s curvature. As it lost momentum near another braid, Annie Lennox’s “Walking on Broken Glass” faded out, and a guitar-drum riff began Belinda Carlisle’s “I Get Weak.”

“Ugh,” said Carmen. “This song is so desperate.”

“Its eighties pop nirvana sweetie,” said Jaleesa.

“She sounds spineless.” She hit her ball again and looked at Jacob. “Please agree on me with this.”

But Jacob kept his head down while practicing his swing on the mat. Martin closed as much space between Jaleesa and him as he could.

“REO, Annie, and now Belinda?” he whispered.

“I burned a CD off of your computer, no big,” she said

Martin wrapped his arm around her and squeezed. “Did you copy a certain, private playlist of mine, and don’t lie because I’ll know when the next song comes on.”

“I might have burned off the songs from ‘J&M Forever.’” She clapped when Carmen made par and tried squirming out of his grasp, but he restrained her in a friendly chokehold.

“I’m not enjoying this game you’ve set up,” Martin said.

“I thought the songs would remind you both of the good times.” She grabbed his arm and slowly tried to pry it off her neck.

“Butt out of my life.” He tightened his grip. Jacob was sinking his ball into the cup, causing Rapunzel’s head to bobble up and down.

“If it wasn’t for me, you would’ve never have hooked up with Jacob in the first place.” She reached down and tickled his side. Letting out a few low-pitch giggles, Martin backed away and crossed his arms around his stomach. She loved reminding him that she played matchmaker for them. One night, two years and four months ago, she set them up in the previous apartment she shared with a hippie named Betty. They ate moo goo gai pan and drank raspberry wine-in-a-box prepared for them on the folded out table. Jaleesa was Jacob’s boss at the university’s tutorial center. He’d never come out, but Jaleesa took a chance.

Now on hole twelve, Martin played through the broken braids of Rapunzel’s iconic hairstyle. After four strokes, he managed to see the damsel’s bald head bobble in celebration.

As Martin prepared his first swing on hole thirteen, doughnut-shaped with the naked emperor being handcuffed by a police officer in the center, Belinda faded from the speakers and the pleading voice of Juice Newton “Angel of the Morning” began. Carmen confessed she liked the song and she swung her ball in front of the clover covering the emperor’s genitals. Martin shut his eyes and remembered the time this song had been on, when they were alone in Jacob’s loft. Jacob had taken off his shirt and Martin said he didn’t want Jacob to see his fat. Jacob said he loved Martin’s love handles. Martin told

him not to say that and backed away, tripped and fell on the bed. It was soft and the sheets were cushy. Jacob fell on him and pushed enough of his shirt off to kiss all over his chest and belly. Martin's stomach muscles clenched every time Jacob's lips touched his skin.

Juice continued wailing above Martin as he swung his putter five times to get his ball quickly around the fat, naked man.

"Double bogey," Carmen announced.

"Don't care." He stood next to Jaleesa, gazing around the course as Jacob played through his turn. Juice finally shut up after they finished the hole, Jaleesa whack Martin with her putter.

"That hurt," Martin said, rubbing his calf. They had been waiting while Carmen debated the right angle that would send her ball around the various playing cards and chess pieces on the checkerboard felt. A swirly-eyed Alice sat cross-legged in a straitjacket behind the cup.

"I set this up for you," she whispered.

"I didn't ask you to."

After Fall Out Boy and Relient K had safely flushed Juice out of his mind, Martin decided it was time for his ex to squirm. He walked around the couple and sat on a plastic toadstool. "So when did you two become an item?"

"We're not official," Jacob said.

"This is our second date," said Carmen. She bounced her ball off the white queen, grazed the King of Hearts, and then stopped an inch from the cup.

“First date,” Jacob corrected.

“I consider Parade our first date, honey.”

“The bar?” Martin asked, preparing his turn around the scattered game pieces.

“Yeah.” She tipped her ball into the cup, causing the spirals in Alice’s eyes to swirl. “I walked in there a week ago and spotted this adorable man that I had known for a while now, sitting at a high table in the corner of the room looking as if his life had ended

“He’d broken up with his girlfriend.” She picked up her ball and walked over to stand next to Jacob, who was working too hard to avoid his ex’s glare.

“Oh my god,” Martin said, swinging his putter in a random direction. “Why would that bitch drop-kick this hot piece-of-ass?” His ball bounced around the felt like a pinball.

“He said he hurt her badly.” Carmen slid her fingers through Jacob’s hand.

Martin stopped the ball with his foot near the base of the Queen of Hearts. He looked at Jacob, who was freezing the checkerboard felt with his eyes.

“Please stop,” Jacob said, his voice barely registered over the Lemonhead’s cover of “Mrs. Robinson” coming through the speakers. Jacob had told Martin it was his favorite cover of the song. Martin suddenly felt dizzy from the music.

“She wanted too much of you too fast sweetie,” Carmen said. “Forget about her.”

