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Everything Begins as a Memory

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Everything Begins as a Memory

By

Tim Fogarty

A Creative Writing Project
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies
through the Department of English Language, Literature, and Creative Writing
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree of Master of Arts
at the University of Windsor

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Everything Begins as a Memory

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April 30, 2017

Declaration of Originality

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Abstract

How do we create narratives out of the material of our lives? What happens when these narratives are challenged? What hold does the past have on us? Can we ever rely on the narratives we construct? These are the questions which drive *Everything Begins as a Memory*, and the stories that comprise this collection offer eight different ways of dealing with them.

All set in Halifax Nova Scotia and the surrounding rural communities, these loosely interconnected stories are meditations on place and memory. In the course of each story a character is forced to come to terms with the meaning of some aspect of their past, and to reconstruct the narrative they have created for themselves. The process of their reconstruction is a form of epiphany in each case.

I propose thinking about the literary epiphany through the ideas of three thinkers who diverge in many ways, but whose thoughts influence and impact my short stories. Specifically, I take on the concept of experience, borrowed from 20th century German phenomenologist, Hans Georg Gadamer, I invoke Freud's concept of the uncanny, and I turn to literary theorist, Svetlana Boym for her work on nostalgia.

In the course of these stories and the accompanying critical essay I am interested in reviving the literary epiphany as a mode of expression and literary exegesis. To do so, I privilege a phenomenological approach to literature, considering the experience of the characters to be of paramount importance. I argue that tracing the character's arc of self-understanding, or the failure thereof, is an essential structuring principle in short fiction.

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Everything Begins as a Memory

Grant works out his ideas on the job. The noise of the excavator makes it so he can't talk to anyone for most of the day, so he lets the part of him that needs to pay attention pay attention, and the rest of him works out what shots he still needs to shoot, what lines he needs to write, and who he needs to call to play a role for him while he moves stones to clear paths for roads, rearranges earth to make room for homes. He spends the day counting off the tally and repeating the phrases aloud, to himself, under the hum of the machine.

His hands stay busy in the daytime, so he makes use of his memory. He builds himself memory palaces as he tears into hills, moves the big stones and levels the landscape. He compresses his thoughts into the smallest phrases he can manage.

Get an insert of Maria opening the closet door to break up the second scene,
becomes

Insert Maria's closet door, becomes

Maria's door, then numbered

1. Maria's Door

He numbers everything that he strains to remember in his mind while his hands work the levers.

1. Maria's Door

2. Window as Prism

3. *Clean Doorstep*

4. *Wave Break*

5. *Need to get a shot of Jack climbing the tree where my treehouse was. The tree that it blew out of.*

Grant eases the teeth of his bucket beneath a big hunk of granite. It keeps slipping. Five, Jack in the treehouse tree. Grant edges in beneath the granite again. Five, Treehouse tree. Grant lifts his boom slowly with the granite, far too big to fit in the bucket, balanced on the teeth, carries it to the pile of boulders he's made through the course of the day, and begins to count again, rattling off his list like a mantra.

At the end of the day he says his goodbyes to the other guys on the crew, then writes one through seven in the margin of his earth-darkened notebook, sitting in the driver's seat of his car. He leaves the door unlatched just enough for the dome light to illuminate his handwriting. He finishes the list and then starts the work of reclaiming the meaning of all those messages to himself. What was it about the treehouse tree, he asks himself, as the tail lights of the other cars paint the worksite red for a second before they take off.

A long stop at a red light on the way home makes him remember the shocking red of the lichen on the trees behind his grandparent's house. The taste of the pine sap smeared on his hands, and the unconscious action of trying to lick it off. It looks like it should have tasted sweet. Not the case. Bitter and sharp like distilled pine scent. How to break this down?

1. *Red Lichen ...*

He remembers most, but some become ghosts – just impressions in his memory. He remembers the number and the phrase, but not what he had meant to tell himself. Some phrases he couldn't remember the meaning of no matter how long he stared at the blank spot in his notebook, but has carried around for years. *Downtrodden Horizon*, is one that keeps coming back again and again. Sounds like a prog rock song. He can't remember what he meant, but he can't forget the sound of the phrase.

Downtrodden Horizon.

Downtrodden Horizon.

The light turns green, and he steps on the gas, counting off his new list as he heads home.

