AUSTIN NIGHTS

By
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SMASHWORDS EDITION

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This book is a work of fiction and any resemblance to persons, living or dead, or places, events or locales is purely coincidental. The characters are productions of the author's imagination and used fictitiously.

Adult Reading Material

*****

{for bridget}

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AUSTIN NIGHTS

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3.

Today is April 1st, and I just finished recording a 4:01 video to celebrate the moment. Bridget is driving the white Silverado packed to the hilt with the stuff we couldn't do without: our home.

We're driving a long way. Miami Beach was death defying, but we have to leave now, leave the giant ocean with its therapeutic sands and salts for no less than five years.

Austin will be our new stomping ground. We're driving there as I write. Bridget has both hands on the wheel. Sometimes there's a large iced latte between her legs.

I find the mixture of caffeine and inner thighs more stimulating than just caffeine. Goosebumps from the iciness of her refreshment riddle her flesh. I reach over and grab the cup without asking for a sip. She doesn't make a sarcastic remark.

"Thanks," I say, lingering when I put the iced latte back between her legs.

She raises her eyebrows high above her Tri-Rail sunglasses and says, "Good, isn't it?"

"Very."

I slide her iPhone into the passenger door pocket and look at the familiar I-95 North scenery. Nothing has changed really, not in the four years I've lived in South Florida at least.

"What a beautiful day," says Bridget, her window rolled down.

The highway and air sound loud outside. She has to shout everything to be heard. But if we roll the windows up and crank the AC, mpg in the Chevy plummets from 20 to a little less than fifteen, and we're on a budget.

1

Off in the distance, a train speaks in Austin. I listen to the whistle and wonder where it's going. If it has a long way yet or if it has already arrived.

We're exploring the South Lamar area on our way to Half-Price Books. We walk over railroad tracks as the whistle blows again. It sounds closer. Will we see the train?

I think I can speak for both of us when I say we're feeling full of life these days.

Suddenly, I fancy walking along these railroad tracks.

Dear Lord, where would we be without the railroad?

I say to Bridget, "We need to walk along these tracks soon."

She says, "We can do that."

I look north down the tracks. Their graceful curve through the trees and over the creeks toward downtown is different than anything I've ever seen.

"Austin is so photogenic," I say. "We need to get a real camera."

"Right?" Bridget collates some reddish gold hair behind her ear. "It's such a beautiful place."

We hug each other around the waist and face north, wildflowers growing all around us, trees growing taller than the wildflowers, and glassy skyscrapers growing taller than the trees, and we understand why so many people love it here.

Austin, you seem to have it all.

4

Close to Winter Garden, a Florida Orange Center billboard lures us off the turnpike. The center promises free orange juice samples at exit 304.

Bridget sees the billboard and parks the Silverado in a mostly vacant parking lot.

I take a picture of the Florida Orange Center Seminoles. Bridget wanders off to what turns out to be a fifteen-foot, mummified Florida gator behind thick glass.

“It’s rotting,” says Bridget.

She’s right. There are cobwebs festooned along its teeth, and from the tip of its nose to a plastic tree stump.

I take a couple photos with her iPhone. In the first, she’s acting a bit sexy. In the second, she’s terrified of the gator. Her mouth is open and her fingers are fanned out next to hollowed cheeks.

Inside the Orange Center, we get a noseful of honey and citrus. There’s a shelf of one-quart orange juice bottles for $2.99. They look like miniature plastic gallon jugs of water, except they’re orange.

We go to the back of the store for free samples. A lady with her arm stabilized in a cast and sling asks if I can push the lever while she holds plastic cups under the spout. I oblige. The generous samples she pours are fresh enough that we buy a quart of goodness for the road.

As the cashier rings up our purchase, I grab a hexagonal mesh of honeycomb for sale on the counter and shake my head. Bridget knows what I’m thinking. One sting from a bee (or wasp) and I go straight into anaphylactic shock.

This honeycomb is my frailty. This honeycomb is my Darwinian soft spot.

1

I don’t know exactly how to start. Michael is the writer. I’m the graduate student. He gave me his computer and asked me to start writing about Austin. He told me to just go ahead and write. He’ll find a way to use whatever I write.

I’ve only read bits and pieces of what he has written, and I only vaguely have an idea of what he wants this *memory* to achieve. I assume writers want to give readers an experience. Writers want to affect readers. But Michael never talks about this.

I feel like I have to help him out. I have to give this memory some effect. Readers are all about the effect. But the snippets I’ve scanned are like a journal. At least that’s the impression I get. I don’t think people want to read some stranger’s journal.

Who is Michael, after all? I mean, I love the guy with all my heart, but not *everyone* loves Michael.

He has no readers.

To get readers he needs to throw in some effect. I think that's why he asked me to add to this memory. *I*'m the effect, which is quite flattering. But, honestly, I can't promise him much. I've never written anything like this, at least not as an adult.

He did give me a clue as to why he wants me to write with him. He said a good way to make a song catchy is to make it a duet.

I know he's on to something here. Think about Scarlett Johansson and Pete Yorn, or Beyoncé and Jay-Z.

Then think about Ella Fitzgerald and Louis Armstrong.

5

Not only are public libraries a celebration of everything true and noble, but they are also the meeting grounds for vagabonds and the mentally ill.

Vagabonds are harmless. They tidily keep to themselves. But they also stink to high heaven, and this holds true for vagabonds in all time zones. Sometimes I'll be sitting on a nice library couch, working on my memory away from the stench of vagabonds on the computer terminals and desks, and this black swan will walk through the door with a plastic grocery bag hanging from his fingers. Without really thinking, he'll snatch a magazine or newspaper and plant right next to me.

A matter of survival, of adapting to my surroundings. My gut wrenches, my nostrils constrict. The smell of iron, layers of dried sweat, grease, bad breath, pee, feces, feet, and cultures of bacteria in their armpits all mix into one revolting scent that kills my appetite.

I begin to worry if this horrid stink will stick to me. Taint me. This stink is enough to keep me off the street. I don't ever want to smell like vagabonds.

A life of hard labor leaves a person smelling differently than a life on the street.

Is it all right if I change seats, I always wonder when this happens, *would it be hurtful if I moved to another spot, far away from this rotting potato? Or is tolerance proper? Is this not what being human smells like, after all? Take away the soap, the shampoo and the conditioner, take away the perfume and cologne, take away all these manufactured fragrances, and isn't everyone a rotting potato at heart?*

But, when all is said and done, I'd rather be in the company of rotting potatoes than the mentally ill. The mentally ill are imbalanced. They may smell decent sometimes, but they are batty and unpredictable.

They can also be unabashedly lecherous. I'm thinking of one guy in particular. He's somewhere in his 20s, a regular patron of the Twin Oaks Library here in the South Congress area. I'm not sure what his issue is, but his mind is off kilter. I don't know this at first. In fact, my first impression is just that he looks strange, like a leprechaun.

He screws his eyes on Bridget. I try not to notice his conspicuous ogling and go about writing my memory. Bridget is sitting next to me on the garish couch, combing the web on her laptop. She wants to find one of her favorite TV shows.

The leprechaun runs off toward a pot of gold, which happens to be a 30 minute time slot on one of the computer terminals. When his time ends, he takes his spiral notebook and walks right by us. His scent is neutral, but he doesn't seem very clean, especially the soles of his feet, which are stained black.

He takes off his loose flip-flops, wipes his feet, and walks around the library barefoot, pacing like a man trying to figure things out in his house, pacing back and forth. It isn't until he appears from in between the stacks dragging a massive backpack with hiking boots dangling by the laces that I begin to hold this leprechaun suspect.

If I owned a dog, I'm sure it would've growled and barked uncontrollably. Innocent until proven guilty doesn't hold in the world of dog, or at least dogs find guilt using a different kind of process, one more instinctual, one more about survival, not justice, not learned law.

The leprechaun waits for another computer terminal to open. This one is situated closer to Bridget. He hurries the man at this terminal.

He asks, "How much longer do you have?"

"Five minutes," says the man.

It's during this short span that the leprechaun throws propriety out the door and becomes unabashedly lecherous. His eyes penetrate Bridget without a blink. Every time I look toward him, he's digging deeper into her with a diamond encrusted optical bit.

Sometimes he sees me blocking his path, but this doesn't stop him. He's a man capable of inhumanity. I can see it in his gimlet eyes, in his complete disrespect for the ties that bond one person to another.

I can do what Michael asked me to do and write about Austin, but I think he's already doing that, pretty much every day.

Austin is beautiful. I love it here. We haven't seen enough of it yet to really like it, but we've seen enough to know it's physically appealing.

Michael's always quick to point out there's no beach in Austin. We both miss the beach, but we prepared ourselves for this gaping absence. At least that was our plan. And for the most part, Michael doesn't pine for the sea. Only when he's on the phone with friends does he say, "Yeah, but Austin isn't 0.5 miles from the ocean."

He always says *zero-point-five*, not *half-a-mile*, or *around the block*, or *close*. He has a strange way of saying things. He really does. Like he pronounces the silent T in *buffet*.

At first I thought he was trying to be funny, but then I realized he even says the silent T to people he hardly knows.

When I correct him, "You don't say the T. The T is silent. You know that, right?"

He says, "I *know*."

But he still says the T.

Then there are times when he sounds like my grandfather. Like the first time I heard him talk about the ghetto, which is pretty much where I lived when we first met, and he said *hooligans*.

C'mon, who says hooligans? I'll tell you who – my grandfather, not my boyfriend.

Or last night, he comes out and says with a totally straight face, "We could go to New Orleans and eat a poor boy."

"Po' boy!" I tell him, "You mean po' boy!"

He doesn't understand. His reasoning is, "McMurtry wrote poor boy. I think *po' boy* and *poor boy* are alternates. Either way, I know it isn't wrong to say poor boy."

And he starts saying poor boy all night. Language for him isn't something to take lightly. He respects language so much he *over* says things.

He ends up sounding either silly or like my grandfather.

"What?" he asks. "You think I'm a stuffy white guy just because I say poor boy?"

I look him dead in the eyes and say, "Yes. *Hello?*"

Every grandson should keep the memory of his grandfather alive. This isn't meant to be sexist. Please – grandmothers should be brought to life, too.

Long live grandmothers!

But everything in this memory will come as it's remembered.

Bridget, though not a blood relative of Granddad, does more than could ever be done the day she illustrates and watercolors him nursing a green bottle of beer, his hands folded elegantly on his lap.

I take his picture, but Bridget brings him to life in a way only Bridget can do.

Flashback:

Granddad visits me in college. My freshman year he solo-drives from Boca Raton all the way to Hyde Park, Chicago. Granddad is a driver, up there with the best of them. He can drive cross-country without touching the soft shoulder. I've never gone on some long-distance pull with him, but I know he can drive. The road for Granddad is a lapidary gem. He studies the road and sees everything he could ever want to see.

When the day comes that he can't drive anymore, a large part of Granddad dies.

I know this because I see the look in his eyes, at the age of 80, after driving all by himself around 1,330 miles, from Boca to my dormitory at the University of Chicago, and stopping only once in a Tennessee rest area for a couple hours of shuteye.

He carries my golf clubs into my dorm room and sits on the fake leather reading chair. He folds his hands elegantly on his lap, just like Bridget, quite a few years later, paints them, and he's wildly enlightened, like he just got back to The City after spending time in The Forest learning about things and coming to terms with Life.

Granddad, sitting in the faux leather chair, is dapper in a colorful wool sweater. His bright silver hair is parted. Even though I haven't visited him in some time, I can tell he's freshly barbered, straight razor and all, doing the best he can.

Bridget and I are drinking sixteen-ounce cans of Lone Star poolside when a man wearing a sombrero comes out to his patio for a late afternoon smoke.

What I like about his patio is the garden design – succulents in terra cotta pots. I can't call them by their scientific names, but I do see an agave blossom.

"I like your succulents," I say.

"Thank you," says the man in the sombrero.

He lights a cancer stick and drags. For a second, I think I see the color of his eyes, the same aqua blue as the swimming pool. I take a hit of Lone Star. I have no intention of reading the little existential book I have with me. It's dormant on the Chattahoochee.

Dostoevsky's translated words aren't going anywhere without me, I think, *but life, this moment, I can't say the same. When outside of your house, Michael, it's critical to live. Save reading for the times when you have nothing better to do than stare at that green wall. When will Bridget decorate it with her artwork? We need to hang some artwork on that wall.*

"I do garden design on the side," offers the man in the sombrero when he sees I'm trying to avoid reading. "What do you guys do?"

This is a question I always balk at. When you're a student, people ask what's your major. When you're out of school, people ask what you do for a living. Formalities I'd rather do without.

"I'm starting grad school at UT in the fall," says Bridget, picking up the slack.

"That's a great school," says the man in the sombrero, "the ivy of state schools. What in?"

"Clinical Psychology."

The man in the sombrero laughs and takes a hearty drag. "That's a good thing to be studying around here," he says. He says, "Lots of basket cases in Austin."

Bridget, probably conjuring the leprechaun and the verbally abusive bastard child in our building, agrees wholeheartedly. Her dimples pucker as she swigs Lone Star.

"I'm unemployed," I say, not wanting to shirk the question.

The man in the sombrero buoyantly nods three times. "Okay," he says, "cool. I'm Abe."

5

On this overcast day in Austin, Bridget decides to buy a camera she found last night on craigslist.

I understand we need a camera if we want to capture Austin and shape it to our liking. The iPhone won't do Austin justice.

There's too much green energy here, too much physical beauty willing to be digitally preserved.

But this need to preserve shouldn't get in the way of appreciating Austin's beauty as it lives. We must remember to experience things with our own senses rather than once removed through the lens of a camera.

The guy we're buying it from has rusty straight hair that falls to his traps. He wears the superfluous beanie. He has a barcode tater tot on the underside of his wrist. His cotton tee is burnt orange with a white and featureless longhorn centerpiece.

"The only reason I'm selling this camera," he says, "is because I got a digital SLR. It's necessary for my work now."

"You take photos for a living?" I ask.

"And video. I do production work. This camera was a great starter camera. The only reason it's a step under a DSLR is because the lens is fixed. Other than that, it has all the features and capabilities of most DSLRs on the market today."

"Really? So a fixed lens is the only difference between this and a DSLR?"

"Yep. That's what makes this is a bridge camera. But believe me, it can do everything. I know you'll love this camera. It takes great images in auto. And if you want more control, throw it in manual."

"Can you give us a quick overview?" asks Bridget.

We're sitting outside on the patio of a nearby coffee shop. The patio overlooks a garden/greenhouse that sells plants and pots and general horticulture equipment.

"Sure," he says. "You can download the manual online, but I know how it is reading those things."

Apart from a primer on our new used camera, which really is quite nifty, beanie man also discloses the location in Austin that parties like Miami:

“Take Cesar Chavez west till you get to the end. There’s a lake there with boats to drink on. People go there to get down Miami style.”

He nods his head and looks at Bridget for approval. He doesn’t know partying in the style of Miami didn’t interest us in Miami, so it probably won’t interest us here.

“Where are you from?” I ask, always curious about people’s origins.

“I was born here,” he says. “In Austin.”

3

There are a lot of things that define who we are, or at least have the ability to define who we are, if we let them.

I’d like to think I don’t let things define me. This isn’t true, though. There are many things that define me. All I have to do is think about it, and I see how many things define me, and I see how it is I am the way I am.

Cross-country driving is one of those things. The road. The interstate. The highway. Four or more wheels rolling on asphalt for what seems like forever, but is in fact an easily quantifiable distance.

Miami Beach to the South Congress area in Austin is 1,350.8 miles if we hop on the turnpike, or 22 hours 45 minutes with traffic. Bridget’s iPhone estimates our travel time using the basic algebraic formula $r \times t = d$.

We can count on this basic formula on the road, like we can count on paradise in Miami Beach.

I wonder what we’ll be able to count on in Austin?

5

Michael is the least street-smart person I know. It’s pretty incredible how blind he is to what’s going on around him. Even when it’s still daylight, he’s totally oblivious of the most obvious criminal activities happening right before his eyes.

I seriously can’t believe him!

He tells me he was sheltered growing up, but on the walk to the library today it really hits me: Michael wasn't only sheltered, he was kept in the dark at the expense of common sense.

He can't blame his eyesight either. Not this time. He's wearing his eyeglasses. It's true he usually doesn't, but he makes a point to wear them when we're going to the library, in case the leprechaun is snooping in between the shelves.

Michael has his guard up when it comes to the leprechaun.

I'll admit I'm paranoid about the leprechaun, too. The leprechaun freaks me out.

Wait. I'm getting sidetracked.

A man in a large yellow t-shirt is walking several steps ahead of us on our way to the library. He lives in The Oaks, in the building next to ours. I think he's Mexican, but he could be Colombian or Greek or a New Yorker for all I know.

Michael is talking about how he doesn't like the sky here. He thinks the Austin sky is too white. He thinks it has too much glare, like a napalm sky. He speaks strongly about how the hazy Austin sky doesn't do it for him.

"Not compared to the sky in Miami," he says. "The sky in Miami made we *want* to go outside, even during the heat of day. But here in Austin, I'd prefer to stay inside. The sky here is brutal. It's punishing. It's unfriendly, like a sky full of napalm fires."

I'm not sure from what book he gets this weird simile. I know he has never in his life seen a napalm sky. I also know he recently finished reading *The Quiet American*, so that probably has something to do with it.

The man in the large yellow t-shirt is now a few yards ahead, north on Congress. He doesn't really seem like a shady character at all. When I spy him spinning a lanyard around his index finger and whistling catchy ditties, it doesn't seem like he'd belong to the underworld. But it doesn't surprise me.

Michael is thinking to himself, staring at the napalm sky, when the deal goes down. I don't call his attention to it, since it's so glaringly obvious. The man walks straight to the bus stop, drops a baggy of something into a duffel bag, and another man wearing a sun-bleached trench coat – even though it's 100 degrees out – smiles from earlobe to earlobe, checks what's in the sack, zips his duffel bag, and claps hands with Mister Yellow.

"What's up?" says the overly happy man in the trench coat. He casually sucks on a bit of cigarette. His fingertips are greasy.

"What's going on, bro?" replies the man in the yellow t-shirt. With his back facing us, he lifts one loafer onto the bus bench and turns contrapposto to make

sure we aren't street smart.

I feel like saying, "Well, *that* was pretty obvious!" I feel like calling him out, but I know Michael wouldn't approve. He prefers to fly under the radar. He doesn't like it when I draw unnecessary attention to us. But still!

"Did you see what just happened there?" I ask, when we're out of earshot.

"No," Michael says, pushing his eyeglasses higher on the ridge of his nose.

"You didn't notice the drug deal?" I ask.

"Drug deal?"

"*Hello?*" I exclaim. "The guy in the yellow t-shirt?"

"You mean the one who was walking just ahead of us from The Oaks?"

"Yes! He's clearly a drug dealer."

"Really?"

"Definitely. He dropped a plastic baggy into some guy's bag and then shook hands to get the cash, more of a high five, but to the side. Classic drug deal."

"I saw the two guys meeting, but I figured they were having an unexpected reunion."

"Are you kidding me? Ha! The guy in the trench coat *sure* was happy to reunite. Did you see his smile?"

"I did see him smile. He looked *very* happy." Michael laughs. "Was it weed?"

"I don't know," I say, slightly annoyed. "It was all wrapped up."

"So, a guy in The Oaks sells weed?" Michael amuses himself. "I wonder if he has some good regs? Like those Jamaican regs we had in Miami?"

"What I loved about that drug deal was the handclap at very the end," I say, trying to teach him about the street and get off the topic of weed. "It's the same way kids pass notes in school."

"Keen observation," says Michael. "We learn survival skills early on."

We?

I'm not so sure Michael ever learned this set of survival skills, to be honest. I wonder if he ever passed notes, or if he even knew passing was going on all around him. He probably thought everyone was being especially friendly. Maybe

he even felt left out. You gotta love the guy.

But Michael's total lack of common sense doesn't stop there. On the walk home from the library, at the exact same bus stop on Congress, we see a teenager who makes no attempt at being discrete about what he has in his hands. I don't say anything at first because the man in the large yellow t-shirt is nearby, leaning against a fence post.

He's still twirling a lanyard, but the ditty whistling has stopped.

Once we're out of earshot, "Did you see what that kid was holding?"

"What kid?" asks Michael.

"At the bus stop," I say. "He was the only person there."

"No, I didn't see him holding anything."

"You're joking, right?"

"I was looking at the cell phone on his lap. It had *wicked* flames painted on it."

"So you didn't see the bag of weed in his hands?"

"Are you serious?" asks Michael. "He had *weed*? Out in the open?"

"Yes! And the guy with the yellow shirt was still hanging around."

"I *did* see him," says Michael, acting smart all of a sudden. "I thought you were going to point him out, but instead you point out a whole bag of weed! Incredible. I must be blind. Did it look good?"

8

Jon does tell us we might need to change the oil in the Silverado. He says, "If the light comes on, you should change the oil. 40 bucks at Jiffy Lube."

Since neither Bridget nor I have ever seen the light Jon speaks of, we keep an eye out for anything unusual, expecting it to be some icon on the dashboard, probably yellow or orange.

We don't think it's the simple sentence that shows in the odometer panel every time we start the truck:

CHANGE ENGINE OIL

We figure Jon has seen the exact same sentence for a short while and is waiting for the yellow or orange icon to shine.

Once that icon shines, the oil needs to be changed. But for the time being, everything is as it should be, or at least how Jon left it, so the oil doesn't need to be changed yet.

9

My cousin, a decade my junior, comes over to visit us in Miami Beach. Our place is in disarray. Boxes are stacked in the corner and furniture is getting ready to be sold on craigslist. Honeyed Cat sits on a pile of unmade cardboard boxes, which she thinks of as her scratcher.

Shaggy makes his typical entrance. He carries three cone-shaped joints with him. He sticks the trio in between his lips and stretches his arms to absorb the glory of being alive and in the company of family.

"Think this'll do?" he asks. His sarcasm is duly noted.

We adjourn to the bedroom, close the door, open the jalousie window, and get stony.

What I like about Shaggy is that he calls me Coz, a valid Scrabble word. There is truth in being called Coz. It's special. It means something.

Dear Lord, what are we if not a relation to someone else?

"I'm good." This is me speaking, informing Shaggy I've had enough. He remains silent and treats himself to another voluminous pull.

Then he clears his pink lungs and asks, "Are you sure?"

Fragrant smoke enshrouds my face. It's enough persuasion for me to say, "All right."

Shaggy extends his arm and laughs, "That wasn't too hard, Coz."

"No," I say, hoarding another pull and smiling impishly. I say, "It wasn't."

7

In writing this memory of our life, I don't want to restrict myself to a straight line of causal prose. One section doesn't necessarily cause or affect the next, or even have a say in the general drift.

I don't want to dwell on the structure of this story, but I do want to say the *I* you are reading right now *is* the writer of this memory, or at least most of it.

But this isn't a journal. It's a memory meant to entertain.

Frida Kahlo painted from her life in the same way I write from mine. The richest aspect of her life was *her* life. Frida painted from what she experienced firsthand:

I paint myself because I am so often alone and because I am the subject I know best.

9

The balcony is a nice place to sit and talk, especially when you're drinking bananas, mango, apple, and tangelos soaked and cooled overnight in Italian Pinot Grigio.

I'm telling Bridget about the children's book I read at the library about Steve Jobs. Last week I learned about Fidel Castro, and this week I learned about Steve Jobs.

For a long time I've stayed away from biographies. The last biography I sat down with and learned from was *Bo Knows* by the great crossover athlete, Bo Jackson. But biographies can unintentionally keep people low, not by persuading them they aren't good enough to even pick an apple off a tree, but by making people enamored, even blinded by the unparalleled successes of these achievers, and all of a sudden it's enough that these people like you and me accomplished so much. All of a sudden, their mind-blowing life moves you straight into complacency, however enlightened you may be, you're just complacent: happy enough with everything you can let things ride like they are. That's my problem with biographies. The fantastic story of another person's life can suddenly become comfortably stifling.

It's kind of how I feel after I walk out of a really good movie. Every really good movie makes me feel the same way. Somewhere near the beginning, I want to stand up and leave and create a piece of art. I feel like I can do it, all I have to do is start writing.

But, invariably, I stay and watch the entire movie because it *is* a really good movie. I stay in my seat and keep my eyes focused and follow the dialogue all the

way till the very end. Then, I walk out and feel totally happy. The inexorable itch to create isn't there anymore. In its place there's a complacent man: comfortably stifled and eager to relate what I just watched rather than create something of my own.

Watching really good movies, for me, is like reading about the giant achievers, or the makers of our history. I read about these giant achievers, these history makers, and I am totally content by the very end. Their story, somewhere near the beginning, makes me feel optimistic, like I can do it. I can be Michael Davidson, the writer. I can put the book down and reach the ranks of the great achievers.

But, invariably, I read the entire book. Follow it closely word for word until the very end, and then I'm satisfied with what I've done. I've learned about Fidel Castro, or I've learned about Steve Jobs, or Bo Jackson, or Larry McMurtry of Archer County.

I not only learned, but I also felt really good doing it. Their stories are so spectacular, so against-the-odds, simply reading them puts me in a state of beatific awe, or, better yet, grace, and what's even better: I can relate their stories to other people and experience grace again.

It's a beautiful and strange thing, being able to identify with someone so closely they make you feel something real, like Making Dreams Come True, like having a vision and carrying it through to completion, because they've achieved everything *and some*.

But you haven't done a damn thing except read a biography.

We're sitting on our new balcony in Austin, Bridget and I, sipping pinot-soaked fresh mango, and I become inspired by the illustrious story of another person who doesn't know me and probably wouldn't give me a second of his time if I were to tell him my lackluster story. This doesn't keep me from trying my best to infect Bridget with my complacent admiration for Mister Think Different.

Steve Jobs travels to India, seeks gurus, lives in ashrams, becomes green, and he has no idea what he wants to do. That's why he's in India, to figure some shit out. It occurs to him, while witnessing serious poverty, Thomas Edison did more for people than any guru.

Steve Jobs has an epiphany, and he returns to Silicon Valley, back in the days when it had orchards, and starts Apple. Steve Jobs is a history maker. He made history doing exactly what he envisioned when he left India: using electricity to improve quality of life worldwide.

There. Grace.

3

At 2AM, Bridget is bleary eyed and ready to give the steering wheel to me. While she drove through Florida, Alabama, and Mississippi, I managed to catch a couple hours of shuteye, somehow, and feel up to the challenge of driving through the deep hours of the night.

Still, it seems prudent to buy caffeine pills. I figure any gas station will carry them in stock, but the first clerk I ask in a Louisiana Kangaroo Express tells me if they're not on the shelf with the other pills, they don't have them.

I try a different Kangaroo Express, on the north side of I-10.

I lock my lover inside the Chevy's cab. She gazes at me through her bloodshot eyes, helpless and delirious, and I walk toward the automatic doors.

A man behind the counter is busy being busy at 2AM. He thumbs through pages on a cheap clipboard. I can't understand his business.

"Already 277 customers," he says to me without looking up from his pages, "and it's only Thursday night. We're busy."

He nods his head, then he shakes his head: a man in Louisiana in disagreement and agreement with himself.

I ask if he has any caffeine pills. He says he took two tonight.

"I'm jittery," he says, "I feel great right now, completely on top of things, *wired*." He nods his head. "But when I come down," he says, "I'm going to crash like a 747." He shakes his head and makes the sound of a falling airplane.

I ask what pills he took. He hands me a four-pill package from the back wall. Each pill is colored like a wasp stinger. I read the ingredients and see Yellow 5, a synthetic food coloring phased out in the UK for its adverse health effects.

"You have anything else?" I ask, returning the stingers.

"Yeah," he says, "we have pure ephedrine, if you can believe that, but it's expensive."

I wonder if he's trying to peddle drugs to late night drivers. A little speed might do me good. At the very least, it'll keep me from taking micro naps and driving on the soft shoulder.

"How much is expensive?"

"Four bucks for four pills," he says. Then he does the math, "Buck a pill."

"That's reasonable."

Back in the car, Bridget is still bleary eyed from eleven hours straight of interstate. She took her concentration to the limits, and now she's feeling the consequences.

"I just tripped," she says.

"What do you mean?" I ask, curious about her usage of the word *tripped*.

"I just rested my head against this pillow and stared at the gas station. It felt like I was rushing forward, and the windshield wobbled."

"Wobbled?"

"You know, it moved like one of those mirrors in a fun house, all wavy, and all I saw was that clerk nodding and shaking his head. What's wrong with him?"

"Who?" I ask, combing her reddish gold hair off her temple. "Oh, he's all hopped up on Yellow 5."

Bridget wants to laugh, but there's only a snort left in her.

I lean over to kiss the crown of her head. Then I pop ephedrine into my mouth, jiggle the tiny pill on the flat of my tongue to feel its weight, and swallow down with some fresh orange juice.

"Off we go," I announce.

I turn the engine over, put the transmission in drive, and let the reflective green sign take me to the 1-10 West ramp. I merge onto the two-lane interstate. A semi flashes its taillights on and off twice.

I manually tune in a station on the FM dial and read the odometer. Bridget drove her half. It's my turn to drive the rest.

2

We take the camera out for a night of walking and photos. North on Congress Ave, there's a pink rosebush outside a small convenient store with a bevy of beer and wine to choose from, an inebriant for everyone, truly democratic.

But it's the pink rosebush that makes me stop and try out our new camera.

Experimenting with shutter speeds satisfies my compulsion to control the things

around me. I wouldn't call myself a Nazi, but I do like to shape reality in subtle ways, like adjusting shutter speeds, or making Honeyed Cat diurnal.

"Can I take a photo of you smelling that rose?" I ask Bridget.

"Which one?"

"The biggest."

I stabilize the camera on the mini-tripod, set it to maximum shutter speed, and snap three photos. Bridget looks paranormal, a visitor from elsewhere filling her senses with foreign stimuli.

How can we resist?

"Want to buy a road soda for our walk?" suggests Bridget.

"Yes," I say. I say, "I'd like that."

Inside, the sterile glow of fluorescents complements my buzz, courtesy of Shaggy. 1.5 pulls suffice. I become serious, or at least as serious as a little man from the beach can be under very specific circumstances. Beautiful Bridget, on the other hand, is buoyant as she glides to the back of the store and returns with an IPA we've had once before.

Although I'm tempted to follow suit, as I, too, am partial to a big beer of IPA, my past comes up for air and reminds me of the good-fun that comes with 24 ounces of Steel Reserve.

It has been years since I've experienced a 24-ounce can. Miami Beach only carries a stock of twelve- and sixteen-ounce cans. The last 24-ounce can I imbibed was in Ocean Beach, out there on the west coast, where the sun sets last and the airplanes deafen.

Back there, back then, I got 24 ounces for 100 cents.

Today, here, it costs 194 cents.

Oh well, I think, *it's worth the extra 94 cents.*

And it really is. From the inaugural sip, the taste of the high-gravity lager cooling my gullet and setting my mind abuzz: there's no lubricant quite like the Reserve.

While even the most intoxicated, urine-smelling street urchin maintain the Reserve is a headache in a can, I can't agree.

The Reserve is a font of creativity and progress.

This country's forefathers drank The Reserve.

I've done some of my best thinking on Reserve nights, and tonight, with the waxing moon high in the Austin sky, things are on the up and up.

3

The leprechaun is trying to explain he's in the process of doing something neat on the internet to the man who has five minutes left on the terminal.

The five-minute man doesn't pay him much mind. He's busy doing his own thing on the internet.

"I can get access to 200 Smart cars here in Austin," says the leprechaun, frothing at the mouth and staring directly at Bridget while he addresses the five-minute man. "But I can't do any of my work on those computers over there because they won't let me edit my site. I have some important work to do. It'll only take a few minutes. Are you almost done there?"

"Five minutes," says the man, "like I said."

The leprechaun jots something down in his notebook and then stares at Bridget. I let him know I'm aware of his ogling, but the leprechaun knows nothing about acceptable behavior.

Social mores: negative.

The five-minute man takes his sweet time. Even with the analog clock ticking behind him, he finishes his business online at his leisure. When he stands, he makes certain his collared shirt is significantly tucked in underneath his gut, checks his Casio, plugs his yellow umbrella underneath his arm, and saunters away without bidding so much as a fare thee well to the eager leprechaun.

I remember there's a 30 percent chance of rain today. Outside, the white skies are cloudy but hardly pregnant with rain. A 70 percent chance the umbrella won't be used, and still the five-minute man thinks it's worth carrying around all day. This is a clear case of overprotecting yourself.

The leprechaun sits in front of the computer, which happens to offer a prime view of Bridget. I hear him make some keystrokes, pause, and then stare at Bridget.

He stares for no less than a minute, burning into her with his psychotic eyes.

Bridget is oblivious to his impropriety. She wears earphones and is watching one of her TV shows she can't watch at home because we don't have a digital receiver.

Nor do we have the internet.

At home, we're an island, disconnected and even estranged from the current of life that never stops flowing. At home, we do a lot of reading and talking, a lot of eating and cooking, a lot of naked loving and sleeping, a lot of playing with Honeyed Cat, a lot of Scrabble, a lot of watching movies on our projector. At home, we pay no mind to the bouncy ADHD world of the internet and TV.

Bridget also plays piano. She's thinking about taking lessons.

But the leprechaun, for some reason, inspires worry in me, like if he somehow found out the whereabouts of our home, what would he do?

He seems capable of anything, there at the computer with his sooty bare feet and his bold ogling.

And now his equally sooty hands are underneath the desktop, probably playing with himself as he stares at my lover.

I make a mental note: keep an eye on this pervert. When he finishes jerking off, he wipes his hands on his shorts. I shake my head and reprovingly close my eyes. *Is he serious*, I think, *did he really just do that?*

The next thing I know, he's sitting right next to me with a grungy notebook and pen ready for note taking. It takes every bit of my self-restraint to keep from springing on him and wringing his neck. He seems breakable. He's weaker than me. His shoulders are gaunt and narrow. I could easily take him. I could.

But then, from out of nowhere, he surprises me when he projects his mousy voice across my lap toward Bridget, who doesn't hear him at first because of her earphones and the TV show playing on her laptop.

He waves his icky hands at her and repeats, "How old are you?"

Bridget removes her earphones and casts an impersonal gaze at the leprechaun.

He asks for the third time, "How old are you? Are you like fifteen?"

"No," says Bridget, "I'm actually 22."

"22!" he ejaculates. "Seriously? You look like you're fifteen." His words are derogatory. He isn't paying her a compliment. It's shameful for her to be a day older than fifteen. It's inconsistent with his fantasy.

He engages his pen and intrudes further, "Where do you hang out? What bars do you go to at night?"

"Um," says Bridget, hesitating to answer, "we haven't been to any bars in Austin

yet. We don't really go out much."

The leprechaun rolls his eyes and says, "Sure you don't." He ignores that she said *we*: *we* haven't been to any bars yet. Even though I'm right here in between them, I don't exist. *If there is any way I can make this any easier for you*, I think, *please let me know. You can call me milksop. Milksop's my name.*

He says, "You've never been to a bar here? What do you do for entertainment then?"

Bridget shakes her head. She has given him enough time. "I don't know," she says curtly. "We stay home a lot." She brings her earphones close to her ears. She's trying to tell him she doesn't want to talk anymore.

I should hop in and interrupt, but I've become pointless, a dumb duck in the middle. I'm only here to watch. Don't mind me, the name's Milksop. Milksop's my name.

