

BEACHES IN WINTER

Ben Penley

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*Dinosaurs! Alive***I. *Ralph is Demoted***

There is a virus called the tobacco mosaic virus that mottles the leaves of tobacco plants and that's something that a lot of people don't know. It's why I think the science center is so great and why I've coerced Ralph into giving me free weekend tickets. The talk about viruses is in reference to last month's temporary exhibit on infectious diseases and how sometimes felines can spread leukemia through touching wet noses. I told Ralph, although he is not the director of temporary exhibits but rather a ticket seller, that there should have been sinks and soaps all over that exhibit because washing your hands is one of the best methods to stop contagions so I guess you can't learn everything at the science center.

The building is filled with puzzles like, which pulley is the most efficient and which travels the fastest: a pool ball, a golf ball, or an atom? Other sections are more informative like how is an ocean wave formed or how does a scale five earthquake feel? There is even a rooftop butterfly garden but there are always couples kissing up there and so it's hard to focus on the butterflies although occasionally one with a distinct wing pattern will attract my attention.

There is one room that I don't like. The walls are lined with small sharks in jars, mounted animal heads, and stuffed snakes. The samples, too, have been handled so thoroughly that the rattlesnake's rattle has detached and the alligator heads are missing teeth. There is but one smattering of life in this room—a pin of tortoises. On my last visit, Ralph told me that a mother tortoise just laid a cluster of eggs and, although I will not enter the room because of its unappealing surroundings, I am pleased to hear about the tortoise. Besides that, there is nothing to be learned there. I have only entered this room once, before I knew it held so many carcasses.

There is a group of ten-year-olds that visits on weekends. They are in a free summer camp for impoverished kids and sometimes they even bring case-less pillows and stained blankets to sleep alongside the permanent, glass-encased display of a dusty deciduous forest. Other times the children will participate in anatomical lessons wherein retinas are removed from cow eyeballs or whole frogs are pinned and dissected. One of the funnier things about these children is that they think all adults are authorities. For example, one of the children, and this was earlier in the summer, asked if I worked at the science center because I suppose on that visit I was wearing a blue polo shirt and khakis similar to the varieties that employees like Ralph wear. I laughed and told the kid that I didn't but I could if I wanted to.

The temporary exhibits are near the front of the building and Ralph always gives me the gist of those upcoming. These forecasts, though informative, are often lackluster because Ralph has a novice understanding of the sciences and often interjects with personal complaints about his long hours and general mistreatment. But he has reserved a free ticket to the upcoming exhibit for me so that I may learn through immersion. He says that the exhibit will deal with animatronic dinosaurs and rocks that contain fossil records and I have surmised that the point of this exhibit is not so much about celebrating dinosaurs or the newest in animatronic technologies

but rather the rocks and by extension the fossils that connect us, as in the present-day “us,” with Mesozoic and even (although this predates dinosaurs) Precambrian Periods.

And so I’m excited when I visit the science center for the “Dinosaurs! Alive” exhibit, although I think a more fitting moniker would be either “Fossils and Rocks” or “Our World as Told by Rocks.” I arrive as early as the town’s bus schedule allows but there are no dawn-break morning routes on weekends and so when I do make it there, the summer camp school bus is sitting in the parking lot and the children are filing in the front entrance door. When I’m at the ticket stand, I see that Ralph is not there but instead an older woman with a leather face. I mean that her skin looks like leather. “I was expecting to see Ralph here,” I say, approaching. “But no worries. There should be a ticket for me somewhere on the desk.”

The leather-faced woman stops me with her waving hands. “No sir,” she says, almost whispering. “There’s no free ticket for you here. Not since Ralph was caught.”

“What do you mean?” I ask. I place a hand on the counter.

“The managers found the free-ticket stash on Ralph’s person—you weren’t the only one.”

I’m not sure what she’s getting at and so I say, “Please bring Ralph here.”

“Be quiet,” she says. “The managers might hear you.”

I stand there, silent.

“Ralph can’t be within ten feet of the ticket booth,” she says. “It’s part of the deal he worked out with the managers. Once they found out, you know, they wanted him fired and never again within a mile of the center.” She pauses. “But he begged and now they have him working on the janitorial side of things. Cleaning bathrooms and changing straw in the tortoise habitats.”

“Please call for Ralph,” I say, assertive despite the volume warning. The woman frowns and so I lower my voice. “I can meet him at the side-door.”

“I can’t do it,” she says. “If you want to make it inside, you’ll need to purchase a ticket. But I’d say it’s worth it for the new exhibit. Have you heard about it? The dinosaurs roar and move their tails. It’s all very realistic. There’s even a T-Rex in the back with feathers.”

This last fact makes me want inside all the more, as I’m eager to see their representations of scientific progress and theories. And so I say, reaching around in my pockets to indicate their emptiness, “I would be pleased to purchase a ticket but it seems that I’ve left my wallet at home. You trust that I will be back tomorrow with the appropriate change?”

“No sir,” she says, “I can’t do that because I will not clean bathrooms. The managers are on the lookout for these kinds of dealings. Can’t do it.”

I determine that this woman is not worth the trifle and so I consider the alternatives. There is another entrance to the building at the back and so I decide to walk around the block to get there but first I sit at the benches surrounding the public sundial so that she doesn’t suspect that I will dupe her. When an aged couple approaches her counter, I execute the plan.

The attendant at the back entrance is just as rude as the leather-faced woman. I can see Ralph inside, sweeping the floors, and so I wave my hands, hoping to attract his attention. But the attendant grabs the wall-mounted phone and starts dialing. I tell the attendant that I just want to speak with Ralph about what’s happened but she refuses and tells me that I should be going.

II. *Camp Counselors*

I am principled and although I support the science center and respect their financial needs, I do not agree that there should be a price on information and education. And so, on the next morning when the school bus for impoverished children arrives, I join the counselors and tell them that I will help look after the children for this session. The counselors are teenagers and a few protest

because I haven't been trained. But one adolescent with bangs over his glasses agrees that I can take his place so that he can prepare for a calculus exam. We climb into the school bus and he trades his long-socked uniform and hat for my street clothes. We exchange these clothes one garment at a time so as to not expose ourselves.

The attendant who was at the back of the building yesterday is now at the front and because I had less of an interaction with her as opposed to the leather-faced woman, I am able to gain admittance undetected. I ask one of the counselors, a short girl with braces, if the children toured the Rocks and Fossils Exhibit yesterday and she doesn't understand and so I say "you know, the temporary exhibit," and she tells me that they did and the dinosaurs were so realistic. But anyway, she says, their mornings start with orange juice and pancakes in the auditorium.

I decide that I will join them for breakfast and, once things have settled and there are more off-the-street visitors, I will venture into the Exhibit. In the auditorium, the kids form lines at the rows of brown fold-out tables. Stacks of pancakes are held in metal receptacles and the children fork them onto their plates. There is soon maple syrup dripping from their mouths and onto the lacquered wooden floors. It is not surprising when I see Ralph with a mop and water bucket. I whisper at him, "Ralph, look over here, it's me!"

He looks and motions for me to come closer and to be quiet. "Be careful out here," he says. "I had to tell them your name and I overheard talk about lifetime bans. The serious kind. The kind reserved for larcenists and vandals, not people like you." He continues mopping.

"Thank you for the warning," I say. "But I'm here to see the new Exhibit."

"I can understand that," he says. "The Brontosaurus looks great but let me tell you, I'm getting sick of these janitorial tasks. The tortoise laid twelve eggs. Twelve. And that requires around-the-clock monitoring." He pauses. "Come to think of it, I could use your help with

something a little later. Excuse yourself from these kids when they're headed to the planetarium for the solar system show. Just wait outside the double doors. And don't tell anyone either."

I agree to the meeting and return to my counselor duties of standing with eating children.

III. *The Managers*

I am now standing with the children on the rooftop and some of them are running around with the butterflies. Two counselors are sitting close to each other on a bench, not monitoring. There is an announcement over some fuzzy speakers near the door—"Karen, please come to the front entrance. Karen." I know, from signs on the walls, that Karen is one of the managers. I tell the other counselors that I'll return soon and, I joke, don't let the kids follow a monarch over the ledge but none of the counselors laugh or show signs of understanding.

The managers, all three of them, are at the front entrance near the Exhibit and are surrounding a woman in a wheelchair. I slip into the men's bathroom to hide and listen. They are telling her that the freebies and even the visits to the science center are over because she is banned for a duration no shorter than her life. Karen tells her to collect her things and to please exit from the wheelchair-accessible back entrance. I stumble at the severity of this and, once I hear the managers disperse, leave the bathroom and trail behind the woman.

Before she exits, I approach her and grab the handles of her wheelchair. "I'm interested in what just happened," I say. "What do you know about lifetime bans?"

"Please let go of me first," she says. When I do, she turns the wheelchair around and continues. "Do you know Ralph, the previous ticket seller?"

"Of course," I say.

“Well he’s the cause of this,” she says. “I thought he was giving me free tickets because I’m in this wheelchair. I thought he had sympathy. But he didn’t care about that. He just cared about the size of his paychecks. I guess the joke’s on him though because now he’s a janitor.”

“Ralph cares,” I say. “He lets us inside so that we can learn.”

“That’s not what I heard” she says. “I tried to tell the managers that he was trying to spite them, that they shouldn’t take it out on us. That’s why I’m even here today. But they wouldn’t listen to me and I couldn’t speak through these tears.” She indicates her tears. “I never needed the free tickets is the worst part. I even purchased a small boat with the settlement from the accident.” She indicates her non-functioning legs. “But now I’m banned for life and there’s no such settlement to fix that.”

Down the hall, children file into the planetarium. I thank the woman for the information and excuse myself for the meeting with Ralph.

IV. *Black Tortoises*

I position myself in line with the children, at the back with the deviants. The kids who chew gum and tie other children’s shoelaces together. Ralph is standing outside of the double doors. He has opened both doors and wedged them. He no longer has his mop and water bucket. I approach the entrance and see that inside, constellations are projected onto the dome of the planetarium. Line-drawings connect the stars to make belts and gods and animals. “Hello,” I say to Ralph.

“Good,” he says. “Follow me.” The children have all taken their seats and Ralph removes the wedges from the doors. They close and we walk through the halls of the science center.

“I was speaking with another visitor,” I say, “and I heard that you are disgruntled.”

“That’s not the case,” he says. “You, yourself, know that I just want people to learn.”

“Right,” I say. “We share a common set of beliefs.”

We turn a corner and stop at the reptile room. I will not go inside and Ralph knows as much. “That’s right,” he says. “We do. Now wait out here and don’t let anyone else inside. Nothing to learn about in here.” He grabs the hat from my head. “And give me that hat.”

I stand guard at the entryway and discourage a teenaged couple from entering. After a while, Ralph comes out with my hat held shut and bulging. “What’s in there?” I ask.

“The tortoise eggs,” he says. “Management asked us to bring them to the new Exhibit for a special showing. Something about egg-shape and evolution.”

“That makes sense,” I say. “Can I see them?”

Ralph opens the hat and reveals the cluster of twelve perfect, round eggs. I am eager to see them hatch and would like to shake them into birth but I restrain myself. I realize, too, that the eggs appear altogether too soft and fragile to be toted around the science center.

“Shouldn’t those be kept in the incubator?” I say.

“I’m just following orders,” he says. “Besides, I think there’s one in the Exhibit room.”

We walk, slow and delicate upon my request, toward the Exhibit. And soon we are there. A “Dinosaurs! Alive” sign featuring an expressionless pterodactyl hangs over the entrance. I hold the door open for Ralph because he has his hands full of eggs. The lighting in the room is dim and, although I doubt it is representative of Mesozoic times, I appreciate the ambience it establishes. There is a fine mist hanging in the room, which is now, functionally, a trail through a prehistoric forest. Dull spotlights illuminate the dinosaurs along either side. Shrill reptilian calls echo through small speakers disguised as rocks and ferns. Informational signs line the entire path discussing dinosaurs, the rocks upon which they stand, uncovered fossils, varieties of fern, and the extinction event along with the small mammals that survived.

“Would you look at that,” I say. I am talking about the dinosaur footprints painted on the path, indicating the direction that visitors should follow. There are other visitors here, standing captivated by the complete fossilized skeleton of an adolescent duckbilled dinosaur. The sign indicates that the skeleton is a replica but the people, I am sure, cannot tell the difference.

“The incubator is just around the corner,” Ralph says. But I am not concerned for the eggs at this moment because there is too much to learn about our reptilian predecessors.

We continue walking down the path. I stop at the intermittent informational signs and Ralph waits with me because, as I told the woman in the wheelchair, he cares about knowledge.

“Look at this,” I say. I indicate a sign about the carbon cycle and how dinosaurs are used in the present-day. There is a functional and pumping oil derrick although I doubt it is extracting. Behind, there is a television screen showing a series of oil gushers in black-and-white.

Ralph nods. He appears impressed but distracted, looking down at the bulging hat.

We round the corner and there is a large, speckled mother stegosaurus with a moving tail that passes back-and-forth over her nest full of hard plastic eggs. She is protecting them from a herd of velociraptors. “Here it is,” Ralph says. “Help me over this rope.” He is talking about the braided rope that lines the path and separates it from the displays.

He climbs over the rope without my help. “What do you plan on doing?” I ask.