The phrases that end up on his lists don't begin as new thoughts, but as memories. Everything begins as a memory. The way that the kitchen light silhouetted Maria as she did the dishes the night before would be perfect for the scene where the protagonist has to get out of bed in the dark. A note on character motivation comes from the unintended pleading that seeps into Jack's voice when he plays hard and becomes too tired for company. Every piece is a precious stone unearthed. Something that he wants to save before it gets lost again in the dirt. Every day he rearranges memories into more stable forms, as he works the arm of the excavator. Every day he fights the unfair reality that the mind is a machine for forgetting.

...

“Well, they’re closing at the end of the month,” his aunt Susan said into the receiver. “We hand over the keys on the first. But until then I suppose you can still come and go as you please. Long as you don’t make a mess.”

“Okay if I take some furniture in to dress the set?” he asked.

“Long as it looks like it does now when we hand the keys over on the first, you can use it all you want. You still have your copy of the key, right?”

“Yeah.” He could feel the trepidation in his own voice. Resented it.

“Grant,” she said sighing, “I know you didn’t get a vote in selling the house, but there’s nothing for it now.”

“I know,” he said. “I just wish that I could have found the money. Or if it had only been six months earlier...”

“We’re not getting into this again. It is what it is, and that’s just what it’ll have to be. You can use the house until the first,” she said. “Long as you don’t leave a mess.”

...

He sent short films out to festivals all over Canada and the Eastern States. He had his approach to submission down to a science – DVDs of his shorts burned and ready to package, letters saved on his computer in a folder titled *marketing*, which only required minimal adjustment to tailor to a new festival. He sent out his form letters, and received kindly worded form letters in turn, addressed to him but written for anyone.

Another bubble-wrap-lined envelope for another DVD for another festival. Grant cobbled these hopeful packages together, printed address labels, sealed them

neatly and stacked them on the corner of his desk. The right postage affixed to each. In the corner of the living room that Jack calls Daddy's office, everything has a place.

On his way out the door, Grant grabbed the neat stack of DVDs to throw in the mail on his way to meet Billy, in town for the week from Vancouver. Grant stepped over Jack's toys and did his best to ignore the basket of laundry in the hallway that still needed to be put away. He lifted his work jacket from the coat rack and took a moment to find one that wasn't covered in worksite dust.

"Once you have a reputation, it becomes a lot easier," Billy said as he caught the eye of the server and ordered another drink by pointing to his empty glass.

"Working my way up to the first few jobs was really hard. Nobody wants to hire an unproven. Looks like a bad bet when they have money on the table. Once I could point to a credit or two, things started to fall into place," he said, nodding to the server as she put a fresh pint down in front of him.

"I was watching that old *Robocop* VHS again the other day. You remember that?" Grant offered.

"I remember the movie..." Billy waited for more.

"Don't you remember? We watched the scene..."

Billy interrupted, "...of the melting guy getting hit by a car. Yeah, I remember now," he said laughing.

"We must've sat in my parent's basement, rewinding that scene a thousand times trying to figure out how to replicate the special effect for our movie," Grant said.

“Anyway, watching it now, the tape is so thin from all the wear that you can barely see the scene through the static.”

“Don’t have time for the classics these days, I guess,” Billy said. “Keeping pretty busy.”

“Are you getting to hang around any sets?” Grant asked.

“Not really. I could weasel my way in if I really wanted to. But who needs that aggravation, right? I can just do my job and then enjoy the film that comes out the other side without having to worry about interrupting people so busy doing their jobs they barely notice the pressure. Making movies isn’t all games, you know,” he said.

“To see how it’s done, though...” Grant moved the bottom of his beer glass through the moisture on the table. Trying to make a pattern of it.

“It’s not much fun on a set most of the time. Besides, I know how everything gets done. And that I can’t do everything. I’ll stick to my job and let everyone else do theirs. If I get this field producer gig, then I’ll do that, but it’s just a job,” he said, his voice rising to compete with the bartender turning up the volume of the music.

“No, but, I mean – don’t you still want to make?” Grant said, almost yelling.

“I do make things. I don’t have to take charge of every part of the process, though. Why? You looking for a few pointers?” He looked out over the top of his glass.

“I’ll take what I can get.”

“Still making your shorts?”

“When I find time.”

“That’s great, man. I wish I still had the drive to grind ’em out.” He smiled.

“Really, that’s super exciting. You should send me one sometime.”

They’d been drinking at a waterfront pub in Historic Properties, and Grant got too drunk to drive home, so he walked along the harbourfront. The changing weather meant that tourist season was wrapping up. Not many people on the Boardwalk, he thought and decided to take the long way home, avoiding the traffic on Barrington. The sunset spread deep pink and purple over the horizon. The colour of the sun works perfectly for a final shot. He thought to himself,

The way it should end

As he turned away from the light to head back up the hill to the apartment and Maria and Jack he began to think his way down the memory list from that day, adding the colour of the sunset to the end. Walking over the uneven sidewalk slabs, he closed his eyes against his own drunkenness fumbling through the list, sometimes remembering, sometimes not.

