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The following is a collection of short stories that deal with miscommunication, expectations, the disappointment of failed expectations, disappointment more generally, the redemptive power of love, and bears.

SOMETIMES THE BEAR GETS YOU

by

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SOMETIMES THE BEAR GETS YOU

Baccalaureate is one of my school's many pre-graduation wankfests, but it's the only one in a church. We go to public school so I think the whole thing is illegal, but I'm not sure who to talk to about it, and if I knew I probably wouldn't talk to them anyway. They make you put on the robes and you either sing, read a poem, or you "quietly appreciate the contributions of your classmates."

Even though it was a month before graduation, they said we had to rehearse. If you're like me and you don't think everybody needs to hear your version of "Danny Boy," that means walking in, sitting on the risers, and trying not to look bored.

I don't understand why people do it, get up in front of everybody and sing some song or something. If you're popular, your friends are going to hate it, or at least give you shit about it. If you're not, popular that is, well you really ought to be keeping your head down. I mean, you better enjoy the hell out of that song, you better really feel like you fucking nailed it, because you know you're gonna be paying for it.

Jacob Harris read this poem called "A Shropshire Lad." The poem was all about how the best sort of people were in the place he was leaving, which is great and all, but last I heard they were still putting bras in Jacob's locker. Not far into it Jacob started talking to his hand. He brought it high up in the air and almost shouted at it, then he brought it back down and did this thing where he gave it a little pat, like he was happy with it. He said something about his hand being honest and then something about it

rotting, and God knows what else he said. Whatever Jacob had going on with his hand was his business. That's when the bear walked in.

I shouldn't say "bear." I should say man in a bear suit, but when he first swung open those big double doors (yes, they really swung open, the man in the bear suit had a flair for the dramatic) I thought he was the real deal. It helped that the man in the bear suit must have been about 6'6" and his costume showed attention to detail.

His fur was black, but it wasn't matted and dried out like a car seat cover. It looked thick. I never touched it, but it even had this sheen about it, like it was oily. And he was a huge guy. I mean, there was some real bulk to him. I know you're probably thinking of some ball of fur, but he moved like he was all muscle and bone. He really filled that thing out. His paws were just huge, and of course there were the claws. Shiny, black—you didn't have to be told that they were dangerous.

Outside of the fact that he always walked upright, there was one problem with the costume. His face. The rest of him looked so creepily alive that the rubber nose and the glued in eyes stuck in that dumb stuffed grin, well it all made you feel a little better. It reminded you that whatever else happened, you weren't going to be eaten.

This was the guy that walked through those church doors, the man in the bear suit. I'll admit I was excited once I thought I figured out what was going on. I was ready for everybody to start laughing, or pointing, or something. But I looked around and Jacob was still reading his poem, Megan was still being an uptight bitch, and everything else was pretty normal. And it wasn't like they couldn't have noticed him. The pews were all empty except for the choir director and the five teachers who were drawing overtime pay.

Once the man in the bear suit had finally strolled up to the front row, Mr. McKee moved his books out of the way to clear the seat next to him, but other than that nothing, I mean nothing.

I tried to ignore him, imagined if I could just get through the next hour or so I could pretend like whatever had just happened hadn't happened and get back to my normal life. The man in the bear suit started waving at me.

I slid down in my chair and closed my eyes. I thought about baseball. I've always liked baseball. Then I thought about the next twenty years of my life spent in shrinks' offices, looking at those little glass diplomas on the wall. I opened my eyes again.

The man in the bear suit was still waving. It looked like he was nearly wrenching his arm out of the socket by the force of it. I sheepishly pointed two fingers at my chest, praying that there would be some sign that he didn't mean me. He nodded vigorously in response. He started clapping. He was stretching his arms out and bringing his paws together, almost hitting Mr. McKee in the face with each clap, but the sound he made was a dull kind of thud. And then, as if he hadn't done enough, he yelled my name. "Steeeeeveeeeeeeen."

Imagine a retarded kid, a yawn, and thunder all rolled into one, and you'll have some idea where we're at. Plus he always took so long to say anything. I mean it took forever for him even to get started, then the pauses between words, and the way he had to draw out every syllable. After he said anything it'd be like, "Man, that was ten minutes ago." He didn't talk that much though. Which was good, because my dad talks all the

time. He's always trying to come up with some clever phrase and sometimes it's like I love you and all, but could you just please shut up?

Let's stop for a minute here. OK, it's very possible that I'm crazy. I don't *feel* crazy, but I'm a reasonable guy, and I'll allow you to draw the reasonable conclusions. I haven't asked anyone about the man in the bear suit because, well, how do you ask? The closest I came was when I asked Chucky Borstien, Chucky and I use to set things on fire in his backyard, "Hey, what you think of that guy?" I raised my left eyebrow and moved my arm like I was poking him in the ribs with my elbow, even though I wasn't. Chucky said, "What guy?" And that was that. Anyway, before you start drawing all sorts of conclusions, I smoke a little dope, but that is it. I mean, if Courtney Gabrielle saw a guy walking around in a bear suit it'd be like what do you expect? She'll snort anything that's not nailed down. Point is I'm an ordinary guy.

I snuck out of the church, climbing down the back of the risers when none of the teachers were looking. I figured a half day's all right no matter how you get to it. When I was little and wasn't feeling good my mom used to wrap up ice in a dishrag and hold it against my head. She was sleeping on the couch when I came in, so I got the ice myself and flopped down on my bed. That's when he called. I knew it was him because of the heavy breathing.

"Hi," I said.

"Hello."

"So, what's up?" I didn't know what else to say.

"I'm... very happy... to be talking... to... you."

“OK.”

“Are... you doing... your homework?”

“Well, yeah man, I’m doing my homework.”

“I... just wanted to... say... hello.”

“Great. Great. Hi and everything, but I’m really busy you know.”

“Yes. I will... let you go... then.”

“Sure, it’s just all this homework.”

“Good... bye.”

“Bye.”

It wasn’t the only time the man in the bear suit called. He started calling two, three times a day. Mostly he kept asking about school. When he asked what my favorite subject was I told him that I guessed math was all right even though my teacher was a jerk. He said math was very important. He said he liked to fish, and sometimes I could get him talking about that, or at least get him to repeat that he liked to fish. There wasn’t much more to it, but I got used to the whole thing.

So, I know I said that I smoke weed, but my mom’s got me beat by a lot. It’s hard to catch her without a joint and a bag of tortilla chips. Which is cool and all if you’re coming over to your friend’s place and his mom’s getting the brick out of the flower pot—telling you to go grab a two liter of Coke and a jar of Newman’s Own, but not so cool when you’re trying to explain why your mom didn’t come to the parent-teacher conference, and the reality is she was so baked she would have been arrested. My dad left a few years ago. They didn’t get divorced or anything and they actually still like each

other pretty well. My dad comes over about every other week to clean my mom up and take her out for dinner. Afterwards he usually spends the night. He just got tired of what he calls my mom's "listless paranoia."

I guess you'd figure from all that that my dad kinda has things worked out and does something with his days, but he's sorta the same way as my mom. He says he's involved in "charity work." I always figured that meant working at a soup kitchen or something. But one time I went to one of his "events" and it was mostly a bunch of old ladies slugging back martinis, then slurring things at my dad and me. "Oh, Marvin don't you look handsome tonight! And your boy, he's so adorable, why don't we see more of him?" We didn't stay till the end. My dad grabbed my hand and we went out the back door. He said that he needed some air. That it was all too much. I think he misses getting high with my mom.

If you're wondering how it is that we're not poor, my grandfather on my dad's side was an inventor. He came up with the plastic hypodermic needle. Ever since my dad went straight my mom always refers to it as "Marvin's little irony." At any rate, you'd be surprised how much that needle is worth, even though I sometimes think we'd all be better off if my parents would just get jobs like normal people.

I'm not telling you all of this so you'll feel sorry for me. I have a good home life. My mom and I get movies all the time, and she makes little jokes about the actors and does voices. And my dad and I go hiking pretty often. Sometimes he gets into asking questions like "what does it all mean" on those hiking trips, and I don't know what I should say, but it's not boring right? They're better than a lot of parents.

The reason I had to tell you all this is that if we were the Cleavers, if we had dinner at six thirty with the TV off and I talked about my day at school while my dad was all smiles in a sweater vest, well then when eight o'clock rolled around and a man in a bear suit rang our doorbell, it might cause something of a stir. My dad might say "Well, hello, what's this?" And my mom might respond "Oh, honey, be careful he could be crazy!"