He begins to remove the plastic eggs that the mother stegosaurus is protecting. Her tail hits him in the shins but he doesn’t seem to mind. He tosses the fake eggs into a cluster of ferns in the prehistoric forest and carefully dumps, with a tip-of-the-hat, the twelve tortoise eggs into the nest. They roll around for a moment and Ralph smiles once they are all still. He places the hat beside the nest and takes a step back, out of the moving tail’s range.

“There,” he says. “How about that. No one will think to look for them here.”

As I am realizing that Ralph's plan is one of his own construction, the intercom announces that the place is on shutdown because all twelve of the tortoise eggs are missing.

"I thought we were taking these to a showing," I say.

"Yeah," he says. "That'll show them, is what I meant. Good luck cleaning this up!" The eggs, presumably from all the jostling, begin to crack. A beak emerges from one.

"Re-collect those eggs," I say. "We need to get them to the incubator in the reptile room."

"I can't do that," he says. "I've been mistreated for too long and this is what they get. And I thought you, of all people, would understand. What, with the free tickets and all."

"Ralph," I say. He appears unhinged. "I apologize for how management has treated you—dispensing free tickets is honorable and should only be met with rewards. But right now I'm not worried about you and your janitorial tasks. I'm not concerned about these tortoises either." I point at the egg from which a baby tortoise is timidly emerging.

"I'm not concerned about the camp children being upset over the tortoise deaths. These children, you know, have opened frog stomachs and held cow optic nerves in their grimy fingers." Dinosaurs roar from the speakers at our feet.

"Another thing I'm not worried about is these lifetime bans and how they could, theoretically, be imposed on me. But what I am worried about, right now, is that the children and patrons of this great science center might miss the chance to see the educational wonder that is birth. Even if it's not a live-birth." I pause. "And because there's nothing to learn from stolen and unobservable eggs," I say, "I'm going to have to collect the eggs from this nest and return them."

"You're right," he says, "I'm not concerned about these tortoises either." With that misinterpretation, he stomps on half of the eggs. Their yolks spread out in the nest and some of the liquid sticks to his shoe as he raises it for another stomp. But before he can lower his foot, I

jump the rope barrier and knock him back into the mother stegosaurus. He stumbles and falls into the ferns where he threw the plastic eggs earlier.

“You will not squash the science center,” I say. I don’t know if he has heard me and so I say it again, more emphatically.

I gather the remaining yolk-covered eggs in my counselor’s hat and leave the Exhibit. I walk with determination and some reluctance to the reptile room. The science center employees and the counselors are patrolling the halls and looking in trashcans for the missing eggs and I tell them that I am returning some of the eggs now and so please follow me.

The reptile room is full and there is no shortage of incriminating stares as I walk through the door. Half of the hatchling tortoises have emerged from their eggs before I can return them and so I toss those into the habitat with their mother and return the rest to the incubator. I watch, with the children and camp counselors and managers, as the remaining eggs hatch.

END

Emerald Shores

It is winter and I am staying at Emerald Shores—a beachfront motel built in the Fifties. It offers reduced monthly rates in the off-season. The motel itself is two stories tall with white walls, exterior corridors, and a copper green roof. The roof isn't made of copper though. The pool has a thin, algae-filled layer of water that freezes on some nights. I know that it freezes because ice reflects light in a way that I can recognize. I told the landlady that the constant thawing and unthawing wasn't good for the concrete and she might not have a pool come summertime but she hasn't done anything about it.

When I signed the renter's contract, the landlady told me that she would be installing cable television soon. I was excited to hear this because the place that I had been staying only had three channels. One of the channels was public television, which mostly had children's shows. I have no children and so I never watched those shows. I have been living at Emerald Shores for three months and the landlady has still not installed cable. But we do have five channels and none of them are public television so I'm not complaining.

There are two other tenants, Mary and Allen. If I could ever get the two of them together, I would tell them that they should open a law firm because their names sound so good together. I

have never been in either of their rooms but Allen sometimes nods at me and he has shown me the inside of his car, under the hood and everything. Once we spoke about a shark attack that happened fifteen miles north. We agreed that the man should not have been in the water—it is so cold in the winter. If Allen and I were better friends, we could talk about things like this more often. I am sure that we could also watch television together. The channels don't matter when friends are present. Mary could even come and we could order pizza.

I am working right now as a change-collector in the arcade that is on the boardwalk. The arcade itself appeared in a movie that was filmed in the Fifties, probably when Emerald Shores was being built. There was a chase scene in which the lead actor ran from a lesser, villain actor. The lead actor was able to get away because there was a large crowd of people. I only know about this movie because the manager told me.

The responsibilities that I have as change-collector are opening the machines, putting change in a large bucket, and taking the bucket to the manager. If I see a coin on the ground, I will place it in the bucket, give it to a child, or keep it. It just depends on how I am feeling.

I do have other responsibilities—ones that keep order in the arcade. For example, once I saw a teenager climbing on the ski ball machine. He had collected all of the balls in a pouch that he made by lifting his shirt. He was placing the balls, one-by-one, in the 100-point hole. He had a high-score by the end and won a lot of tickets. When he slid down the slope that he should have rolled the balls on, I was there to take his tickets. I told him that he shouldn't cheat and I gave the tickets to a small child who was obeying the rules.

I am lying in bed and watching an old hockey game when the phone rings. Emerald Shores is a motel so the phone is a landline. The handheld portion of the phone is connected by cord to a base that sits on my bedside table. My manager has called. He tells me that I am needed

because a man is there and has asked to speak with me. I ask the manager if it is Allen. He must not have heard me because he only tells me to “please be here soon,” and then he ends the call.

When I get to the arcade, the manager tells me that the man left a while ago and didn’t leave his name. According to my manager, the man was a real treat. He was with a woman and was giving his tickets to children. The man had brown hair. Allen has brown hair but I haven’t seen him with a woman, not even Mary. I thank the manager for calling me and he tells me that since I am here, I can collect coins from the machines. I do this and then I leave.

I return to Emerald Shores and, while standing in the parking lot, consider knocking on Allen’s second-floor door. To ask if he visited the arcade to see me and, if he said that he had, we could watch television in his room. His curtains, however, are closed and there is no light coming from between them. I can tell that no one is there. I return to my room and sleep, alone, to the sounds of a talk show on the television.

The next day, I leave for the arcade around noon, hoping that the man looking for me last night has resurfaced. Before I reach the sidewalk, the landlady walks at me from the office. Her mouth opens and closes as she walks toward me but I can’t hear her until she is in my ear—it is windy. I tell her that I didn’t hear anything and she tells me that a man has been to the office to see me. The landlady says he asked for my room number. I ask if it was Allen and if Allen had been to the arcade last night. But she’s already walking back to the office and out of the wind.

The arcade, once I am there, has a paper sign taped on its closed door that proclaims, WE ARE CLOSED. The manager has done this once without informing me but he didn’t use a sign like this. On this sign, too, the W and R do not resemble his handwriting.

There is a payphone outside of the arcade. I am able to use it because last night I felt like keeping the coins that were on the ground. The phone booth has a large directory—the yellow

pages—bolted to its wall and I look through it. I am looking for a detective. I suspect that something sinister has happened to my manager, what with the man looking for me last night and the discrepancies in the sign that is posted. Although the manager thought the man was nice, he could have been putting on a show so that my manager would let down his guard and make himself vulnerable to a kidnapping.

And I do not trust the cops with this case. But unfortunately for my manager, the closest detective is eighty miles away. I know this because of the area code in the yellow pages. I decide to call him anyway, thinking he might provide his professional advice.

It is not the detective who answers the phone but his secretary. I have a nice conversation with her but she tells me that the detective charges sixty-dollars-an-hour, even for a phone conversation. I begin to tell her my situation, hoping she will provide semi-professional advice. She must have learned something through spending time with the detective. As soon as she realizes my scheme, she hands the phone to the detective. I hang up fast but in a few days I know that I will receive a bill in the mail. I will have to solve this case on my own.

On the trip back to Emerald Shores, I decide to walk on the beach. A father and son are flying a windsock kite. The wind blows sand into my face and I might even feel a mist from the ocean. I look over and the kite-flyers do not seem to mind the sand so I remain on the beach until they can no longer see me. I then return to the boardwalk and wipe the wet sand from my face.

When I am back at Emerald Shores, the landlady and the fire department are standing around the pool. Caution tape surrounds the rim and I lean over it with my feet planted on the ground. The concrete of the pool must have cracked and opened a sewer-line because there is an exposed pipe and the sewage is pouring. The fire chief looks at the landlady and asks her if I live here. He then tells me that the structure of the building has been compromised and

condemned—the surrounding area is now a biohazard. He pauses and then tells me the meaning of this—I will have to evacuate. They have collected my things and will offer a temporary shelter. The landlady tells me that the other two tenants have left and are headed for the shelter. “Mary and Allen?” I ask, and the landlady says “who?” I decide that she is not the best landlady because she doesn’t even know her tenants’ names. The fireman offers me a ride to the shelter and I take it. He says that I will have to search for a new home. The shelter is only temporary.

When I arrive at the shelter—a freestanding storage room behind the fire department—I find Mary and Allen sitting on a cot. They are together, a couple by the looks of their handholding. I consider telling them that they should open a law firm but I think better of it. Allen tells me that he has been looking for me. He had not known that I work at the arcade. The night before last he had seen me with a bucket of coins but was lost in a crowd before he could approach me. He looked for me the following night with no luck. He spoke with the landlady but she was no help. He wanted to recommend a movie filmed in the Fifties—a movie with a chase-scene in the arcade. And did I hear about the arcade manager breaking his hand? Because that meant I might be excused from work for the foreseeable future.

I tell him that I didn’t know that but I’m glad to hear that nothing sinister has happened to him. And I tell him, too, that I am interested in watching that movie.

Allen leaves for the video store while Mary and I cart-in a television from the firehouse. The fire chief gives us permission to do this. When Allen returns, we watch the movie together, the villain chase scene and all, with the three of us sitting on the cot.

END

Bruce, The Fugitive

I'm at the library for legal advice. There's a panel of local lawyers. The audience is sitting on brown foldout chairs and the lawyers are sitting at a long table. There's a security guard standing behind them. I'm at the back wearing large, obstructive sunglasses and a heavy coat. I left my wallet at home to prevent their asking for an ID. A woman asks a question regarding whether she can sue her neighbor for shooting her dog. The lawyers respond and after that, when they say, "Does anyone else have a question for us?" I stand. The pamphlet said that a temporary immunity would be extended to all questioners so I know that it's a safe environment to disclose revealing information. I ask if I can lose unemployment benefits for sheltering a fugitive if I know that Bruce, my roommate, is stealing shirts from Sears. And, as a follow-up question, what course of action should I take to help us get out of this as free men?

The lawyer wearing a shoulder-padded brown suit tells me no, that I can't be indicted unless Bruce is on-the-run from the law and I am aware of such criminal activity. Then he asks how many times Bruce has thieved and if I've ever been a witness to the crime myself? Or, more importantly, if I've acted as an accomplice? Or if, perhaps, I'm wearing one of those items of contraband right now? Another lawyer, one with mop hair and a pronounced cheek mole,

whispers something into his ear. He writes a note on his legal pad. As the security guard raises his head and directs his attention toward me, I realize this was a rotten idea. I tell the lawyers, “Thank you, that will be all,” and I grab my things and leave before I can be further questioned.

I’ve lived with Bruce since high school and he showed no tendencies until about a month ago, when he greeted me at the door and said, “Please, come inside.” He took me to his bedroom and presented a floral dress shirt. It had shimmering white snap buttons and a crisp collar. “This one’s for you,” he said. “Found it in the back of the men’s section. Designer’s some Hollywood big shot. I asked the lady clerk before I took it into the bathroom.”

“That’s great,” I said, not understanding why he’d taken it into the bathroom.

“The best part,” he said, pulling an identical shirt from his closet, “we can match.”

I wore the floral shirt the next evening on a date with Elaine. We went to Dos Amigos for their four-dollar-fajitas night and while we were eating, I told her that Bruce gave me the shirt I was wearing. She said it was nice, that Bruce has good taste in clothing and I should listen to him in regards to fashion but otherwise there wasn’t much there. In terms of Bruce and his capacities.

I had been seeing Elaine more often and, because of it, I was spending less time with Bruce. He told me that once he found a girlfriend, we could go on loads of double dates. To the fair and to high school football games. Maybe even the gym or a cycling class. He didn’t know Elaine harbored some semi-negative opinions about him.

After the date, I brought Elaine back to the apartment. We were watching some television in the den and Bruce came out from his bedroom and stood in our viewing path. He asked her if I could be excused for just a moment, that he had something important to show me.

He took me to his bedroom and showed me an assortment of microfiber, water-wicking polyester shirts. The stuff that serious athletes wear. He said, "Here, take this one. Tell your woman out there that I can hook her up too. Just give me her numbers and preferred fabric."

"Bruce," I said, "I appreciate the generosity. But how, can I ask, are you getting these?"

"I have my ways," he said.

"Did the store give you a bag?" I said, "Or a receipt of purchase?"

"Didn't think to ask for one," he said.