Idiot!

"Stay home a lot?" persists the leprechaun. "That sounds like fun. You don't go out?"

"Not really," says Bridget.

Is he going to ask her for a date? I think, worried. *Stop being such a coward, Michael! Lay down the law before it's too late.*

My armpits drip a bead of sweat.

The leprechaun doesn't want to stop at Bridget's answer. He won't stop. He says, "I can get access to 200 Smart cars in Austin, but I need to find out where people hang out. That's all I'm trying to get out of you, some information for my business."

His business?

At this, Bridget shifts her eyes to her laptop screen and scrolls to the bottom of the site with her touchpad. When she's about to put her earphones back in place, the leprechaun mutters nonsense, scratches angrily on his notebook, and disengages his ballpoint pen. He zips his massive backpack, turns his elfish nose away from us, and surprises me again when he side-talks to no one in particular. But it sounds like he's threatening to murder us.

Bridget is the first to dive in. She's in her black bikini with blue goggles in her hand.

"It's cold," she says, "I don't know if I can stand this for long."

She giggles.

"Is it colder than the ocean?" I ask.

"Yeah," she says, teeth chattering.

"Really?"

She nods, her reddish gold hair silvery wet under the Austin sun.

"You'd think it would've warmed up already," I say. I say, "I guess I'll stay dry then."

I uncross my legs and spread them wide on the chaise lounge. *At least it's pretty out*, I think. *I'm glad to be here rather than inside*.

Bridget slips underwater, opens her legs, scissor kicks them in, and propels toward the other side with her arms. I want to take a picture of her, so I blink my eyes.

Bridget's beautiful, I think. My hands clasp and smugly settle on my stomach.

Abe opens his sliding screen and steps outside onto his succulent-filled patio, which is adjacent to the community pool here at The Oaks.

To make conversation, I ask him where he comes from.

"I was born in the San Bernardino Valley," says Abe.

"Oh yeah," I say, "I lived in Ocean Beach a little."

"It's beautiful there," says Abe. "Beautiful part of the country."

"Yes," I say, "it is beautiful there, but the airplanes are a problem. They call it the OB Pause, every time a plane flies over and conversations stop. How's the valley?"

"Back when I lived there, it was a serious place. Lots of guns, lots of hellions and real bluegrass. I played gigs in watering holes that seem like folklore now. I moved to LA, from there to Houston."

"Oh yeah," I say, "I lived in Houston, too."

“Whereabouts?” asks Abe.

“Memorial area,” I say.

“Okay,” says Abe, nodding largely. “I lived in Montrose.”

“I like that area,” I say. I say, “I think it’s the neatest part of Houston.”

“It really is,” says Abe, “at least I think so. You can walk pretty much everywhere, and the art museums are first-rate. But I only lived there three years. After that, I moved here to Austin. I love it here.” Abe pulls on his cancer stick. He has sucked down three since our conversation started. Abe is a chain smoker. “From California to Texas,” says Abe, “from an extremely liberal state to extremely conservative, but you want to know one thing I find surprising?”

“What’s that?”

“Texans are more supportive of people’s loony ideas. Here in Texas, when someone wants to get a new business going, no matter how *out there* it is, Texans welcome the idea and encourage the hustler to get out there and go for it. But in California, they sure are quick to point out the pitfalls, quick to poke holes and deflate entrepreneurship.”

I stare at my ten toes. I fan them and say, “Good observation.”

Abe sucks on his cancer stick, “It’s true. At least that’s how it’s gone around me.”

What I like about Abe is his profound and articulate understanding of *his* life. He is his own master. Although he has his share of experiences and well-formed opinions, he understands these are specific to him and not necessarily shared.

4

Come to think about it, the leprechaun is more elfish, or at least enough of an elf that it should’ve been mentioned in conjunction with his moniker from the beginning.

The leprechaun *elf*.

I’m sorry for the inaccuracy. I was in a hurry to commit this memory to my hard drive.

And from there, where will it travel, into whose hands, under whose eyes? Or will it simply harden into a long string of zeros and ones?

So many of my memories have hardened into binary digits.

I don't even turn their ignition at regular intervals to keep them alive, like the Civic I leave parked on Jon's berm in Hollywood while we take his white Silverado to Austin.

The Civic, I worry about. The rear driver tire has a slow leak I've neglected to do anything about for months. I'm certain it'll be flat, or as good as flat, when we return.

The oil, though synthetic, will also have to be changed.

I know these problems will need to be remedied before even attempting to complete the third and final leg of our epic cross-country transplant.

But what I don't know is when I use the battery I haven't started for days to run Jon's cigarette-lighter compressor and pump my nearly flat tire enough to make it to the tire shop, the corroded battery will be milked of its sap, rendering it incapable of holding even one more charge.

I can't be upset. 97,000 miles off one battery, and never so much as a hiccup until Jon's wife, Cynthia, has to give us a jump.

Is this also the fate of the memories I've let harden into zeros and ones? Will I have to find another Cynthia to help get them running again, at least running enough to make it to the repair shop? Or, if that day ever comes, will they be irredeemable, lost forever on a hard drive? The argument against writing on computers is there's a chance to permanently lose your data, especially if you aren't at least somewhat responsible about making backups, preferably onto a reliable server.

Otherwise, writing on computers is a terribly foolish business. Fashioning your ideas into words then fashioned into zeros and ones on your shaky hard drive is an effort that should be avoided from the beginning.

Better to write on paper, where your ideas are made into physical words, not binary digits. Keep your words in a safe place, however, in case a black swan goes after them in some unpredictable and unavoidable swoop.

Pardon my pseudo-intellectual epiphany, but I feel it's worth knowing that when The End comes and everything resets except for our Conscious Mind, the only tales accessible to new generations will be the ones communicated orally, not by zeros and ones, or even the written word, but the ones remembered.

And so I'll make this a memory.

I've already decided I'm going to work with what I have. Michael has faults, like anybody else, but I'm going to work with his faults and make the most of them.

That doesn't mean every now and then I won't mention his faults. I have no intention of keeping him in the dark, or reinforcing his delusions. He needs to get thinking like a man. I'm in no hurry. I'm only 22, and I have another five or six years of graduate school to get through. We have time to get married and raise a family, but I at least want him to understand his ideas about how to live are not very practical, nor will they make him the happiest.

Sometimes I can't believe he has a degree in economics. His approach to money isn't feasible at all. He has no idea what it really takes to run a family. For now, like I said, it's fine. But he has to understand what people his age with a college degree earn.

The truth is, Michael needs a prod every now and then to make him see the way he lives isn't sustainable. Don't misunderstand me. I don't want him to simply submit and do just anything. I want him to find something he's interested in rather than waste his life away at some corporate job. I want him to think about what he'd like, maybe working at the local library or bookstore or becoming a teacher, and then I want him to lower his head and charge. I wouldn't want him to change what he's doing right now if he were secure.

He calls it gainful unemployment. Yeah, right! *Hello?*

I know whatever he's doing right now isn't gainful, not even to him.

In his weaker moments he can't hide this from me.

Without much prodding I can see he's worried about getting a career. He doesn't think a career will rob him of his personal time to write and be creative, but that he won't be able to *get* a career even if he tries, and this makes him insecure.

"What're you worried about?" I ask. "Why don't you start trying?"

But he doesn't answer my question. Instead, he detours into a hypothetical:

"What am I going to tell our children when they ask, 'What do you do, Dad?'"

Our children?

"You have a college degree, Michael," I remind him. "You have work experience, a lot of it, you can find a good job."

"That stuff doesn't mean anything," he lies. "I'm not qualified for anything."

"What do you *want* to do?"

"I don't know," he says, shaking his head. "I'm already doing what I *want* to do! I really don't think anything more will happen. Honestly. I don't think I'll be able to make a middle-class salary."

Michael really believes he won't be able to find a career. He's worried about not amounting to anything. He sees time passing, and it's leaving him behind, and it *will* leave him behind if he doesn't act. That's partly why I'm here: to make sure he doesn't get left behind.

2

Earlier today, Sheldon, our landlord in Miami Beach, says we won't be back. He says five years is a long time. I tell him when we return, we'd like to live in his building again.

"A lot will happen in five years," he says. He says, "You won't be back."

Then he goes for lunch at Pita Hut and to run errands. I imagine him biting into a falafel laffa. We finish loading Jon's Silverado all the way to the tailgate. Everything is in there, our entire home, down to Honeyed Cat's litter box.

Bridget suggests a last walk to the beach. I pass the 41st St marker and walk up the stairs to the Mid-Beach boardwalk thinking, *This is the last time*.

We don't swim in the tumultuous sea. Bridget gets her toes wet. I make use of her iPhone to make some nostalgic videos. The sun is setting in the west. Sheldon calls to ask where we are. He's ready to do the final walkthrough before returning our deposit and going out to dinner.

"We'll be there in five minutes," says Bridget.

I look south toward Government Cut. It's a 3.5-mile run from here, seven miles roundtrip, and I've run the whole way on the sand in about 50 minutes. This is a special place. I will miss it.

Goodbye.

On the way out, we throw away some refuse disrespectful and near-sighted hooligans left scattered on the white sand even though there are trashcans everywhere.

6

On our walk back from HEB, Bridget boldly claims an unusually high percentage of women have tattoos in Austin, higher than other cities. We're carrying three bags of groceries between us, mostly carbohydrates and dairy. I'm carrying the case of Lone Star beer.

At first I don't believe her. Tattoos, in general, are fairly common among the citizens of the world. I don't see how Austin of all places could have an inordinate amount of female body art consumers.

"I swear it does," says Bridget. "I'll prove it to you."

Right then a burly woman manning a pickup hangs her beefy left arm out her window. No less than three garishly colored tattoos stain her skin between shoulder and wrist. She's a living billboard of the immaculate Virgin Mary, a humming bird siphoning nectar, and a mariachi skeleton on bike.

"She's only one," I say. "She's not representative of *all* women in Austin."

"In most cases," says Bridget, "I'd agree with you. But the women in Austin like their tattoos. The more conspicuous, the better."

We get home and store our provisions. It's about a three-minute walk to HEB. This is the closest I've ever lived to a grocery store, and the best part about HEB is it's open 24/7.

Bridget changes into a frumpy University of Miami hooded sweatshirt. We decide to have homemade mac and cheese for dinner and treat ourselves to two beers apiece.

"Let's come up with a codename," suggests Bridget. "How about tater tots?"

"Every time you see a girl with tattoos you'll say *tater tots*?"

She digs both hands into her pocket and pulls down on her sweatshirt, "Or at least until I prove my point."

4

My first encounter with the crazy girl is on her move-in day. I'm involved with

Dostoevsky on the carpet. It seems like a good place to read this anti-book. But sometimes I have to rearrange myself because carpet can be hard and abrasive on elbows.

Our 523 square feet of space gets the most sunlight in our bedroom, where there is a sliding glass door. I usually keep it open, especially in the gentle mornings, when the air outside isn't scorched yet by the lingering day. I'm reading on the carpet directly in the sunlight coming through the sliding glass door when I glance at a giddy girl with eyeglasses walking toward our building. She has a childlike skip to her gait and she hums.

When she sees me reading she's prompt to say, "Hi! I'm your new neighbor!"

"Hi," I say back, talking to her from our bedroom when she's on the grass below. It's a little strange, but I figure she's hyper friendly.

Bridget comes out of the closet with a plastic hanger and dress. I don't know if the crazy girl sees her.

"I live right there!" and she points to the balcony next to ours.

I nod. I say, "Okay," and then I half-wave.

She resumes humming and skips out of view. A few minutes later, I hear commotion in what I assume is her bedroom. She screams and catches her breath. She screams a little quieter. Then she sobs and pounds the carpet.

I imagine her in child's pose.

Bridget is the first to suggest our neighbor has mental problems.

3

What's insane about this drive is we're going to have to turn the white Silverado right around and drive back to where we came from once we get to South Congress.

We may be going to Austin, but as soon as we get there, we're going to have to head back east to Hollywood because the Silverado isn't ours. It belongs to Jon, Bridget's dad. He lets us borrow his ride to move our things from Miami Beach.

We do consider our options before committing to the Silverado route, knowing the Silverado will involve us being truckers for no less than a week.

Our other options are: [a] hire some shady mover, [b] rent a sixteen-foot moving

truck, or else [c] rent an SUV, sell our stuff, use the money to rent a furnished place, and pray to dear Lord everything we want to take will fit.

Until the morning of our scheduled departure, we have settled on [c], to rent an SUV and drive separately to Austin, where we will return the SUV and stay with only our Civic coupe. Sounds peachy.

Not quite: enter the black swan.

The only available SUV is a glorified station wagon. Eternally optimistic, we put down the seats and assess the optimal cargo space. It won't carry enough of our stuff to justify the rental.

More specifically, Bridget has an upright piano to think about.

We shake our heads to the Cuban behind the counter, express our regret at a lack of recourse, and cancel our order without being charged some nonsense fee.

What do we do now?

On the drive back to Miami Beach, Bridget calls her dad to explain the setback. He's quick to agree to let us use his 2006 Chevy Silverado. All we have to do is get it at his house in Hollywood and drive it back to his house when we're done.

Sounds peachy. We detour north to Broward County.

The Silverado is in Jon's driveway, like he said. He took the Tri-Rail to his office. His wife, Cynthia, dropped him off at the station in the morning. Her shift doesn't start until noon, so we catch her fresh and tender out of the shower, redolent of lavender. We touch cheeks and kiss the air by way of greeting. She gives us the key to Jon's Silverado and says we're *loco* for wanting to drive so much, but she wishes us the best.

"Thanks," says Bridget. "We'll be seeing you again soon!" Bridget laughs like this is some joke, but it's not. Even though we're driving so far, we'll be back at this waterfront house in several days to return the Chevy.

I say goodbye to Cynthia after Bridget gives her a long hug. She watches us walk across her overgrown lawn.

"You want to drive your dad's truck to Miami Beach?" I ask.

Bridget knows I'm not as comfortable as her when it comes to steering oversize vehicles through I-95 traffic.

"Fine," she says. "I'll follow you."

The drive to the beach is zippy: I-95 South to I-195 East.

I listen to WVUM, which is 90.5 on the FM dial. University of Miami students run the station. The MCs talk like they're in slow motion, but sometimes the music they play gives me goosebumps.

When we get to the I-195 junction, I slip down the middle lane of the freeway. A ramp slingshots me east, toward the glory land. Vodka advertisements cling to buildings on either side. Some have glass bottles upright between long legs. Then, in a hurry, civilization stays put and we're on a bridge over the Intracoastal. Off in the distance, condominiums stare at the Atlantic, but to the north and south: saltwater, a lot of saltwater currents, and coconut islands, and boats moored to anchors.

Hot Chip serenades me with one of their intricate intros. I raise the volume and look all around at a cut of the bluest sky. Every time I reach this road, I want to shout the happiest sound in the world. This drive is unmatched. It's latent with promise, a promise upon which only this place can deliver.

Then, the sign at the beginning of the island:

WELCOME TO

MIAMI BEACH

Palm trees wearing neon halos shoot up into the sky. I can smell the ocean. It's in my nostrils, and from there it's absorbed into my bloodstream.

3

Granddad scans my dorm room in his stitched sweater. He really does look dapper. I imagine how it must feel being him, having seen so much change. What I mean is, he knew Chicago back in the days when it was a big town with stockyard and trains. He participated in WWII, a frogman defusing underwater mines. He traveled the world, this octogenarian sitting calmly in my faux leather chair.

Granddad looks at my magazine cutout of Bob Dylan hanging over my bed, blowing his harmonica. He looks at a bowling pin I use as a bookend. He unfolds his hands to brush a silver hair off his forehead. He folds them again, elegantly.

"Think you'll ever use these clubs?" asks Granddad, waggling my seven-iron.

I shake my head, "Not really. I'll probably hit some pitch shots on the Midway, but a golf course is expensive on my budget."

He visits me on a Sunday.

"You want to go to mass?" I ask. "There's a Catholic chapel on University Avenue, not too far from here. We could walk there. I usually go with several friends."

"Oh! I'd get to meet your friends?" asks Granddad. "I wonder what they're like?"

To Granddad, the University of Chicago is an incubator for eccentrics to study and do something even more eccentric with their lives. It isn't a vocational school. Students here, he always says, come weird and leave weirder. With 20/20 hindsight, I have to agree.

We cross the Midway Plaisance on our pilgrimage to Calvary Chapel. Granddad doesn't do much in the way of talking or asking questions. He listens and laughs. When we pass the oxidized statue of Carl Linnaeus, I see him decipher the latinized name of the ennobled Swedish naturalist. In his younger days, Granddad would've climbed this statue and spent the day reading an account of the Middle Ages. This would've been his spot for ruminating on the passage of time. He would've grown ponderous and wrinkled sitting on the unwavering coattails of Linné – alas, not in this lifetime. The medieval carillons and lágrimas will have to be postponed indefinitely. Sorry, Granddad, but today you must be pious with me and a sampling of my friends.

Although the name on Pepe's birth certificate is Michael, everyone calls him Pepe because he always wears Pepe Jeans cotton tees.

Pepe hails from San Antonio, a terribly bigoted place.

Pepe's father is a bearded, small press poet of regional renown.

From Pepe, I learn why the sky is typically blue.

I also learn Windows, the operating system, sucks.

Pepe claims to sleep no more than a couple hours a day. It's exceedingly common to see him roaming the halls of Matthews House during the witching hours. If you leave your door open, he'll pop in uninvited and unheard, like the Cheshire Cat. He shocks many girls this way, leaning against their open doors and waiting a little bit before making his presence known. To compensate for his refusal to sleep he can also be seen at all hours of the day planted deep in the lounge, indulging in what he claims are catnaps on the only wallowing chair. The one place he's seldom found is in the bathroom. He performs all hygienic duties on the sly, and it gets to be a juicy question in Matthews House how often he showers.

Common consensus is once every ten days, but no one actually sees Pepe entering or leaving the shower. Dandruff is a serious issue for him. On days when he wears

dark Pepe Jeans cotton tees, white flakes are conspicuous around his collar. But these don't embarrass him in the least, and I observe him on more than one occasion use his hands to flick his shoulders clean without a hiccup in his discourse.

Granddad, however, prefers the company of Liz and Jenny. In mass, he listens closely to them singing, and after the priest wraps things up with *go now to love and serve in peace*, or some similar words, Granddad asks everyone if they'd care to grab a bite to eat somewhere in Hyde Park, on him.

Rather than answer, Pepe clears his parched throat, settles into his jeans, and flicks some dandruff off his shoulder.

"I'm sure there's a place you like in the neighborhood?" prompts Granddad, turning to the girls.

Jenny speaks, "Oh, thanks, Walter, but I've put off a ton of reading for today."

Liz seconds.

Granddad takes me to a Mexican joint on 53rd St with a neon jalapeño in its window. We talk about Chicago and James Joyce and Mamma. I listen to his discourse on how the Irish saved civilization. Then we order two buffets. I eat exotic fruits and burrito and frijoles and yellow rice. We sit across from each other at a booth with a street corner view of brownstone stoops. Granddad loves Chicago neighborhoods, but he must be getting along to Indiana to meet with tool and dye shopkeepers.

He drops me off at my dorm room in Burton-Judson, BJ for people in the know, and I watch him drive away, his full head of hair brilliantly silver and trimmed.

Yes, I think, *we do the best we can*.

When I get back to my room, I plop down on the faux leather chair and feel a thick wall of indelible emptiness swell in my throat. I touch the forged blade of my seven-iron and almost cry. It's hard saying goodbye.

8

"But his non-fiction is really good," says Abe. "He ties it all together beautifully."

Abe is the one who finally gets me to read Larry McMurtry. For some reason, until my conversation with Abe, I thought of Larry McMurtry as a genre writer. *Lonesome Dove*, though I've never read it and haven't the slightest idea what it's

about, seems to be a very long western romance, and as a child I didn't develop an interest in westerns.

If anything, I fostered disdain for everything cowboy. For some reason, I never had a hankering to ride horse, nor wear boots, nor drive a stampede, nor barely fit into my jeans.

Ropes and lassos, flocks and crops, cattle and horses, acres of arid land, cancer sticks and toothpicks, cowboy hats and wrangler shirts never grabbed my fascination. The truth is, I think I was born anti-western. From the very beginning, I preferred ocean settings, both domestic and international. I was drawn to tropical music and tropical art and tropical diversions.

I don't think I'm the same way anymore. Not that I like westerns, or want to become western, but I've come to realize ocean settings, for all they're cracked up to be, can only give me so much growth before, like any other setting – western or urban or mountain or forest, desert or rustic or island – I get complacent and, if I want to grow more, must change my trajectory and move to a different stage.

I'm in control of my own growth. I decide how much I want to grow. The more I see and live through, the more I'll grow. It's really quite easy. There's nothing to it. Back in the days of my youth, I thought growing would be much harder.

In fact, it's almost *too* easy the way I'm doing it. Maybe I'm doing it wrong? Could be. I know there are many areas, after all, in which I could afford to grow more, like in the marriage and family department. Becoming the husband and paterfamilias is, at least in my opinion, daunting and beautiful. In my 30 years, I've studied many guys my age or younger with wives and children. Although they seem staid and stolid – they are, after all, ramifying their family tree – they don't always seem happy. Some are more accurately described as downright put upon, and their wives don't seem any better off.

Bridget and I have talked at great lengths about marriage and family. We both want to get married and have/adopt children, but there's no rush. For now, the intimacy shared every night, when our brains and hearts kiss, when our souls mingle, is still teaching us something new and making us grow more entwined. I know there will come a time when, to avoid getting complacent, we must change our trajectory and move on to a different stage.

I'm not sure what Larry McMurtry has to do with any of these feelings inside me. He's a bibliophile to the nth degree, a true lover of books and the written word, and he isn't afraid to let his words take him wherever they want to go.

It's sad to think everything I've ever written, all my stories and failed efforts at getting published in a serious way, are nothing to Larry McMurtry, who is one of the last great readers on earth.

But this memory I'm writing is going to somehow find its way into his hands. I

have a plan, and it'll work because it isn't based on merit. My problem with getting published in a serious way is depending too much on the merit of my writing, which is the same thing as depending on my own merit as a person, and I'm far from serious. If anything, I'm a scumbag.

While I may not deserve to get published in a big way, I do deserve to be read by Larry McMurtry. I learned recently he runs a secondhand bookstore in Archer City:

BOOKED UP

He's often found behind the counter, running the day-to-day operations.

When I finish this memory, I plan to drive 297.5 miles north to Archer City. I'll show the Texas Man of Letters my manuscript.

Then I'll ask him one question.

I'll say, "How many times in your life have you had the chance to Make Dreams Come True?

Then I'll say, "We're both human here. Let's help each other."

3

I don't think Michael realizes she isn't talking with him. He steps outside to take the trash to the dumpster, and our neighbor starts talking. It might seem like she's talking with him since she's looking at him, but she isn't. She's talking to herself in a roundabout way.

Still, for whatever reason, Michael decides to pay attention when she screams from the parking lot, "That fucking asshole! I hope he... Every guy who likes sports, they're all fucking assholes, and I hope they bleed pus from their cocks! Do you hear me? Every guy who likes sports!"

"Yeah," says Michael.

Can you believe he'd even respond? Because I can't. I guess he figured she was distressed over some breakup. But she has serious mental issues.

When she continues talking about guys who like sports and pus, Michael calls for me in the kitchen. He says, "Bridget."

It's then he finally admits something isn't right with her.

I open our door wider to make her aware other people in The Oaks can hear the things she's saying. She spits a few vulgarities out of embarrassment and runs to her place.

But the sad thing is she lives in the apartment directly next to ours! While she's looking for the right key to unlock her front door, Michael and I are quietly standing next to her. She keeps her head down. The freckles and acne on her face tremble.

And she's wearing way too much perfume.

I feel like saying something. Maybe she needs some company. I feel bad saying this, but the last thing I want is to spend time with this girl. She's completely unstable. And she always wears sweaters. No matter how hot it is – and it gets hot in Austin – I always see her wearing long-sleeved sweaters.

She's probably hiding scars.

2

I'm in the bathroom changing out of my orange bathing suit and into pants when someone knocks on our door. The knock echoes throughout the empty apartment. It's Sheldon here to do the final inspection.

Bridget lets him inside. I tighten my belt and look around the bathroom. It's hard to believe there's nothing inside these drawers, these cabinets. Just this afternoon I thought it would be impossible to pack everything into a box. It seemed like so much junk, but now it's all gone.

There's no shampoo or conditioner in the shower, none of Bridget's razors, no body soap, no shower puff, no shower curtain even. Where has it all gone, and when will it be put to use again? This bathroom makes me sad. For nine months I groomed and relieved myself in this bathroom and now, somehow, there are no remnants. If I didn't know any better, I'd think we never lived here.

"So you guys are all packed up?" The landlord asking the rhetorical question of the year.

He opens the freezer, takes out the icebox full of cubes, and dumps it into the sink to let thaw.

He opens the fridge, scans the shelves, and leaves both doors open. Then he unplugs the refrigerator and moves to the windows.

He opens all seven windows to air out the place of allergens, which Honeyed Cat did her best to spread evenly throughout.

He opens all the drawers and cabinets in the kitchen.

“Was this knob always missing?”

We tell him it was, in unison, and we’re being honest. But the landlord in him seems doubtful.

“What about this?” He touches the three-shelf wall unit. “Are you taking this?”

We shake our heads, again in unison. “The girl moving in said she wants it.”

“Oh,” he says, “you’re leaving it behind for her?”

“Yes. She already agreed to buy it.”

He moves to the bedroom, “And what about the bed?”

“A friend of Chloe’s bought it. She’s picking it up tomorrow morning.”

Chloe is another of Sheldon’s tenants. She actually referred us to him nine months ago. If not for her, who knows what place we’d be leaving behind today?

7

After several hours of driving in the deep night, I’m happy with how alert I feel even though I should be exhausted.

Bridget is having trouble sleeping in the cab. The seats don’t go back, and without at least a little give, she can’t finagle her way into a single minute of decent repose.

Every minor aberration on the road jolts her stiff. She stares out the windshield and remembers how it wobbled. Then she studies my face for any signs of sleepiness.

Three years of living together with an observant and keen girl means no secrets. She knows when I’m sleepy, my lower jaw drops and my bottom lip goes slack.

No matter how many times she touches my chin, pushing it up and admonishing me, I don’t have the mindfulness to correct this telltale.

But the little pill I took three hours ago is working its magic without any effort,

and the shape of my mouth tells Bridget I'm awake.

She settles into her pillow, shuts her eyes, takes a deep breath, and reminds me, "If you get tired, Viejo, pull over."

"I will, Love."

Outside the cones of headlight, the road is desolately dark. I look in my side mirrors and see no signs of life, only the muted red of my taillights.

I look ahead of me and see white lasers being gobbled up at 85 miles per hour.

I pass on the left and cruise on the right.

I sip on the most refreshing orange juice in the world.

On dark stretches of interstate, I flick on the high beams to better see the pitch-black nooks in the forest that brackets the road. This is my way of saving deer, and Jon's ride.

CHANGE ENGINE OIL

With the AC off and both windows mostly rolled up once we left Florida, the Chevy is getting 19.12 mpg. We expected 20. We aren't far off the mark.

I have the radio tuned into a station that played Carlos Vives and left me jonesing for more vallenato. The constellations look big in the sky, especially Orion, which hunts bear directly above I-10 West.

No shooting stars. No swerving cars. No rain. No fog. No bumps on the road. No ice on bridges. No snow. No cold. No traffic. No roadwork. The perfect night for driving, for making time and thinking about how great it is to be alive and moving west.

When we reach the Texas state line, the friendly slanted Lone Star illuminated from the ground up with eerie black lights greets us.

Howdy.

Bridget opens her eyes and asks if we can stop.

"I haven't been able to sleep at all," she says. "I need to lie down. I'm delirious." She looks at my bottom lip, "And I don't want you driving anymore, Viejo."

"Okay," I say, "we can pull over and sleep here."

This is the first time we've ever slept at the I-10 Texas Welcome Center, but I'm tired at this point, and the promise of spooning Bridget's body makes driving tedious.

It’s six minutes past 6AM.

9

I like the way clothes look drying outside in the breeze. Seeing them hanging on our balcony on this warm and sunny spring day in Austin is something new for me. I‘ve never dried my clothes outside. There are poor families in Miami still using clotheslines, big poor families with grandparents and uncles and aunts living under one roof. I know hanging my clothes on the wrought-iron railing isn’t new or foreign in the world, nor is it novel or something to make light of, but rather a serious matter, a living symbol of the line that separates classes.

But seeing all our shirtsleeves and necks, all our shorts and pants legs, all our towels and our basket of undergarments, hanging on the balcony railing is also highly revealing. We’re too optimistic about the amount of clothes we can stuff inside the commercial dryers in The Oaks laundry room. We’re also too cheap to feed the slot four more quarters for another hour cycle.

Why buy another hour when all we need is another fifteen minutes? Maybe we’d pay a quarter more to finish drying our clothes, but not a whole dollar.

In this case, the sun is the most sensible way to go, seeing as it is so venomous here in central Texas. It might as well be put to use.

On our way back from the laundry room, we pass by the swimming pool, and a little mongrel dog barks at us from the shade of a Texas tree. I don’t feel anything for this cur. But it does make me think about how many times it has been to the vet, and how much food it has eaten, and I think about if it’s really worth the trouble, this little thing that needs flea medicine every month.

Surely this creature can’t have a soul. But I know it does. I just have to be heavily intoxicated to feel its existence.

We’re almost back home, carrying our two baskets of slightly wet clothes, when *she* comes into view. I’m talking about the crazy girl who lives next door. She’s probably the looniest person in The Oaks, and she doesn’t fall on the pacific side of the spectrum.

Every day around noon, Bridget tells me to turn off the radio. Then she sneakily opens the kitchen window to better hear the tantrum inside 229. I have no idea what goes down. All I know is this 20-year-old girl mercilessly pounds the shit out of something and screams vulgarities from another planet. I’ve thought about what it is she pounds the shit out of and with what she does the pounding. I know it can’t be the actual wall and it can’t be her own fists she’s using, right?

Maybe she has a futon mattress she slugs with a wooden baseball bat, or maybe she lowers her shoulder and plows into the back of her couch. Whatever it is, it lasts for around ten minutes, and then it stops. We don't hear another peep.

Then comes today, when we're carrying our two baskets of slightly moist clothes and spot the crazy girl on the threshold of her front door, spinning in place and snapping her fingers.

She stumbles from dizziness. Her curly brown hair falls down to her earlobes. She is bespectacled and freckled. Bridget and I look warily at each other and climb the stairs to the second floor. Crazy hides behind the door and peeks at us from the dark. Her eyes are spooked, and her mouth is hanging open in a stupor. What kind of meds is she on? You'd never think such a demure thing could work up such a private display of rage.

There's a saying around here printed on lots of burnt orange cotton tees:

KEEP AUSTIN WEIRD

Crazy and the leprechaun elf are sure doing their part, and they both lurk right around our stomping ground. It's kind of a disconcerting thing, living in what seems like the epicenter of Austin weirdness. It isn't like the ghetto. It isn't dangerous to walk the streets at night. I'm not worried about getting mugged. These people are insane, not criminals. They're off the chain, unhooked, not cold-blooded.

They probably have schizophrenia.

At least that's Bridget's best diagnosis. Early-onset schizophrenia is extremely rare. Most people develop symptoms in their 20s. Rather than be born with the mental disorder, or show clear telltales of it when growing up, it's much more common for college students to unexpectedly have a breakdown one day. The rest of their lives are fierce battles against a multifaceted brain.

They drop out of college, they stop learning anything constructive, they can't hold a job, and their lack of accountability makes them dangerous. Some are good about a consistent dosage of medication, which is proven to help their condition, even make them functional members of society. But others aren't good about their meds. Maybe they can't afford them, or they don't like the way they make them feel, so they aren't good about their meds, and they have long spells of misbehavior, like pounding futons with a baseball bat and screaming, or, in the case of the leprechaun elf, sharply turning his eyes away from Bridget and me at the library and side-talking to nobody in particular:

"Are you looking at my face? Hey, you! Are you looking at this face I have to live with? Every day I look at this face. I can't do anything about this face. I was born with this face. This face isn't going to change. You hear me? I'll buy a gun and fucking kill you. I'll kill you right here. Don't test me. I'll buy a gun and shoot

you. I'll find you on Facebook. You're like everyone else. You're on Facebook. I'll buy a gun and find you on Facebook and fucking shoot you."

For some reason, although there are a host of librarians chewing the fat behind the circulation desk, several feet away from the leprechaun elf, not one acknowledges his schizophrenic lapse. It's impossible no one else hears what this troubled man has to say, but everyone, including Bridget and me, pretends nothing happened.

In this way, the leprechaun elf zips his backpack with all of his earthly trappings and saunters out the door into the balmy night. Who he was addressing in his deranged monologue, I hope to never know.

But when Bridget and I leave the library right at 9PM, which is when the Twin Oaks Public Library closes, we see the leprechaun elf circling the bus stop, muttering obscenities under the menacing light of a street lamp. I lightly touch Bridget's elbow and point to an alternative route through the desolate parking lot away from the bus stop. If he's watching us to see what direction we go, once we enter the walkway to a strip mall, he'll only know we live somewhere south of the library.

Still, I can't help but wonder how much longer our address will remain a mystery.

5

On our way out, I ask Bridget, "Where's the bass coming from?" She says, "Some ghetto girl's ride." We leave our second floor apartment, and from the landing I see a car double parked with four windows down and the trunk popped. The bass is more offensive outside. My head doesn't want to bob to the beat of radio rap.

"Hey there!" shouts a large woman carrying two paper grocery bags, one cradled in each arm, "how y'all doing? You guys moved in after her and her baby boy left, right? Yeah, I saw her around some, but she kept to herself a lot. By the way, I'm Gloria, nice to meet y'all. Me and my husband, we lived here nine years. We live," she points above us, "right on top of your heads!"

I try to continue the thread, but Gloria doesn't hear me. Listening to booty bass in her car has made her loud and deaf. It's only natural. But I can tell she has a good heart and means no harm.

"*How* many years have they lived here?" asks Bridget.

We're walking to Cumberland Rd, en route to a local coffee shop on South 1st St known for growing its own beans on a farm just outside Austin.

“Nine,” I say.

“Did she mean here in *The Oaks*,” wonders Bridget, “or in Austin?”

“I’m not sure,” I say, “but I like the way she always backs her car in when she parks.”

0

The thing about the road is it gets me dirty. Even though I don’t do much in the way of sweating, the road makes me oily, a result of overly productive sebaceous glands.

If I go more than sixteen hours without rubbing my face into a pillow, or showering, my skin gets especially shiny. It starts with my nose, which sweats sebum minutes after I shower, and spreads from there.

Sometimes, on really long drives, the oil gets so bad my eyes sting. I can picture the oil oozing down the slopes of my eyelids and coating my myopic lenses. But Houston is close enough my eyes don’t sting when we pass Chimney Rock, where everything is familiar.

You see, I’ve lived about eight years of my life in Houston. I love Houston. Houston is a lot of my heart. I wouldn’t say I agree with everything Houston does or stands for, but I have friends there, good friends, the kind that mean something because they know a part of me no one else can possibly know.

Another thing about Houston: my father, also Michael, still lives there.