Of course, my dad wasn't there and my mom once she's gotten herself settled in on the couch is pretty much done for the evening. So when I opened the door and the man in the bear suit was standing there, his little marble eyes pointed at me, I said, "Mom, come see who's at the door."

"No, I'm all comfy," she said.

"Really Mom, it's for you," I lied, stressing each word so anybody else would understand that at that particular moment they were needed at the door.

"Tomorrow, tomorrow," she said.

After that, I could feel myself turning a little red. Manners are manners, man in a bear suit or no, and he was standing there very politely, waiting for me to finish talking to my mother. I thought about inviting him inside, but then I remembered seeing *The Lost Boys* and I know a man in a bear suit isn't quite the same thing as a vampire, but it's like better safe than sorry.

I said "Hi" making an embarrassed little wave of my hand at the man in the bear suit and looking down at my shoes.

"Hello," he said.

“Hi.”

“I thought... we could go... to... T...G...I... Friday’s.”

What the hell, I thought. “Yeah, we can go to T.G.I. Friday’s.”

I looked at his paws and noticed he was holding money, which makes sense I guess, it’s not like he had any pockets.

When I walked outside the man in the bear suit started looking around, he seemed pretty confused for somebody without facial expressions. “Oh, right,” I said. I realized that the man in the bear suit didn’t have a car.

I drive a ‘90 Camry that I didn’t pay for. You already know that my parents are loaded, so I could be driving something else, but it gets me around, and unless you’ve got a reputation, it doesn’t fly to roll up to my school in a Lexus. Anyway, they made mine before they decided the Camry was supposed to be a luxury car and it’s pretty tight on the inside. The man in the bear suit was hunched over, spilling out of the seat a little bit. I leaned as far to the left as I could, but he was fumbling with his seat belt. I had to lean over and help him with it. He grunted in appreciation.

I was glad that the restaurant wasn’t far and that I knew how to get there. I didn’t want to be pulled over, and I wasn’t sure how good the man in the bear suit would be at giving directions. “What kind of music do you listen to?” I asked him. After I said it, I didn’t want to wait the ridiculously long time it took him to form words so I just said, “Let me guess, oldies,” and tuned the dial to the station.

T.G.I. Friday’s isn’t really my favorite restaurant. All the shit they throw up on the walls strikes me as pretty tacky. But the man in the bear suit seemed to like it. I asked

for an out of the way table, laughing and shrugging at the waitress, even though it didn't seem to matter to her one way or the other. The man in the bear suit ordered a milk. I almost asked him how he thought he was going to drink it, but I let it go. He started to tell me stories about his childhood, which you'd think, being a guy in a bear suit, would be a little more interesting than it was. I told him that I had to use the little boy's room.

Walking to the bathroom, I saw two kids from my class making out by the pinball machine. It was Craig and Paula. I had heard they were together, but Paula wasn't the type you could ever describe as a "girlfriend." She was wearing hoop earrings and a shirt that showed off the rose garden tattooed on the small of her back. I tried to get past without them seeing me.

"Hey what's going on buddy?" Craig put out his hand. Usually I wouldn't get this much from him.

"Nothing. Just hanging out."

"Well shit, let's be neighborly. What you planning on doing when you get out of this place?" He waved his hand at a canoe on the wall, but I was pretty sure he didn't mean the T.G.I. Friday's.

"I'm still considering, you know, weighing my options." Paula rolled her eyes.

"Awesome, man. Good for you."

"What about you?"

He shuffled his feet. "I think I might work for the old man for a bit." I imagined Craig ten years older, sitting in a van that said "Williams and Sons Plumbing," the "and

Sons” painted on below Williams. The garage door was closed and the engine was running.

“Cool,” I said.

“I um, I hear your mom deals?”

"No, not really. I guess I could get you some." I'm not sure why I was playing dealer to Craig. I didn't even like Craig. I looked back at the man in the bear suit. He was shaking his head, that big miserable head.

"I can't do this now," I said. Craig shrugged. "I'm kind of tired of being the weed guy."

That was just priceless to them. They both started to really get into it. These ridiculous spasms of laughter. It wasn't that funny. Nothing's ever that funny.

“Fuck off,” I said, “He won't leave me alone, all right? It's not my fault.” They weren't listening anymore. I turned away from them, but the man in the bear suit was gone. I found a crumpled twenty dollar bill sitting on our table.

My mom was going to come to graduation, she had even put on the dress, but while I was trying to tell her what time she was supposed to be there and what row I was going to be in, she kept drifting in and out.

“Christ, Mom,” I said, “How much shit did you have?”

“Don't be such a little Republican. It's a celebration.”

I started with how it was graduation and since I wasn't necessarily college bound this was her chance to see me do something, even if it was, on the whole, fairly gay. But I

realized halfway into my little spiel that she was snoring and I figured I'd just let her be. It wasn't like I was getting the award for most handjobs given to the shop teacher or anything. My dad was, well who the hell knows where my dad was. He wasn't there either.

They held graduation in the auditorium. I tried to look out into the audience, but the stage lights made it so you could just barely make out the people in the first row. I was actually sandwiched between two kids from the honors society. They were just so pleased, fingering those little yellow cords that they draped over their shoulders. As if they needed anything else to tell us all that they were going to be fine. One more round of applause. The cruelty of the alphabet meant that my locker had always been between these two. All the big red A's, the paper bag book covers, the three ring binders. The principal was just getting under way, saying, "Ladies and gentlemen, friends and parents, allow me to introduce the class of—" That's when I heard the roar. The big sound that filled the hall and then kept filling it until that was all there was.

After the ceremony, the man in the bear suit was waiting for me on the lawn.

"I... have a gift... for you," he said.

He handed me a book. "Jack London. Thanks, that's really nice."

He stood there, his face, as always, totally blank. But I thought he was waiting for something. I slugged him one on the shoulder.

"I am... so proud of you," he said, and he slapped me on the back with his massive paw. I'm not going to say you haven't lived until a bear's slapped you on the back, but it's close.

STACEY LYNN

Vasco squinted at the clump of trees that separated us from a CVS Pharmacy and a Jewish Deli. “All right, I will tell you,” he sighed, taking a pack of Marlboro reds out of the pouch of his sweatshirt.

“Hey, can I bum one of those?” I asked

He eyed me with suspicion, “Yes, perhaps you better. These will make you a man quickly, much quicker than booze.” He paused. “Although books can make you a man too, but with books it is very slow.”

He lit two cigarettes in his mouth then handed one to me. My friends gave me looks of admiration.

“Now, don’t interrupt me. The first thing you must know about women is that they are crazy.” We laughed, but he didn’t. “It is not funny,” he said, cigarette still hanging from his mouth as he spoke. “They are the right kind of crazy, but dangerous too. Many women I know keep guns. It is an honorable thing to die for a woman you love, but not if she shoots you herself.”

“Where do they get the guns?” Eggs asked him. Eggs was actually named Steve Rotondo, but everybody called him Steven Rotten Eggs. We were his friends so we just called him Eggs. He didn’t seem to mind that.

Vasco laughed and said, “You are still young and there are some things I cannot explain to you.” He smiled, and Phil and I smiled back at him, but Eggs seemed unsatisfied. I coughed when I accidentally inhaled.

“So, why do they—”

“Stacey Lynn has one,” Vasco blurted out. He nodded meaningfully and I nodded along with him. “Her last boyfriend, the one before me, he was a sailor, a captain really, and a very wealthy man. He smuggled diamonds out of Africa. He knew people, people in the mob.”

“Here?” I asked him.

“Don’t be stupid,” Vasco said in frustration. “There’s no mob here. In New York. Stacey Lynn’s from New York.” Vasco rubbed his hands together. “When she was there, she worked at an all night diner called the Green Hornet. Paul, that’s the name of the smuggler, had just unloaded his latest shipment. It was about two in the morning, and the rain was coming down heavy. Paul and two of his mafia associates decided to stop in for a piece of pie and discuss their next job. He was beating the rain out of his coat when he saw Stacey Lynn. I guess he must have known he was too old for her, but he didn’t care. He told the other men, ‘I’m going to marry that girl.’ He said that before they even sat down, before she had even taken their order.”

Vasco looked off towards the trees again. “Paul made Vito and Carl sit with napkins in their laps, keep their elbows off the table, and say ‘please Mama’ and ‘thank you Mama.’ Paul could not talk to Stacey Lynn, she made him sick to his stomach, and when she asked if he wanted anything, he just shook his head. He told Vito and Carl to

keep ordering pie. They had lemon pie until it ran out, then strawberry rhubarb. When it was time to go, Paul hid a small blue diamond, one he had been saving for a special buyer, under the check.”