At the end of the next week, he said that his closet was getting full and, looking forward, could he please use some of my closet space? I told him sure. But if he kept it up, he would have to steal some hangers and I imagined those would be harder to smuggle in cargo shorts. I was starting to let on that I knew how he was getting the shirts. But my knowing wasn't changing his habits. The next day, there was an economy-sized pack of velvet hangers on the countertop. Two hangers had been taken out and, hung on both of them, were matching shirts with a bird of paradise pattern. That's when I started to consider myself, if not a perpetrator, a perpetrator.

Now I'm back at the apartment after the legal panel. There's a tank top on the bathroom floor, a flannel draped over the television, a five-pack of white tees in the refrigerator. I hear a rustling in his bedroom and open the door, stand in the entryway. I ask him how it's going?

He is arranging some clothes in his closet and tells me that he quit his job at the Mighty Dollar. He has expanded his operation to hit, once-a-day, the Sears on Highway 187.

"Why the escalation?" I ask, gripping the doorknob. "Don't we have enough shirts?"

He laughs and tells me to calm myself. He was talking to the dollar store manager, his former employer, and she told him about a Second Hand store across town that traffics in used

clothing. It's how she affords to clothe her four-month-old. The clerks at the store, based on the quality of shirts brought in, will make reasonable estimates and pay what they're worth.

"There's a real future in this now," Bruce says. "But I'll need a partner. I can't be both stealing and selling in this new age of surveillance. And, besides, it'll give us something to do. Like when we ran together in high school."

When I pause to consider, he tells me that he knows I'm worried about repercussions.

"I saw the *Lawyers at the Library* pamphlet on our coffee table," he says. "But—and I've thought about this for a while—the system is foolproof. And here's how."

He goes on to describe the plan. That I'll drive him to Sears and he'll do what he does best—peruse and choose the best shirt varieties offered. We'll drive back to the apartment to remove the stickers and such. We'll purchase a shredder once we have the funds. For convenient transport, we'll collect the shirts in inconspicuous garbage bags. From there, we'll drive together to the Second Hand store. He has some CDs that we can listen to. I'll cash-in the shirts while he waits in the car and we'll return once again to the apartment to share in the accrued wealth. What we spend the profits on, he says, well that'll be a joint decision. With that, he stops talking and looks at me, standing there with his hands wrung together and his face hopeful.

I tell him that I'll have to consider it. That I'll talk it over with Elaine this evening during our picnic at Huffman Park and I'll let him know tomorrow morning.

We're at the park with paper plates, sitting at a table with our backs to the freshly paved parking lot. Elaine brought an entire saucepan of macaroni. I purchased a pre-packaged salad mix on the way to her house. The kind with purple cabbage. I pour it into a large popcorn bowl and cover it

with vinaigrette. I fork some salad onto Elaine's plate. One of the iceberg leafs misses and lands on her shirt, a cotton turtleneck that Bruce gave her a week ago.

Elaine gets out a napkin and I tell her that he asked me to be partners.

"What's that mean?" she says, dabbing at the dressing stain.

"He wants me to be his driver. And to share in the profits."

Elaine laughs at the proposition. "You know how I feel about that."

A car door shuts and we turn our heads. It's a well-dressed couple and they're walking toward us, her heels clacking on the asphalt. The man's arm is around the woman and she's wearing a sleeveless gown. Elaine recognizes them first. "Is that Bruce?" she says.

He's holding a loaf of bread with his other arm and presents it to me when he arrives at the table. "I thought I could drop this off," he says. "Looked like you left it on the countertop and I wouldn't want your dinner to be ruined. And this is Clara. I met her at Sears."

I didn't know that Bruce had met someone—someone in a dress like that.

"It's true," Clara says. "Hard not to when I'm on shift and he comes in once-a-day."

"But we have to be going now," Bruce says, looking at me. "We're headed into town and have reservations at, as you could probably tell, a nice restaurant. We'd extend an invitation but I know you two have some important matters to discuss."

"Right," I say. "Pleased to meet you, Clara."

The two of them walk back to his car, he gets her door, and they drive out of the park.

Elaine says, "Can you believe that?"

"No," I say. I place the bread on our table and watch them leave. "I cannot."

It is now the next morning and last night, after our picnic, I told Elaine that I needed to join Bruce on one heist. That a friendship hinged on it and she should attempt to understand the complex workings of Bruce. But now I'm alone in the apartment. There isn't even a note explaining his absence—something that he's always left in the past.

And so I wait at the apartment for a few hours until he arrives. Once he does, he tells me that he spent the night with Clara and had to drop her off at work this morning. While he was there, instead of wasting a trip, he went inside and took a few polo shirts.

"Does Clara know about this?" I ask.

"Not a chance," he says. "But I figured, you know, where else would I meet a woman?"

I nod. He tells me that he plans on making it official—their relationship—in the next few weeks. Then he'll let her into the operation with a delicate reveal. He'll present her, similar to how he did with me, with an elegant blouse. He'll let her discover his habits on her own and then, if he knows her like he thinks he knows her, she'll doubt the prospects of such an operation. But, with a spreadsheet outlining the financials, as he plans on constructing in the coming days, she'll be won and he'll have a partner on the inside. Clara will make things exciting with some embezzlement. An old fashioned double-dipping, as it were. Until then, he says, he has a compelling reason for visiting Sears once-a-day.

"That's a great plan," I say. "Want me to join you for a second hit tonight?"

"Decent idea," he says. "Unless you have something with Elaine."

As the plan outlines, I drive Bruce to Sears. He puts in a CD and we listen to it. I sing along to the parts that I know. But Bruce doesn't. He seems distracted, looking from the window. And so

I tell him, once we're in the parking lot, that I want to come inside for this one. That we could use a little excitement and I want to learn his techniques in case we ever have to switch roles.

"All right," he says, "But stay close. And take off the sunglasses."

While we're walking inside, Bruce is eager to tell me what he knows about petty larceny. He details how important it is to hit just one department per day. From how he understands it, and based on what he's learned from Clara, each employee is responsible for the inventory of a unique department. That to remain undetected, he can't steal a double-socket wrench and a sweater vest because that increases his likelihood of being found-out and captured. Two employees, twice as likely. And the inventories are checked daily.

"Does it matter the relative number of stolen item?" I ask.

"What does that mean?" he says.

"You know," I say, "if there are five wire-cutters and fifty-five silver necklaces?"

"Of course," he says, opening the entrance door for me, "that's why I stick to the shirts."

We enter the building and walk past the women's intimates.

Bruce tells me that it's important to linger for an appropriate time. To look at the lawnmowers or an item that could take some serious consideration before a purchase. To remain in the store for a period of time that warrants a visit to the restrooms. It also doesn't hurt to talk to a clerk or two—let them know that you're interested in their knowledge of the wares. "For example," he says, indicating a heavy-set teenager, "Trent over there knows everything about John Deere and its competitors. And, once I'm finished speaking to him, he returns to his desk, satisfied to have informed a customer. He lets his guard down."

We walk past an unmanned checkout counter and there is a notice taped to its surface, concealed from undiscerning customers. It's hidden behind the console computer, indicating that

employees should be wary of theft because numbers, as of recent, have been erratic. “Bruce,” I say, “have you seen this notice? It might pertain to us.”

“Keep walking,” he says.

We walk to the men’s clearance section. It’s a table piled with shirts of all sizes and fashions. The shirts are unfolded—a wrinkled mass of cloth that requires considerable rummaging to find the appropriate size. Bruce sticks his hand into the mass and pulls out two matching medium graphic tee-shirts. The design has some doves flying over the brand’s name, which is spelled out in rose thorns. “These will do,” Bruce says, and hands one of them to me.

He leads us to the bathroom, which is just beside the fitting room. Both are unmanned.

The restroom is empty and we enter a stall together so that Bruce can demonstrate how to conceal a shirt. I’m wearing a heavy coat and he tells me to stuff it into one of the larger pockets on the inside. “On the chance that you’re not wearing a heavy coat,” he says, “let me show you how to do it.” He lowers his cargo shorts and situates the shirt so that it’s not hanging from the leg holes and is properly undetectable. He lifts his shorts and claps his hands twice. “I’m glad we’re doing this together,” he says. He pats me on the shoulder.

Bruce leads us out of the bathroom and at the previously unoccupied counter stands Clara. Her attention is on anti-theft tagging a pile of blouses. The manager of the store is overseeing her work—he is wearing the nicest button-down that Sears offers and has a golden nametag. He presses a button on the counter’s telephone and the intercom chimes. His muffled voice reminds the clerks to be on high-alert in the coming weeks. Code Orange, he continues, has been issued. Bruce does not regard the warning and we approach. His hand is on my back.

“What a dinner and night that was,” Bruce says to Clara. “Couldn’t wait to see you again.” Clara places the anti-theft tagger on the counter. Bruce does not address the manager, who re-cradles the intercom phone. The manager looks at Clara and picks up the tagger.

“You’re telling me,” Clara says. But she side-looks at the manager, indicating that she is being monitored and that there is a time and place for these niceties and now is not that time.

The manager begins handling the blouses, tagging them faster than Clara was. “Just a reminder,” he says, “Code Orange is in full effect and so that means we need to focus our attentions.” He does not look at Bruce or me. He turns to Clara and his golden nametag glints.

I swallow and put a hand in my coat pocket. I rearrange the rose-thorn shirt.

“I understand,” Clara says.

“Just a moment,” Bruce says. He reaches over the counter for Clara’s hand. “I wanted to introduce you two, formally. I thought about it. And I think it’s important that we establish this friendship now. Between you two. With no jealousy from either side.”

The manager stops tagging and looks at Bruce, who still has Clara’s hand. Bruce grabs my arm—the one attached to the hand holding the rose-thorn shirt. He pulls on it to give my hand to Clara. To establish the friendship. But with my hand comes the shirt. It falls to the floor. The price tag is apparent. And so is the sticker indicating the size.

“Code Orange!” the manager says. He rounds the counter and grabs me from behind. He has me in a hold, his nametag pressed hard against my back. “Get the other one,” he says.

Clara does not move. Instead, she tells Bruce to run. To leave here while he can. But he does not. He does not move from where he is standing. He tells the manager to release me.

But soon another clerk—Trent from the lawnmowers—is upon us. He puts Bruce in a similar hold and says, “There’s no getting out of this!” The manager nods and we are rushed through the store. Customers stop to watch. We are taken to the holding cell near the entrance.

We are detained and await our punishment, together.

END

Different Kinds of Plastic Wrap

I decide that because I need a new place to live, I will contact David Gerald. He is looking for a roommate as per the fliers he's posted on corner telephone poles and the town's bathroom stalls. It is summer and I am training to become a butcher at Budget Foods.

His address is on the fliers and so after work, I walk to his door. The house is wrapped in durable plastic HouseWrap and the few areas of exposed siding are dirt-stained and sun-bleached. There are tan and barcoded vinyl siding strips beside buckets of white paint and stacks of plywood. The carport is cluttered with materials. As I am noticing a patch of blood on the left knee of my khaki pants, a woman with synthetic hair extensions opens the door. I am wafted with a smell of peanut butter and cigarettes. I ask, "Are you David Gerald?" and she laughs and tells me no, that he is shopping at JACK'S for galvanized nails to finish the exterior renovations but in the meantime, I can come inside for a glass of cold tea.

Her name is Helen Meyer and after pausing for a moment, she tells me that she recognizes me from her cousin Ruthie's middle school yearbook. It isn't that I am in middle school now but rather that I have a distinctive birthmark that people can remember. Helen tells me that I was beside Ruthie in the headshot lineup. This is reasonable because I have a last name

that also starts with “ME” but I tell her that I am not too sure about that and she might also recognize me from where I work because everyone needs groceries. Helen says sure but enough about that, the tea is Leanne brand and brewed fresh this morning. Helen also tells me that she is David’s serious and singular girlfriend and that they are in a perpetual honeymoon. David has asked her to live with him once the renovations are complete although that timeline is unclear and in the meantime, since she does not have a source of income, a reliable renter’s weekly contributions—in cash and manual labor—would be a considerable help. Helen, I learn, is the one who suggested the idea and even made the fliers.

I tell her that I am here, waiting for David, to see if he would like to consider me as a roommate and I realize that this is redundant and now Helen isn’t listening but rather looking at the blood on my left knee. Before she questions it, I tell her that I am an apprentice butcher and spent the afternoon preparing flank steaks from a bovine and, if she doesn’t mind, I might like to wash these pants in her sink before David returns.

I remove the pants after Helen has directed me to the half-bath which, she tells me, would be mine if I lived here. But the water, even when mixed with hand soap, will not remove the stain and I am left with wet, bloody khakis. I tell Helen that David shouldn’t see me like this and she recommends that I change into a pair of David’s jeans. But I refuse because this wouldn’t be appropriate and instead, I ask her to disregard telling him that I was here.

The reason that I need a place to live, a new place, is because my duplex landlord was in a horsing accident in which she fell and now she cannot walk more than five feet without falling. It is more a problem with her brain than her legs. It isn’t that being handicapped prohibits her from being a landlord—I know legless and lobotomized men who are employed. It’s just that she

cannot afford the immediate medical bills and must sell her properties. The duplex is being retrofitted into an animal health clinic and I cannot live with the ghosts of household pets.

