

Rain Dreams

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Wind is great. I mean, you're walking along on some sidewalk and there's no wind, and you're rolling around in your thoughts, and then the wind comes up, and, whoosh! . . . you can't even remember what you were thinking. It's like you've been woken up from a weird dream filled with overconfidence on one hand, and paranoia on the other, for one fresh conscious moment. Reason: the wind.

I am arrogant. That's for sure. How the hell do I actually know if the wind is great, or just another random name of a thing without meaning? Arrogance is a terrible thing. It can drive you crazy. Because it makes you come to conclusions. And a lot of times that happens when there are no conclusions to be made, like, how much do you love your wife? Or why? Or if? Or exactly when did "if" begin? And suddenly you're off to the races, forming conclusions. And a lot of times they're bad.

So arrogance rarely pays off. But you have to have enough of it to at least form some semblance of confidence in yourself, for the sake of survival. Otherwise, whoosh...you don't even care about whatever you were thinking, or if you've ever thought it before, or whether you go home or get lost somewhere and never come back. So I don't mean to overly influence your thoughts or conclusions about the pros and cons of arrogance, or wind. Because whatever you conclude is probably too mental to trust anyway. That's the truth.

There are coughs, and cuts, and madmen and guns, and terrible decisions you have to make about one thing or another. That used to be life. But now it just feels like you're on Realty TV and you have to follow the script: Do this. Think that. It keeps society neatly ordered. They call the show "school," or "work," or "the military," but it has nothing to do with you. That's why you smartly develop the trait of arrogance despite knowing there's bad in it – and the anger about being controlled goes all the way through to setting good boundaries for yourself, and even a feeling of outright revolution. Mutiny against the producer, your parents, the agents, and the writers of all this. You want to leave the page.

Unfortunately, you are not smart enough to find your way to something better. You love but it leaves. You revolt, but without looking far enough out into the big field of things. Windows without wisdom. And that leads to just more windless days of wandering in thoughts without a sail, without an anchor. And all that's passed you by is time. Which is everything.

Pure thinking doesn't want you writing about it at the same time. It's jealous. It wants its quiet time in the sun before you try to define it and imprison it with symbols. So in a way, all writing is fake. Unless you have a really good memory.

One of the things Rainy did when she first saw me was write something down in the beat-up brown notebook she always carried around. She hid behind it. She crouched behind the sentences and pretended no one would notice. The same flawed psychology as an ostrich, except the sand was a piece of paper.

I pretended not to see her hiding. So it worked. At least in her mind. But what I did see clearly, despite her face becoming shadowy within the reflection of her small three ring binder, was long eye-lashes and slightly out of place auburn hair. Nervous hands. One held a pencil. She hated pens. Expressive eyebrows which gave too much away for her own liking. Thin body. Probably under-eating. She was too nervous to relax and eat, so it was just a survival thing – “eat or die, and I probably don't want to die. Not today.” Whereas with me it's eat and. . . *whoosh*, let's keep eating. It's tastes great and it's fun. I'm thin too, so that just goes to prove it's all genetic anyway. At least until you're thirty.

So I walked right next to her and stood there looking the other way. Kind of like standing next to an ostrich and looking out to the sunset. You see nothing but orange sun rays flickering off the graying sea. No ostrich in sight. Until she lifts her head from what she's writing. She stares at you as if to say, “Why the hell would you be standing next to me? Can't you see I'm just a ghost in a window no one can see out of? And you're just a gust of wind?” *Whoosh*, bouncing off the window glass like a blinded bird, a collision of feathers. A streak of colored tears, like rain against cold gray silica. Windows are like ostriches. You look all the way through to somewhere, but rarely do you pay attention to the boundary of glass that's standing right there between you and the thing you are seeing. You have your head in the sand.

That's like Rainy. I saw her face through the glassy wanting of my perception. But I knew nothing about the true person in front of me. She had a big story behind her. But all I could sense was a resonance of myself bouncing like sonar against a silhouette.

I tried to steal a glance at what she was writing but she turned away too soon. Off she ran. Back into the forest of herself. Back I skulked, into the isolation of a million windowed room – all these things you can see but may not touch. It's all fantasy. But not the sensual kind. Just dead gray images as if on a screen. This was the state of things at the time.

Romeo was quite amused at his mother. She tried to teach him meditation when he was twelve. Fat chance she had. Fat chance *he* had. How do you tame a mind primed for all the lures of modern times without having any of the experiences yet?

Romeo's actual name was Chase. That gave him a head start, I guess. Certainly in terms of time, dimensionally, he had the inside track. He met Rainy a year before I did.

One time she let her guard down. One time he found a way in to a place that came to rest like quiet bells. But our Romeo was deaf. Not deaf like Beethoven. Deaf to resonance. And that ended things pretty quickly. Still, he wanted to go back again, to that place of quiet bells he couldn't hear, because it's what Romeos are born to do.

It would never have worked out anyway. His mother didn't like her. She was too odd, too quiet, especially when she was asked a question. Rainy never answered questions. She'd just look away bored or pretend the question was never asked and start to talk about something else. She was rough around the edges, mother said. But that made Romeo even more attracted. Moths, flames. Hearts, siren calls. Brains, loaded guns. She made him feel scrambled up inside.

He was rich, or his mother was. Dear father died and left a fortune. He inherited an addiction to the place he couldn't hear. A place where he was no longer wanted. A thing he couldn't have.

He resorted to nice suits and hair gel. That just made things worse.

Fashion is wasted on the erotically ignorant. Millions of every generation, in every country, wander around malls or outdoor markets for hours looking for a fashion miracle. Something that makes them look like something more than they are when they're sitting around relaxed and naked. Some businessman buys a red silk tie from China on sale for six hundred dollars. He goes to a meeting wearing this thing around his neck, but it doesn't prevent him from getting hoodwinked by some tech-whiz twenty year old kid in blue jeans from New York. And he's out six hundred dollars for what exactly?

Yet this was what Rainy was forced to do one night. She was put on a runway in front of hundreds of people in a big city and told to walk slowly and paint a smile on her face. Later her father crooned that she never shined so brightly or smiled so innocently as when she was on that runway wearing a white chiffon overlay. She was someone else.

But she hid there too, just like she did when she was in shorts and a tee-shirt writing in her journal. She exuded a quiet eroticism either way. A holy dewy place in the clouds where no one was invited. A few thieves and bandits had broken in along the way. And Romeo, who was not Beethoven, stumbled deafly through his soliloquy before drinking his self-made poison of ninety-nine percent pure hair gel. But in the end they all walked away with something akin to fool's gold. Because that's what fools think it is.

Rainy's father was in the textile business. He was away a lot feeling things. Silks. Angora wool. He once told her proudly that dyed flax fibers in a cave in the Republic of Georgia dating back to about 34,000 B.C. proved beyond a doubt that people have not wanted to be naked for a very long time.

But he was never home. Then the day came when Rainy's mom told her he was feeling more than silk and Angora wool during his business trips away. He was feeling someone in Maryland.

Rainy could understand why. Her mom had always been difficult. Nothing was enough for her. Not him. Not her. She wanted more. But more didn't exist. As if often doesn't.

Beginnings are a grateful parenthesis, Rainy once said. When she was born they named her Rainy for a very romantic reason. Her mom and dad had met in the rain, standing under the alcove of an office building waiting for the bus to come. They got off the bus together twenty minutes later, at a stop where there was a bar they'd both been to separately before they met. *How romantic was that?* So, they could have named her after a drink, like Rye. Or Champagne. But they didn't do that.

I was working as a waiter at a café on the outskirts of town. The building looked like a giant white shoe box. The roof was caving in so it looked like someone had stepped on it while running past the outskirts. Everyone wanted to leave here.

Inside the café there were fifteen tables. Forty five chairs. Five awful paintings of birds and fruit. Actually two of them were birds, two of them were fruit, and one was a bird sitting on a piece of fruit. Your eyes always had a choice between repetitive and derivative. The only good thing they served in the whole place was the boxed orange juice. It tasted like lemonade and everyone seemed to like it. We ran out a lot.

I liked serving. I liked seeing the different ways people ordered. It would have nothing to do with me. Sometimes they'd bark out their order, "Eggs and toast and a side of jelly." It was military-like. Then there would be the matronly tone, "Oh my sweetie, there are just so many things here. Would you mind bringing me some coffee while I look things over?" You get those two on a date and it could be really awful.

I chose this job for a specific reason. After I graduated high school I needed a summer job. Something easy-going and part-time. Something hyphenated. Because I didn't want it to fully take over my life. I figured as soon as winter came I'd have enough money to travel for a year before heading off to some mediocre college on my way to a mediocre job. I was not driven as far as a career was concerned. I had no big life plans, other than wanting to have kids someday. That was one odd thing, I liked being around kids. They didn't think normally, and they were honest. So I figured if I traveled for a year first, I'd get my fill of nuance and subtle surprises and exotic cultures before stepping back into reality - which once you get there isn't always necessarily terrible. I was cautiously neutral about my future.

The day Rainy came into the café she was sweaty and winded from a jog. She had on shorts and a sleeveless t-shirt that was pretty much soaked through. She wiped her face with her arm before sitting down at the table furthest away from the window. When I came over she smiled at me nervously and looked down at the menu. She remembered having seen me before but couldn't recall where, or why. I had seen her a twice from afar and had been recalling her every since.

The first time is when I saw her writing in her notebook in the old park next to the even older library. The second time was when I saw her arguing with Chase right in front of the "Do Not Feed the Rats" movie theater. That was its nickname in town. I guess Chase was in the death throws of trying to win her back. She walked away upset. He began to run after her. But as she rushed by me - an innocent anonymous bystander to the scene - he looked at me, realized what a fool he was making of

himself, and stopped. Guys hate to be seen by another guy in a situation like that. It reminds both guys how desperate we all are.

Her watched her for a moment to see if she would turn around. But she didn't. As he turned to walk in the opposite direction I could hear the click of his new black shoes angrily striking the sidewalk. And that was the end of the chase.

"I guess I'll have some of that orange juice-lemonade thing," she said. "And a grilled cheese sandwich." She didn't look up. She just ran her fingers through her hair and cleared her throat.

I had to be the one to break the news, "Ahh, we're out of the orange juice-lemonade thing. Too many people order it. The owner thinks its good to run out of something people like because then they'll come back again sometime just to get it. Repeat business. But you're in luck with the grilled cheese -- we have cheese. And we have bread."

"Listen, I'm super thirsty," she said wiping an auburn streaked strand of hair away from her eyes. "Could you just bring me like a gallon of ice water?"

"Sure." I began to walk away.