“Hello, Greg,” Vasco shouted. I turned and saw my brother about 30 feet off.

“Hi, Vasco,” he responded. “We better get going if we’re going to make it on time.” My brother nodded at Eggs and Phil. “What you kids up to?”

“Nothing,” I said, disappointed that he’d already arrived.

“Tell Mom I’ll be home later.”

“OK.”

“Goodbye, Boy Scouts,” Vasco said to us. He always called us Boy Scouts when my brother was around.

Phil, Eggs, and I came down the hill behind the high school. It was early summer. It should always be like this, we thought. How can it still be light at nine? How did we survive through the winter? How could we ever let this end? Eggs’ house came first.

“See ya, Eggs,” I said to him.

“Sure thing,” he said back.

I asked Phil if he wanted to come for dinner. He thought his mom would kill him if he wasn’t home.

I don’t know about Vasco,” he said to me.

“What about Vasco?” I asked him.

“I don’t know. All the stuff he says, do you think any of it’s true?”

“Of course it is.”

“All the stuff about the girls?”

I grabbed his arm. “I’ve seen the girls, Phil.”

‘Really?’

“Yeah,” I said, stuffing my hands into my pockets.

“What are they like?”

“They’re pretty.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

It was true. I had seen them. I used to watch from my bedroom window when Vasco came to pick up my brother. There were usually two girls. The four of them would have to squeeze in tight to all fit on the bench seat of the pickup, and Vasco would smile.

I started to watch them with the telescope my parents had bought me. This was probably unnecessary as I could see just fine without it, but it felt more official, more real, if I could describe tiny moles or dimples, say that I saw them up close.

I thought Stacey Lynn was the girl with the pony tail. She had been in the pickup most of the summer, and I felt that she and I were developing a kind of bond.

“What’s Stacy Lynn like?” I asked Greg.

“Vasco’s girlfriend? I don’t know. She’s cool. I hear she gets around though.”

“She’s been to New York,” I offered helpfully.

“Not like that, dumbass.”

It was the summer of Paul and Stacey Lynn. As she acquired a small box of blue diamonds, he gradually won her affection. Some days it was just Paul, handling pirates off the Barbary Coast, or tracking down a rival in Hong Kong. Others, Stacey Lynn outwitted rogue mafia elements, intent on divesting her of her newfound wealth. On the whole though, these were peaceful stories. Stacey's box was safe, and the two of them were healthy and tan. It was becoming apparent that Vasco was a romantic.

By the time the heat of August rolled in, we were lucky enough to be on a particularly good bit. Joe Mazzini seemed to be throwing everyone in sight into the Hudson.

"Paul spent a lot of time looking at the river," Vasco told us in solemn tones. "He wondered how many of his friends were down there below. He was hatching a plan, though. He would—"

"This," Eggs said slowly, "is total bullshit."

Phil and I laughed nervously.

"What," said Vasco, blinking into the sun.

"You heard me. You're lying. None of this could have happened."

It was quiet for a long time after that. I heard the cars speeding by on the four lane highway past the clearing.

"Fine," Vasco said. He stood up, nodded at Phil and me, and walked towards the CVS.

Eggs' betrayal was so sudden that Phil and I didn't know what to do. We walked home as usual, silent this time, but pretending nothing had happened. I think Phil wanted to cry.

Wednesdays were the days we met Vasco. Two passed without me leaving the house. On the third Wednesday Phil rode his bike to my place in the early afternoon.

"We should go," he said to me.

"What about Eggs?"

"Fuck him. Nobody likes that kid."

Vasco didn't show, and we spent most of our time kicking rocks.

"Sucks," Phil said over and over.

My mother served meat loaf that night, a dish my father so thoroughly enjoyed that he usually couldn't be bothered with conversation.

"What's Vasco been up to?" I asked Greg. I meant to sound nonchalant, but my voice came out high-pitched and awkward.

"Vasco?" My father said, his head shooting up from the plate.

"You know." My mother paused. "Greg's friend."

"Hmmp, Vas-co." My father divided the syllables with a combination of scorn and amusement.

I looked expectantly at Greg, but my father's double pronouncement of the name seemed to have closed the issue.

"Aren't you going to answer your brother, Greg?"

“He’s fine,” my brother sighed, “same as he always is I guess. You can never tell with these Mexicans.” My brother had a knack for making startlingly awful statements at which my father would snort or grunt with approval.

“Greg,” my mother said in a way that she imagined was scolding, but usually only encouraged him.

“Just saying, Mom. He’s a good guy and everything, but I can’t ever figure him out. Anyway, I’ll probably see him at the game tonight.”

“Oh, there’s a big game? You should take your brother.”

“Yep, do him good.” My father added, still having aspirations that I would join the JV team next year.

“Come on,” my brother protested, but my father explained that if Greg wanted the car he was going to make damn sure that someone in this family developed a proper appreciation of football.

“You better enjoy the hell out of this,” Greg said on the ride over. “You realize that people are going to see me with you, right? Is that why you dragged your sorry ass along? Because you can’t stand to see your brother happy?”

“I didn’t ask to come.”

“Well, just, you know, speak when spoken to.”

When we got to the high school, Greg waved to a girl that I recognized, but had never seen. Stacey Lynn, in the flesh. He walked up to her kissed her and said “hey baby.” I thought I must have gotten it wrong, but he pushed me forward, and said, “Stacey this is my brother,” while he looked at his shoes.

Stacey Lynn told me that she was ever so excited to meet me. I was embarrassed. I'm fairly sure I bowed.

Through the first half I tried to focus on the game, but the two of them were talking low and giggling. Greg kept squeezing her knee. I realized I hadn't seen Vasco's truck in over a month. I wondered if the stories had continued after he and Stacey Lynn had ended.

Vasco sauntered towards us well after halftime. Stacey Lynn saw him coming and whispered harshly to Greg, "I thought you said you'd talk to him." He seemed drunk, and he spoke too loud and looked too big as he stood above us. "A little birdie told me I'd find you here he said," looking towards the sky as though the bird were there. "My buddies. My friends. And oh, my little Boy Scout," he said as though he noticed me for the first time. I told him I wasn't supposed to be here.

Vasco said he would buy everyone a hot dog. Stacey Lynn didn't want a hotdog, and Greg said that he was perfectly capable of buying himself and his little brother a hotdog. I said I wouldn't mind having two hot dogs, and Greg asked what the hell I needed two hot dogs for. I'm not exactly sure how everybody ended up not having a hot dog, but Greg seemed fairly angry about the whole thing.

"Look, Vasco," Greg said before Stacey Lynn cut him off. She said it was OK. That she and Vasco should talk, and that she would call Greg latter and everything was fine. Greg hesitated before accepting being sent off.

On the ride home, Greg began, “I don’t know if you know this, but Stacey and I are going out.”

“I figured,” I told him.

“Vasco’s got his own car, I’ll give him that. Let me tell you, that’s hard to beat. But, it’s not like he’s going anywhere. What’s he going to do after school? Work at some McDonald’s? He’s good looking in his own way, I can admit, but if I may say so myself, I think we’ve got pretty good genes.” He smiled and rubbed my head. “Plus, Stacey and I, we just have a lot more in common.”

“Stacey Lynn,” I said.

“Who’s got time for that double name shit? Anyway, we hang out with the same sort of people. We both like the OC and Outkast. She’s into dance, and I’m a pretty good dancer. It’s just a perfect fit. Vasco will see. It’s better this way.”

“Could you stop talking?”

“Fine.” My brother sulked. “I’m just trying to tell you a little bit about how the world works. Don’t you want a girlfriend someday? It’s never too early to start figuring this stuff out.”

I went to our spot the next day. It was a Saturday, not a Wednesday, but I knew he’d show up. It was already too hot at nine, and by noon I had sweated through my clothes. I closed my eyes and tried to sleep while I sat on a milk crate, but the back of my eyelids seemed red from the heat and the light, and I could feel my skin drying and curling back.

“What are you doing here?” Vasco asked me. It took me a moment to get him in focus. The sun spots blurred my vision and the air seemed to be quivering from the heat.

“I want another story.”

“It’s over. The story ended.”

“It could end differently.”

“There’s only one way it can end.” Vasco lipped his lips. “The unthinkable happened. Paul had evaded the devious Mazzini only to discover that it was his own true love, Stacey Lynn, who had given up his whereabouts. She had sold his diamonds and must be laughing, thinking what a fool he had been. Paul realized what he had to do.”

“Don’t kill them off.”