...

His mother grew up in the house Susan put on the market. He spent most of his own childhood there, after school, with his grandparents, waiting for his parents to come pick him up. He wishes Jack to have these same memories of the place, so he takes him often. But over the past couple of weeks it’s been empty, so they don’t go inside. He walks Jack around the yard, trying to give him a sense of the place. The evergreen woods that border it on three sides, and the stony shore open to the ocean. He walks Jack to the rocky shore, though Jack can’t keep his balance on the big,

bleached stones and needs help. Always needs Daddy's hand. Grant walks the shore and tries his best to make it fun - tries to make it memorable - so something of this place will stay with Jack. He lifts Jack by his wrists in big bounding arcs, to make it look like Jack is leaping five body-lengths at a go. Just the same way his own father did to him. Grant thinks:

1. Jack on the rocks

and keeps the image of his son walking beside him filed away.

Sunday's the last day he has with the house. He can't make it back during the week, and he has to hand over his copy of the key on Thursday. He plans to make the most of the time he has. One more scene. One he's sure he can finish before sunset. Feeling for the key in his pocket, he turns it over in his fingers as he starts thinking his way down the list again.

On his computer he keeps bits and pieces of vignettes he's filmed for his latest passion project that need stitching together. He keeps at them, fine editing shots that fit together perfectly, but have nothing to bookend them. Perfect pieces without context. An establishing shot grabbed when the clouds reminded him of a painting. An insert shot when he found a door handle that looked period appropriate at his insurance agent's office. Jack's silhouette against a sunset near the waves. Shot after shot after shot that need something to hold them all.

Grant knows he could make a masterpiece, if only he had the time, if only his actors didn't age. He shot a part of a vignette that called for an infant in Point Pleasant Park with Jack, and had to abandon it as Jack aged out of the role. Even the adult

actors register noticeable changes from shot to shot. Haircut changes, and facial hair, and the lines around the eyes. Sam lost a lot of weight, Josh gained some. Nothing remains static or fixed in the faces of his friends.

Pulling off the main road, Grant turns down toward Paddy's Head, and tries to run down the list of what he needs before they start filming. Drop the equipment off at the house, set up for the first shot as best he can, pick up Austin, pick up Sam, get the costumes set, check the light, set the camera. All ready. He runs the mental checklist of what he packed in the trunk: his cheapie lighting rig, his camera, batteries and mic, costumes and a few props.

Today he doesn't rely on memory, though. He made lists before he left the house. He pats his shirt pocket every few minutes – those lists will tell him if he's remembered everything. One outlines the day's logistics, the other details the shots he needs. He stayed awake late into morning working out the shots in the closest detail he allowed himself to imagine. He often imagines levels of detail it doesn't pay to think of. He imagines the textures of light on his actor's faces – the kind of thing that only frustrates him when he can't create it on set.

A few months before, he spent half a shooting day in his own living room, trying to get his friend Sam to deliver a line of dialogue just so. "Remember when you answered the door at Mike's party and told those guys they had the wrong house? Try saying it like that. That was the perfect tone of voice," he directed. Grant nothing but a silhouette delivering direction in front of the bright, hot lights.

“I know what you’re talking about, I remember the night, but I don’t remember how I said it. That’s forever ago,” Sam, wiped the sweat from her face, then delivered the line again.

“That was better. We’re on the right track, but can we do it one more time?”

“I can do it again, but I don’t know what you’re looking for. Can you give me specifics?” she asked.

“Let’s just try it again.”

“Tell me what you want. I can make it happen, but only if you tell me.”

She has made excuses why she can’t come back ever since. Grant can’t finish the scene without her. Disappointment taught him how much detail he can allow himself to expect from a scene. He knows now that the situation dictates the details.

Through his life Grant has driven this road so many times that he does it without thinking. Like those moments at work that he can let himself check out mentally because his body remembers how to complete the task without him. He knows every curve of the road, where to speed up and when to brake. But, looking at his son in the rear view mirror it suddenly feels new again. He imagines it through Jack’s eyes. Jack, who doesn’t know the curves, or when to ease up on the brakes or what lies around the next corner. Grant feels again the novelty of every turn of the wheel. For a moment, he doesn’t feel safe to drive. The sensation of being pulled along by the car overwhelms him. When he regains himself he thinks:

2. *Jack’s Eyes*

“Sure you don’t want me to help set anything up while you’re gone to get Austin and Sam?” Maria asks from the back, where she sits beside Jack’s car seat.