“I was wrong.”

“She abandoned you.” She eyed Martin and Jaleesa. “Aren’t I right?”

“You need to move on.” Martin felt tears forming in his eyes. He dropped his putter and dashed to the restroom.

Inside, he breathed through his mouth to avoid the smell of urine and junk food crammed into the trashcan. He flicked the switch on the wall. The ceiling light blinked grey-white on the mirrors and stained floor. Near one of the mirrors, someone had penned, “Want a real ‘Happy Ending,’ call Bobby at 423-SUK-FAGS. Martin remembered Jaleesa telling him that the owner was named Bobby. He was a retired burlesque dancer from New Orleans who had come to Anderson County because of his dying mother. When she had passed, she had left him these few acres of wild fields to do with as he wished. Apparently he loved fairy tales and acid and decided to merge his two favorite hobbies into his own dream world.

Martin switched the faucet on but only received a few drops. The mirror didn’t agree with his rubbed cheeks and blood-vein eyes.

“I admit defeat,” he said to his reflection. Before they broke up, his desire for Jacob to come out had been boiling for some time. It hit its zenith during Carmen and Jaleesa’s “New Roommate” party. Jacob wouldn’t come with him and said they would meet each other there. Then during the party, he avoided Martin, and instead herded a temporary harem of groupies all night. Carmen got the closest to him. Martin wound up sinking into a leather couch and drinking four beers. After a while, he decided to walk outside the front door and take a fresh cigarette-and-booze-free breath of air. A few minutes passed before Jacob joined him.

“What are you doing outside?” Jacob had asked.

“Needing space,” Martin said.

“Do you want company?”

“Do you?” He eyed him.

“Yes,” he said, rubbing his arm. “I think so.”

“You sound so sure.”

“I’m here with you.”

“Almost here.” Martin started walking, not looking back. “You know what I want.”

Now, the restroom door opened. Jacob walked in. Martin looked at him for a moment, and then down into the sink’s cruddy drain.

“I’m sorry I mentioned your dad,” Martin said.

“It’s okay.”

“He’s better than nothing. All I have left of mine is a phone number on a cocktail napkin.”

He looked back to his reflection and spat at it. He turned to Jacob, grabbed his head between his hands and smashed their lips together. Jacob twisted his thin fingers into Martin’s hair.

“I’m sorry I gave you an ultimatum,” Martin said.

“Shut-up.” Jacob rammed his tongue down Martin’s throat. His tongue tasted like chipotle barbecue but Jacob’s chapped lips tasted like sugar. Martin pulled his head away.

“Cotton candy?” he asked.

“Lip gloss,” Jacob said, looking down. He grabbed his sleeve and rubbed his lips.

“What is she, twelve?”

“It’s not what you think,” he said. “We were eating, and she just kissed me. I have been trying to get that nasty taste off my lips since then. Please,” he said, his hot breath

steamed the back of Martin's neck. Martin closed his eyes and leaned his head on Jacob's.

"I couldn't wait for you," Martin said. He turned and pressed his lips on Jacob's, a soft, brief touch that would let him remember the feel of his kiss but forget the taste of Carmen's lip gloss.

"Tell me it's easy and I'll do it," Jacob said

"I suck at putt-putt, and you want me to tell you that coming out is easy?"

Martin turned on the other faucet in the restroom and was grateful when it actually poured. "I know we have two beautiful girls waiting for us outside." He splashed some water on his face and then wetted a paper towel. "One is my best friend. The other is your girlfriend"—Jacob winced as Martin handed him the paper towel—"who we don't want to be suspicious." Before opening the door, he pressed a hard quick kiss on Jacob's cheek.

"I'll wait," he whispered and turned away. A moist pressure hit the back of his neck. It was the humidity, Martin said to himself. He inhaled the night air, thankful that it washed away the sewer smell of the restroom. The girls stood over the swirly-eyed Alice. Jaleesa held her putter and Martin's in her hands. Carmen leaned on her putter with her eyes half-closed

"What took you guys so long?" she asked.

"Guy stuff," Martin said.

## Shattered Machine

As I drove down I-75 with my father in his brand new 2006 BMW Coupe, the air conditioner blew a sixty-five degree breeze straight at my face. Dad preferred the shivering temperature, and the icy wind did keep me alert from any oncoming trouble. I fidgeted in my seat. My goal was to drive smooth and calm. Cars passed us but I dedicated myself to a smooth seventy miles per hour drive. We were twenty minutes into the unbearable two hours it would take to get to Atlanta. I moved my lower jaw back and forth as the digital clock turned from 10:28 am to 10:29 am. My father drank from his two liter plastic cup, filled with the screwdriver he mixed before we had set off. He glared at the road and parted his lips.

“We’re going to talk,” he said.

“About what?” My stomach lurched.

“What do you think?” Dad wanted me to start the conversation. I would bring up a random topic concerning my life, and he would either approve and start his inquiry or disapprove and repeat the question.