When we pass the Bunker Hill Sylvan Learning Center, I tell Bridget, “That’s where I worked. In between those buildings right there, tutoring kids in math.”

Once we get out of Houston, wildflowers guide the way through the bulge and roll of the land. Livestock get fat off hills. The Colorado River coils, a symbol of confusion. I wonder why so serpentine. It seems like too much effort in design, too much snaking around to put water through, but this is how nature settled in central Texas, looping back in on itself, a tortuous waterway that defies efficiency precisely because it can. Nature and the universe run according to the same clock, one that isn’t preoccupied with concepts like efficiency and progress and accomplishment. No hurry, no rush to get out the door.

If I must run according to a clock, I want to run on this clock, not the one created by man, with its seconds and minutes, hours and days, milliseconds and nanoseconds, but the one of shifting tectonic plates, creeping oceans, imploding

stars, and winding rivers.

“When we come through here again,” says Bridget, “remind me to pick some of these wildflowers and take them home with us. I want some on our coffee table.”

“I’m down,” I say, one eye on the radio dial and the other on the road. “I think that’s the state flower right there. Bluebonnets.”

“Maybe we should take some back to Florida with us, too?” she suggests.

“I think your dad would like that.”

Bridget is happy with her plan. She folds her palms in her lap, squints through the strong sunrays, and smiles. The passing scenery blurs into a thing like expressionism. I admire the reds and oranges and whites and yellows and blues and purples as we roll up and down the green bosoms of central Texas.

Then, we get somewhere.

First, there’s the *Austin City Limits* sign, brown and rectangular with white letters, it’s hanging out on a pole by the side of Route 71, all unassuming like.

Next, there’s 311 covering *Love Song* on Austin radio, which has a reputation for its independent sound.

Although we know we’ll be driving this road back toward Houston in a few days, and from there east to Florida, our initial impression of Austin isn’t anticlimactic.

Instead of navigating straight to our new home, Bridget wants to show me where at University of Texas she’ll be studying for the next five years. She doesn’t know how to get there, but the iPhone guides us with its GPS and Google maps. I, however, have trouble merging on I-35 after driving from the Sabine River, where the Texas Welcome Center sits, all the way to Austin on little sleep and a double shot of espresso in a can.

The sudden onslaught of slow cars makes me cantankerous. I curse Austin drivers, curse Austin infrastructure, curse stoplights and bikers, and all I want is to park the Silverado and be done.

Yet even in my belligerent delirium we somehow find an intersection Bridget positively identifies as Dean Keeton St and Guadalupe St.

“Make a left here,” she says.

I curse at some pedestrian on a crosswalk. Bridget points to the psychology building, where she’ll soon become pedigreed with a doctorate in Clinical Psychology. I see the burnt-orange structure made of brick and ask, “Where’s the Golden Ratio?”

“It’s in the middle,” she says, picturing her future, “in the courtyard.”

2

“Is that a man with a camera I see there?” asks Abe, sitting in the shade of his balcony, smoking a cancer stick, his hair moist from sweat along the top of his ear. He speaks to me only after I’ve waved, and his question is rhetorical, since it’s very obvious I’m a man with a camera.

“Yep,” I say. “I’m just getting back from taking photos.”

“Yeah?” he asks, “Did you get any good ones?”

“I don’t know,” I say, “I haven’t seen them yet.”

Abe sparks another cancer stick and talks prolifically on a wide array of stuff. Today I learn one of Austin’s drawbacks is an overabundance of individuals. Abe says people in Austin can be persnickety about their individualism. Everyone is keen on the whole idea of showing off their individuality, and this is apparent in the way they keep their homes, in their tattoos, and also the way bands play their music.

“For Cinco de Mayo,” I say, “Bridget and I went to the 2nd St block party. We saw a band called Brownout.”

“Did they blow you away?” asks Abe, dragging cancer.

I look up at a cut of the whitest sky and reflect.

“No,” I say, “I wasn’t blown away.”

Abe laughs. His voice is very deep and circular and very full of phlegm.

“That’s the problem with a lot of these Austin bands,” he says, “in terms of ability, they have what it takes and then some, but very few of them can blow you away, very few can *move* you.”

Abe says Austin is full of mediocre bands that stay together for about ten minutes before breaking up and joining or starting another band.

“Their problem is they’re full of themselves,” says Abe. “If you watch them closely, each member of the band won’t bother interacting with the other guys in the band. They’ll look straight ahead into their own world. Every person in the typical Austin band is too consumed by their own individualism. They’re there for themselves, and they *are* themselves. The band means little to them. I like to

watch bands that interact with each other. I like it when the drummer laughs and engages the guitarist and they play fucking good. It's more fun that way, to see them having fun being a band."

Abe also tells me James Michener, the author of *Texas*, said people in Austin are highly interested in the things most people find ordinary. He then drops the name of another Texas writer who said, "Austin isn't part of the Republic of Texas. It's the People's Republic of Austin."

"I need to drink some water," I say, drawing out a resolution to our talk.

Abe snuffs his cancer stick and says, "It's a scorcher, man." He stands, "See you around."

8

Shaggy is a glorious pothead, smoking the dankest since the sixth grade. He got his GED and valets cars in Miami Beach. But he won't do this for the rest of his life. He'll do whatever he wants whenever he wants to try something new. He's still young and eager for adventure, for experience, for trying on this giant boot that is The World.

What I like about Shaggy, or at least one of the things I like about Shaggy other than calling me Coz, he isn't stingy. He's very generous with his stash even though he has no moral qualms about smoking alone. He enjoys the act of spreading happiness. The whole idea of the Peace Pipe goes where he goes.

Shaggy spreads peace. How many people can you say that about?

Although we enjoy hearty mirth inside the sealed bedroom in Miami Beach, there's a dollop of sadness. We're keenly aware of what this baking session stands for in our history as cousins. Shortly after today, the boxes in the living room will be packed in the Silverado, the bed I'm sitting on will be sold, the bureau from the early 20th century that belonged to my great-grandmother will be stored at Jon's – I'll be moving to Austin with Bridget.

Shortly after today, Shaggy and I will be lost. Maybe we'll talk once or twice over the phone in the next five years, maybe we'll visit each other on holidays, but no matter how much we stay in touch, we will grow separately.

This is the last time, I think. *This is the last time,* I repeat to think. Then I look up from the old wooden floors. I say, "Let's go throw the football on the beach. It's nice out."

We look out the window at a cut of the bluest sky. A propeller plane flies over with a vodka advertisement hanging off its ass. I think of the beach. It's always there, one of the few things in life that are always there: the beach, and Bridget's tasteful tater tot.

Shaggy grinds the rest of the joint gingerly into the elephant ashtray. Orange embers turn into gray smoke signals that curl into the ceiling. He leaves the clip for me, for when I feel like doing some stone philosophizing in Austin.

I'm grateful. It's a gift, a peaceful gift.

We take turns carrying the football to paradise. Bridget is with us. She wears her bikini underneath her jean shorts and halter-top. Her reddish gold hair blows in the ocean wind.

"You know, Coz," announces Shaggy, "my arm's a canon. It's been a little while since I last threw the ball, but you know what the thing about canons is, right?"

"What's that?" I ask.

"They're surefire."

"Whatever," I say dismissively. "I need help on my spiral. When I was younger, I had a sweet spiral. But not anymore. How do *you* hold the football?"

Shaggy demonstrates his finger positioning. I decide I'm going to copy it. Maybe it'll do the trick. The truth is, I've had many dreams puzzling over a football in my hand. No matter how many times I try throwing it, the damn pigskin wobbles like a child's top about to lose its centripetal force.

But I can throw it a long way. I have a good arm. I just can't find the spiral.

The entry to our part of the beach is elegant. First, there is the matte steel 41st St marker with a tessellated aquamarine base. Then, winding through short palms and spunky bushes, there is a staircase with eleven wooden steps. You cannot see what's on the other side of the staircase from the bottom. To see, you must walk up the steps. I breathe in the salty air and ascend with a skip.

Bridget's ahead of me, also skipping. The bounce of her body is arousing. At the top, the three of us stand shoulder to shoulder and admire the horizon and the lap of the sea. Exercising gentiles and orthodox Jews pushing strollers pass us on the wide boardwalk that spans north and south. The 41st St lifeguard tower is pastel blue and purple. The sand is expansive and white and fine. Towels and umbrellas dot the shoreline. People tan. The ocean waves gather and break infinitely, throwing spume. No traffic is audible. Nothing is audible except for the sound of waves and the call of gulls and the brackish wind.

"We're on an island," I say, reminding everyone we're actually on a strip of land

with water on all sides, completely disconnected from Florida. This is why the water in Miami Beach is so crystalline, and the sunlight so tropical.

Shaggy can't contain himself any longer. With a sudden step, he jazzes his way to the beach. Bridget and I hug each other, turn toward each other, and kiss.

"I love you."

"I love you."

8

With our newly purchased camera slung over my shoulder and 24 ounces of Steel in my clutch, we amble along Congress Ave toward downtown.

At what seems to be the north end of the street, couched in between parallel lines of streetlights and a nest of skyscrapers, is the Texas Capitol. Its sunset-red granite dome that brags of reaching greater heights than the nation's capitol is illuminated. On the very top stands Lady Liberty. She has plucked the Lone Star from the night sky.

And above her, too far away for Austin to reach, the spring moon waxes.

Bridget is brown-bagging her IPA. Everything is good until we see a bum crumble to the sidewalk, crawling on his hands and knees before curling into the fetal position and ebbing. He's wearing a 2010 census cotton tee and faded jeans.

What's disturbing about this bum isn't only the way he crumbles to the concrete, but also the bloody gash on his forehead, sitting red and oozy above his temple, it's in need of medical attention, perhaps.

Bridget and I slow down and take a closer look at this bum to see whether he's going to be alive tomorrow or if these are his last breaths. His face is pale, his lips are pale, and his hair is pale. This bum is drained of vigor, a cause for concern. What choices did he make that brought him here tonight, crumbling before us? I guess you could also ask the reverse: what choices did *we* make that brought *us* here to this sidewalk to watch this bum fall to the ground, vanquished?

"Are you all right?" asks Bridget, bending over at the hips to try and fix eyes. I know she's doing the right thing, but I also know this is a bum. This is someone who's on the fringes, a loner full of spiteful independence – an Austinite.

"Are you all right?" repeats Bridget. She gets an unintelligible answer issued through a bubbly mouth. Bridget gets closer, "Do you need help?"

"No!"

Venom breath jerks my lover back toward me. She steadies her brown bag of IPA.

"C'mon," I say, "he just wants to be left alone."

But not more than a block north of the vanquished bum, Bridget turns around with a calling in her eyes. She really feels this bum is in trouble. "What if he dies?" she asks.

"He's not going to die, Bridget. He's drunk and tired and doesn't need our help."

"But you saw how much he was bleeding?" Bridget looks back toward the bum. "He should go to the hospital. Head injuries are serious."

"Are you kidding me?" I ask. "In his state, he doesn't want to mess with any kind of authority. Think about public intoxication. He just wants to be left alone."

"I'm going back," says Bridget. "Are you coming with me or not?"

This is an ultimatum. I snap a few photos of a neon sign:

SORRY,

WE'RE OPEN

Then I walk back to the corner with her.

At first, we don't see remnants of the bum. "Look," I say, "he's already gone."

But then we turn the corner and run into a pile of human rock with pale hair strewn on the concrete like wimpy serpents. He's still bleeding.

"Let's at least tell someone about him," says Bridget, "that'll make me feel better."

I follow her back to the beer-and-wine mart. The man behind the counter knows us from before. He has pockmarks and earphones draped around his neck that dangle on his designer cotton tee.

"I have a question for you," says Bridget. She looks cute in her eyeglasses.

"What question?" asks the man behind the counter, coming closer.

Bridget puts her elbows on the glass counter, above the lottery tickets many people buy, reasoning *if you don't play, you can't win*. This is the absolute truth. You must play to win. No one has ever won the lottery without playing. *But why isn't this enough to make me play the lottery*, I think, *why am I not a gambler when it comes to my own money? No poker, no craps, no blackjack, no Vegas, no*

bets, but when it comes to my own life, when it comes to securing a job, starting a career, investing in myself, I gamble recklessly and ignorantly.

"You see that guy lying on the corner?" Bridget points through the window. "He's bleeding a lot from his forehead. Do you think I should call an ambulance?"

"Who, him?" asks the man behind the counter. "He's passed out. He's always around here, getting drunk and into fights. It's sad, but this is the way he chooses to live. He comes in here and buys beer all day. I can't do anything about it. It's his choice."

The man behind the counter looks at me for some sympathy, probably since I carry 24-ounces of Steel Reserve, a high-gravity lager.

"It's sad," he says, "but this is how he wants to live." Shoulder shrug. Earphones surge and settle on his man boobs.

"Can you keep an eye on him?" begs Bridget. "He doesn't look good."

"Sure," says the man behind the counter, "but soon he'll stand up and walk away. He's passed out, that's all."

While the way this bum chooses to live is sad, it's also sad commerce makes no effort to curtail his alcoholism. When there's profit to be made, it's easy to turn the other way. But, when you take away the embellishment, selling this bum beer when he's able to buy it is no different than selling cocaine to cokeheads, or crack cocaine to crackheads, or methamphetamine to methheads, or heroin to Sherlock Holmes.

Oh, Watson, the needle!

4

Perhaps, if I willingly let different music into my days, this would be a different memory.

Music is a lot of who I am.

I'd go so far as to say if you don't like this memory, you don't like my music.

I like cumbia. I like underground hip-hop. I like vallenato. I like dub reggae.

Out on the streets they call it merther!

I like ethereal music because I'm an ethereal person. I like 1960s Dylan.

I like music with wispy female vocals and male falsettos. I like airborne sounds that make me think of bagpipes on the beach.

I'm up in the clouds, building castles in the sky.

Is it possible to be down to earth without being grounded?

I wonder.

1

He really does look like a leprechaun. Michael's right. I wouldn't know how to draw him any better.

I notice him today when I go to the library. Michael doesn't approve of me going there alone, but we don't have internet, so while he registers the car at the County Tax Collector, I'm at the library doing some reading.

Before grad school starts in September, I have to keep up with some of the readings circulating my lab. It's not that I *have* to stay abreast. I could easily ignore grad school until September, but I think it'll be good to learn as much as I can before my schedule gets crazy. This way I can hit the ground running.

"Champagne for everyone!" shouts a voice.

At first, I'm expecting a library employee to have a bottle with him, but then I see the leprechaun walk through the book detectors with his stuffed backpack and a two-liter bottle of Dr. Pepper.

He carries the plastic bottle as if it were more precious than his firstborn. The head librarian tells him not to take the bottle inside. "Excuse me," she says, "you have to leave that behind the counter with me. No drinks in the library."

"Okay," he says, "just don't drink it!" He slyly cocks his eyes, "I know you want to."

"I'm not going to drink your soda," she says condescendingly. But she also seems to be flattered.

"It's champagne!" he corrects.

The leprechaun sniffs the bright yellow bottle cap and hands her his Dr. Pepper. He drags his heavy backpack with him to an open computer and sits. A cardboard sign trails behind his backpack like the muddy train of a wedding dress.

Luckily, he doesn't see me.

Is he really homeless, living on the street? But he can't be more than 25. He has to have a family he can turn to for help, right?

After a little while, I forget about him and begin to read my lab papers. A tall guy sits next to me. He cold boots his mean-looking laptop. The fan makes a noise like a jet.

I don't think anything of him until he takes out a dingy brown bed sheet from his bag and drapes it over his head and laptop. I try to guess how long he's going to hide like a kid reading by flashlight after his parents go to sleep.

But before I can start hypothesizing about what he's doing under there, he throws off the bed sheet and begins stabbing his laptop.

I suddenly realize all he did was type in his login password. He covered himself with his blanket to make sure no one in the library saw what he typed.

Obviously, he has sensitive information on his laptop. A password isn't enough to keep him safe from his enemies in the library. No, he has to make sure not a soul in sight can even see him *typing* his password.

Talk about paranoid.

Why is Austin so weird? Michael and I have discussed this before. He thinks it's something about our corner. But for some reason I don't think Austin's finest are exclusively here. I think they're everywhere, on every corner.

What is it about Austin that makes it a wasteland for the mentally ill?

9

The clouds are swimming across the white heavens. They really are. This isn't a cliché. It is truth. The clouds are swimming across the white heavens, and the live oak is swimming its branches on its corrugated trunk.

If you must know, my boxer shorts are sweaty from our first run in Austin. I figure it is a good time to drink a Sierra Nevada Torpedo and meditate with Baoding balls.

We took Congress Ave north to the Colorado River, stretched our bodies out, and ran west on gravel paths to Lamar Blvd. Austinites were in heat. We took a bridge to the gravel paths along the northern banks of the tortuous Colorado, ran back

east to Congress Ave, and then south across a different bridge to our starting point.

Locals call this Town Lake Trail.

Running is such a raw exercise. Seeing bodies running makes me want to run. On the other hand, seeing bodies lifting weights makes me sorry for those lifting.

I want to run while I'm alive. If I live to be 70, I want to do it running. If I live to be 80, I want to do it running. 90, 100, 110, I want to do it running.

7

The Oaks sneaks up on us unexpectedly.

"There it is!" shouts Bridget.

"Where?"

Then I scan the colorful sign:

CHANGES ARE AFOOT

Bridget holds my shoulder. I slow down and make a sharp right turn that Jon's Silverado handles with surprising ease considering our home must weigh 1,000 lbs in the bed.

Although Holly, the girl we found on craigslist and are subleasing from until the end of her lease, left the key under the doormat, we don't know where to park or where to find the doormat.

We're disoriented and greasy and smelly after a full 24 hours of driving and sleeping in the cab. We long for a shower, for body cleansing, for ablutions. We can taste what it will feel like to be horizontal on an actual bed, our legs stretched, our bodies eager for renewal.

The road still hums in our ears when we see what looks like the management office. I pull in nose first, turn off the American engine, and kiss Bridget. "Here we are. Here we are." We're thinking this, mumbling our arrival through our road-weary lips, and we're also taking in our surroundings, which are completely foreign and unknown. I have never been here. Bridget has never been here. Yet *here* is where our home is, not in Miami Beach, not on the road, not anywhere but here, in The Oaks: 130 Cumberland Rd. If not for this address, we'd be homeless, shiftless.

What is this place? How will it treat us? Where will we go from here?

The Oaks is comprised of multiple buildings. Although we know our unit number is 228, we don't know our building number, so we're lost. We duck into the office to be found.

Inside, the air is climate controlled and nectarous. There's a large painting of a partially unpeeled orange with the truism:

IF YOU DON'T TRY

YOU'LL NEVER KNOW

Right from the start, the Lone Star State is giving me permission to indulge in all my weird ideas, to be Michael Davidson.

Don't be afraid to try, Austin is telling me. Be more afraid of never knowing. Is this sound advice? Aren't there times when we should keep away from trying and be rewarded for never knowing? Is Truth always worth the innocence and ignorance we're born with and can never get back? I'm not sure, but Capitol City is telling me *yes*. Capitol City is telling me a world of not knowing isn't a world worth knowing.

A misshapen woman with purple boots steps out of the break room.

"Hi!" she says. "What can I do for y'all?"

"Hey, I'm Bridget, and this is my boyfriend Michael."

"Hi Bridget and Michael."

"We just drove here from Miami Beach."

"Oh!" says the woman with purple boots. "That's a long drive. Welcome to Austin! I spoke with you on the phone, right? You're subleasing 228 from Holly?"

"Yes. I know Holly left the key under the doormat, but where's 228?"

The woman with purple boots hasn't introduced herself. She points a fake fingernail north, "Y'all are in Building Nine, on the second floor. Holly did leave the key under the doormat. It should be there."

"Is there anything we need to do now?" asks Bridget.

"No. Y'all must be tired after that drive. I bet y'all just want to shower and rest."

Bridget gives life to her dimples. I nod and speak my first words, "A shower sounds," but I can't complete my sentence, and the woman with purple boots

laughs at our condition. She proposes, “Why don’t y’all clean up and rest and come back here later to watch a short leasing video, but I actually need to get the contract printed, so that can wait until another day.”

We drive Jon’s Chevy to Building Nine, find a leopard key under a doormat, and push the front door open.

1

Michael doesn’t understand Honeyed Cat is delicate. He doesn’t understand she’s a precious little princess who needs to be treated tenderly. She likes to be loved softly on her head and under her chin. She starts to purr. But even when Michael tries to be tender, he isn’t tender enough.

I try to show him how to do it right, but he can’t get her purring like I can. I think it’s because he uses his fingernails and I use my fingertips. A subtle distinction for a cat to make, I know, but Honeyed Cat definitely responds to my touch more.

He’s too rough with her. I know he loves her, but he’s too rough with her. She’s a little kitten, a little girl. She’s even sensitive to his verbal abuse.

He doesn’t think she understands what he’s saying, but Honeyed Cat is delicate. She’s a little princess. She may not understand exactly what Michael’s saying, but his tone gives him away more than he thinks.

Then there are those times when he throws her and flips her and scares her into sprinting as quickly as her tiny legs can spin.

His excuse, “I’m keeping her agile.”

But I know he loves her. I just wish he’d be more gentle. I think the main problem is he takes her for granted.

6

This evening, I feel stuffy inside. It has to be 90 degrees in our apartment.

“I’m hot,” says Bridget, simply stating a fact.

“You want me to turn on the air?” I offer reluctantly.

“Please, Viejo.”

She’s prone on the sofa, reading a non-fiction book about autism. The last two books she read were also about autism, but fiction. Bridget kills books. I don’t know how to put it lightly. Her eyes scan the page, and I wonder how much longer this book will live. Not that it dies when she finishes, but it’s mostly dead, or at least left dying. In death throes it will sit on some shelf, pressed tightly between other dying books. I sometimes resuscitate them. I open their binding and give their pages new breath. It’s an act of salvation, opening a dying book. But this salvation is mutual.

I fiddle with the thermostat until warm, stale air is sucked into an intake and cold air is spit through vents.

“I’m cold!” I yell, slapping Bridget’s red corduroy shorts in jest.

This is me at the height of my sarcasm, claiming it’s cold after about a minute of cold air cycling through our one-bedroom.

It’s still 90 degrees in here, no doubt.

Notwithstanding, Bridget asks, “Are you really?”

“No,” I say, laughing like a child and playfully slapping her red corduroys again. Her inner thighs feel good even without an iced latte between them. I say, “I’m joking.”

I rest my head on her slim stomach, which is digesting the pinto beans, tortillas, rice, and avocado lunch we cooked from scratch in our cramped kitchen.

“Want to take the bikes to Half-Price Books?” I propose.

Getting out of our apartment seems like the only sensible thing to do when I picture the digits on our meter recklessly rolling toward greater numbers, each number equal to a monthly electricity bill with no upper bound.

“Sounds good,” says Bridget, letting the book fall limply in between her breasts. I thriftily power down the air conditioner. We put on our socks and shoes and turn off the lights and bolt our front door.

In an effort to maximize space in our 523 square foot apartment, we chain our bikes outside our building, underneath the stairs. We’ve seen other bikes secured this way, so we don’t think anything of it other than the clutter it spares us from storing them on the balcony.

But when we’re opening the combination lock, a carousing Mexican stops to offer some sagacity. Beginning in broken English and then sliding into the Spanish of Mexicans, which is choppy and hacks off final syllables, he tells us we need to be

careful with our money. He tells us there are bike thieves around here. *Ladrones*. Even last night he saw some carry off a couple bikes like ours. He tells us the chain we have is as good as shit for these professionals, who come prepared with scissors and saws. Then they ride off into the darkness.

Poof!

I nod, my arms folded across my chest, my outlook on life grave. The old Mexican lifts the sombrero on his head to scratch a few gray hairs. He tells us again these are times when we have to be cautious with our money, and he walks away.

His dusty boots resound on the concrete pathways that wind through The Oaks. I listen to their clip-clop and pedal, a few feet behind Bridget.

9

Dogs with underbites are funny. Today Bridget made an appointment with a hack vet who advertises in the *Austin Chronicle*, and while Honeyed Cat is probed and analyzed in one of two examination rooms, there's a dog with an underbite waiting in the lobby with me.

She weighs 11.2 lbs and has white hair. Her owner, dressed in pink, finds a mysterious pustule on her dog's back.

"What's *that*?" she bemuses with bated breath.

She parts some white hair and gasps. I take a peak to see the damage. It looks bloody and irritated. I imagine the dog is experiencing some pain due to this skin lesion. She might even be screaming on the inside.

Pets: they say a lot about human nature. Why do people like to be in the company of pets? Why do we feel it's our duty to take care of a cat that comes back for more food? Why do we cuddle with dogs and gaze into their nearly blind eyes? Why do we speak to a living creature that cannot understand or speak back? Why do we endure their attacks? Why do we attempt to train and domesticate?

I can name people who care for their animals with more love and lucre than some families give to their children.

I can name people who laugh when their dogs growl and bark at strangers.

What happened to innocent until proven guilty? For these people, their pets are the most reliable judges of character.

I want to know how vets feel about pets. I want to know what this racket of affluent animal doctors thinks about the flood of people who seek their advice and treatment on a regular basis because they want their pets to live forever in resplendent health.

The dog with the underbite is thirteen years old. I overhear her pink owner say this to the vet, who seems crazy on the other side of the counter. He has eyeglasses on the tip of his nose and the widest eyes I've ever seen. He looks hopped up on a bit of cat cocaine. He doesn't have a problem telling the pink owner her dog is dying. She can try to keep her alive a little longer, but these are her last weeks.

Bridget exits the examination room, Honeyed Cat alert and childlike in her cradled arms, and Bridget is crying. I'm alarmed. I think the worst: that Honeyed Cat is going to die of feline leukemia.

"What's wrong?" I ask.

Bridget doesn't answer. She wipes away a fallen tear, sets Honeyed Cat on the seat next to me, and says, "Can you take her?"

I close my netbook, which is the sole carrier – *stupid me!* – of my memory, and look at the jade eyes that have come to mean so much.

Bridget walks across the tiled waiting room to the counter, where she foots the bill.

$115 to learn that Honeyed Cat is FIV positive. That's what the cracked-out vet did. Never again is Honeyed Cat going to be the same in our minds and hearts. She's infected. If she gets sick, her immune system could falter and she could die.

Feline Immunodeficiency Virus isn't the worst possible news, but it isn't the best.

I carry Honeyed Cat to our car. I speak to her in gentle whispers. There's a word for what I'm doing: anthropomorphism.

On our second drive from South Florida to Austin, this tiny cat coped with the exhaustion and ruggedness of 1,420 miles on the road. She was healthy then, at least in my mind and heart. She was Super Cat. There was nothing wrong with her apart from the occasional flea or tape worm.

Knowledge may be power in some instances, but it's also helplessness.

"Do you have any other cats?"

That's what the wide-eyed vet asked Bridget after taking longer than usual running the tests. She must've been a wreck in that examination room.

“No,” she said. “Honeyed Cat is the only one.”

“Good.”

“Why is that good?” asked Bridget.

“Your cat is FIV positive. We ran the test twice to make sure. Both times it came out positive.”

“Okay. What does that mean?”

“Don’t worry, Honeyed Cat isn’t in pain. But she can infect other cats. And if she gets sick, as with HIV, her immune system won’t function normally. You can think of it like a sleeping alligator.”

“Is there anything I can do?”

“Feed her a high-protein diet. If you see her sneezing more than normal, take her to the vet. A simple Cold could weaken her enough to be fatal. Other than that, your cat should live for another ten, maybe even fifteen years.”

“How old do you think she is?”

“Well,” said the vet, “was she smaller when you found her?”

“Yes.”

“Then she’s probably three.”

3

“Hey,” I say to Bridget, “remember that caffeinated clerk in the Louisiana Kangaroo Express who kept nodding and shaking his head?”

“Yeah.”

“I think the ephedrine he sold me fucked me up.”

I’m sitting on our new balcony with the sun shining on my left shoulder. I go ahead and try again to determine whether anything is wrong inside my chest cavity.

After unloading our home from the Silverado, my armpits smell like bacteria. Maybe if I used deodorant with aluminum and parabens in it, my bodily stank wouldn’t be so offensive. But, to preserve the health of my memory when I get to

be an old man, I refuse to lather my armpits with anything other than natural deodorants. And this is the price I have to pay after 24 hours of no shower and no bed: effluvia.

"What do you mean?" asks Bridget, more ragged from the road than concerned.

"I don't know if I should've taken those pills," I complain. "The box didn't even list all the inactive ingredients. Whatever else was in them fucked me up."

I stretch my left arm far over the wrought-iron railing to illustrate my pain.

"When I do this," I explain, "my heart feels like it's being compressed."

"Maybe you have heartburn."

"I don't know." I stretch and have trouble breathing, "Does heartburn feel like your ribcage is suffocating your heart?"

Bridget doesn't answer. I think she recognizes the alarmist in me surfacing.

She goes about unpacking the boxes I finished unloading while I wonder about the inactive ingredients – *Yellow 5, Red 40?* – that are squeezing my heart pulpy.

9

Outside in the parking lot, my other neighbor, not the crazy girl, is cleaning his car. I spy on him through the drawn blinds of our kitchen window. My car is much dirtier than his and still I haven't thought about a carwash.

"What's he using there?" I ask Honeyed Cat. "Is he using a special blue cloth? No, he's using a blue towel. There's no way he bought a special blue cloth to clean his car. He isn't the kind of person who'd buy a special blue cloth to clean his car."

He holds the towel at shoulder height, spreads it as far apart as it'll go, folds it in half, and then in half again, and wipes the hood clean. He moves to the roof of the car. I'm surprised at how well his blue towel works. No water, no soap, just a dry towel.

Here in Austin, there's a lot of pollen riding the springtime air. If you don't give your car due diligence, it'll soon be brushed yellow, like mine.

And after it rains, the pollen becomes even more unsightly.

I decide right then and there to clean my car with a dry towel once Bridget gets

back from work at the Children's Autism Center in Round Rock. But I probably won't.

I leave for the Twin Oaks Public Library. On my way down the flight of stairs, I think about stopping to chat with my neighbor, whom I've only said hello to once before, but once I reach the parking lot asphalt I'm only able to smile and admire his work.

On Congress Ave, the maintenance man for the adjacent complex looks up from a doorjamb he's working on and sees my eyes on him. I nod and say hello. He doesn't nod back, or acknowledge me in any noticeable way.

"Fair enough," I say. The next man coming my way is Mexican. He wears a black baseball cap and smokes heavily on a cancer stick. I decide right then and there I'm going to say hello to prove to myself the people around me are friendly. But as we pass, he turns his head in the other direction and blows cancer, his eyes never meeting mine, so I stay quiet and don't even manage a nod.

A busload of people gets off the 1M at the HEB grocery store that I love so much. It's interesting to see how some walk quickly and others take their precious time. One of the busiest passengers has a baldpate. I decide right then and there that if I ever have the same affliction I will immediately shave my scalp with a razor. Baldpates look vulnerable in the harsh Austin light. They shine like mercury wafers.

I don't want to stand too close to this busy man lest I contract his genes. While he waits on the corner to cross Congress Ave, I back into the shade of a knobby tree. Sitting in the same shade is the bum Bridget and I saw last night with a scary looking gash on his temple. I guess he lived. There's no remnant of the wound. He has a cardboard sign propped next to him that reads:

PEASE FEED

GOD BLESS

AM HUNGY

I wish I had a beautiful apple to give him.

When the cobalt pedestrian signals from the other side of Congress Ave, a steady beeping also sounds to alert the blind it's safe to cross.

A woman passes me. It's difficult to say if she's walking faster, or if the dog on her leash is pulling her along at an uncomfortable rate. On the opposite corner, a bum standing in the biting sun asks her pointblank, "Can I trade places with your dog?" She doesn't hear him at first, or at least she thinks she doesn't catch his brazen plea, so he repeats himself in the same dreary voice. He asks, "Can I trade places with your dog?"

“No!” she says. I slow down to listen further. “No!” she says again. “It’s not my dog. I think the owner would kill me.”

Two male buskers make twangy music outside the Twin Oaks Public Library. A gaping guitar case with green velvet lining panhandles while they play. One strums, the other sings elegiacally about the disgusting wars this country fights.

9

Somewhere in the Florida panhandle, Bridget notices my slack jaw.

“Aye Viejo,” she says, “I don’t want you driving anymore.”

We pull into a rest area with nighttime patrol. The last image I have before trying to sleep is of a portly security guard wearing a green windbreaker and a brimmed hat. He’s standing malignantly by a picnic table. He reminds me of a murderer surveying his prey from a mountaintop somewhere in Oslo.

I take off my eyeglasses and get underneath the blanket with Bridget. We attempt to spoon.

“Wait,” I say, and lock my door.

The cab isn’t dark owing to the yellow lights shining down on the rest area. And the grounds are noisy with the diesel purr of semis. To make matters worse, I can’t keep the middle seatbelt buckle from knifing my loin.

Bridget is no better off. Half her body hangs off the seat. Still, we press into one body and somehow find the land of nod.

At 7AM, I jolt awake and have a pressing need to hit the road posthaste. Bridget isn’t ready to travel yet, but the road summons. I rub the little sleep I got out of my eyes and look around to see this place I’m about to leave behind. Then I turn the engine over and merge onto I-10 West.

CHANGE ENGINE OIL

By no means am I wise. I wasn’t born wise, and the world hasn’t had enough time to make me wise. But the world is trying. Like this morning, at 7AM, the world wants to show me the soft pink hues of a foggy sunrise.

I feel like I'm driving above everything around me. All I can see are treetops and this sky washed out in pink. To think this happens every day.

Unearthly, that's the word that comes to mind as I drive across the land. The earth is unearthly. My heart grows light and playful. There's gentleness in the new morning. There's growth, ripening, and maternal protection in the new morning, but before every new morning comes the end of deepest night.

I ask Bridget if she can record this scene on her iPhone while the radio plays *Under the Bridge*.

3

Of the many amenities society offers, public libraries sit at the top of my list. I have two library cards on my key ring: Miami-Dade and Austin. Both are predominantly green, which I like. Green is a good color.

The Miami-Dade card is flanked with palm fronds. A slice of blue heaven crowns the Spanish roof of some building. A vibrant sun shines down on a tiled courtyard. I love Miami's sky.

The Austin card has a field of grass leaves, wheat chaff, dandelions, and a butterfly in the foreground. Stars pop. One flies above the rest: the Lone Star. In the background, the Congress Ave Bridge leads to downtown. Sunrays shoot from an invisible sun.

There's no blue sky on Austin's library card because the sky in Austin isn't blue. It's a white sky here, white and vast in every direction. When the time comes, I'll use my local library's Wi-Fi to find employment.

When will this be?

A perfectly reasonable question that deserves an answer considering I've holed myself up in our apartment every day for the past two months while Bridget jumpstarts what will prove to be a thriving career in the booming field of autism.

Again I've let myself become a lowlife. Even though I have a readership of only family and friends at best, I've decided to write another manuscript, a follow-up to the zeros and ones of my unpublished Ernest Pipe manuscript, which I wrote in Chicago under the working title:

C R A S S I T U D E

While the race for a career goes on relentlessly around me, I sit inside, out of

contact from the rest of us, I lag, I fall to the bottom of the ladder, and I do it writing. Someday, the world is going to go on without us. How we spend our limited time on earth, how seriously we seek and care for a job, is up to you and me. The older I get, the more I'm convinced writing is what I'm supposed to do with my finite time here. It's through writing that I will make the most of my life. I understand the beauty behind marriage and family. I, too, want to ramify the tree of humanity, but words will be my legacy. However trifling, my legacy will be a creation of love and honesty. It's only fault, if any, will be that it's all too human.