“No, you and Jack enjoy yourselves. I want him to have a fun day,” he says, looking into the rearview mirror that is angled as much at Jack as the road behind him. He still has to get the first shot ready before they lose the morning light. He figures two hours for the first scene.

The morning began with Jack at 5:00. He tore around their flat, leaving a trail of trucks, bricks and animals. Some of them, Grant thought, he didn’t even recognize, though he himself had surely bought them.

The unfortunate necessity of free actors means a late start on the weekend. Asking friends to act for free makes sense. Expecting them to forgo a weekend sleep-in doesn’t. For Grant weekend sleep-ins are nothing more than a distant memory he lets himself covet every so often.

Grant woke up with Jack and made bacon and eggs for the three of them. Maria painted for most of the morning in her studio. She gave up a studio day for him to film, so he didn’t bother her except with a plate of eggs, which he left steaming in the slanted light of her studio.

By 10:00 Jack ran himself out, and sat at the foot of the couch with a book open on the floor. Jack’s eyelids bounced back more slowly with every blink, like the drawing down of a bouncing ball. An unexpected nap. Grant sneaked out of the living room and down the hall to the studio room, to Maria, engrossed in her canvass.

“He just conked out on the couch,” Grant announced in a whisper.

“Je-sus!” She almost yelled, but didn’t, drawn out of her concentration. “Don’t sneak up on me like that. I could have ruined a brush stroke,” she turned back to the canvass.

“He’s sleeping,” he said, with emphasis.

She wiped her brush and put it on the table. “Okay, but quick and quiet.” She unbuttoned her jeans on the way to the bedroom.

“Do we have another mode?”

...

“Well, that didn’t take long,” she said. He ran his hand down her stomach, but she grabbed his wrist before he got there. “No, it’s fine. I’d rather paint. I’m kind of on a roll the past few days. I want to make the most of it.” She grabbed her Levis from the foot of the bed.

“I’ve noticed. I’m loving the blues in this one. Reminds me of... I don’t know what,” he said, his hands in front of him like he might grab the words from the air. “But I love it.”

“Well, we’ll see if you love it when it’s done,” she stood into her pants. “I mean, thank you,” leaning over to kiss him.

Walking back into the studio room he heard, “Oh, Jack! No.” Some things you can’t anticipate, even though you should.

Jack covered in the hues of blue that Maria mixed carefully all morning. Her hope of painting completely gone. She picked him up and held him with outstretched arms so as to not paint herself with her own colours.

“Here, can you give him a bath, please,” she handed Jack over to Grant.

Jack’s face turned on the word “bath” and he squealed “nononononono!” as Grant reached for him. Jack, slippery with paint, wriggled so that Grant had to hold him close, mushing paint into his shirt.

“I’ll clean up in here,” Maria said, picking her palate up from the rug.

Grant ran the bath and calmed Jack down, singing “Nobody’s Child.” He soaped Jack up with a wash cloth, and watched how the oil colours swirled in the bathwater.

1. Oil Swirl

...

When they open the door, Jack squeezes past Grant’s leg in the doorjamb.

“Where is everything?” he asks, seeing the house empty for the first time.

“Aunt Susan moved it all to her new home, remember?” Maria says.

“What about Aunt Susan?” Jack asks.

“What about her?”

“Did she moved, too?”

“To her new home, yeah.”

Jack runs into the house, emboldened by their solitude. He stomps from room to room exclaiming “Wow!” every stop. The house so empty it seems a new house. Grant tries to skin his own memories of the place over the bare walls and floors, but only dulls his ability to remember. He sets down his lighting rig and camera bag on the worn wood floor by the kitchen door.

“You guys fine for a bit?” Grant steps out onto the front step.

“We’re *fine!* Now get going. You’re burning daylight.”

“Isn’t that what your mother says?” he asks, turning back toward her.

“Doesn’t change the fact that you’re burning daylight!” she says, kicking him in the back of the leg from the doorway.

“You always know when I need a kick in the pants.”

...

Grant pulls into Austin’s driveway around ten. Austin lives only a few minutes’ drive from Susan’s, but he built his place so far back in the woods it feels like the rugged wilderness.

Grant hops out of his car and up the steps, knocks on Austin’s door. He nearly knocks again, but Austin opens.

“Come on in, I’m just finishing my coffee. Want any?” he asks. His bathrobe hangs heavily at the bottom like it’s weighing him in place.

