

 garland



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*On the front cover: A photograph by Jennifer Bodgan. The full
version can be seen on page 3.*

From the Editor:

We hope that words will help us speak to each other. For all of our sakes, we hope that we can show each other something we know exists, but has yet to be spoken out loud.

Thank you to my staff—chaos is a heavy cross to bear. This certainly would have been doomed from the start were it not for all of your hard work. And thank you to Ron Tanner and all in the Writing Department who have always been so supportive.

Please Enjoy.

the garland Volume 20, Spring 2007

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Laura Klebanow

A Lack of Portraiture

*A unanimous vote: the schoolhouse razed—
raze, raze the schoolhouse.*

They give their daughters
dolls without faces—
they don't believe in any sort of portrait.

And when he came he boarded the door,
dismissed the boys and
lined those girls against the blackboard.

They gave their daughters dolls without faces
and, never having much use for faces,
she offered hers in the place of the others.

He must've noted how neat the line
their bonneted heads made against the dark board
but he shot them there, the trembling daughters.

He shot them faceless—he, a milkman.
He shot them faceless
though she offered her own.

Kendra N. Richard

A Released Balloon

I became you.
The grooves of my body—
Sculpted as your calloused
fingers created the texture
of my skin.

Your soul transfixed to me
like the string of a balloon
tied to a child's wrist.

But I don't believe in souls.

So I released myself into the sky—
and wait for my outer layer to burst,
breaking out of your mold.

Erica Campbell

One Bus Stop



Photograph by Jennifer Bodgan

First Day of School, 1995

I am sitting on the pink carpet steps and my mom is brushing my hair into two long braids. I am pulling on sparkly yellow hair ties. It feels nice when she holds my hair in her hands and brushes from top to bottom. I close my eyes and feel her tug at one side. I like this. I wish I could stay here.

I'm too excited to stay here, because it's the first day of a new school year. Between my knees is a purple backpack that has a pack of 16 crayons, a box of pencils, four notebooks, a ruler, two glue sticks, scissors (the safe kind with the purple handle) and a package of tissues for when my nose runs. My mom finishes braiding my hair and helps me put my backpack on. Danny walks to the door with a blue backpack that doesn't have the same supplies as mine, but Mom says that's because he's a year older.

Danny and I walk outside with Mom and her camera and stand

One Bus Stop

by the flower bushes. I stand close to Danny and he puts his big arm around me. I smile so big that my eyes almost shut and she takes the picture. Big brother, little sister on the first day. Mom walks close to us, gives us a kiss and Danny wipes the kiss off his cheek. He says it's time to go, so we start walking to the bus stop.

Halloween, 1995

I wave goodbye to the jack-o-lanterns on our steps and we walk to the bus stop as a cat and a devil. The eyeholes in my black mask are small and it's hard to see, but I don't want to take it off because everyone at the bus stop will want to see my costume.

Danny tells me to stay on this side of the street and he walks to Billy Joe (a ghost) and Matt (a Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle) and talks to them. He is showing them his pitchfork and his red tail. Danielle (a bunny), Christine (a princess) and Casey (another princess) are by the sewer. I walk near them and hiss and meow like a cat. Danielle says, "Freak! What are you doing?!" They start laughing and I start laughing, too. I look for him, but it's hard to see where Danny is now because these eyeholes are so small.

Five Days Until Christmas, 1995

"Can we build a snowman later, Danny please? Danny, Danny! It's snowing!" Danny opens the front door and holds onto my hand. "Jingle bells, jingle bells, jingle bells, jingle bells." We got to sing this song in school yesterday, because everyone in class was good and stayed in their seats. "Sing with me, Danny."

"That's not how it goes, Steph. It's Jingle bells, jingle bells, jingle all the way."

"Oh okay ... jingle bells, jingle bells, jingle bells."

Danny laughs, "You got it."

Erica Campbell

We slip-slide on the ice. It feels like we are skating on a big white road instead of walking to the bus stop like we always do. Danny takes off his hat and puts snowballs in it. When we get to the bus stop, he throws them at Billy Joe. Richie walks up to me: "I have a secret mission for you Stephanie."

"Okay."

"There is a special pole that tastes like the fruity wallpaper in Willy Wonka. All you have to do is lick it."

I follow him to the pole. It looks cold, but Richie says, "Come on!" Danny is still having a snowball fight with Billy Joe. I put my tongue on it and I get glued. All I can see is the white pole in front of me and my tongue pulls like taffy when I try to move. I start to cry and try to call out for Danny. Richie is laughing at me and the other kids run over.

"Look at the dumbass! She's stuck!"

"Richie, you jerk! What the heck did you do?!" He comes up to me and touches my shoulders, "It's okay Steph, calm down. I'm right here."

Valentine's Day, 1996

I made cards for the kids at the bus stop, my friends in my class, and my teachers. I have them in a plastic bag.

"Happy Valentine's Day, Billy Joe. Happy Valentine's Day, Matt. Happy Valentine's Day, Richie. And here's yours Danny." I walk over to the girls and hand out cards to them. No one gave me a card, but that's okay.

"What is this Stephanie? Do you love me or something? Do you want to have sex with me?" Richie gets close to me and pushes the card in my hands. "I don't want this! What's wrong with you?! Did your Mom do drugs when she was pregnant or something?"

One Bus Stop

I don't take the card back and he rips it into little pieces. The red paper pieces fall onto my shoes and I stare down. I can hear the big bus coming down the street. They are all laughing.

"I have to go Steph, I'm sorry about your card. I'll see you at school, okay?" Danny walks up the steps on the bus and it pulls away. My cards fly out the windows and land on the street.

I stand at the bus stop until my bus comes. It is yellow like Danny's bus, but it is smaller.

My bus driver opens the door, "What's wrong, Stephy?"

"They ripped up my cards! They're all over the street and I made them with Mom last night and wrote their names on them and drew hearts." Ms. D hands me the box of tissues and tells me to take, my seat.

"You know, not everyone is as nice as you are. You need to remember that."

Two Days Before Easter, 1996

I forgot my spelling book. My light blue spelling book that I need every Friday for our spelling exercises. I forgot it on the kitchen table and I need it now. I can't stop crying and Ms. D pulls the bus over.

"Calm down Steph. It's okay. I'm sure Ms. Mallory and Ms. Denise have an extra you can use." Breathe in and out.

"I really need it! I won't get any points for today and points are really important." All the kids on the bus are looking at me, but I don't care. I just want to go home and get my book

Last Day of School, 1996

I'm waiting outside on the porch for Danny and I can hear birds making songs. It sounds nice, but I think they forgot it's

Erica Campbell

morning and people are sleeping. You can't make noise like that when people are sleeping.

It is warm outside and I am wearing my favorite outfit: a t-shirt with a zebra on it. He is wearing pink sunglasses. I have on black and white zebra shorts, too. Danielle runs up to me when I get to the bus stop. "Hey Steph! Do you know what a condom is?"

"Danielle, stop. You're not funny," Danny says.

"Come on, Danny. I'm not trying to be funny. I just wanna know if she knows what it is. What's the big deal?" She takes a step closer to Danny. Danny tells Mom he would fight the kids at the bus stop for what they say to me if half of them weren't girls and the boys weren't so tall.

"No. I don't know what it is," Danielle looks at me now.

"All right, Steph. I want you to do something for me. It's a homework assignment. You know what homework is, right?"

I nod.

"When you get home, ask your Dad what a condom is. But you can't tell him I told you to, all right? It's real simple. Do you get it? Nod if you do, shake your head if you don't. It's real easy." I just stare at her. I think she is being mean to me and I should ignore her.

"Are you listening to me, stupid? Can you hear what I'm saying?" I look away at a tree behind her. "Can you believe this? The freak won't answer me!" I feel her hands on my chest and she pushes me backwards. I fall on the rocks and scratch my hands. I start to cry.

"What the hell, Danielle? Why do you have to pick on her? She never did anything to you!" Danny yells.

Matt walks up to him, "Stop blaming Danielle! Your sister's a retard, she's a weirdo, and we don't want her here!"

One Bus Stop

My eyes are fuzzy with tears and I can't see very much, but the neighbors come out and break up the fight. We walked home and Mom was upset and Danny's eye was black.

First Day of School, 1996

Danny and I are standing outside by the flower bushes and Mom takes our picture. He gives me a kiss on the cheek and says, "Be good." He walks away to the main road where his new bus stop is. He has to go to high school this year and be a big boy. I want to walk with him. I like Danny and I like going to the bus stop with him.

Mom holds my hand and we walk to the sidewalk in front of our house. I have a blue backpack this year that has three notebooks, a pack of eight markers, a box of pencils, an eraser, and three folders with pockets.

Maybe next year I can go to the bus stop with Danny.

Caitlin Rohan

History: Inspired by
Richard Newman's Theology

On family vacations we'd stand on the barren battlefields—
My father electric with history's possibilities.
He seemed to get a buzz from the static electricity
That one feels on those fields where thousands
Of soldiers died in the American Civil War.

My mother would remain in the ice blue minivan,
Enjoying the air-conditioning with my sister.
I would join my father on those fields,
Listening to him relating facts, snatches of trivia.

Those fields were endless, haunted miles where Americans
Had hunted each other, brother against brother, and
Even over a century later we could find an old bullet,
a brave remnant that weathered battles, reckless rainstorms,
Years of rancid rust.