“There’s really nothing to talk about,” I said and started gnawing at my bottom lip. We passed a stretch of Dalton’s giant carpet stores. At our current speed, we still would have to drive an hour and forty minutes before reaching Atlanta.

“Oh there’s plenty to talk about,” he said and then picked up his cup. I heard the tiny ice pebbles crashing into each other as he drank. He swallowed twice before putting the cup back down. “You have many problems that have needed to be resolved for some time now.” He didn’t look at me. His cell phone rang and he answered it. My chest muscles relaxed. The phone call provided a few extra minutes of peace, maybe more, but

I wasn't settled. I had tried extending the "calm before the storm" segment of our conversations before and always ended up defeated.

Dad wanted answers as to why he didn't "understand" me. Why at seventeen-years-old had I not gone on one date? Why was I seventy-five pounds overweight? Why didn't I have friends to go out with? Why did I stay in my room and do nothing but watch *Golden Girls* and play video games? Those questions had been asked and I didn't know the right answer to give him so he would drop the subject. But there were reasons for my behavior, a big one in particular that had increasingly been a pain to deal with. And if Dad was more open, he would already know the answer he was looking for.

A winter night the year before my father had caught me looking at shirtless male celebrities on the internet.

"Why are you looking at this filth?" he had asked.

"Kids keep calling me queer at school, and I just assumed I was."

"Are you as stupid as you are fat? They tell you you're queer and you believe it?"

I remembered apologizing for being gullible and him finally walking out of my bedroom. But then he stopped, turned around and said "You're not gay son. You don't bathe enough. You don't care about hygiene. You wear dirty clothes two, three times a week. That's not what a gay man does. I mean, I'm considered more gay than you by those standards." He closed the door behind him. We never discussed that night or the web site again. I assumed he was thinking I was going through a temporary phase of homosexuality. I was terrified of correcting him.

I pulled back from a crimson Volvo I had begun tailgating. I didn't hear any criticism from him, so I relaxed my grip on the steering wheel. The digital clock read 10:40 am. I pressed my foot on the gas pedal and sped around the Volvo. I pledged to stay above seventy-five mph but never tip over eighty. When I heard my father stop talking on the phone, my body tingled. I breathed through my mouth because my nose had clogged up from the freezing air.

“Are you ready to talk now?” he asked.

“I don't know what you want me to say.”

“You stay in your room all the time. You only come out to eat. You have no friends. You don't go to church. This is not how a human being lives his life.”

Everything he said was true. I commuted forty-five minutes from my home to my high school Monday through Friday. When I came home, I completed my homework and played video games and watched television and masturbated to the work-out magazines I hid under my mattress. I stopped going to the weekly teen services at my church when I listened to my minister during one service preaching about God not allowing “perverted” boys like me into heaven. Then I heard a few shouts of “Hallelujah” and “Amen” around me.

I decided to show my strengths to my father in an attempt to deflect his accusations.

“I'm trying to make an ‘A’ in all my classes like I did last year.”

“And I'm proud of you for that, but you are not active anywhere else. You are huge and you don't exercise. You could die because of your weight.”

I was six foot four and 265 pounds. I pulled apart my squished layers of belly fat and felt the air tickle my skin. The road curved and I put both my hands back on the steering wheel.

“And you’ve never once considered living with me,” he continued. “That hurts me.”

The statement I had feared the most. My parents had divorced seven years ago, and I’d lived with my mother since then. In the beginning, it was because Mom had full custody of me. Around age eleven, Dad had repeatedly told me that if I loved him, I would fight with my mother to let me live with him. Desperate for him to be proud of me, I created many useless fights with Mom over the topic of me living with Dad instead of her. Every fight ended with both of us in tears behind slammed doors. Soon the fights wore me down, and I had to tell my father I wanted to stop creating pointless arguments with Mom.

“So you don’t love me, is that it?” he had asked me in his car once as he took me back to Mom’s house after a visit.

“No, no, I do love you!”

“Obviously not, all your mother has to do is cook you a meal and you’re on her side.”

“But she keeps on saying no!”

“Then you keep doing it.”

“But I’m so tired!”

“Fine! I knew it was because of your laziness! You can stay with her all you want! You don’t have to see me ever again!”

A year later, Dad decided to bring the topic back up for discussion. Only this time, he chose a dangerous machine on wheels as the talking ground.

“It would be too difficult for me to move in with you,” I said, “because I have school and everything.”

“That’s not an excuse.”

“Do we have to talk about this?” I smelled my deodorant wearing off, and I put all my force into calming down and praying he wouldn’t notice the stench. On the other hand, the more disgusting I became, the less he suspected I was gay.

“Why are you smiling?” he asked me.

“Nothing.”

“Tell me!”

“Don’t yell at me!” My concentration shook. The car shifted into the yellow line before I took control of it again.