“No, I’m awake as I’m going to get,” Grant calls into the kitchen taking off his shoes.

Austin stands at the entrance holding a fresh cup of coffee for himself. “So, you’re all set to roll?” he asks.

“Yeah, all set,” Grant replies. “You have a chance to go over your lines?” he asks, absentmindedly patting his shirt pocket to hear the crinkle of his lists.

“Not really. I did, but I don’t exactly have them committed to memory,” he says, between sips.

“Fine, fine. We can work around it. I know you know the drill. Long as you’ve got a feel for it.”

“The ghost-thing, right?”

“Yeah... We’ll figure it out,” Grant says, as much to himself as to Austin.

“By the way, can you give Maddy a ride back to the city after the shoot? She has to be at work tomorrow morning and it’s easier than me making a trip.” Maddy appears in the kitchen doorway and says hello.

“Hi Maddy. Nice to see you. No problem,” Grant does the math to figure out how many extra stops an extra body in the car will cost him. “Just about ready?”

“Yeah, almost good,” Austin says through the steam of his coffee.

...

Grant gets back to Susan’s house around noon. Sam took just as long as Austin and Maddy, putting Grant further and further off his schedule.

Finally pulling into the driveway, Grant sees Maria painting in the yard and Jack playing in the grass. The waves breaking white in the wind behind them in a way familiar to Grant.

3. Family and the Waves

“Okay guys, the clothes you need are hanging up in the bathroom. I’ll set up while you get changed. Meet me back here when you’re ready, we’ll shoot scene eight.”

“Which scene?” asks Austin.

Grant feels the tug of Jack's hand on his pant leg. "Beach, Daddy," Jack says, looking up at Grant.

"Buddy, not right now. Ask your mom."

...

The family house is a small saltbox with wooden window frames and hardwood floors. The kitchen has a wood stove and a brick chimney. Grant sets up a few odds and ends that he has collected as props over the past year. A hanging from a rafter and a pair of candle sticks on the countertop. He knows how to shoot the scene so it will require minimal dressing. The house looks good on camera and looks better with little in it. He has tried to shoot there before, but spent half the day moving Susan's furniture, her magazines, and Susan herself out of frame. He'd filmed a scene the year before that had to be thrown away when he realized that Susan had left a pack of her cigarettes on the table, in focus, centre frame.

When he began making movies he would just set and light a scene the way that he wanted to see it and then put a camera in front of the action. Seeing the hours of footage from his first day of shooting almost made him quit outright. Nothing that he had created for the camera looked like *life*. He knew that he would have to film it all over again as soon as he viewed the footage. The thought of calling all those people to ask them the favour of shooting the same scene over seemed impossible. But he did.

It took him dozens of days of shooting, over the course of months, to realize why the images he captured on camera didn't convey what he saw on set. He had to trick the camera into seeing what he wanted to see. Everything had to be heightened.

Unnatural on set came out as natural on camera. Even the way that he asked the actors to perform. He thought that he wanted the performances understated and quiet. He didn't realize how stilted you have to seem in life to get those emotions to register on the camera.

...

Sam finishes dressing quickly and when she comes downstairs, Grant sees how stiff and uncomfortable she is in the costume. He hopes that this is the kind of unnaturalness that translates well on camera.

“Hey, Sam, before the others get back, I wanted to say thank you for coming and giving this another shot. I know I wasn't very easy to work with last time,” Grant says.

“It's okay. I like doing this. I don't always know if *you* know what you're looking for, but I'm happy to help you try to find it,” she concedes.

Maria steps inside to use the washroom. She bumps into Austin in the doorway. “We ready?” Austin says impatiently from the front step, looking around the yard. “I feel like an idiot in this costume.”

“We ready,” Grant says.

As he begins shooting, the sky clouds over, and he adjusts the lights. The waves break into larger and larger caps. The wind picks up and Grant knows that they will blow out the sound in the mics, but he keeps shooting, not letting the fact that he will have to get Austin and Sam to re-record their dialogue another day affect their performances. The yard grows familiar again as he brings his memories to bear on his

decisions on how to shoot the scene. The day itself becomes more and more familiar. The light through the low-cloud in the sky, the sound of the waves breaking, the spring smell of a neighbour burning their field.

Grant consults his lists. “Sam, can you say your line the way that Austin sounds when he gets offended?”

“Yeah! I know exactly what you mean,” she launches into an impression of Austin.

“I don’t sound like that,” he says, ruining the take, but making them all laugh.