My father would stand entranced by some voltage from
The fields, as if he could see the battle taking place,
Something no one could really understand. Sometimes
though
I felt it too; a cold shiver in the August heat, as we visited
Some part of America's ancient history:
The arrogant battlefields of Antietam
Or the gutted, ghostly fields of Gettysburg.
Battles that my father, the child of Irish-German immigrants
Was not even ancestrally linked to.

Broken Wrecker

. I was the only child brave enough to venture out, and with a
Glazed, sun-struck stare, he would whisper:
"Won't everyone be impressed when you read about these
Places in textbooks, but you've been here?"

Broken Wrecker

I hope I am a survivor
In the compressed compacts of his mind,
Like a slow, scratchy silent movie,
One he's unable to ignore,
One with precise mechanical ticks.

A broken, repeating video-storm
One that shakes on-screen,
Repeats the same reels
Wrecks any of his normal
Brain cells with morbid
Mirages of me. Me as a

Constant catastrophic scene
That plays, carouselling in
An overwhelming circling.

I hope he can never let me go.
That I'm played back like a sick,
Stuck video forever.

Lorraine Cuddeback

Bathsheba



Photograph by Nicholas Marx

I was sixteen when I met Uriah. I was on my way to the well to draw water, carrying a large clay jar. My right arm encircled it just above the base, and my left arm grasped the rim. A handful of strands from my dark hair obscured my vision, but I had no free hand with which to brush it away. Thus, I felt Uriah before I saw him.

"I'm sorry" I said as I backed away and bowed from the bump of contact. I was slightly flustered, and kept my eyes locked on his sandals. His feet, I noticed, were large, dirty, and had broad nails and a crooked pinky toe. It was endearing.

"Are you Bathsheba?" A bass voice trembled above me. I nodded silently, lest my father see and thrash me for talking to a strange man in our courtyard. "Please, Bathsheba, might you look at me?"

My eyes rose upwards as my head lifted up just enough to look

Bathsheba

Uriah in the face. It was a kind, curious face, though the outward presence of sweat and mud tried to hide the gentleness that radiated from within. His jaw was square underneath a dark beard, and his eyes hidden under a thick brow. High, angular cheekbones rose up to meet at a broad, flat nose. He was not unattractive, and his wide, strong shoulders betrayed his soldier's training far more than the breastplate or sword at his side.

As he took me in, I saw his eyes glitter with approval. "Thank you, Bathsheba. I am Uriah, please remember my name." And so he was on his way.

"Uriah." I whispered to myself, continuing to the well. "Uriah." No, I would no forget his name.

That night, my father called for me.

"Bathsheba." Obediently, I came. I stood before my father, he standing in the naked moonlight of early evening.

"Bathsheba." The word was a thought, and idea he was examining with his tongue—feeling it out over vowels and consonants. "If ever there were a woman or child to be proud of, Bathsheba, it is you. Your mother was a good woman, a good wife for the time I had her. So shall you be. Uriah has asked for you, I have granted it."

Uriah. It was many moments before I knew what to say. *Uriah*. His name weighed heavy on my heart - but it was not a fearful weight. It was the weight of a heavy cloak, protecting you from nighttime cold, Uriah.

I nodded—not as consent, as an act of obedience. I had known this day was coming; it was my duty. There was no argument in my heart, only acceptance.

Lorraine Cuddeback

That night as I lay in bed with cool air clinging to me, I turned the word "wife" over in my mind. It was short, concise—no elaborate twisting of the tongue or lips. Being a wife - that would be simple. I would cook, clean, care for, and share a bed with my husband. Straightforward duties, just as the word implied.

I looked up at the moonbeams shining through slits in our thatched roof, and felt them shine clear on my face.

In three months time, I became Uriah's wife. I took my title with all the pride I was allowed—the rest was bestowed upon my father, who glowed in a way I had never seen. His friends celebrated him, applauding the good match, his good sense to marry me to such a strong fellow as Uriah.

Uriah beamed as well. Whenever he looked at me, I saw the same gentleness I had first seen, in my father's courtyard. Clean, free of dirt and dressed in rich robes I thought him to be a benevolent King. I was glad to be his.

And so I left my father's household and entered Uriah's. He worked to train his men for our new King's army, and I kept the house. I kept his gear clean, I fed him food for strength, and I shared his bed to keep him warm at night. It was a regular, predictable life that I settled into, and it was in this manner that the months passed.

A year had gone before I sensed the change in my husband. Uriah never changed the way he treated me, but the look in his eyes hardened. Where once I'd seen, kindness, even fondness, I saw nothing. He looked at me the way he would look at a stone, as if I held no importance to him. Yet, his words remained calm and his touch gentle, so I had no complaints to make.

Rumors among the soldiers' wives spoke of a worsening war.

Bathsheba

Kind David was straggling, they whispered furtively over clay jars at the well. I thought maybe this had caused the change in my Uriah's dark eyes. He was a good soldier, making his way through the ranks on a ladder of his strength and skill. I did not know what he had seen in battle; I could not begin to know. Maybe the blood and the death were weighing upon his spirit. Maybe too many of his comrades had fallen.

So I listened to him moan at night, into the empty air ahead, and I wondered if my life was losing its simplicity.

It was halfway through my third year of marriage when King David called Uriah to the city. We packed up, and we left—Uriah was obedient to the King, and I was obedient to Uriah. The road was not long, but the trip remained weary. Dirt and grit and sand filled our eyes and the sun beat upon our heads. At night, Uriah and I kept our own tent, and in the cold we clung to one another warmly.

It was in the cold - the pure, clean cold, devoid of the dirt and dust of daylight, that Uriah revealed his mind to me. "When was the last time you bled?" It was a blunt question, one I did not expect lying wrapped in my blankets while he took off his gear.

I thought a moment, recalling the time of purification. "Three weeks. Three Sabbaths have gone by."

"Your mother, she died giving birth to you?"

"Yes." Uriah knew this, and I did not understand his asking.

"You were the only child she ever bore."

"I was."

Uriah sat next to me. "I want a son. Why have you not given me one?"

I sat up among the blankets. I knew it was my wifely duty to

Lorraine Cuddeback

bear children—indeed, I would have welcomed a child into my heart. I looked at Uriah, his profile outlined by moonlight. "I do not know." It was an honest answer.

Uriah laid himself down, impatiently. "I may die soon. I wish a son to carry on my name and my line. We have been married for two and one-half years. That should have been time enough for two sons, with a fertile wife."

I stayed silent, sitting. There was nothing to say - I was not performing my duty. Long after Uriah's breathing revealed him to be asleep, I stayed awake. The moonlight shone through a slit in our tent, and it appeared muddled and cloudy on the sand inside.

Following Uriah's desire, I began to use mandrakes and other old cures for infertility. The weeks seemed to pass by more slowly for me, as I counted the days to see my failure flow from me, or my success swell up inside. He grew further from me, spending long days training youths the swing a broad, glittering sword, and shoot swift arrows. He returned late and came to my bed at night, his only action as a husband.

Then came the time when Uriah left me for war. I was in charge of his house; it was in an area adjacent to the King's palace, where all officers lived, and it was not too much for me and a handful of servants to manage. And though the servants were there, they were not for company. They lived by working, not forming friendships with their master's wife. That was their duty, and it was simple. So mostly, I was alone.

In the rear of the house there grew a small but shady garden, with leafy olive trees and green brush, bejeweled with slender but bright desert flowers. In the middle of the garden the trees broke apart, hugging the edge of a cool, shallow, clean pool. In

Bathsheba

the afternoons when I had finished all the chores, I would sit in this pool and clean the dirt from my body, washing aside my fears for an hour's time. I would soak my long dark hair in the water, letting it float as a blanket atop the water, then flip it up and over to wring the sand and flour and mess from it. It was soothing, simple, and relaxing.

One of those sleepless afternoons, as I rewrapped my damp, clean body in the harsh material of my clothes, a servant of the King came to me. He was led by a steward, a man I knew loyal to Uriah with a deep affection, who eyed the King's man with a superficial suspicion. The King's servant led me from my home into the King's palace - a foreign place of tall ceilings that smelled of cedar wood and looked of gold. I was led through no less than three grand chambers before I arrived at a smaller one off a long, private corridor. A long, low couch stacked high with silken pillows dominated the room. My heart contracted as I realized what his summons was for. I had suspected - but now I knew. Soldiers' wives were not called to a King for anything else.

The servant who had led me here made his exit, and the heavy wooden door clanged shut with a noise that shook my bones. I stood for a long while, waiting. My hands were folded and clutched to my belly, as though I might protect myself, my womanhood. I found myself praying - my mouth moved in the silent prayers I had often heard my husband say, but which I was not supposed to.

But still, the King came.

He was not the King, and he was the King. He entered the door with a straight back and strong stride, garbed in silk, with a chain of gold about his neck and chest. He was regal in his air and presence - but in his looks he was simply David. He was a man

Lorraine Cuddeback

younger than my Uriah, but older than I. He was clean shaven, and his hair held a gentle curl without the weight of sand and sweat. His eyes were a bright blue - clear and without mystery like the sky on a sunny day.

"Bathsheba." He spoke my name on a sigh, a sigh of fire and passion. I lowered my head, looking at my sandals. There was nothing to say.

"Bathsheba, will you not talk to me?"

I remained silent.

King David walked towards me. He stood next to me, nearly upon me but without touching me. He breathed into me ear- "I will not harm you."

Finally, I turned to look at him. "But you will. You will harm my marriage, harm my soul, harm my husband." I knew not how I was so bold with him—a nameless power had seized my tongue as its own, and had its way with it.