I am allowed, as per the lease that I have signed, to live in the duplex until the end of the month but because I am accommodating, I allowed the new owners to begin with destruction and construction. The wall separating the duplexes has been removed and now the neighbors sort through my stuff to find and take items of value like the expensive but half-used candle that I bought on discount. And so although I sleep at the duplex, I do not spend much time there.

There was a telephone number on the bottom of David's fliers and so I call that night after missing him. I do not tell him that I visited earlier and so this is our first real contact. He tells me that he will be home tomorrow as it is undergoing renovations and it is a full-time job. He pauses several times during our conversation to address someone with him—"Grab that. Not that. That."; "What law is that?"; "And who told you that?" It could be that he is with Helen.

I am back at David's doorstep during a lunch break. There is an opened box of nails on the porch and while the amount of vinyl siding under the carport seems unchanged, the plywood is gone. It is not David nor Helen who opens the door but instead Gloria who gasps upon seeing my birthmark but is quick to apologize and tell me that she is David's ex-wife visiting from Tuscaloosa. Her blonde hair is bobbed and while her lips are pale, her tan is one that could have only been attained through riding cross-country and helmetless on the back of a motorcycle. She is wearing floral scrubs and the top has a low neck exposing her rough and liver-spotted chest. Gloria tells me that David called her last night. There is a pause and unlike Helen, Gloria does not invite me inside the home. I tell her that I am here, on the front doorstep, looking for David. He told me that he would be here. Gloria tells me that David went to the neighbor's to use a saw

and is now preoccupied with looking for their missing Doberman and she is unsure when he will return or if he will even find the dog. I ask her if it would be worth searching for David on the street because as of five minutes ago I had fifteen minutes on break. Gloria tells me that he and the neighbor are searching the streets in a truck and could, by now, be in the next town over.

The neighbors' houses are surrounded with trees but I can see that their roofs are sunk and the windows are boarded. Gloria did not tell me which neighbor David is speaking with about saws and lost dogs and so I walk on the road in the direction of Budget Foods. There are no patrolling trucks. There are several squirrel carcasses encrusted into the asphalt of the road but there are no signs of a Doberman—not even a far-off barking.

The butcher shift is short. For its duration, I am in the cold-room making select chicken cuts. Chickens arrive with no feathers and so the rest is simple. The most important part of the job, advanced butchers tell the apprentices, is the packaging. If meat is not tight in the cling wrap, it will turn gray or green or even a combination of those colors.

When I return to the duplex that night, I find that the roof has been removed and there is now a sign in the front detailing the store-opening deals: free general health check-ups, dental consultations, 20% off on neutering. The telephone line leading to the duplex has been cut to allow room for the sign and so I am unable to call David or Helen or even Gloria. The construction workers have left their large machines sitting in the yard and so, because it is cold and there is no other shelter, I climb into the glass encasement of an excavator and sleep.

I am awake at dawn because that's when the construction workers arrive. As I am stepping down from the excavator, a dog that I hadn't seen starts biting at my legs. I grab its collar and because it might be a Doberman, I take it to David's and I see now that the

renovations are complete. There is no longer exposed HouseWrap and the carport is empty except for an Indian Motorcycle. I knock on the door and he is there. He opens the door and I hug him. I tell him “Here is the dog. I found it! It’s a Doberman, right? Now what about living together?” But the man tells me, taking the cigarette from his mouth, that he is not David but instead his new roommate. I ask him “Where is David, or Helen, or even Gloria?” and he does not have an answer for me but rather tells me that I should be leaving and that the dog is not a Doberman but a Border Collie.

END

Palm Tree Peroxide

It is our second night at the Dunes Resort and I have an unconscionable earache. Elaine is upstairs and sleeping while I'm in the ground-floor gift shop looking for pain medication. I can find nothing but postcards and dolphin-shaped bottle openers. I'm searching through the travel-sized deodorants and sunscreens, holding my ear, when the cashier calls out to me.

"Come over here," he says.

I look at him. He's wearing a green resort polo shirt like the concierge and bell-boys. But his shirt has a tear on its shoulder. I approach but remain behind the shelf of toiletries.

"Closer," he says. I follow his orders and walk to the counter.

"You don't happen to stock Advil or eardrops?" I say. "The brochure for this place gives the impression of paradise and, to be frank, I can't imagine paradise without modern medicines!"

"You won't find those here," he says. "The owner's New-Age. And the pharmacies are closed at this time of night. You know, because of all the prescription-drug abuse." I did not know. "But I know a guy." I nod, indicating that he should continue. "Yeah," he says, "brother-in-law's an unlicensed pharmacist. Deals droves of painkillers. Give me your hand." I do and he

pulls a pen from behind his ear. While he is writing an address and phone number, he gives a description of the motel and its surroundings. That it is north of North Myrtle.

“Please don’t tell Elaine,” I say. “And cancel the wakeup call to our room.”

I take the elevator to our room on the fifteenth floor and ensure that Elaine is still asleep. She has never been on a romantic vacation with me and, just recently, she told me that one of my more attractive characteristics is that I’m the picture of health. That my vital signs are irresistible. We started dating at the beginning of flu season, a month ago, and even without a vaccine I haven’t contracted the bug or even as much as the sniffles. But the ear pain is constant and brown liquid wax drips intermittently. I can’t have her seeing me like this.

I leave the resort through the indoor pool area full of splashing children.

I am driving north to the address that’s on my hand—to the Calabash Motel where the brother-in-law lives. I’m holding a damp cloth to my ear. The cashier said if I reach the pier and seafood restaurants, I’ve gone too far. It should take twenty minutes. The beach road is lined with resort after resort and for a while there isn’t even a glimpse of the ocean. But soon the resorts make way for mansions and the mansions make way for vacant lots. I pass three Rite Aids with radiant CLOSED signs and barred windows.

Once I’m in the motel parking lot, which is crossed concrete with gaps of white seashell shards, I call the number that the cashier gave me. A woman answers.

“Who’s it?” she says.

“A client,” I say. I am discreet. “You have a Dunes brother or a pharmacist boyfriend?”

“That’s right,” she says. “Room 201A. Five minutes.”

I place the stained ear cloth in the passenger seat and ready a cluster of ones to exchange for pain medication. The exterior staircase and hallways are carpeted and the lights are off in all of the rooms except hers. There is a breezeway lined with ice and vending machines. The opening allows access to the back of the motel, which appears to have a single bench and birdbath but is otherwise a forest. I climb the stairs and I'm at Debra's door and knocking.

The woman who answers has her hair in a towel but is clothed. The walls are accented with wood. The comforter on the queen-sized bed is thin and paisley and, after inviting me inside and requesting that I take a seat in a chair with exposed springs, she sits on the bed.

She tells me that her name is Debra and that David is her drug-distributing boyfriend. Her brother at the Dunes sends clients when he can. "And so what's the problem?" she says.

"Elaine is at the resort and she's sleeping. Our first night was fine. Elaine even expressed satisfaction with my skin health, you know, how clean my pores were. But now I have this earache," I say. "A middle-ear infection that might be soothed with a quick acetaminophen or decongestant." I point at my ear and there is a deep, dull pounding at its mention. "Soothed before Elaine wakes up and realizes that I'm no longer on the resort premises."

"OK. We can handle that," Debra says, standing and opening the closet. Her movement causes the towel on her head to unravel. But it doesn't fall. It remains tight enough to hold her wet hair. Debra doesn't notice and instead focuses on unlocking a metal safe stationed on a shelf in the closet. "We keep the drugs in the safe—all classes—because David's worried about theft. In a place like this. Can you imagine?" Debra laughs at her joke that I don't quite understand.

"The drug I'm looking for," I tell her, "is a common one and might even be in your purse. That's where a lot of women keep this type of drug. Advil or Motrin. Tylenol."

"All classes," she says, continuing to fidget, "are combination protected."

After some time, I pocket my cluster of ones and say, “Need some assistance?”

“That could help,” she says. I stand and approach her and the safe. Once I’m behind her, she lets loose the lock. It clangs against the safe. “The combination’s 12-4-25,” she says.

I begin to turn the face in the required directions, landing on the required numbers. Debra, standing beside me, looks inside my ear, tilting her head for a better view. “You have something in there, you know,” she says. “We have cotton swabs in the bathroom.”

“Are you sure this is the right combination?” I say. The lock is uncompromising and the shackle remains closed even after I have jiggled it. “And no, no thanks.”

Debra sighs. “He must have changed the code,” she says. “And forgot to tell me.”

“That should be no problem,” I say. “Just a minor inconvenience. Where’s David?”

Debra tells me that David is night-fishing and the options, now, are limited because he might not even return until morning. “And so I guess we could check the seafood restaurant down the road for cleaning agents,” she says. “I’ve heard that peroxide will clean an ear. Have you heard that? I know the janitor over there.”

I tell her sure, that it is worth an attempt while we’re waiting for David. Debra untangles the towel from her hair and places it on the bed. Her hairs hang in damp, clumped strands. We leave the motel and walk toward the restaurant. It’s a short walk and we pass the boat dock with a few dinghies and mid-sized motorboats strung to posts.

Debra asks me about Elaine, about our relationship.

“We have been going strong,” I say, “for a few months. And for this trend to continue, I need to have a steadfast constitution—one that doesn’t waver or show signs of distress.”

“I can understand that,” she says. “David had a sinus infection. The sniffles.”

“On our first date,” I say, “I took Elaine to the science center. It was then, in the infectious diseases exhibit, that Elaine said it. She said, ‘Can you imagine living with someone who has one of these diseases? Living in constant fear.’ And that’s when I knew that I had to remain healthy, more than anything else, for her sustained interest.”

Debra tells me that she, like most women, is afraid of contracting Lyme disease. That the real problems are the lingering effects that manifest in joint pain. We continue walking.

The restaurant is closing but there are still a few families rubbing butter on hushpuppies and cracking crab legs. The ceiling is vaulted and the sheet glass windows reflect the dining area. The outside is not visible. We walk past the hostess and to the white-tiled kitchen. The floor is wet with a recent mopping. Debra asks a large man in an apron if he has a nontoxic cleaner and she points to my left ear. “He’s got a problem,” she says.

He tells us to wait, that he’ll check the restrooms and the storage closet in the kitchen. We wait and watch the catfish pop as it’s fried. The man returns with bleach and lye and we tell him that’s okay, no thanks, we’ll look somewhere else because both of those are toxic cleaners.

But before we do, I ask, “Do you have pain medicine? Because, like I was telling Debra here earlier, it’s a common thing for people to have. I would even guess that some diners in the hall ingested one or two before beginning their meals.” The large man doesn’t look at me but rather at Debra and tells her that he doesn’t have it. Not here and not at his home either.

When we are walking back from the restaurant, Debra tells me that she has the information of someone who is so unreliable that she cannot seriously recommend him. I tell her that I will be in contact because there’s no use in waiting around for David’s uncertain arrival.

I call the friend and he tells me that we should meet in the parking lot of a Godfather's Pizza in North Myrtle. That I should be there in ten minutes. I tell Debra that if she doesn't see me again, her opinion about her friend should be revisited. Because, in that case, I'll be cured.

I park in front of the Godfather's Pizza and wait until a beat-up hotrod parks beside me. It has a spoiler. I get out of the car and so does he. He tells me that I'm lucky he was able to make it here on such short notice. He had to cancel another, more important appointment and, to be honest, he'll likely lose money on this deal with me. He tells me that he doesn't mind, though. He can sympathize with my problem because as a kid, he had nothing but ear infections. He tells me that his parents never believed him, thought he was kidding around, and so that's why the left side of his face is paralyzed and the skin sags. He smiles, showing off, and only the right side of his mouth rises. He tells me that he'll give me a good deal because of this. He has a box of Midol and so I purchase it at five times the market price. He leaves, screeching his tires while turning onto the highway. I look inside the box to find that both blister packs are empty.

I drive back to the Calabash Motel—the pain is only intensifying and I have no other leads. When I arrive at the road that leads to Debra and David's, there is a police checkpoint. Three parked patrol cars with flashing blue lights block my passage. An officer with a flashlight that could double as a blunt instrument indicates, with his hand, that I should lower my window so that he can speak with me. I lower the window.

The wax inside my ear has dried and so I cannot hear what the officer says. "Could you please repeat that?" I ask. "I couldn't hear what you said." He shines his flashlight on my face and, when he finds nothing suspicious there, continues to the passenger seat. He pauses at the stained ear cloth but then continues to the backseats, which are empty.

“Road is closed,” he says. He’s raised his volume. “You need to leave.”

I consider telling him that I have important business to attend to but, because I don’t know the nature of the road closure, I decide that I’ll park elsewhere and approach the motel on foot. But before I do, I ask the officer if he has an Advil because, if he does, I’m willing to pay?

“I don’t,” he says. “Please leave.”

I turn around as the officer has ordered and pull onto a road that runs adjacent to Debra and David’s. There is some thick brush that separates the roads and obscures the view of the motel and restaurants and, after parking the car, I walk into it.

The low visibility requires that I approach the tree line on the motel-side. When I do, I see that officers are at the dock, standing beside a man who is sitting next to a pile of crabbing pots. The lights are on in Room 201A and I follow the forest to the back of the motel. I’m careful to avoid tall grass and contracting ticks that might transfer Lyme disease to me or Elaine.