“His revolver was a firearm he trusted, sturdy, reliable, well-oiled and maintained. He didn’t like guns, but in his line of work he had to have one, and Paul was not the type of man to settle for second best.”

“Don’t kill them off.”

“The smugglers’ code rose above love. It was the only thing an honest smuggler could depend upon. Love was fleeting. Love pissed in your mouth. The smugglers code was clean.”

“Please.”

“The code, of course, left no room for interpretation when it came to someone revealing your whereabouts to a mafia boss with a vendetta against you. Allowances were not made for women. Paul thought the code was harsh that way, but the code was bigger

than him. He knew she would still be in her apartment. Her arrogance was such that she must have thought he could not escape Mazzini's clever trap."

"Wait."

Vasco shrugged. "It was possible, wasn't it, that Mazzini had tricked her? That the whole thing had been an elaborate ruse? No, that was hoping too much. Not in this lifetime. Not in this cold rainy city. He checked the chamber, one for him and one for her, the way it ought to be. He still had his key, and as he opened the door he knew. He leveled the gun."

"Stop," I yelled, and Vasco did. He sat down at his old spot and ran his fingers through his hair.

"The gun jammed," he went on. "Paul should have known not to trust a twenty year old revolver. When he realized what he could have done he knew he didn't have the heart for smuggling anymore. He took her in his arms and they lived out the rest of their life in the country." Vasco looked into the sun. "Go home," he said.

But I couldn't move. I knew that once I turned my back, Stacey Lynn would be dead.

THE SEMI QUASI ALMOST PERFECT NUMBER

Marnie liked the symbols: the black ink on the lined white paper that made the curves of a section sign, the Pacman mouth, ready to eat the larger quantity, the super and sub scripts, drawn steady and small. Clean, uncomplicated, they promised an elegant universe. "Elegant universe" made her think of planets in ball gowns, but she had faith in the idea, if you could have faith in something tested and proven.

She was good at math, but not great. "Not great," was the part that everyone made clear to her. She hit the wall her junior year of college, working for strange unsympathetic men until she thought she could feel beads of blood forming on her forehead.

In her dreams she handed in page after page of notebook paper to frowning professors. The pages were stained with coffee, mud, sweat. They were crumpled, frayed, run through the wash till they were dry as leaves. The professors would say, "This is insane. You have to stop," and then, "You're not even in this class. Did you know that? Is there someone I can call?"

Her parents told her that it was time to try something else. They sent her cutout magazine articles about changing majors and finding yourself.

She didn't realize when things started changing. It felt the same. She still had the burning spot in her chest. But her professors started to say, "See, see!" with a relieved look on their faces as they pointed at her papers. "You should think of this," they'd say,

or, “you should try that,” once even, “you know, I wouldn’t have gone that way, but it’s got its own little music to it, doesn’t it?”

She felt free. She drank wine with the girls down the hall. She even started flirting with a boy she’d seen around the dorm. He had no interest in math. She thought it had been like missing a limb. If you had your leg back, at first it’d be nonstop running, tennis, and jump rope. But then you got to be normal again. You got to forget about it.

Professor Melick was the first number. One moment he had been happily describing to the students his monogrammed bathrobe, pointing out that if his middle name had been Wallace rather than Lawrence, the monogram would be MWM which would read the same backwards, forwards and upside down. Then he was 16. Marnie knew that he was 16. Not the age, but the numeral. It was a fact as perfect and clear in her head as the states of the union or the degrees of a right angle.

She raised her hand.

“Yes, Ms. Rhodes?”

“Sixteen?” she asked him.

“Sixteen, what?”

“What do you think of it?” She asked.

“Well, Ms. Rhodes, it’s a perfect square so I’m going to come out in favor of it. Anything else?” No one laughed. The math majors had grown accustomed to their classmates coming unhinged.

“No, I guess not.”

When the class met again, two days later, he was still a sixteen. She wondered if he was somehow inserting the number in her head. Could overhead projectors be used for hypnosis?

Then it began spreading. Some of the people she knew had numbers now. That was just a new circumstance to become acquainted with. Most of her professors had one, some of the people who lived in her dorm, the homeless man who collected cans. Not all of the numbers were easy ones either. One friend was e to the negative 3rd power. Why Mary Coffman, a girl she hardly knew, was an imaginary number was anybody's guess.

At lunch she had wondered if evens got served more quickly than odds, if they had better food. At the library, she'd thought about the Dewey decimal system and divisors. Maybe a big number meant you were going to be rich, or maybe it meant you'd get cancer. These would be, she reasoned, observable things. If she had enough data she could begin to make sense of it. She watched her fellow students carefully. Her notebook contained entries like "77402: Usually pink clothes, frequent trips to the bathroom, Baptist."

She couldn't make any conclusions. Human beings were terrible subjects for observation. Outside of having maddeningly different routines, it was difficult to get people to reveal if they had a familial history of alcoholism, or tell you their shoe size. And, of course, she was a blank. One in twenty didn't have a number. It was holding at that: nineteen numbered for every blank. She knew the most about herself, and it was all information she couldn't use.

Greg was also a blank. He asked her out for Chinese food. People didn't date anymore. That was what she'd been told. They said you didn't eat Chinese food unless you were already sleeping together.

She hadn't been to the restaurant before. She didn't like the wallpaper. It showed a man with an oddly shaped head carrying a lantern across a short bridge as colored blossoms fell down around him. The edges of the picture faded to white and then came back in with the same man crossing the same bridge over and over. She wondered if it was cheaper to have only one picture.

"Why'd you go out with me?" Greg asked her.

"What?" she said. She'd been trying to pick up an ice cube with her chopsticks.

"We don't know each other very well. I was surprised when you said yes."

"If you didn't think I'd say yes—is this like a trick? Oh God, am I part of some fraternity initiation?"

"No," Greg said. He was shaking his head. "I'm not a frat kind of guy. You seemed different."

Marnie looked away from him. "I am different."

"I know," he said. He smiled at her.

He was handsome, probably, she thought. A little off though. His hair was slightly too long, his clothes didn't quite fit right, and he kept grinning at her. She started to get angry.

"Is that your line? Do you tell all the girls, 'Hey, you're different. I really get you.' Am I the one, Greg? Do we need to act on our passion while we're young and alive?"

"Hey, I'm not like that."

"How many?"

"How many what?"

"How many girls do you ask out? Let's say a month. Give me an average, Greg.

Are you one of these 100 rejections for every success guys?"

"No. Two since I got here. Just two."

"Were they different?"

"Maybe." Greg shrugged. "probably not."

"OK," she said, looking down at her menu. "Sorry," she added.

"I'm thinking about getting the duck."

"You should know," Marnie said, "I don't get better. I'm not funny and I'm not spontaneous. Girls are supposed to be funny and spontaneous."

"I do get better," Greg said. "You're going to like me more and more as you get to know me."

"That'd be a nice change."

He did grow on her as they ate. He let her talk. She'd had exactly one boyfriend before and he had never let her talk. She hadn't realized that she had anything to say.

With other people she usually felt ashamed of something. She felt she could tell Greg things, like how she used to turn around in circles when she walked home from school.

He didn't think it was odd. Maybe he didn't know any better.

"What do you think," Greg said to her, "is that his daughter or his girlfriend?" Greg tipped his head in the direction of a middle-aged man and a woman who couldn't have been under 30.

The man was chewing with the left side of his mouth while talking out the right. He was apparently saying something funny enough to compensate for this, as the woman he was with was laughing.

"Girlfriend. Actually, they really work together. They're good for each other I think." She was surprised to hear herself say this.

"You don't think he's too old for her?"

"No, I don't know why, but it seems right to me." She did know why though. Their numbers matched. She felt happy when she thought about the two of them together.

Marnie rushed through the rest of dinner. Greg kissed her on the cheek when he dropped her off. She thought it was an odd, old-fashioned thing to do.

Two numbers made a data point. She plotted it on a piece of graph paper. She thought of all the happy couples she knew, and penciled in dots for them too. Finding the function wasn't difficult.

In a way, Marnie believed, it was the perfect function. It described exactly what you needed to know about someone, would it work? And the answer, if you followed the data to its logical conclusion, was a simple, verifiable yes.

Marnie knew what she had to do. She had to start a dating service.

She called it "ordered pairs." There was a survey she made her clients take. It had questions on it about what animal you most resembled and what place would make your

ideal vacation. She claimed it was scientific. She felt bad about that. She didn't like lying, though she couldn't help but laugh a little. It really was scientific. She used to think people who talked about soul mates were hopeless. Now she knew that for every input there was an output.