“Well don’t tell me it’s nothing! When I ask you a question, answer it!” He breathed deep through his nose and drank two more gulps of his screwdriver. His posture relaxed. “My father is dying. Do you realize your grandfather has only a few more weeks left?”

At 11:05am, my father mentioned Grandpa for the first time on our trip. I’d always known he played a big part in my father’s current temperament. With the combination of failing chemo and skin cancer slowly killing his brain cells, most of Grandpa’s spirit had already disintegrated, along with the family as a whole. His skin shriveled into a bright yellow hue that stuck to his fatless head. His snowy white hair on top of his liver spotted head and family-famous mustache had fallen off

“Have you visited your grandfather?” my father asked and took another sip of his drink.

“Two weeks ago.” I didn’t visit him as much as the rest of the family because his home had transformed into a pre-funeral visitation with grey lightning and a draft coming out of the chimney. Every time I visited him, I always felt the house was dying with him. I didn’t like to see everything shutting down around me, like a battery running out of juice.

“You haven’t seen your grandfather in two whole weeks?” His voice almost reached the same octave as the two one-syllable words.

“I’ve been busy.” The road started looking infinite. It bended, swerved, and curved into a slow trial of will for me to sustain. I broke my rule about tipping eighty and pressed on the gas pedal.

“You see, this is what I am talking about. You don’t care about anyone but yourself.”

“That’s not true.” I almost cursed the digital clock for reading 11:10am...and then 11:11am.

“Yeah it is. You really have problems.”

“You’re sounding like I’m some drug addict. That’s not fair.” I wasn’t a drug addict. I was a hormonal closeted teenager.

“I never said you were a drug addict, but you don’t do anything unless you get something out of it.”

My body sweated and my face dried up from the freezing air. I pushed the button with the red triangle five times.

“Don’t push that,” he said and pressed the button with blue upside-down triangle seven times.

“I’m freezing.”

“Then I’ll push the vent to face me.”

He arranged the vents so that they no longer blew the air on my face, but now I felt the air circulating the car and blowing at the back of my neck. The driver’s seat shrank and my knees clanked together. I thought of opening the side window before I heard his cell phone ring. The sound relaxed the muscles in my shoulders and back. I closed my eyes for a second. The road widened and the cars and trucks moved farther away from me. The digital clock changed a little quicker from 11:12am to 11:20am, and then 11:35am. And finally at 11:46am, when I passed the exit to Rome, Georgia, hope began to reemerge. Not close to ending this trip, but close enough to feel my feet on the hard, stable ground for a little while.

I wouldn’t have to tell him, not yet. But the voice in my head drenched in acid and degradation, whispered to me what I feared:

*Fag, people already know.*

I’m a human being, I said to the voice.

*Queer, that’s why you ran away from your last school.*

The kids were idiots and jerks.

*Homo, your mother doesn’t even like you.*

My mother loves me because I am her son.

*She cried and cried when she found your cock-and-balls magazines.*

She was just surprised.

*Have you heard this joke before? A fag was doing chin-ups in a gym when he notices a broom leaning on the wall in front of him.*

Be quiet.

*He grabs the broom and takes off his shorts. He then starts jamming up his ass with it while continuing with his chin-ups. He keeps going up and down and up and down until his hands start building up a sweat.*

Shut up.

*He loses his grip and falls right on the broom. It goes up his ass, through his body and bursts out of his skull. His queer brain splatters all over the gym. Funny isn't it?*

No it's not.

*Then why did you laugh with the rest of your fellow male students?*

If I hadn't, they would've become suspicious.

*They would've found out that you are a sick, perverted God damned homo. And your daddy would think of you the same way if he ever found out.*

"Why are you crying?" my father asked.

"I'm not." I wiped away two tears touching the edges of my lips. We passed Dave & Busters Arcade and were in the middle of semi-clogged traffic on the four-lane interstate. The digital clock said 12:14 pm. It would take a minimum of twenty minutes to reach our destination.

"What do you have to cry about?"

"You don't get it," I said. Another wrong answer.

“What do I not understand? I give you a nice car, you go to a nice school, and you go to therapy. I practically give everything you ever wanted and you’re never grateful.”

His crescendo voice caught me by surprise.

“I don’t want to talk anymore.” I slid my hand on the side window and felt the sunlight. I removed it and enjoyed the warmth lingering on my skin.

“Too bad, because I’m not stopping till I get some answers from you.”

“I’m not ready to talk.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“It means there are some things that I’m not ready to tell you. So please stop.”

“No! You tell me what the hell is wrong with you now!” His voice rose and he stared full face at me. Each word he spoke echoed in my ear. A faint ring started inside my head. I drove on the lane farthest to the right. A massive blue Silverado in front of me stopped and then drove on sporadically in the suffocating traffic. The high wall of a delivery truck blocked my sight from seeing the other lanes on the other side of it. When the Atlantic traffic increased, I had to slow to sixty.