"Or, how about iced tea?" My eyes returned to her face. She looked up innocently and I became magnetically transfixed on her neck. A few wet strands of hair nestled against the delicate place right next to her left shoulder. Her neck invited me to move closer. But necks and the rest of people don't always agree.

"We have iced tea. But it really sucks. It's like ten-year old Earl Grey. Plus you don't want to know where the ice comes from."

She stared at me like I'd just landed from a distant planet. Can't anything be easy? "Everyone orders iced coffee instead," I continued on. "But it's bad coffee too. And, same ice."

"Yeah, thanks for the inside scoop, but, uh, I've only been here, like, ten thousand times. I've had everything at least once."

"Okay. So, iced tea?"

She hesitated. Had she seen me somewhere before? Tall and gawky, I stood there grateful to keep looking at her neck. "No. That's okay. Just go ahead and bring me the ice water. But as soon as you can, okay?"

I began to speak but she interrupted, "I don't really care where the ice comes from." Wow, she reads minds too. I was impressed. I looked at her hands. Elegant but pale.

“Hello,” she whispered. “Ice water okay with you?”

“Yeah. 10-4. . . .That means ‘okay’ in police terminology,” I said nervously.

She shook her head, “Just hurry before my throat points a gun at you.”

I brought her some iced water before I placed her order with the cook. In fact, I left an entire pitcher of iced water on the table.

Then I went over to Hal and said, “Look man, can you make sure the grilled cheese actually gets melted on this one?” He looked out of his little serving hole, hot and sweaty from the grill, and twisted his neck around until he saw her. “Table 13, eh?”

“Yeah. Just make sure the cheese is melted, okay?”

For the last year of my nineteen on the planet I had been involuntarily celibate. This was preceded by my only serious relationship with the greatly disturbing Deana Kelly. We met at a party. A crazy disorganized party with too much liquor, too much talking, and not enough dancing. Conversations took place in small groups which made the whole thing sound like a drunken version of the Tower of Babel. I couldn't stand it anymore, so I went out to the balcony to get some air. That's where we met. She was out there laughing about something nasty with a friend of hers. But mercifully the friend left. Deana described herself as a gymnast, which is always a good way to start a conversation, since flexibility is mostly an attribute. Before long she mentioned that she came to the party with her mostly platonic friend, Carl. It struck me that "mostly platonic" could be one of the odder oxymorons in the English language.

The scene fades to a sunny day, picnicking by the lake, laughing about all the little things, as lovers often do. "Look at that red ant trying to carry away my entire sandwich! Isn't that funny? Isn't that cute?" Whereas, if you were there alone it would have grossed you out. That's love for you.

She had some very cool qualities. She was willing and able to do a cartwheel while we were walking down a crowded street. She was willing to do almost anything, come to think of it. She was actually adventurous to a fault. In that way, we brought out the worst in each other, pushing each other to our rational limits. She mocked monogamy, jeered at jealousy, cackled at commitment, invited emotional danger at all times. I learned to keep my mouth shut unless it was to point out red ants trying to carry our sandwiches back to its friends. I was just happy to have her around. Because I was strung out on love.

I eventually came to feel that the kind of love we had created was "true love," as opposed to just "love," because lovers could come and go, but we'd always come back to each other, because we were free of that kind of clingy emotional addiction, unfettered by traditions and cultural rules and government laws.

Then one sunny day the red ants weren't funny anymore, because she called me on the phone to tell me she had 'fallen in love' with her gymnastics coach, who inconsequentially happened to be married. She told me that things were not going to be the same between us.

Of course, I didn't believe her at first. Because she mocked monogamy and cackled at commitment. But the gymnastics coach did believe her. He got a divorce so he could spend more time with his little Gumby. He had been a brilliant college gymnast in his day. So they had two very flexible bodies. I guess they were able to find lots of ways of bending around each other that I was totally incapable of, since all I did was ride my bike.

Mary Robinson gave birth to Rainy, her first and only child, when she was thirty four years old. Before and after and during the moments when Rainy was conceived Mary was what you might call a roaring drunk, otherwise known as a certified, liver-approved, breathalyzer-confirmed alcoholic. She would have Scotches for breakfast, perhaps since she was half Scottish. For lunch Martinis were delicately poured from a glass pitcher, perhaps since her husband's name was Martin and he used to pitch in Little League. Dinners, and after dinner, were full of surprises. Variations on a theme. A mix of wines, beers, and Jack Daniels, depending on the occasion. And there was always an occasion, even if it was just to raise your glass to boredom. Or to toast intemperate forms of toxicity.

She was usually very quiet and private about her drinking, unlike her crazy Irish brother who was never quiet or private about anything. Although occasionally she could get a bit extroverted by repeating alcoholic jokes she'd heard over the course of her life-long party, such as "I've only had one in dog years." To which her hysterically funny plastered friend would respond, "Did you say something about dog's ears?" The friend would proceed to wipe the accidental word-spit off Mary's dress while profusely apologizing. But Mary stayed very patient about these things.

However, here was the dirty little secret -- she was far less patient with her family. She was sure she was misunderstood, and that made her very angry. So Rainy had to be on guard, except in the rare and holy moments Rainy could catch her sober.

Rainy's father, Marty, was a small gentle man who spent most of his time trying to stay out of Mary's way. She had an Irish temper. A vindictive streak. And although most men found her pretty, if not drop-dead gorgeous, with her red hair and thin shapely body, most realized they couldn't wiggle their way in to her good graces for long. They quickly came to understand Marty's predicament.

Back in the early days, Marty and Mary made pretty decent livings. They owned a house in a sweet town north of here with a bit of land. They has some money saved in the bank. Then one sunny day the IRS came calling. They spent half their savings defending themselves, and the other half paying back-taxes -- because it was finally proven that they actually were cheating. Mary was not the most forthright citizen when it came to filling out tax forms.

They abandoned their rural house and land, because they couldn't sell it, and moved to a town closer to the city so they would be closer to their places of employment. It took many years of hard labor, and more cheating on their taxes, to start saving up a little bit of money again.

Rainy's closest encounter with true love was with a boy named Daniel. Daniel the Forest Man, who hated to be called Dan, just in case you needed to know. He was one of those tall silent Daniel Boone types, who took her deep into the forest for an entire weekend at a time and tore at her clothes at night hunting for skin from inside an unlit tent, as the moon stood guard over the travesty, which some might loosely define as "making out."

She admired a lot of things about him other than the way he kissed and the way he touched her. He had a handsome face, blue eyes, and a decent amount of muscles. He seemed strong and self-reliant. But along the way, as they walked hand-in-hand down the trails, exploring caves and dried-up stream beds, he made it known to her that he had no time for girly things, like books for instance. Books could not conquer the wilds. Books could not catch fish. Books could not start a fire from twigs before the sunset turned the earth cold and lifeless. Contrarily, books just pushed wimps into the worthless world of fantasy and doubt and chaos. Ripe for every kind of prey, including paranoia. Paranoia and doubt had no natural predators, he philosophized. He wanted none of that. He wanted to be King of his domain. So he never asked to see what she was writing in her notebook, which was fine with her.

But as time went by, she grew weary of wandering, and wary of his logic. He relentlessly explored the world. But she drifted away, back into her own private place. She chose fantasy over facts, and rides in old convertibles over hiking through fields of flowers. She didn't care about the names of the flowers. She didn't care what they smelled like, or if they were edible, or if they were perennials or annuals, or even if they existed in reality at all. Maybe they were a dream, in his dream, and she was just playing a bit part in his dream too. But she was a dimension separated from all of that now.

This was all good for me, as it turned out. I was not Tarzan of the Wilds. Not a House on the Prairie guy. Not a guy who could make a fire, or set up a tent, or cook fish on a stick over an orange-blue flame out there amongst the mosquitoed marshes. In fact, I couldn't even roast marshmallows. In fact, I don't even like marshmallows.

But after I served her ice water and grilled cheese that day at the café I became Tarzan of the inner realms, dragging her along through the cerebral tree-tops of my synapses day and night, to a new world I spied from afar. The world of us. I was living there already. She was still living at home.

My parents used to be hippies. Then they became half-hippies, half parents. Where we lived was fitting. Our apartment was right above a small store that sold beads, Indian clothes, and a house-made perfume called, "High." The owner's golden retriever was permanently sprawled sideways across the most well-traveled isle. We only went in there once a month to step over the dog and pay the rent. We always came out smelling like patchouli oil.

They were like the dog – my parents. Laid back but very protective. They would comment on my messy clothes, my part-time jobs, my odd choices in girlfriends – they liked Deanna Kelly but didn't trust her. I can't imagine why. So I didn't tell them about Rainy Robinson. At that point there was nothing to tell, and I liked my fantasies uncrushed.

Then my father lost his job. He was a radio dispatcher for AAA. Which is more than one "A" less interesting than being a radio dispatcher for AA. Imagine what that would have been like. Anyway, they caught him smoking weed during his break and they fired him on the spot. He came home stoned and fired.

I offered to try to get him a job at the café. Hal and the owner, Sam Buckbaugh, both shrugged, which meant he was hired. That was the same thing they did when I got hired. I guess it's called bridled enthusiasm.

In the world of science fiction my dad would have been an ex-hippie *and* a Republican. That way he could have related to the Sam Buckbaughs of the world. He would have gone drinking with him when the café closed up for the night. They could have driven to the nearest polling place together on election day and either laughed or become bitter after the votes were counted. But my dad was not like that. He was a gentle, aimless, sweet man, with opinions that were always tempered with a deep respect for his lack of understanding of the cosmos. I jokingly called him, "Mr. Maybe." The only thing he was sure of was that he loved mom and me. And that was enough for us most of the time.

So I let him bring home both of our tips. It looked a bit more impressive to mom that way.

Mom, meanwhile, was an accountant at a tech store in town. The store only sold crap from Hewlett-Packard so there wasn't much she needed to account for unless it was during the big Christmas sale, where they pretty much gave everything away for free so they could re-stock the shelves with the next generation of things that weren't going to sell. How they stayed in business without having a liquor license I never could figure out.

I was driving to the store before my shift on a gauzy-gray drizzly afternoon when I spotted Rainy walking quickly with a ripped up suitcase in her hand and a knapsack over her shoulders. I pulled up next to her and yelled her name out the window but she pretended not to hear me. So I pulled into a parking space and yanked on the emergency brake and ran after her. Rain drops or tears were on her face. Her hair was wet. Her clothes didn't color match. It looked like she hadn't slept.

"Going somewhere?" I asked.

"Why?"

"That's what I'm asking you." She never answered questions.

"Headed towards the bus station?" She shrugged.

"Rainy, get in the car. I'll drive you wherever you want to go. The ride is free."

"Nothing's free."