She put up flyers on campus and people came to her. Slowly at first, but then more and more. It was a word of mouth operation. And unlike any other dating service, if you didn't like the first option there were no alternatives.

Some people she couldn't help, the blanks of course, but also the ones who didn't have a match. She didn't take their money. She wondered if there might be someone for them somewhere far away, like China. It didn't seem fair.

She had more friends than she'd ever expected. People trusted her. When a new client came to her and asked her if she was sure that this was the boy for her, saying that he was a bit overweight and didn't seem to care about model UN or her year abroad in Africa, Marnie looked her straight in the eye and said, "There's no question in my mind."

Greg kept coming by her room. He brought her manilla folders. She had three filling cabinets now and she kept running out. He brought other things too, food and stuffed animals. Every time she looked around she felt like there was more of him there, as though the things he left were part of some overall strategy to take over.

He asked her why she started doing this. He said it didn't seem like her. She was about to say to him "Haven't you ever been good at something?" But she was afraid he hadn't so she stopped herself.

She gave him the survey. He smiled and said that he didn't want to put down the wrong answers, but she told him to take it seriously. She said that this was what she did. When he left she filed it away without looking at the answers.

He wanted her to go to a party with him. He'd asked several times and when she finally said yes, he high-fived her with glee. It didn't seem to her very dignified.

The party was in the basement of the dorm. There were two beer lines and a DJ, but the room was all the same elevation so you couldn't see anything but the people in front of you. The overhead lighting was switched off, and the people throwing the event, Marnie thought it was a sorority, had decided on purple black lights. The party-goers clothes stood out, but their faces looked unusually smooth and empty. It was hard to recognize anyone and you couldn't hear voices over the beat of the bass.

"I'm going to get two beers," Greg yelled at her.

She stood against the wall waiting for him to come back. A girl grabbed her by the wrist. She had a glowing bracelet and necklace.

"Hey you're that relationship girl," she shouted.

"Yeah."

"How about me, could you do me?"

"Sure. Come by," Marnie said into her ear, the girl was still dancing.

The girl shrugged. "I'll be happy with anybody here tonight."

The dull thud was working its way through her body. Her head felt like it was being shelled with each drum beat. Her vision went dark and spotty. She couldn't see faces anymore, just colors. The crowd cheered and swayed back and forth. The colors

swirled like one of those time elapsed shots of cars going over a bridge. She felt her way along the wall towards the direction she remembered the exit was in. Her hand grabbed the railing. There were twelve steps. She always counted the steps. She'd read Sherlock Holmes as a little girl, and he'd chastised Watson for not knowing the number of steps up to the office. Twelve steps. The metal door opening was the loudest sound she'd ever heard. She gasped for breath. Had she not been breathing?

It was a half-moon, she could make out most of the stars too. She sat on a stone bench. It was cool to the touch and she felt like lying down, putting her ear against the coolness of it. But she didn't. She sat straight up and looked into the woods. There was a deer at the tree line. Students threw garbage out there. It looked at her before it jumped back off into the darkness.

The numbers were gone. She knew that. She didn't want to think about it, so she just sat there quietly for what seemed like a very long time.

"Hey," Greg said, "are you OK."

"Not really."

He was standing behind her. He put his hand on her shoulder.

"We have to stop seeing each other," she said.

He took his hand away. She thought he said "why," but she actually wasn't sure that he said anything at all. She answered him anyway.

"Because I don't know how it ends up." And as he stood there behind her she wondered if she didn't know after all.

GRIEVING FOOD

"Why don't you stop eating?" Devon said to me, her feet up on my mother's kitchen table. "What? I'm not eating," I said without looking up from our calculus homework. These boyfriend-girlfriend study sessions had been her idea. They made me grumpy.

Devon liked to make lists. Specifically lists of items that I could not name, like the capitols of microstates. A moment before she'd asked me about the ingredients in Worcestershire sauce.

"No, not now, just in general," she said.

"Am I putting on weight or something?" I asked her.

"No, it's just you said you wanted to do something special for our senior year. Something we'd remember."

This time I looked at her. She was balancing a pencil on the back of her hand. "So we're going to stop eating?"

We both knew what the something special was that I had in mind. In five months of dating we hadn't had sex. We called it "the deed" which was supposed to be a funny way of diffusing the tension.

"It'd be great, Garreth. Think of all the meat heads we'd confuse when we tried to explain it to them."

"Explain it to me first so I've got a leg up," I said.

"We'll be in better touch with ourselves, better touch with each other. Plus, I don't think anybody's ever tried it in Ohio before."

"Have I told you before I'm a fan of food? Now seems like a good time to mention it."

"It's about control, Garreth. When you find out that you don't have to eat when you're hungry, It'll make you free. We'll have this crazy intense experience together."

"OK," I said. Devon was the only seventeen year old I knew who was entirely comfortable in her own skin. I was terrified that she'd find out that I wasn't like her and leave me to face the rest of high school alone. So I ended up doing a lot of things that seemed like really bad ideas.

"You're going to love it," she said, "I promise it'll be great. Now, how many supreme court justices can you name?"

"How many can you name?" I asked her.

She smiled, "All of them."

I nearly gave up on the first day. My family had pot roast for dinner. I'd told them that morning: one week of juice and vitamins. I thought, out of sympathy, they might limit themselves to weak tea and toast. But I could already smell it in the house when I came home from school. There were carrots, onions, potatoes, all breaking down in the oven until a fork could slide easily through, fat from the meat dissolving and rising to the surface, like tiny oil spills.

Devon hadn't been at school. In the past, when she made me do something ridiculous, I could depend on her to explain for me why I was doing it. Between Devon and the pot roast, I felt crushingly alone.

I called her and her mother answered the phone. I liked Ms. Stevenson. She had a Southern accent and she called me "sugar," using what I thought was exactly the right amount of irony. She'd given me a goofy pair of sunglasses once when Devon and I had gone to the pool.

She said that Devon was under the weather. She had a nice but obvious way of lying, Her tone somehow acknowledging the awkwardness of the moment but also the necessity of keeping up appearances.

I didn't know why Devon didn't want to talk to me, and I was afraid of why. So, I chose to believe that she was sick. Ms. Stevenson sounded odd because she was worried about her poor daughter. That was logical. Naturally, Devon had to break the fast. She was too ill to come to the phone. She needed her strength. But sick as she was, how much could she really be eating? Wasn't continuing the fast without her a way of showing solidarity and concern, and wouldn't she be thrilled when she found out what a sacrifice I had made?

The second day was easier. I didn't think hunger was supposed to work like that; it struck me as a pretty terrible idea that hunger would work like that. But by that evening, solid food already seemed like a curious detail of some fad I'd checked out of. Late that night I looked skeptically into the fridge. "What is that, potato salad?" I mumbled as I poked at the container with my finger.

I didn't feel light-hearted, but instead just light, like I was standing in a stalled elevator waiting for the upward jerk. And I felt giddy. I got it now. I didn't have anything to do with the food-eaters. Those were not my people. It felt like a secret, like some cosmic joke that only I saw the humor in.

Devon finally called me on the 3rd day.

I had brought her a gift, and when she let me into her house, we both stood in the entry way for a moment. She looked tired and confused.

"What's that?" she said, pointing.

"It's a pot." I was taking started ceramics. "If you put anything in it try to keep the weight towards the center," I told her.

"Oh, OK, thank you."

Her room always made me uneasy. I dreaded the inescapable girliness of it. Her furnishings included a four poster bed, a dresser and matching night stand, a couple of white wire-frame canvas chairs, and posters with French writing depicting colorful French-looking scenes. The carpet, ceiling and walls were all the same unrelenting shade of white. It seemed obvious to me that I'd never have any idea who could live in a room like that.

"I hope you're feeling better," I said.

"I feel fine," she said, sitting down on her bed.

"So," I extended the "O" and rocked back on my heels.

"My dad died," she said.

"Ah," I said.

"We weren't close, but I didn't plan on outliving him." I remembered that her father lived in Sandusky. She hadn't mentioned him often and I'd never asked.

"You should have called," I said.

"I'm going to the funeral. My mom's not-- do you want to come with me? It's tomorrow."

"Yes."

"Eight then," she said, standing up from the bed. "I'm sorry, I know it's early."

"That's fine. That's just, that's OK."

"Thanks Garreth. I appreciate it."

"Should I stay? Do you want to talk?"

"No," she said.

"Well I'll see you at eight then. I could be here at like seven-thirty if that would be better. Or earlier really."

"Eight is fine."

I moved to hug her, except I stopped short and squeezed her bicep. It was something I'd seen older people do.