7

In Texas, there's a city in the middle of nowhere and it's the state seat. Once called Waterloo, the Texas capitol was renamed Austin, in honor of Stephen F. Austin, who, standing by a live oak, signed an important treaty with the Native Americans in the early nineteenth century. The live oak that helped establish the first boundary line in the Lone Star State still lives on Baylor St and 6th St despite recent vandalism.

Some people believe Treaty Oak is ~500 years old.

In Texas, there's a natural spring that, three centuries ago, Native Americans visited to mend their wounds. The site became part of Zilker Park, cared for by Austin in the heart of the city, and it took the name Barton Springs Pool. Old Pecan trees guard the 1,000 foot long swimming hole dammed off on either side. When I do my rendition of a swan dive into the year-round chilly waters, I can feel the water piped up from what I imagine is the center of the earth. This is the mother spring. My scrotum tightens. I surface for air and look around me at the sunbathers on the hill.

It's no ocean, but it does the job pretty decent.

In Texas, there are at least three Austin transplants. Few people know of them, but if you rummage in their pockets, you'll see their mugs staring out of Texas drivers' licenses, and you'll scan their zip codes as AUSTIN TX 78704 because they were forced to surrender their previous state IDs.

One of these transplants, however, doesn't have a license at all.

She doesn't need one because she doesn't drive a vehicle. As a matter of fact, she never leaves the house.

5

Honeyed Cat has turned our concrete balcony into hunting grounds. She crouches in the corner, behind a green potted plant, and waits for birds to alight on the wrought-iron railing.

Grackles with yellow eyeballs preen their feathers, unaware of the tiny cat not more than five feet away.

Honeyed Cat's tail, curled like a candy cane, freezes one inch above the concrete. She readies her tensile muscles, locks her eyes on the quarry, and, when I least expect it, bursts into a choreographed pounce.

The grackles squawk. Their feathers explode in a chaotic flurry until flight is found. I've seen this happen with Honeyed Cat's retractable claws dangerously close.

But she isn't discouraged. There will be other birds. In this way, the hunt continues, except instead of using the green potted plant as cover, she'll move to the carpet of our bedroom and sink into alert repose by the sliding glass door, which we leave open at all hours of day and night, at least for now.

This keeps her life interesting. It gives her purpose through recreation. But there are times when I consider closing the sliding glass door, like this morning at 7:13AM.

Somewhere deep within the folds of sleep, I hear a bird alight unknowingly on our balcony. When the bird settles, our tiny tiger breaks through the vertical blinds with grace and fury. I don't hear the typical escape from the bird, so I take it that Honeyed Cat sunk her claws before flight and is feasting on warm blood.

I shut my eyes, happy with our tiny tiger's victory. I don't think about cleanup, but I do have trouble falling back asleep, which is why I think about closing Honeyed Cat's fun at nights, so she won't startle me awake again. It's also not safe, leaving the door to your bedroom open for anyone to break in while you sleep. Plus, it's noisy as hell outside.

Nearly three hours later, Bridget bestirs, and I open the vertical blinds.

No carcass, but there is a shiny black feather. I tickle Honeyed Cat's tiny white chin. She has a blackhead. Cats are prone to getting blackheads on their chins.

In the near distance, three discharges sound. Bridget asks, "What's that?"

"Gunshots," I say.

Then a lone bugle touches the elegiac notes of Taps.

1

Jon asks if I want to go count tools in the shed. I look at Bridget and ask if she wants to come, too.

"No thanks," she says.

But I should've known my question was rhetorical. Bridget rarely wants to count tools in the shed.

I follow Jon out the back door, across the artificial turf of his screened patio, and out the creaky-hinged door that slams behind us.

This is Hollywood. I look up at a cut of the bluest sky and feel maudlin. This is the last day I'll get to enjoy the coast. After today, Bridget and I and Honeyed Cat will hop into the red Civic and return to Austin more permanently. As expected, I had to purchase two new tires and change the oil. I also had to get a new battery, which I didn't expect.

The car is ready now, and Honeyed Cat is as ready as she'll ever be to drive cross-country to landlocked central Texas.

But for today, the water sparkles as it laps against Jon's boat.

"Have you gotten the bilge pump working again?" I ask.

"Not really," laments Jon. "The other day I had to rush home from work when it started raining. I almost lost the boat."

Stretched languorously between two generous palms: a hemp hammock. If the shed weren't so inviting, I would've spent more time on this hammock, swinging with the book of some great writer in my hands.

Jon unlocks the door. "I'm working on building a ramp here," he informs me. "These steps get pretty slippery when it rains."

I look at the stack of cinderblocks leading up to the slightly elevated shed. One of the blocks is missing entirely.

"Yeah," I say, "these steps definitely seem precarious."

Jon grins and yanks the door open. The inside of the shed is exposed wood. The roof beams show. One windy night, with the palm fronds smacking the aluminum siding, Jon decides to build a tri-tiered shelving system to maximize surface area inside the shed. He doesn't sketch a blueprint. He doesn't even follow a

preexisting diagram on the internet. But that's the way to do things when the spirit strikes and you have a world of tools and materials at your disposal. Jump right in and have fun with it. Build things.

Jon shuffles to the back of the shed. That's where he hides his weed, in a file cabinet. He asks if I can *twist* one up for us.

"I think you're more efficient at rolling," I say, remembering how long it takes me to cull the seeds from the good stuff. I say, "I'm an impractical perfectionist."

"Yeah," he says, "but yours burn better."

He turns on the battery-powered radio, finds an AM station playing dub reggae, and looks into his dorm fridge.

"Want a beer?" he asks.

"Sure," I say.

He reaches down and pulls out two Heinekens. He uses the bottle opener next to the door. I remember the day when he attached the bottle opener into the doorframe of his shed. He used his cordless power drill. It happened in a matter of seconds.

That's all the time it takes for a lifetime of functionality.

"Thank you," I say. I make sure to look at his eyes when I say this because I really am grateful. Beer and weed in the party shed, what a luxury, what a setup. I look out the small picture frame window and see sunlight radiating off the canal. Bridget comes in to see what we're up to. Dear Lord, what did I do to deserve this wonderful place and this wonderful company?

"Want to sit down with us, Babe?" asks Jon.

"No, Father," says Bridget, "but I'll take a beer."

Jon grins. "They're in the fridge there," he says. "Help yourself."

I pinch the paper and start the upward roll. When I reach the adhesive strip, I lightly use the tip of my tongue and set the joint down to ossify.

"Do you want to sit?" I ask, standing to let Bridget take my seat. I didn't hear her say no to her dad's offer already, and it turns out to be a good thing.

To my surprise, she sits down, and Jon picks up the joint, reaches into his pocket for a yellow lighter, and starts things off without asking permission. His eyes wrinkle at the edges, and the air in the shed is aromatized.

The joint makes its first round. It's burning slowly. Resin seeps into the gum

paper.

Bridget shakes her head sweetly and takes her leave. “I’ll be outside,” she says. I say we’ll be a little longer, and she closes the door behind her.

Jon takes a hit of beer. I take a hit of weed. We continue like this for several minutes, listening to dub reggae and enlightening our sensory organs, before Jon picks up a red plastic funnel.

“You know what this would be good for?” he asks.

I take my time to guess what he’s driving at, “Not really.”

“Well,” he says, “hand me that power drill behind you with a quarter-inch bit.”

Again, without any kind of preliminary sketch or preexisting diagram, he presses the drill perpendicular to a spot of floor off in a corner of the shed and drills through the wood. He then plugs the tip of the funnel into the hole and watches for my reaction.

When I begin to laugh, he knows I understand what he outfitted his shed with in a matter of seconds, for a lifetime of functionality.

“The only problem is the grass underneath. If I don’t want to kill it, I should make

a little PVC drainage pipe that runs off to the canal.”

“You think your neighbors would figure out what’s going on after a few uses?”

Jon pensively tilts his chin. Then, “It *would* be a conspicuous trickle.”

The dub reggae cuts for a quick traffic update. A Jamaican comes on air to tell us I-95 is glacial. A semi jack-knifed at the Golden Glades Exchange. Expect serious southbound delays.

“Listening to traffic reports isn’t so bad in the shed,” I say.

Jon grins. “It sure sucks when you’re driving in it though.” He pulls, “By the way, did you change the oil in the truck?”

I press my lips, wishing I were more of a man. “No,” I say. “The light never came on.”

“What do you mean? The light was on before you drove to Austin.”

“I don’t know, Jon” I say. “I guess I was waiting for *another* warning light.”

“Well,” says Jon, passing the joint, “there goes that engine.”

He measures my worth with an unnerving stare and concludes he isn't happy with me. I didn't change the Silverado's oil after driving over 2,700 miles on its wheels and the dashboard telling me the whole way:

CHANGE ENGINE OIL

This is a fact. I feel deeply ashamed. I feel pointless.

0

I drink a lot of tap water even though some people think it's dirty.

No private sector company has persuaded me that their bottled water is any better than my tap water, or that my tap water is bad for me.

I'm not saying that cancer clusters aren't a direct result of contaminated tap water. It happens, and I'm sad and concerned when it does.

We place a certain degree of faith in public sector companies, but when these start failing us, we begin to ask ourselves, *Who can we trust?*

In this way, living in civilized areas becomes more like living along the untamed waters of the Amazon. Each step in the rainforest is a giant leap of faith. Which reptiles lurk beneath moist foliage? Which schools of fish await bathers? Who will watch us sleep?

Pythons. Piranhas. Panthers.

If we don't trust the waterworks, why do we pay a premium to live in civilized areas, why don't we adapt to the wildness of jungles, or the jaggedness of mountaintops, or the aridness of deserts, and rely only on ourselves?

Why subject ourselves to the wide spectrum of pollutants created by cities *and* pay for something like bottled water when we can slake our thirst with perfect water, breathe clean air, and eat unprocessed foods elsewhere?

There are times when I feel like civilization is killing me and charging for it. Driving through east Texas doesn't help.

The sooty skyline of refineries and chemical plants begs me to wonder what I'm doing living here, not off the land, but off the products and byproducts of a greedy and ambitious Collective Mind.

Honeyed Cat comes to life the second Bridget and I turn off the light. In the dark, she watches us in bed and then heads over to the kitchen for a little snack. The last thing I hear before falling asleep is Honeyed Cat steadily crunching dry food with her incisors.

After her meal, I don't know what she does. Bridget and I fall asleep spooning. I smell her nape. My breath sways her peach fuzz. My forearm sits between her breasts. Our toes sometimes wiggle.

Sleep unwinds us. Dreams begin moving our eyes. I don't mind being woken up by a storm or some other natural occurrence. But when Honeyed Cat rasps her retractable claws against the sliding glass door to be let out, I grow frustrated and very mean.

Honeyed Cat is keen on communicating. Although she has a limited vocabulary, she's a glib talker when she tries. Mostly I find her talking cute. I like when she demands something, and over the years we've become fluent when it comes to expressing what we want of each other.

But this incessant scratching has got to stop. I know her ultimate goal is to force me to keep the sliding glass door open again, however, a return to those lax days simply can't happen.

The safety of our home comes first and foremost, not the unimpeded freedom of Honeyed Cat. I decide this after multiple brushes with the leprechaun elf. He looks at Bridget with limp lips of lechery. It's perhaps cowardly to go out of my way to avoid the leprechaun elf and throw him off track with circuitous routes home, but it's in my best interest to preempt any situations that might force me to act like a man.

I try to ignore Honeyed Cat. This is foolish. Honeyed Cat can be ignored only if she wants to be ignored. Once she has it set in her tiny head to be heard, she always wins.

Her nails might as well be clawing a chalkboard. I burst out of bed, and Honeyed Cat hunkers down to hold her ground. I see her even though it's dark because she wants herself to be seen.

Instead of admitting defeat and opening the sliding glass door, I shoo Honeyed Cat in the direction of the bedroom door and shut her out. She's spry on her tiny feet. But it's no use.

After enough time passes to let me find sleep again, she paws the door. First a civil paw, like one gentle knock, then things augment into cacophony. I curse and

open the door. She slithers past my feet and stands at the sliding glass door.

You'll never win, she thinks.

Her head is turned toward me. Her dilated pupils reflect darkness.

Let me out, she thinks, *we've been through these antics before*.

I meet her halfway. I open the sliding glass door to let her out and then I shut it.

You wanted to be let out, I think. *Now you can stay out till I feel like letting you in*.

For several hours I'm able to get quality sleep. REM makes my eyeballs fidget as I dream the craziest dreams. Dreams I'd rather forget. But Honeyed Cat makes sure this doesn't happen.

Right in the middle of REM, when my breathing is heaviest and slowest, Honeyed Cat starts rasping the glass. She quickly transitions to the metal frame.

I try to ignore her pestering, but she doesn't want to be ignored, and the image and context of my bizarre dream jars me. Trust me, there's such a thing as waking up on the wrong side of the bed.

Bridget turns over and threatens to stir from sleep unless I let Honeyed Cat in right away. I stand, huffing and puffing and full of vinegar and piss, open the sliding glass door a crack, hang my hairy barefoot out to keep Honeyed Cat from wriggling past, and I deliver a swift kick to her brisket. She retreats, hunkers down, and levels me with an evil eye.

So that's how you want to play, she thinks.

I hiss at her to make myself understood, and then I leave the sliding glass door ajar, but not enough for her to slink through. She's intent on getting inside. She swipes her paw through the air and tries to finagle her tiny head through the crack to no avail.

"Meow," she says, "meow." The rasping recommences. I pick her up and toss her into the utility room. "Scratch all you want in there," I say.

Bridget won't tolerate this treatment of her cat. She gets out of bed and lets Honeyed Cat back inside. I swing my arms to hurry the damn thing out of our room.

"First you want out," I say, at my wit's end, "and then you want back in. What do I have to do to get some sleep around here?"

The answer I'm looking for from Honeyed Cat comes in the form of a victorious

wet lick of her razor-sharp forepaw.

“You can’t treat my cat that way, psycho,” says Bridget. “She’s a confused cat.”

“I’m locking her on the balcony today,” I say. “I’m going to make her diurnal even if it’s the last thing I do.”

“Do you know I have to be up in 30 minutes?” asks Bridget, noticeably disturbed. “Let me sleep!”

8

Forgive me, but my disposition is prone to reflection and melancholy and becoming pointless.

As you already know, I’m not in the throes of contriving a story. What you’re reading is trying to stay formless and free, without limitations and plot. This means the occasional digression.

What I mean to say is, this Sunday I reread what I’ve written up until tater tots, and I was extremely disappointed with everything about my writing, which is mediocre at best, and absolutely uninteresting, and stunningly tiring, and boring, and not at all a reason to write but a reason to change everything about my life and the way I spend my time.

What have I committed myself to in these pages? Another journal? Another attempt at creation? Why, if I’m not a creator? Why, if I’m nothing at all?

What I mean to say is, why write about myself when I’m nobody worth reading about? I’ve failed to live a commendable life. Granted, I’m only 30, but at this juncture I don’t see the new morning. Austin, for a short while, was my new morning, but not even a couple weeks later and I already see only the dead of night.

Dostoevsky wrote:

But anyhow: what can a decent man speak about with the most pleasure?

Answer: about himself.

So then I, too, will speak about myself.

I must not be decent anymore because I find no pleasure in speaking about myself.

What happened between the beginning of this memory and now? Why the change of heart? Why not plod on with conviction? Why let my melancholy get the best of me? Why become indecent?

It's not complicated. I'm not complicated. I'm aware of my problem.

What I mean to say is, I'm 30 years on earth and have nothing really going for me in terms of security or chance for security. I haven't invested prudently in Michael's stock. My resume is without direction, without theme. I'm a factotum and am really at risk of remaining a factotum for the rest of my earthly life.

If you sense that I'm writing with desperation it's because I am. I'm desperate to say something for the record because my record says nothing about me.

There are times when I throw myself on the queen-size mattress that once upon a time belonged to a girl named Holly, and I stare at the fan and feel withered right on the inside, right where it hurts the most.

For how much longer will writing work its wonders and placate my worries? I don't think it's working right now. I'm still up in the air, worried about my future. I'm still weak, concerned, and unable to stand up and be a man.

What do you do for a living? How do you earn your bread?

I can't answer these questions, especially right now, in my current state of so-called gainful unemployment, these questions loom like a taunt, a whipping. But getting a job is easy enough. All you have to do is hit the streets until it happens. I understand this, and I'm not lazy, and I will get a job.

I will. Just not right this second.

Instead, today I go to HEB and notice for the first time how all the employees wear their nametags on their hearts, and these tags not only tell their names, but they also tell how many years they've been employed by HEB. And if they've worked at HEB for less than one year, a Lone Star shines solitary in place of a number.

The woman checking us out, on the other hand, has worked at HEB for a whopping sixteen years. I stare at her face and see how professional she is when she scans the juice Bridget is buying.

"Oh," supplicates Bridget, "I wanted to get cash back. Can I still get cash back?"

The veteran employee smiles at Bridget's mishap, makes precise keystrokes to reset the transaction, and pronounces, "Swipe your card again, Sweetie." She bleeds casual professionalism onto her till. I'd even go so far as to say she's happy with her choices in life.

As Bridget swipes, another HEB employee is about to pass. I know he's a HEB employee because he wears a solid red long-sleeve dress shirt.

When his heart comes into focus, I ignore his name and see his number: 36 years.

Staggering!

I study the grocery store around me, and I see this monolith, a super manager in his domain. He has a potbelly, gray hair, and a ruddy complexion. 36 years for the same company. Is this a feat I'm capable of, to work for 36 years for the same company?

How about five? Can I work five years for the same company? How about more than three? Is more than three possible?

I'm such a factotum.

But, for some dangerous irrational reason, even this weakness and desperation and melancholy that comes with being a factotum, with wandering from one occupation to another, never staying for too long in one place, like a shark, like some prehistoric organism of the sea, seems preferable to working for 36 years in the same place and becoming a super manager monolith.

It's harder, it's less certain, it's insecure, crazy and highly un-laudable, but this is, to be blunt, who I am. This is how I made my world, and I have to believe I made it this way for a reason, if not, everything I was before, my entire history, would be destroyed, and I don't believe any part of me should be destroyed. I've been decent my entire life. I respect all of me, the whole spectrum, from year 0 to year 30.

Somewhere in there I wanted to become a writer. Somewhere in there I wanted so badly to write for the rest of my life, and although there are many ways to do this without being a factotum – I can go about it smarter, with more perspicuity, a little more sense – I've never been one who tries to be smart.

There. I feel better now.

2

Jack Kerouac lived his final days on the west coast of Florida, in St. Petersburg, in a one-story brick house with a two-car garage. The concrete driveway is made uneven by the erratic roots of an old pine.

Honeyed Cat seems to be doing all right after we drugged her with a half dosage

of a generic antihistamine. She isn't sleeping on Bridget's lap, but she's groggy and inert.

It's my idea to find Kerouac's last house on earth.

I think to do it somewhere on I-95, before detouring toward Alligator Alley.

Although I haven't read his opus, Kerouac is a legend in my mind. But his single-family house in St Petersburg isn't much to leave behind. Compared to Hemingway's House in The Keys, Jack Kerouac's is second-rate. People drive past it every day, and most don't even know of its significance

How could they if it's unmarked?

No signage along I-275 leads the way to his house. Even the shop owners in the strip mall across the street have never heard of Jack Kerouac. I walk into a pizza joint that brags of its establishment date, as if its dough were something meaningful, and I ask if they can steer me toward the beatnik's house. I know it's somewhere nearby.

"Jack *Who*?"

That's the answer I get from the chorus, that and a cancerous guffaw.

Against my better judgment, I try to explain. I say, "Jack Kerouac, the writer. He died in St. Petersburg, in a house right around here. He wrote *On the Road*."

"That's right. I remember someone coming in here asking about this Kerouac guy."

"Do you know where he lived?" I ask. "I know it's in this area."

"Can't say, but it's probably right under your nose!" Three cancerous guffaws put the exclamation mark at the end of this joke.

I say, "Okay, thanks anyway."

No one in the grocery store knows either. You'd think bagboys would read Kerouac. His beat prose seems like it would somehow get on their reading list. But of the three bagboys I speak with, only the scrubbiest one is semi-helpful.

"Look online," he suggests.

Why didn't I think of that before? That's usually the first step I take when attempting to answer a question, I take Bridget's iPhone and query Google, but for some reason, perhaps more of an inquiry into the proliferation of Kerouac's prose, I resort to popular knowledge for finding his last house, and instead come to know what it means to be unknown and under-recognized despite persistent

efforts and contemporary successes.

His house, as it turns out, is right across the street.

0

Rainclouds overhead, I open the sliding glass door, let Honeyed Cat back inside, and begin to remember something Abe told me:

If your pictures aren't coming out how you want them to – get closer.

That's the way I want to write, using the same principle of closeness, of sidling right next to my subject and writing as I see it from there. While it's true sweeping panoramas have a beauty of their own, life in close proximity is cosmic.

Lightning happens, thunder follows, and Bridget asks if I want another Lone Star.

"Why not?" I say.

She takes the last sip from her sixteen-ounce can and fetches our last two beers from the fridge. Before these are finished, we're in the closet unpeeling shirts and pants. It's the storm outside that raises the barometric pressure of our libidos. We burst out of the closet and onto our queen-size bed. The ceiling fan cools our skin. More lightning, more thunder, and rains quench fledgling shoots of grass.

Tonight, we're having pork chops for dinner.

9

I don't know if I've already mentioned this, but our place in Austin is small. Around 523 square feet, not including the balcony and utility room. It also has very little in the way of character. Apart from the green wall separating our living area from our bathroom, everything is painted sterile white and coated with popcorn to make the walls and ceiling appear smoother.

There are no arched thresholds, no old wooden floors that give some with each step, no columns, no tiled shower, no custom cabinetry, no lofty windows, the effect being an emphasis on the green wall, which isn't coated with popcorn but painted thickly and smoothly, and it's not even drywall but vertical slats of wood.

Bridget doesn't like this wall on our first walk through. The color is too dark for

her. We get to our new place, find the key underneath the doormat, like Holly promised she'd do, open the front door, and Bridget sees this green dividing wall staring at her like a cesspool that has the gall to stand upright.

Since we managed to sell all our furniture in Miami Beach in four days thanks to the wonders of craigslist, we were able to use a portion of that money to make sure our place in Austin is furnished with a sofa, dining room table, two chairs, coffee and end tables, queen-size mattress on box spring, and two tray tables.

As far as logistics are concerned, I can't think of a better setup. Apart from the 4,000 miles we have to drive, this move is as hassle-free and frugal as it gets, and I'll gladly make another move like this in the future.

But the green wall is destabilizing. Neither of us comments on this oddity. I'm not as disturbed as Bridget, who immediately says we should move the pearl white micro-fiber sofa to the other side of our living area, that is to say, in *front* of the green wall.

"There, that's better," enthusiastically remarks Bridget, "it makes the sofa *pop*."

An unexpected change of heart for Bridget. A simple reconfiguration like this is all it takes for her to appreciate the splash of color in our new home, and the sofa is much better situated in terms of aesthetics. Even I notice.

In this way, our green wall takes its first step toward becoming Wall of Awesome. The next step, much larger in size, happens two weeks later, when Bridget pulls out hammer and nail and hangs seven pieces of artwork, four of them her creation.

Highest on our Wall of Awesome, an inch from the popcorn ceiling, is her watercolor of Granddad.

7

Today, on the bus to UT, I realize why Mexican Spanish is difficult to understand.

It isn't that they cut off the ends of words, like Michael thinks, but that they say each syllable.

Mexican Spanish is more syllabic than, say, Colombian Spanish.

Where Colombians are smooth, compressing the highs and lows of their speech until it all sounds digitally mastered, Mexicans are staccato.

When I get off at my stop, I walk north to Dean Keeton St. My lab is having its

weekly meeting today. I also have to tell my mentor whether I want a PC or Mac in my office. I can't believe I'm going to have an office, and my *own* brand new Mac.

"Vagina necklace?"

I stop in my tracks and face this wimpy kid wearing tie-dye. He doesn't act like he asked me if I wanted a vagina necklace, but I'm pretty sure he's selling necklaces with a clay vagina pendant. They kind of look like a swirl, or even a conch shell. The same labial shape is painted on the face of his skateboard.

"What," I say, "are you a feminist?"

He shrugs and says, "I love women."

After my lab meeting, on my way to the 1M bus stop, I spot the same wimpy kid. He's standing next to a cart of food with a sign on it that says:

THIS FOOD IS FREE TO TAKE FOR THE HOMELESS

He sees me and snatches a plate. Then he skateboards downhill. He's carrying food in one hand, and his box of vagina necklaces in the other.

I read the sign again, to make sure I read it right the first time.

4

We have the projector shining D.A. Pennebaker's *Dont Look Back* on our screen. I've seen it once before, but Bridget hasn't had the privilege.

Somewhere near the middle, a TIME reporter is sitting down with Dylan, and Dylan is reaming this guy with a waterfall of words. He's like a font of nonsensical wisdom, punishing this TIME reporter for having the gall to interview him when he's totally incapable of understanding Bob Dylan and everything related to Bob Dylan.

The TIME reporter has teeth like a rabbit. Pennebaker is merciless with his camera, filling the frame with this reporter's ugly mug. There's no doubt Dylan is in control, talking ceaselessly to this media man, trying in vain to enlighten him:

"No, I was saying that you're gonna die and are gonna go off the earth, you're gonna be dead, and it could be 20 years, it could be tomorrow, any time, so am I. We're just gonna be gone, the world's gonna go on without us. Now, you do your job in the face of that, and how seriously you take yourself, you know, you decide

for yourself."

Dylan's words, no matter how thoughtless, resonate for me. It's clear, whether it's true or not, that Dylan does his thing fully aware of his mortality. Now think about this. Think long and good about this, but not too long because then you'll make yourself pointless. In this life, we live knowing very well that someday we'll be gone. *Poof!* Does it make sense, if you already know this, to go about your life seriously?

Dylan is Dylan because he can't possibly take himself seriously. There's a little bolt inside him that's always slightly loose. He does what he does and he does it well, but he doesn't do it seriously.

At the end of the film, his manager at the time, Albert Grossman, tells Dylan that the newspapers are calling Bob Dylan an anarchist. Dylan laughs, smears his hand into his cheeks, and asks for a cancer stick. Grossman goes on to tell him that they think he's an anarchist because Bob Dylan doesn't offer any solutions.

9

"Drogas," I sing to Honeyed Cat, "drooogas."

Drogas, in case you don't know Spanish, translates most accurately into *drugs*. It carries all the same connotations carried in the word *drugs*.

Whenever we can, we try to ease Honeyed Cat into becoming bilingual. It'll make her more desirable in the marketplace.

That's a joke. We have no intention of putting Honeyed Cat to work. Lord knows her tiny soul is put upon enough having to deal with the likes of me every day.

"Drogas," I sing, "drooogas."

Honeyed Cat juts her rear toward heaven, extends her tiny padded forepaws in front of her, and crooks her tail like a candy cane. Her jade eyes squint a little, her whiskers pull back with her triangular ears. Honeyed Cat is a drug fiend, and it's Friday night. Time for her weekly wind down.

She struts toward me in the kitchen, from brown carpet to linoleum. She rubs

silky around my shin and calve. She licks my anklebone and looks up at me, "Miaow."

"You want drogas, Honey?" I ask. Her tongue tickles like sandpaper. I ask, "You

like drogas?"

"Miaow."

I fish out a wine cork from her catnip baggy. She knows this aromatized cork means getting high and frisky. It means temporary bliss. I twirl it with my index finger and thumb. I hurl it into our bedroom. She scurries. "Get it!" I say. Her claws grip the carpet as she tears around the corner and pounces. That cork never has a chance. She somersaults with it and does her kill move with her hind claws. Sometimes she misses the cork and kicks her tiny chin. She flips onto her honeyed belly, ripples a wave along her spine, darts her tiny head in every direction, and is back at the cork, chewing on it and coveting it.

I toss the cork around a couple more times so she can enjoy being Super Cat.

"You love her," says Bridget. She's inside the bathroom, on the other side of our Wall of Awesome, getting ready for our night moves.

I don't see her until she appears dressed in a summer dress. Her reddish gold hair is in the embrace of a green ribbon. She's an Irish nymph. Her lips are bare. I take her hand, and we walk to the door. I turn off the lights, and we say goodbye to Honeyed Cat.

The moon is low and full in the night sky, directly in front of us.

I say, "It's brown tonight."

Bridget agrees. She says it looks as big as a planet.

"It's not," I say. I say, "It's a moon."

"I know *that*," she says.

We pad paved terrain with four quiet feet. We reach Congress Ave.

"But can you believe," she says, "that we've walked on that moon?"

It *is* incredible to think humans have been oh-so-far-away from earth. I don't know if we're meant to go oh-so-far-away from earth. I'm an isolationist. I don't even think humans should've crossed the ocean. The ocean is hostile enough. Think of Space.

Why do we always want to push farther? Why do we always think we're missing out if we haven't seen everything? We're like cats, always curious what's behind the closed door, or inside that cabinet. Stay within natural boundaries. Learn yourself right where you are. I'm all for traveling by foot and by wheels, but by ship, airplane, rocket? These are absurdities. They'll only lead to exploitation and further trouble.

Dear Lord, I know my frustration makes me speak nonsense. I'm prolific in the art of guff. According to my understanding of Your story, we bit into the apple of knowledge and You exiled us. Banished us from the land of sweet ignorance. I've had my share of apples. I'm going to smoke an apple tonight, after Bridget and I drink 24 ounces of high-gravity cider. I'm not asking for the land of sweet ignorance. I renounced that place almost directly after I was born. Some may even think I renounced it before.

But, dear Lord, if I can't live in the land of ignorance, if it's no longer possible for me to live off Your bounty, please give me the wherewithal and the freedom to continue putting together my own legend, but not – I repeat, *not* – at the expense of those people I love and trust. I'm no starving artist. I simply want to make my own legend.

4

To have the ability to move fast without an engine, to get places in record time without polluting, to use calories as your fuel. It makes so much more sense. It also frees your mind, riding on your bike.

Bridget and I are keenly aware of this when we ride to Pecan St, known as 6th St these days, for an arts and crafts fair.

On the way there, coasting north down the sidewalk without a helmet – *stupid us!* – we pass an older woman doing her lawn on South 1st St.

She has a small bungalow she neatens up on Saturday. Every Saturday she takes out the trusty lawn mower and rake and puts the landscape around her bungalow in proper order, and she does this wearing a cotton tee that scans:

FREEDOM IS NOT FREE

If freedom isn't free, I think, *how much does it cost? Would I pay for freedom? It seems like if you have to pay for freedom, you probably aren't very free to begin with, and besides, it completely goes against my anti-consumerist way of being*.

On the opposite side of South 1st St, I recognize a moonlight tower straight out of the stoner classic, *Dazed and Confused*. I try to alert Bridget, but she's too far ahead.

The next point of interest is a cluster of trailer park vittles. Austin is famous for late nineteenth century moontowers and these street vendors. Keep overhead low and food quality high – a winning recipe. But I hear unctuous city officials are doing what they can to make it more costly and bureaucratic to get vendor

permits. They also want to make inspections more stringent. Local economists predict one out of every five will have to shut down shop. Leave it to city officials to keep the population safe.

4

Miami Beach was *death defying*. Where did I get that descriptor?

I wrote it in haste, thinking that hastiness would make me honest, but that doesn't answer my question.

Miami Beach was *death defying*. I can't make any sense of it, yet I feel it captures the spirit of my Miami Beach.

We lived 0.5 miles from the actual beach. A ten-minute walk was all it took for us to reach paradise. Where we lived, paradise was reliable. I could depend on paradise. I could count on it to always be there.

The sea,

always there.

The cut of the bluest sky,

always there.

The sands,

The sun,

The seashells,

always there.

The horizon,

always there.

Such an open space, full of fractals and the golden ratio,

always there.

Austin?

I'm ashamed of the way I just treated Honeyed Cat. I don't know what came over me, and I'm sorry.

The shower was cold. The water was little more than a trickle. Quite aggravating. I'm not trying to make excuses for the way I behaved, but it *is* tough to shower for a new purchase on the day under these conditions. Shitty showers should justify, at least to some extent, shameful behavior.

Backstory:

We asked the woman with purple boots for a visit from the exterminator and a replacement showerhead. I think ours is corroded. Something as simple as a new showerhead could fortify our water pressure.

Although the woman with purple boots promised us a new part, it's been almost two months since our request and nothing. The exterminator has come, though. He banged on our front door one morning and, since no one seemed to be answering, decided to use his universal key to open sesame.

I jumped out of bed, stumbled into some dirty shorts, and shouted, "Wait!"

But he continued to jabber with the key. Little did I know, it was impossible for him to enter since I had bolted the top lock, which can't be manipulated from outside.

Honeyed Cat was frightened of this foreign man. She played statue in the corner as he did his thing with the little spigot that hissed like a serpent spitting toxins.

"Did I spook her enough?" he asked, chuckling and reeking of cancer.

"I think so," I said.

Bridget was asleep under the covers. She wore a shirt and shorts, but it looked like a beautiful naked girl sleeping in my bedroom since the sheet was wrapped tightly around a bare shoulder.

The exterminator came, yes he did, but the showerhead has been politely ignored. It isn't a terrible inconvenience. I've lived for many years with worse water pressure, so none of this backstory sufficiently reconciles what I just did to our tiny cat, shitty shower or not.

Apparently, she isn't feeling too well. Something is awry. Her tiny stomach is giving her trouble, or it could be more serious. Whatever the case may be, when I got out of the shower, sprayed across the carpet: her vomit, acidic and chunky.

Her silent ailing didn't keep me from shooting her an evil eye. Of course, she was looking at me, already trying to gauge my wrath.

Is he going to be sympathetic, thought Honeyed Cat, *or inhuman?*

"Why didn't you vomit on the linoleum?" I asked, crazy-eyed. "Or why didn't you go outside and vomit on the balcony? The door's open. Just why on the carpet?!"

Looks like he's going to be inhuman.

This train of thought got me all in a rage, and before I could stop myself, I was taking Honeyed Cat to her vomit and making her smell what she had done.

"No," I said, "don't do this again. You realize I have to clean up your mess?"

Yep.

Not feeling my message was communicated, I accidentally let her honeyed belly rub into her vileness. She growled in disbelief as I carried her to the balcony and locked her out to clean herself.

Inhuman.

Bridget believes people are born inherently good. Most Christians believe in original sin, or people are born inherently bad. Jews, Muslims, and Hindi reject this congenital guilt. Then there are others who believe people are born neither good nor bad. These believe in tabula rasa at birth and it's life itself that makes us one way or the other.

Honeyed Cat assiduously works to make me live up to my inherent goodness. Even I'll admit she's making progress. I do treat her gentler. I no longer throw things at her and I don't throw *her*. Testament of my progress is the lack of scratches on my hands and forearms. Back in the day, we got into scrabbles often. It couldn't be at all avoided. These scrabbles usually started out innocently enough, with me teasing her using a string of some sort, and then I'd inevitably try something that made her angry, like tying the string around her honeyed belly.