"I'm free. It won't cost you anything to come with me." She hesitated, then stopped and stood still for a moment, then turned towards the car. The bus station was a long way from here. And buses cost money. And they didn't come very often. So I had become a logical option. Nothing more. I took her suitcase and knapsack and threw it in the back seat.

"Where to?"

"Towards Jansen Bridge."

"Cool. Believe it or not, I've never been across it."

"Never?"

"Yeah, really, I'm a Jansen Bridge virgin."

She shook her head, looked at me sideways, then looked out the passenger window.

I was going to miss work. It would be the first time, so I doubted that they'd fire me. I looked at her semi-angry face. It was beautiful in its ferocity. Eyebrows furled downward. Lips pursed. Her arms were crossed. She was slumped and leaning against the unlocked door.

"You're sitting as far away as possible," I said. "But I can still hear you talk. . . .Where are you going after we drive over Jansen Bridge?"

"Weird trees," she said, staring out the window. "I hate weird trees. They remind me of weird people." I hoped she wasn't referring metaphorically to me.

Then I thought more about it and said, "Yeah, well in a way, all trees are weird. I mean, when you think about it they're trying to stretch up and up and up to something that would kill them if they ever reached it. So their end goal is kind of suicidal."

I didn't think she'd respond, or even know what I was talking about, but then she said, "No it's not. Because they don't *know* the sun would kill them. So it wouldn't technically be suicide. It would be a well intentioned disaster." Then she started to laugh and added, "Kind of like marriage."

I laughed too but I wasn't quite sure I totally got what she was saying. We drove for a while without speaking, then she blurted out, "If you must know, I'm divorcing my divorcing fucked-up parents. That's why I'm here."

Now I understood *why* she was leaving. But I still had no clue where she was headed. What if I never saw her again? Was this the end of my fantasy? I was taxi-ing her over an uncrossed bridge. And then that would be it.

"I can come," I said, barely loud enough for her to hear.

She laughed nervously, "Not with me."

I drove on.

"Okay, what if I told you I wasn't leaving?" I said casually.

"*What are you talking about?* I don't even know you! Look, where's the closest town over the bridge that isn't a stupid one-horse piece of shit town like ours?"

"Martinsville, I think. I saw it on a map."

"That's right. The big scary town of Martinsville. That's my first stop."

"Lucky coincidence, mine too."

"Just take me there. . . please," she moaned. She pulled her legs up and folded her arms around them.

"At your service, ma'am."

The drizzle turned to hard rain and I increased the windshield wiper speed. You could hear the squeaking of the wipers even during a virtual waterfall of rain. They were pretty much worn down to the steel rods.

“Do you have enough money?”

“Mmm. . . . Long ago,” she said, “I used to think if I broke open my big pink piggy a million dollars would spill out. I’d put coins in there ever since I was five and never opened it once. Then the day came when I pulled the rubber stop out and shook all the coins out on the floor. I counted for hours. Thirty four dollars. *Thirty four dollars!* Well, I’ve got more than thirty four dollars now. So I can definitely pay for gas if that’s what your getting at.”

“Forget it. I was just. . . .” She was oblivious to my offer to help. And my offer to stay with her. She didn’t want to hear any of that.

We found a motel right beyond the “Welcome to Martinsville” sign. It’s as if the town was saying, “Welcome to Martinsville, Now Go to Sleep.” Rainy had never stayed in a hotel room alone before so she accepted my offer to stick around while she checked in.

It was 5 pm, the start time of my work shift at the café, back there in what we reverently called, “Nowhere town.” The rain was still falling hard; light had abandoned this day early. The office didn’t offer much hope that the room would be very nice. In fact, as I looked around a bit more while her I.D. was checked and her cash gladly taken, I realized this place might be a “broken clock with cracked glass” kind of place. Because above the registration desk there was a big round stopped clock with a crack through the middle of the glass. So that’s why I thought of that.

She was shivering slightly as she walked across the parking lot to her room. She came to a door right in front of my car, “108,” and unlocked it. It smelled faintly of cigarette smoke beneath a much stronger scent of “Raid.” Or maybe it was cheap air freshener that couldn’t afford to smell like anything else but “Raid.” It was dark and dreary with all the curtains closed and the lights off, as if to say, “Welcome to Martinsville, *Now Get Out! . . . Run!*” She pulled the curtains opened and yanked the window free as far as it would go. I brought her suitcase and backpack into the room from my car and then flopped down on one of the two twin beds. “So what do we do now?” I said.

She was standing near the bathroom door. “What do you mean?”

“Well you can’t just kick me out in the rain. Let me stay and keep you company for a while. There’s nothing on TV at 5 pm except lies, and news of the war, and lies about the war that they call news about the war. . . .And I’m harmless.”

“You’re annoying.”

“Annoying? Why, because I like you?”

“You’re annoying because you like me, but you don’t know me. . . *at all.*” Her eyes darted over to the wall and back for no apparent reason; a nervous habit. “So, that’s kind of annoying, okay? Because I’m a total stranger. And here you are pretending to care. Care about what? About who?”

She said all this casually, which made it more affective than if she had said it angrily. I said, “Look, I do know you, a little. Like, I know you write things in your brown leather notebook. And I know you like grilled cheese and ice water after a long run. And. . .” I started to go blank.

“And what?”

“Well, that’s a start, isn’t it? Or, maybe it’s an ending. Which one do you want it to be? I swear, I’ll leave right now if you want me to.”

Her hair was wet from the rain. As she was thinking, her mouth twisted up a bit and her eyes squinted at me as if to focus in on something. “I guess you can stay until the rain lets up.”

I nodded. “Okay, cool.”

Right at that moment we heard a thunder clap in the distance. And the rain began to fall beyond rhythm, like it was attached to infinity.

Sitting at the edge of separate twin beds in a Motel 6 in Martinsville is where Rainy first told me about her father. And why her parents were getting divorced. She said they were both so messed up the neighbors were probably going have a block party when they were gone. Everybody hated them and their endless loud fights.

She pulled out a joint and lit it, then passed it to me. Getting high wasn't something I did every day, or even once a month. I felt a little self-conscious being high and alone with her. I could feel the paranoia creeping into my thoughts because of my assumption that she was judging me. So I told myself: Just let go, be yourself, show her who you really are, don't be afraid or intimidated, you have nothing to lose, right?, because it's obvious that she doesn't like who you've been pretending to be, so why try anymore?

But by the time I was done thinking the sentence I couldn't remember the beginning of it.

At the same time she had begun thinking about her dad's pregnant girl friend, because she blurted out, "Can you imagine anyone having kids? It's insane."

"I dunno. I could see myself having kids someday. . . ." I said honestly.

"Why the hell would you want to do something like that?" she laughed.

"Well, the way I see it, we're just sitting around here without kids, and what are we? A pile of radioactive star extract, technically; we're these meaningless star crystals sitting in little lonely piles far apart from each other. But then we have to go and ask the question, where did stars come from? Because we have all this time on our hands, right? And then, what exactly does "from" mean? And *that* kind of jag can go on and on for infinity. But when you have kids you don't have time to think about unanswerable stuff like that. Which is mostly just a huge waste of time anyway."

She stared at me with a perplexed look on her face, so I continued in order to further explain myself, "So then someone starts talking about the ocean.' And the guy without kids asks, 'What exactly do you mean by *ocean*?' Because he thinks that's an important question for some reason. 'Come on,' the answer man says, 'you don't know what the hell the ocean is?' And then, embarrassed, the guy without kids says, 'Duh! Of course I know what the *ocean* is.' I was just messin' with you. I know what the sky is too for that matter. Blue, black., gray, you name it. And outer space, I know about that too, because I've seen pictures from Hubble. . . aren't they so. . . *defining*?"

"When of course we don't truly *know* about any of those things.

“And then someone brings up the God thing, and the guy without kids says, ‘Well *THAT one I know for sure*. . . . that’s *easy*. I just use my instinct. I can *sense* Him. And if *you* don’t, or, if God forbid, you sense some *other* God, well then, you’re a damn fool! And He will be on my side when the bombs fall. And He will be on my side when the dead are counted.’

“Because everyone knows God. . . .

“But having children can stop all the mind-games dead in their tracks. Because there is *nothing* theoretical about children. The truth they live in every day is pragmatic, it’s real. There are no philosophical musings about ‘the truth’ out there somewhere. The truth is right there, looking up at you. The truth is ice cream. There is nothing that is not true about ice cream. And that’s what they want. Ice cream, and an occasional hug. It’s simple. It makes sense. . . . So that’s why I want kids someday.”

She began to laugh and turned her eyes up to the sky, “Shit. You’re *such a freak!*”

I felt like I was in limbo. And this was not the kind of limbo you could escape by dancing under a stick. This was *totally stuck* limbo. Inescapable without help from afar. Because there was no way I could just move closer and start to kiss her. Besides, my body was glued to the bedspread. So I called upon the Ghost of Christmas Future.

... Rainy had an astral smile that night.

"The dawn will be closing soon. Get in the car," she said.

So I got in.

She drove silently until we reached her destination, "Shut the moon, and put your hands on my face. . . ."

Just as I was finding my hands, she said, "Beginnings are always a grateful parenthesis."

Yes, she saw what I saw -- that humans are a continuum, and we only see them when they, and we, are *right here*. But they're actually back there too, as well as someone who will be. We're like confused quarks, flying around in a particle accelerator until we break apart, and drift into one of the other dimensions of a place we think of as "somewhere." But we don't really know. We can't be sure.

Until somehow, by the grace or curse of God, for or other reasons unknown that have nothing to do with a God, we reappear in this world again. Standing in front of each other.

Could be different this time? The answer depends on your location in the accelerator.

So while sitting in the dark, I said to my astral girl, "Your face feels as soft as Indian silk." And she said, "That's the bottom of my dress."

So I fumbled around reaching upward until finally I found her face, and put my hands upon her cheeks. I kissed her milky lips, drawn there by a magnetic magnification, until suddenly the connection extended, exotically, inexorably, to both of us both, as if we were covered in lamb skin on a bitter winter night. Shiver turns to warmth. Silver stars twinkle wildly. Constellations co-join. Astral milk shakes all around.

That's how Rainy and I swam together through a galaxy of dark matter, and conceived our son, Orion.

We played happily in the fields of time, running amok, wandering through warm cosmic winds, and tumbling through wormholes that led us away from the last time we looked.

Our daughter, Oceana, was conceived two years later on a sailboat at sunset. She could swim at the age of three. She never wanted to leave the beach when we ventured there on summer days.

This, then, was our young family of four. Soon to be three. Then two.

Then one.

Because, layer by layer I awoke from the dream of Christmas Future.

This was getting *really bad*. Now I couldn't even get high without her taking over my every thought, and freaking me out.