“Please stop.” I pressed my head on the window and felt my right ear burning on the glass. But I didn’t want to move my head in the other direction.

“No! Tell me now, Son!” A faint monotone ring pierced in my brain as his voice continued to go up an octave with every command. I tried popping my ears but the ring escalated, so I prayed for deafness, a temporary loss of the senses. My hands and legs became heavy and required more energy to control.

“I can’t tell you.” The ringing shortened my vocabulary to a few begging words.

“No! Tell me! Are you gay?”

“No. I’m not gay!” I screamed. The ringing stung now and caused a growing headache on the right side of my brain.

“Then what?”

“Stop it!”

“Tell me! I’ll take you out of that school if you don’t tell me!”

“Don’t care!”

So tired of thinking.

“I’ll take away the car!”

“I don’t care!”

Too loud. So tired of caring.

“Tell me!”

“No!”

How can I still be holding the steering wheel?

“Tell me!”

“No!”

So loud. So tired of holding the steering wheel.

“Tell me!”

Want to stop. Need to stop.

“Tell me now!”

“P-Please....”

Stopping...now...

“Tell me!”

“I’m gay!”

Silence. Like soft, feather pillows inside my body. A light numbness spreading within my muscles, my eyes, my legs, my brain. The ringing was still there, and became more present when the screaming had stopped. My body swayed a little as I stopped at the toll booth heading into Buckhead. My father handed me four quarters. My right hand took them, gave them to my left hand, and then my left hand dropped them into the slot. The toll gate rose and my right foot pushed the gas pedal. I stared at nothing but squirming vehicles in multiple lanes while my body kept going. An automated machine driving the expensive black car.

“You think I’m mad, but I’m not,” I heard my father say, but he sounded far away. His voice was so calm, and light and reassuring. I wondered if this voice was just in my head.

As my body drove me and Dad off the interstate and up the exit ramp, I picked up thoughts somewhere in my mind that felt so empty now. I saw my father carrying me in his arms as he ran into the emergency room when my arm broke from crashing my bike into a pole. I saw us playing Mario golf and him winning. He told me I was a good loser. Angry, I ran to my mother and told her that he said I was good at losing. I tried to remember the last time he held my hand or wrapped his arms around me, but I couldn’t piece those memories together. I gave up.

## Blackout

I sat in my car in the parking lot of the movie theatre. I needed stale popcorn, expensive chocolate, flat Coke, and a B-rated thriller to distract me. I took the keys out of the ignition. Voices in the parking lot overshadowed the last few breaths of the engine. One high-pitch voice ordered her “bitch” of a friend to get her “fat ass” to the theatre that second. The voice was coming from a thirty-something-year-old woman wearing skin-tight Capri cut-offs and a denim tank-top with strings of rainbow beads rattling around her belly. The shadow began forming, a trick in the corner of my right eye.

“Obnoxious sow,” the shadow said

“Don’t be mean,” I said, watching the woman walk up to the front doors of the theatre. The blurry contours of honey and dark almond hair hovered around the shadow’s petite shoulders.

“Just because she could fit in it, doesn’t mean she should wear it.”

“You’re so critical,” I said. I played with the shadow. Even though I was talking to it, I was trying not to believe that I was acknowledging its presence.

“You’re disagreeing with me?” The shadows swirled and the colors took shape.

“That’s not the point.” The woman stood by the doors heading into the theatre. She was staring down at her cell phone, mashing her thumbs on the keypad. Even when I was about fifteen feet away from her, sitting in my car, I could hear the clicking sounds she was making, like firecrackers bouncing off the pavement.

“Maybe you’re defending her because you look like you belong with her.”

I glanced down at the wrinkled navy shorts and worn-out maroon shirt I wore. There was a tiny hole on the left side, right under the collar bone. It was so small. No one would know it was there except me.

“I’m nothing like her,” I said.

“What makes you think that?”

“I’m not a hundred pounds overweight with the laugh of an ass.”

“No, you’re just the guy who sits alone in a crowded parking lot talking to himself.”

I turn to my right. The shadow disappeared. I picked up my car keys that I had dropped in the passenger seat. Dangling between my car key and the key to my dad’s house was a tiny teddy bear. Both of its legs were torn off and much of its pink paint was chipped off. I could barely make out the word “Princess” on its belly. I put the keys in my pocket and stepped out of my car.

“I don’t know where to start,” I said, scratching the pillow in my lap. I leaned on the edge of the couch with my leg stretched out over the cushions. Greg sat in his office chair across from me, writing in my opened vanilla folder. My second one. My first one was crammed in between a pile of other vanilla folders on his desk next to him. It contained eight years of notes of therapy in which I talked about my parents’ divorce, my father, my weight, my sexuality, as well as my regrets and dreams. Those worries now seemed as thin as the paper they were written on.