I climb the stairs, which are accessible through the breezeway, and soon I’m knocking on Debra’s door while kneeling so that the guard-rail hides me from the officers. There is no response and this makes me anxious. There is a nagging pulse in my ear. I cease knocking and Debra peers from the blinds, turns off the lights, and opens the door. I see, in a glimpse of moonlight before we close the door, that her hair has dried. I ask, “What’s happening?”—which is not to say “how’s it going?” but rather, “what’s going on outside with the police officers?”

Debra understands. “The night-fishing client,” she says, “must have been an informant because the man who’s being confronted on that dock, right now, is David. I’m inside because David won’t tell them anything and he doesn’t even carry his license. We’re safe here.”

I remind her of the reason I’m here. I have been polite and understanding in our encounters thus far and I hope this change of attitude will refresh her memory in terms of the

combination. I tell her that although I see myself as a sensitive man, ear problems and the eventuality of Elaine ending things is more sensitive and if we don't find the combination, I might become quick to anger. This is just a warning because soon I imagine my ear drum will burst from unmitigated pressure. "I hope it doesn't come to this," I say.

Although I cannot tell because the lights are off, Debra's composure does not appear to change. Instead, she tells me that David could be detained for a long while. For a duration no shorter than tomorrow afternoon. "And," she says, "if you think you'll receive a combination on David's behalf, well, you're incorrect in assuming that."

"I'll tell you what's incorrect!" I say. This is not my usual behavior but I am spurned. I make my way to the closet that holds the safe, stumbling in the dark. "The combination on this thing!" With that, I hit the safe with a clenched fist. I recoil because it hurts. But the safe isn't even dented. Debra gasps. It does not swing open like it might in some feature-length films.

Debra is silent and after shaking the pain from my hand, I tell her that this is uncharacteristic of me. That I am often even-tempered and this—along with an otherwise high-functioning immune system—is likely the reason that Elaine is dating me. "Yeah," I say.

"My feelings for David," Debra says, "didn't change when he had the sniffles." Her silhouette approaches the window. She opens a slit in the blinds with her fingers and looks out at the dock. "Who knows what will happen to him now," she says.

I walk to Debra and the window, still shaking my hand. I look out at the dock and see that the officers are now accompanied by a man in a scuba-suit. The officers, David, and the diver board a mid-sized boat. An officer wearing a peaked cap takes the helm. They leave the dock.

“What do you make of that?” I say. Debra tells me that she doesn’t know but there are a few interpretations and most of them, she thinks, are positive. David will be a free man tomorrow and Debra lets me know that she couldn’t be happier because of it.

I leave the Calabash Motel after thanking Debra for her efforts. I am without painkillers but the ear pain has been diverted to the much more manageable hand injuries. I drive to the Dunes Resort, take the elevator to our room, and climb into bed with Elaine. I place my injured hand beside of her and, in her sleep, she takes hold of it with hers.

END

A Hole in the Ceiling

It is summer and I am living on the outskirts of a small town that was, two hundred years ago, built on a swamp. There are many problems with my residence—due in part, I would say, to the town's founders. The roof is matted with decaying Spanish moss, chiggers have established colonies in my back skin, and fungus grows inside the bathroom faucet.

The real problem, though, is with the bedroom-ceiling fan. When it is not spinning, my bed sheets grow damp from humidity and the room smells of mold. I am allergic to mold, or at least the smell, so the fan operates on the highest setting. Rotating at this speed, it shakes violently. Last night, it ripped itself from the popcorned ceiling. I was uninjured but the wooden blades cracked and the motor was dented so now I must purchase and install a new fixture before my sheets dissolve in the thick water vapors.

In the morning, I am outside and away from the wooden splinters that could snag my legs. David, my truck-and-trailer-owning neighbor, is outside with his dog. I have spoken to him once before. He and his supposed wife are my neighbors. He agrees to assist in the dumping of the old fan and the hunt for a new one. He knows of a light store, the Light Place, in the middle of town. It is the one beside Jenkins' Funeral Home.

He tells me that his wife acquired a floor lamp at the Light Place six years ago and it has since lit their living room. His wife, in the few months that I have lived here, has not introduced herself to me and I have not seen her in the yard. David tells me that the clerks at the Light Place don't negotiate—a stipulation that is fine with me, I have never been to a light store open to negotiation. But first we will load the truck and visit the trash dump.

I load the scraps into David's truck, moving a shotgun and a dirty shovel to the side. I am pleased to discover that the bed of his truck is deep so the fan scraps do not need securing. I have the truck loaded in minutes and call to David. He is standing with the dog. The mutt finished its business earlier, and I am sure that David was merely pretending to be occupied while I moved the fan. I do not mind, though, since he is helping in other ways.

The truck has no safety belts and the seats are cracked from age, showing their yellow-foam insides. It smells of mold in the truck and so I crank down the window. David drives fast around the curves and, to my surprise, a portion of one of the broken blades hops from the bed and onto the asphalt. There is a clunk. The blade lands on its tip and does a few spins like an ice figure skater before toppling and resting.

"Oh! Did you see that?" I ask.

"I'm not stopping." David says.

That is not what I was getting at but I let it pass. I imagine David has never seen ice living in this place. I imagine that David has crunched at least six turtles with his two front tires. But there is nothing wrong with that because those are just his circumstances.

In ten minutes and twenty curves, we arrive at the dump on the right. It is operational. I can see the dump-keeper sitting in his outhouse-sized booth, smiling. But David does not slow. In fact, he accelerates. The dump-keeper continues smiling.

“You missed it,” I say, “on the right!”

“We aren’t going to the dump,” David says, “I have a friend that could use the motor.”

“The fan motor? It’s dented from the fall.”

“Doesn’t matter.”

David takes a left, onto a packed and unnamed dirt road. An overgrown mess of trees and shrubs encroaches on the road from either side. The forest is full of knotted swamp cypress and a few knees have sprouted on the road. The knees don’t slow David. He maintains his speed even through a large puddle of black water.

The road ends and David stops the truck and throws open his door.

“Where’s your friend?” I ask.

“His house is a mile walk that way,” David says, pointing into the swamp forest.

I throw my door open in a fashion similar to David’s and round the truck to the hatch.

The fan motor is not heavy—it is the wooden blades that make it clumsy to carry. I ask David if his friend needs the blades and he says no, that those aren’t required, and so I begin to snap them off at the base, shielding my eyes in case of flying splinters.

“Hand me the shotgun,” David says, “there are cottonmouths in these woods.”

With the motor and shotgun, David and I enter the woods. There is evidence of a footpath—trampled leaves, thin tire-tracks, and hard ground. Snake carcasses hang from twine in the trees. There are fresh and flayed specimens loaded with buckshot alongside rotten and decaying ones. There are even a few hanging snakeskins that hold no carcass. It smells like month-old trash and dirty metal but at least it does not smell like mold. David tells me that these morbid mementos are his handy work and they serve to warn the other snakes.

We soon arrive at a shack hidden in a patch of cypress and buried in scrap metal and strips of used vinyl siding. I count three cushionless couches stained with mildew and one mattress growing mushrooms. There are several mostly-emptied cans of mustard-flavored Vienna sausages. The brown sausage water stagnates in a few. Amidst the mess, there is a cleared path—about the width of a human or an alligator—circling the house.

David knocks and a man opens the door. He is sprawled on the ground before us. He has hoisted his torso, clutching and swinging from the door handle with both hands and with all of his strength. His camouflaged tank top exposes his raised and wrinkled arms and he appears to be wearing parachute pants but this is an illusion—they are only regular pants that are ill fitted to the thinness of his legs. It seems that he has removed himself from his motorized wheelchair to open the door. Maybe it provides better leverage.

“Hello!” He looks up at us, smiling with his capped and yellowed teeth. He is cheerful for a man on the ground.

David helps him into the motorized wheelchair that sits a few feet into the hallway. I place the motor in his lap. It is not heavy enough to crush someone and I assume he doesn’t have feeling in his legs anyway.

“Look at that, you’ve got a motor for me,” he says. “Now you boys wouldn’t mind helping me with this?”

David tells him that we are on our way to the Light Place and then asks if I mind. There is only one answer—“No, I do not mind.”

“On your way to the Light Place? Well, I hope you find what you need there,” the man says. “Let’s head to the back, then.”

I realize, when David begins to push him, that the motor is for the man’s wheelchair.

We walk and glide down the ramp to the backyard. There is a slanted tin overhang that covers the man's refuse—a galactic pinball machine with the glass shattered, a car motor, and a deflated blowup jack-o'-lantern whose torn skin has faded to a light peach.

“Get a lot of trick-or-treaters?” I ask.

My question is not acknowledged. David is quick at work on repurposing the fan motor. His friend helps, but only as much as his condition allows. He hands David a wrench and a screwdriver and a pair of wire strippers while I watch.

“Try that,” David says.

The man pushes a finger-sized joystick on his armrest and his mobility is restored.

He smiles at David and looks at me. He tells me that because of my generous motor donation, I can have anything in the yard.

“Do you have a working ceiling fan?” I ask.

It is a rhetorical question and joke but I can tell that he does not like it. I have made his kind offer—one that he has considered for the past hour—into a mockery.

“Actually, how about that hockey stick?” I ask.

There is a hockey stick propped-up against the shack. Its handle is wrapped in tape that is brown and frayed. I cannot imagine the man has much use for it now—nor has he ever. There are no skating rinks in the swamp. It is not that I want a hockey stick; I am only attempting to mend my reputation with the man.

“It's yours,” he says.

“Decent choice,” says David.

I shake his hand and take his stick. I tell him that the visit has been a real pleasure, nod to David, and begin to walk alone through the woods and to the truck. David, I am sure, will follow me once finished speaking with his friend.

When I am at the near-halfway point on the trail, I hear David behind me. I am swinging my hockey stick like a machete and having a generally good time, pausing on occasion to slap shoot rocks at trees. I turn to greet David in this fashion—to pretend-shoot a rock at him. He isn't there and instead, sliding through one of the thin tire-tracks, is a thick and striped brown snake with its white mouth open wide. I hit a rock at it and that misses. The snake advances and I take a whack at it with the stick, right in its midsection. It is halved. It is a gruesome scene and I have no twine with which to hang it. There is nothing to do but keep walking.

A thunderstorm starts while I am still in the cypress thicket. The hanging snakes dance as rain falls on them. The water is ankle-deep in minutes and I begin to run down the path that leads to the clearing. I imagine that there are alligator nests in this swamp. I imagine that David and his now-mobile friend are sitting in the den, discussing rain, cottonmouths, and the Light Place. I imagine that my bed sheets will be soaked when I return. But soon I am at the clearing where the truck is parked. I climb into the passenger-side seat, where I will wait for David until the rain has stopped and the water has soaked deep into the ground.

END

Investments in Chlorine

I'm parked at the used car dealership, sandwiched between an Accord and a leather-top Grand Cherokee. But I'm not here for the zero-down deal or the thousand-dollar test drive. In fact, the dealer's office is closed for the night and I'm comfortable in a mini-van. I'm here because Ralph, a friend of mine, is around the corner holding the second in a series of investors' meetings at the Budget Inn. I suggested that he rent the pool and hold the meeting after some team-building exercises. Breath holding contests and the Color Guessing Game. But he told me that wouldn't reflect well on the seriousness of this endeavor and instead, he reserved the conference room.

We started advertising for the investors' meetings about a month ago. I helped Ralph design and post fliers on the ATMs downtown because I'm his biggest investor. And, since his success is mine, I promote him wherever I can. At the pool. The park. Wherever.

But I'm parked here because Ralph was concerned a financier might follow him outside and, perhaps, request a ride to the airport in his non-existent car. This admission of car-lessness might damage Ralph's professional persona. And so I agreed that I would wait here, in the same location that I waited during the first meeting.

I'm tuning the radio, away from a winter weather advisory, when Ralph rounds the corner in his pinstriped suit and nods. He gets into the car and presents the paper of names. Eight people were in attendance, all local residents. There were ten at the first meeting. "If we can enroll just half of these people in the investors' program," Ralph says, "it's going to take off. I know it."

"How were the energies?" I ask, turning onto the highway. The second meeting is about gauging energies. That, Ralph has said, is the most important aspect to establishing a business relationship. I have told him that collaboration potential should also be considered and that a decent method of doing this is crowding a swimming lane—to the point where it's altogether too full—and seeing if people pass or not. Ralph thinks this is neither a practical nor meaningful test.

"Fine," he says. "The energies were fine. A few took notes. One man kept nodding."

"Did you incorporate any of the team-building exercises that I suggested?"

"I didn't get around to it," he says. "Might work better at the next meeting."

"Right," I say. "After the other uncommitted people back out."

"Yeah. But would you stop at that Texaco?" he says, pointing. "I haven't had dinner."

I park and wait while Ralph grabs a plastic-wrapped chicken salad sandwich. He unwraps it and eats it in the van while we drive back to our apartment.

I work at a public pool that is right off the interstate. I make a decent wage but it's nothing compared to what Ralph's ideas will make for me. I am not a lifeguard but rather the attendant that checks IDs before people enter the pool-area. This is because I never quite learned how to swim. Regardless, being an attendant at the pool is an ideal occupation because I am able to imagine the group efforts that occur within the pool-area. Instructors holding children while they float. Teenagers practicing relays. Constructive games of water polo.