It was after midnight at the Motel 6 in Martinsville. The rain had stopped. I looked over and saw she was asleep. So I curled up under the covers in my twin bed next to hers and watched her breathing slowly in the near-darkness.

I had a number of other dreams that night. Each one woke me up and made me toss and turn for a while. Some were about her. Some were about weird trees that looked like weird people. Some were about Martians – a favorite topic of mine since I was six. Being high in a town called Martinsville may have triggered that. I finally fell asleep for good about the time the sun came up.

Here is the truth: Being a hero is a hard task for anyone. But if you don't live your life as a hero, then you're a coward. There isn't anything in between.

When I woke up she was gone.

I opened the door to our dingy room next to the parking lot and immediately squinted from the light. The sky was achingly clear and the streets were dry. It was as if it never rained. I wondered if she would have left if the weather hadn't cleared.

I called the café and quit.

I called my folks and left a message that I was fine and that I might be off traveling for a while. They could call me on my cell if they needed to. Rainy had no cell phone. And her parents weren't listed. What were they thinking? Did they care she was gone? Did they know?

I got in my car, a beat up Hyundai Accent which I bought and fixed up after it had been totaled, and began pulling out of the Motel 6 parking lot. The only thing I could think of was to head in the opposite direction of Jansen Bridge since I was sure Rainy wasn't going home.

The main street the hotel was on led directly out of town. It looked the same as most of the state roads that connect towns around these parts – instead of shady lanes with lakes and picnic tables and friendly people waving as they walked hand in hand, you had an empty soul-frozen line-up of the usual suspects -- Exxon, McDonalds, Mobile, Burger King, Chevron, Taco Bell. Motel 6 sat at the beginning, the curl of the yellow brick road. Except there were no munchkins there to wave me goodbye. Only a spy, a thief, a shape-shifter. At the first traffic light, in the middle of a big intersection, the shift happened. I hadn't locked the car door. And suddenly a man casting a giant shadow came racing out of the Motel 6 parking lot towards the car, stumbled in on the passenger side and told me to drive.

He was overwhelmingly big. He had to bend all the way to his waist to get inside. He had a gun in his hand. Blue tattoos were carved all over his muscular arms. He was wearing a light blue denim work shirt. He had a beer belly, uncombed red hair and a thick red beard. His eyes were smeary, which meant he was either stoned or insane, or maybe stoned *and* insane.

The light turned green and I obediently pressed on the gas pedal. The car took a deep breath before deciding to lurch forward and gallop away at twenty miles an hour. "*Faster,*" he yelled.

"*It's a totaled Hyundai,*" I yelled back.

Never try whining to a guy who looks like he's just escaped from prison. Tempers are usually short. Empathy lacking. He took his left foot and jammed it under the wheel and pressed the accelerator. It was then he knew I wasn't lying. The car responded with a moan and actually seemed to slow down. Knowing that I'd told him the truth seemed to calm him down a bit. Measurably, let's say he went from a "jumping off a building" kind of freaking out, to an overdosing on cocaine kind of freaking out.

I was hyperventilating myself, crying silently for my dad, if you must know, who would probably have been crying for *his* dad, who, knowing my grandfather would probably have gotten himself killed telling this guy to fuck off.

This was no time to be a hero. I didn't want to know what he wanted, or who he was, or where he came from. Blame it on a severe lack of curiosity. However, I did notice the name "O'Brian" written on the top of his shirt pocket. He probably stole the shirt from an Irish guy, now dead.

He directed me down a number of unknown streets until I saw Jansen Bridge coming up on the horizon. It looked like a badly put together erector set, steel beams suspended in the air going every which way. Another left. And another. Finally we came to an alleyway near the pier. "Thanks for the ride, Jack," he said. He yanked the car door open and began to run. So *this* was how escaped inmates hail a cab.

I put my wreck of a car in reverse, hoping for a quick exit before he changed his mind and came back, and nearly smashed into a big yellow dumpster that smelled like urine even with all my windows closed. I guess it was painted yellow as a warning to those with a deformed sense of smell.

As I was driving away, on a road I'd never been on and hoped never to drive down again, I saw something on the road in front of me that made me slam on my brakes. Could it be? I got out of the car and reached my hand down towards the black crusty road goo until I picked up familiar brown notebook. How did it get here? Did she throw it down in the middle of the road out of frustration, or did she drop it accidentally? Or was she in trouble? This was not a safe part of town. This was actually like being on the top surface of hell. One step down and, poof.

I looked around but saw no sign of her. I took the notebook and put it in the front seat of the passenger side, where minutes earlier a lunatic had been sitting holding a gun. I drove off slowly, because it was a totaled Hyundai, but also because I didn't quite know where to go. She obviously wasn't headed out of town. Why would she have come back towards Jansen Bridge?

I pulled over near a heavily gated bar called, "Off the Pier," which is where the patrons around these parts hopefully, for the sake of mankind, flung themselves

after a good stiff drink. I picked up Rainy's notebook and looked at the last pages, hoping to find a clue.

The final page was titled:

"Hero Clown from Nowhere Town"

"The boy is mad. He wants something more from me. What a clown. Just, FUCK HIM!!!"

That was the end of the poem. I studied it for a moment. The first thing I did was count the syllables. Yep. It was a Haiku alright. I *knew* she was a good writer.

But also, that last sentence. It was a double entendre. Did she mean, *fuck him*, or I like him enough to fuck him? The placement of her comma was disturbing.

But wait!

There *was* also something on the next page, written in very light pencil. It was the last entry:

“He thinks he knows what it’s like to have kids! He thinks he’s got *infinity* and *God* all figured out. He’s so arrogant.”

Arrogant? Me?

I was spending all my time begging for her attention, like a slave, like a jester, like a dog, like a weird tree waiting for the rain. As far as all that stuff I said last night, I was stoned, I was just midnight rapping, not even thinking she was understanding what I was saying, no less remember any of it the next morning. *I couldn’t even remember it!* But all I could think of now was, did I push her away by sounding pretentious? I wouldn’t put it past me.

But wait! She was the one judging *me*. Wouldn’t she be just as equally arrogant as I was? But then, wasn’t defining her as arrogant just a defense mechanism, instead of truly owning up to my arrogance? But then. . .wasn’t realizing it was a defense mechanism an act of deep humility?

I began to read further back in her journal. None of it was about me.

Then I turned to the very first page. It said: “Sailing on, with chaos and rivers of gifts all cascading.”

A few pages later it mentioned Chase in unflattering terms. “His hair gel smells like a blend of raw potatoes and his mom’s perfume. Plus his cocaine habit makes him shake like a naked Eskimo.”

Enough.

I closed my eyes and tried to think things through. Could she be in trouble? Maybe I should get the police involved. Call 911.

But what would I say? “There’s an eighteen year-old girl who doesn’t want to live with her parents anymore, and I can’t find her because when I woke up at 11 a.m. at the Motel 6 we were staying at she was gone.”

And the officer would say: “Sounds like you’re outta luck, kid. Maybe she thought you were a schmuck and left to get away from you.”

And I'd say, "She doesn't think I'm a schmuck. Just arrogant."

And he'd say, "Stalking is illegal, you know."

And I say, "But she could be in trouble."

And he'd say, "You have proof of that, kid?"

And I'd say, "Her journal."

And he'd say, "Her journal? Why? What did it say?"

And I'd say, "It said she thought I was arrogant."

Then after thinking things through I'd probably add, "Actually, I think I *am* stalking her. I mean, she obviously doesn't want me around. She thinks I'm arrogant. So. . . Gee, thanks a lot for our little chat, officer. I feel better. I think I'll go home now."

Forget 911. I had to find her.

I quieted myself and found you
unfurling across the time with water blue eyes
which you so cautiously closed for privacy when we first met.
And now light-years of possibilities later, you are here with me,
an angel of coincidence.

Far away as you may take me some day,
Know I don't care.
I will watch the alpenglow of myself become
benignly blinded by the beauty of you,
gorging upon the minutes filled with the details of you,
growing by the minute from the distraction of you.

Until at last I die, so many realities from now,
Lonely in those last moments.
Not knowing if any of me
knew a fragment of you.

But the dream
was a good dream.

Night fell and the rain came again. I had made two slow circles all around the city and now found myself back at Motel 6. It was time to give up and go home.

The most disturbing thing, of course, is that I didn't know whether she was safe. But the second thing disturbing me was that she didn't feel the same way I did. Her journal made it clear that I was just bugging her. I was a passing shadow in her life. So I nodded goodbye to the Motel 6 parking lot, framed in sickly yellow lamplight.

And there she was, walking towards the same room we'd rented the night before.

I swerved the car over to the entranceway, found an empty parking space and ran over to her. "Where the heck did you go?"

"Well, where were you?"

"Looking for *you!*"

"Why? I just decided to take a morning walk."

"Bringing your suitcase and knapsack with you?"

"I didn't want you to steal anything."

"*Me? What?*"

She had a sly look on her face. But I knew how to get her attention.

"Did you think I'd read your journal or something?"

She became silent. I could almost see her thoughts darting around.

"Rainy, what's going on?"

"You know, I was going to invite you in. But you're a creep! I'm out of here for good tomorrow anyway, so it's not like it would have mattered."

She headed inside, but after she unlocked the door she left it open.

I stepped quietly inside, then someone came in from behind me – "Rainy Robinson?"

"Yes."

"Your Uncle Jimmy says to call him on his cell."

“Okay, thanks.”

I sat down on “my” bed. “Wow, your Uncle knows you’re here?”

“Yeah, he’s been following me around. He’s like my mom’s spy.”

She tossed her suitcase and knapsack into a corner. “I gotta call him.” She started out the door.

“You can use my cell if you want.”

She stopped and looked at me oddly, assessing something. “Whatever. Thanks.” She took my cell and stepped outside, shutting the door behind her.

I was thinking of the right moment to tell her about finding her notebook. Did she even know it was missing? I opened the door and saw her talking a few doors away, so I went to my car and brought the notebook inside.

I looked around the room as if for the first time. There were some sickly-green tinted paintings hanging over her bed. They looked perfectly hideous against the orange-brown carpets. I hit the john. The “hot” faucet didn’t work on the sink. It just spun around disconnected to anything. When I came back into the room she was sitting on her bed looking a bit shaken up.

“You okay?”

“Where is it?”

“What?” I said.

“You couldn’t know.”

“Your notebook?”

Her eyes blazed as she stared me down.

“Look, I found it, Rainy. It was in the middle of a street near Jansen Bridge.”

“Insane,” she mumbled. “How? Did you take it from me somehow?”

“No, I swear. It was in the middle of the road out near the pier.”

“What were *you* doing near the pier?”

“I could be asking you the same question! Actually I had an interesting visitor escort me to the neighborhood. I wouldn’t have thought you would go anywhere near that place.”