David made no response. His eyes never left mine, even when he took my veil from my head, releasing my dark hair - still wet from the bath. They did not leave mine when he clutched a few strands between the tips of his fingers, and he rubbed them softly. When he brought the strands to his nose and inhaled - that is when his eyes left mine. They closed, briefly, as if he had to shut off all other senses in order to enjoy my scent.

When they opened again, they looked at me with an intimacy I had only ever seen in Uriah's eyes. And for a moment, when the King brought his mouth to mine, to taste me as he had smelled me, I could believe that it was Uriah, my husband who was touching me.

But the moment did not last, and hours stretched on.

That was the first time David called for me, but it was not the

Bathsheba

last. His servant would come for me, I would leave, and return hours later. He was the King, I obeyed his call.

That first night I returned, though, I shed my clothes and put on the mourning blacks I'd had for my father the year before. I wept in a corner, and dirtied my hair. I had lost my pride, lost my goodness. I was an adulterer. I was a sinner.

I had not fulfilled my duty as a wife. I had failed to be faithful, I had failed to bear my Uriah a child. What had seemed so simple, was impossible.

In my mourning, I traced designs in the ash that littered my corner, while tears dripped down my cheeks and off my chin to create small craters in the fine grain of the ash. I imagined each tear was a prayer, and each impact was its failure. Wildly, I hoped the tears would begin to rise of their own accord, lift themselves from my cheeks and float into heaven, where the Lord might see them. He would gather them in the palm of his hand and see the pain, the regret, the sorrow in their saltiness. The Lord might forgive me, then.

I looked out the window of my bedchamber to the night sky. It was a new moon, and there was no light to penetrate my darkness.

The new moon came again before I realized I had not bled since before David began to call me. The next moon came more slowly, as each day I agonized over what I knew in my heart to be true. I was not sure which I wanted more, to bleed or not. On the day of the second moon, I put my hand to my belly while redressing from a bath, and waited for David's servant to come.

His servant came, led by my steward who barely contained his hostility. We walked, and I always remained two steps behind the manservant, though I knew the way well enough. No one acknowledged me. I folded my hands gently in front of my

Lorraine Cuddeback

stomach, as though these strangers' gazes would poison the treasure inside.

When David came to me, I told him I was bearing his child.

"Are you sure?" He looked at me. The brightness in his eyes told me he did not question the parentage, but merely the truth of existence.

I nodded. David turned from, with a swirl of his silken cape. From behind I saw a hand grasp at his hair in a desperate grip. "How long, Bathsheba?" He whispered in urgency, still turned away.

"As few weeks as six, or as many as twelve."

The grip in his hair tightened, then slacked. "Go back to your house, Bathsheba, and prepare for Uriah."

I watched from our front door as Uriah's chariot entered and turned into our courtyard. The house had been scrubbed with my own hands, food prepared by my own labor, all in honor of my husband, the faithful soldier, returning to a faithless wife.

I waited in our doorway. I saw Uriah come to our gate. I saw his steward go to him, and I saw Uriah look at me. He was too far for our eyes to meet, and I strained to make out his features. Finally, the steward turned from him, and Uriah remained still.

He never came to the door. He never entered the household; he never came to our bedchamber to warm my chilled bed. Instead, I remained by our door, and Uriah remained just outside the gates, with fellow soldiers. I stood vigil there, waiting for my husband.

In the early hours of dawn, the King's servant came to bring Uriah to the King. I knew I would not see him again. Three weeks later, the King's servant would come to me with a letter of Uriah's death—brave and valiant on the field of battle. The last image I'd

Bathsheba

ever hold of my husband was him lying next to the guards instead of next to me.

There was no need for mourning Uriah; I had done so already. A week after his death, I was wife to David. Six months later, I lay on a bed in the David's palace, holding his new son in my arms.

His son was dead.

The babe would not feed from me, and he accepted no nursemaid's milk, and no goat milk spooned to him with a tiny, silver ladle. He starved himself.

I lay still, in bed. Was it not better that he had died? He was conceived in sin, and born of blood. Though I did not know how David killed my husband, I knew his hand was in it. My child would have lived a tainted life, his soul black before he ever had a chance to live. Could the Lord suffer such a son to live?

Next to me, David wailed. "Is there no mercy on my child's soul?!"

For a moment, I was silent. We were alone, all the servants fearing for their lives around the wild David.

"The Lord is taking his retribution."

"On a child! That is not just, it is not the Lord's way."

"If the Lord were just he would have saved me from you." The statement was not made in anger, but honesty. A just Lord would have saved a good wife from her wanton King. A just Lord would not have let a child be the fruit of such unholy union. A just Lord could not have suffered the child to live.

David was silent for a long while. He took the babe in his arms, and looked at me. He spoke: "Then we have paid for our crimes." I turned my head, for I feared my eyes would betray my thoughts. It was too high a price to pay.

Matthew Rooney

Untitled Dalí

I bent my body over a branch
To check the time on the hands,
wondering if the elephants
will be late or early today.
Bent over, with the sand
seeping from my shoes and
the distant sea splashing
I look and notice the woman approaching—
even with her head of flowers
she's certainly got a figure on her,
and she can carry it too,
(not that I've noticed,)
though, look—
those are the flowers
that are her eyes, her nose,
her mouth, her lips,
and as she steps
over the jaw-bone rocks
she sways and sashays and says
nothing to her companion,
just as well her slave.
A brief, thin, outline of a man
following on his knees,
minding the petals, the trane.
'This is absurd' he muses,
'I'd say so myself
if my jaw hadn't fallen out,
and I can't rinse the sand

Untitled Dalí

because madam
squanders water on
her lovely face, and stem.'

At the horizon, you appear as an angel,
something like one, anyway;
your shadow long and tall and thin,
your long hair, flowing, blonde
wearing wisps of white in the wind,
lifting a ring to gather the prayers.

Scream

A man on the news,
father of the 32 year old
murdered by the church
said he had so much inside him
that he wanted to scream
but couldn't.

He paused,
and I expected him to scream,
I wanted him to.
He asked the people who loved him
to scream in his place.

On the steps of the church,
Baltimore's 1st Christian Church,
wrapped romantically for this
Valentine's in caution tape,
he shook.

I love him.
I would scream.

John Dougherty

Five



Photograph by Nicholas Marx

1.

Jerry's path was blocked by a rough, dirty hand the color of dark chocolate. It was connected to a bony chocolate arm, which disappeared inside a soiled, faded-yellow sleeve. The filthy, rough hand, arm, and sleeve belonged to an equally filthy and rough bum, who had made a little nest for himself on the side of the pavement. There was another torn and dirty shirt there, and a worn cardboard sign reading: "NEED \$\$ GOD BLESS YOU." The bum himself had a small, scrunched face, covered in craggy gray stubble and he wore a soot-covered John Deere cap. His eyes were wide and dark, and one of them was lazy, slipping off in the opposite direction of its partner.

"Hey man, can I just get some spare change man? I just need to buy myself some food man." The homeless man's voice was quick and low and the words ran together. He seemed to

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stumble even as he stood, his back hunched, his hands gesturing spasmodically in the air.

Jerry took a step back, hoping he wouldn't have to smell the bastard. He tried to avoid looking at the bum's creepy, sliding eye. The anger rose inside of him like bile: couldn't a guy walk down the street in this city anymore without getting hassled?

"I don't have anything," he said.

This wasn't true. Actually, Jerry had a crisp five dollar bill in his wallet, as well as several other bills. It was the five, though, that immediately came to mind; the five that would not end up in the hands of this parasite.

He tried to step around the bum. But the bum wouldn't be put off, and he stumbled in front of Jerry again. And now he could smell him, smell the reek of the street and the booze and the garbage on him. Jerry's gut curled, and he tried not to inhale.

"Just gotta buy some food man, just tryin' to buy some food," the bum insisted, shaking a peeling, outstretched hand in Jerry's face. He couldn't take anymore of this.

"You want something?" Jerry asked. "Well here, I'll give you a tip: Get a fuckin' job."

And with that he stepped around the homeless man and continued on his way down the sidewalk.

The balls on these people! It amazed and infuriated Jerry to no end. They spent all day hanging around, too busy getting drunk or high to figure out their own shit, and then they had the nerve to harangue an honest, working man like Jerry for cash? Just because he wore an Armani suit and a Rolex? What, did he expect Jerry to feel obligated, because he had the money? Now, Jerry did not consider himself a heartless man, but he sure as hell wasn't an enabler, and he certainly wasn't going to help society's waste

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become even more wasted. He earned his money.

Still fuming, Jerry pushed through the doors of the Barnes & Noble. He held the door open for an older couple, not really noticing them as they walked by. Once inside the store, enveloped in that warm fluorescent light and the thick, rich smell of paper, he began to feel a bit better.

He made his way over to the magazine stands, and picked up The New York Times and The Wall Street Journal. He glanced at the cafe, and then checked his watch. Twenty-five minutes until he was due in the boardroom. If he walked briskly, he'd have more than enough time to grab a cup of coffee. Better than that swill they put in the office coffee maker.

He waited in line behind several other men and women, also in suits, most also carrying a newspaper or two under their arms. He took the five out of his wallet and slipped it from finger to finger, making little green-and-gray waves over the backs of his knuckles.

While waiting, he had time to admire the barista, a cute blond girl. Her hair was straight and its natural color, her skin clear—free not only of acne, but also from those hideous piercings and stubs that teenage girls seemed to be so enamored with these days. She was short, with a trim, nicely-formed body, and the small, perky breasts of the newly-mature.