“Start where you feel comfortable,” Greg said and wrote down another note in my second folder. Those contents held discussions of my first apartment, my first kiss, and as of Mother’s Day, my first real tragedy.

“I thought I was above it.” I pulled down a blind and glanced out the window at the thick blanket of gray hovering over the trees. “Growing up in a funeral home. I thought I’d become desensitized to death. Idiot.”

“No one can prepare themselves for this.”

“I believed I did. I feel foolish admitting that.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s one of life’s lessons, like falling off a bike the first time. You have to experience it, make the mistake, and then battle through the consequences. When Grandpa died, the funeral proceedings felt like a chore. I had to really commit to shedding tears for him. And six years later, when Grandma passed, it was a relief, honestly. The woman wanted to go.”

“Their deaths were expected,” he said, writing more notes. “This isn’t.”

A train horn blared out the window beside Greg. I looked in time to see the black locomotive dash through the mesh of elms and cedars in the distance.

“Usually in stories, the reader foresees death, sees the foreshadowing,” I said. The rhythmic sounds of the machine riding the tracks agitated me. I couldn’t speak over them. I could barely process a coherent thought while the dull colors rushed by. The sounds passed, but my mind didn’t calm down. “The last thing I said to her was ‘Don’t screw up Mother’s Day.’ So no, I didn’t expect it.”

Inside the theatre, the ticket line was a tight zigzag pattern. Mom had given me cash, an incentive to have a good night out. I figured the “good” part would come once I had my drink, popcorn, sugar, and a seat in front of a mediocre flick.

I monitored the space between the middle-aged father in front of me and the “Obnoxious Sow” behind me in the line. We were moving in swift unison. It was hypnotic. I could almost detach my mind with body, allowing it to move one step after another without a direct order.

Then Lady Gaga’s “Bad Romance” broke my concentration, and the Sow behind me answered her cell.

“I’ve stopped waiting for your ass,” said the Sow on her cell. “It was hot as hell out there.”

I blocked her voice by focusing on the stone interior of the building. Banners displayed the new selections of coffee and tea at the concession stand. There were also self-serve drink stations at opposite sides of the lobby and high tables scattered around the center area.

“I’m almost at the end of the ticket line, so move your butt.” The Sow’s tone cut through my ear drums.

“Moo,” the shadow whispered in my ear

“Shut-up,” I mumbled to the voice and lowered my head. The man in front of me looked to his side before going to an opened register. I was in front now, thankful for the added space in front of me. But the cow was still talking.

“Why do you defend him? Yeah. No. You know what? You’re pathetic.”

“Pathetic.”

I glanced back up to see a register open.

“One adult for *Predators*,” I said.

“Nine-fifty,” said the kid.

I paid him, grabbed my ticket, and then immediately gave it to another kid who ripped it in half and gave me the stub. I walked into the welcoming space of the lobby. Strangers were all around me, but did not care who I was or what my life had been like the past two months. The gamble of bumping into someone I knew was high, especially since it was Saturday night at the only theatre in Cleveland. The risk I took for a distraction.

“Your outfit’s embarrassing,” the shadow said next to me.

“Why do you care?” I barely breathed out the words. “You’re not even here.”

“Then you should be embarrassed for me.”

“You don’t exist,” I mouthed.

“Not to these people.”

The lobby slowly closed in, filling with too many people. I walked past the concession stand and into the restroom. It was a smaller area, packed with men, fathers, and sons.

“Good choice.” The shadow trailed my steps. I couldn’t see it, but I knew. I knew, because I constructed it that way. I fought to run from it, but at the same time, I wanted it to follow me.

I kept my head down, squeezed my shoulders in to avoid physical contact, and walked to the last stall. I tapped the door and found that it was unlocked. So I kept pushing until it hit a man pissing in the toilet.

“Not vacant,” said the man.

“Sorry.” I turned and walked out of the restroom.

“Lost the mood?”

“Yeah.” I stepped into the nearest line for the concession stand. I didn’t look at the prices.

“You’re just upset the guy didn’t invite you in the stall with him.”

“Please disappear.” I glanced around to see no one behind me. The hollowness in my chest became more present. Hanging on the wall above a bench was a poster for the movie *Eclipse*.

“Let’s see that.”

“We’re seeing aliens and guts,” I mouthed.

“I want hot, glittery vampires.”

“Forget it.” I turned back around. The teenage girl behind the register gave me a safe, placid smile. I ordered a Diet Coke, candy, and small popcorn.

“I want to see Edward,” the shadow said, “I never got to see the movie.”

“That’s because you were slammed into a tree two months before it came out.” I blinked. I was standing in the middle of the lobby talking to air. I shifted my popcorn under my arm to rub the sweat off of my forehead. Luckily, *Predators* was playing in the nearest theatre. I took a few steps before someone called to me. Someone real.

. She was half my height, with white hair and wearing cherry glasses.

“You probably don’t recognize me,” she said.