“I was looking for a ferry, or some kind of boat that could take me north. I like boats. And then my Uncle Jimmy shows up out of nowhere. He thought I was like going to jump off the pier and kill myself or something. He’s a bit over-reactive. But I can blame my screwed up mother for that. She doesn’t trust me. She doesn’t think I can make it on my own. She doesn’t get it. So she gets Uncle Jimmy all riled up and he decides to follow me around to make sure I’m not going to kill myself.”

Then she added, “Uncle Jimmy said from what he can see you’re pretty high strung.”

“How does he know that?”

She just shrugged her shoulders. “Like I said, he’s been spying.”

She started to look through her notebook. “I can’t believe it wasn’t torn to pieces with all the cars going by. It must have dropped out of my knapsack when I was crossing the street.”

She added, “You really found it in the road?”

“Yes, how else would I have known you were down near the pier?”

Then she looked up and searched my eyes, “. . . Did you read it?”

“I read the end to see if it would give me a clue about where you were headed.”

“It didn’t.”

“Well, it gave me a clue about where you were headed, with me.”

She smiled. “Why, because I said you were a goon?”

“Something like that, yeah.”

She sighed, then closed her eyes.

Then she came over to my bed and sit next to me, her face right next to mine. “Well, sometimes you just have to read between the lines.”

The next morning we awoke to rain yet again. I could hear it spattering on the window.

Then came a terrible pounding on the door.

She awoke startled. I got up and tried to peer through the window to see who it was but I couldn't see from that angle. "Who's there?" I called out.

"Uncle Jimmy. Open up!" He pounded on the door again.

"Go ahead. It's okay," she said as she ran into the bathroom and closed the door.

I unlatched the lock and the door flew open.

"Oh my God!" I screamed.

"Yeah, I'm Uncle Jimmy. Jimmy O'Brian. Nice to meet you again, Jack."

"Please don't kill me. . . .us."

"Yeah, look, the gun wasn't loaded. I was in a rush to get to Rainy. So bygones." He looked around. "Where is she?"

"I'm in the bathroom!" she called out.

He sat down meekly on the bed, wet from head to toe, his beard dripping raindrops onto the floor. His face was unshaven. He looked like he hadn't slept in days.

She came out looking fresh and glowy, even though her hair was still tangled from sleep, and her shirt was untucked. "Uncle Jimmy. This is Taylor Morrison. The friend I told you about."

"Yeah, we met. He was kind enough to give me a ride yesterday."

Rainy looked at us both, not understanding, then leaned forward on one foot nervously and smiled, "Cool. . . .I think."

O'Brian's cell phone had a ring tone. It was Beethoven's "Für Elise." Nothing like a sensitive classical music buff who looks like he's just escaped from a barbed wired facility for the criminally insane.

"Yellow... Yes, sis, she's right here. Everything is fine, mostly." He glared at me. "Not a problem. We'll get a ride back with her friend here, or catch a bus." He glared at me again. "No, not Chase. Some kid named Troy, or Todd. Something like..." I was glad he didn't remember my name.

He handed the phone to Rainy. "Hey Mom. How's work going? Oh, too bad. Well, he's an ass... He asked you on a date? Sure, I don't give a crap. It's not like I have to watch..." She headed towards the bathroom, but before she closed the door I heard her say, "Why do you care what dad thinks? Why would you need to make him feel jealous? Just move the fuck on."

I found myself alone with "Uncle Jimmy." He looked at me and his eyes turned moist, "Look, I'm sorry about the carjacking yesterday. I was just trying to get down to the pier before Rainy did something stupid. Her mom says she's an emotional wreck, I guess you know why."

"Screwed up parents?"

"Divorcing!"

"Okay."

"And that part of town she was heading towards is filled with serious nut cases."

"You mean like guys running around with guns?"

"Look, I told you it wasn't loaded!"

He pulled out the aforementioned pistol and shook it at me, then aimed it at the wall and pulled the trigger. A huge explosion ensued which shook the room and left a massive hole just above the TV.

In landed to the left of the exact same painting of a bird sitting on a piece of fruit they had in the café. The world is filled with coincidences.

Rainy came running out from the bathroom. "Jesus Christ, what the hell was that?"

"I... I didn't know it was loaded. I swear I emptied all the bullets out of the chamber before I left the apartment!"

“Yeah, except the one you saved to shoot me with!” I screamed. I was shaking from the gun blast. I absolutely wanted him to go back to the mental institution from whence he came.

“You used to be a cop, Uncle Jim. How the hell could you miss emptying one of the chambers?”

“I dunno, Rainy. I just did. But the others are empty. I *know* that.” He pointed the gun at the same wall and pulled the trigger again. I plugged my ears but he pulled the trigger over and over, resulting only in well-greased metallic clicks. He reveled in the silence between each click. “*See?*”

Rainy put the phone back up to her ear, “Okay mom, the rest of the gun was empty. Everything’s fine.” She went back into the bathroom and closed the door.

“You used to be a cop?” I was bewildered. My ears were still ringing.

“Yeah, but then I killed someone by mistake and they let me go. So I got a job as an auto mechanic. But what the fuck. I can’t even fix my own car out there. I think it needs a fuel pump. . . Got a big straw in your pocket?” He began to roar with laughter. A true comedian.

There was a knock on the door. The motel clerk shouted, “Is everything okay in there?”

“Yeah,” I shouted back. “Someone tried to kill a bird but they shot the tangerine by mistake.”

“May I please come in, sir?” He had a very sweet sounding Indian accent. It sounded so polite and gentle.

Uncle Jimmy sighed, then opened the door by leaning backwards and pulling it open with his left hand.

The clerk, barely more than a kid my age it seemed, came in holding out a gun of his own. “Who fired de shot?”

“I did, Gandhi. Put down the pistol. It was a mistake.”

“Vell, sir, you need to pay for the wall, den.”

“The whole wall, Chief? Look, all that sucker needs is a little spackle. Five bucks at Ace Hardware and a quick paste job. And the painting is fine. See? I totally missed the bird. No harm, no foul.” (I think he was making a pun. . .foul. . .fowl.) I stopped myself from laughing.

Next thing you know three policemen are standing at the opened door. "What's the problem here?"

"*This* man . . ." the kid from India points his bony finger at O'Brian.

"Jim!" bellowed one of the officers. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"Hey, Pete. I'm just watching over my niece. A little private detective gig."

Officer Pete looked at me, then back at Uncle Jimmy. "He's a niece?"

"Nah, she's in the bathroom talking to her mother."

The other officers were staring at the bullet hole in the wall. Jimmy looks at them and says, "Don't ask."

"Well, we have to ask, you know that. We have a report to write up."

"Yeah," Jimmy says. "Just say some guy was duck hunting and accidentally aimed at a tiny bird sitting on top of a tangerine by mistake." He started laughing, but the other officers didn't think it was funny.

"Look, I came here to watch over my niece, Rainy Robinson, my sister Mary's daughter. She's eighteen, okay? But she's not feeling real happy at the moment because Mary and her dick of a husband, Joe, who I *will* kill the next time I see him, are getting a divorce because he got his girlfriend pregnant and he really misses changing poopy diapers. . . .are you writing all this down?"

The officers had something akin to smiles appearing on their faces while one of them was dutifully scribbling in his little black leather book.

"So," Uncle Jimmy continued, "her mom thought my niece might try to kill herself or something. And my god damned car wouldn't start after she took off towards the pier. So when her creepy boyfriend finally wakes up from his likely pot-induced beauty sleep I panicked. I jumped into this poor dumb shit's car with him in it, hence a carjacking, a code 209.5, as opposed to stealing his car, so cross out the 537e, Walter."

The officer named Walter, dutifully crossed out 537e and replaced it with 209.5.

"So I get down to the pier and take off on a full run with these fucked-up black mechanic's shoes on my feet that slide around and make my feet feel like burning lead - you guys don't know how good those shoes they give you are until you walk around in these dogs," he lifts up one of his tree trunk sized legs to reveal one beat-up black dirt-covered shoe with no arch.

“Anyway, I get to the only place on the pier that’s high enough to jump off of and actually kill yourself, and guess what I don’t see?”

The officers are staring at him. The Indian guy behind the desk is standing there with his mouth open wide enough for a cat to jump in it.

“*Rainy*, my niece, jumping off the pier, that’s what I don’t see.”

On cue, *Rainy* comes out of the bathroom, her conversation with her mom now over.

“Because she wasn’t trying to commit a 164. She was looking for a fucking ferry! A Martinsville ferry! Which would go exactly where if one existed? From Jansen pier to the nearest offshore oil rig? A real tourist attraction, don’t you think? Jeez, *Rainy*, how crappy stupid are you, anyway?”

“It’s genetic,” she shoots back.

The officers begin to snicker. Jimmy had them eating out of his hand, but now he was the punch line.

“You think you could pay for a boat ride with piggy bank money?” He was trying to rebound back to being the joker and not the joke. But he was the only one laughing now.

“Okay, Uncle Jimmy, I get it. They get it. I’m just a dumb little shit kid, okay?”

She glared at the police standing at the door, “But I’ll tell you this. I wasn’t down by the pier trying to catch a damn boat. Or trying to kill myself by jumping off a six foot dock.”

“Vell den vat ver you doing, fishing?” the Indian clerk cackled. An awkward silence ensued.

At that moment, “*Fur elise*” began to play again from Uncle Jimmy’s cell. He snapped it open. “Sis, we’re in the middle of a little discussion here with your daughter and her weird friend Tommy, or whomever the hell he is, and a little Indian guy, and a few cops because I shot up a wall, so can I please call you back?”

“You think she’s sleeping with . . . *him*?” He glared at me with eyes of stone. Then he looked at *Rainy*, “What gave you that idea?” Then his attention went back to the phone. “I won’t let him out of my sight, trust me.” His fist tightened and he turned a little bit red in the face. He snapped the phone shut. “*Siddown*,” he commanded to me. I saw no reason not to.

Officer Walter budded in, “Jim. I’m afraid we may have to take you down to the station for a chat.”

“Come on Walter, get off my back. I have to. . . .”

“No, Jimmy, don’t put up a fight,” said the officer standing closest to the door. “It’s regulations, you know that. And by the way, what’s up with the crappy beard? It makes you look like a deranged Irish version of Santa Claus.”

That broke the ice. Uncle Jimmy laughed, the officers laughed, the Indian clerk who was Hindu but tried to imagine a red bearded Krishna, laughed. And off they went in two freshly painted squad cars headed for their little chat downtown.

“If Uncle Jimmy isn’t going to let you out of his sight he’d better leave his glass eye behind,” I said.

“Yeah, but we just saw him leave with both eyes. Right?”