She had the sort of body which would have driven him insane if he were still seventeen, but now only made him smile with a touch of nostalgia and, perhaps, a little slyness. She was a reminder that he was not exactly young anymore (not that forty was necessarily old), but also a reminder that he had, in fact, been young once.

"Grande coffee, Italian Roast, no sugar, no cream, to go, please," he said.

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"Straight, black coffee?" She asked.

"Like five thousand volts directly to the nerves, my dear."

She smiled slightly, humoring him, and rang up his order.

"Good to see someone your age with a job," Jerry said. "Don't get that too much anymore. Too many damn trust fund kids."

"You don't really strike me as blue collar yourself, sir," she said, still smiling.

Jerry grinned. "Witty, too. Are you going to college, my dear?"

"I plan to."

"Parents paying your way?"

Her smile became wry. "As long as I don't pierce my eyebrow."

Jerry laughed, recalling his thoughts of a few moments ago.

"You wouldn't want to mar such a pretty face with metal, anyway.

But, yes, college. That's the way to go. I went to college myself.

Had to pay my own way, but I made it through."

"You had to pay your own way?" She looked him over quickly, no doubt taking in the Armani suit, the Rolex, the fifty dollar haircut. "What did you pierce?"

He laughed again, deeply. The woman behind him in line made a show of checking her watch and then, if he hadn't grasped that he was holding her up, looked up at the clock on the wall and sighed. Jerry ignored her.

"No, nothing like that," he said. "We didn't have a lot of money. I grew up in Co-Op City. You know where that is? In the Bronx? Little Italian neighborhood. My dad worked a steady job, but it didn't pay much and my ma... well, Ma took her life when I was fourteen."

The girl's face softened into a mix of sympathy and muted

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horror that made Jerry somewhat uncomfortable. He had a distinct dislike for how that particular chapter in his biography always killed any conversation, how it made the person he was talking to become suddenly cautious and reverential, like he was suddenly very fragile. Like they were at Ma's funeral, for Christ's sake.

"But I did some odd jobs here and there, worked hard in school, and with a little bit of help I made it through four years. And here I am, with my degree, my MBA, and a life story that's prime Movie of the Week material."

She laughed a little at this, and the tension broke. The woman behind Jerry coughed.

"Anyway, we both have jobs to do, working stiffs that we are," Jerry said. "So, what do I owe ya?"

She glanced at the computer screen. "\$4.49."

"Jesus," he said, grinning. "Takes an arm and a leg to get a cup of coffee these days."

"Hey, consider yourself lucky," she said. "Usually I charge an arm and both legs."

He handed her the five dollar bill.

"Keep the change," he said, and winked. "Well, it's been a pleasure talking with you..." He glanced at her nametag. "Rachel. Good luck with college. Stay away from those piercings."

"I'll try," she said. "Have a nice day, sir."

Jerry went down to the end of the counter and picked up his coffee from a rather less pleasant or attractive barista, paid for his papers at the front of the store, and then rejoined the hustling sidewalk traffic outside. He felt deliciously warm inside, and he didn't stop smiling all the way to the office.

The bum and the five dollar bill had slipped completely from his mind.

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2.

Rachel's shift ended at two, just after the lunchtime crowd came through. She half-hoped, half-worried that she might see the nice, nearing-middle-aged businessman from this morning. Half-hoping because he'd been friendly and talkative, unlike most of her customers. Half-worrying because if he did show up again, he might ruin what was a perfectly nice little memory by hitting on her or doing something else that exposed him as a creep. Familiarity breeds contempt, that's what they said. Rachel thought this was a singularly shitty way to form relationships, but the point was mooted because the man didn't show up again.

When she left the Barnes & Noble, her green apron bunched up inside her handbag, she still had his five dollar bill in her pocket.

Technically, yes, it was stealing. But Barnes & Noble made enough money (especially during her shift, because she was, in her own modest opinion, an outstanding employee), and she felt that she had earned it. In fact, she would even go so far as to say that the businessman had meant for the five dollars to be hers.

(Jerry, if he had been there, wouldn't have disagreed.)

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Besides, she needed cash right now, this very moment. If she was going to do this, she needed the cash in hand.

She could have taken money out of the bank account, but she was sure that somewhere between punching in her PIN and hitting the "Primary Checking" button, she'd lose her nerve. And she certainly wasn't going to ask her mom for the money, because Mom, being Mom, would want to know exactly what it was for, and then Rachel would blush and stammer and everything would fall apart. Even if she didn't crack and tell her mother what she was buying, Mom might be just suspicious enough to not let her spend the weekend down at Caitlin's shore house, and that would just make a mess of everything.

No, she needed the cash in her hand, right this moment. She needed to just do this and get it over with. She hadn't even really rung up the businessman's coffee anyway, so she'd just slip another five in the cash register tomorrow, and everything would be copasetic.

As she walked down the sidewalk, weaving in and out of the flood of suits, eccentrics (non-starving artists, she liked to think), and tourists, a homeless man in a John Deere cap called out to her and asked if she had any spare change to give him.

Rachel stopped and removed herself from the crowd. She looked the man in the eye (or as much as she could; his left eye seemed to slide here and there on its own accord) and said: "I'm really sorry, sir, but I don't have anything."

He nodded, a full-body nod that reminded her of a Buddhist monk bowing.

"That's okay, thank you. God bless you."

"God bless you, too, sir," she said, and continued on her way. It was a lie, of course. Along with the five, she had a twenty in

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her wallet (it had occurred to her, after receiving Jerry's five, that an even twenty probably wasn't going to be enough; twenty-five seemed like a safer number). But it was her practice to not give homeless people money. Still, she also made it her practice, when turning someone down, to stop and turn them down politely and directly. She couldn't imagine what it must be like, to spend all day without talking to a single person, to be ignored, avoided, passed by. She remembered how lonely she had been during the first week of this summer, when all of her friends were off having post-graduation vacations with their families, and she was stuck in the Outer Banks with only her mother to keep her company. She couldn't imagine being that lonely every single day.

And so, even though she didn't like lying, she made a point of stopping. People seemed to appreciate that; Rachel knew she would.

After a relatively chilly spring, the summer was becoming progressively nicer. Today, for example. It had been cloudy on the bus ride to work this morning, sure, but the clouds had faded and now the sun beamed down brightly on the city, washing everything in color and light. It was a warmth that you felt both outside and inside, that electrical lightness that filled you when you were young and free on an early summer's day. And the towering, grimy, hard-edged city seemed more like a stage than anything else; a diorama for her to explore and enjoy, a setting for incredible things to happen.

She was tending dangerously towards the romantic now, and she knew it. But wasn't that what this was all about? Romance?

Rachel realized that she didn't have an answer for that question, and the lightness in her heart faded, a little. She tried to think of all of those fuzzy, fairy tale moments with Jason. The

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sterling heart locket he had bought her for her birthday; the way he had greeted her, with a man's tuxedo and a boy's grin, at the bottom of the stairs before prom; the way he'd surprised her on Valentine's Day, when she had been working the night shift, with a bouquet of flowers to which, they found out that night, he was terribly allergic. She remembered how, between sneezes, he had alternately cracked jokes and called himself an idiot, how she had known, in that moment, that she was really, truly, in love with him.

"We should hang out at my place." That's all he'd said, when she told him about going down to Caitlin's. "We should hang out at my place." That's all.

The pharmacy was just five blocks away, but the journey seemed especially short today. A bit shorter than she would have liked. She paused outside, and steadied herself.

Okay, come on, she thought. Just... think about this. Be sure you're ready.

She tried to think. Or, at least, she tried to look like she was thinking. But her head was too full for her to actually think, and after a few moments of listening to the buzzing between her ears she gave up and walked into the store.

It took Rachel a few moments to realize that she had no idea where they would be. She quickly scanned the aisle markers, but they didn't seem to be much help. She guessed she could just walk up and down the aisles, but then someone might notice her, and ask her if she needed help finding something, and then she would just die from embarrassment.

She bit her lip. Still, she had no idea where to start looking. Maybe it would be better to just bite the bullet and ask someone. There was a woman with a muffin-top of white hair restocking a wire shelf with candy nearby. She didn't seem very threatening. It

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would be just like asking Grandma...

Rachel blanched at the idea, and decided that maybe it would just be better if she went home. This was stupid anyway, especially since...

"We should hang out at my place."

She stopped, sighed, and then walked over to the old woman.

"Um, excuse me, ma'am?"

The old woman looked up at her, somewhat dubious, and then smiled. "Hello, nun. What can I do for you?"

"Um, I need some help finding something," Rachel said.

"That's no problem," the old woman said. She had a thin plastic nametag, which read: ANNE. "What are you looking for?"

Rachel could feel her face getting hot. Through some small genetic mercy, she didn't turn red when she blushed—there was nothing that looked stupider than a beet-red blond, in her opinion—but she did turn a very lush and vibrant shade of pink. She imagined that she was doing that right now.

"It's okay, hun," the woman, Anne, said. "I've seen it all. There's nothing you could say that'll shock me."

"It's... it's just a little embarrassing," Rachel said.

"Tampons?"

Rachel laughed, a bit louder than she had intended to. A few of the other people in the pharmacy looked over. She was sure that her face was the color of the inside of a grapefruit by now.

"No. God, I wish. I got over being embarrassed about those when I was twelve."

"All right," Anne said. "Then... pregnancy test?"

A cold shock ran up Rachel's spine, and she stiffened.

"No," she said flatly. "Just... ugh, no. No."

"I'm going to need some help then, hun."