I told my parents about the funeral. They didn't have much to say, but they paid a lot of attention to what I was going to wear. My father laid out five ties for me. I couldn't tell them apart. I knew that they were different colors, possibly even different patterns, but somehow they all looked the same.

I couldn't sleep. I went downstairs to the couch and turned on the TV. I found a cooking show. The chef was basting a very large bird, maybe a turkey, maybe not. I hadn't realized before what a strange looking object a baster was. He was talking, I think about basting, possibly proper basting technique. I felt fascinated and mildly nauseous. There was a cranberry stuffing too. When the camera zoomed in the cranberries were twinkling. He kept saying things like, "Ah, now that looks good doesn't it?" and, "Oh, yeah, I can smell it that's really coming together nicely." He observed that the bird was getting good and moist. My God, I thought, that's like a whole animal. I don't remember falling asleep, but when I woke up the pillow was damp from where my mouth had been. Bob Ross was on, painting a mountain.

We'd had a string of warm days and chilly mornings. Devon must have been waiting for me. She came out right away when I pulled up. She was wearing a black dress with tiny white circles. Her shoulders were hunched from the cold and her brown hair was just long enough to touch them. She looked pretty. I got out and opened the door for her. I realized then that the truck was a pretty shabby ride. It was blue. I wondered if I was supposed to drive it in the line of cars that ran the red lights. I didn't know if that was only for the black cars. I also didn't know why they drove slowly the whole way and still ran all the reds. That didn't seem to make much sense.

She asked me if I wanted any breakfast.

"No," I said, "I'm still doing the fast."

"Oh, I forgot," she said, "So, how is it?" She sounded genuinely interested.

"It's good," I said, "really good. You should-- we should totally do it together. Some other time I mean."

"We have to go see this guy, Ron Huff, first," Devon said. "Mom used to know him and he was a friend of Dad's so we have to go see him."

"Why isn't your mom here?" It was a question that I didn't really want to ask, but it seemed like I should.

"She offered. She and Dad didn't really get along, and," Devon paused, "I said I'd rather go with you. I knew you won't make me talk, and I don't really want to talk if that's OK."

"Yeah, it's fine," I said, "whatever you want."

"Maybe we can talk a little, just--" she frowned.

"What's your step mom like?" I asked her.

She shrugged.

"What?"

"I never met her."

"Well, how does that work?"

"They've only been married two years."

"Still," I said, I didn't know if this was too much talking, "two years is kind of a long time.

"Yeah," she said.

"So you haven't seen him?"

"No, I saw him once in the past two years, but we just went to Cedar Point for the day, and then I went back that night. He thought I liked roller coasters."

"Lucky Haskins," she said.

"What?"

"You know John Sykes at school? His band is named after that exit: Lucky Haskins."

"It's a good name," I said.

"I don't know," she said, "I don't think Haskins means anything."

"Probably not," I said, "but it sounds good."

"It's not his fault-- not all of it."

"Whose fault?"

"My dad's. I didn't like going to see him. He'd try to be the fun guy, but he wasn't very fun. It didn't come naturally to him. We went to the movies some, but I--I don't think he liked movies." She squinted. I could tell that she was trying to figure out why someone wouldn't like movies.

Ron's place was a modest two story house, but he lived on his porch, weather permitting. He had two recliners, a couch, which sagged from the weight of back issues of National Geographic, old newspapers, a collection of mysterious steel parts, a fridge, and a portable black and white TV that could be tuned to the radio but could no longer show pictures.

He was a thin man with a bad suit. He jogged towards the truck, saying he hadn't seen Devon since she was "wee." When Devon attempted to call him Mr. Huff, he insisted on Ron.

He offered us beer, and when we said no he tried again with wine coolers. Finally he produced two cokes from the fridge, the old glass bottle variety, which he said had a better flavor.

"We all went on a trip," Ron said. He'd been telling us stories for the past hour, about how he moved onto his porch, about his ex-wife, and mostly about Devon's father. "Me, you, your dad, and your mom, you must have been about four, do you remember that?"

"No, sorry"

"Well we were driving to Chicago for an electronics show there and your dad decided to bring you and your mother along, her mother's a very nice lady," Ron said to me, "Anyway, your dad was a big smoker then, his wife Gail won't let him smoke now, says it bothers the cats, and he liked to smoke cigars while he was driving, you didn't like them, said they stunk. So, he's smoking away on this cigar, but he sticks the thing out the window and this big chunk of lit cigar flies back in and lands on his right arm. Right about that much," he held his fingers an inch apart. "Your dad starts cursing like you wouldn't believe, and he's waving the arm around, trying to get it off, but it's burning into his skin, I can smell it, I mean this is a big chunk of cigar." Ron stops to take a sip of beer, "So he's waving his arm, swearing, and he starts hitting your mother with that arm, and doesn't mean to but he's hitting her, and she's pushing against him to get him to stop, and

still the foulest things are just coming out of his mouth. He's getting creative. Then the car, because your dad's not paying any attention to it at this point, it goes flying off the road into the ditch. We go, God, half a mile in the ditch, and everybody's terrified. You were clawing into the backseat. But your father is just carrying on like before. After a long, long time, we come to a stop. your dad's arm looks burned bad. He jumps out of the car, and he starts rolling around in the grass, because it's killing him and he's trying to get it out of the air. Then he stops that, he gets up, and he gives the car a good hard kick, about three times, I think he near broke his toe. So you get out, and he says, 'What is it honey?' Just like that, 'What is it, *honey*?' And you kick the car and say, 'Hairy mother fucker.'"

Ron was taken by a fit of laughter, and we laughed politely in response.

"You really don't remember that?" he said.

"No," Devon said, "I don't remember it."

Ron considered this and spent a moment thinking. "Your Dad, he was trying to get straight with you, I just don't think he knew much about it."

"There's something I gotta show you," he said, rising from the recliner and walking into the house."

"We've gotta get out of here," Devon said, once he was gone.

"OK," I said, "I'll make an excuse."

"He's a bottle of moonshine away from a sing-along," she whispered as he came back out. She didn't look amused.

Ron was carrying what looked like eight oversized black picture frames. "He used to kill em in the freezer," he said, handing one of the frames to Devon. Devon dropped it in surprise. He handed it back to her. "Drove Gail nuts, she would have tossed the lot if I hadn't got them out."

Looking over Devon's shoulder, I saw that it was a bug collection. He seemed to prefer the large colorful bugs, especially one's that looked dangerous. The insects were carefully spaced and pinned through the center with a card underneath. Each card had a date, a location, and his name, all spelled out in neat capital letters.

"So, what do you think?" Ron asked us.

"They're very nice," I said.

"He was crazy about them," Ron said to Devon, examining one of the collection frames like he'd never seen it before. "Well," he said, "they're yours."

"No," Devon said, "I couldn't possibly take these." She stood up to put the one she was holding back on the pile.

"He would have wanted you to have them," Ron said.

"Maybe if we just took one?" I offered. Devon gave me a look.

"I could keep three, maybe four," he said, rubbing the back of his head in estimation, "I don't think anymore than that would be right."

It wasn't long before the funeral started, so we had a pretty good excuse for leaving. On the way Devon said, "So there it is in the back. My inheritance."

The funeral was a funeral. I don't know what else to say about it. We sat in the back. There were about fifty people there most of them middle aged. Not many speakers.

Mostly they focused on his work. That seemed odd. Devon whispered to me that Ron was the only person who seemed to know anything about her father at all.

At the burial site, Devon grabbed me by the hand and said that she didn't want to mingle, so we stood at the outer edge of the crowd, and watched people slowly make their way to her father's wife who stayed near the casket. I could feel Devon's heartbeat in her hand, and I tried to match my breathing to hers, in the hope that that would mean something. Devon's uncle found us and he and his wife repeatedly said how they didn't see enough of her. They invited us to their home, saying, "You kids will just love Louisville, it's just fabulous for young people."

There was a reception afterwards, held at Devon's father's house. The house was in a small development just outside of the city. It had been built into the side of a hill, so the entrance was on the second floor. The real mourning seemed to be taking place there, right around the door. I moved rapidly past the entranceway, avoiding eye contact until they made it to the relative safety of the lower level. The cats were locked in the master bedroom. A sign on the door read "Do Not Open!" in blue magic marker.

Most of the men assumed wide stances standing in half circles around nothing in particular. They didn't say much, and they would stand like that until their wives came to move them to some other part of the event. They looked like kids waiting to be drafted for a pick-up game.