“No, no, no, I only wanted Sam to talk that way,” Grant smiles. “Okay, that take was almost perfect, but one more without the chuckles, eh?”

“Where’s Jack,” Maddy asks, as she walks into the yard.

Grant turns his head to where Jack is playing – to where he should be playing. He forgets everything in the world around him aside from the space where Jack should be. He doesn’t hear the hum of the camera, or the concerned sounds of those around him, or the crashing of the waves against the naked granite bedrock along the shore. Nothing registers but Jack’s absence.

A thought comes to him almost unrecognized. The scene he was filming, not just taken from some random memory. Not just the texture of a place, but specific. The details come back, dreamlike. Playing trucks in the yard as a child, his father painting the house, his mother working in the garden. The day his mother referred to as the day he went missing. “You remember, it was the day Grant went missing. We even had the

neighbours out looking for ya.” Everything that seemed so familiar now pegged to a memory that he can’t unhook, even as he calls out the name of his son.

He yells out Jack’s name in every direction. His voice catches in the wind. He panics, but tries not to panic. He yells, but not in his own voice. He calls out in his father’s voice. He calls, “Jack! Jack! Jack!” He runs to check around the corners of the house. Yells in the kitchen door to Maria, comes back out and continues calling. He can hear the strain of keeping his voice even.

The memory that he was trying to film was the day that he walked to the point by himself, when he could just barely walk, and his father had come chasing after him. He remembers the place where he hid himself the day he went missing, and there’s Jack’s little body silhouetted by the slant of the newly setting sun.

Jack walks along the back of the scraped-bare granite bedrock of the point, just above waves breaking. Waves big enough to break a man. The past falls fully in front of Grant. He knows that he walked the same dangerous walk at Jack’s age. Run away, sulking, from his father who yelled after him, “Get back here before I tan your hide!” Grant yells exactly that now. Yells it before he knows what he is going to say. Something he’d never said in his life.

Then what had he done as a child? Run farther, wanting to escape, but also wanting his father to come and get him. Jack continues walking toward the point, farther toward the black rocks slicked with fine seaweed and spray. “Don’t you dare go one more step, boy, if you know what’s good for you!” he continues to holler out the lines, already written for this part. Jack keeps moving in the same direction. Grant had

wanted so badly for his father to follow him, but every time he yelled out, it made him want to get farther away.

“Jack!” And then, as if on cue, Jack falls down, out of sight, and Grant is running and running fast over big ankle-twisting stones on the beach, over smooth granite mound on the point, over to his child sobbing on the stone, sea spray breaking behind him. “Don’t scare me like that, boy.” Grant never calls Jack boy. He still speaks in his own father’s voice. He can’t seem to break character.

Jack holds his knees, bloody and bawling now. Grant knows how he feels, because he feels it, too. Not crying out of fear, but because he’s safe. “What did I say?” he thinks.

“Daddy,” says Jack into his shoulder.

“What did I say, Jack? Don’t go near the water, right?”

What Did I Say?

“Daddy,” Jack says again.

...

Behind the controls of his machine on Monday morning, Grant sits silently inside the sound of the motor. He removes stones from the clay earth of a future subdivision, now just a muddy field. The clay goes down for metres. Impossible to reach bedrock. Everything malleable. A company truck sits on the periphery of the site and backfires whenever someone starts it. The sound sharp enough to cut through the thick drone of the excavator engine. Grant, startled, raises his head toward the sound.

A cloud of stifled exhaust billows about and hangs low in the wet morning air. It moves slowly over the land – a little cloud, fragile as memory. He allows it to float by.

You don't have to hold on to it, he tells himself.

You don't have to hold on to it all.

Foundation

First, the game of crawling through the culvert that ran beneath the end of our road. I mean, not so much a game – just Sean daring me to wriggle through to the other side. Then I'd have the balls to dare him. Not one of those big culverts that you can kind of crawl through on hands and knees. Its walls only wide enough for us to fit our shoulders in and squirm through like eels. We would only crawl through on dry days, so we could dust the dirt off when we came out the other side. We tried it once on a wet day, or I guess I should say Sean tried it, and his mother gave him hell for a week about the state of his clothes. He came out looking like someone had wiped their ass with him, his mother said. She wasn't wrong. We got better at hiding it from then on. We crawled through that culvert over and again, squeezing out like newborns until it didn't scare us.