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Rachel exhaled slowly, shakily. "Well," she said, "I'm going to my friend's shore house for the weekend and, um, my boyfriend, he's going to be at the shore, too, and I was thinking about—I mean, I will be going over to his shore house, at some point or another, and we're going to be hanging out, just the two of us, and, uh..."

"Oh," the old woman said, her voice dropping a few octaves in understanding. "Condoms."

Rachel felt simultaneously relieved and miserable. "Yes."

"Well, then. Well. Follow me."

The old woman led her down the third aisle from the door, all the way to the pharmacy counter in the back. The shelves in front of the counter were loaded with all variety of condoms. If it was possible for Rachel to feel any more awkward, she did so at that moment.

"You're not looking for anything fancy, I imagine," Anne said. "Do you know what, um, size your boyfriend is?"

Rachel was vaguely horrified by the question, and felt childish. When had she become so mortified of the birds and the bees?

Since I grew wings and started making honey, she thought, and almost laughed.

"I, uh, I don't know."

"Is this the first time you've, er, done something like this?"

"Yeah," Rachel said. And then she quickly added: "I mean, I don't even know if anything's going to happen. He just said that we should hang out at his place. And, I mean, I don't know why this time is going to be different from any other, but I feel like it is. It's like... like he wasn't hinting that we were going to, but at the same time... he was? Do you know what I mean?"

Anne nodded. "Oldest trick in the book, hun. Leave things

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ambiguous, no one's embarrassed or to blame if things go badly. Usually it's the other way around; that's supposed to be one of our tricks."

Rachel wasn't exactly sure what she meant, but nodded anyway.

"And you're sure this is something you want to do?" Anne asked.

She fumbled for an answer. How did you say yes and no in one word? Because, of course she did. Of course. She was in love with Jason, after all, and he was in love with her. It was more than a little strange, she figured, that they hadn't done it already. It wasn't like they were Jesus Freaks or anything. Sex was just

It was, in a single,
terrifying word, change.

something that people their age did, and there was nothing wrong with that. All the better when the two people loved each other. Besides, Jason was going to Boston for college next year, and even though she was sure they'd survive the distance, this summer was going to be her last chance to see him whenever she wanted. It was, she had realized with a somewhat sickening sense of maturity essentially the last of Jason-and-Rachel as they had always been. It was, in a single, terrifying word, change.

So, yes, of course she wanted to. But, at the same time, there were some doubts, some small fears, some...

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"Yeah," she said. "I'm sure."

"So, you've never seen..." The old woman arched her eyebrows, finishing the question without words.

"Well, no," Rachel said. "I mean, we've done stuff, but... like, our clothes were on. Like... uh... you know. Stuff."

The old woman seemed a bit confused on this part, but Rachel had no desire to clarify. Maybe if there was a nicer word to use than "dry hump"—how could you make something like that sound nice? It just sounded so... crude, put like that. If you were doing it, it was just fun; when you talked about it, it sounded dirty.

"So... could you guess as to the size?"

Rachel glanced at the boxes on the shelves, and finally said: "Um... maybe medium."

"Medium," Anne said, picking up a small box and handing it to her. "Might as well take a pack of larges as well, just in case. At the very least, he'll be flattered." The old woman handed her another small box.

"Most likely, he'll have his own," the old woman said. "But if not, you're prepared."

Rachel felt as if she had accomplished something monumental. Her breath came out deep and relieved. "Thank you. Thank you very much."

"Absolutely," Anne said. "Now, let me ring you up."

The old woman carried the boxes for her to the front of the store, and discreetly slipped them into a plastic bag as she rung them up. Rachel felt her confidence returning, felt the flush leaving her face.

"That's \$11.50 total," Anne said. She pursed her grayish, wrinkled lips. "Listen, hun, I know it's none of my business... but just be careful, all right? No matter what, be safe."

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Rachel began to feel her nerves lighting up again, and said, forcing a laugh: "I will be. Don't worry about me, ma'am."

She shoved her money, the five and the twenty, into Anne's hand and grabbed her bag. "Keep the change," she said. "And thank you again."

She was out the door before the old woman could respond. It took her another city block's worth of walking before she was completely in control of her nerves again. Once she had calmed down enough to stand still, Rachel let out a long, grateful breath, and allowed herself a little laugh at the awkwardness of the whole situation. It was the sort of laughter that people often indulged in while trying to remove any tension or weight from a situation. It was the sort of laugh, she learned that weekend, that virgins often made during their first clumsy, fumbling attempt at sex.

"Well," she said. "That wasn't so bad."

3.

When Anne flipped through the two bills and saw that they were a five and a twenty, she tried to call the girl back, but she was already gone. Oh well, that just meant that the store turned a profit on the twenty. And since the store was turning such a substantial profit, Anne didn't have any qualms about slipping the five into her pocket. This would make the cash last a little longer until her next paycheck.

Still, she found it very troubling; a girl that young, buying something like that. How old was she—sixteen? Seventeen? A young woman, certainly, but not an adult by any means. She felt a subdued pang of guilt—should she have tried harder to dissuade the girl? Was that her responsibility, as a Christian? She decided, eventually, that she had done the best she could—if she

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had convinced the girl not to buy the condoms, then she might still have gone and fooled around with her boyfriend, only maybe without protection. And that, Anne thought, would be even worse.

The thinking made her tired. She thought that she had lived long enough for all of her decisions to be simple, for all of the day-to-day moral dilemmas to be much clearer and soluble. Wasn't that the reward for living eighty-five years? How much more could there be to learn, after that much time? And, to be quite honest, how much more could she learn in the time she had left?

By the time her shift was over, at eight, night had fallen over the city and a heavy, hopeless stone had formed in her belly. She decided to forego dinner for a bit, and walked down Seventy-third Street, to the church. The Gothic stone façade of St. Francis' was dark and just a bit foreboding in the early darkness, but the light behind the stained glass windows and pouring out from under the door was warm and inviting. She walked up the cool, gray stone steps. A homeless woman dozed in the corner, covered in a blanket the texture of wall insulation.

There were a few people, scattered here and there among the two long, rigid blocks of pews—most of them around her age, most of them women. One of the priests, Father Musgrave, was on the altar, moving things around, playing with the sound system. There was a mass at midnight, though Anne hadn't been in a while. It seemed like so much of an effort.

She lowered the pew, her hand shaking, and kneeled on it. Her entire body shook as she went down, and she thought of a rusty machine, struggling against its own gears, ready to snap from pressure it was no longer well-oiled enough to take. She leaned her elbows on the pew in front of her, rested her forehead against her folded hands, and closed her eyes.

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Anne began to pray. She prayed for the awkward and embarrassed young girl from the store today, prayed that she would make the right decision, prayed that she would listen to God's voice in her heart. She prayed for Father Musgrave and all of the holy men, for her coworkers, for a sick neighbor, for Miss Palantino, with her five children and her oversized teenager of a husband. She prayed for peace in the city, in the nation, in the world.

She prayed for the departed souls of all of her friends; for the soul of her husband, dead almost a year now. It occurred to her that she should pray for the continued health and well-being of her living friends, and found that she couldn't think of any.

And when she had run out of things to pray for, she knelt there, eyes closed, and listened to the silence.

Nothing spoke back.

She pushed with her heart, with her flailing faith, with what she thought was her soul, straining, trying to feel something. And nothing pushed back.

Anne became very aware of the tiny noises of the church, of people coughing, of Father Musgrave moving hear and there, even the far off bleating of traffic. Sometimes, when you closed your eyes, it felt like you were actually going somewhere else, that you were penetrating the physical world and touching something deeper and much vaster that lay beyond the stone, concrete, steel and dirt of the world-you-could-see.

But the world behind Anne's closed eyes felt empty and thin. She felt empty herself. And very, very tired.

She couldn't find the energy to say the Our Father, and simply sat back in her pew, letting out a long, resigned breath. This had seemed so much easier, years ago. When she still had friends with

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whom to go to Mass. When she still had her husband. And now it was just her, her alone, and who was she?

She had thought, earlier, about how things should get easier as you get older. But maybe that wasn't true. And maybe that was the reason that no one ever wanted to grow old: because the longer you were alive, the harder things got.

Anne wondered how much time she had left. The thought was both dully frightening and, in some detached, almost brutal sense, relieving. In both cases because she was sure there couldn't be too much left.

A man she recognized genuflected and slid into the pew ahead of her. He turned around, his round face split by a wide grin. He reminded her of a Jack-o-Lantern when he smiled like that, especially now that a bald spot had encroached over most of his already short brown hair.

"Hey there, Mama Anne," he said. "How are ya?"

She couldn't resist a little smile. "Tired and old, Rick. How are you?"

He cocked an eyebrow. "You? Old? Now, Mama, you're just being uncharitable, and as I recall, charity is a key Christian value."

"So's honesty, hun," she said. "How are things at the school?"

"They're going just fine," Rick said. "We'll be done by the end of this week. I just have one more final to give, and then I can throw myself headfirst into the wonderful world of non-stop grading. I'm particularly looking forward to reading the essays."

"You never know. Maybe you have a young Hemingway in your class."

"Maybe a young Stephen King or Tom Clancy. I don't

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know about Hemingway."

Rick taught English at a public high school down on Locust Street. Anne had met him four years ago, when he had started attending Mass at St. Francis. He'd originally been a Christmas-and-Easter churchgoer at St. Peter's, but after the death of his mother he had, in his own words, "gotten a new lease on faith" and switched parishes. She considered him an acquaintance more than a friend, despite the time they had known each other and the fact that Rick had taken, jokingly, to calling her his surrogate mother. He was a nice man. Before she'd met him, she had held all of those old standard stereotypes about homosexuals, including a few left over from the Eighties—that they all had AIDS, for instance. But Rick, Rick was a good man, a good Christian; she figured if the Church could accept him, there was no reason she couldn't.