She'd scrabble for the fluidity of freedom, scrabble for her precious life, scrabble to make me treat her as an equal, and all her scrabbling has worked. Now she doesn't have to scrabble anymore. She merely eyes me steadily until my shameful behavior is reflected on her jade. And she sometimes growls.

But I've learned and I'm learning still.

More importantly, I've come to understand this is Honeyed Cat's time on earth and she's spending it with me. I want her to pass this time pleasurably. I make sure she always has food and water. I give her fishy treats, tuna juice, and, every

now and then, a cut of cheese. I clean her litter box and sing her name even when I'm away.

I know I probably seem cuckoo addressing a tiny cat, but animals have souls.

To my credit, unlike the previous time, I only leave Honeyed Cat on the balcony for a few minutes. She sits like a tiny Buddha and studies me from the other side of the glass pane until I smile and open the door. The vomit is gone. We're on good terms again.

Asshole.

9

Moving is educational. After this trip, I'll never look at a rental truck on the interstate the same way. Now I know how much these trucks set you back.

Not only that, I know the proper way to think about possessions, in particular, large pieces of furniture you *like a lot*.

Moving within the same city, or even the same state, isn't the same thing as moving cross-country. This isn't apparent when we first look into our options, but it doesn't take us long to see that moving over great distances prohibitively raises the cost of a rental truck or movers, and this premium, in turn, raises the overall price of the furniture you like enough to move. Is that couch really worth it? What about your bed, is that worth paying extra to keep? What if you can only sell it for a fraction of the price? These are critical questions that aren't obvious at first, but the truth is that almost all furniture, when you pay to keep moving it, is a money pit. Family heirlooms are one thing, but that generic furniture you *like a lot* should be jettisoned without stutter.

2

"Tater tots."

That's Bridget calling my attention to a woman lounging poolside with many tattoos plastered on her body. We're about to join her at the community swimming pool.

"You also have a tater tot," I remind her.

It's true. Bridget has a beaded infinity sign on her right hip. It's hidden behind fabric most of the time. But even in a bikini, when most of her body is out, it's discrete. I've seen it countless times – privileged man that I am – every day for the last three years. I have traced my thumb along its infinite loop, watching the ink under her elastic skin distort.

There's significance behind Bridget's infinity sign. It's not haphazard, not the result of a reckless whim. This so-called tater tot is a reminder of what Bridget has been through, so she won't forget the things that sometimes happen to the people she loves.

This tater tot is her empathy.

But I won't get too much into the relationship between Bridget and her tater tot. All I'll say is the girl by the swimming pool doesn't have an infinity sign. Her tater tots are unsightly: too colorful, large, and over-exposed. I can't see what any of them are even though her body is bombed. Too busy, too abundant, so that every tater tot devalues its neighboring tater tot, like digital photography versus film.

Reluctant at first, Bridget straps on her blue goggles and gauges things with a breath stroke. Then she makes me proud and plunges. Bubbles break the surface. I begin to want the water. The bombed girl, a witness to the same temptation, walks over from the deep end and stands on the first stair, water up to her tater-totted canklebones.

"When it's this cold," says Bridget, treading, "I think it's easier to dive in."

"It's icy," says the bombed girl, heedless to the advice. She steps out of the water, her arms wrapped around her stomach, and asks about our respective ages.

Since she's looking at me through plastic bumblebee sunglasses, I answer first, "30." Bridget is busy swimming, so I also answer for her, "And Bridget's 22. How old are you?"

It seems appropriate to reciprocate interests in age.

"26," says the bombed girl. Then she explains, "My boyfriend's bringing beer, and I'd feel strange offering any if either of you were under-aged."

I wonder if she's actually offering, I think. I think, *I wouldn't mind a cold one.*

To increase our chances, I act as if we've already accepted the beer that's about to arrive. The bombed girl tries getting in again. This time she makes it a little farther before admitting, "It's too cold for me." She retreats up the stairs and to her chaise lounge by the deep end, where she thumbs through some glossy magazine.

I look at Bridget swimming happily and say, “How’s the water now?”

“Fine,” she taunts. “Aren’t you coming in?”

“That’s it,” I say. I say, “I’m going back to our place and changing.”

On the way, I recall the ocean water of Miami Beach, how it opened my sinuses and clung to my skin and hair. How it dried out my pores and left salt trails on my face and arms. Its perfect temperature. I love seawater, but I have to enjoy what’s here. I have to work with what I have.

Honeyed Cat rubs against my legs after I walk through the front door. She’s hungry. Her bowl is empty. I fill it with cat food, change into my bright orange trunks that last were in the ocean (and, in fact, still smell of the ocean), and walk back to the community swimming pool, thinking about how amplified my flip-flops sound in the courtyard.

“Ooo whew, whew, whew, whew, whew,” goes the Grackle. “Crewhewwhew!”

3

Bridget is asleep with Honeyed Cat curled on her lap. Underneath her corduroys: the beaded infinity sign that has no beginning and no end.

I’m driving through Alabama. I don’t feel tired and my jaw is taut. In fact, I feel like I could drive all the way to Austin.

I slowly lose the station I’ve been listening to for the last 60 miles. I have the radio balanced full throttle to my speaker. That way Bridget can sleep while I make time.

I scroll through the FM dial until I hear the familiar voice of Delilah. She’s laughing. I know her laugh well. Delilah has ten children, some of them adopted. She believes in God. She’s a three-time divorcée. She lives somewhere in Washington. She tends to a garden. She’s the most listened to woman on the radio, at least in this country.

Her catchline:

SLOW DOWN AND LOVE SOMEONE

Delilah is my friend because of these times on the road when she somehow finds me. Even when I’m in the middle of Nowhere, USA, on a pitch-black stretch of road, not another headlight or taillight in sight, Delilah finds me.

"If you aren't deeply moved by this oil leak in the Gulf of Mexico," she says, "if you don't feel a profound sadness at the destruction of so much helpless marine life and by the damage it will cause to the environment, then you have to rethink your life. Say a prayer tonight, say a prayer for this horrible catastrophe. Scientists are saying it will take 100 years for the environment to recover. *100 years!* This is a terribly sad thing that we've done to our world."

Cut to song.

Her music is mediocre mush. Her advice is just that: her advice. She doesn't claim to be wise. She's a real person who has lived and messed up, a person with foibles. But her god-like presence on the FM makes it easy to associate her with the goodness in life. And her callers, her callers are all real people like her. Her callers are trying. Her callers are doing the best they can.

I listen to Delilah as I drive west on I-10. Bridget is asleep in the passenger seat, and Honeyed Cat is drugged-up in her lap. Of its own accord, my hand rests on Bridget's thigh. I think of the goosebumps from that icy latte. Back then, we were still in Jon's Silverado with a whole lot of driving to do, and we still have a little ways to go in our trusty red Civic, but we're making it, and that's something.

Bridget is meaningful, I think. *She's taught me so much about the big questions in life. She's made me think about infinity and love molecules. She's proven logically that our love can exist forever. There's a chance our love will be infinite. Let me see if I can get this straight. Bridget started by saying matter can neither be destroyed nor created. Then she said our love is chemicals in our brain, our love has a physical form, in other words, our love is matter, it can't be destroyed. When we stop living, the earth will absorb our indestructible love molecules and, because of pheromones, there's a chance these molecules will find each other in the Infinite just like they did in Life. Therefore, our love can exist forever.*

Q.E.D.

The fuzz flashes its emergency lights ahead. I get nervous and slow down. When I pass, I hold my breath and wait to see if I'm going to be pulled over. But the lights must've been fair warning. I whistle softly to myself. Honeyed Cat momentarily comes out of her drowse and perks up her ears, thinking it's mealtime. I pump Bridget's thigh three times. Then the speedometer is back at 85 mph.

"You're listening to Delilah."

Cut to commercial.

“I’m the piano teacher.”

I stand from the sofa and extend my hand. The piano teacher and I exchange one or two sentences about my dealings with the piano, but he isn’t here in our apartment on my account. Bridget found his number in a local coffee shop. After she used the ladies’ room, she sat back down at the counter with me and showed me a slip of paper she tore off the bulletin board with his contact info.

The piano teacher is in a hurry. He has five more sessions today. Bridget’s free trial isn’t worth more than 20 minutes of his time.

He takes a seat on our hard wooden chair and says, “Play me something.”

Bridget’s fingers sound out the expository notes of a classical piece. She’s nervous, but that’s only natural when playing for the piano teacher.

He stops her after several measures. He asks, “Are you counting?”

“No,” she says.

“I like my students to count aloud. One, two, three, four, or one *and* two *and* three *and* four. It’s better to hit the right keys with a slower tempo rather than hurrying. If you hurry,” he says, “you get used to hearing the piece played that way, and you start to think it’s correct.”

Even though I’m not looking in on their lesson, I’m certain Bridget’s underarms are sweating.

She plays what she can in 20 minutes. The piano teacher is jumpy in his assessment, asking if she practices scales, asking if she has Hanon, asking if she can sight-read, asking if she knows how to count triplets. Based on her playing and her answers, he says he can teach her. He knows where she’s at, and when she’s ready to pony up $30 for 45 minutes, he can commit to a lesson a week.

On the way out, I ask the piano teacher where he’s from.

“I was born here,” he says. “In Austin.”

7

Abe confesses there were several months in the 1960s when he went back east to bum off his parents and try to become Bob Dylan.

He carried around his guitar, wore funky shades, and hung out with musicians. He wrote songs, arranged instruments, and really tried to compose music that had a lot of worth and lots of guts.

"Music that *moved* you," he says.

I listen to Abe talk and see him much younger and more nimble back in the old days when life was in black and white and shades of gray. He lights his third cancer stick and is about to launch into a personal story. This is the first time I notice his stutter. It isn't severe, but it's there, and it makes Abe self-conscious.

"I had my sister drive me out to a four-day festival in Newport," he says. "It was a big favor, but she did things like that for me. She's dead now. It makes me feel good every time I have a reason to talk about her a little. Beautiful Anne."

Abe pauses to let me ponder what he said about Beautiful Anne. I stare up at a cut of the whitest sky and hear a grackle ignite the air with static.

"Ooo whew, whew, whew, whew, whew," goes the Grackle. "Crewhewwhew!"

"Anne drove me out to Newport for this festival," Abe goes on, "and I met all stripes of people. But what I'll never forget is the day when Chuck Berry was headlining. Everyone wanted to see the great Chuck Berry play back then. He was a serious act. He got paid something like 20 grand a show, and he went through them like a businessman. He had the venue sign these contracts that obligated them to get him in a limo from the airport and have a band familiar with Berry music ready to go. If the band played well, he'd pay them a grand. If they blew it, he'd give them nothing. He'd walk onstage, plug in his guitar without tuning it, and *move* the crowd with his music. Then he'd get on to his next concert. He made serious money, but he was Chuck Berry."

Abe drags cancer and listens to the music in his head. He starts singing Chuck Berry. I vaguely recognize the tune.

"But when the time came for him to play," says Abe, "this guy tells the crowd Chuck Berry won't be able to make it to the festival. About 25,000 people got instant depression. I've never seen that many people hang their heads and drop their arms together. It really was a testament to how important music can be for people. Luckily, the guy talking to us went on to say that instead we have Lovin' Spoonful! Everyone perked right up and started going crazy as these four guys with long hair ran onstage and started singing, 'Do You Believe in Magic.' They really played beautifully."

Abe laughs. I can see him looking at me, but I know his mind is elsewhere.

Memories are like that: you'll be living in the moment and all of a sudden you're in the past, in a place that's almost completely lost. I love memories. I love remembering what I've seen and lived through. Remembering is more than an act

of kindness. It's an act of engendering. When you remember, like when Abe remembered his sister, you're breathing new life into something that's on the brink of permanent extinction.

"But if I could do it all again," says Abe, smoldering cancer, "I'd want to be the One Hit Wonder. I'd love to be the One Hit Wonder."

8

Austin doesn't charge an arm and a leg for avocadoes. Since we've been here, we've each had half an avocado with lunch every day.

How can you beat avocado? If there's a way, I don't even want to know.

There are some things in life like that. Things you love so much you don't even want to know anything better. What you have is enough. It'll always be enough.

Like avocado, like honey, like rice: these will always be enough.

No matter where I am in life, no matter what contents and discontents follow me out the front door, there will always be avocadoes, there will always be honey, and there will always be rice.

This isn't an exhaustive list as far as things are concerned, but it's pretty close.

Like the road, like the ocean: I've let these things define me.

1

Michael knows how allergic he is to bees and wasps and fire ants.

He's had enough close calls to make sure he's prepared for the worst at all times. At least this is the way it should be, but I know it's not. Michael doesn't do well with preparation. He doesn't take things seriously enough even when he knows he should.

I've never been with him when he's stung, but I heard about the most recent time at his grandparent's house in Boca Raton. He was helping rearrange patio furniture when he ran into a nest of mud daubers on the fan cord. A wasp stung the top of his right ear. He says trying to swat it away made the sting worse.

Within minutes, he was lightheaded and losing vision. Anaphylaxis is no joke. And in Michael's case, it has gotten worse with each sting.

His dad rushed him off to the hospital, and he was treated immediately. Apparently, the medics couldn't even get a reading on his heart because it was pumping so slow and faint. They gave him a shot of epinephrine and everything returned to normal.

If he had the shot on his person to begin with, like most people who have this fatal allergy, he wouldn't have gotten so close to dying, and he wouldn't have had to pay what he calls an outrageous hospital bill for nothing.

For nothing, Michael? Really?

He has an EpiPen now, but he still doesn't carry it with him all the time. I can't believe the guy! It makes me so nervous when he leaves home without his shot. It's his lifeline.

What's it going to take for him to learn?

6

Bridget's tucked in. Her callipygian body shapes our comforter. She wants to sleep. I, on the other hand, have a paragraph to finish writing.

I can move into the living room, but that won't do any good. Bridget can't sleep until I get into bed with her. We have to become parentheses before we fall asleep. That's our tradition. Sacred spooning to calm our nerves. And besides, I've finished.

I close my netbook and stand from the edge of the bed to slide the glass door shut. It's a cool spring night. No clouds, lots of forgiving breeze, but it'll make me feel better if I shut and lock the sliding glass door. This feeling of security, however false, does a lot to counteract my paranoia, which has generated quite the disturbing image.

In the stillness of an Austin night, the leprechaun elf leans over me while I sleep. He simply climbed the wrought-iron railings of The Oaks and let himself in through the sliding glass door. The wooden baseball bat will be too far away to help fend him off, and besides, he'll have it in his claws.

"Did you think I forgot about you?" he'll say, "how could I forget you? Take one last good look at my face!"

To stall for time, I'll pompously ask, "What happened to the whole gun idea? I thought you were going to shoot me with a gun."

It's all about stalling for time. Life's about stalling for time. The more you stall, the more chances you have. Who knows? Maybe this logical question regarding the gun will stall enough to rattle his nerves. I'll leap from the bed and swoop down on him with the heavy brass desk lamp I use as a reading light.

Either way, I don't want to risk anything remotely similar to this befalling our home, be it the leprechaun elf or some reprobate from the correctional facility across the street. Or even the crazy girl next door. All she has to do is skip the septum wall that divides our balconies and start screaming her unearthly obscenities.

But in trying to lock the sliding glass door at 12:37AM, I wake the baby on the third floor. The little boy wails. The women immediately stir into action while the man of the house snores soundly on the sofa in the living room, that is, until the crying gets so bad the snoring stops and his deep voice sprays curse words. I think I hear Gloria tell him to shut up as she swiftly works to regain silence.

Dear Lord, look what I've done. Look at the conflict I've created.

Why do I have to try multiple times to lock the sliding glass door after it doesn't lock on the first try? Why if I know it makes sound on its railing, a heavy penetrating sound loud enough to stir an infant, especially when I make this sound several times as I try to slam the door tightly enough for the lock to catch, why?

"You woke him up," says Bridget, stating the obvious.

"Shit," I say. I say, "shit."

I stuff my face into my memory foam pillow and feel terrible about waking the infant. His wail amplifies and, in turn, amplifies my guilt.

How can you be so careless, I think, rubbing my face into the memory foam to smear this guilt away, *how can you be so careless and paranoid that, in trying to secure our home, which can only be falsely secured at best, you wake an entire household?*

The women's feet shuffle to and from the kitchen, where the stove warms his bottle. Maybe, to stall for time, the mother has slipped half her pajama off her shoulder and suckles the boy.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the bedroom, Honeyed Cat worries about not having free and clear access to the balcony. She plots in the dark.

There's no time for hotels along the way, no time for restaurants, no time for walks on scenic routes. My mission is clear and imperative. I must get to Austin as quickly as possible and settle. Until then, there will be no rest other than when our safety is in question. In other words, there's time for resting in the Texas Welcome Center.

I don't have a problem with resting before continuing, if this rest will help keep us alert on the road. I also don't have a problem with stretching during gas stops. Blood clots are a reality. Sitting for too long, whether in a plane or car, does increase the likelihood of having an embolism.

Then there are the times when traffic comes to a complete stop on I-10 West, like it does when we're trying to cross Louisiana for the third and final time. The iPhone shows a solid red line, indicating a block of traffic, but it doesn't offer an explanation.

It starts with one guy getting out of his SUV. Then the lady next to him turns off her engine, rolls down her window, and smokes a cancer stick. Then three guys in their 20s do a Chinese fire drill. They have dreads. Then random cars lose hope and cross the grassy median over to the fluid I-10 eastbound traffic.

"Where do they think they're going?" I ask Bridget. "Is there an alternate route?"

I get out of the car to stretch my legs, preempt the blood clot. Bridget doesn't follow suit. She sits in the passenger seat, shielding Honeyed Cat from the sun with one of our two memory foam pillows.

"I'm not sure, but turn off the car," she says, "we're not going anywhere for awhile."

The thing about traffic jams like these, the kind that brings cars and trucks to a total stop, is that it isn't right getting annoyed at the delay in your progress, however long it may be, because their cause is almost always an accident, an irreversible undoing.

"I'm just glad we weren't any closer," says Bridget.

"Why, so we don't have to see the cleanup?"

I say this sarcastically. It's wrong.

"No," says Bridget. "It could've been you and me, Viejo."

There's sadness in her voice and demeanor. She may not have known those

involved in the accident, but she understands they were travelers like us.

It's called empathy.

0

I close the sliding glass door, and Bridget sparks incense. We don't like the smell of cigarettes. They disgust us.

The new guy who moved in downstairs with the three-legged dog, he smokes cancer sticks, and all his ephemeral friends do the same. They laugh on the ground-floor balcony, directly beneath ours, every night of the week. He's a college student, a sophomore at St. Edward's, a mindless Mohawk who doesn't think twice about hanging a gigantic Texas flag in his kitchen because in his kitchen he wants to think about Texas.

I don't like people who are overly proud about where they live. Anyone who hangs a gigantic Texas flag, or any flag, in his or her kitchen is no friend of mine. I'm dead serious. There's such a thing as nationalism. History proves it over and over. Whenever I see anyone who flies high their flag, I want to shout, "Read history!" and then I want to walk away and never see their faces again.

If we're incapable of learning from our mistakes, we're incapable of learning.

But I won't let the cigarette smoke get the best of me. Fuck cancer sticks. I'll shut the sliding glass door, and Bridget will spark incense, and we'll breathe clean air unpolluted by mindless Mohawks who hang flags in their kitchens.

In the silence of our sealed home, I fetch Bridget a glass of tap water. She's prostrate on the micro-foam sofa, wearing green shorts and white cotton tee, her reddish gold hair collated neatly behind her ear.

I turn off the movie we were watching. She has fallen asleep. After twelve ounces of 90 minute Dogfish Head and ~500 milliliters of the cheapest Pinot Grigio at HEB, her brain is spinning. But we're not lushes. We biked close to ten miles today, up and down Austin hills. We walked through the Pecan St arts and crafts fair, perusing booths and tasting all vittles. We bought our mothers dreamcatchers for Mother's Day. Did you know the string is what catches dreams, not the beads, not the feathers?

We biked and ate fried fish without the fries because we didn't have enough money. We biked and drank strawberry lemonade. We biked and took photos of the old live oaks in Republic Square. We congealed with the crowd on the Congress Ave Bridge until bats took flight. And, at the end of it all, we came

home to Honeyed Cat, changed into our swimsuits, and cannonballed into the pool. No one else was there to join us on our nighttime dip.

Bridget likes to swim laps using either her arms or her legs, but never both together. She gets a more effective workout this way. More isolated. More controlled. She may be right. She wore a mismatched bikini conducive to fantasy. Her skin glowed in the pool light. When she used the ladder to rise out of the deep end, I felt my entire body throb, and I pulled her back into the water.

We showered together.

Then, with Nag Champa burning, we turned off the projector.

Bridget is asleep on the micro-foam sofa. Her head is resting on my lap and spinning from beer and wine. Mine is a vortex of alcohol, too. But I had to write.

I don't like people who let flags define them. I'm never going to become a mindless Mohawk. Nor will I ever pay for my freedom.

6

It has always bugged me, when reading stories written in the first person, why is the narrator writing any of this down? Is it even written down, or is it a story that exists outside the page, as in stories passed down orally, and somehow happens to be transcribed? If so, who did the transcribing, the narrator or the author, or someone else entirely?

Unless the narrator makes it clear whom he/she is, and what he/she is doing writing anything down, the story seems to be a farce, like hiding behind a mask, like a lie.

There must be an explanation for what I'm reading. How is it I'm reading any of this? I not only have to understand the story, but I have to understand its genesis.

2

The woman with purple boots steps out of the management office, and Bridget dives into the pool.

No one else is swimming even though the sun hasn't set and is, in fact, a couple hours away from setting. But Building Six casts a long shadow over the water

once the day is on the wane, and most mortals in The Oaks find the swimming temperature too frigid this time of year, early spring.

Bridget, on the other hand, swims leisurely after our rigorous bike ride to the Barton Creek Greenbelt. It's easier for her to take the cold water after near heat exhaustion.

Distance-wise, our bike ride isn't too severe, only seven miles. But the terrain is laden with steep ascents. Case and point: even on the easiest gear, Bridget can't make it up two climbs, or rather, she could make it but not any quicker than the pedestrians who speed by her, so she decides to do the sensible thing and walk uphill with them.

Our efforts, however, allow us to see another weirder side of Austin. In the middle of Capitol City, there are running creeks and swimming holes and waterfalls and hiking trails and rock walls and verdant energy growing into the sky. Butterflies flit, turtles pop heads, flowers bloom, and the purl of creeks serenades this natural greenery.

Austin, you seem to have it all. In the same amount of time, we can either bike downtown, or to the State Capitol, or to a thriving state university, or to an urban trail that runs along the Colorado River, or to any of the 300 music venues, or, if we're in the mood, we can go to the greenbelt, where life is playful and free. It's also stoned. Joints and one-hitters make the rounds while people perch on rocks and stare ponderously at seasonal beauty. There will come a time of year when these waters runs dry. The creeks will grow impoverished. The greenery will turn brown and lose its tenacity. Aridity will sear the terrain.

But now it's spring, and this past winter was full of rainfall, so now life flourishes. It also gets deeply stoned.

From every direction, my eager nostrils catch billows of dankness. It's too much for me really, to walk around and see people going from rip-roaring laughter to quiet profundity. Everyone has the best ideas *ever* to talk about. They sit on these rocks and expound at great length. And then, almost on queue, everyone goes silent and thoughtful and very Om, if you know what I mean.

I take some black-and-white photos and navigate some tricky spots in trails and ask Bridget if she knows what poison ivy and poison oak look like. Every now and then I try to clap eyes with someone smoking a nice joint, but his or her eyes are invariably fixated on the Om running inches above the river current.

"Aren't you going to swim?" asks Bridget, harmlessly splashing chlorinated water in my direction.

"I don't think so," I say, chuckling on the chaise. "There's no sun to dry me off."

The woman with purple boots rushes back into the management office. She seems

to be vexed over some business matter.

I feel sorry for her condition.

8

Sometime after trying in earnest to become Bob Dylan, Abe turns to painting. He gets more recognition as a painter. Colleges give him residencies. He spends his time in Virginia, up in the mountains, painting in his studio with a view of altitude. He doesn't have to do anything but paint for the year.

Then, when this residency expires, he gets another residency, this time on the west coast. He takes the Greyhound Bus there. He calls himself a *million-miler*. He's loath to use air travel, and he doesn't own a car.

The Greyhound has shown him this place that is our country. Of air travel, he says you miss too much of what's really going on everywhere in America. You disappear into an airplane in one place, and appear in another, and you have no idea about what's in between the two places. It's really a crying shame, he says, because, man, this country is absolutely amazing on the ground. There's so much on the ground. It's so beautiful. Up in the air, he says, the sky is always blue and a little cloudy, predictable.

It's before this 3,000-mile journey by bus that Abe's uncle gives him his first camera, a point-and-shoot. Abe's understanding of the camera is as a painter.

"I'm trained as a painter," he tells me, slightly stuttering. "I apply the same technique in my pictures as I do in my paintings. I took to photography right away, but I haven't gotten much into digital photography. The quality isn't as good yet. I take most of my photos in black and white, and a lot of times there's noise in the black areas of digital photos. The cheapest film camera is about a 33-megapixel digital camera. I don't even think those are out yet!"

I tell Abe I want to learn how to take pictures. I say, "Bridget and I got a camera. It's a nice camera, but I can't get my photos to look the way I want them to look."

"Oh yeah?" asks Abe, dragging cancer. "How do you want them to look?"

"Like the way I see things." I say. "True to life."

Abe laughs. "That's not easy. People spend their lives trying to get their photos to look like what they see. But one bit of advice I've always found helpful: if your pictures aren't coming out how you want them to – get closer."

I fix my eyes on a cut of the whitest sky. A robust cloud effortlessly sails toward the Texas plains. A grackle alights on the wrought-iron fence that surrounds the pool. A girl in bikini reads a glossy magazine on the chaise lounge. I can't tell where exactly she's looking when she looks up from the pages because of her plastic bumblebee sunglasses, but I recognize her lurid tater tots.

She's 26, and she never did treat us to that beer.

"Ooo whew, whew, whew, whew, whew," goes the Grackle. "Crewhewwhew!"

6

Our bedroom is far from dark and quiet, even in the stillness of deep night. Honeyed Cat is unreasonable, really. She demands that we leave the sliding glass door open at least enough to allow for an egress. If we shut her passage, if we limit her freedom, I'll ultimately be the one who will be sorely awakened in the wee hours of morning by her retractable claws scraping alternately between aluminum frame and windowpane. She'll disturb my REM cycle, and I'll wake on the wrong side of the bed. It's very easy with Honeyed Cat. Either give her what she wants or go mad.

When I try to make a stand and teach her a lesson, Bridget immediately sides with her cat. In the end, I'm the bad guy. I'm the stern parent the child grows up despising, the emasculated Gestapo.

But, with the sliding glass door left ajar for Her Royal Highness, the artificial glare of floodlights that hang on each building, and the seemingly endless 911 calls for help, pollute our bedroom – make it hostile by some standards – because Austin nights have a significant increase in decibels.

I don't know how a metropolitan area of around 750,000 people can be punctuated so frequently with emergency sirens. I've lived in other, bigger cities than Austin, and nowhere are sirens more prevalent than here, in this brave democratic outpost, the last standing blue bastion in the center of red Texas.

2

Austin calls me for a run. I answer accordingly and leave The Oaks without a shirt. It's true that running is a spiritual experience no matter where it happens. I've had my share of epiphanies while running. It's more than a physical

experience. There's also the mental determination required when going the distance, and the innermost desire to conquer any weaknesses that may stand in the way.

PAIN IS INEVITABLE,

SUFFERING IS OPTIONAL

And let us not forget self-induced runner's high. My body's response to steady effort is a deluge of smiley-faced endorphins. I love endorphins. After three miles of continuous motion, of pushing my body to the limits, I manage to laugh, get high, and know my wiry legs pumped on endorphins could run forever. After three miles, I feel detachment from myself while being very much in tune with the tiniest cogs in the center of my abdomen.

Austin is full of hills. Some are barely perceptible. All of a sudden you realize the muscles in your legs are experiencing a slow burn. Others are steep. To climb them you have to high step. For some reason, high stepping up steep hills is easier for me than the slow burn of deceptive grades. To run in Austin, you have to manage both with a calm head. You can't rush or sprint hard when everything seems peachy. In Austin, it's necessary to ration. You have to pace yourself if you're in it for the long haul.

I'm in it for the long haul. I know I am the moment I start my stopwatch. I don't say anything to myself regarding how far I will travel, but I know I'll travel far. After all, the day is finally cooling. I want to see Austin by foot. The sky is pastel blues and pinks. The clouds are cotton candy. I head west on Cumberland Rd, pass a couple runners, and head north on 5th St.

5th St is special. I like running on 5th St. I feel safer on 5th St than I do on, say, 1st St or Congress Ave. 5th St is more like a neighborhood. There are old trees on 5th St. I'd even go so far as to say 5th St is pleasant for running. It's not Miami Beach. There are still cars and busses and the noises of civilization, which is to say, there are no waves and there is no sand. Still, 5th St has its own charm.

0

"Vas a escribir así, mi amor?"

That's Bridget speaking Spanish, naked. She's about to hop into the shower to wash the chlorine out of her reddish gold hair. But before ablutions, she did a suggestive dance to Jimmy Hendrix's *Little Wing*, and I said, "You're beautiful." Then I straightened my lower back and sat properly, so when I'm really an old man, I'll be able to watch Bridget interpret *Little Wing* naked and I'll be able to

say, “You’re beautiful,” and not be hunchbacked.

Meanwhile, on the other side of our bedroom, Honeyed Cat stands inquisitively over a five-legged grasshopper. She has sheared off one of its hind legs. This form of torture is her idea of good-fun times. She won’t *ever* snuff this grasshopper. She’ll only lightly pounce and dismember it one appendage at a time. Then she’ll go over to a distant corner and hunker down in predator pose, waiting for her expiring toy to contrive an escape.

Honeyed Cat is an agent of destruction. She’s programmed to be harmful. Inflicting injury is her way of ensuring survival. She doesn’t know any better. She’s trapped in a lower form of existence. Finding freedom is nearly impossible for her, even with the sliding glass door left ajar at nights. While it may seem appealing to nap all day and have food given to you regardless of whether you work or not, she’s ignorant and slated to a life without any form of enlightenment.

8

Larry McMurtry, I’m almost ashamed to say, is teaching me to think about the sweep of human progress. His non-fiction is shaping my view of history. For example, during a walk today, with bridge camera diagonal across chest, I start to think about the sun over my head. Although I’m wearing a generic white baseball cap, the central Texas sun, that mighty thorn in the heavens, pricks me with venomous radiation. Especially when I tramp north down the railroad track toward the skyscrapers, my neck is red from the bite.

Too bad Bridget isn’t with me, I think. *We had planned to do this together*.

This is the first time I walk down a railroad track. But, as a young kid, man did I love building railroads. I’d sit down on the carpet and connect segments to build the track that a train would then ride around and around for as long as I wanted. What an idea: trains and railroads. It’s so controlling and inflexible. Compared to the galleons that travel the seas, our trains and railroads are more like prisons. First there’s the freedom of uninterrupted land, where horses and buffalo roam wherever their hearts desire, and then there’s the strict fence of track, where destination is enforced and etched on a timetable.

The idea of trains and railroads is so human. Only the human mind could devise the railway system. It’s such a simple and exploitative idea. All it takes is thousands of enslaved laborers working thousands of hours in chains doing the same thing over and over again.

Over and over.

It’s strange to think the advent of the industrial revolution required redundant and strenuous work that, in addition to being of great service to the progress of this country, demeaned the human spirit.

Does art redeem us? Is art powerful enough to compensate for thousands of men on the tracks doing nothing but marching in time with the foreman and making more in the way of tracks?

First there’s the freedom of the land, where pioneers roam, but they have to be willing to build their own shade away from the sting of the sun. They have to gather food and water, work the land to make it bear fruit, love and hate the sky that either waters or scorches their crops.

The pioneers toil all day and sleep and eat only as much as they need to toil the next. The pioneers have no time for art, for any expression of the mind that isn’t through hard toiling. They are incessantly working on the railroad, and they do this so that in time the next generation will have a head start and have a few spare minutes to start making the art that will redeem all of humanity, backward and forward.

9

Because of Honeyed Cat, the sliding glass door is open.

We’re snuggly spooning when the sound of someone diving into the pool opens our eyes. It’s 4AM. The Oaks says the pool closes at 10PM, but no one is here to enforce this rule. Once the management office closes, honor code governs the tenants.

This means anarchy.

Three more people ignore the No Diving paint and jump headlong into the pool. The salvo of splashes summons Bridget to the sliding glass door, where she pulls aside a handful of blinds and peers into the floodlit courtyard.

She sees people swimming and climbing out of the pool, running around a little, and then jumping back into the pitiful body of chlorinated water. I don’t get out of bed. I could, but I don’t want to become curious, especially after Bridget says, “They’re all naked.” She peers as close as she can without blowing her cover. “No,” she says, “one girl is fully clothed, and the other is only wearing panties.” She doesn’t say anything more about the guys, but I hear their low voices teasing the girls, who play their part and hit the high notes:

“Marco.”

“Polo. Polo!”

I hear someone catch a breath and swim to the other side of the pool.

“Marco.”

“Polo!”

“Marco.”

“Polo! Polo!”

I hear more splashing and swimming for dear life.

The same girl is saying Polo, shouting it to be better heard. She’s taking their game a little too seriously, and she’s heavily intoxicated. She even manages to slur Polo.

Bridget gets back into bed and cuddles me. A few minutes later, the Marco Polo shouts are replaced with the somewhat restrained moans of rutting. I’m certain they’re using a chaise lounge.

Police sirens blare. They’re getting closer. I picture these nudists discovered inside the conic light of the law. Someone must’ve reported this foursome, I’m sure, but as soon as the sirens peak next to the night swimmers they begin to fade into the other side. The Doppler Effect soundtrack plays in its entirety.

Again, the sounds of people rutting, less restrained. They probably think no one is awake at this hour, and if some one is, what a rush. The guy grunts. The girl is quiet for an interval. Then burgeons her stentorian breathing, her crescendo.

“It must be because of the full moon,” whispers Bridget into my ear.

9

Bridget sees a flashlight shining through the crazy girl’s apartment. The illustrious

life story of Steve Jobs isn’t as contagious as I thought it would be.

“The police are here,” she says, suddenly animated. “Flashlights mean police.”

We put our wine glasses down and walk to the kitchen window, where Honeyed Cat is perched on the sill. Two cop cars, one ambulance, and one fire truck are in

the lot. Bridget's interpretation of the flashlights impresses me. But the crazy girl has been a little more than senseless for a couple hours, making all styles of noise: screaming at the absolute top of her register, sobbing out into the open air, swinging her baseball bat into the futon mattress, slapping her forehead, stomping her feet, howling.

It's no wonder someone called the police on her. Another cop car arrives on the scene. This one makes three. From the kitchen window, we can see pieces of forced entry on the ground. Clearly, the cops busted into her place, completely unexpected, uninvited.

It seems to me like we should have a right to privacy that no law can take away. That isn't the way society works, though. Reasonable doubt is all it takes. When there's reasonable doubt someone is self-injurious or simply causing injury, the power of law can break in and introduce draconian reality. As members of society, we must behave correctly, or at least correctly in the eyes of the written law, which is always changing and growing, mounting the shoulders of the previous generation, the law doesn't plan to stop this game of piggyback. It'll get smarter with us, always ahead of the curve. The more time that passes, the more nuanced and expansive the law gets. But I'm a stone philosopher, not the real deal. I never took a class on the philosophy of law. I've no right to be writing about this subject. I'm not qualified, it's beyond my ken.