But in terms of the job, I don't check IDs for members of the swim team because I have all of their faces memorized. One of the greater responsibilities of this job is greeting the eight-and-unders who all have bloated bellies like poached eggs. It is important to make these children feel welcome so that the pool becomes a community-like setting.

When older patrons attempt to gain admittance, I often take time checking their IDs, chatting with them and discussing other, somewhat more pressing matters. I will often pitch Ralph's product. It makes for good practice. The ONE-STEP, as Ralph has named it, is the first in a line of practical car accessories. The step is perforated and thick stainless steel with rails that allow for accessible entry and exit from otherwise too-tall vehicles. It is packable, meaning that the rails fold down and the entire apparatus can be stored under the passenger-side seat. Ralph projects that it will be a best-seller with older and otherwise disabled audiences.

"The startup funds for such a product are high," I say, speaking with a married couple in swimsuits and goggles. They are shivering with goose bumps on their limbs. "Ralph has spoken with numerous welders and mass-production will be on the order of thousands."

"Right," the husband says.

"That makes sense," the wife says.

"And distributors are reluctant to stock new products," I say, reaching under my desk for a flier. I slide it across the counter and into the wife's hands. "But once it's off the ground, selling in a few chain-stores, great returns are expected. Ralph will be holding the last in a series of investors' meetings tonight—rain or shine. If time is permitting, we might even take a group swim in the hotel pool. Please consider attending."

"We appreciate the offer," the husband says.

It will soon be my lunch break and so I'm about to suggest showing them a prototype that I keep in the van when the husband grabs his wife's shoulder and their IDs from the counter.

They thank me and leave without the flier. Because, I assume, it would get wet in the pool-area.

When I'm back at the apartment after work, Ralph is rushing to compose his final presentation. He's in the common-area, gluing graphs to a trifold poster board. Papers are scattered on the floor. This meeting is about market forecasts and where, exactly, the investors' funds will be used. There's some discussion about margins. An exciting aspect to the final meeting, in particular, is that Ralph will show them the prototype ONE-STEP. The one that I have in my van. One look at its practicality, Ralph has said, and the investors will be sold. When someone inevitably asks if it can be demonstrated with a vehicle, Ralph will say, "The Budget Inn doesn't allow cars inside the conference room." Ralph has practiced the delivery of this joke with me and hopefully it should get a laugh or two from the audience.

I have suggested, too, that it might be beneficial to have a current investor speak at a meeting. Ralph told me that I, the sole investor, am not prepared to give such a testimony. He told me that I need to practice more at the pool before he can trust me with a task of that weight. But now, in the apartment, Ralph is cutting a glossy businessman from a magazine.

"There was a couple at the pool today," I say, "who might be interested in our product."

"Did you give them a flier?" Ralph asks.

"Of course," I say. "They thanked me for the opportunity and everything."

"We'll see if they show up," he says. Ralph is sometimes short when he's focused.

"The couple might expect to see me there," I say. "You know, as a comforting presence. Or even leading a discussion about my experiences."

“Put away these scissors, would you?” he says. He hands them to me and pastes the businessman onto the bottom corner of the poster board. “That’s it,” he says. “Finished.”

The ONE-STEP was not Ralph’s first idea. He’s also the proud inventor of antimicrobial socks, an idea I first heard about when we met at the Lions Club. They were having an entrepreneurship night and, as luck would have it, I sat at the same table as Ralph. I saw that he had true investment potential. Others were pitching nonsensical ideas—a lighthouse statuette-making business, a salvage yard for making scrap metal wind chimes, a world-wide restriction on the number of emeralds that make it to market. Ralph and I ate the provided crackers and spoke about socks. We exchanged contact information.

After a week of correspondence, Ralph told me that he didn’t have a place to stay. He said that he’d been living with a friend who wasn’t supportive. Ralph said that support is the one thing a budding entrepreneur needs. I told him that he could live with me as long as he kept inventing and pursuing this sock idea. I also requested that he give me a few shares once his business went public. And, although Ralph could never get the antimicrobial socks out of the blueprint phase—a problem with available materials and a general lack of funds—he showed promise in having an idea that could have revolutionized the industry.

Once he abandoned that idea, though, he entered a period of depression that lasted a few months. “I have nothing,” he would say. “There’s no future for me.”

I would suggest ideas, trying to help him in his creative process. I must have suggested at least three different schematics for an arm-to-foot linker useful for swimmers floating in chains. I suggested a two-person lifejacket and a kickboard with three different sets of hand-holds. But none of these ideas stuck with Ralph because I’m not a true entrepreneur.

During that phase, he would have me drop him off at the shopping mall before I went to the pool. He wasn't interested in shopping. Instead, he would sit on a bench outside of the Roses, thinking and watching. Aged women would shop in the store and, once bags accumulated on their soft arms, their husbands would exit their cars and help the women carry. On one instance, Ralph said that a couple arrived in an F-150. One of those earlier models that don't have the step-down. It came time for the husband to help and, upon opening his door, he fell onto the asphalt. Physically, the man was fine. But Ralph doubted that his pride was. And so that's when Ralph thought of the ONE-STEP. That's when Ralph left his period of depression.

There's a sheet of ice developing on the road and we're driving to the final investors' meeting. The sheet of ice is from the snowfall. It wasn't a problem before, when I was driving home from work. But now it's later and colder and Ralph and I are wearing heavy coats.

The entrance to the used car dealership is a steep hill and when I attempt to scale it, the van's tires spin. "It's not feasible," I say. "There has to be somewhere else that I can park."

"Let me out here," Ralph says. "Park wherever but don't let them see you in the van."

I put on the hazard lights and he exits the van. He takes the poster board and plods across the road, crunching salt. Then he walks around the corner. I can tell that he's focused just in the manner of his walk. When enough time has passed, I turn off the hazards and drive to the Budget Inn. I park in the back, next to the garbage disposal and where the parking spaces become irregular. I sit, listening to the radio. But all of the stations are warning of the impending winter storm. There's no music. I turn it off and look around. The pool, I can see, is housed in fogged glass. The outline of a frond-plant is evident. It looks inviting and I'm reassured that it would be

a fine setting for a meeting. A memorable one at least. I notice, too, a litter of kittens under a decommissioned church bus. They are clumped together for warmth and so I leave them alone.

I notice that Ralph, in his rush to make the meeting, forgot the ONE-STEP. I push the passenger-side seat back and grab it. The prototype has a weight to it and requires two hands. And some muscle. I open the van door and, rushing, almost fall onto the ice-covered asphalt. But I don't and, after collecting myself, lumber toward the entrance of the Budget Inn.

When I'm at the entrance, I have to place the ONE-STEP down so that I can open the door. An attendant recognizes that I'm struggling and rushes to help me. "Thank you," I say. "Could you direct me to the conference room? I have an important delivery."

"Just down the hall," he says.

I thank the attendant again and continue walking, turning onto the carpeted hall lined with rooms. A hotel guest is standing at his door and looks at me quizzically. He's confused about the metal apparatus I'm holding. "Follow me to the conference room," I say. He retrieves a keycard from his wallet and enters his room, letting the door shut behind him.

I pass the business center, which is not the conference room. It has two desktop computer workstations and clocks from three different time zones. I keep walking, past the vending and ice machines. Past the kiosk of brochures with regional information. I hesitate at the turn that leads to the pool. Everything smells like chlorine and I'm tempted to make a visit. To take a quick swim or even have a round of find-the-penny with a willing participant. But Ralph's presentation takes priority and I continue walking, undeterred, toward the conference room.

I reach the end of the hall. There is a door with a checkered window and a placard beside that reads CONFERENCE ROOM 1A. I place the prototype on the floor because the attendant is

not here to help. I open the door and hold it with my knee, half-in the room. I reach down to grab the prototype and once I have it in my hands, I find that the door is oriented at the front of the room. As in, I'm standing beside Ralph. He is presenting to a room of four people. A man wearing a trucker hat, an aged woman with chain-linked glasses, and a mother holding her child.

"Hello," I say. I attempt to make the entrance appear natural. Like Ralph must have planned. I place the prototype on the table, just in front of the man wearing the hat. "I am an investor in the ONE-STEP and it's one of the greatest decisions I've ever made so far." I do not look at Ralph because I'm focused on our investors. I continue, now moving my arms about while I speak. "This product is about ease-of-access. It's about being able to drive around with friends, unconcerned with how you will get out of your truck or tall vehicle. It's about Ralph and me and all of you. But, most importantly, it's about making money." I say the last part for a laugh, perhaps to foster a sense of community. But only the child sneezes.

I clear my throat and proceed to the most important part of the presentation. "What I have brought here is the ONE-STEP in its first stage. With the allowed funds," I say, "we were able to make this prototype for demonstrations. Please stand and join me at the front of the room."

The mother and her child, understandably, remain seated but the others approach.

"Just one moment," Ralph says, addressing the crowd.

"Please discuss amongst yourselves," I say, uncertain of what Ralph has to tell me. Perhaps he will congratulate me on executing his plan. "We will be back in just a moment."

Ralph ushers me outside of the conference room and, once we are in the hall, closes the door behind us. The man and aged woman, I can see through the door's thin window, are assembling the ONE-STEP. They are putting it together themselves, raising the rails and snapping them into place. The aged woman grabs the man's hand and steps onto the prototype.

“Do you want me to have nothing,” Ralph says. “You want to scare these investors away before I’ve even received their first payments? Because I won’t let you.”

“What?” I ask. I point at the door’s window. “Look,” I say, “Our investors are having a great time together. Even the kid is climbing it now. This is what entrepreneurship is about.”

“That’s enough,” he says. “I’ll finish this meeting now.” He re-enters the conference room, leaving me in the hall. I consider knocking on the door, entering and further demonstrating methods for proper collaboration. Handshakes and smiles. But I don’t want Ralph to have nothing. I want him to have what he wants—the ONE-STEP for himself. And so instead of re-entering, I watch the investors step onto and off of the prototype. I walk back down the hall, past the business center and vending machine and kiosk and pool.

The attendant thanks me for visiting as I leave the hotel. And I thank him too. But I don’t need his help with the door this time because I have left the prototype for the investors to enjoy. Perhaps, by now, Ralph has joined in on the fun. Perhaps he is perched on the step.

It is still snowing and the kittens have huddled even closer under the church bus. As I’m walking past them, I’m careful to monitor the volume of my ice-crunching. I don’t want to disturb their huddle. I step into the van and turn on the radio. It seems that there have been enough weather warnings because now there is music. I pull around to the front of the Budget Inn and park underneath the awning. I will wait here, where Ralph and the investors can see me upon their exit. I will drive Ralph to our apartment. But I will think about ideas other than the ONE-STEP. I will think about swimmers floating in the deep-end, arm-in-arm.

END

Word on the Street

Haston and I are in an argument about the oriental runner in the living room. He's had enough of the rug because, in the past and just a moment ago, he has tripped over it. The corners are turned-up and a television cable runs underneath it so there's a hazardous hump down the middle. I tell him that I'm unwilling to compromise, here, because it's the foremost piece in the room. He tells me that he doesn't care and grabs the rug from the floor. He gathers it in his arms. It's in folds against his chest. He hobbles to the open window of our third-floor apartment. I tell him that I'll call his probation officer if he does something dramatic. This is an empty but persuasive threat that I often use. I pick up the phone and clear my throat like I'm about to speak with the law.

"Don't you dial," he says. "Don't dial."

"Haston," I tell him, "Put down the rug. You have one-too-many strikes at this point and if I direct the chief lieutenant of the Wilmington police into your bedroom, that'll be it for you." I choke on my words, here, because I'm bluffing. I would never invite a mafia Don into my home.

But Haston doesn't know that the chief lieutenant heads an interstate crime racket. He doesn't even read my newsletter. His bedroom is full of drug paraphernalia and in his closet there's a shoebox full of lewd magazines. His mattress isn't situated on a frame but rather sits on

the floor. He doesn't even have sheets. When he moved into the second bedroom, he asked if I had an extra blanket. I told him that I didn't and since then, for five months, he's been sleeping sheetless, skin-on-cover, on the mattress. I've offered to take him shopping but he's never shown a sincere interest. For these reasons and past infractions, Haston's in constant fear of being jailed.

"Fine," he says, "you got me." He returns the runner and situates the cord under its permanent crease. He huffs and leaves for his bedroom. I don't follow but call out, telling him that we'll have to be quick in getting to his church obligations in the morning. I have an event.

I am the writer of a newsletter that's self-distributed to hundreds of people. It's full of rich details focused on my life's events and on exposing corrupt public officials. I'm the great revealer of important information that otherwise wouldn't find its way to the public. I've released, for example, that the New Hanover Clerk of Court traffics large quantities of drugs to students in surrounding high schools and even to the parents of these children. I've released that the superintendent of these high schools, himself, is responsible for the drunk-driving deaths of numerous teenaged students. I also have a suspicion—yet to be formalized or discussed—that the chief lieutenant of the Wilmington police is a paramount figure in an interstate crime syndicate. I became aware of the possibilities a few months ago and, since then, I've done all that I can to accrue evidence that will be used to indict him. It's an ingenious racket that he operates, really. He peddles drugs so that he can bust the no-lives who consume them.