“You saw what I saw.”

She began singing “Fur elise,” like this, “la de-da de-da de-da, de de de de,” then shut the door hard with her foot.

The kiss and everything that followed was nothing we would have wanted Uncle Jimmy to see.

“Okay,” she said breathlessly. She turned to me and gave me another kiss, “I’ll tell you whatever you want to know.”

My astral girl had become real. Silver stars twinkled wildly. Constellations co-joined. Right there in the middle of the day. I touched her cheek, in real time this time. “You’ll actually answer my questions?”

“Within reason,” she whispered.

“Okay, then how much money do you have on you?”

She laughed, “Why? Are you going to charge me for this?”

“You said I could ask you anything within reason. We’ll probably need to eat, and drive, and. . . .be somewhere?”

“Okay, I have about seventy five dollars left.”

“I only have another thirty.”

“Yeah, I don’t care about that,” she shrugged nervously. “Wanna ask me anything else?”

“Yeah. . . . Do ya like me?” I smiled a little too widely and moved closer to her.

“You goon. I’m starting not to.” She pushed at me.

“Okay, then tell me this -- why are there all these secrets going on?”

“What secrets?”

“Why did you go down to the pier? I want the real story.”

She hesitated for a moment, then said, “Okay, Taylor, get in your car. It’s time you knew. And we have to get out of here.”

“Knew what?”

She got up and started to put on her clothes. “You’ll see.”

She quickly packed up her suitcase and knapsack and put them in the back seat. This was her way of letting me know we were checking out of the Motel 6.

“Where to, fearless leader?”

“Back to the pier. To see something.”

I started driving down the same streets I had been forced to drive down with O’Brian the madman. When we got close to the bridge she directed me down a small street I hadn’t seen yesterday.

“Park here,” she demanded. We were at the very edge of the northern part of the pier. When we got out she said, “This is where Uncle Jimmy found me yesterday. He came running from right over there.” She pointed to where the yellow dumpster was. He escorted me all the way back to the hotel then went off to fix his unfixable car.”

We kept walking until we came to the end of a dark alleyway. “This must be it,” she exclaimed. We kept walking with things getting darker until we were standing in front of a dozen steel-coated mail boxes, each one with a separate lock. She search with her fingers until she found the right one. The she pulled out her wallet, dug into an insert usually reserved for a photo of your kid, and pulled out a very small key.

“Yo ho ho and a bottle of rum,” she sang.

“You got me all the way down here to get drunk?”

She unlocked the box and I craned my neck to see what was inside.

Out came an old crumpled paper bag. She looked in it and closed it back up. Okay, let’s get out of here,” she said with her voice shaking.

Drugs? Did Chase put her up to this?

We drove as quickly as the Hyundai would go, out of Martinsville, towards the next town with the old crumpled paper bag firmly in her grasp.

It started to rain so hard the windshield turned everything into a blurry waterfall. She leaned over to kiss me.

“So before we drown do you mind telling me what’s in the bag?” I said.

“An inflatable boat.”

“Yeah, and I’m Noah, right?”

She nodded, turning her steely blue eyes towards me, “And that would make me Mrs. Noah, I suppose.”

“Officially you’d be Mrs. Ark. But Mrs. Noah will do. Odd honeymoon we’re having.”

She became serious again, trying to see along with me out of the fogged-up window.

After another few miles of driving through the maze of wet gray cotton, I said,

“Really, Mrs. Ark, what’s in the bag?”

“Just drive, Jack,” she said.

We were trying to stay ahead of Uncle Jimmy, who we figured would soon try to find us. After getting out of the police station he'd still have to fix his car, but we knew he'd come after us as soon as he could. So Rainy suggested we skip the next town after Martinsville and we headed east towards a farm town called, "Elly's Pike."

We came to a hilly green town half way into the middle of nowhere, and Rainy told me to pull off the road at the "Elly's Pike General Store." We went in and looked around. There were rows of mismatched items of all shapes and sizes – cheese next to a pair of plumbers boots, next to cans of Raid. It also had a rack of clothes. She bought me a pair of jeans, which I tried on first, and a fresh white shirt. And finally a toothbrush all my own. I'd been using hers. We picked up some food too. A ripe tomato, a loaf of bread, some fresh butter and a box of Oreos. We gassed up outside at an old single pump – yes they were part gas station too -- until the car was topped. I calculated that what she spent on all these things pretty much tapped her out. I still had my thirty dollars. But then what would we do?

As we drove on we saw a bed and breakfast sign and she told me to pull in. We went to the front door and knocked. An elderly lady answered. She saw us shivering and huddled together. "How much you got?" she asked. "Thirty dollars," I said. She thought things over for a moment. "Okay, payment is upfront. Room's at the top of the stairs."

This place was a whole lot nicer than a Motel 6. The floors creaked but the furnishings were all antique. The house smelled like fresh gravy. We opened the door to our room and saw a big bed with a white quilt, flowers on the night stand, lace curtains, an old dark wood dresser, a painting that looked like a pencil sketch of a farm that might have been this place a hundred years ago.

I flopped down on the bed and the springs bobbed me up and down. It was so comfortable I could have fallen asleep on the spot. "Want to tell me what's going on?" I yawned. I was relentless.

She ignored my comment and began to inspect a chess board with beautiful, hand carved marble pieces. She ran her fingers across the smooth carvings. The board sat fully prepared for the guests, laying handsomely upon an old wooden table with two big chairs facing each other.

"Do you know how to play?" she asked.

"I'm not a grand master, but I've dabbled."

"Well, dabble with me then."

She sat down in one of the chairs and motioned to me with her eyes. I made my way over. She'd taken white.

With her first move I took notice of her hands and fingers. No rings, no bracelet. No jewelry anywhere. Not even a trinket around her neck. No earrings. She obviously couldn't afford even imitation diamonds. Or maybe she just didn't care for jewelry, real or otherwise.

"I used to play with my mom. She was pretty good at manipulating things. I could see that."

Rainy's mind was very complex; she led me to think she was planning one direction of attack, only to attack me from another angle. But after so much aggression against my barely capable defense, she got too confident and exposed her queen and I trapped her.

At least that's what I assumed. She moved her hand towards one of her pieces. When I looked at the move she was about to make I realized after I took her queen she would quickly get me in check mate. But she suddenly pulled her hand back. "I need to distract you," she said.

She got up from her chair and took me by the hand and led me to the big white framed window overlooking the street and opened it wide. Even though we were on the second floor there was no screen. I could see straight down into the garden if I leaned my head out. I could smell dampness in the air. White birds flew past in a small flock. She was somewhere behind me. I wondered if she was going back to the chess board to prove that in so many ways she now had my fate in her hands. But instead she pressed lightly against me and put her hands under my shirt. I felt her soft hands probing, touching my skin slowly, outlining my ribs as she circled her other hand across my chest.

She moved over to the bed and laid down on her back. I kissed her and she started to laugh.

"What's so funny?"

"We're rich, Mr. Ark."

"What are you talking about?"

She kept laughing as she brought the crumpled paper bag over to the bed.

She reached her hand in and pulled out four small rolls of yellow coins. "Know what this is?"

"It's very shiny. "

“That’s right. It gold, dear boy. A *lot* of it.”

“Where in the world did you get this? Rainy, stop messing with me. What the hell is going on?”

“Okay. I’m going to answer you directly, Mr. Ark. . . .because I guess you deserve it, for being such a good sport. My dad -- the creep who impregnates non-wives. He felt really guilty after my mom served divorce papers on him. So he called me one night and told me he had a gift for me. But I had to keep it a secret or it might get hung up in the divorce settlement, even though he had meant to give it to me all along when I graduated high school.

“He said he bought the gold the year I was born for, like, two hundred and fifty dollars an ounce. Forty ounces. Forty shiny one ounce coins. Cost my dad ten thousand dollars at the time. She fingered the four small tubes of coins now laying on the bed.

“And what’s it worth now?”

“Oh. . . .maybe like, *sixty frickin’ thousand dollars!*”

“Jeez!”

“But if my mom or Uncle Jimmy find out about this, it’s going to be gone. . . .She’ll by sixty thousand dollars worth of booze and cigarettes. So”

“So. . . .”

“So we have to spend it. We need to spend it *now*, before they find out. We have to figure out a way to have the best time of our lives and *drain these tubes* A.S.A.P.”

“*We?*”

“Yeah, you’re my taxi boy. So officially that makes you an accomplice.” She reached over and kissed me.

We didn’t care that the some of the gold tubes were lying between us. We pressed up against them as the sun went down, and then moved still closer.

After our gourmet dinner, catered by the Elly's Pike General Store," Rainy did something quite unexpected. She handed me her brown notebook and said, "You can read any one page you want except the last entries. They're private.

I opened her book up to a random page near the beginning:

Wind. Windows. Quiet bells
Belie the naked truth.
I'm here, not hearing.
Sky seas, I'm not seeing.
Water reaches out;
I'm too old to remember now.

The other entry was:

Freedom(e).
I need to move out of the dark dome
of me. . . . Ark, dome, me do, can't move,
night worlds colliding.
Find out
Who is inside this cage of mine
Mixing up motives. Pacing.
Lost. Mad. Endless maps appear on a wall.
My feet are stuck on the ground.
But I'm getting closer to somewhere.

I closed the book and looked at her. "You are really something else." That's all I could say, since I myself had never been able to write anything.

She held out her hand. "I trusted you to read only what you did, and no more." I gave her the book back. Then she said, "It won't win any contests. But I wanted you to see." She started to put the notebook safely back into the side of her backpack.

"Of course it would win a contest!" I stood up, and stood over her like a looming shadow, then pointed my finger down at her, "In fact, Ms. Robinson, you have already won the first round of the contest, and now you've qualified for *the lightning round!*"

I took Rainy by the shoulders and sat her in a big overstuffed antique chair, then sledged her across the wood floor until she was facing me.

I jumped up on the bed and started bouncing. "All right, contestant number one, if you win this 'Final Round' you will be able to choose from a number of wonderful prizes. Are you ready for The Final Question?"

"Fire away," she said as seriously as possible. She swiped her hair away from her face and sat up attentively.

"The category is. . . "Literature!"

"Oh no, that's my worst subject."

"Luck of the draw," I said shaking my head sadly. "And here is the 'Final Question.'" I hummed a dramatic set-up tune, then asked, "How much wood could a woodchuck chuck if a woodchuck could chuck wood?"

"Oh, I know this one!" she started clapping. She stood up straight and cleared her throat, "A woodchuck would chuck all the wood it could chuck if a woodchuck could chuck wood!"

"Judges?. *Ding Ding Ding!* We have a new champion!"

"Now, Rainy Robinson, you can choose from the following very expensive prizes, some of which could go as high as *sixty thousand* dollars!"