"And how are things at the pharmacy, Mama?"

"Oh, same old, same old," she said, but her thoughts drifted away. Back to that young blond girl, her face rosy with shame.

"Hey," Rick said. "What's wrong?"

"Who said anything was wrong? Just thinking, that's all."

"Well, do you mind me asking what you're thinking about?"

She pursed her lips. She wasn't exactly sure what she was thinking about herself. She knew something was dragging her spirit down, she just couldn't quite identify it.

After a few moments of thinking, she said: "Rick, can I ask you something?"

"Sure. Shoot."

"Have you ever had a prayer answered?"

His face went blank with thought, his eyes rolling just slightly upwards. She could almost hear the words turning themselves

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over and over in his head before they came out of his mouth.

"You mean, have I ever heard anyone talk back, or..."

"No, I mean..." She paused. What did she mean? "I mean... have you ever prayed for anything, and then had it happen?"

"Ah, okay." He spent another few moments thinking. "Yeah. Yes. I'd say I have. It's not always obvious that that's what's happening, and it's not always in the way I expect it to work out... but, yeah, I'd say I've had prayers answered. Why do you ask?"

"I don't know," she said. And this time she was silent for a good two minutes. Rick waited.

"I don't know if I want to believe in God anymore," she said at last, quietly. "It just... it seems like so much work."

"Bible never says it's gonna be easy," Rick said, his voice gentle.

"I'm just so tired now. I feel like... like I shouldn't be here anymore. Like everyone from my world has already moved on, has already finished the race, and I'm just lagging behind for no good reason. I don't want to have to think about things anymore. I don't want to have to learn anymore. I just want to be... done."

She was silent again, and when she spoke next, her eyes grew moist and glassy.

"I've thought about doing it myself. You know? Ending it myself. I could just swallow all of my pills and go to sleep and not have to worry about anything else ever again. But every time I go to... I just get so scared..."

Thick tears started to roll down her cheeks, tracing wet lines to her jawbone. Rick hopped into her pew, and put an arm around her, holding her and stroking her arm.

"It's just lonely and difficult and I'm so tired all of the time. I just want to rest. That's all." She sniffed deeply, and tried to stop

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herself from shaking. The sobs came, regardless. Soon the entire church was a blurred mess of refracted light and color.

Rick's arm was firm and warm around her shoulders.

"Just let it come, Mama," he said. "Just let it all come out."

And she did. She let the tears flow and she let the sobs break like waves and she clutched at the fabric of his shirt, as if holding on for dear life. She could feel something heavy and dark, draining out of her with each sob, each whimper, leaking out with each tear.

"Don't give up now, Mama. You've still got people who love you, you've still got your health—more than I expect I'll have at your age, anyways. You've got your heart and you've got your mind and even if you can't really feel it, you've got your soul. He has faith in you, Mama, even if you don't always have faith in Him."

She pressed her face into his shoulder, wetting his shirt, shuddering with a fresh bout of sobs. He hugged her closer, and she felt so small, small and frail, but perfectly safe at the same time.

When the last of the tears had come, when the sobs had subsided, she pulled away slowly, wiping her eyes and her nose. She made a small smile.

"Thank you, hun," she said. "Really, thank you."

"Don't mention it, Mama," he said, with his own small smile. "Listen, what are you doing tonight?"

She pulled a tissue from her purse and blew her nose. "Not much. I was going to buy some dinner and watch TV, I suppose. Sleep."

"Well, how about you go and buy your dinner, and then head on over to my apartment, and we can watch TV together," he said.

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"Really, Rick, that's okay," she said. "I'll be fine, I was just..."

"Mama, don't lie to me in a church. That's next to blasphemy."

She sighed in mock exasperation. "Well, if you're going to gnaw my ear about it all night, I guess I could."

They left the church, Rick genuflecting as he exited the pew, and walked down the street, towards the WaWa.

"Maybe, if you're still awake, we could go to the midnight mass," Rick said.

Anne thought about this, and was mildly surprised to find that the suggestion didn't make her weary. "Maybe we could."

With all of the lights down here, all
of the lights and energy and heat,
the sky just looked like a black
sheet.

She found a microwaveable dinner in the frozen food section of the WaWa and went up to the counter to pay. The cashier was an Indian boy, maybe around the same age as the girl from earlier. He was polite and chatted with her and Rick as he rang up her dinner.

"All right, that's \$12.99," he said.

She pulled her wallet from her purse and handed him a twenty. He handed her the change, and she dropped it in her pocket, out of habit. As she did so, she felt, and remembered, the five dollar bill that the girl had left at the store. She had an idea then and, smiling, dropped the five into the tiny tip cup.

"There you go," she said. "Put it away for college."

John Dougherty

The boy grinned. "Thank you, ma'am. Thank you very much. You folks have a nice night. Enjoy the weather!"

"You too, hun," Anne said, and they left.

It was a spectacularly warm night, probably a good night to see the stars, if you weren't in the city. She looked up at the dark sky, a ragged line between the tops of skyscrapers and office buildings. With all of the lights down here, all of the lights and energy and heat, the sky just looked like a black sheet. But, it occurred to her, just because you couldn't always see the stars didn't mean they weren't there.

Satisfied, at least, with that, Anne smiled the rest of the way to Rick's.

4.

Upon counting the contents of the tip cup, Ramar found at total of ten dollars: the five that the old woman had left and three ones and some assorted coins making up another five. That was an impressive amount, especially for the graveyard shift.

He turned the sign on the front door to CLOSED, and then, carrying the tip cup, walked over to the sandwich station where Jason was busy powering down the machinery and disposing of the leftover food. He pored a half-full pot of coagulated soup into a trash bag, retching a little.

" 'Mmm-mm good,' huh?" Ramar asked, leaning against the counter.

Jason grimaced into the trash bag, and then tied it up. "Screw you. How much did you make?"

Ramar shook the tiny paper cup, letting the quarters on the bottom rattle around. "Ten bucks, total."

His friend whistled, tearing a new trash bag off of the roll

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under the counter. "That's nice, bro. That's bank."

Ramar glanced at the sandwich station tip cup, and saw a single, greenish penny inside. He reached into his cup, took out the three ones and the quarters, and dropped them audibly into Jason's cup.

"There you go. For not puking all over the floor."

Jason snorted, dumping shredded lettuce into the trash bag. "Very funny. You should keep the cash, though. I hear they raised the cover charge at the gay bar."

"Yeah, you'd know, wouldn't you?" Ramar said, laughing. He took the remaining five dollar bill out of his cup and slipped it into his pocket,

"Seriously, man, that's your money," Jason said. "Take it back."

"Yeah, it is my money. And I'm giving it to you."

Jason frowned. "Dude..."

"Trust me, I don't need it," Ramar said. "You're the one who's going to the beach this weekend. You could use the cash."

"Yeah, I guess so, but..."

"Besides, I'm doing the whole 'live simply' thing."

"What?"

" 'Live simply, so others may simply live'?"

"...What?"

"I only need five bucks to fuck your mom."

"Oh. Why didn't you just say so?"

They finished the rest of closing, sweeping and mopping the floors, adding up the day's cash and nestling it in the safe in the back room. As they were getting ready to leave, Jason poured the contents of his tip cup into his hand and held it out for Ramar to see. "Sure you don't want this?"

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"Dude. Seriously. Take it."

Jason shrugged, grinning. "Hey, if you insist..."

They turned off the lights and locked up. It was half past midnight and the streets were dark and silent. In the distance they could hear the whisper of tires on asphalt, the occasional honk, the undulating shriek of a police siren.

"Is your girlfriend going down to the beach, too?" Ramar asked.

"Yeah," Jason said. "Yeah, she is."

He didn't say anything more than that, and Ramar decided not to pursue the topic.

"Hey, you should come down," Jason said. "At least for Saturday night. Ethan's got a fake so we're just gonna load up. I'm thinking a Start-of-the-Summer Pong Tournament."

Ramar shook his head, keeping his smile steady, if slightly forced. "Sorry, man. I've got a family thing this weekend."

Which wasn't a total lie. But the greater portion of the truth was that Ramar wasn't all that comfortable with the idea. He knew Jason, sure, and Jason was a good guy. And he drank, on occasion, sure. But he didn't know Jason's friends. It wasn't like the two boys hung out outside of work or anything. And sure, maybe it would be cool to meet some new people, to expand his friendship with Jason, but there was still that nagging worry. In some small, guarded corner of his mind, Ramar was still the skinny little Indian kid who had been tormented on the playground all through grade school. It wasn't as big a part of him as the healthy, quick-witted young man Ramar, student council president and track star, who was getting a full ride to University of Chicago... but it was still a part of him.

"Family thing? Your dad?"

Five

Ramar nodded. "Yeah. Fundraiser."

"That's... I don't know, man, that's really cool."

"What?"

"That your dad has a whole fundraising thing? That's awesome. I mean, so many people in this country strike it rich, and then they don't do shit for anyone else. But your dad, he comes over here and works his way to the top, and what does he do with his money? He's trying to help out people back over in India."

"Sri Lanka."

"Oh. Sorry."

"Don't worry about it. Close enough." Ramar churned this around in his head a bit. "Yeah, I guess it is pretty cool."