Funny that when I dream, I dream about that culvert and not the Foundation. In my dreams I'm trying to wriggle through toward the light at the opening, but I'm not a kid anymore, and I get stuck halfway because I'm too big. I can feel myself growing up against the concrete walls, and I just get more and more stuck. Sean calls to me, says that he needs to leave me. Then he's gone. The dull light comes in through the opening at the end, and that seashell sound of being alone closes in. Every time he leaves it starts to rain. Every time, I feel a wash of dirty water against my throat, then wake up. Every time.

...

WCW, Saturday afternoon on the TV. The day that Hulk Hogan became a heel. He came out all dressed in black, and started beating up on a referee. A real bastard. Nobody could stop him, he was still the Hulkster, after all – good or bad. That colour change of his outfit still sticks in my mind. You spend a childhood watching this guy, and he's your hero, and you see him every Saturday since you can remember, dressed in bright yellow and red like a mustard commercial. Then one day he comes out dressed like a heavy metal album cover. The colours of Saturday afternoon shows still thrilled me.

I wanted to hit something – the Hulkster himself, maybe. I didn't know what, and I'm still not sure what. I stood up from the carpet where I sat in front of the TV and turned the dial to *off*. I strained to listen through the silence for my father. That morning while Dad showered, I'd stolen a cigarette and some change from his nightstand. I made it a ritual that summer to take either cigarettes or cash from him in this way. Usually I only took one or the other. The yellow light that seeped out under the bathroom door shone just enough for me to see the MacDonald Export "A" lass. Her smile turned accusatory as I put the pack down.

"Go ahead and tell," I told her, "see what happens," and walked out with one of her cigarettes between my lips.

With the Hulkster's poor turn fresh in my mind, I decided I needed a smoke straight away. I retreated to the anonymous corner beneath the far end of our back deck, where I made my way through a summer's worth of my father's secret cigarette tithe.

When I think about it now, smoking that close to the house seems like asking to get caught. When someone lights up nowadays I can smell them before I see them. But back when people used to smoke everywhere, the whole world must have smelled like that. I know our house must've reeked of it. We don't register what's right there in front of us, day to day.

Mostly, anyway.

"Piglette..." I heard coming from the second floor of the house as I came back inside. I still closed the door quietly. "Piglette..." I heard again, wafting down in his mock-sweet voice. Mom called me her little piglet before she left, and he had taken this pet name and turned it into a jab. I didn't understand it. I still thought then, that the way he spoke to me had something to do with me.

"What were you doing out there, Piglette?" he asked, with notes of faux femininity. His voice boomed out loud enough that his interrogation could begin before I got in the same room as him. He lay beneath the bathroom sink with a wrench, and I could only see him from the chest down, laid out uncomfortably on the linoleum floor, his back pitched under the rise of the cabinet. He spoke into the underside of the sink. It gave his big voice a strange dead resonance. Every time he repeated the word – "Piglette..." – it sounded pinker, and I wanted to wash the colour off me.

"Playing" I said, into the cabinet.

"Funny sort of playing, that," he said as he stood up, his torso emerging from the cabinet, and wiped his hands with a rag. He turned off the flashlight that lit the dark

little space beneath the sink. “Where did you get the smoke,” he asked, loudly, but not yelling.

“I found it,” I said, not knowing what to say.

“Don’t make me do this, buddy,” he began. “I don’t want to,” he said, not bending down to talk to me. “When I was your age, if I lied to my parents, they’d knot the ol’ rope up and lay into me. Hell, my mother...” He broke off like his mind had changed gears without shifting.

“Dad,” I said.

“Just go play,” he said, kneeling back into the cabinet. The flashlight came back on and only his body stuck out into the bathroom again. In that moment, I almost wished that he hit me. That I could understand, at least.

With his back shrugging in discomfort against the corner of the cabinet he seemed in that moment fragile. His body looked enormous to me, and his muscles flexed taut in the way that hard work makes a body taut. Nothing like the Hulkster. Seeing him squirm beneath the sink, I knew for certain that if the Hulk body slammed him he wouldn’t land with the huge microphonic thunder of a real body slam, but break like an empty beer bottle.

I clenched my fists as I walked away from him. I could feel how the drywall would buckle under my knuckles, and stood, for a moment, where the hallway light shone against the wall like a target.

Instead, I headed down the road to see Sean.

His mother said that Sean snuck out somewhere into the back lot. I knew exactly where. I followed the path that Sean had beat in the bush behind his house, calling his name as I went. The forest grew in thick, nearly up to their back door. You couldn't see two feet into the woods until you made it to the clearing that opened up like a clubhouse. The branches still grew in tight enough to make the light diffuse in the clearing. We spent most of the previous summer with a hatchet cleaning the little brush limbs from the bottoms of the fir trees. The clearing that we cut out of the bush was just tall enough for us – an adult would have to crouch to enter.