"Would you like a beautiful, powerful, brand new laptop computer?"

". . . No."

"How about a beautiful, powerful, brand new cell phone with built-in cable TV and a year of service already paid for?"

"No."

"How about. . . *an inflatable boat!*"

"No thanks. They just bob around going nowhere."

"Okay, okay . . . how about beautiful, powerful, brand new car?"

"No, um, well, maybe."

"I'm sorry, the judges cannot accept maybe as an answer. I will repeat the question. Drum roll please. . . *a* beautiful, powerful, brand new car?"

"Okay. . . No."

“Here’s one! A gorgeous new closet full of hot sexy clothes.”

“Definitely not.”

“Diamond earrings?”

“No. Not gold earrings either. No jewelry.”

“But how about a diamond ring?” I said.

“No rings. *Ever.*”

I paused, absorbing what I should have already assumed.

“Okay, how about a slave! A human slave to . . .”

“No fucking way.”

“We’ll censor that out later, film crew. But please remember, Ms. Robinson, this is a family show.”

“Okay, okay, fine. But what are slaves doing on a family show?”

“I dunno. We’ll have to fire the producer later. Okay, here’s your final choiceHow about an all-expenses-paid trip around the world for a whole year?”

“Hmm. . .Where to?”

“You name it!”

“Not Ireland!”

“That’s not really the kind of affirmative answer the judges are looking for. There is a lot of ‘not Ireland’ in the world, especially if you include all the non-land masses. So please. . . .”

She thought about it and said quietly, “Maybe Paris. Or Italy. Spain! Chile. Peru. Maybe China. Maybe . . .all of them!”

“We’re writing all this down, please continue.”

“We can go. Taylor, we could go. . . *everywhere!*” Her face looked as excited as a child’s. Her eyes were bright. But then she immediately turned pensive.

“If that’s what you want.”

“Yeah. I know.” She went to the window and looked out into the night. “Let me sleep on it. But I think. . .” she stopped herself. Then she added out of the blue, “First, there’s another place I want to take you. Tomorrow.”

She turned around and climbed up on the bed to stand next to me, then put her arms around my neck, “Just know. . .” she looked deeply into my eyes, “I think you make a very compelling game show host.”

It was the first compliment she’d ever given me. It seemed to me at the time we were definitely getting closer to somewhere.

A beautiful morning carried sunshine through all the windows. We slept in and took our time getting out of bed. There were so many reasons not to get up. There was so much life in front of us, but nothing to do. It was perfect.

Around noon we checked out and packed up the car. She told me to drive further east towards a town called, "Captain's Ridge."

We got off at a dusty exit and drove through the small strip of stores that represented the downtown. A gas station, an old diner, a grocery store, a bank, and a small Victorian-looking inn near a Greyhound Station.

At the end of town she told me to turn left, and up we went, winding around a two-lane road until the views off to one side became impressive. We could see so much green, grass and farmland normally hidden by steel and roads and buildings from ground level. Near the top of the ridge she told me to turn into a dirt driveway. We traveled down a gravel road until a white house appeared. No other houses were around it. It was enclosed by a long wooden fence. Nearby was a fire trail leading up to the peak. She told me to park the car and I followed her through the wooden gate to the front door. She tried the knob but it was locked, so she went around the side of the house, climbed through a slightly opened window and opened the front door from the inside.

I looked around. There was no furniture, a lot of dust, sun beams angling through the living room windows, a kitchen with no appliances. "Is this where you used to live?" I asked.

She nodded. "Till I was eleven."

She took me by the hand and took me up a creaky flight of stairs. We entered a small room with a window that looked out over the valley. There was a small empty closet and an outlet with a cable wire still attached. She must have had a small TV in her room.

"Oh my God," she said breathlessly. She bent down in a corner of the closet and rose up holding a four by five photograph. It was her as a young girl, with an out of control smile on her face, the same auburn hair except slightly redder. . . A green gulch in the background, and a white bird flying low, almost landing on her shoulder. She was standing straight, but her hands were outstretched as if she were going to try to fly any minute! It was perfect, with the bird looking like it was going to land on her.

"Classic," she laughed. "Me wishing I could fly away."

“Why?”

“Why?” She looked away as if to consider whether to answer the question or just change the subject.

“Okay. . . Because, my parents, well, they sat around a lot, usually at the kitchen table, and drank, and fought and drank some more. Then, they’d call me down for dinner and get on me about something insane, like, ‘You’re so pretty, why don’t you join the cheerleaders?’ And I’d just shake my head in disbelief at how clueless they were. Then they’d get mad at me for not answering the question. So I’d just come back up in this room,” she looked around for a moment, maybe remembering where her bed was, and her dresser, “and I’d sit down right here in this corner, and hide out until they were asleep. So, imagining I could fly away had a lot of upside.”

We wandered around the house a bit more. She didn’t want to go into her parents’ old room, but we wandered downstairs, and then further, into a room that had been renovated from an old garage. “This is where the pool table was,” she said. “We were living the high life back then.”

We walked out the front door. She locked it behind her. Then we began walking up the fire trail. She carried the photo in her hand. About ten minutes later up a steep hill we came to an overlook. It looked across a gully and unfurled into the horizon, with blue sky about the only thing you could see.

We sat down and she did the strangest thing. She looked at the photo, which was obviously taken right here at this spot, and stared at herself, Rainy the little girl with the big smile on her face and her arms outstretched, with the same auburn hair except slightly redder. . .this green gulch and expansive blue sky framing her, and a white bird flying low, just like the flock birds gliding across the gully now, and then she ripped it up in a dozen pieces, until the pieces were too small to rip anymore, and she flung the confetti of photograph off the ridge. “Have a nice life,” she said.

I was too stunned and confused to say anything so I just continued sitting with my arms hugging my legs. I’d glance up at her from time to time, then look out to the gully, then close my eyes.

She came closer to me and said quietly, “I used to see a sail boat out there in the distance with an orange sail. It was slowly crossing the sea. I saw the sky as the sea sometimes. Can you imagine seeing that?” I looked across the expanse and easily imagined the endless rolling blue as a vast ocean. So I shook my head. The silence sitting at this spot was so palpable I could hear the ringing in my ears. Not a sound anywhere, except for her voice.

She whispered almost to herself, “Vast and blue and something you could travel away on. And then one day I saw that boat with the its triangular orange sail and there was this umbilical cord of orange light from the sail, a wavy shimmering

reflection cast off of the water-sky, and it rolled on and on until it came right to me, right in front of me. And I attached myself to it and I sailed away from here. I flew actually, with the orange light guiding me. But I never knew where to go exactly. Just 'away.' Anywhere away. And I didn't care if I ever came back. But then the dream was over and I'd have to go back down.

"And then one day my mom told me we were moving. So I came up here for one last dream. I was up here so long my dad came to get me. He brought his camera along. And he took that photograph the last time I was up here. So that's why I had to give it a proper burial."

I was just about to say something when my cell phone rang. I immediately promised myself I'd never to have a cell phone again. It broke the umbilical cord Rainy and I were traveling on and reality came shattering in. I instinctively looked at the number but didn't recognize it. Rainy did though. "Shit, it's my mother. She must have vacuumed up your number when I called her on your cell the other day."

I got up from where I was seated, and wound up my arm like a major league pitcher with no one on base, and flung the phone into a big tree. It flew into a mass of silver shards. One tiny chip almost hit me in the leg. The battery dove out without a parachute and mercifully died on contact. "I guess that was one of those weird trees," I said.

She looked at me stunned for a long moment. Then she combed her hands through her hair and started laughing, "You are *such a fucking freak!*"

To which I said, "Makes two of us."

We drove back into the small town of Captain's Ridge and decided to check into the inn near the Greyhound station.

Before we did, however, we made a little stop at the bank. We went into a quiet corner where the deposit slips were and Rainy carefully dislodged a coin from one of the tubes. Then we went up to the teller. "Can you cash this?"

She looked at it and asked us to take a seat at the manager's desk. A fat man in a wrinkly black suit greeted us. He reminded me of a scuffed up bowling ball. He looked at us with a tad of suspicion. But then he looked carefully at both sides of the coin, an American Eagle, and proceeded to put his reading glasses on. He looked at the daily value of an ounce of gold. "We take a fee for this," he dutifully warned us. And then proceeded to dole out one thousand five hundred and twenty two dollars. We thanked him and quickly left. We were quiet and subdued until we got far enough away from the bank to start screaming and jumping in the air. Oh my God! This was the real deal. This was sixty thousand dollars worth of real money in her pocket. This was. . .*insane!*

We walked over to the inn. There was a business card at the front desk with the name of the place written on it: "Inn Here." There were only five rooms in the whole place but it wasn't a "bed and breakfast," because the old guy who hosted and owned it couldn't cook. He laughed about it when we checked in. "I just eats over at the grocery deli, or once in a while over at the diner," he said slurrily, due to the fact that he had two front teeth missing. One would assume both establishments offered a variety of soft foods.

We stayed in the suite, which was two hundred dollars a night. But it was worth it. Because the room was double sized and had a romantic view of the Greyhound station majestically situated right across the parking lot. Below us was an empty parking space reserved for the handicapped. And that meant it was "extra quiet in the suite," crowed the old man, "because ain't no handicapped people in this town." He made sure to add, "That's part of what you pay for in the suite." He began to count the brand new bills we laid in front of him. "Yep. Nice and quiet. Not a sole around to disturb you."

When we entered the suite we flopped giddily onto the bed. "Is this crazy or what?" she said breathlessly. I closed my eyes for a moment. My thoughts were buzzing. Everything was going at rocket speed, in the right direction for once. I tried to imagine the future, with her, where would this all lead to, in the long run. But her thoughts were somewhere else.

She gazed out the window looking out to the Greyhound station. "When I was little, my dad used to drive me into town with him and while he was in that bank next

door withdrawing money I'd stand outside and stare right over there, at that Greyhound station. All the buses coming and going. And I'd think to myself, this must be the main connection point in all of America. Look how many buses and cars and people there are! This is the magic passageway, right here before me, if you have enough money, to get you anywhere in the world. Especially New Zealand, Zanzibar, Zimbabwe. . . .Anywhere with 'z' in it. So it would be as far away from the beginning of the known alphabet as possible."

Evening came. She took the four tubes of coins, now one coin short, and put them on the bed in front of us. She leaned over with her elbows on the bed, staring at these tiny powerful canisters up close. They were like ritualistic offerings. But we were our own Gods now! We were sacrificing these little round golden lambs to ourselves. I was drawn to her, and leaned over, above and behind her. She began to laugh quietly. Then she pushed up against me playfully. I kissed the back of her neck. Then came a light knock at the door. A gentle, sorry to disturb you kind of knock.