Getting back to the crazy girl. While Bridget keeps her post by the kitchen window, I return to the balcony and listen for any clues to shed light on what's happening. I hear the deep voices of the police countered by the shrill voice of the crazy girl. At one point, when Bridget tells me to come because a man is walking into the ambulance, I think he's going to grab a gurney and cart the crazy girl out of her apartment, all cut up and a broom stroke away from passing the ghost. But he only returns with a little black bag.

"Did she hurt herself?" I ask.

I return to the balcony and hear a bubble of laughter burst. The fire truck leaves. The police cars leave. All that remain are the ambulance and the crazy girl. Part of me is sad that she's so crazy. Another part is concerned that if the proper steps aren't taken to treat her craziness, she might go crazy on her neighbors.

I wasn't the one who called the cops, however, and Bridget wasn't either. We both agree it was the mindless Mohawk, who had an incident with her only the other day, and he warned us afterward that he was going to call the cops on her if things got even a little bit out of hand.

For the first time in Austin, we have a bottle of whisky in the freezer. I ask Bridget if she wants to watch the storm roll in and enjoy a tot on the balcony.

"A *tot*?" she asks. My stuffy-white-guy word choice must confuse her.

"Yeah," I say, "a tot of whisky."

She approves of my idea with an endearing blush. I make a move for the kitchen, but she beats me there. The 750 ML bottle looks elegant in our freezer. It has been there long enough for the glass to get frosty. Bridget pours our share with a tumbler. Then she flavors it citrus with a squeeze of freshly cut lemon. I take mine straight, with no ice even. I want my tot as stiff as possible. Bridget has hers on the rocks.

For background music, we play a copy of Abe's CD, *Dreaming of Open Water*, which he gave us shortly after I complimented his succulents, but not a second before I expressed interest in hearing him play guitar. His CD is a solo release, him and his acoustic, all sixteen compositions arranged by the jack-of-all-trades himself. Although they don't appear in this CD, Abe also knows how to sound the sax, banjo, and oud. These are additional tools he uses to touch the tones of his soul.

"I'm trained as a painter though," he says, "I see everything as a painter."

As the storm rolls over South Austin, straight off the Colorado Rockies, I throw back some whisky and look at my little world. Two hot-pink floats are scattered poolside. The giant live oak sways gently in the gusts. I study a smallish bird hanging in the air currents, not once flapping its wings, it hangs in the same spot, a westerly facing logo of freedom.

The whisky makes Bridget talkative. I love listening to her enchantment with the world. A lot is going perfect in her life. She's very aware of how everything kind of fell into proper order, and she's thankful and prepared to get the most out of this time in Austin.

It begins to rain. Water collects in the gutters and is piped down to the grass. Bridget lifts her toes on the chair to keep her legs dry. I briefly put down my whisky to scoot the piano bench I'm sitting on farther back. The wind gets strong. The table umbrella next to the pool blows right over the wrought-iron fence and is in danger of ruin. Out of the blue, Abe materializes next to the umbrella and uses the crank to tuck it in. His gray cotton tee gets wet. But rain doesn't bother him. It's only water. It'll dry once he gets sheltered. No biggie. *Dreaming of Open Water*, that's what he decided to title his solo release, yet he has never been to Miami Beach. What does this tell me? Well, I know that people instinctively want the open water. We're drawn to the sea. In the very marrow of the smallest and most vital cogs in our body lives salinity, even if we have never visited the most beautiful swimming water this country has to offer.

Abe sets the tidied umbrella flat on the Chattahoochee. With the deed done, he goes back to the cover of his succulent balcony. I notice a subtle limp in his gait. Abe stutters and limps. In the face of his own frailty, he lights a thin rod of cancer. I don't see him. I only see a carcinogenic smoke signal blow from the depths of his balcony, letting everyone in the area know a frail man willingly pollutes himself under this tempest.

6

Bridget has finished her IPA. I've finished my Steel Reserve. We're nicely buzzed and walking back south on Congress Ave.

There's no sign of the injured bum on our return to The Oaks. We bend down to look at the sidewalk, check for signs of hemorrhaging from that gaping head wound, and find the corner opposite the beer-and-wine mart clean and desolate. Where did he go? Where does a bum burrow for the night?

"Are you hungry?" I ask, glancing at the waxing moon. I ask again, "Are you hungry?"

Bridget spins on her feet. Her reddish gold hair blooms in the AM. I catch her by her waist and say, "I'm hungry, Love."

"I can always eat," she says. "What's open now?"

"I don't know. We can check the pizza joints."

But the only two on Congress Ave are closed. Even Taqueria Arandas on South 1st St closes at midnight. Demons! In Austin, few restaurants are open late, at least we don't know of any yet within walking distance. Somewhat frustrated with the state of things, I manage to fish another option out of the Austin aquarium.

"We can go to HEB," I say, "they're open around the clock."

At least there's a 24-hour grocery store, I think, *at least there's that*.

We buy two Central Market pizzas. I'm happy they're reasonably priced and free of dreadful hydrogenated oils. In fact, the ingredient list is sparsely populated and wholesome. I understand each one. Nothing is on there that seems like poisonous chemicals, not even high fructose corn syrup, which I also refuse to eat. Give me real sugar, give me real oil, give me real butter.

Q: How can food companies feel good about feeding children and adults edible food substances that'll hurt their hearts and give them diabetes and cancer?

Q: How is it ethical to knowingly peddle products any moderately informed person knows are health hazards?

A: I don't fucking know.

We have no idea what we're doing. The bottom line makes us gaga. Gaga people hurt everyone around them. Give me real sugar, give me real oil, give me real butter. Stop cutting so many corners. Stop raking in a profit from peddling the same shit contaminated with trans fats and syrupy corn.

And, while you're at it, learn how to stop a leak in your pipelines when they explode in the middle of the beautiful ocean. Fuckers. You have no idea what you're doing, do you? The only thing you know how to do is convince other people you aren't as gaga as them. But the truth is that the whole wide world would be better off if you didn't take your bigwig job so seriously. The truth is that the whole wide world would be better off if you stayed inside and kept to yourself and created your legacy of love and honesty. But to do this, first you'd have to acknowledge your ignorance. It's pretty easy if you try. Stop thinking you know more than everyone else. Admit you don't know anything at all.

And then go inside and stay there.

On the way out of HEB, we say goodbye to the security guard with a lazy eye. On his heart, I see he has been a HEB employee for seven years. I don't read his name.

"This pizza's going to be good," I say, relishing the near future.

Bridget finds my hand with hers. We walk across the parking lot. The moon is on its descent. Everything would be picturesque if it weren't for the yellowish man standing by the soda machine. None other than the leprechaun elf. He has a bottle of Dr. Pepper filled with wine. His cheeks are flushed, and his hair is combed differently.

What's this, I think, *is he drunk?*

I wouldn't have recognized him had I not seen his massive backpack where he stores his worldly possessions. I see this backpack, and I know it's the leprechaun elf. He is drunk indeed. He stands by the soda machine and stares at the starlit sky. His hair is tousled in the warm wind as he smiles wryly at no one in particular. I get the feeling he's elsewhere in his thoughts, completely bedazzled.

He side-talks a mantra:

"I am not a fish. I am not a fish. I am not a fish."

He repeats this sentence no less than three more times before we're too far away to hear. I think he doesn't see us even though we pass within a yard or two.

"Did you see who that was?" I ask Bridget, still holding her hand.

"No," she says.

"Standing by the soda machine, you didn't see him?"

"Obviously not, Viejo! Tell me."

"The leprechaun elf. He was drunk and smiling and talking with himself in the same voice he used at the library. He looked scary, as if he were plotting some evil. I wonder if he saw us and didn't let on? You think he knows where we live?"

We become hyper paranoid when we get home. We lock all the doors and windows and use the iPhone to make sure there's absolutely nothing on the internet that may supply the leprechaun elf with clues as to where we live or who we are. I'm convinced we're too late. Our identities have been compromised. That's why he was standing outside *our* HEB. He's messing with our minds now. But Bridget still thinks we're anonymous. To make sure it stays that way, she deletes her Facebook account.

Then we eat our pizzas.

2

I'm listening to the shrill of grasshoppers. I've written through twilight and into the night. I hear a moth running into the light bulb above my head. It makes staccato music.

Back in Miami, one of Bridget's close girlfriends with a condo overlooking Biscayne Bay used to call me grasshopper. I don't think I deserve such a reverent title, but I'm not about to tell her that.

The last thing she wrote to me came in the form of postscripts on a letter addressed to Bridget. I'm going to ruthlessly share what she wrote because it's the only piece of advice I've gotten in recent months:

PS: Grasshopper, life without Mary has been more fulfilling for me. Since we divorced, I have not only gotten back in tune with things I had neglected, or simply forgotten, but I have also discovered how much more productive I can be, and what a high that gives me! Hope you find your way to divorce as well…. You won't regret it (and I hope you find your way back into school, too)!

PSS: Always remember the epiphanies you had on my balcony.

8

In their 87th year on earth, my dad, Michael, gives a cat to his parents, whom I've always known as Mamma and Granddad. My dad's their eldest son. He drives all the way from Houston with a cat named Stoli, after the Russian vodka.

Mamma and Granddad don't know about the cat my dad's bringing in tow. Being a robust woods cat built for life in Siberia's thick snow, Stoli's merrily received even though Mamma and Granddad are dog people.

"A dog would be here sitting with us," says Mamma.

"A dog would come when it hears its name," says Granddad.

"It's a nice cat," admits Mamma.

"Where's my four-legged friend?" calls Granddad, sitting on his velvety green chair.

"Where's your cat, Michael? I've been looking all over and it doesn't come out."

"When it hears your voice he comes," seconds Granddad, "but not when it's just us."

"Come here, kitty cat," cajoles Mamma. "Come here little guy."

Stoli proudly saunters across the kitchen floor and rubs against Mamma's ankle. He sidles closer to her and arches his back. Mamma reaches over the sofa and pets Stoli with arthritic hands. Happiness beams from her watery blue eyes. This makes Granddad happy. He folds his hands elegantly on his lap.

"Oh Mare," he says. Mare is short for Marian, which is Mamma's real name. "It seems to like you."

"You see, Bus," says Mamma, laughing with her husband until her eyes well up. "And you didn't want to believe me when I told you it's a nice cat."

She sniffles. The blue vein underneath her forehead's skin glows.

0

The woman with purple boots walks up the stairs of our building. I'm washing a cup at the sink. Iridescent soap bubbles entertain Honeyed Cat on the windowsill. The woman with purple boots doesn't see me even though she walks right by. I'm not sure if she sees me at the sink and chooses not to let me in on her awareness, or if the opaque screens at The Oaks really conceal my presence. Regardless, I turn off the water and open the window some more when I hear her knocking on the crazy girl's door.

"Hi, Sara," says the woman with purple boots.

So, I think, *her name's Sara*.

My ears perk up and listen intently for the juice to tell Bridget when she comes back from work. We don't know what happened that night after The Call. All anyone knows is that Sara wasn't prepared for the law's entrance into her apartment. Someone dialed 911, most probably the mindless Mohawk on the first floor.

Not too long ago, he stops us on our way for a walk through the local neighborhood. I have our new bridge camera dangling on my shoulder, lens cap in place.

"Excuse me," he says, "can I ask for y'all's opinion on something?"

I quickly oblige, "Sure."

"Do you know your new neighbor?" he asks.

"No," I say.

In fact, at this point, the only interaction I've had with my neighbor was when she saw me reading on the carpet and said, "Hi! I'm your new neighbor!" Back then, before I knew the first thing about her, she seemed like a bubbly 22-year-old girl who may invite us over to share a cup of jasmine tea.

"Well," he says, having a little trouble finding the right words, "I don't like her. She's a nutty bitch."

"Really?" I ask, uncertain as to his degree of histrionics.

"Yeah, bud," says the mindless Mohawk. I never correct strangers when they call me *bud*, but I don't particularly like it. "Just now, me and my girl were enjoying the day. It's Sunday, you know?

"It is Sunday," I confirm, "you're right."

“Me and my girl were sitting on the porch listening to the radio, and your neighbor walks by our patio and says, ‘Turn down your music. I don’t like your fucking music.’ That’s what she said, and then she threw her drink at my screen! Now I don’t mean to be assuming things here, but it’s the middle of a Sunday. I can listen to my music however loud I want. She doesn’t have to like my music for me to listen to it. We live in a community here. As long as it’s not late at night and people are trying to sleep, I can sit on my porch and listen to my own damn music, right? I mean, could you guys hear my music from your place?”

I look at Bridget, and Bridget looks at me. “Not really,” I say. I say, “When we were on the balcony, I think we heard your music, but it wasn’t loud.”

“That’s what I thought,” says the mindless Mohawk. “I’m just letting y’all know I’m this close to reporting your neighbor. She’s a nutty bitch. Keep an eye on her.”

Bridget notices the tantrums the next day. We’re in the kitchen, talking about Austin, when she hears a piercing scream. For some reason, I don’t hear anything until the banging starts shaking our common wall. My ears tune into the disturbed noises and I imagine Sara going ballistic on a futon mattress. The screaming is bad enough, but when it’s punctuated by bouts of intense sobbing I begin to wonder what the hell is wrong with this bespectacled girl who seems so harmless.

“I’ve got to get you a new front door,” says the woman with purple boots. “How have you been sleeping if you can’t even lock your front door? I’ll get maintenance to install one first thing tomorrow. It’s not safe to sleep here with your front door unlocked.”

“Thank you,” says Sara.

“What happened the other night?” asks the woman with purple boots. I’m impressed by how smoothly she slips this question in, as if she doesn’t have the slightest clue.

Sara’s answer, however, is indistinct.

“Well,” says the woman with purple boots, “is everything okay now? ‘Cause there are some people in the building concerned about you.”

Sara mumbles something. She’s talking softly, cutely. You’d never know the rage she can work up on the spot. That’s what schizophrenia does to a person.

“I need to know,” says the woman with purple boots, “I need to know there will be no more incidents like this.”

Whatever Sara says, it’s enough to assure the woman with purple boots she won’t escalate again. Building Nine will have nothing to fret over.

“You’ll get your front door tomorrow,” says the woman with purple boots. “If anything happens again, Sara – and I know it won’t, but if it does – I’ll have to call your mom.”

“Okay,” says Sara. “Thank you.”

The busted front door calmly closes and the woman in purple boots clops back to the management office. Around noon, unlike every day before the emergency fleet came and had a talking or two with her, destructive outbursts don’t come from Sara’s apartment. I can’t believe Sara is suddenly better. She’s so far gone. It’s disbelief that makes me open every window, turn off the music, settle next to the wall we share, and listen for the nervous breakdown that has become a staple in my life here at The Oaks. But Sara’s completely silent. I imagine her sitting with her back against the wall, her hair quivering from the concentration it takes to control her fragmented mind. In a way, I miss her wicked romps.

Poor Sara, I think, *lonely Sara*.

The paramedics must’ve given her the medicine she so desperately needs. But there’ll be times when she forgets to take her dosage, or she’ll intentionally neglect her dosage because she can’t stomach the side effects.

3

Honeyed Cat comes with Bridget. Wherever Bridget goes, Honeyed Cat goes. They are an inseparable item, and I’m there when the two join forces.

The occasion is commonplace as far as lovable street cats go. We pull nose first into our parking space in North Miami Beach after dinner, and a scrawny cat looks at us from the second floor fire escape. Bridget immediately recognizes her tiny face, which really is quite fetching, and she informs me she has seen this same cat twice before and she’d love to give her a home.

“Don’t scare her away,” she says.

She opens the passenger door and starts clucking the tip of her tongue against the roof of her mouth. Honeyed Cat makes a dash for the forest on the other side of a barbed wire fence. It’s instinct. It’s survival. In this swampy forest she’ll find cover from the big world of unpredictable elements, like cars and people, but tonight Bridget seduces her away from the wild and into our home. The process involves water and flash-frozen salmon.

She’s so tiny the first time she steps paw inside our home. I’ll always remember how tiny, like a miniature cat, probably malnourished, but beautiful and tiny. She

has the same jade eyes she has now, as she preens her wild coat on the brown carpet of our new home in Austin. This is the third place she has lived in with us. North Miami Beach was where we found her, at the end of a cul-de-sac street. From there we moved to Miami Beach, and now Austin.

She survives the 1,420 miles in between Miami Beach and Austin. It could've been 1,350.8, like on our first trip in Jon's Silverado, but I have the impulsive idea to switch things up and follow Alligator Alley to I-75 North, visit Jack Kerouac's last house on earth, instead of taking the turnpike through central Florida. Even with the superfluous 69.2 miles, Honeyed Cat pulls through this epic cross-country transplant. She curls into a ball on the floor, rests her tiny face on one of our ankles, and recedes.

Every now and then I check on her and stroke her tiny chin and profess my love. But I don't tell her we're almost there. There's no point in lying to a cat.

4

It's only been several days after the law busted down Sara's door and she's at it again. I'm asking Bridget questions about early diagnosis of autism in children. We're sitting on the micro-foam sofa. Austin radio plays on my twelve-year-old stereo. Once upon a time a commendable system, now there's a short in the amplifier, rendering one speaker mute.

"Do you think it'll ever become common for parents to bring in their newborns to be diagnosed for autism," I ask, "like detecting Down's, but directly after birth?"

"Not really. Eighteen months is currently the earliest people are comfortable diagnosing a child as being somewhere on the spectrum."

Bridget asks for the remote. She changes the station to something less twangy.

"A year and a half!" I shout. "What's the margin of error at that age?"

"Pretty small. A big indicator is lack of speech."

"What if they're slow learners?" I ask. "Isn't that possible? Certainly at that age an incorrect diagnosis must be documented somewhere."

I always play devil's advocate in any kind of discourse. Bridget has had enough of these talks with me to know I don't have an actual opinion. All my opinions are temporary and developed on the fly, to get a rise, and they're often ignorant and against the grain of traditional thought.

"I guess that's possible," she says, "but research has shown that a lack of speech at eighteen months, in conjunction with other indicators, is reliable."

Bridget uses the beat-up remote to lower the volume. All of a sudden, our apartment is quiet. With her index finger she signs *shh*. I know she hears Sara.

"She's outside," says Bridget.

On the parking lot, I hear some guy's voice, "Take it easy, Baby."

Then I hear Sara unhook and scream, "Don't call me *fucking* Baby!"

The guy sounds like he's being attacked. Bridget runs outside to see what's awry. I'm behind her. On the parking lot, one floor below, in the yellow glow of a street lamp, Sara grabs a vagrant's shopping cart and slams it against the asphalt. The bum isn't prepared for this assault. He tries to break away from her arms.

That's when Bridget yells, "Stop it!"

Sara glowers our way, adjusts her eyeglasses, and stabs everyone with her acne.

"She must be off her meds," I whisper.

The mindless Mohawk, equally concerned, comes outside with his three-legged dog. He looks up at us on the landing, pulls on cancer, and, as if responding to an unspoken request, blows carcinogens in the opposite direction. He makes the tally three against one. Defeated, Sara punts some of the vagrant's belongings for good measure and steams toward Congress Ave. Bridget asks the vagrant if he's all right. He doesn't have anything to say, nothing except for a few aggrieved grunts. He only wants to set his HEB grocery cart aright, gather his strewn stuff, and shuffle off.

The mindless Mohawk sarcastically says, "He shouldn't have called her Baby." Then, to his dog, "C'mon, Bear, let's get inside."

The three of us acknowledge each other and then return to our separate apartments, one stacked on top of the other. I notice the mindless Mohawk linger on Bridget, as if they shared a secret between them, or wanted to share a secret. I don't tell her about the green pellet of jealousy that catches fire on the hearth under my heart. But she smells the stink in my breath.

It's nothing, I assure myself. *You're inventing things*.

Gloria is manning one of the fire pits in the courtyard. It's Memorial Day. She has her sauce and bucket of water right next to her feet. Two bags of HEB charcoal, a plastic blue bottle of lighter fluid, and a tray of marinating chicken breasts and racks of ribs make up the rest of her barbecue archipelago.

"How y'all like the pool?" asks Gloria, silver tongs crabby in her hands.

"It was really nice," says Bridget. Her Irish nymph body is wrapped in a green towel, but underneath she wears a mismatched bikini, and underneath that is her tater tot. She says, "You look like you know what you're doing over there?"

Gloria grins. She has a spandex brace on her knee. She wears a purple cotton tee and a pair of Reebok walking shoes. Her hair looks burnt under the noonday sun. Taking her time, she says, "I do. I know what I'm doing." She wets her lips, "I got five chicken breasts and two racks on there. I'm gonna feed these guys and take some to my pops."

She walks over to us. Her friends are on a nearby stoop. They salivate over the saucy plume that finds its way up to the white Austin sky. Gloria asks, "Where y'all live?"

Although we already told her, we point to Building Nine, "Right up there, on the second floor," says Bridget.

"Which balcony is yours?" asks Gloria, too drunk to remember our first encounter.

"The one with the lei hanging on the candelabra," I say. "Two bikes."

"Oh," says, Gloria, "I see now. Me and my husband live right there." She points to the balcony on the third floor, directly above ours. "We've lived there ten years."

"Ten years!" I say, thinking it was only nine. "That's a long time."

Meanwhile, I remember the other night I shut the sliding glass door too many times and made the baby cry. I don't think it was Gloria's kid. But it was probably her grandchild.

"Yessir," says Gloria, tracing a swoosh with her chin, "it sure is a long time, it sure is, but we love it here."

Gloria turns to the two other people she's feeding, minus her pops. We wave as she introduces her husband and her best friend, Candy.

"I've known Candy for six years," says Gloria. "Candy's the greatest, and she's doing great." Gloria gets closer to us and more or less whispers, "Candy's an alcoholic. She hits the bottle hard." Here Gloria makes a gesture with her

clenched fist to emphasize how hard Candy hits the bottle. She says, "But she doing great now. She's been clean for four months. You know, today she's having one beer, but she can control it."

Bridget and I nod imperceptibly. Candy is hewn rough around the edges. Half her face doesn't seem to be in line with the other half. Her hair is also imbalanced: cut mullet style in the back and left puffy in front. She doesn't acknowledge our greeting.

Gloria's husband drinks luxuriously out of a brown bag. I wonder if it's Steel. He lifts his double chin to nod hello.

"I'm feeling good, too," confides Gloria. "I've had my beer, had my drink." She does a neat jig on the balls of her feet. "Y'all drinking?"

"We're about to," says Bridget.

"What y'all drink?" asks Gloria.

"Michael likes whisky," says Bridget. "I like rum."

"They both work!" assures Gloria. She claps her crabby tongs and eyes the plume, "I love it here," she says. "It's so close to everything. There's even a liquor store within walking distance, if you *need* to walk." Again she reacts physically to her punch line. She says, "It's perfect location."

Bridget and I are quick to agree, nodding more perceptibly.

"I know," I say. "You can walk everywhere. The grocery store is right there."

I point to the north. Gloria tamps her burnt hair and uses her fingertips to wick the globes of sweat along her widow's peak.

"What," she asks, cutting to the chase, "you guys don't got a car?"

"No," says Bridget, "we have a car."

"Me and my husband," says Gloria with pride, "we each have our own car. Come here and let me show you my ride. Oh yes," she says, "I like my ride."

We follow her to the parking lot. She points to a white Town Car that's backed in.

"Oh, *that's* yours?" asks Bridget, acting like she doesn't already know. Then she taps my shoulder, "Michael likes the way you park. He copies you sometimes."

"You don't say!" bursts Gloria. The women laugh at this revelation. I nod.

"That's my sexy ride," says Gloria. "It is *so* spacious. I used to own a Ford Ranger, but one day it was raining and I was fixing to get on Ben White, and the

back of my truck went like this." Here, Gloria flaps her hand.

"You fishtailed?" I ask.

Gloria quizzically looks at me. Apparently she has never heard of the term.

She says, "I don't know what I did, but my truck ran right into a wall." Gloria shakes her head. "I shoulda been dead," she says. "But instead I got that spacious ride right there. I do have payments to make on it still, whereas my truck was all paid off, but I don't miss that truck. My car is spacious enough to fit all my grandkids when they be asking for a ride. I got so many grandkids, there's some I don't even know I have."

Yep, I think, *it was her grandchild.*

Then I say, "That *is* a spacious ride." I say. "It's like a boat."

"Exactly!" says Gloria. "I feel like I'm steering a boat in that thing."

"Our car isn't as spacious as yours," I say.

"Which one's y'all's?"

"That red one right next to yours," says Bridget.

"Oh," says Gloria, sounding like she's about to say something clever, "y'all finally got around to washing it!" She bows her head and dances on the balls of her feet. "Which of y'all parked all crooked like that?"

Bridget and I can't gauge it's crooked from where we stand, but we trust Gloria.

"I think I did," volunteers Bridget, laughing to make light of the situation.

"No," I finally admit, "I parked last, and Bridget washed it at the gas station."

Gloria likes the way we answer her question, with willingness and honesty. She sees her saucy plume calling for attention.

She says, "Listen, it was real nice meeting y'all. What're your names again... Michael and Bridget?" Gloria looks at me, "Michael, that'll be easy to remember. My son's name is Michael. Well, y'all enjoy the rest of your vacation."

2

Shaggy is on the beach, running recklessly on the sand, waiting for us to join him

on this beautiful day. I squeeze Bridget's slender waist and walk down the stairs, toward the pastel lifeguard tower. The three of us, standing in a triangle, toss the football playfully. Without meaning to we throw it more gingerly to Bridget. She catches and throws. Her reddish gold hair is full of action. If we had a fourth, we'd be quick to start a game of touch football.

Alas, we're an odd number.

Soon, however, Bridget says she's tired. She wants to feel the water to see if it's not too cold to swim. We aren't pleased with her decision to secede, but when we beg her to stay, she smiles, shakes her head, and walks toward the east, toward the vastness that lies at the edge of all continental cliffs.

"All right now, show me what you've got!" I challenge Shaggy.

"Don't be talking, Coz."

Shaggy easily flings the football 20 yards. It spirals into my hands with a force I can hear. I nod my head indifferently and fling the football back. Mine doesn't spiral like his, but it makes it to him zippy enough.

"You can throw," he says, close to sounding condescending.

"I know. I have a good arm," I say. "I just can't get a nice spiral going."

Shaggy runs back another 20 yards and launches a throw that lands right in my so-called breadbasket. This time I'm more impressed. I don't lengthen the distance between us anymore than he already has, but I manage the completion.

Shaggy nods and palms the football. With outstretched arm, he tells me to run toward the ocean. I follow his gesture, and he steps back, loads the right half of his body, and whips his shoulders through. The football meets me on a full clip. Again I hear the force, like a bullet I somehow manage to catch, and I give myself a pep talk:

"C'mon, Michael."

Being the unoriginal man I am, I copy Shaggy and tell him to run like he asked me to run, except I say to run west, away from the ocean, and I follow his advice on how to position my fingers on the white lace.

The same wobbling jellybean flies through the air, but this time it doesn't even make it the distance to Shaggy. The football scuffs against the sand. Shaggy bends down to pick it up. Although he's kind enough not to comment on my errant throw, this is the first time in my 30 years on earth I feel myself not growing older, but *aging*.

I don't let the thought make me pointless. Shaggy and I go on playing catch. My

core muscles are acutely aware of the springy youthfulness in Shaggy that seems to get springier and more youthful as his body warms and I tire.

But I can run like the wind, I think. I think, *I may no be able to out throw Shaggy, but I can definitely outrun him, and I'll be able to for a long time still.*

5

Austin's sun has made Honeyed Cat strictly an indoor pet. She appreciates the luxury of shade. Under this Austin sun, she cannot rest her tiny head and snooze. Direct sun in Miami, on the other hand, was drowsing and maternal for Honeyed Cat, but this damn Austin sun is venom, especially as we near summertime. Austin's sun is diffuse in a thinly clouded sky. The light comes from everywhere, and it's merciless, like I imagine the sun to be in the Texas plains, right around the place where Larry McMurtry grew up, Archer County. Austin's sun is arid and too strong as it hangs up there forever in the biggest sky I've ever lived under.

The balcony is a place Honeyed Cat loves to populate, but only during the temperate early mornings and cool nighttimes. When the sun's out, she stays inside, away from that sun-seared land. If, for some reason, she's trapped on the balcony during those punishing hours, she's antsy and obsessive about finding shade somewhere, and her eyes are squinty and mean looking, and her ears are slicked back, and she paces like a great cat in a cage. But she's desperate for shade. I know this because I've locked her out there twice. The first time in an attempt to make her diurnal, and the second when someone came over to spray over the cracks in our bathtub, and they asked all pets to be removed from the premises.

But the spraying was earlier this week, and after keeping Honeyed Cat outside until the toxic fumes dissipated, which took all day, I don't think I'll ever lock her outside again. After that day on the balcony, trying in vain to hide from the sun, she has been inside mostly and a little under the weather, doing lots of sneezing, taking sprawling naps on her back that seem troubling, and using her litter box less. She hasn't taken her usual sprints back and forth either, and she isn't eating much, but she's drinking a lot of water, like a dehydrated lion lapping from a lake. And she vomited again, not a hairball.

Sometimes I catch myself hoping she isn't dying. After all, getting too much exposure to the sun probably isn't the best thing for a tiny cat with FIV.

When Bridget comes home, I tell her I won't exile Honeyed Cat to the balcony again, even if they have to *re*-resurface the bathtub.

3

The second logical alternative would have been to rent a moving truck, which would save us a return drive. The problem with the moving truck is the following: after gas and taxes and insurance, it would've cost no less than $1,400. Plus, we'd have to drive separately – one in the truck, the other in the Civic – and this would mean a hotel room and nothing but straight business on the road.

Jon's Silverado, on the other hand, would only cost gas, which we figured would run us no more than $400 if we didn't crank the AC, and we could take shifts driving, so any sleep we needed could be gotten while the other drove. No hotel room would be necessary.

Q: Was shelling out $1,000 – in addition to forfeiting the $810 we'd get from selling our furniture – worth not having to drive an additional 1350.8 miles, between us?

A: Hell no.

4

On my father's side, I'm part Scottish. The Davidson clan tie hangs in my closet, a reminder of my stock. Granddad gives me the green tie before I leave for the University of Chicago. Bridget's watercolor of him hangs highest on our Wall of Awesome, very close to touching the ceiling. He passes the ghost a few days after my birthday. September of 2009, I think it was the twelfth day of my birth month, right around midday. I don't even know he's in the hospital, let alone about to permanently leave us, at least in body.

Everything happens so quickly.

He's having a lot of difficulty at home. His youngest son, Paul, has been taking care of him so he doesn't have to live in the old people's home, but, after a little while of this, the basic things get too hard.

Paul should be the one writing this part of my memory.

He knows how to tell it better than anyone.

But I'll do my best.

The day after Granddad passes the ghost, we drive up to Boca Raton to join Paul

in a kind of intimate mourning. We want to spend the night. Although Uncle Paul refuses to admit it – he *is* a man, after all – we know the loss is difficult on him, and he still has to break the news to Mamma, who has been sound asleep in her bedroom for an unusually long time ever since Granddad left the house.

I ring the doorbell. Hanging on the front door, a wooden sign with a Shih Tzu done in acrylic. In simple cursive:

THE DAVIDSONS'

Paul opens, says hello, and invites us inside. He offers Bridget and me cold beer. We ask if he's having one.

"Sure," he says, "I'll drink a beer."

Stoli does a regal walk-by to discover who's visiting his inner sanctum. Finding it's nobody he particularly likes, he slowly returns to his post on the windowsill, his tail pointed skyward. What a gigantic cat! He must weigh 32 lbs.

We follow Paul's lead and sit on the three-bolster sofa in the living room.

I look at Granddad's velvety green chair and see a ghost.

"Stoli has been acting weird all day," says Paul. "Really weird. He knows Father isn't coming back." Paul combs his left eyebrow. "Yeah," he confirms, "Stoli knows."

Paul tells us Granddad's cynicism got really bad near the end. He didn't want to go on living. He didn't want to hang in there anymore. He didn't want to. The library of colorful pills he swallowed in the morning to borrow more life from western medicine didn't strike his fancy. He didn't see the point in living. He lost his purpose.

Paul says, "He didn't want to live."

Paul tells us Granddad wouldn't even support himself in his final days. The man fell many times even with Paul helping him stand.

"But I couldn't help him," says Paul. "He had to work with me, you know, he had to help me help him. But, honestly, his cynicism got to be so bad."

Paul tells us Granddad fell in the shower. He fell on his walk to the velvety green chair. He fell getting off the toilet. He fell and had so many gashes and bruises on his arms and knees, and with that anticoagulant medication they had him on, it seemed like he was slowly bleeding to death. The nerves in his feet were shot. His feet got to be so swollen he couldn't even wear slippers.

Paul tells us he had to call the paramedics to take him to the hospital. He says he

didn't want to call the paramedics, but Granddad wasn't helping him.

"He was fighting me," he says, "he was fighting me all the time. I would tell him, 'Stop fighting me, Father. You know I can*not* do this with you fighting me all the time.' But he didn't listen."

Paul tells us Granddad was vehemently against going back to the hospital. Paul didn't want to see him go either, but he didn't know what else to do.

Paul tells us on the day the paramedics were coming to pick Granddad up:

"That day, my father cooperated with me. He was a different man. All of a sudden he didn't fight me. He helped me help him. That day, he wasn't a cynic. He wanted to prove he didn't need the hospital. He wanted to show me we could do it together. He took his pills without being asked. If I didn't know any better, I wouldn't have recognized the man. But the paramedics came," Paul tells us, ignoring his beer. "It wasn't smart to keep him here with his self-injurious behavior."

Paul says, "They came and sat him in his wheelchair and didn't say much. I stayed so close to him. I didn't feel good about them taking him away."

Paul says, "On the way out, my father grabbed my hand and said, 'Once I leave here, I'm not coming back.'"

"Well," continues Paul, combing his left eyebrow. "I guess he kept his word."

2

For the weekend, Bridget and I journey north to Dallas. We get a later start than planned, but at least we have avocado burritos from Taqueria Arandas ready for nourishment whenever hunger strikes.

The drive takes three hours. We pass cultish Waco on the way and stop in a deserted parking lot that overlooks the plains of central Texas. It's already past sunset. All we see are silhouettes of hills and leaves and red-antlered communication towers blinking as we masticate avocado. I look in the rearview mirror at a strip mall and see Czechoslovakia. There's the *Czech And Go* gas station, the *Czech In* hotel, the *Czech Kolache* bakery, and the *Czech Yourself* insurance agency. It turns out we're north of Waco, in a town called West.

The Dallas skyline welcomes us around 11PM. The red horse with wings is on top of a building that doesn't quite deserve to be called a skyscraper. Larry McMurtry, in a non-fiction book I finished the afternoon before leaving for

Dallas, wrote about the Pegasus. So, I know this neon horse has been in place in Dallas since at least 1968. It's belittling, the unstoppable passage of time that stains all things.

Cody, my friend, meets us outside his house on La Vista Dr. I go to shake hands, but I soon see it's all right to hug. We haven't seen each other in almost two years. He's married to Carla, who hails from Paris, Texas.

"What's up, Bum?" greets Cody.

"Bum," I echo.