Ron seemed relatively at ease, like he was an old hand at this sort of thing and that there was nothing to be concerned about. He had first introduced Devon to a number of the guests, the reaction was universally the following: a brief gasp of shock, as if they

were startled by encountering someone so close to the deceased without any prior warning, the words, "I'm so sorry for your loss," the emphasis placed on the so, an inquiry into Devon's school progress, her mother and/or social life, and a parting look, gesture, or word meant to inspire courage and express sympathy.

Then there was the food. Laid out on folding tables on the first floor, there seemed to be more of it as time passed: oily macaroni and cheese, deviled eggs, meat-loaf, au gratin potatoes, fruit plates, bean dip, pimento dip, onion dip, guacamole, humus, assorted desserts, and things I couldn't even guess at. A lady tried to push some turkey soup on me. I declined, saying I was already full. This food was worse than normal food, it was grieving food, coming to room temperature. I didn't want anything to do with the people who ate it.

Ron had taken Devon away about ten minutes ago. A man was talking to me about why getting a CPA was better than going for the MBA. I hadn't expressed any interest in either degree. Devon came towards me. She was walking quickly and holding back tears. She grabbed me by the hand and took me into a room down the hall, locking the door behind her.

It was a bedroom. She started crying. Real crying. People could hear crying. I grabbed hold of her with one arm and put my other hand on her head. She leaned into me. Her nose was cold. It was touching my neck. Then she pushed me into the door. "No," she said, "no." she was shaking her head. I waited. I kept waiting. She sat down on the bed. She started breathing deeply and slowly. She wasn't looking at me.

"I guess Ron hasn't seen this room, huh?" she laughed. It was an ugly laugh.

I hadn't noticed the room. There were trophies, and ribbons along the right wall. I picked up a trophy with a girl with a bat on top, it read:

Valley League Softball
The Pirates
MVP
Devon Eckles

"I didn't know you played softball," I said quietly.

"I didn't," she said, "I didn't ride horses or run cross country either."

"I don't understand," I said.

"Apparently, honors student wasn't good enough for him. He wanted an athlete.

God. Who the fuck made these things? There's some trophy guy somewhere getting rich."

Devon put her hands over her face. "Why wasn't he proud of me?"

I didn't say anything.

"Oh, I live in California. That's why I haven't been to the house before. My bedroom, that's what she said, that's why I haven't been in my bedroom before. Gail, Gail said. And let me tell you, California is sooo great. The surfer--" Devon stopped talking.

She was crying now without any sound, her shoulders moving rhythmically up and down.

I didn't move. I wanted to hold her and say reassuring things, but I didn't move.

"Do you know who I am?" she asked me.

"I love you," I said.

"That's different."

It took about ten minutes for Devon to stop crying enough to be able to leave. I found one thing in the room that she actually did. I was checking the drawers for tissues or a towel, and I came across a 6th grade report on Honduras. I showed it to her and she remembered it. She took off my jacket and folded the report inside.

I told her that I'd take care of the goodbyes. I told everyone that she was very upset and just didn't feel up to staying any longer. Ron said that it was a "tough, tough thing."

I was pointed in Gail's direction. She looked like a woman who I'd once seen at the supermarket carrying her coupons in a small binder.

She pressed her hands into mine. "Are you Devon's boyfriend?"

"Gareth," I said as I removed my hands, adding, "I'm very sorry."

"It's just so good of you to be here," she said, "all that way."

I told her that we had to be going, that Devon was too upset to say goodbye herself.

"Wait," she said, "there's something--" she took her purse from a nearby table and produced a picture. "It's just, she doesn't look at all like," she handed me the picture without finishing her thought.

The girl in it was about twelve years old. She had strawberry blonde hair, a slightly upturned nose, and wide spaced eyes. It was another fake. She looked very happy, and she bore no resemblance to my girlfriend.

"Yeah," I said, "you can still tell in the eyes and the mouth. She think the dark hair makes her look edgy."

"Come here," Gail said, and she hugged me tight, like she wouldn't let go. "You tell Devon she has to come see me. I'll fly her out. I know she's busy but she has to come see me. She's always going to be family. Tell her that."

"I will," I said.

"Her father loved her so much," she said

"She loved him too. She told me so."

We sat close together on the way back, she had slid to my side of the bench seat. It was seven o'clock, and the sun was doing a late summer kind of trick where it was huge and on fire, and very hard to look at while being very hard to look away from. I felt too tired to talk or to think, so I stared forward and let the purple spots burn into my eyes.

I think I saw the goose first, but I felt the muscles in Devon's arm clench as the thing registered in front of me. Its tiny head perched on the long graceful neck, pointed at my approaching truck. I remember the expression on its face as resolute, but given the speed at which we were approaching, and the relative inscrutability of fowl, I guess it could just as easily have been quizzical. I whispered "fuck," at about the same time as the loud thud of impact.

"Do you think it might be OK?" Devon asked me.

"No," I said, trying to see out the back window, "No, definitely not."

WINTER GHOSTS

“He was—”

“Don’t. You don’t get to tell me about him. You have to keep that for yourself.”

Steven stood up and walked to the fire. He took the poker and stabbed with it.

Lana was rubbing her fingers against her rainbow scarf. Her black hair was bound in a ponytail. Steven called it her serious look.

“I don’t mean to be... we’re here. I want to talk about things, just not that—not that specifically.”

“What can I say?” Lana asked.

“If I knew,” he let the sentence drop.

“Do you want a grilled cheese? I’m going to make a grilled cheese.” He asked with hope.

“No.”

For Steven a grilled cheese meant provolone on fresh sourdough with a thin slice of tomato, the bread crisp, but golden, not black, with the cheese slightly burnt at the edges. He had remodeled the cottage kitchen twice. It was larger than the living room.

“You’re sure?” He cut the tomato with a paring knife.

“I’m fine.”

“I hate to see you not eat. We haven’t eaten in hours.”

“Really, really, I’m fine.”

He dropped the knife and pressed his palms against the counter, looking at six slices of tomato. “So, say what you were going to say. Let’s hear all about him then.”

Listening to her attempt at a response, Steven had lost the ability to distinguish between sympathy and disgust.

Lana and Steven had come to South Haven Michigan to rebuild their marriage, but for months before, Steven had been concerned.

At night he would twitch, violent and unsubtle twitching, each limb attempting to explode its way back into his body. When he moved onto the couch he wanted to comfort Lana, but he hadn’t slept in days, and he knew how easily telling his wife she was not the problem might turn into telling her she was. All he could say was “I’m sorry, I’m too worried about hitting you,” and the best gesture he managed was only taking one pillow from the bed.

The doctors said it was stress, and he tried the things people try for stress: exercise, movie-watching, pills. These did not work. He returned to the doctors and got more pills.

Steven slept again, but in his waking hours he developed a long catatonic stare. He and his wife ate breakfast together, and when he finished first, he studied the motion of her fork.

He quit the medication, but when Lana told him that she had been with another man, he was not surprised. He couldn’t remember the last time he touched her.

Rejecting the idea of counseling, Steven said to her, “South Haven,” the way men might have said “Camelot.”

He had spent each summer there since he was a boy, but this was winter, and the winters in Western Michigan are somewhat unforgiving.

The wind blew outside, and Lana watched it from the window. Steven was drinking coffee, readying himself for the repetition of their nasty little fight. He felt disconnected from that. Taking responsibility was one thing, but he wasn’t sure he had any sort of choice.

“Do you believe any of this matters?” He asked Lana.

“Sure,” she responded, distracted.

“Come on, be serious.”

She scratched at her nose. “How can I be serious? Do I believe that we should be together? You know that.”

“I wasn’t trying to—”

“You were honey,” she said softly. “What do you think about it?”

“Nothing in particular.”

“We are going to fix this, Steven?”

He didn’t respond.

“Steven, don’t do that. We’re going to fix this?”

“Right, of course.”

The doorbell rang. Lana and Steven had gone to sleep early, agreeing that the first day was bound to be bad. As he heard Lana waking in the other room, Steven got off the couch and opened the door. It was their next door neighbor, Ellen. Behind the screen, she stared at him expectantly, like he had knocked at her door. Her eyes were red and bloated. Like Steven, she was a seasonal. It was too cold for either of them to be in South Haven.

“Ellen, come in. I didn’t know you were here.”

“We can’t find Jason.”

Steven paused before repeating, “come inside Ellen.”

“What do you mean?” He asked, glancing at Lana.

“He’s gone. We went for groceries and he was gone. His coat’s there, our cars are there. We don’t know where he is. We can’t find him.”

“Where’s Mark?” He asked, noticing the outer door was still open, and the wind was swinging it.