"Who's there?" Rainy called out. I instinctively reached over and put the tubes of gold in my pockets. One coin slipped out and I hastily put that one in my back pocket.

"I have a small gift from the manager," said the voice, a small weird high-pitched voice.

Rainy stood there frozen, looking oddly confused, so I started towards the door. As my hand began to unhinge the lock she called out, "Don't open it!" But it was too late.

O'Brian came spilling through the crack, his voice blustery. "I'm the gift! Enjoy it while it lasts!" He roared with laughter, obviously proud that he'd tricked us into letting him in.

"How did you find us?" Rainy whispered, her mouth open slightly, still shocked at the sight of him.

"I'm ex-cop, darlin'. And a professional detective, remember? As soon as I saw the weather cleared I figured you'd want to take him to your little meadow up the hill before flying off for good. . . .But I couldn't be sure." She said nothing, blushing slightly.

"So I drove over to the old house, saw the fresh car tracks – but no one there. So then I said to myself, 'If I was high, and romantically involved with a creep, and needed a place to sleep after showing him my little meadow, where would I go?' So I drove over to the only place to stay in town. And bulls-eye. Saw the little creep's car. So I just parked my big-assed Chevy convertible right next to your little piece of garbage, and took myself that nice little spot in the handicapped zone. Because I'm not gonna be here long. And then, my professional detective mind said to myself, "If I were rich, what room would I stay in? The best room in the whole damn joint, of course. Since you're loaded now, why quibble over a hundred dogs here and a hundred dogs there? So I climbed the little red carpeted stairs and put on my best "faggy bell hop" voice, and bang, ground zero."

“What do you want from me, Uncle Jimmy? Can’t you just leave us alone? I’m safe, if that’s what mom ‘s worried about. Everything’s okay.”

“Really? Okay? You’re standing there in possession of stolen property, a lot of dough, a lot of yellow dough, eh? And you’re telling me everything’s okay?”

“It’s not stolen.”

“How’s that?”

“Dad gave the money to me as a gift.”

“You know it’s not your father’s gift to give. That was *their* money, his and your mother’s. You have no legal right to it.”

“But . . .”

“And how did you get the key? It was in your mom’s jewelry box, wasn’t it? And you stole it. That’s a crime too, you know.”

“Dad told me where the key was. Otherwise how could I have known?”

“Then he’s an accessory to the crime, now isn’t he? Because that money is part of their divorce settlement. It’s not his. It never was.”

“He told me he bought it for me when I was born. To give to me, later, now. . . .”

“Tell that to the attorneys, honey. They’ll get a good bendy fucking laugh out of that.”

“Look, Uncle Jimmy, mom makes plenty of money at her job. And dad, he’s a creep, I know that. He left mom and screwed up really bad. His money can’t buy him out of that in my eyes. But he *owes* me. . . something. . . don’t you think? He owes me more than some stupid-assed attempt to make up for the past. Maybe he owes me something that can make me believe people aren’t all completely insane. Maybe the money is his way of telling me sometimes things can be good, can be fun. That some things can actually work out in the end. . . . and that you don’t always have to run away from what’s right in front of you”

He began to applaud. “Great sob story, little pirate. Very nice. But in the end, you took something that’s not yours, from the master of running away. That’s who he is. And that makes you nothing but a little two-bit thief. A thief who got his runnin’ away genes. What do you deserve for that? Buried treasure?”

Rainy stood frozen before him.

“So hand it over.”

“How about if she gives you half?” I said. My words fell into an otherwise silent insanity that had pervaded the room. But I ventured on, “Let’s say her dad just wants her to have his half. So we’ll give you her mom’s half, and we’ll call it even. How about that?”

“You should have thought about before, Tommy the Creep. But my detective work is very costly these days. The bills are piling up, I’m afraid. . . .So, I’ll need it all. Right now.”

“We’ll tell dad what you did,” Rainy stammered.

“Oh great! And he’ll tell the police he was hiding gold in a safe, undeclared to the IRS, for eighteen years. Then of course, he’ll be so very glad to pay his taxes on the profits, pay off his divorce lawyer, and give all the rest to you! Life is very complicated, little niece. You gotta be an accountant these days just to figure out if you have any money left. You can’t just spread your wings and fly away from reality. Cold hard facts – life is lived on the ground. Usually belly down.”

“Uncle Jimmy, you know this isn’t fair,” she said gently. She was stoic, calm. No hint of fear. Staring directly into his eyes. “Can’t we. . . .”

“*Fair? Fair?*” He began to laugh like a madman. Then, “You have your poor naïve mother’s sense of humor, you do.”

He sobered up by pinching the bridge of his nose, and said in a low voice, “You know, you’re just as greedy as all the people you hate for being greedy! See the irony there? See what that feels like? It’s poison, isn’t it? And now, it’s poisoning you. You’ve resorted to begging. *You!* You’re a thief, begging for fairness. What a stupid little kid you are. I thought you had more to you than that.”

She was still standing straight before him, but her eyes became moist. She began to shake almost imperceptibly. He’d gotten to her.

“Now give me the coins. Right now.”

She looked back at the bed: “I don’t know where the fuck . . . ! *They’re gone!*”

“Hand it over! Now!” He took out his gun and pointed it at me. “If either of you move in any direction but the coins, I’ll blow his head off. And believe me, this time all the chambers are loaded.”

“They’re in my pocket,” I said. “Just slow down. . . .I need to put my hands in my pocket to get them for you. But I don’t carry a gun. So. . . .”

“Stop right there!” he yelled. “Which pocket?”

“The right one.”

He walked over to me and put the muzzle of the gun right against my temple. I began to shake. I felt like I might black out. I closed my eyes, and felt the cold metal pushing against my brain.

He took two tubes out of my right pocket, and as I expected, he checked my other pocket too. The other two tubes were there. He patted me down to make sure there were no other tubes on me and then patted Rainy down as well. Then he searched the room for more, knowing what to look for. He looked in the bathroom. Under the bed. But he wasn't going to find anything else. He'd gotten all the tubes we had.

He crowed, “Your mom and I are sure to have a very good time with your asshole father's undeclared illegal money. Thanks for the golden moments we've shared over the last few days. I've enjoyed every minute. Cheers to the lot of ya.”

Then he elbowed me into the wall and I fell to the floor, trying to breathe.

He left the room with the door wide open. Rainy went over and slammed the door shut and locked it. Then she opened the window. Then she ran into the bathroom, possessed by something, and filled an ice bucket with water from the bath tub. I got up from the floor just in time to see her running to the window and pouring the water into Uncle Jimmy's car. The top was down. It was a straight shot. An easy target. And the front seat got pretty wet.

She ran back in and filled the bucket again. I saw Jimmy getting in his car and watched him as he began to curse and feel down to his soaked-through pants. Rainy came flying out from the bathroom and just as he looked up she dropped the other bucket of water straight down onto his head. Then she through the empty bucket as hard as she could down at him. It pinged off the top of the front windshield and ricocheted into his nose. He waved it away like a giant steel mosquito and looked up fuming.

“And there's my gift for *you*, Uncle Jimmy! Give my regards to mom,” she yelled and slammed the window shut.

We watched him screech away, cursing, rich, and soaked to the bone.

It was the only time I ever saw Rainy break down and cry. She wouldn't look at me. She sat on the side of the bed and buried her head in her arms.

"Rainy," I whispered. "It's gonna be all right. I've been saving up. Another few months of work at the café and I'll have enough money for us to travel for a long time, go anywhere you want to go. Except I don't have to feel guilty about it that way. You see? Because it'll be my money. And then you can be my accomplice. And I'll take care of the rest."

She says, almost to herself: "It's not about the money, Taylor. Or traveling to any specific place, for any specific reason." She wiped a tear away. "It's not about you having to feel guilty. I liked buying you clothes, and a toothbrush! And I don't blame you for any of this. This is about me. It's about who I really am. Some of what my uncle said wasn't too far off. And I have to own up to that. That's why I'm crying, okay?"

"No," I said. "It's not okay. You're none of things he said about you. I can see right through all that. It's all going to work out!"

I handed her the one gold coin I'd put in my back pocket. "Here's about \$1500. That should get us started."

"He'll probably come back for it," she said. "The man's relentless."

"We'll be gone. We can leave right now."

"No. No, let's go to sleep, Taylor. I'm tired. I don't really care about him anymore. I'm not going to run from him. I don't want to run. I don't want to fly. I just want to sleep."

She beckoned me to bed, and we held each other there, with the golden light from the Greyhound sign refracting through the tightly closed window.

When I woke up, of course, she was gone.

The note said, "I went to the Greyhound station. Will be on a bus by the time you wake up. Don't follow me. I'll try to come home some day. I loved you. You know that. – Rain.

At the bottom of the note was the gold coin.

I wandered into the bathroom where the only thing that remained was my new toothbrush.

I brushed my teeth with cold water, and walked back into the bedroom.

I looked out the window. The handicapped spot was empty. I looked across to the Greyhound terminal. Caught sight of the entrance. No one was there.

We were sitting on the floor of your childhood room. You were showing me a photograph from long ago. A green hilly island, a bird flying low, almost landing on your shoulder. You were ten years old.

You took me by the hand. You introduced me to your parents. They had been living in the same house all these years. I tried hard to please them. They could see I cared for you; and I was kind to them. But they didn't like me, or what I meant to you.

I went back into the bedroom where you had grown up. I was glad for the privacy. I felt darkened and alone. You followed me in, sat beside me and put your hand on my face. - "I would lock myself away in here too. They made me feel just like you feel now."

White fog curled in from the sea and rearranged the landscape.

We were two small birds sitting together, looking across the gully, wondering if we should try to fly over to the other side. As I gauged the distance I thought - we won't make it. We're not really birds, and it's too far. . . . But we should try anyway.

When I looked over to find out what you were thinking, you were gone. I looked around for you, but not for long.

Me wanting, you wishing. For what I would only know white.

I was driving a car. But I was pressing on the brake while I pressed on the gas. I drove slowly, across cities, across oceans, wanting to find you, but knowing there could be no rescues. Rescues never work. You could find me if you wanted to. You had been in my dream before.

I went back to the hill and sat by the gully. I was trying to decide if I should fly across to the other side alone. Away from here, away from you, and everything I ever tried to love.

An orange ribbon of light appeared in the sky, unrolling itself before me. I followed it out to the end, where a sail boat floated on the open horizon.

Suddenly I saw you. Standing alone on the deck,
backlit by an orange triangular cloth
fitted to the spar and rigging,
rippling from the wind that moves time forward.

Without words, the wind was clear. You were pleading with me, a tear falling. . . .

Let the longing lead you home.

The End.

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