Jason raised an eyebrow.

"What?"

"Nothing. You just don't seem really... convinced, is all."

Ramar sighed. "Well, I mean... it's hard to understand. I don't even really get it. I mean, most of the time my dad's real quiet, you know? Real quiet, kinda shy, kinda withdrawn. Like he's totally in his own head, or he just doesn't know how to react to everything around him. It's like, even though he's been in the country all this time, he's still really confused by everything."

"Well, dude, he did kinda grow up in another country," Jason said. "I mean, you were born here, so it's all, like, natural to you."

"Yeah, that's true. But, like, he just seems so distant all the time, but every time he sees you he gives you this enormous hug. But he doesn't smile, right? He does with relatives he hasn't seen for a while, but... I don't know, my whole family's like that. We're really close, but it's like it's just something we do. Like, we shouldn't be touchy-feely people, but we are."

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"And my dad does all of this stuff for charity, but he doesn't even like the Sri Lankan government. But he still does all of this stuff... I don't know. I don't get it, is all."

"I don't think we're supposed to understand our parents," Jason said. "If we could understand them, they wouldn't be our parents anymore. They'd just be people."

"They are just people."

Jason shrugged. "Look, I don't want to be anything like my dad, you know that. I'm just saying... there's something different with parents."

"I think maybe that's it," Ramar said. "I think maybe my parents are the way they are because they don't really see much of a difference between people."

"People are different though," Jason said, and there was an edge in his voice. Ramar wasn't sure what nerve he was touching on, but decided it might be best to leave the topic soon.

"Yeah, of course. But, I think, there's a lot that's the same. Like... the ways we relate to each other. The ways we intersect. You know what I mean?"

"Kinda."

They were silent for the next few minutes. So, it came as something of a shock when a pile of rags on the sidewalk started talking.

"Don't even wanna sleep, and I don't wanna take a shower," the pile of rags said.

"Jesus!" Jason said, jumping back.

Ramar peered at the pile and, in the darkness, discerned the shape of a man, huddled in a doorway, wrapped in a tattered blanket. He was wearing a John Deere cap, and he looked up sheepishly when he saw that he had been overheard. He stared

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back at Ramar and Jason, trying to keep his face composed, but unable to hide his fear. His left eye seemed to drift away on its own.

Ramar spoke. "Hey, man. Sorry if we, uh, disturbed you."

The man stared back, unblinking.

Something sparked in Ramar's head. "Hey, uh, here."

He reached into his pocket and pulled out the five dollar bill from the tip cup. He handed it to the man, who took it with one shaking, peeling hand.

"Thank you man," the man in the doorway said after a moment. "God bless man."

"Take it easy," Ramar said, and continued walking down the sidewalk. Jason followed, quickly.

After a few moments, Jason said: "He's probably just gonna use that for drugs."

Ramar shrugged. "Yeah, maybe. But maybe a hit is exactly what he needs right now to keep going. I'm not gonna judge him."

Jason seemed to mull this over, and then shook his head. "You are a strange dude, Rammer."

"Rammer?"

"Come on, that's a sweet nickname. 'Rammer.'"

"Sounds like I'm a super villain."

"Naw, bro, then you'd be 'The Rammer.'"

"Hey, that's funny," Ramar said. "You mom calls me 'The Rammer,' too."

"Ha. Ha ha. Hilarious. You got my cell number, call me when you get some new material."

Ramar laughed that off. The night was warm, but not muggy—a nice, summer night. A nice night to be alive, out under the far-off sky. He found himself thinking of his father, and himself, and how,

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by some strange anomaly of nature and the soul, they intersected. Ramar smiled.

"Okay, now, tell me more about this Pong Tournament..."

5.

James rolled up the five and slipped it into his right sock, and then put his sneaker back on. It would be safe there for the night. And tomorrow morning? Tomorrow he'd be able to afford a feast at McDonald's. Enough for himself and, maybe, Shine, Gary, Tony and some of the other guys at the park.

And, maybe, if there was a little left, he'd buy some dope. Just a little. Just enough to take the edge off. Quitting was a process, not a light switch. That's what they told him at the drop-in center. And until he found a new job, James was fine with taking the process at his own speed.

He settled back into the doorway. He maybe had another hour or so here before the cops roused him. Sometimes in the winter he'd start trouble, just so they'd take him to a nice, warm cell for the night. But he wasn't going to risk that tonight, not with a crisp new five dollar bill in his sock.

Today had been a blessed day. It hadn't seemed like it most of the time—with the combined gnawing of hunger and addiction, the daily barrage of loneliness, rejection, and abuse. A man had told him to get a fucking job this morning. Two young men had beaten him up in an alleyway. Most people had just walked by, like he wasn't there at all.

And then, just as he'd been giving up, just as he'd started to curse and rant at himself, for lack of anyone else to talk to, those two boys had come walking down the street, and given him five dollars. If that wasn't a sign from God, what was? He

Five

remembered the story of Sodom, of the two angels disguised as travelers, walking the streets of that doomed and sinful city, seeking out the righteous. He muttered a prayer as he curled up in the doorway.

Wrapped in a rotting blanket, lying on a pavement stained with cigarette butts, chewed gum, and dog shit, and five dollars in his left sock, James slipped off to sleep counting his blessings.

Lindsay Rubino

Manequin

We played illicit affair
for awhile. Late nights
he called and I came,
his dead end a right I took, while I
chain-smoked many last cigarettes.

I stayed silent as he pulled me inside,
listening to his heavy breath and rustling
of clothing. Shirt lost,
I gained bare skin and lips
that spoke nothing but wanting words.

He posed me like a mannequin -
arm behind my back, leg around his side.
Like a compass where I was north,
he pointed towards me.
I thought of everything but that moment:

The stars were bright. My nose itched.
His girlfriend's name.

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The Gentleman's Club



Photograph by Jennifer Bodgan

It all started some years back, late December, I think. Maybe Sunday, though it felt more like Tuesday for some reason. The truth was... it all seemed lost, forgotten those days. All the hard work, the time, the energy, the hope for better days—all lost in the commotion of pesky political scandals and those "Just Say No" campaigns. Understandably, we had to do something about that. We just couldn't leave things as they were; no, not in that condition. The cities were in a slump, the forests littered with trash, the children learning hate at recess and lunch. It was a mess and the saddest thing was that our old strategies just weren't working anymore.

Take a bite out of crime; only you can prevent forest fires; I love you, you love me. No one wanted to hear that crap anymore. That's when we decided to start the Gentleman's Club. It was a rather prestigious organization. Three members—Smokey, McGruff and myself. We met twice a month at local bars around the city, ordering

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the usual frothy drinks and eating peanuts while we schemed, though we never met at the same location in hopes of preserving the anonymity of the group. It *was* undoubtedly small, but, fortunately, that allowed us to operate in the underground—our way of honoring the love we had for the forests and the cities and the children we spent a lifetime protecting with those catchy slogans and television ads.

Anyway, Sunday happened to be the first meeting ever, so we met at Boondocks Bar & Grill where we had gone several times, just the three of us hanging out. It was one of the more popular bars deep in the heart of Baltimore, filled with those tiny televisions mounted on the wall, all-you-can-eat onion rings and plenty of females if you wanted to talk or do more. McGruff always wanted to "do more," wherever they would do it, regardless of what "more" meant. After all he was always busy barking at the local bitches strolling around with their tails in the air and desire on their breath. Yet, outside the group and the bar, he still appeared to be that good old boy with the tan trench coat and plastic detective badge trying to save the world.

Smokey, however, was quite different. He was the only member of the Gentleman's Club to be married, so often he would have to scurry back home to the wife and kids before our meetings even ended. But more importantly than that, he was more of a recluse than the rest of us—the social sort of recluse one might find sitting with friends at a bar on Friday, then dancing alone in the corner of the club on Saturday night. It was his shyness and his exclusivity that kept him silent. In fact, he mostly just listened, didn't say much in between our rants, only a few words here and there when he had to, though that wasn't often at all. Regardless, he spent his times with the guys adjusting those khaki pants of his and rubbing that beer belly, which is exactly what he did that Sunday at our first meeting

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of the Gentleman's Club.

I was interested in anything besides scratching myself or grunting as the football game got exciting. There was a timid little girl, looked too young to be at any bar really, but she had a look about her that said she was truly special. Perhaps it was the purple dots sliding along the small of her back, the swoosh of her tail in the stale bar air, the purple bow tied neatly around her hair. Or maybe it was that small yellow blanket, sexy and warm, that she carried with her, held close for comfort. I thought: *I love you. You love me. Let's get together and make babies. With a great big hug and an hour full of fun...* Yet...we were there for business, that Gentleman's Club agenda. We told the bitches we weren't interested in "more," at least, not that night, though it would be our last at that bar.