“He phoned the police, they said they’ll look, but nothing until morning. He’s going door to door.”

All of their eyes turned to the lake. The moon was full and they could see far across the plane. If there were a break in the ice, there was no way of telling. Someone could slip in quickly and the wind would swallow the short yelp of surprise. It’s been too cold too long for that, Steven thought.

“Will you go around town and look for him? I have to stay here.”

“I will.” Steven responded, turning towards Ellen.

“Lana,” he continued, “you should go next door and stay with Ellen.”

“I’m going. I’m going,” Ellen said, and left the room. Her padded steps onto the beach faded into the empty noise.

Before she put anything on over her flannels, Lana fumbled with a stocking cap. Lately, Steven had noticed her having difficulty with her fingers. She kept dropping things, and she had to pass packets of sugar to Steven for him to open. It wasn’t just her fingers. She had been a dancer, but now she hunched and shuffled her feet when she walked. While he tried to be angry, he only felt guilt. He wanted to know what he was doing to her, if he was rubbing off.

“I could come with you,” she said to him.

“No. I’ll go find Jason. I’m already dressed.”

Hurt, she told him to be careful.

Steven grabbed his keys and thought about telling his wife he loved her, but it was only a passing notion.

He wasn’t sure where to look. South Haven didn’t have much nightlife. Jason was only 15, but Steven checked the bars anyway. The tension between the people who lived in the town and those who owned property on the lake made the winter months uncomfortable. Despite his family’s ties to the town, his money was only welcome in the summer, and it took Steven’s admissions of doubt and concern to make the patrons try to

help. Still, he was angry. He couldn't believe a child could vanish and all it meant was a sympathetic shrug.

He tried again, this time at the local Stake and Shake, but the young manager looked doubtful, and the staff of two watched him without expression.

“He has brown hair. He's five-five. Probably wearing a grey sweater and jeans. How many people come in here that you can't remember? Why don't you people know who anybody is?”

“I'm sorry, I'm just not sure. If anybody comes I can ask—”

“You don't have to ask. Brown hair. Five-five. He's got a big chin. Real fucking simple.”

He tried to slam the door, but it was on an air press, so he had to keep pushing it closed to make his statement.

He wondered if they would laugh at him and call him a tourist. He wondered if they'd think it was funny that his wife found it necessary to outsource.

Steven drove along the lake road at five miles an hour. He had the windows down. He wasn't shouting for Jason, but he felt ashamed to be warm while Jason was still out there, and he thought the cold air would keep him awake.

Upset at how useless he was, he tried to focus on Jason, but all he could think about was his wife. He couldn't get the picture of her in flannel and the hat out of his mind. He tried to think of her lost in South Haven, but the comparison was all wrong. He

imagined the horrible things he would do if she died. Burning down the house, quitting his job, moving to another country where he would have no friends, those seemed like the only appropriate actions.

He understood the way they did it in Homer, ripping out hair, and rolling in piles of dung. He thought of grief that couldn't be dealt with, real paralyzing grief. Steven understood loss as something that you carried. He tried to think of Ellen and Mark as changed, unable to come for dinner, forced into terrible sorrow by the banality of small talk. That wouldn't be them, he was sure of that.

He scanned his small field of vision and felt terribly sorry for Jason, sorry that nobody could really be dramatic about him being gone.

Steven opened the door to his neighbor's cottage. Ellen and Lana were sitting on a couch, their bodies angled away from each other. The contrast between the two of them seemed like an angry joke.

"Has Mark checked the boardwalk? I'll look along the boardwalk."

No one said anything.

He hadn't removed his hand from the door, and he pivoted himself on it, moving back outside.

Lana shouted, at him, "Wait!"

She looked at him with fear, but his face only seemed sad.

"I'm coming with you," she stammered, "I put coffee in some thermoses, let me get them."

“All right,” he said softly.

Staying a few feet outside, he watched Ellen while he waited. Her head was tilted back, and she kept turning, looking at the upper portion of her walls. Lana came outside with the coffee. He nodded at her and put the warm containers in his bulky pockets.

The frozen beach made walking difficult. They held hands and leaned into the wind while Steven used the flashlight. Lana covered her mouth with the collar of her down coat. Steven periodically tried to check if she was all right, but the wind made his eyes tighten and water, which blurred his vision.

Steven called out Jason’s name, surprised how little sound he made. Thinking it might help, he tried to remember as much as he could about Jason. The five of them had dinner a few times. He had taken Jason out water skiing before. The last two springs, Steven paid Jason to help set up the dock. There was a girl with red hair; he couldn’t remember her name.

For the most part, Steven couldn’t get people. He couldn’t find a conversation or an action that transformed them into something he could put down on paper and understand. He liked many of them, he even loved some of them, but he liked them because they surprised him. He was genuinely touched by gifts, by anything new, by the newness of people that never ended. Jason couldn’t be rebuilt out of his memories. He never thought he’d have to pay for that.

He spit, but the wind caught it and it trailed off his cheek. He wiped his face against his shoulder before it froze.

Lana squeezed his hand. “The boardwalk.”

The path led up a hill and into the woods behind the beach. Steven didn't see why Jason would be in the woods, but they were large, and it seemed impossible that someone could go missing on the beach. Relief came to Steven as they moved away from the wind and into the forest. He rubbed his hand on Lana's back.

"What if he went out on the lake?" Lana asked.

"He's not. He's not on the lake."

"But—"

"He's not."

Steven handed a coffee to her and cupped his hands yelling for Jason, wondering if Mark had gone elsewhere. "We better move on down," he said.

"Maybe he ran off." She said casually.

"Why would you say that?"

"Because he's fifteen, Steven. I mean, maybe we're just out here for no reason. He decided to run off with the circus, and we're out here." She laughed, but suppressed it when she felt him grip her arm.

"This is important."

"I know that, I just want you to feel better. He's probably fine."

"You don't have to be here if you don't want to be," he said, trying to take bigger strides through the snow.

"I want to be here to be with you."

"Lana," Steven said, losing control of his voice, "They're a family, and they won't be if they lose him. If we don't—"

“We’re a family.”

“What?”

Lana shouted her words over the wind. “We are a family. That’s not fair. You shouldn’t do that.”

Steven shouted back. “I’m not talking about that at all.”

Lana nodded, but Steven didn’t know what she meant by it.

He looked around at the mess of trees. He wondered if Jason could be hiding, or maybe hidden.

“This place,” he said “this place!”

“If he’s out here, we’ll find him.”

“I just can’t figure how they’d lose him, or where he’d be, or anything.”

Lana pulled down her coat to show her face.

“I’m sorry,” she said, “this was supposed to be our time.”

“It’s not your fault.” He couldn’t make out details in the low light, so he didn’t look at her.

“And that was the only time, it won’t happen again. I’ve—”

“Jesus. Stop it.” Steven called for Jason again.

“And it’s not as if that fixes anything, is it? Pardon me if I don’t applaud.” He wheeled around on her and spoke before he remembered he wasn’t the type of person who said those things.

He heard a defense catch in her throat, and he wanted to hurt himself for going after her. “That wasn’t right. I shouldn’t have said that. It’s just that I don’t see any

reason to have this conversation. What you did wrong you can't undo and whatever I did wrong I can't change either."

"Let's just keep going." She said to him.

He kept moving, straining against the deep snow, but he felt warm breath on the back of his neck. When he turned to look at his wife, she was close to him. He was surprised by how beautiful she was.

Lana placed her hand on his shoulder, as though she would dance with him, but neither of them moved.

"Do you even want me back?"

Every day he had thought about the other man, imagined him proposing a toast at dinner, imagined him sitting outside their bedroom reading *Les Miserables* to her and his wife, imagined him winking through the mirror as Steven tried to brush his teeth.

"I do," he answered, without hesitation.

"Then you have to trust me. I don't deserve it, but trust me. We can make it better."

"Am I? Am I supposed to trust you? Is that what it is? Well, hooray for trust. Hooray. We've got every reason to believe that that'll work. Jason probably trusted he wouldn't up and vanish in the middle of South Haven Michigan, and look where that got him! It's not like this is the middle of the fucking Yukon, is it?"

"Jason! God Damn it Jason, where are you?" He threw his flashlight to the ground and kicked it, feeling nauseous and spent.

He thought the lake was supposed to be where girls wore bikinis, and people built fires on the sand. His enduring memories of the place were vague. They had none of the acuity of his real life. He looked to his wife for help.

“We’ll find him,” she said.

“Yes,” he said. But he knew that the boy had already faded into the overpriced real estate.