“I’m sorry, no.” I tried to give off a bashful demeanor, but didn’t let go of one of my expensive theatre snacks.

“My name is Sandra Tilly. You were in my Sunday School class when you were five.”

“Oh, okay. Hello.” Sunday school, church, God: concepts I didn’t want to think about at the moment.

“I’m so sorry to hear about your sister. She was a sweetheart.”

“Thank you very much. She is very missed.” I’d thanked so many people in the past two months. I doubt there was an ounce of gratitude left, if there was ever any to begin with.

“How is your mother doing? I couldn’t imagine the pain she must be going through right now.”

Mother worked all day and then came home and stayed in her bedroom, only coming out if she wanted a drink or a bite to eat from the kitchen. “She’s doing as to be expected. Some days easier than others.”

“Well, please tell her you and her are in my prayers.”

“She’ll be very thankful for that. Thank-you.” I mimicked the smile the concession stand girl had and disappeared into the theatre. There were people sitting in different spots, some in clusters, and others filling two rows from side-to-side.

“You can’t take it when the spotlight’s on me.”

“You could never take it when it wasn’t.” I climbed up the stairs and picked a seat at the end of an empty row. The dimmed lights were a comfort, like my bedroom in the middle of the night. But as I sat in the dark, the shadow still lingered in the corner of my eye, sitting beside in the empty seat next to me. I put my candy on the armrest across the empty seat.

“But the limelight’s always on me.”

“Always.” I clawed a hand full of popcorn and shoved it in my mouth, letting three or four kernels fall down my shirt and into my lap. The taste was salty and stale.

“You’re jealous of the attention I’m getting.”

“Nope.” I scratched the armrest. “Angry.”

“Of the attention?”

“Nope.”

“Then what?”

I tossed more popcorn into my mouth. More kernels fell into my lap. Then I drank my Diet Coke. It wasn’t flat as I had predicted.

“One party,” I said. “In the middle of night, on Mother’s Day. You had to go to drive. No. Get driven by your stupid bitch of a BFF who couldn’t keep her damn eyes on the road, just for a party. A party with that spotlight you were so obsessed about. You died for that stupid spotlight.”

The lights went out a few seconds later and the previews began.

When I walked into First Baptist Church, holding my mother’s hand, I didn’t know what to expect. I already felt exhausted before we sat down on a couch in the lobby under the chapel. My family started walking in, one by one. They gathered around in a large circle. Mom and I sat on opposite sides of a couch. We didn’t talk, just stayed in our own minds. Dad was the last to walk in, still wearing his sunglasses. We hadn’t been together enough because he lived on the opposite side of town, with me taking care of Mom. After all of my family members walked into the lobby, Dad’s business partner at the funeral home said a prayer before instructing us of what the next four hours would be.

Mom and I walked into the chapel first. There was a large shadowbox displaying my sister's high school diploma that she never received, the graduation cap she never had a chance to wear, pictures of her and her friends at school, and a large senior picture of her in the center. Her casket sat on a long table next to the shadow box. A video of family pictures was being projected onto a large screen behind the pulpit. Mom and I were seated next to the casket, as well as my father, stepmother, and two half-sisters. Soon the funeral home employees opened the front doors of the chapel and started ushering people in. Relatives, friends, acquaintances, and strangers lined up and slowly walked passed me and my family.

At first, I thought the task would be simple and easy: shake hands, say "thank-you," and move on to the next person. My mind was locked on the faces moving in front of me. Mom didn't seem to notice I was sitting next to her. Dad was the same. But it didn't matter. The people were passing us, each one demanding my attention. The novelty of the pleasantries quickly wore off and I began to retreat within myself. I felt more isolated than ever. I motioned for my Aunt Alice to take my place for a minute. I walked out of the chapel and into the hallway. It was cooler, easier to breathe. I went into a prayer room down the hall that was set up for my family to have a snack and drink in breaks. I had a bottle of water and a sandwich. I looked out the window and noticed the line continued all the around the church. I was not sure I thought it was a good thing or not.

I returned back to the chapel, resumed my position, and hoped the night would go by faster than it had. My wish was not going to come true. There were so many people. They had to be seated in the pews until there was room for them to walk over to us. I

could not look around and see the video on the screen or I would become dizzy and soon feel a headache coming on. The faces became nameless. My parents became more distant to me as time passed. I wanted to sleep. Mom kept her a civil trance while dad could barely compose himself. He slumped in his chair one minute, and got up and embraced someone for another minute the next. I sat in the middle, trying to make myself believe the night was coming soon. My little sister lay in a casket two feet to my left and the line of people started becoming a huge wall that never ended. So I took another break.

As I walked through the hallway, I looked out the window. The line of strangers draped across the walls of the building. So many people I didn't know or care about. So many strangers praising my sister's life and her impact on theirs. Then the question hit me, the one I tried ignoring all night: Would my Visitation require the size of the church's chapel? I dismissed the question for the moment and went to the restroom.