Our activities started the following Sunday. Gospel music poured out of every window along St. Paul Street, filling the air with wailing 'hallelujah's and the sweet sounds of 'Praise the Lord.' Fathers tied their ties and slid on their slick leather shoes. Children wriggled into their clothes, all fussing while they put on that itchy Easter suit or the same old floral print dress that they had worn several times before. And mothers paced frantically back and forth in fear of being late to church once again, scared of what the others might say when they realized that she wasn't sitting in the pew that she normally sat in on Sunday—*What could be more important than church? This shows her true character. She's obviously not as devout as she pretends to be.*

As the entire neighborhood hurried to be at church and to listen to the pastor's sermon, a stranger walked the soon empty streets, canvassing the area, just one of those people who didn't care. It was McGruff, circling the neighborhood in that same trench coat that

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made him famous back in the day. Although he didn't care about sin and holiness anymore, the honest-to-God truth was that he hadn't gone to those houses with any intention of causing damage, just the simple hope of dissolving the barriers that those along St. Paul Street had built up:

First it was the wrought-iron fences that bothered him. They encircled each property with the sole purposes of keeping others out and hiding their dirty little secrets within. After all, it was the only thing these people could really lose. If any of those secrets ever got out, they had the power to destroy, and the destruction would be swift and unruly. Then it was the "Beware Dog" signs, sending a very clear message—*Leave or be bitten by the ferocious dog that we purchased to keep you out, maybe to protect our possessions, but mostly just to keep you out.*

He began with the numerous "Beware Dog" signs that decorated those thick iron gates of the large mansion at the corner. He tore the signs down, one by one, tearing them into strips before he arranged them into a neat pile near the entrance of the gate then climbed, jumping forward into the front yard. The trespassing was just the first sign that he was truly born into what he always called a "condition of sin," growing up in the slums and the city. After all, he had been taught very early on that it was inevitable; he would be known as a gangster and a thief one day. And with the Gentleman's Club operating in the city, it was a reputation he would soon build for himself.

Later inside that same house on St. Paul Street, he moved from room to room in a silent rage, Smokey and I watching intently. He thought about each item before he broke it or stuffed it into the thick pockets of his trench coat. When finished, he stood against the bleak bedroom wall, satisfied. As he stared across the piles of shattered

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glass and torn photographs and broken dreams, there was nothing else he could have felt, but satisfaction. After all, it isn't so much what is stolen that bothers robbery victims, but rather what is left broken in pieces, scattered around as if thought about then discarded in anger or desperation—the antique crystal glasses left shattered, the ballerina music box twirling aimlessly with her torso snapped in half.

For McGruff, he wanted that uneasiness to rest in the neatness in the piles of destroyed things, arranged with an unexpected intimacy that should disturb them. He wanted them to question the purpose of all that destruction, what lesson he was trying to teach. The answer was in the notes—"It's time for a change for you *and* for the city"—that he left them to be found in awkward places—in the freezer behind the half-eaten ice cream that the mother incessantly ate or attached to the knife that the teenage girl used to cut herself sometimes. For him, it served as a sign that he had studied them intently, that this was not just the aftermath of a storm they had never anticipated, had never prepared for.

He explained to us, the transition between his former self and the self he became, as a simple refocusing of his energies to the more urgent issues within the city. He was just acting with the sense of immediacy and rashness he thought warranted by the situation. After all, the poverty was undoubtedly disturbing—the children stealing from local groceries, the wealth of homeless people (some his friends, his family) sleeping on the sidewalks late night. It was because of the condition in the city that McGruff initially proposed the formation of our Gentleman's Club and the decision to implement our own modest proposals, regardless of what they were and what was lost in the process. It was a last ditch effort to bring back life into the places we loved.

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And the reality *was* that McGruff loved the city intensely, though it was falling apart, practically dying back in those days. His love was based in an awkward kind of silent faith that things would eventually get better. And staring at the abandoned buildings and the history captured behind boarded up doors and windows, he realized often that his love was hope—something worth saving. So, he was willing to steal like a modern Robin Hood, in order to protect it and build it up. That was why he was on St. Paul Street that Sunday, scavenging the nicest homes. It wasn't the malicious desire to destroy, which many of his later victims would believe. Instead, it was his love and the drive and the hurriedness that he brought to advancing his goal of improving the city that drove him to deconstructing its surrounding all at once. Sometimes you just have to tear it down to make it any better.

Later still that Sunday following our meeting, the nine o'clock night air was filled with the late night scent of dead animal carcasses rotting slowly as campers slept snugly in their four-bedroom tents and campfires fizzed out surrounded by then hot stones. Children fooled around with flashlights, making puppets and playing flashlight tag until their parents disturbed them, warning them to go to sleep or else. Fathers locked up food into metal cabinets so that the smell couldn't escape and that no animals would come around for a late night snack. And mothers, well, mothers just shifted back and forth in their sleeping bags, worried about the possibility of some vicious bear attacking her family while they slept—*What about bears? Oh, what would I do if it hurt my babies? What was that noise? Honey go out and see if it's a bear!*

While everyone in the forest was sleeping or worrying, a stranger crept through the trees and the fallen leaves, scanning the ground

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with his flashlight, so as to avoid broken branches and the noise that could alert witnesses. It was Smokey. McGruff and I followed behind, distant so as not to interfere, close enough, though, to help if we were needed. He was no longer worried about sleep; he too would be sleeping in hibernation. He was more concerned, however, about maintaining the silence as he worked, not interested in stamping out campfires or blowing out the kerosene lamps still burning too closely to dry leaves. After all, he had warned them in the past—"only *you* can prevent forest fires"—and clearly they didn't take his message to heart, so he sought to teach them a lesson.

He was bothered by such mistreatment of the forest—soda cans and candy wrappers tossed aside instead of trashed, tree branches purposefully broken for mid-afternoon sword fights with friends. See, Smokey was motivated by his love for the forest—a deep infatuation, unrestrained, but also unreciprocated—a fact I doubt he ever realized. It was a deep passion for the trees and the leaves and the sense of peace he achieved while mediating in forgotten campsites, alone, just the breeze and the air he grew up with. He loved that scent and that feeling and that peace that he submersed in when he was alone in the forest. In fact, he depended on it, was willing to do whatever it took to preserve that feeling. Apparently, whatever it took meant a fire, more like a blaze that could be seen burning for miles—a spectacle and a message as he saw it. Sometimes you just have to let it burn and hope that things will work out in the end.

But, it wasn't so much the forest that he wanted to destroy, though there were others he could retreat to if he did. The truth was that he just wanted to eliminate the opportunity for it to be abused. He didn't want to spread the message of an arsonist, but rather that of a horrible campfire accident that would inspire people to protect the forest themselves. It was his job to inspire you to prevent forest

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fires, so he justified his actions to himself as just fulfilling public service once again. So, he began with a pile of decomposing leaves in the center of the forest. A nearby family had left a campfire burning to give them warmth as they slept that cold December night. But regardless of their reasons for leaving it, they were wrong; there were no good excuses for leaving a fire unattended, or so he thought as he added leaves to the pile.

It was circular and tall—the perfect kind of mound kids like to jump in after the leaves are raked and the yard looks decent again. When finished sculpting the pile, he doused it with kerosene, pouring almost the entire can, saving just a little in case he needed some more later. He pulled out a match, lit it and held it burning in his hand, staring at the glowing orange as it flickered and twirled in the breeze. He began to question himself, was this really him? Was this really happening tonight? It was, but as he held the match, he realized that although it was his love that made him passionate about the forest in the first place, he was truly amazed with the fire and the power that it had to destroy so much so quickly. He dropped the match and the mound of leaves was engulfed in flames. Softly he chanted under his breath—burn, burn, burn baby burn—and the leaves did burn and the flames did spread as he had prayed for, yet feared at the same time.

It grew later and later that Sunday at the bar, felt like Monday because, by then, we were all exhausted from our work and the trials of our days. I had put aside my fantasies for the moment and we had settled down into our hard work of planning the activities of the Club. After a few hours of discussing and planning and figuring the little things out, Smokey had to leave. He left a few dollar bills

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on the table before rushing out the door. He was late and his wife would start worrying, not about him or the possibility that he might be hurt, but rather she worried that he might be living a double life with another family, other children. She worried she was just another, the affair, the late night fling that kept going on until he said so. Anyway, McGruff and I continued to talk as the night went on.

What would each of us be doing over the next few weeks before we met again? Would we need any help carrying out our individual plans? What effect would this have on the places and the people we loved? All of those questions had to be answered that Sunday at Boondocks because things were already in motion. There would be no time to prepare later, no apologies for inaction if one of us were to be caught. Everything had to run smoothly in order to make a difference.

And secretly each of us prayed that it wasn't too late or that our work would make enough of a change, so that it would inspire even those who simply couldn't be inspired anymore. But the entire time we were scheming, I just couldn't stop thinking, just couldn't stop staring at that little girl, still standing in the corner with her blanket held close.

Over the course of the night, we stared at each other for just one short moment—her lips painted with a deep red gloss, cheeks accentuated with a little pink blush, fishnet stockings, those small ballerina slippers hugging those tiny, sexy toes. She carried that blanket as if her life depended on it. And I wanted to meet her, not with the others around, not in the safety of this city bar, but rather beneath that blanket that she coveted—the two of us embraced in a secret passion that extended beyond McGruff's love for the city, that was stronger than Smokey's infatuation with the forest he grew

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up in.

But I watched her from the corner, fully engaged with her and the moment, though McGruff kept talking and asking questions and tapping me on the shoulder whenever I failed to respond. "What the hell do you want McGruff?! That sounds good alright. I'm thinking, I'm thinking, just leave me alone for a second." Then I looked over. *Damn it. She's gone:* I thought. Then he asked me, "So what do you think about my proposal?" I never answered, didn't stay with McGruff too much longer. Instead, I followed that timid little girl with the bow and the blanket, followed and embraced her all the way home.

Thank you,
see you next year.

In this issue:

Jennifer Bodgan, Erica Campbell, Lorraine Cuddeback, John Dougherty, Laura Klebanow, Nicholas Marx, Kendra Richard, Caitlin Rohan, Matt Rooney, Lindsay Rubino, Betsy Van Langen, Christopher Varlack