I plan on gathering details at the *Wilmington PD Festival*. It's tomorrow and the chief lieutenant himself will be there, introducing the mayor. The mayor plans on introducing a new crime-stopping incentive that's worked in cities of similar sizes and geographies. The two of

them, then, will accept questions from the audience. This, the question-and-answer forum, is when I will strike. The crooked men of the world deserve to be exposed.

But the newsletter viewership is dependent on Haston. Newsletters with his name in the title receive far more attention than those entitled—ANOTHER PUBLIC OFFICIAL EXPOSED. The fluff that has people reading day-to-day, it seems, comes from my interactions with Haston.

In the morning, after I've written the first half of a newsletter detailing last night's events with the runner, I notice that there's a shallow but expansive puddle of coffee on the kitchen floor. The toaster's upturned and crumbs from inside are strewn about the counter. The runner is gone.

I knock on Haston's bedroom door, hoping that this was a simple and mostly unsuccessful heist and that he's still sleeping on his mattress unaware. He doesn't answer and so I enter to find that the room has been emptied of incriminating artifacts. There are no substances, syringes, pipes, or patches. His tent and sleeping bag are no longer in the closet. But I don't panic or call the authorities because he has done this before. And every time, he leaves a note on the back of the bedroom door. The current note expresses his dissatisfaction with last night's encounter and how he's taking his belongings and moving to the waterfront to live under the Cape Fear bridge. To do this, the note reads, he had to borrow my car and I can retrieve it at the bus depot after lunch. Haston is an honest criminal.

He always returns within the week and although the newsletter does dwindle in viewership, it's best to let him return on his own. But I realize, this time, it will not do. Under his new and more stringent terms of probation, Haston's required to spend mornings discussing his transgressions in a small-group at the Unitarian church. The group leader is required to release

attendance records to inquiring parties like, for example, probation officers. And so accruing more than one absence is an offense met with an unspecified amount of jail time.

The car, as Haston detailed in the note, is no longer in the parking lot and so I take the bus downtown to the Cape Fear bridge. The festival, too, is occurring downtown and so it's convenient that Haston's decided to be homeless today.

The bus passes the home of the chief lieutenant—it's a veritable villa, one that's constructed exclusively from imported Italian materials. The chief lieutenant often sunbathes on his third-floor balcony but, on this morning, he's not there. He could be searching for Haston at this moment. The small-group leader, perhaps, preemptively suspected that Haston would flee and decided to warn the force. But it's more likely that the chief lieutenant's preparing for the day's festivities, already enticing the mayor to participate in his crime ring. There's a chance, too, that the small-group leader hasn't realized Haston's absence yet because the meeting begins in an hour. This, for the sake of Haston and the newsletter, is what I must hope.

The bus makes a stop near the homeless shelter and I exit. The homeless who've accepted their lot, the saddest type of homeless, congregate here. Their faces blister and develop skin lesions as they sit on the shelter's stoop, clapping their hands together and sniffing pocket lint. There's nothing else for them to do. I must remind Haston that his life can be more full than this—and that it is when he's living with me and contributing to something greater than himself.

There's still a short walk to the bridge and once I'm there, I see that Haston's tent is pitched but there are no stakes fastening the corners. The tent's close to the water, flapping in the wind. It's placed on the dirt tracks of an old service road that runs underneath the bridge. I unzip the front and see that Haston's inside, looking at a lewd magazine. He's just looking.

“Look,” I say, “put down the magazine and let's have a talk.”

Haston sets the magazine on top of his shoebox collection.

I tell him that I saw his note and I, too, was upset over the rug encounter. But in the last few hours, I've come to forgive him and hope he will grant me a similar pardon. I tell him that we'll find a new rug, one that's smooth and creaseless. But at the present moment, we should be leaving for his church obligations because the small-group leader is likely, at this moment, noting his absence on the roll-call sheet. And I need to get back here for the festival.

"Your car," Haston says, "is at the bus depot. Like I said in the note."

"That's fine," I tell him. "We can walk."

The bus depot is, at most, three miles from the bridge and I set a mindful pace. Haston trails behind because he has a tent on his back and so, every other block, I slow for him to catch me. I direct us past the homeless shelter in hopes that Haston will see the useless men and reach the same conclusions that I did earlier. But the stoop is empty and Haston keeps his head down.

The *Wilmington PD Festival* is just past the homeless shelter. There's a tent for the K9 unit, demonstrating what a trained German Shepherd can do to a person's leg. There's a tent for gun safety, demonstrating how to load and clean an assortment of registered firearms. There's even a tent for suicide prevention. One of the tents is empty and without a sign to indicate the absent party. Amongst the displays is the main stage with a centered podium and black and blue balloons on either side. It's the podium that the chief lieutenant himself will speak at. People are gathered near the stage. We walk through the crowd.

I ask one of the reporters, "How long until the speeches commence?"

He tells me that the chief lieutenant's speaking in fifteen minutes. He'll introduce the mayor. The mayor, he's heard, will introduce a new crime-stopping incentive that's worked in

cities of similar sizes and geographies. The two of them, then, will accept questions from the audience. It's more information than I asked for but I thank the reporter anyway.

Haston reminds me that he needs a ride and, since we'll be late for the church obligations, he also needs me to act as a responsible guardian who can confirm that he wasn't late because he was shooting-up. Rather, he was the one who wanted to be on time and I prevented him from it. And although I risk missing the speeches, I have to consider the option that will best sustain interest in the newsletter. I have to take Haston to his meeting.

Once we're at the bus depot, I see that there's an officer at my car. He's wandered, I assume, from the festival. He's standing at the trunk and writing on a pad. He could be a meter maid but meter maids don't often wear helmets or holsters or badges.

"Haston," I say, "where are the substances?"

He's silent. The car's registered in my name and, if Haston's paraphernalia is found, a warrant for my arrest will be issued tomorrow. The chief lieutenant will appear at my door. He'll still be slick with sunbathing oil when he arrests me. And once he seizes my computer, that will be the end of it. I will have no probation officer. There will be no small-group meetings for me. I will no longer expose officials. I will never write about, or see, Haston again.

"In the fridge," he says. "At home."

The officer, or authoritative parking official, rips a ticket from his pad and places it under the windshield wiper. He moves on to the cars across the street. Once we reach the car, I find that he has given us a ticket for parking in a space reserved for bus drivers.

I tell Haston that he will need to be more careful in the future because even an errant parking violation could send Haston to the clink. That even being associated with crime could do him in for good. I drive him to his church obligations, careful not to exceed the speed limit.

We're forty-five minutes late for the small-group. I join Haston inside so that I can tell the leader, after the session, that it was my fault. That no probation officers should be called because Haston, for this, doesn't deserve jail time. I know that the group leader is a large man, one whose blue ankles look like overfilled sausage links, and so I'll tell him that we stopped for breakfast and the drive-thru took longer than we expected. The deep fat fryer had to be heated for the hash browns. He'll understand this and there will be no escalation.

But once we arrive, we find that the usual room is full of well-dressed children reciting psalms rather than reformed drug addicts discussing their misdoings.

"How long are the meetings, usually?" I ask.

"Forty-five minutes," Haston says. "But sometimes, especially if someone's missing, they end early. Roger usually lingers in the back lot though."

"Who's Roger?"

"The group leader."

We rush to the back lot but Roger, his minivan, and the roll-call are gone.

"Do you have this Roger's phone number?" I ask.

"It's at the apartment," he says. "Never bothered putting it in my phone. I know where he lives. He's always talking about lake-front grilling after the meetings."

"How far away is it? In the direction of downtown?"

We start walking to the car.

“No,” Haston says, “he lives on the lake near the high school. Lake Waccamo or something. He said that he’d take us on a speedboat ride if we got through the sessions. Guess I won’t be seeing that boat now. Guess I won’t be seeing much of anything now.”

I tell Haston that he doesn’t need to alert me of the consequences that we face. I’m aware and worried. And so once we reach the car, we drive toward the group leader’s lake-front home. The chief lieutenant, I’m sure, is introducing the mayor at this moment.

The grill’s going at the group leader’s home. We can see from the road that he’s outside, standing at the side of his house. He’s standing at his smoking grill with a tattooed woman.

We pull into his driveway and Haston waves from the car. The group leader frowns and places his spatula to the side. We exit the car and wave again. They meet us.

“Haston,” he says, “it’s a shame that you couldn’t make the meeting.”

“It was my fault,” I say. “We were held-up at the Hardees. Haston, on the other hand, told me that he could go without the biscuits that we’d ordered. That the only nourishment he needed was his small-group meetings. And so we left before we even received food but at that point, due to my stubbornness, we were already quite late. I do apologize.”

“I can understand that,” he says. “How about, since Haston missed the meeting, and since I have three prime sirloins and a kielbasa on the grill, we have an impromptu-small-group? We even have Debra here.” He indicates the tattooed woman standing beside him. “At my very own lake-house. Over a couple of steaks and sausages. Tell you what, the morning’s absence won’t even go on the books if you two can do that for me.”

“Yeah, maybe we could all learn from it,” Debra says. It is clear now that she’s in a position similar to Haston’s and is attempting to make nice with Roger. “I know I could.”

“I would love a smoked sausage,” I say, “But if I leave now, perhaps I can catch the question-and-answer session with the chief lieutenant and mayor. At the *PD* festival.”

“That was today?” Roger says. His face reddens and not because it’s heated from the grill. He isn’t standing at the grill. “I was supposed to have a booth there. To talk about reformation and outlooks for criminals who enroll in our program.”

“There’s still time,” I say. This is not true. The festival ends after the mayor speaks. Haston knows this and almost says as much—not thinking, I’m sure. I speak before his interruption. “Let’s have the meeting on the road. Put the grilled goods in a baggie. I’ll drive.”

Roger tells Debra to grab the food items from the grill. He rushes to the passenger-side of my car and tries the door handle before I have even unlocked it.

Little is discussed on the ride because Roger is anxious to arrive at the festival. Debra mentions one of her past misdoings. The time she got in that fountain and broke the nose from the water-spouting cherub. Haston shares a few lines from his rap-sheet. But he mentions that attending these meetings, even the impromptu ones that take place in the car, and living with a positive influence contribute to his betterment.

We arrive at the festival and I park in an available space. One that doesn’t advertise fines and possible boots. Roger tells me, getting out of the car, that he appreciates the reminder. That this festival means more to him than I could know and that Haston, now, is off-the-hook in terms of being absent. He walks, determined and with swinging arms, to the section of tables and tents that are wholly unoccupied. Debra follows behind him.

Everyone else in attendance is clustered at the stage which, now, has guards standing on either side with K9 units. The mayor and chief lieutenant are looking into the crowd, listening. I

hear the end of a question as we approach, “—I was asking around and couldn’t get a real answer. You know how that is, I’m sure.” There are knowing laughs from the mayor and crowd. “I thought I would ask you because who better to ask? When can it be repaired?” The mayor fields the question because the chief lieutenant knows nothing of mending broken things. The question, based on his response, was about the digital pedestrian walk-sign. The one near riverfront that has been out of commission for at least a month.

I place a hand on Haston’s back when we stall at the outskirts of the crowd. This indicates, to him, that I want to be closer to the stage so that I can be heard. “I want reporters surrounding me,” I say. “I want them as unwitting witnesses to this inevitable exposure.”

There is another question from the crowd about the lawlessness of our area and why, exactly, are our Boys in Blue allowing this? The chief lieutenant approaches the podium. His response is compelling but he speaks like the con-man that he is. He describes his efforts to reduce crime and enumerates the increase in drug-related arrests. But he, conveniently, chooses not to mention his tile-roofed villa or the fountain in his side yard with its continuous flow.

He steps back from the podium and I, along with Haston, am close enough to the stage to be heard. Haston says, “Ask the question.” He tells me that he will even read the newsletter if this is revealed as legitimate. I smile and raise my hand confidently, indicating that I would like to inquire with the parties on the stage. The chief lieutenant looks at me. He begins to point. To call on me and address my concerns. But his eyes pass over me and to a ruckus elsewhere in the crowd. A woman screams. From the side of the stage, a man rushes up the steps and to the podium. The K9 dog latches onto the man’s leg but the men in suits aren’t fast enough. He takes a gun from his jacket pocket and shoots the chief lieutenant in the stomach.

Those reporters who were present cover the shooting in detail. The secret life of the chief lieutenant is, in short time, uncovered while he recovers in a hospital under high-security. The public learns that he trafficked drugs across state lines. They learn that he constructed a three-story, authentic Italian villa with the earnings. The shooter was a hired hand for an area rival who was instructed to shoot for the gut because that's what the area rivals thought of the man and his unsavory dealings. The reporters receive praise for their hard-hitting journalism and the effort that they put into exposing the man himself, the chief lieutenant.

I write a long newsletter about Haston and the oriental runner.

END

The Reformation of a Towel Thief

Corner Brook is a town of two paper mills and this does something to the air. People adapt to the odor, but I'm convinced it has an impact on the psychology of the place. The stores here are mandated to have bars over their windows and residents who are brave enough to walk the streets do it in pants with zippered pockets. It's because of this stench—the very foulness that becomes integrated into our moral fibers—that people are driven to crime here. At least that's what I told Claire when we first met at her apartment.

But I'm sure she didn't believe it because how, then, could she—and her effect on otherwise resolutely hard people like me—be explained?