The movie started as a cliché action flick: unknown jungle, characters with unknown backgrounds, and a plot I could decipher after the first scene. But this was about distractions, not art. After the third scene, I'd eaten two-thirds of my popcorn, chewed off half of my candy, and drank all of my soda. I felt a little uncomfortable in a public place but confident that the movie will alleviate the feeling.

Then the movie went black, the sounds of the building shut down, and after a second and a half, the emergency lights turned on. The audience rumbled, A few people yelled "What?" or "That was quick!" A few minutes passed before an usher came in to tell us that we could wait for the electricity to return and the movie to come back or line up in the lobby to get a paper credit since they could not access their electronic cash

registers. Many in the audience groaned and a few immediately stood up and walked out. I decided to wait awhile, hoping the electricity would come back on.

“Are you still mad at me?”

“No.” Time seemed to stretch. Heat was building in the room. The emergency lights glared down at me and I shuffled in my seat. Nothing was worth this compressed heat.

“Who’s stopping you from leaving?”

I looked behind me to see if any sparks were flying in the projector room. Complete blackout. Leaving my trash, I stood up and walked out of the room. Emergency lights shined all through the hallway and lobby. People sat on the floor, leaned on the wall, or stood in the long line for their refunds. The heat was worse with all the bodies so close to one another. There were already long lines waiting for a refund in the dark lobby. The heat and people were not worth the ten dollars. Instead, I focused my sight on the red exit sign as I maneuvered through the dark shadows around me. Outside, lights were off all in the surrounding areas, including the gas station and fireworks shop. The night air cooled off the compressed heat of the building. I stretched out my fingers, allowing the air to brush off my palm sweat. Then the shadow was walking beside me.

“I hated when you held my hand.”

“It was to annoy you mostly.” I stepped into my car, put the key in the ignition, and drove out of the parking lot

## Bibliography—Literary Works

- Agee, James. *A Death in the Family*. New York: Penguin, 2008. Print.
- Baldwin, James. *Giovanni's Room*. New York: Delta Trade Paperbacks, 2000. Print.
- Burroughs, Augusten. *Running with Scissors A Memoir*. New York: Picador, 2003. Print.
- Forster, E. M. *Maurice: Novel*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2006. Print.
- Gay, William. *Twilight: A Novel*. San Francisco: MacAdam Cage, 2007. Print.
- Guest, Judith. *Ordinary People*. New York: Penguin, 1982. Print.
- Holleran, Andrew. *Dancer from the Dance: Novel*. New York: Perennial, 2001. Print.
- Isherwood, Christopher. *A Single Man*. Minneapolis: Of Minnesota, 2005. Print.
- Lynch, Thomas. *The Undertaking: Life Studies from the Dismal Trade*. New York: Norton, 2009. Print.
- Richard, Canning. *Between Men: Best New Gay Fiction*. New York: Carroll & Graf, 2007. Print.
- Taylor, Peter. *A Summons to Memphis*. New York: Vintage, 1999. Print.
- Toole, John Kennedy. *A Confederacy of Dunces*. New York: Louisiana State UP, 2000. Print.
- Waugh, Evelyn. *Loved One: An Anglo-American Tragedy*. Boston: Back Bay Books, 1999.
- White, Edmund, ed. *Faber Book of Gay Short Fiction*. London: Faber and Faber, 1991. Print.
- Williams, Tennessee. *Collected Stories*. Grand Rapids: New Directions Corporation, 1994. Print.

### Bibliography—Craft Books

- Burroway, Janet. *Writing Fiction A Guide to Narrative Craft*. Elizabeth Stuckey-French. 7<sup>th</sup> ed. New York: Longman, 2007. Print.
- Gardner, John. *On Becoming a Novelist*. Boston: 1999. Print.
- Hemley, Robin. *Turning Life into Fiction*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. New York: Graywolf, 2006. Print.
- King, Stephen. *On Writing*. 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary ed. New York: Pocket Books, 2000. Print.
- Forster, E. M. *Aspects of the Novel*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1985. Print.
- Silverman, Sue. *Fearless Confessions: A Writer's Guide to Memoir*. 1<sup>st</sup> ed. Atlanta: Of Georgia, 2009. Print.
- Tufte, Virginia. *Artful Sentences Syntax as Style*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. New York: Graphics Print, 2006.

### Literary Criticism

- Bucknell, Katherine. "Why Christopher Isherwood Stopped Writing Fiction." *On Modern British Fiction* 227 (2002): 126-148. *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 15 Oct. 2010.
- Piazza, Paul. "Christopher Isherwood: Myth and Anti-Myth." *Contemporary Literary Criticism* 14 (1978). *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 15 Oct. 2010.
- Rubin, Louis D. Jr. "Trouble on the Land: Southern Literature and the Great Depression." *Canadian Review of American Studies* 10.2 (1979): 153-74. *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 15 Oct. 2010.