We've called each other bum since high school. I think we first started calling Cassie, his awesome golden retriever, bum after it became clear all she did was wag her tail happily when we walked through the door, or whenever we called her to be with us, and then she'd settle into a divine drowse. I'm not sure how the name got applied to us, but each time it's mentioned the memory of Cassie is invoked, like Beautiful Anne, like Monk.

I could write a whole book about that dog. She'd wake me in the morning with a sock in her mouth. She'd get on my trundle bed and position her head directly above mine and nudge me with her sock. She did this until I wrangled the sock from her and tossed it through the door and down the hall. Then she'd run off, chasing it golden.

There's a photo of Cassie and me. I'll always love that dog. She kept me light and carefree in those years when everything was oozing apathy and angst and acne vulgaris.

"You didn't tell me you live on a compound," I say.

"Compound," echoes Cody, trying to gloss over the non-insignificant detail that he does in fact live on a compound. He redirects, "Have you ever heard of mulberry?"

Although I hear Cody ask me a question, I'm distracted.

His house, built in 1936, has a Mediterranean aura. Its white stucco walls and brown window frames place it somewhere along the cliffs that surround the bluest body of water – Homer's world. The detached two-car garage and vegetative courtyards and the ancient cedar in the middle of his driveway and the 2,500 square feet of gross living area in the main house are some of the reasons why I call it a compound. Our 523 square feet of apartment space in a schizophrenic corner of Austin pales in comparison to his completely remodeled single-family home in an East Dallas country-club neighborhood.

"Can we live in a house like this someday?" asks Bridget, as she's about to get ready for our first night of sleeping Mediterranean style.

I smile and say, “Yes.”

“Okay,” she says, and she shuts the bathroom door and brushes her teeth.

Both Cody and Carla have built careers over the past decade. They are, and I’m not saying this lightly, productive members of society with a marketable skill set. This beautiful home is one of the things being productive and marketable has gotten them. They weren’t rewarded with this home. They earned this home, and they will earn many other things over the course of their lives together. It has to do with their willingness to work and their mindset. They have clearly defined priorities, and they are focused, and they are positive. Theirs is a balanced life. They are not afflicted with the insecurities I sometimes let depress me. Neither is Bridget, though. She, too, has a clear path and will not let a damn thing get in her way, not even herself.

That’s what has happened to me. I’ve let myself get in the way. Headiness can make a person inert. Writing doesn’t necessarily make matters any better, especially when it’s the case that my writing isn’t marketable. But I haven’t always been heady. There are times when I had a plan and got close to carrying it out. Even recently, in Miami Beach, I was a white-collar professional with a better than average shot at securing a line of work that would always provide a middle-class life, maybe even upper class if I played my cards right.

In Miami Beach, I was a residential appraiser, and I was good at what I did. In fact, I’d say that everything was peachy. But then the regulations within the industry got so freakishly controlling after the economic meltdown ~2008 that many appraisers had to start pursuing new careers. I stayed in the field until the end. It was all I knew how to do. I had no other ideas when it came to making myself marketable. But I’m still young, and there’s much life to live yet. I have to make myself marketable. It isn’t a choice, but an imperative, that is, unless I don’t care about being destitute, and not only financially destitute, but also socially. I have to be strong. I have to use my time wisely. I have to prove myself.

Am I resilient? Resiliency isn’t only an admirable trait, it’s requisite for the good life. You have to be able to bounce back. You can’t let anything keep you down. You have to regroup and retrench. You have to hold your head high, push out your chest. You have to smother insecurity and be confident, unstoppable, if you want something in life. You have to find a job and work at it and be loyal to it until that job pays you and makes you independent.

Like Cody says, There’s nothing wrong with a little autonomy.

I nod in agreement.

You’re right, Bum, I think, *there’s nothing wrong with a little autonomy. But you have to be fair to yourself. You have to be ethical to the man you see in the mirror. The generations that came before us, the pioneers that built their own shade so later generations could be artistic and redemptive, didn’t these distant*

relatives already demean themselves enough for one family line? Shouldn't we have the choice to shape our lives according to our heart? As long as we're willing to work hard at whatever our hearts want, shouldn't independence, by now, come with that?

1

Michael called. He's on his way back from getting our car registered with the state of Texas. I'm still at the library. It's crazy how much work I'm already doing for my psychology lab. Classes haven't even started yet and my mentor wants me to put in ten hours a week. These would be unpaid.

I'm shaking my head at this, even though I'm the grad student. It wouldn't be too bad if I weren't already going to Round Rock every day to work at the Autism Center. The thing is, I need the money right now. My bank account is running low.

I'll have to tell my mentor I can't put in so many hours in the lab this summer. Once classes start, I'll be in the lab all the time. But for now, I think one day a week is good. I'm willing to put in one day a week and keep up on readings, period.

By the way, the tall guy's under his blanket again with his mean laptop. I hear the fan whirring. He must be typing another password. I wonder what he'd do if I ripped that blanket off him. Would he yelp like a little girl? Or would he roar out like a wild animal in an Aphex Twin video? I don't really care to find out.

What I'm more curious about is why the old man reading a reference book keeps on mumbling to himself. Maybe mumbling isn't the right word. I don't know. He sounds like he's making sentences, but his mouth is closed. His mumbling is singsong. I can tell he's holding a conversation with multiple speakers. He sports a beard shaped like Ernest Hemingway's. He has a blue cap low over his eyes as he mumbles. He's not even looking at the reference book. He's sitting in his chair, his legs crossed at the knees, and he's staring at his hands, which are folded in his lap. Sometimes he pauses, twiddles his thumbs, and picks up where he left off.

The mumbling is incessant and quite loud for the library. I'm certain everyone hears him, definitely, because eventually some guy in a muscle shirt with tater tots all over his pasty legs and arms smacks the spine of his fishing magazine against the table and forcefully says, "Hey man, can you shut up!"

The mumbling ends on an offended note. The old man looks at the bully with the bill of his blue cap, but he gets no thank you. The bully flips through his fishing magazine again. Everyone else in the library acts like they didn't hear a thing.

I can't help myself. I wait to see if anything else is going to happen, but the mumbler is able to be quiet for a very long time. Not a peep comes out of his throat. The conversation has officially ended in the name of upholding peace.

About 20 minutes later, the guy in the muscle shirt closes his fishing magazine. He rubs his chin with his index finger, as if cleaning his chops, and he zips his backpack and stands, not forgetting to tuck in his chair underneath the table. As he makes for the library door, he looks earnestly at the Hemingway lookalike and says, "Sorry, man."

At this, the singsong mumbling resumes right where it left off. The old man is in his element again. When I try to count, I come up with no less than four distinct voices.

This takes me back to my question:

What is it about Austin that makes it a wasteland for the mentally ill?

Schizophrenia and bipolar disorder are rampant here, not exclusively on our corner. All you have to do is walk on Congress, stop momentarily at bus stops, and visit public libraries to understand how successful Austin is at *keeping weird*.

Is there something in the tap water?

I sure hope not because Michael has me drinking the stuff!

But seriously, what is it about Austin? Are they running low on Seroquel? That's how they treat schizophrenia and bipolar disorder. Or maybe Austin hospitals don't have enough psychiatric beds? Maybe all these unstable minds on every street corner are literally dying to be committed and helped, but the healthcare infrastructure simply doesn't support them? So they end up living on the street, keeping the city weird, at least until they hang themselves in a stairwell.

There's nothing weird about that, Austin.

1

Bridget remarks, "The moon already looks smaller, doesn't it?"

Minutes after being a big and brown open eyeball on the eastern horizon, the moon is small and white, but it's still full.

"You're right. It is smaller," I say. "I think it's biggest when it rises."

We reach the beer-and-wine mart, where, once upon a time, Bridget bent over a

rose bush and smelt the biggest rose while I experimented with shutter speeds. The moon was waxing then. I don't have the camera with us tonight. There's always the appeal of traveling light. I'm a big fan of traveling light. The less stuff in my pockets and around my shoulders the better off I am. All I have on me is my debit card, keys, and temporary driver's license. I wear no watch, no jewelry, no hat, just shorts, cotton tee, socks, and tennis shoes.

I had to surrender my Florida driver's license at the Texas DMV. The lady who was in charge of getting me a new license allowed me to take several photos of my Florida driver's license for posterity, before I surrendered it to her, before she tossed it in the wastebasket. I used Bridget's iPhone to capture the way I looked after arriving fresh from Chicago to Miami. The importance of this photo documented only in my Florida license is apparent to me and no one else. I had spent a year writing Ernest Pipe short stories and, eventually, an Ernest Pipe manuscript. This photo ID was the only record of how I looked after *being* a writer.

Q: What would I become in Miami?

A: A Residential Trainee Appraiser.

"I forgot," I say. "How much is your Steel Reserve?"

"1.94 after tax," says the man with pockmarks.

He doesn't have white earphones dangling on his designer cotton tee tonight, but I suspect they're nearby. Truth is, I'm still not too pleased with the price. I think a dollar is more appropriate. 100 cents for 24 ounces. Oh well. Bridget returns from her forage in the back coolers with a big bottle of her preferred IPA. The green ribbon keeps her reddish gold hair compartmentalized. I fish into the open-air ice cooler by the counter and surface with 24 ounces of the good stuff.

"I only have this temporary paper license," I say. "The DMV took my Florida one."

I hand the pockmarked man a folded sheet of paper with a black-and-white printout of my mug and salient characteristics.

"It's okay," he says, "I've seen your ID before. I remember you're over 21."

I think he unfolds the starchy paper for nostalgia's sake.

"Yeah," he says, "they did the exact same thing to me when I moved from Canada. They took my Canadian driver's license and gave me this sheet of paper. Why didn't they let me keep my old license? I don't know. It's still valid, like dual citizenship. Next time I move, I will know to change my address and get two licenses. Then I'll only surrender one."

Bridget understands this procedure all too well. She says, “That’s exactly what I did! I still have my Florida driver’s license even though I surrendered one.”

“Good job,” says the pockmarked man. “Now you are both Floridian and Texan.”

He swipes my card. I sign my name.

“Can we get some brown bags?” I ask.

We’re about to walk out the barred door and make copper bells jingle when:

“You remember last time you were here?” I can see the Canadian is talkative tonight. “I don’t know if you heard already, but do you remember that guy you were worried about?”

He points to the sidewalk corner outside, where, once upon a time, a crawling man collapsed and curled into the fetal position. We look at the corner. Someone is sitting on the bus bench tonight, wearing a straw hat and playing the ukulele. No one is passed out.

“Yeah,” says Bridget, “with the gash on his forehead.”

“They found him dead,” says the pockmarked man. “Right around here.” He points to the southwest. “They found his body behind a house.”

“In an alley?” asks Bridget.

“Right around here,” says the pockmarked man. He swallows. “He had been dead for two days before they found him. People used to call him Monk.”

“Monk?” I ask.

“Yeah,” says the pockmarked man. “That’s what people called him. I don’t know his real name. I think he died of dehydration. It has been hot in Austin.”

“And alcohol doesn’t hydrate,” I say. I say, “That’s too bad.”

I want to offer my condolences. I’m empathetic. With Reserve brown-bagged in my hands, the news saddens me.

“I did call the ambulance several times for Monk,” says the pockmarked man, “in the past. He was hurt badly some nights. He got into fights. But I stopped calling because I always had to fill out paperwork.” He swallows. “What could I do?”

What could *you* do? What could *we* do?

The three of us look at each other. In my mind, I’m thinking about the last time I saw Monk. I didn’t know his name on that searing day. The air burned the hairs in my nostrils. I was on the way to the public library, and Monk, Monk was sitting

behind a bush on a wall constructed by Mexican stonemasons. He was trying to keep cool. He was trying to live another day, and this shade was his only respite. Not the shade of a house, not the shade of friends or family, but the shade of a bush on the northwest corner of Congress Ave and Oltorf St, on a stonewall. I stood right next to him as the streetlights cycled red, yellow, green, as the orange hand unfroze and changed to the cobalt pedestrian, I stood right next to you, and my mind was focused on you. But I didn't give you money, and I didn't give you food. In fact, I had neither money nor food on my person. I would've given you food, Monk. I would've given you a beautiful apple.

Monk, Monk, with your pale cheeks and pale hair, with your pale fire burning on an empty tank of paled hope, your memory is invoked within the pages of my memory.

PEASE FEED

GOD BLESS

AM HUNGY

The copper bells jingle as we leave with the weight of Monk. The Austin night greets us with her full moon. I turn to the love of my life and admit she was right to be concerned when we saw Monk bleeding from the head.

7

For six years, I made daily entries into spiral notebooks. Everything about me could be found inside these notebooks. There was no holding back, no secrecy. With time, they became quite the liability. Still, I lived for these notebooks, which is to say, whenever my days got irritatingly redundant, whenever these notebooks became uninteresting and tiresome, I knew a change was necessary.

For six years, these notebooks made certain I stayed in one place only as long as I could grow within that place. Once growth was stinted, these notebooks wasted no time to beg for a new beginning.

While it's true new beginnings can be found in the same place you've lived in since day one, new beginnings can also be had in different places. I think it's important to live in different places. I think there's meaning in looking at familiar things and thinking, *This is the last time*, and moving on to first times.

0

Abe is the one who tells us the truth about The Oaks. He says:

"Last year they dumped a lot of capital into fixing it up. They painted the buildings all funky, did landscaping, and improved the plumbing in all the apartments. Before that, this place was home to drug addicts and the deranged. Some of them still live here. I'm sure you're aware of that." He pulls on his cancer stick. "You still see them walking around. They're out at night. Sometimes you'll hear the odd scream. But now it's a lot of St. Ed's students. The turnover has gotten better though since I moved in with my wife four years ago. They have to do something about the damn Lollapaloozas, but the drug addicts and crazies can't afford the rent anymore, so they're either moving out or getting kicked out, slowly."

St. Ed's, or St. Edward's, is the 125-year-old university across the street.

Mindless Mohawk goes to St. Ed's.

"Have you had any close calls?" asks Bridget. "Anything dangerous?"

"Not really," says Abe. "Two St. Ed's students used to live two floors above me." Abe points up. "One night I had to pull someone over who was going upstairs for the soiree, and I said, 'Bring me one of the guys who's throwing the party.' A few minutes later, one shows up, and I yank him inside and let him listen to the awful noise. 'I can't sleep, man. My wife can't sleep either. We have to work tomorrow. Can you please have some consideration and turn down your music?' He couldn't believe how noisy it was in our place. He apologized and agreed to quiet down. A little after that, they moved out. Other than those Lollapaloozas, this place has been great. You just have to make sure to get to know your neighbors. Same as you do anyplace you live, you know?"

Bridget and I quietly nod. We don't tell him about Sara, or about the drug dealer, or about the mindless Mohawk's Lollapaloozas.

"What about sirens?" I ask. "Do you hear an abnormal amount for a city this size?"

"Not really," says Abe. "Why, do you?"

I shrug my shoulders and raise my bushy eyebrows.

"Enough to make me wonder," I say. I say, "Especially at night."

Off in the distance, the Catholic carillon tolls time.

I'm not sure if Michael has a point this time. He puts so many conjectures out there, but I always find holes. What makes it even worse is he doesn't stay with one idea for long. He just tests them. He just bounces them against me to see if they'll stick.

His latest idea is that people are getting whiny. That's the word he uses, *whiny*. Like usual, I let him talk. He believes he's whinier than his parents' generation, and his parents' are whinier than his grandparents' generation, and his children will be whinier than his generation.

His children?

I can only paraphrase his idea. Basically, he's saying each previous generation is stronger than their progeny. Kids today have more excuses than their parents. These kids have too many options, too many ways out.

Michael believes kids today are more sensitive. They have no self-reliance. They go to the doctor too much. They're quick to seek help. They work too hard to create an identity, pulling from all the forms of expression available. Kids are fragile, artistic. They have smooth hands and feet. They spend too much time inside.

He says, "I'm whinier than my father, and my father is whinier than Granddad. Gone are the days when people were made of iron, when they stood for something *definite*."

He says, "People don't think in absolutes anymore. Everything is relative. Relativism is slowly weakening the beast inside us. Soon it'll fill its lungs with air for the last time and tip over dead."

I can see where he's coming from. But I don't think it's necessarily a bad thing. While there seems to be a case for arguing each succeeding generation is less practical and more abstract, or *whinier*, isn't it also undeniable we're making progress in many different ways?

Since the generation of first settlers, haven't we succeeded in taming the wilderness, haven't we made a record of our knowledge and learned more on top of that, haven't we built libraries and railroads and cities, haven't we created art?

Route 71 becomes Ben White once you reach Austin City Limits, but for as long as it is Route 71, the rolling plains of central Texas are stunning, especially at the start of spring, when all the wildflowers color the hillsides. Bridget never did pick any to take with us on the Silverado's return trip, partly because she worried they'd wilt inside our non-air-conditioned cab, and partly because she forgot. However, on the last leg of our epic cross-country move, driving the Civic, she does remember the hillsides of wildflowers along Route 71, and she pulls over multiple times to construct her bouquet for our new home.

Honeyed Cat is curled at my feet. Her eyes are closed and her coat is dusty from lack of preening. Somewhere around central Florida, while waiting for Bridget to get her espresso in a Wal-Mart with a Dunkin' Donuts, Honeyed Cat realizes she's in it for the long haul. If she is to survive this trip, she must recede deep into herself. She must become Buddha.

Bridget skips out of Wal-Mart with an espresso and – *what's this?* – a pound of bulk sesame sticks. I immediately shove my hand into the bag and surface with a mouthful, which I saddle onto my tongue. Bridget, on the other hand, takes one sesame stick, nibbles away half of it, stares at its nourishing beauty, takes another nibble, leaving only 1/3 of the original stick, looks at me, rolls her tongue around her mouth, and finishes the stick after a short pause and long blink.

We eat differently. This difference has made me appreciate food even more. Bridget's approach is more like a surgeon dissecting a frog. She takes food apart in ways that never occurred to me. I, on the other hand, eat for survival. I'm more like the pioneer who needs to get sufficient calories for tomorrow's work in the fields. Bridget hasn't made me refined. I still think of food in terms of fuel. But what my lover has done is shown me there's an anatomy to food. Peeling away layers to suck at juice in cherries, biting halfway through blackberries or blueberries, staring at their whitish meat, and biting again, or taking your sweet time with a wonderful chip rather than shoving three into your mouth at once. Because of Bridget, I get more mileage out of food, more enjoyment out of a kernel of popcorn, or a single sesame stick. I'm all about getting more out of the same quantities. Having said that, sometimes I have to be reminded.

Honeyed Cat is still withdrawn when we reach Ben White. Bridget pulls the Civic over, engages the hazards, and walks straight into a hillside of wildflowers.

I eat the last sesame stick.

"They're hard to pick," she says, very nearly defeated. "Really hard."

"I have a pocket knife," I say, masticating. I say, "It should do the trick."

I search in the armrest compartment that divides driver seat from passenger. I find a pocketknife with an ergonomic handle. Bridget gallops through the wildflowers, and I decide I need to take a few pictures with her iPhone of her frolicking.

All of a sudden, Honeyed Cat is sharing her space with a bouquet of every variety of wildflower in central Texas. Bridget is proud of her assortment. Honeyed Cat comes out of her Buddha trance to sniff indifferently at Texas pith. Then she shuts her eyes, and the next time she opens them we're parking the Civic for good in The Oaks.

9

Michael doesn't have to commute anymore. He has a strong aversion to cars when in the city. Cross-country driving is enlightening to Michael, but city driving is draining. He'd prefer to work a slacker job within walking distance rather than drive to a job with upward mobility. Now that I'm commuting every day, I don't blame him. I can see his point. Driving is a drag. That's why I take the bus every chance I get. Like today, instead of driving from my job in Round Rock to my lab at UT, I drive home, which is about four miles *south* of UT, park the car, and hop on the 1M bus back *north* to my lab. Riding on the bus is so much easier than driving. I can read on my commute rather than steer clear of slow Austin drivers. I can also look at all the stores and people on the street.

Michael is home when I get back. He opens the front door. I smell the pinto bean tortillas he had for lunch. Personally, I think it's better for him to get out of the house every day, but I know there are some days when he doesn't. Like a hermit, he writes and does whatever else he normally does to pass the time while I'm away. On these days, I think he's more irritable. He doesn't treat Honeyed Cat as gently as he should, and he's moody.

"Michael, you should get out," I say, when he opens the door and squints at the sun. "Why don't you come to UT with me?"

"The bus costs a dollar," he says. "If it were free like it is for you, fine, but it isn't."

I begin gathering my stuff. I'm late for my lab meeting.

"Maybe I'll take my bike to the central library," he proposes.

"You should do that."

He packs his netbook and brings his bike in from the balcony. He starts to whistle a merry tune. Michael needs a little coaxing, that's all.

On the way out, we pass Sara's place. The door is open. We haven't seen her in a few days. We haven't heard any of her episodes either. I look in and see a gaping hole in the foyer wall. I guess all the pounding we hear is from Sara kicking in the

drywall. I look in a little more and see an older woman packing some cardboard boxes.

“Who do you think that was?” asks Michael, once we’re out of earshot.

“Her mom,” I say. “Who else could it be? I think she’s moving Sara’s stuff.”

“Poor girl,” says Michael. He tragically shakes his head. “I wonder where they’ll put her next?”

8

Five months after Granddad takes Paul’s hand in his own and declares, “Once I leave here, I’m not coming back,” Mamma holds my hand on what will prove to be her last bed on earth. Rather than issue an ultimatum, she says, “You’re so cold!” Even with ebbing energy, she manages these emphatic words. Her voice is feeble through toothless gums.

Mamma follows on Granddad’s heels, but I think she never admits Granddad is really gone. After hearing Paul, her youngest child, tell her Bus – that’s what she calls her husband of over 50 years, *Bus* – passed away in the hospital, she cries out on her bed, cries into an unbearable emptiness, and denies the truth. Bus isn’t dead. Bus can’t die. He wouldn’t even think of leaving her by herself. Not Bus. He’s a gentleman. He’s a loyal man. Bus is still with her even though Paul comes with the news of his death.

This is what Mamma thinks the first time she wakes after Granddad’s departure. She isn’t going to listen to Paul. If she’s alive, Bus is alive, too. That’s how it must be. Inside the fog of her dementia, she carries on conversations with Bus. She’ll ask if he’s still taking out the trash or getting the mail. She’ll say he’s snacking in the kitchen on his favorite, peanut butter and jelly sandwich. She’ll talk in hushed tones to Bus, who listens on the other side of the shut door. In this way, Mamma and Granddad never pass the ghost. They go on living forever in their happy little love.

But it isn’t this way for the rest of her family, us with excruciatingly sober heads, us doomed to *real* reality, a reality based on common consensus, on a universal code of cause and effect created and defined by rational people with rational senses. We’re only too aware of their absences.

Mamma dies on the Tuesday following the Superbowl. On what will soon prove to be her deathbed, after she tells me how cold my hand is, she drifts off into reverie.

Paul says, “Stay awake, Mother. You have a visitor and you keep nodding off.”

“Oh,” says Mamma, “I can’t help it!”

These are the last words I hear her speak.

2

My other neighbor, not Sara, is tending to his car again with the blue cloth. I get the feeling that in his mind his car is alive like a horse. He’s in the stable with a bristly brush, smoothing out the sinuous hindquarters after a full day of plowing his field of wheat. He chats and coos with his horse as he strokes the star running down the middle of his head. My neighbor hears the clop of horse hooves and thinks there’s no truer sound in the world. His horse whinnies and tosses his mane and stares at him lovingly, batting his eyelashes.

Yes, I think, *he believes in this horse so much that if I were to stick a mirror under its grill it would fog over.*

My neighbor gets on his haunches and cleans his car’s rims, which are horseshoes in his mind, and I understand this man is missing something large in his life. He gets out of bed every day and feels an emptiness that’s deeper than morning hunger.

Whenever I’m using our bathroom, I can hear sounds coming through the thin walls of The Oaks – his apartment. There’s always a TV blabbering Spanish *noticias*, trying in vain to fill his solitude. He takes long steamy showers. I never hear him talking or singing. I think he’s retired, living from month to month off his meager social security check.

Today, when he’s out tending to his horse on the asphalt parking lot, someone tries calling him. I hear his landline ring several times before falling silent. He doesn’t have an answering machine. Why should he if he’s always home?

When I hear his landline blow up again, a second later, I want to run out and tell him someone is calling. It’s probably important. I even unbolt both locks on my front door, start for the stairs, but then I notice my neighbor sitting on his high horse, which is to say, buckled in the driver’s seat. He rubs down his horse’s thick neck and steadies both hands on the reins. He stares at the vast openness that lies at the edge of continental cliffs everywhere. His horse clops in place, shoots plumes of warm air out of its nostrils, rears back its majestic head, and neighs. My neighbor tightens his grip on the reins and shuts his eyes. The four-cylinder engine is off. He left the blue towel on the roof.

Clip-clop, clip-clop.

He's listening over and over again to the tonic. He feels tiny explosions ripple along his spine and spread into his appendages. He's covered in goosebumps, gazing into infinity. No phone call is worth the destruction of this moment.

1

Sometimes you really can't control what comes into your mind, or, for that matter, what goes out. The mind does what it wants.

I have a feeling that Michael either already wrote about what happened last night or else will write about it very soon even though he didn't actually see any of it at all.

I, however, saw everything. The splashes didn't wake me up so much as the girls. I thought something was really wrong because of the screaming, but when I got out of bed to check, nothing was wrong with any of the people at the pool. They weren't only naked, like I told Michael, and there weren't only the people in the pool. No, while two guys and two girls were swimming, another couple was busy on the grass.

I didn't lie about the four in the pool. Both guys were naked, and the girl was in her panties. The other girl was swimming, but in her clothes. I'm not sure why she of all people decided to stay dressed, especially since she didn't stay that way for long.

It doesn't bother me that I didn't tell Michael more details. If he wanted to see what I saw, he could've gotten out of bed. I wasn't stopping him from seeing what became a full out hedonistic orgy, and because of the underwater pool lights I saw every body part *clearly*.

What does bother me a little is that I recognized one of the guys. The one who didn't swim but stayed on the grass doing it with the third girl. I knew right away who this guy was because of his Mohawk. I'm not sure why I didn't tell Michael. Why? It's not like I think he's attractive or anything. But once I saw it was our neighbor who lives under us I felt a shudder run through me and went straight to bed.

I couldn't watch any longer.

“Leave me alone!” shrieks the bastard child for all of The Oaks to hear.

I’m washing the dishes when I hear this boy’s plea for solitude. He’s screaming at his parent. I hear him through the closed window that sits above the kitchen sink. That’s how loudly he screams. An unreserved scream that doesn’t care about what other people will think.

“Leave me alone!” he howls. “I don’t want you moving me across the country! I don’t fucking like it here! Leave me alone!”

I can’t see this boy. He sounds like a teenager, like a displaced soul. I’m capable of empathy when it comes to displaced souls. At his age, I felt the same way. To move to a new place where no one is familiar is like a crime against young souls they can’t do anything about no matter how hard they try, or how meanly they act out. For young souls there’s no excitement in relocating. Learning a new place isn’t such a great thing like it is for Bridget and me. For young souls, being a transplant in the city of Austin is nothing to write home about.

“No, I don’t like them,” he retaliates. “I don’t fucking like it here!”

His mother – I hear her voice now, like a duet – takes her son’s verbal assault calmly at first. She’s worried the tenants in Building Nine will eavesdrop on their talk. But her son is more than she can handle. He has no respect for her.

After she drops a litany of no, no, no, *no*, each no increasing in intensity until she’s screaming through bloodshot eyes, her displaced son puts her into tears with, *You’re a cunt!* His mother chokes, sniffles, and breaks down into nothing.

He consoles her, *Mom, mom, I didn’t mean it*, but she’s a mess, broken.

8

At Barton Springs Rd, the stoplight turns red. I glance at my stopwatch. I’ve been running a little over fifteen minutes at around 80 percent. I’ve worked up a healthy sheen. It’s good I didn’t wear a shirt.

The run down the hills of South 5th St has blistered my toes. I feel the balls of my feet smart. It’s not the greatest feeling in the world, but I figure if I’m going to be living in Austin for at least the next five years, the sooner I callus my feet the better.

Almost as if the civic engineers were in tune with my degree of exhaustion, when

I'm ready to run again – not a second sooner or later – the cobalt pedestrian invites me to cross. I give myself a little pep talk:

"C'mon, Michael."

North of Barton Springs Rd is a manicured patch of grass. Although I have the option to run on the tortuous concrete trail meant for pedestrians, the spongy terrain of sod lures my smitten feet.

I better watch for dog shit, I think, *I have to be mindful of dog shit*. *Ernest Pipe wasn't, and he suffered the consequences*.

As I run, my eyes follow the trail. It winds up a small hill in the center of the park. Its wind reminds me of a barber's pole. I decide to run up this hill in the spirit of Rocky Balboa. Again, I don't take the engineered trail. I run straight up the southern side. At the peak I have a sweeping panorama of downtown. The Colorado River languishes at the feet of Austin's skyscrapers. The setting sun smashes into the reflective windowpanes as if into a prism. I victoriously raise my arms toward the pastel sky and think, *I am a skyscraper*. My palms meet directly above my head, fingertips reaching for the heavens, and I think, *I am a skyscraper*. The wind rustles my tussocks of armpit hair. My sheen dries, cooling me. A choo choo train blows over the graffitied bridge that stretches between South 1st St and Lamar Blvd.

Have we really come so far?

I spin on my feet to see everything there is to be seen. Austin, you seem to have it all. The Stevie Ray Vaughn Memorial is being worshipped with cameras and girls clinging to the guitar hero's bronze thigh. Dogs as varied as Austinites plunge into the Colorado River and pad their way toward floating tennis balls. Runners break a sweat along the picturesque Town Lake Trail. Hippies throw Frisbee. I sniff the air a bit when I think I smell the aroma of weed. *Yes*, I think, *that's weed*.

At the end of the barber's pole, on the pinnacle of this hill deep in the heart of Texas, there's a young bride and groom taking their wedding day pictures with the Austin skyline in the backdrop. They gaze at each other, they hug and kiss and smile for the photographer.

Yeah, I think, *that's some good weed*.

I start my stopwatch and resume my run.

Cody smiles. We were close friends back in my Houston days. We went to school for two years together, our junior and senior years of high school. It's funny seeing each other grow. We're still the same people, but now we're older and have bank accounts and serious jobs, or at least Cody does.

I find that when we meet every couple years, we reminisce about the golden days. It isn't that new memories aren't budding, but we make a point to keep the old alive as new ones are made. I haven't had many chances to create new memories with Cody. Meeting every couple years tends to put too much weight on the occasion, and when we do meet it's only for a few days. By the time we get the reminiscing over with it's already time to say goodbye.

"You can eat mulberry?" I ask, remembering Cody said something about that fruit.

"Oh yeah," says Cody, "and it's pretty good."

"You've eaten off this tree?"

"Not straight off this tree, but one I saw fall." He shows us through the wrought-iron gate and up his wooden patio steps. "It's good you guys came in the back way because everyone who comes through the front drags mulberry juice in with them."

We wipe our feet on a straw mat, and Carla welcomes us into their home with open arms.

"How was your drive?" she asks, already standing.

"It was pretty quick," says Bridget.

"For you marathon drivers," says Cody, "that drive must've been cake."

We laugh. Bridget and I look at each other. In our eyes: the road, the avocado.

"You guys want anything to drink?" asks Carla. "We have several choices of beer."

We adjourn to the kitchen, sit on some barstools, and toast cold beer to our reunion. The appraiser in me observes their kitchen: granite countertop, stainless steel appliances, custom cabinetry, travertine tile backsplash, and recessed lighting.

"It's so good to see you guys!" says Carla.

"I know," says Bridget. "I'm sorry we couldn't get here earlier. We got a late start."

“Oh,” says Carla, “don’t worry about it. You’re here now.”

We stay up until the wee hours talking about things that have made us laugh for time immemorial as well as things more contemporary and relevant to our adult lives, like Cody’s fundraising role in Public Artwalk Dallas, Carla’s recent career change into the non-profit sector, where she plans events for a local children’s abuse center, and Bridget’s graduate school horizons and new job at the Children’s Autism Center in Round Rock.

“What about you, Bum” asks Cody, “are you still working for Google?”

“No,” I say. “Google was only a year-long gig. I got back to appraising after my stint with Google terminated. I don’t know what I’m going to do now.”

I finish my second beer and stare at the granite countertop. The edges are rough. My fingers trace the ridges as I wait for further inquiry. I’m such a factotum. But that’s the extent of probing into my professional life, or lack thereof. Cody does make it clear, however, that getting serious and starting a career is a positive thing. I agree, but everyone can see on the shallow depths of my eyes I’m at a loss when it comes to discovering what I should do next with my little life on earth. While they want me to do well, they know I’m not being proactive about finding out and getting my shit together. Oh well. I guess I get what I deserve, to each his own, you get what you put in, and whatever other proverbs fit the bill of a lowlife.

Our conversation switches back to the lighthearted memories of our youth, when all of us were on the same level, undivided by class lines. Cody makes me feel like the person I’ve always been. Although I know Carla and Bridget have seen us bums guffaw over this guff that’s central to our friendship, they do a fine job of not making us feel redundant.

8

I feel like we should be interviewed on some late show after our drive. I should be more specific. After covering around 4,000 miles in four days, we’re more interesting than celebrities, at least for the moment.

If we were truckers, it would be one thing. But we’re only humans who happen to be on the road in an epic way.

What has the road taught me other than that truckers are Supreme?

They walk into Pilot gas stations, and they are Supreme.

They take showers in stalls, and they are Supreme.

They brush their teeth over bathroom sinks, and they are Supreme.

They fill cavernous canteens with straight black coffee, and they are Supreme.

And these Supremes come in every shape and size and gender on the spectrum.

Truckers are understated specimen. They're fundamentally different than me. I'm not a trucker. I don't think I'd like to be one, but only because I like being home.

I'm a homebody. That's what the road has taught me. Once I leave home, I have an urgency to get to where I'm going.

I prefer *being* rather than *becoming*.

6

We're riding bikes. Bridget is ahead of me. I'm bringing up the tail with our camera pouch wrapped like a messenger bag around my torso. Inside the camera pouch are two dreamcatchers, one for each of our mothers. Two charms passed down from the hands of Native Americans to help make our mothers' good dreams come true from this Mother's Day forward.

When we reach the Congress Ave Bridge, a knot of people forces Bridget to slow down. She bobs and weaves through the shuffle of feet. I follow, nearly capsizing an old lady with dentures. The Colorado River is orange from the sunset over the west hills. It's picture perfect. Once the mob thins, I ask Bridget to stop.

Why are all these people here? I ask. She catches her breath. The jade amulet on her chest rises and falls. She looks beautiful in the amber light. She says, Something to do with bats. She says, I think there's a colony of bats that live under the bridge. She says, They come out at twilight. I notice all the cameras ready for the moment when the bats will fly. I say, You want to watch them? I say, We're already here.

She spots a place to lock our bikes, and the next thing I know we're two more people in the mob, here to watch the official animal of Austin: the Mexican free-tailed bat. I point like an excited boy at the goose wobbling nonchalantly among the throng. This goose *must* have a name. Sometimes it stands next to someone and analyzes the frenzy as if surveying its domain. Then it teeters over to someone else.

I decide to give it a name.

"Look," I say to Bridget. "It's Cuddles the Goose!"