Claire stood for something else. She was working as a salesgirl at the largest gift store in the province. It might sound small-time but the gift store is our paramount business—in the tour books, other than the large tent-town next to the river, it's our single listed attraction. This meant Claire would interact with the occasional tourist from the mainland, making her the face of Corner Brook and our ambassador to the outside world. Those tourists who Claire serviced must've developed an inaccurate perception of our town. Because Claire didn't dabble in illicit activities like her brother and me and most others in Corner Brook.

I was introduced to her after six months of living with Holland. This was just after his father died in a jiggling accident. He fell from the boat. On most nights, Holland and I were together and searched the streets for dropped wallets and other valuable artifacts. The rare tourists here are often loose with their financials. This is because the condition of this place makes them nervous. Holland and I capitalized on these tourists when we could, standing at the Budget Inn street corner, leaning on telephone poles and waiting for someone with a hole in his pocket to walk past. On occasion, we would smash an intimidating light bulb. One of those long fluorescent ones. This made tourists walk faster and more likely to drop something.

We had just found a name-brand purse resting on the trunk of a car. It was our biggest find. I looked inside and saw that it was full of valuable items. I picked it up, quick, and we fled the scene. Holland, after seeing that the purse was made of patent leather, requested that we visit his sister, who was his fraternal twin from a different father. I didn't know that he had a sibling at the time. No less a twin from a different father. But he wanted to give her this purse, to show her how well he was doing for himself since his father died. Because she'd been trying to contact him since the accident, to meet-up with him. I agreed to this because Holland said that I could have the purse's contents. And, I admit, I was interested in meeting his sister because Holland had a good bone structure. I was curious to see how—and if—that would translate in a woman.

Claire lived in an apartment block much worse than our duplex. It was on a hill beside one of the paper mills. The one at the bend in the river. The mill smoke blasted the eastern face of her high-rise, discoloring the bricks and ensuring that all the windows remained sealed. Inside, there must have been an infestation because the walls were pocked and the carpet chewed. And, although there were spaces for them, the elevators had never been installed. When Holland and I visited on that night, we climbed the stairs to her place on the ninth floor.

At the door, Holland presented Claire with the purse. “This is for you,” he said. Her bone structure, if it can be believed, was better than Holland’s. High cheeks, unobtrusive brow. Her face was covered in light down. Holland’s face offered bristles and an unattractive mulberry birthmark—a genetic thing from his father. I have reached the conclusion that Claire’s father was a more attractive man than Holland’s.

Claire smiled and accepted the purse. But we had forgotten to empty it and so, once she felt its weight and started going through lipsticks and Nabisco crackers, her face changed.

“How’d you get this?” she said, accusatory. “And who are you?”

“I’m Holland’s roommate,” I said. “It’s a pleasure.” I extended a hand. For an introductory shake. But Claire had made her mind up about me and refused it. Frustrated at her attractive unwillingness, I almost forced it on her. Almost grabbed her limp hand. But Holland said—“I just bought this at TKs. I didn’t want to tell you, but it was on sale.” This was prideful.

“The mall is closed,” she said. She was right about that.

“I,” he stumbled, “meant earlier in the week.”

“Where are the tags? A receipt?”

I didn’t understand what she was badgering him for. He was giving her a gift. What did it matter how he obtained it? I wanted to get another word in, to say something helpful for Holland’s case of innocence and, perhaps, to have our lifestyles understood by someone like her. “Look,” I said, “I can vouch for Holland. He bought this. But even if he didn’t, it wouldn’t be his fault. Because—” and that’s when I said the thing about paper mills and moral fibers. How people here are shaped by their environment. That Corner Brook’s is a toxic one.

“Please leave,” she said. “And return this.” Claire gave me the purse and ushered Holland inside because she wanted to speak with him. I waited in the hall, chewing a piece of gum that I

found in the purse, hoping to get another glimpse of Claire when Holland opened the door. I didn't—Holland came out after a while, by himself, and we left for our duplex. He told me that she had a strong word with him because what would their mother think? And, if he didn't attempt to change, she would inform his mother about the debased and unfruitful life he was leading. This was a threat because Holland's financial support came from his mother.

Holland adopted the habit of visiting Claire on weekends. During her lunch break. This was on Claire's suggestion. When he returned from these meetings, he would spend a few minutes talking about Claire and how he didn't understand her. He wanted her to know that he was OK and that, as a sibling, she didn't have to be concerned about his lifestyle or alert their mother because was this any of her business, really? The conversation, then, would turn. He would discuss new schemes. Like sitting at the laundromat and taking clothes from unattended washers. I'd tell him that we would consider it. Then I'd ask more about Claire.

I wanted to know her and the soft hairs on her face. How she defied Corner Brook. And so, on one of Holland's scheduled visits, I told him that I was going to join. "I haven't been outside of the duplex in a day," I said. This wasn't true because that morning I had been to the QuikMart for some mini-donuts and a high-octane energy drink. But Holland didn't know this.

"OK," he said. "You'll have some warming-up to do. Because she doesn't like you."

We left the duplex on-foot because neither Holland nor I owned a better method of transportation. We walked toward Canadian-Chinese One because this, Holland told me, was where the meetings happened. Over dumplings and sticky rice. It was a ten-minute walk.

Cars were sparse in the parking lot but the few that were there—including Claire's Volkswagen—had Pawn-All advertisements wedged under their wipers. For the new one on Confederate Street. "I cased that place on their grand opening," Holland said.

"Is that right?"

"Yeah," he said. "Loads of potential for loss. On their end, I mean."

I asked him how that was possible, stalling at the door to the restaurant.

"I bet their hired hands, the night-clerks, will be teenaged and fearful. And inattentive too. Don't forget that. Because that's how these stores operate now, hiring inexperienced school kids who work for loonies and chocolate bars." This was a common complaint for Holland.

I told him that we would consider it and that I discouraged unsupervised action. "I would prefer to be present if you decide to do anything," I said. I didn't want Holland to be arrested. We had meetings to attend. "And who knows, maybe one of these meetings will resonate?"

He nodded and we went inside and asked the hostess if a woman whose name was Claire was waiting for us? "Perhaps she came with a book?" Holland said.

Claire was sitting in a corner booth, flipping through the pages in said book. There was a dish of duck sauce at her side with no apparent appetizer. When we approached, she closed the book and its title became evident—*Chicken Soup for the Reforming Criminal's Soul*. Claire looked at Holland and I looked at her ears, which were exposed because she had her hair in a loose bun. There were no piercings. No holes. Not even in the lobe.

"What's he doing here?" she said, indicating me.

"He thought he could learn something," Holland said.

"You know how I feel about this," she said.

The conversation disregarded my physical presence. "I'm not what you think," I said.

“Fine,” she said. We sat with her and a waitress with a pad asked us, the newly arrived parties, what we would like to drink and if he were indulging in an appetizer? We abstained.

“What do you have for me today,” Holland said. This was directed at Claire.

Claire looked at me, shook her head in disbelief, and re-opened her book. Passages were highlighted. She stopped on a page with the subheading REPENTANCE and read this aloud in a hushed whisper, as if she was worried that she might be overheard. She proceeded to share a section about a man who had stolen a beach towel and then an angel came to him and said that his actions were wrong. The man returned the beach towel and felt much better about his life. In summary, the book read, the man began an ethical life and there was nothing wrong about that.

Holland, after a moment of rumination, said that he was inspired by the passage because he, in his life, had stolen things but had never seen an angel and that could explain his inability to reform. Claire looked at me to see what I thought. I agreed with Holland.

“That was an exceptional passage,” I said. Claire seemed to suppress a smile and Holland pinched my leg under the booth, as if I hadn’t been genuine in that remark.

The meeting continued like this, with Claire reading varied accounts of vagrants acting immorally and, in keeping with the theme of REPENTANCE, seeing the err in their ways after being graced with some manifestation of an angel. There were literal, light-and-wing angels. There were suave and straight-edged Hispanic counselors named Angelo. There were more esoteric angels, like a deserved promotion at work or a warm serving of lo mein. And I noticed, while watching Claire read these passages between bites of noodles, that I could no longer smell the stench of paper mills. The place smelled like Canadian-Chinese and Claire.

When we left the restaurant, Holland told me that he'd been thinking in there. Not about reformation. Those stories in that book did nothing for him and what did I think of them? Because that's all these meetings were and now I could see how senseless they were.

"It was nice to see Claire again," I said.

"Right," he said. "But I was thinking about Pawn-All and their staff. The time is ripe, you know. There's no riper time than now." The fliers from before had focused his interests.

"We'll have to think about it," I said, as before. "But in the meantime, I'd like to continue attending these meetings."

Holland scoffed, looked at me, and scoffed again. "The night of this next meeting." He was referring to when he would do it. "Wait much longer and someone'll beat us to it. And then they'll hire some ex-con with a gun for killing bull-moose." We walked home.

The next meeting was held outside of the courthouse, where the homeless sat on benches. The meeting had, more-or-less, the same agenda. Claire didn't protest my presence and, instead, greeted me. She retrieved a peanut butter sandwich from her tattered purse and, with a few free fingers, paged through *Chicken Soup* and read from the subheading LOVING YOURSELF AND OTHERS. This section dealt with stories pertaining to internal self-hatred and how this might lead to unacceptable external behavior, like committing crimes. "This is something that we all deal with," Claire said. "And so that's why it's important."

"Even you?" I said. "You're wrong in thinking that." This was the best line that I thought permissible. Holland pinched me on the side of my leg, thinking the comment was in jest. I slapped at his hand because I was being genuine and was tired of these misinterpretations.

“Even me,” she said, the model-citizen that she was. Then she read a piece from the perspective of an action figure who, because his muscles were not toned enough, lashed-out at the child who attempted to engage with him. This resolved once his child-friend began to neglect him, which caused the action figure to have some internal reflection. The action figure concluded that his muscles were larger than most and he should be content with that and, although he had been thrifted before this revelation, he could take this knowledge into his next relationship.

After hearing my genuine and Holland’s not-so-genuine opinions on the piece—positive, eye-opening—Claire told us that she had to leave. Her lunch break was shortened because of an unexpected schedule shift. Holland stood and began walking up the hill to our duplex. He was particularly inattentive at this meeting. Claire looked at me and raised her brows, as if she wanted to discuss something and so I waited with her. When Holland was out of hearing-distance, she said with her chapped lips, “Is Holland taking this advice in earnest? Deserving of our mother’s support? Because, although our mother’s well-intentioned, I think she’s overall naïve and supporting someone who doesn’t deserve supporting.”

“I can only speak for myself,” I said. “But if you’d like a first-hand perspective, be at Pawn-All tonight. You’ll see how much these meetings—and you—have changed us.”

“OK,” she said.

“Wait outside,” I said.

I told Holland that I would go with him that night—but for the sole reason of selling some items. That I could not, at this point, endorse this behavior and thought that he should reconsider things.

I collected cleaning agents from under the sink. Pans. A used hairbrush. I put them in a box and we walked to Pawn-All. I didn't tell Holland that I planned on purchasing a purse for Claire, something to give her when she inevitably became disappointed with Holland's true self.

When we arrived, Holland went inside first, leaving me with the clerk at the counter. He was not a fearful teenager but instead a bald man with meaty shoulders and prison tattoos.

"I've got some items here," I said. "And I'm wanting to sell. Not pawn."

"Place them down and I'll get you sorted. Any breakables?"

I shook my head and he turned the box over on the counter. He started arranging things, pricing individual items under his breath. "I can do thirty."

This was a reasonable estimate and so I shook his hand and he gave me the cash. I put the cash in my wallet and started looking around at the wares. There was no apparent organization—in a bin beside the entrance, I sorted through some old ice-hockey cards, some WWII memorabilia, some used tea towels. The aisles, which were made of three-tiered metal shelves, extended far from the entrance. And the shelves were full. I walked into them, back to where Holland was, and looked for a purse in this mess. I found a clutch. A messenger bag. Three empty Ziploc bags. And, hidden amongst a collection of stuffed animals, sat a leather and name-brand purse. I purchased it from the clerk, who placed it in a plastic bag with a receipt.

I reconvened with Holland, who was shoving a stainless steel garlic press into his pants. "Did you see the clerk?" I whispered. "Looks like an ex-con."

"Should've come sooner," he said. "But nothing I can't handle." With that, he walked toward the front of the store. Past the ex-con, and out of the building. I followed and, upon opening the door to exit, saw Claire in her Volkswagen across the street. Holland was walking with a collected calmness. Back in the direction of the duplex after a successful lift. And Claire

was looking on as he did it. He appeared innocent and, because I needed Claire to know, to see that it wasn't Holland who had changed but rather me, I alerted the ex-con. I said, looking back at the counter, "The man who just left here stole something and I saw him."

The ex-con left his post and ran toward Holland, tackling him from behind. Holland hit the ground, rolled onto his back, and grabbed for his knee. The ex-con demanded that the stolen goods be returned. "You won't get away with this," he said, pulling the garlic press from Holland's pants. Holland grunted and continued to hold his knee, which had reddened. The ex-con stood and turned Holland onto his stomach. Then he crossed his hands tight against his back. I watched but didn't interfere. I watched Claire too, her face unchanged as Holland was accosted and restrained. She dialed her phone, put it to her ear. Then she started her Volkswagen and drove away without looking at me.

I stood in front of the Pawn-All, purse-in-hand, and waited for the police to descend.

END