“Oh my! Whose goose is that?” asks Bridget, bewildered. “Is that *really* a goose?”

It’s no wonder she doubts its authenticity. Cuddles is precocious as it migrates from one pod to another, where it holds its neck high and stands, intermittently dropping an eyelid over its beady black eyes to persuade each and every doubter that it is indeed alive. While Cuddles works the crowd, students from the Texas School For the Deaf, which is on a tract of prime real estate in the middle of South Congress, glibly sign next to us. I can’t remember ever seeing so many people carry on a conversation using only their hands. When I look at their ASL long enough I become hypnotized.

“Stop staring!” says Bridget.

She has to bump me with her shoulder to get her message through. Admittedly, I do not have the best manners in public.

“Look,” I whisper, still intrigued, “when they laugh they don’t make a sound.”

“Stop it, Michael!” says Bridget. “You’re being rude.”

“All right, all right” I say. I say, “Settle down.”

On the reverse side of the Congress Ave Bridge, the world’s largest urban colony of winged mammals capable of sustained flight doesn’t communicate with hypnotic hands but ultrasonic echolocation. I hear their high-pitched squeals growing in intensity as they stir from upside-down sleep and prepare for their nighttime hunt for annoying insects. Suddenly, I remember something.

I say, “Hey, this must be where that bat came from that I saw flying around our place on our first night in The Oaks.”

“You saw a bat?” asks Bridget.

“Yeah,” I say, nodding ponderously. “I thought I told you. Odd that I haven’t seen any since then.”

“Maybe it wasn’t a bat at all?”

“No,” I say, “it was definitely a bat.”

We really don’t know what to expect. Neither of us have ever been around 1.5 million bats whirring in the air. I imagine the event will be something like a biblical cloud of locusts descending from a low sky and bar hopping from ripe crop to ripe crop, laying waste to everything created by the hands of man.

When the moment of truth comes, however, I don’t realize what I’m in the middle of until the digital cameras start flashing. In the fleeting lightning bursts, I see a

blur of membranous wings, and the squealing reaches an upper limit. Beyond this and only the ears of dogs could hear their rumpus.

5

You're going to laugh when I say this, but Michael's plan for this manuscript is to give it in person to Larry McMurtry. He thinks Larry McMurtry will make his dreams come true. He's actually going to drive to Archer City and deliver everything we've written to the celebrated writer of *Lonesome Dove*, a novel he has not bothered to read. I try telling him he should at least read *Lonesome Dove*, but Michael says not even Abe has managed to get beyond the first few pages. Apparently, Abe says the dialogue is a bear to get through. He says McMurtry tries too hard to be loyal to the way people actually speak, to Texas dialect.

I'm not going to stop Michael from driving out to Archer City, but I don't think it'll do him any good. Honestly, I don't know what will happen to this manuscript. I do want it to find a readership, but it seems like everyone has a manuscript they're peddling to agents and publishers. And with the unemployment rate in this country at record highs and steadily rising, even more people are finding the time to put together *that book* they always wanted to write.

I guess the McMurtry route is as unlikely as the traditional route. Maybe Michael is right to think he has to do something unconventional. There are just so many people out there with the same dream of getting published.

What makes him any different? His *heart*? His *tenacity*?

It's sad. It's rough. All the people like Michael, all the hopefuls, who keep standing after being knocked down. They don't quit, until they really quit. Some manage a small win. Some find a little happiness when they get a short story in print. But most are unfulfilled. They simply have to let go of their dreams and move on.

Do they ever put it all behind them?

No. I can tell you right now they never put it all behind them.

There's always self-publishing, which I'm pretty optimistic about. At first, it may only be something to fall back on, but who knows? With clever marketing, this could be the best shot Michael has at winning a readership.

All I can say is, I wouldn't want to trade places with Michael. He's the writer, and I'm the grad student.

1

For those of you who couldn't make it out to the beach today, the water was perfect swimming water even though the purple flag was flying on the lifeguard tower. The sun was directly overhead, far above a cut of the bluest sky.

I walked out 20 yards and could see the hairs on the top of my feet the whole way. Waves gathered momentum and smashed into my abdomen. I'm serious when I tell you these waves made me laugh like the little boy I once was. A scan to the north and to the south revealed other swimmers thrashing about like dolphin, their bare backs arched and shimmery. The salt adhered to my skin, my face, and cleared my sinuses.

I took deep breaths, tasting the sea like a raw Maine oyster. From my thick and curly hair dripped microcosms of ocean. The white sand on the floor was smooth, free of shells and rocks. Around me, no weedlines, no seaweed. Aquamarine waters all the way out to the horizon.

3

Chlorinated water is dripping off my stubbly chin when Abe steps onto his patio. He's the first to wave. I smile and wave back.

"How's it going?" he hollers from behind his wall of succulents.

"All right," I answer. "How're you?"

"I've got work, so I'm getting by."

"Landscaping jobs?" I ask.

"Some small ones. I finished my last big account out in West Lake Hills. I can feel it hit my wallet. When I think about it, that'll probably be the last large account I get until this economy turns around. But who knows when that'll be."

I lift my bushy eyebrows and slowly nod my head. The chlorinated water is making a puddle between my feet. Abe lights a cancer stick and walks over to the swimming pool's ledge. Gravel runs the periphery. He picks up a smooth stone and starts spinning it with his fingers. I think he has something on his mind and doesn't know how to begin.

“What’re you reading?” I ask.

Abe laughs at my monologue prompt. I hear phlegm jiggle in his throat:

“A book about the 60s. You know, I was living in California when they shot JFK. I was in school when the principal got on the PA system and said, ‘The President of the United States has been shot.’” Abe drags on some cancer before continuing, “Then, a little later, the same principal came on and told everyone, ‘The President of the United States is dead.’ And I remember thinking, ‘What the *fuck*?’ But things got crazier. Next they said Lee Harvey Oswald killed JFK, which still doesn’t make much sense to me.” Abe stutters. “Then Ruby comes out on national TV and murders Oswald pointblank. I watched it all. Once again, ‘What the *fuck*?’ But things didn’t stop there. The 60s, man, what a wild decade. Next came MLK, and after that, Robert. They killed Robert! It was incredible. JFK, MLK, and then Robert Kennedy. Something serious was happening in the 60s. It was a decade that retaliated against a long-standing conservative culture. The people were fed up, and they wanted to make things right. But all the great motivators of this counterculture were snuffed. Next came Malcolm X! I couldn’t take it as a kid. Even today, whenever I visit the LBJ Memorial Library and watch footage from the 60s, I have to step outside and cry.”

Abe puts down the smooth stone and lights another cancer stick. I realize for the first time that the rims of his blue eyes are irritated, as if he sobbed it out alone in his bedroom, sobbed for the Decade Of Assassinations.

“Some of my friends think I’m socialist,” says Abe. “I’m not socialist. I’m a radical liberal... ”

I listen to Abe. I study his eyes and I see someone who’s disappointed with the state of the union. I want to pat him on the back, hug him. I want to promise everything will right itself somehow.

Somehow.

In the meantime, go listen to the music that moves you, Abe. Go pick your guitar and blow your sax. Go paint the critter burrowed in your heart. Go roll a nice fat joint and smoke it on a rock in the Greenbelt and breathe, Abe, and remember it’s hard saying goodbye. It’s hard saying goodbye.

2

I close the door behind me without locking it. I’m not carrying house keys because I don’t need to take the precaution. Bridget is home. She’ll open when I return from my run to Government Cut.

I walk to the beach. It isn't quite twilight, but I know it'll grow dark on my return flight 3.5 miles back north to 41st St.

I stretch my wiry body on the sand. I bend down to touch my toes. I twirl my ankles, clockwise then counterclockwise. I lean against the wooden railing and lengthen my fibrous calves, methodical, a musical instrument being tuned before the concert.

I breathe in deeply, falling in love with the ocean as the waves kiss these shores. I want to become these shores. That's why I take out my rusty clippers and trim my nails, scatter them on the wet sand where the irregular waves swoosh and gargle. It makes me happy to know my cells are mingling with these shores. One day, I will be these shores.

Dear Lord, what are we if not seekers of infinity?

I start my stopwatch. It'll take ~25 minutes to reach Government Cut. There's a red, black, and white lighthouse there with JETTY stenciled in black paint. I long to touch this lighthouse, that sign.

Miami Beach is an active place. Even when people are horizontal on beach towels they're *actively* horizontal. The beach keeps people alive. It is, by nature, a restless place. In other words, it can't help but be a restless place. There's no surcease at the beach, no stop. Everything is in perpetual motion. Nonstop. The beach is where we come from. One glorious day an amphibious creature graces these shores, and from there the rest is our history.

But I'm not thinking about this. I'm only a tuned musical instrument running a long long way, unaware of the role of the ocean, the meaning of this sea. I intuitively understand everything around me, though.

The children shouting joyously, I understand.

And the man flying the kite, I understand.

And the woman standing on the bluff in her dress, I understand.

And the seagulls walking all funny, I understand.

And the pigskin spiraling through the air, I understand.

And the sand that sneaks into my shoes, I understand.

And the soccer players, I understand.

And the girls in bikinis, I understand.

And the condominium under construction, I understand.

And the music-thumping-South-Beach bass, I understand.

And the trash cans, I understand.

And the footfalls in the sand, I understand.

And the lovers in sunglasses, I understand.

And the sound of feet carrying me forward, I understand.

And the beating of my heart, heart, I understand.

But I'm not thinking about any of this. I'm only running, aware of my own running, of my wiry body, my organs, my enzymes, my music. I'm a little man on the beach, a dot on the beach, nothing at all, and everything around me is an impression.

8

If I were asked to represent this memory numerically, here's what I'd write:

3.14159265358979323846264338327950288419716939937510582097494459230781640628620899862803482534211706798214808651328230664 7

Or, more neatly:

π

This memory is an irrational number. I made it that way because irrational numbers like π will always remain free despite an unrelenting human ambition for order and control and predictability.

We can attempt to find every digit in π using the fastest processors in the world, but its non-repeating and infinite expansion will, I believe, keep its freedom safe.

Like the ocean, π won't be tamed.

I cannot say for sure what will happen in the *really* long run, though. I guess the only thing I can say is that our Conscious Mind will keep on scratching π until It either [a] discerns a pattern, [b] hits the last digit, or else [c] the Clock stops ticking.

Until then, we have a chance.

When I try calling Michael to let him know I'm on my way home, there's no answer. I always wonder what he's doing when he doesn't answer his phone. It really can't be much. All he does is sit in the dark by himself all day. Whenever I ask him what he's doing, he either says, "I just finished writing," or he says, "Getting some reading done." The rest of the call I tell him about my hectic day at work. Then, even though he already knows the answer, right in the middle of our conversation he asks, "Hey, are you driving?" I tell him *yes*. He tells me I should be focused on driving instead of talking:

"It isn't safe for you to be talking and driving. What is it going to take for you to learn, Bridget?"

Michael isn't able to multi-task like I am. Even when music is on, he can't read. If the music has words, even less, and reading by the pool when other people are there is really impossible. He's so easily distracted. He can't block things out like I can. I can do a lot of things at the same time. I can read with the radio on and people shouting. I can direct my concentration.

He does all his writing in the mornings, right after I leave for Round Rock, and then I think he spends the rest of the day reading in the silence of our apartment. But what do I know? Sometimes he's warming up his pinto beans, yellow tortillas, and Colby cheese when I call – his usual lunch. I've been with him long enough for his monotonous diet not to appall me. But there's something disturbing knowing if it weren't for me, he'd eat pinto-bean tortillas for dinner and breakfast, too.

When I finally get home, Michael isn't there. I look around to guess where he went. His shorts and shirt are on the bathroom counter. His bike is on the balcony. I look at his stash of shoes. They're all there except for his New Balance. He'll probably be back within the hour. But running now, in this Austin heat? Is Michael crazy? Even the weather guy on the radio said that with the heat index it's going to feel like a convection oven tonight. I hope he doesn't push himself too hard.

And he probably doesn't have his EpiPen. In fact, I *know* he doesn't because it's in the glove compartment. Oh, Michael.

I decide to make the house smell good by the time he gets back, all sweaty and tired. He loves cornbread, and it's easy to make. I stir up a batch and stick it in the oven. Finally, at almost six in the evening, I get to take a break. I give a sigh of relief and sit on the couch. Rarely am I in our apartment alone. We're so cramped in here. It's like a cave in our living room because there's no natural light. I can't believe everything we own fits in this tiny space. Of course, our books are still in boxes. I miss our books. I'm going to make sure we upgrade to a two-bedroom

right when Holly's lease expires. I don't want Michael getting too comfortable in here. I know he won't want to spend the extra money to live in a bigger place, but it'll be make us happier. And it will be so easy to move since there are affordable two-bedrooms right here in The Oaks. We won't have to bother with a moving truck or getting quotes. We'll move our furniture by foot into Building Six. How easy is that?

Where's that scratching coming from? Wait a second, where's Honeyed Cat? I use my tongue to call her. I say her name when she doesn't show herself. Where's my sweet little princess? I know she woke Michael up last night, but she's a confused cat. I keep trying to tell him that. What has Michael done with her now?

"There you are, Kitten!"

I open the sliding glass door. She doesn't scurry inside like normal. This worries me. I bend down to pet her, but she barely manages to lick my hand. She stays flat on the ground, her legs sticking out as if she dropped dead on her side. And usually she's so loving when I first get home. What has Michael done to my precious?

When she doesn't stand, I pick her up and pet her tiny head. "Honeyed Cat," I say, "what's wrong with you? Have you had anything to eat, girl?" She's limp in my arms, totally inert. I feel how hot her beautiful coat is, as if she has been baking. Even the air coming out of her little orange nose is burning up. I drop a few ice cubes in her water bowl and I place her gently within reach. But she immediately plops to the linoleum and takes a big breath. Her back shakes. Is she having hot flashes? Chills? Doesn't Michael know Honeyed Cat can't get sick? He was there when I found out about her condition. He's well aware of her frail immune system, yet he already did this to her not once, but *twice* before, with similar results. Doesn't he remember the last time she was under the weather all week after the guy came to fix our bathtub?

"Honeyed Cat," I say, "are you all right, girl? Do you need to go to the hospital?"

Of course, she doesn't answer. Michael knocks on the door, or at least I think it's him since we still don't have any friends in Austin. His chest glistens with sweat.

"Lover!" he says, reaching in with his lips to steal a kiss. But I rear back and give him my disappointed face. He gets the message, "What's wrong? Were you worried about where I was? I guess I should've left a note but I figured I'd be back before you." He's all worked up. "I ran down to the river. You need to see it sometime. There's this hill there with a stone jigsaw puzzle of Texas, and it has all the largest cities labeled. Around the stones is carved, 'DEEP IN THE HEART OF TEXAS.' We'll have to run there someday. Austin has a capitol star by it." He sniffs twice. "Mm, smells good, Lover! What're you cooking?"

"I've had enough of this," I say, visibly upset. "What did you do to Honeyed Cat?"

"Nothing," he says, "I left her on the balcony so she wouldn't sleep all day and be up all night. But I left the utility room open for her to stay cool in the shade."

"Look at her," I say, "she's really sick this time. Do you have any idea how hot it is outside under that fucking sun? You told me you weren't going to exile her again, no matter what. This is the third fucking time!"

"But she could sit in the shade if she wanted. I left the utility room door open."

I shake my head and make my lips scornful.

"You can't change her sleep cycle. She's a cat, Michael!"

"Well," he says, "it's worth a try. I haven't gotten a peaceful night of sleep in over two weeks. Every day I wake up on the wrong side of the bed. You always ask why I'm moody. It's because I can't sleep!" He looks at Honeyed Cat lying on the kitchen floor, practically dead. "Why'd you let her inside? Look at her, she's sleeping now. She'll be up all night again, scratching the door and clawing our bed until I wake up all pissed off."

"*Why'd I let her inside?*" I say, exasperated. "Why'd I let her inside? Are you seriously going to ask me that? You know she has AIDS. She can't get sick!"

"She doesn't have AIDS, Bridget."

"Whatever. You know what I mean."

Honeyed Cat sneezes three times to emphasize my point. Then she falls dead on her side again, listless.

"She's fine," he says. "She's tired because she hasn't been able to sleep a wink all day."

"Tired and fried. You should've felt how hot she was when I brought her in." I think about what he said. I say, "Wait. She's been outside since I left *this morning*?"

"Look," he says, "is this how you're going to be when we have kids? You can't always be the good guy and make me the villain. You can't undermine me like that. Our kids will end up hating me."

I can't believe him. *Our kids?*

In a huff, I grab the car keys and lift Honeyed Cat into my arms. She's still inert, like a small sack of russet potatoes. Poor girl. Everything's going to be fine, Honeyed Cat. I cluck my tongue to ease her tiny nerves.

On our way out, I glare at Michael and calmly break the news:

“I don’t think I ever want to have kids with you.”

He blinks his eyes shut, lowers his head, and breathes a dramatic sigh from his nose. His bare chest isn’t shiny anymore. I just hope he has enough common sense to turn off the oven.

3

What’s the value of plot? I hate to put you through this metaphysical rant, but I feel there’s something to be gained if I at least try to live up to my pseudo-intellect.

Plot gets people involved.

Plot arouses people’s interest so they stay until the end of the story.

In terms of plot, there are stories written to perfection, epic stories. These bastions of literature evoke an emotional response from an enthralled reader. They don’t bend the rules because they *are* the rules.

I imagine that if I write enough of this memory down, a plot will emerge despite my freewheeling approach. That’s what herded words tend toward. There’s irony in the idea that writing freely, writing whatever comes to mind in discursive orts, will eventually lead to a set of parameters that I have to work within. It’s almost as if freedom, when stretched to infinity, is actually a disguised form of constraint.

Freedom is constraint. Disorder is order.

Take the formation of the universe, for example. In the beginning there was nothing, no laws, no substance, only absolute freedom of the kind that will never be again, at least not within the grasp of our Conscious Mind. 13.7 billion years later, concrete laws govern everything down to the empty space between atoms.

No more freedom: only discovered laws. No more disorder: only math.

Freedom is constraint. It’s only a matter of giving freedom enough time. When given enough time, freedom tends to destroy itself, or expose its inner hypocrisy.

0

On our second night in Dallas, Carla checks in early. She's tuckered out after having to wake at the crack of dawn to help Cody set up for the Public Artwalk Dallas.

Due to his role as lead fundraiser, Cody gets to snip the ribbon, christening the event. I take some action shots, which I promise to email, for memory's sake. In them, I manage to capture the precise moments before and after the snipping. In the former, Cody is focused on making the giant scissors cut after an ineffective first snip. But in the latter, the ribbon is divided and Cody is looking down at his work, smiling.

We're camping in the high-ceilinged living room Cody says they rarely use but they'd like to use more. He can't even remember the last time anyone sat here. There's a fireplace and lofty lead-paned windows that span from floor to ceiling. We're gathered around a nice bamboo coffee table. A hardback sits in the center, Bob Dylan's autobiography:

We're just gonna be gone, the world's gonna go on without us,

and how seriously you take yourself, you decide for yourself.

We're nursing the last of his beer. When the dregs are reached and surpassed, we're all very quiet as the barley and hops make our brains spin. Cody, perhaps still in the mood of snipping ribbons, breaks the silence with an offer I can't refuse.

"You want to smoke, Bum?"

The next thing I know, Bridget is standing with me on the back porch. Cody is telling us about the armadillo that sometimes snoops around in his backyard. I suddenly have a memory of the last armadillo I saw.

"It was in Houston," I say. "I was walking late at night through my parking lot. Where I lived, the bayou ran. I always heard wildlife stirring along the bayou, but rarely did I actually see the animals that made these sounds." I pause here, not for effect but to lightly touch the flame to a verdant corner of the pipe. I say, "That night I saw this fat armadillo digging with its claws. The fluorescent lights really did justice to its bony plates. And what a fucking tail! *Segmented*."

Realizing I'm about to become pointless, I notice that Cody has on a Son Volt cotton tee.

"You've seen them live?" I ask.

"I have," says Cody, "a couple times actually."

"Nice." I say.

“Yeah. I take in lots of live shows,” says Cody. “I don’t go to the movies. I figure, if I’m going to spend 30 bucks on me and Carla, why not go see some live music.”

“Good point,” I lie.

Bridget, on the other hand, wholeheartedly agrees. She gets a lot out of live music.

“Tell him, Cody,” she says. She says, “Every time I want to go see live music, Michael always worries about his ears.” She looks at me, “*What* do you call it?”

“I have tinnitus!” I say. Then, looking at Cody, “I have tinnitus.”

Cody looks at Bridget and deadpans, “Michael has tinnitus.”

For some reason, the thought of permanent hearing loss makes us laugh until our stomachs ache. Bridget passes the pipe to me. She wears her eyeglasses. She tilts her chin toward a clear night sky and empties her lungs.

6

Dear Lord, epiphanies are real, no one can dispute that. No one, not even You, can try to tell me that epiphanies don’t exist.

What someone can dispute, even the likes of You, is my theory that epiphanies are more likely to happen in or around water.

But I’m not here to defend my theories. Epiphanies have a tendency to occur in or around water, and that’s something you/You either believe or don’t.

Case and point: Bridget and I are standing on a truly awesome balcony 40 stories in the air, overlooking Biscayne Bay. I’m watching a pattern in the bay and, farther out, the Atlantic Ocean, while my lover sips on some Italian beer with her girlfriend, the one who calls me grasshopper.

The currents move from east to west.

To the north, a weedline.

Stingrays surface like flying carpets from the depths, blow bubbles, and descend into the darkness, into the unknown. Some are large enough to create the wake of a boat, others are babies, and one is albino.

I stand on the balcony, *around water*, and I understand the necessity of prayer.

To pray for people, to love people enough that you pray for them, you give them love in words of silence, in intentions, in positive thoughts, in sunrise meditations, and in smiles.

I stand on this truly awesome balcony, full of charity through prayer, of caritas, bony elbows on the rail, and raindrops start falling from the heavens.

Concentric circles freckle Biscayne Bay. The albino stingray surfaces slowly from the dark depths and starts swimming south, a flying carpet.

I stretch my hand over the edge, palm facing up 40 stories in the air, and the same raindrops that freckle the bay where the stingray swims also freckle my fingers.

In this way, *in water*, another epiphany colors my eyes. Even the magnificence of nature pales in comparison to prayer, to unlimited loving kindness toward others.

6

To celebrate our 3.5-year anniversary, I suggest a picnic. It's tough to go wrong with some soft French bread, Gouda cheese, and a bottle of wine. I'm not going to lie. I do think about getting 48 ounces of Steel Reserve instead of the sulfites, but something in me says the green glass bottle is more aesthetic than silver aluminum cans. And the sound of a cork popping is much more romantic than a gaseous exhale, although it is undeniable that Steel Reserve has sex appeal.

"Where should we go?" asks Bridget.

She's on the other side of our Wall of Awesome, in the closet digging for something to wear.

"How about across the street to St. Edward's? I scoped out the perfect spot."

"Really?"

She likes the sound of this date. I've taken charge for once. I've made all the plans. All she has to do is follow my lead.

For the occasion, she braids her reddish gold hair into pigtails. She could pass for a schoolgirl, one much younger than an entering graduate student at the University of Texas. I take her hand, and we lock the door behind us.

On the walk to St. Edward's, we pass a stand of free *Austin Chronicle* copies. I spontaneously grab one in case we want to do something fun after our celebratory picnic. I tuck it under my armpit and, close to Duke's beer-and-wine mart, wait

for the cobalt pedestrian to signal from the east side of Congress Ave.

Bridget, however, takes my wrist and ignores the significance of the orange static hand.

By way of explanation, she says, “I’ve been jaywalking all day.”

In silence, we walk uphill to the highest point at St. Ed’s. The steady climb makes my thighs burn. No one is around. Classes are out. The campus is desolate.

“Ooo whew, whew, whew, whew, whew,” goes the Grackle. “Crewhewwhew!”

“Did you bring the camera?” asks Bridget.

We’re still walking at a nice clip, holding hands.

“It’s in the bag,” I say, pumping her palm three times.

Then we walk more in silence.

And, a few minutes later, I announce,

“Here we are.”

Bridget looks north toward the skyline. It’s about three miles away. In the sunset, it still appears exactly like what it is, manmade muscle. Because I’m man (not fish), distant skylines always charge my blood with the promise of carnal adventures.

Going farther down the St. Ed’s slope, a 0.25-mile gravel track loops a mint green soccer field, and a set of five tennis courts silently awaits hard court players. Everything around us is so cultured and athletic. Is this Sparta?

I throw down our blue blanket and invite my lover to take a seat at what will be our dinner table. If there were a chair to gently push in behind her, consider it done.

“See that building over there?” I ask, pointing over her shoulder. “Abe says that may be the best existing example of Victorian architecture in Texas.”

“It’s beautiful,” says Bridget. “How old do you think it is?”

“I think it was built sometime in the 1880’s,” I say, giving her an educated guess. “At least that was when this university was founded.”

Bridget folds her hands elegantly on her lap and smites me with eyes full of love. I blush, look down at a long leaf of grass, and shake my head until the blushing fades. To save myself from becoming pointless, I pop the wine cork and pour a healthy, full glass for Bridget, and then an equally full glass for me.

“Ooh,” she says, “Italian Pinot Grigio, my favorite. Make a toast.”

“To our life in Austin,” I say. “Cheers.”

“To our life in Austin,” says Bridget. We clink crystal, “Cheers.”

I suggest finishing a glass before eating. Drinking on an empty stomach makes me a lot drunker, a lot sooner. Bridget agrees this is the goal of drinking. We do that thing.

“But I’m hungry,” she cautions.

For nostalgia’s sake, when we’re almost through our second glass and halfway into our hearty victuals, I ask if she remembers the raccoons that surrounded us on our first anniversary picnic in North Miami Beach. We hunted for a secluded spot, and I thought we found one in Greynold’s Park. But it wasn’t so. There’s always someone watching.

“I even tried the paddle ball racquets,” she says, her cheeks flushed. “Remember? I smacked them together to make them scared.”

“I know!” I say. “But they weren’t fazed at all.”

“No,” she says, “not at all. It was intimidating how bold they were. Four of them!”

“Raccoons will be raccoons,” I say. “At least we managed to get all our stuff together.”

“True.”

In a moment of silence, I take a peek at the *Austin Chronicle*. The cover story is about some guy named Caleb Berwanger, the mastermind behind this company that opened to the public after months of testing with city officials. I’ve seen the little cars driving around Austin. They’re white and blue and really small. I turn to the article to remember what the company is called. While thumbing through, an ad catches my eye. Some guy with a thick beard and the hieroglyph:

LI(F)E

I read the details.

“You won’t believe it,” I say.

“What?” Bridget is being extra still so the butterfly on her shirt doesn’t fly away.

“Sage Francis is giving a free in-store performance at Waterloo. Apparently, he released a new album.”

“Get out!”

“I’m serious. Tuesday at 5PM. There’s probably going to be free Shiner, too.”

“What’s the album called?”

“Life, with a parenthesis around the F.”

Bridget sheds light:

“‘Because life is just a lie with an F in it.’ He sings that in one of his songs. Damn, Sage must be extremely disillusioned with all these wars. We’ve been in Afghanistan 109 months.”

Bridget quotes Sage again:

“‘Just bring home my motherfuckin’ brothers and sisters!’ No one is listening, Sage. No one is listening.”

“Nope.” I shake my head. I say, “Almost a decade of war.”

Gunshots!

Taps plays in my ears.

Salute!

But the bugle of death isn’t enough. The bugle of death doesn’t justify anything.

I quote another protest song.

I sing, “I got soul, but I’m not a soldier.”

“Who’s that?” asks Bridget.

“The Killers,” I say.

“Ah,” she says, “the irony.”

Bridget nods her chin, smiling at the butterfly as it ever so slowly spreads its inkblot wings, and stays. I turn the pages of the *Chronic* some more and find the cover story. I scan the salient points.

Car2Go: not very clever, but it gets the message across. Car2Go is a concept that first came about in Ulm, Germany. Caleb Berwanger got wind of the company after a visit there. It’s a really simple idea. Basically, legal drivers can become members for free. Whenever they need a ride, they find one of the white and blue cars that, according to the article, will soon be within three minutes walking distance of any point in the city, and they pay by the minute, like some cell

phones. Fuel and insurance are built into this unit cost.

“Have you heard about this?” I ask.

“Yeah,” says Bridget, and the butterfly flits downhill. “What’s the deal?”

She snatches the *Chronic* from my grip to read the story at her own blazing rate. I try to paraphrase, but she flips the page before I mention Berwanger.

Wow, I think, *how does she read so fast?*

She freezes.

“What?” I ask. “What is it?”

Bridget has her hand over her mouth to block the gasp. She stares at the next page, the one I never got to because I read too slowly. I scoot over on our blue blanket and squint. Bridget can’t speak. I try to read her eyes, but they’re wide and blank, then I look at the page closely. There’s a black-and-white picture of a familiar face. I can’t quite place it, though.

“Is that Caleb Berwanger?” I ask.

Bridget kills her wine and nods, her eyes screwed to the page.

“What’s wrong with you? You’re starting to worry me.”

Who cares if that’s Caleb Berwanger? I think. *Did she go to school with the guy? She can be so unpredictable when she looks wide-eyed. She’s liable to say anything, anything at all. Maybe this has something to do with the Mindless Mohawk.*

“Isn’t that,” she begins, “isn’t that the leprechaun?”

I take the *Chronic* from her hand. It can’t be. But it is. The elfish nose. He looks drunk, like he did that night we saw him loitering outside HEB with a Dr. Pepper bottle, homeless. I take it that his name is Caleb Berwanger.

So, I think, *the leprechaun is the CEO of Car2Go. The bum with schizophrenia wasn’t crazy after all when he talked about his Smart cars. He was biding his time. He was fine-tuning his enterprise. And now he’s an Austin bigshot, living large on Mount Bonnell, and what am I?*

I shake my head at the same long leaf of grass, now crimson from the blush it absorbed. Bridget is quiet next to me, staring at the skyline that won’t let me enter. I feel myself becoming pointless. No. I pour a third round of wine. It’s too late, though.

Q: What am I?

A: A writer manqué.

Q: What am I?

A: A milksop.

Q: What am I?

A: A fetid mind.

I remember the lascivious eyes of the leprechaun when he stared like some pervert at my lover, and I feel sorry for Bridget. That she should have to live with a pointless man when a man who has a point could whisk her away. As if sensing me appraising my shortcomings, Bridget latches her arm around my waist and laughs it all away. Positivity, she means to say. Positivity is all there's time for on earth. Think positive, Michael. She means to say, I'm yours forever, all you have to do is hold me.

"I love you."

"I love you."

Not quite knowing why, I pull out our bridge camera and set it up on a mini-tripod. I frame the shot and set the timer. I sit exactly where I was sitting, and in five seconds the red light blinks and the shutter opens and closes. We're both smiling, the crowns of our heads touching. Sometimes I think pictures like these aren't really good for a person's health. Portraits taken right after feeling hurt or, as in my case, inadequate can only shed esteem. Nevertheless, this is our 3.5-year anniversary photo. Let it make us stronger.

4

I've been meaning to get to Archer City for a little while now. I've been gestating this memory for longer than it takes to ripen. It's ready. On the outside, it's avocado green, and on the inside, creamy yellow. It's strange, the feeling you get when you know a memory is finished. When you know there's nothing left. Everything is as it should be.

A life isn't worth more than a handful of words.

You see: I've written too much already. But, to my credit, this memory isn't only about me. There's more than me in this memory. That's what makes it pretty.

Archer City would be nothing without Larry McMurtry. His bookstore occupies

most of downtown. I haven't gone in yet because I wanted to wait until I got here to finish longhand. I'm in the Civic. The engine is off. My wrists are the first to start sweating. It's hotter here than in Austin. The only reason anyone would ever voluntarily spend time in this forsaken place is if they have blood buried in this land, like McMurtry. But I'm sure that most Archer City natives leave their origin as soon as they find a route to the city. Population is on the decline. Archer City is a vestigial outpost. Once it may have been the frontier, now it's a rabid dog in need of a bullet to the head.

I almost crank the AC, but roll down my window instead. Bridget does the same and fans her cheeks. The cross breeze is no respite. The pores on my face and upper back dilate. My knees begin to sweat. Soon my cotton boxer shorts and socks get leaden with the weight of water.

How will the Texas Man of Letters receive a wannabe writer? Will he graciously take the manila envelope with my manuscript in it and toss it on his own personal pile of slush? I won't stop him. I'll understand. People only have two hands, after all.

Be positive, I think. *Positivity has carried you this far. Just stick to your lines. Find him and ask, How many times in your life have you had the chance to Make Dreams Come True? Wait for him to think of an answer, but don't wait for him to answer. Then say, We're both human here. Let's help each other.*

Salt from my upper lip coarsens my tongue. Salinity. I touch Honeyed Cat's head. She flashes jade at me and purrs. I pump Bridget's thigh three times. My skin is convex on the surface of her eyes. What was that? A pinprick on my neck. Not good. A cello sounds a black note that's sustained.

Oh, Watson, the needle!

7

At first I don't know what happened. Michael drops his pen and says, "Take," but when I look at him it's clear something's wrong. He should be telling me more than to *take* his memory.

Then I see a wasp poised on his jugular. I swat the yellow and black demon outside with his manuscript and frantically roll our windows. Michael is frightened. Fear makes him look like a mother's son. I remind him not to worry. We have an EpiPen, right?

He shakes his beautiful face. His hair crinkles against the headrest. He studies his hands, the spreading rash on his palms, and sadness makes him choke.

“Isn’t it in the glove compartment?” I ask.

“No,” he says. He drops his hands and tries shutting his eyes. He can’t. “I moved it to our camera case,” he tells me, faltering. “Which I didn’t bring. Fuck me.”

“Okay,” I say. I say, “Don’t worry, Viejo. Don’t worry.”

“Why me?” he moans. “Why me, dear Lord?”

I call 911 and walk Michael across the street to Booked Up.

Bells jingle as I calmly beg for help. The stubborn silence of books answers. What good are they? I scream like a savage. This time someone appears. An old man.

“Are you Larry McMurtry?” I ask.

“No,” he says, “but I can fetch him for you.”

“This is Michael, my boyfriend,” I say, trying to be clear and concise. “He’s allergic to bees and wasps.”

“That’s too bad,” says the old man. “There’s lots of them ‘round here.”

The old man isn’t sarcastic. He lifts Michael’s face by the chin and shakes his head and realizes the situation is grave. I stare at the empty street and wonder how much longer. The token tumbleweed rolls by like an animated piece of eco-art.

“Larry!” yells the old man, “you wouldn’t happen to have a shot of adrenaline handy in your store, would you?”

When there’s no answer, I start to cry.

“Now you hold on there, Dear,” says the old man. He reassuringly braces my elbow. “You hold on while I go fetch Larry.”

Apparently, the celebrated writer is disposed because the old man returns as he left, alone. I’m wondering if this is really how it’s going to end – is this it? – when the old man solemnly reaches into the back pocket of his jeans.

“Oh, thank God!” I say, and I don’t even believe in God. “Thank *you*!”

It’s almost too good to be true, the way this old man fills a syringe with adrenaline from a honey-colored phial, rolls Michael’s sleeve, and deftly sticks the needle in between the sinews of his shoulder.

“Don’t thank me,” says the old man. “Thank Larry.”

END

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