His father would have been furious if he ever found our clearing. We kept a handful of his old Penthouse magazines and our stash of smokes in plastic containers lodged between the exposed roots of a tree. It always amazed me that Sean let us keep these things at his place. I never wanted to find out how my father would react.

When I found Sean, he stood over a frog laid belly up and placed on a scrap of two by four. He had this pocket knife; a miniature imitation of a utility knife that had a little dancing island girl emblazoned on the handle. He said, "Just in time! Please give me a hand with this operation, if you would be so kind, Dr. Jennings."

"Is it alive?"

"Nah. I found it in the grass. It wasn't moving, but I stabbed it in the head just in case." I felt ill, and began to tear up. I knew what he wanted to do with it.

"We're going to do a surgery," he said.

"That's dumb. Let's go to the Foundation instead." My fear slowly turned into self-reproach for not being able to deal with the frog's insides. Sean knew that the

Foundation scared the hell out of me, and by suggesting it, I thought I could get out of the frog situation without having to seem like a sissy. Sean pressed the tip of his little knife to the wet, white belly. Then he picked the frog up and said to it, "Fuck, yeah! I didn't think I'd ever get this pussy-foot back to the Foundation again," before throwing it with a hardball pitch against the trunk of a fat birch. A dead little smack rang out. I looked only long enough to see that it had burst like a boil. It made me queasy, but at least I didn't have to sit there in that awful operating theatre and act tough.

"We're out of smokes," Sean said as we walked toward the village.

"We can stop by Guy's on the way. I've got some money," I said, clutching the two-dollar bill in the pocket of my shorts. I always bought the smokes, always.

When I finally called him out on this, years later in high school, it caused a fight. I knew it would cause a fight. I wanted to cause a fight. "What do you mean I *never* gave you a cigarette? What are you, fuckin' counting?" he said, accusing me of something that couldn't be reduced to cigarettes. I think he wanted to hit me, but I just turned and left, not wanting to find out. I walked back from his house, along the gravel shoulder of the road. We didn't talk much after that before school ended. But, as kids, when we smoked, Sean never seemed to find any excuses to call me a fag, and for five minutes we could pretend that we, and only we, made the decisions in our lives.

Guy sold alcohol and cigarettes from a counter in the back of his house. Back then you had to drive over an hour to the closest liquor store, which meant Guy did pretty well for himself in a village that did not. You could buy cigarettes almost

anywhere, but Guy would sell them loose, and he didn't care if kids bought from him. Or at least didn't care if we bought from him.

The first time, we spent hours beforehand coming up with a plausible lie. When we finally had our story straight enough not to not get caught in any lies and went into the little room through his back door, he didn't even question us. We smoked the cigarettes in the clearing behind Sean's house in a state of disbelief, repeating the story we'd rehearsed back to each other, like it was the joke of the century, smoking the whole time.

Guy never really came out from behind his counter. He broke both legs in a fishing accident years before, and though he could still walk, he rarely did. He stayed just as hard and lean as a much younger man, but grew more gnarled by the year. An old oak tree planted there behind his counter.

He held his cigarette between his knotty fingers and considered us coolly when we entered. I handed him my crumpled two-dollar bill, and asked for eight cigarettes. He didn't take it right away, and instead turned behind his counter to fish the cigarettes out. As his fingers pawed at the paper package, the smoke from his own cigarette hung between his lips and rose around his face in wisps, and looked as if his white beard danced in the still air of the shop. I let the bill fall to the countertop, and waited, poker-faced. "Eight," he said confirming the order. He looked at the bill left between us. "A man always puts his money into the hand of the person he's buyin' something from," he said. I nodded and turned to leave. "How about, when you can look me in the eye when you hand me the money I'll start giving you some John Player's instead of them

Vogues, what ya say?” his French accent surfacing. I turned with my hand on the door. He made a gesture with his shoulders that underlined his question. “Them were what your mother smoked, before she took off,” he said. “Maybe she still smokes ’em somewhere, who knows.”

When I came out, Sean stood, at the end of Guy’s driveway. “You got ’em?” he shouted. The minor humiliation that Guy tried to saddle me with slaked immediately. He opened his backpack, and we put the smokes into our margarine container. Once the cigarettes were sealed, and safe, Sean turned and ran, leaving me to catch up. He headed straight for the Foundation. Off from the highway and down the greased-over dirt road that led the way.

The autumn sun already hung low in the sky, poised to fall. It had turned cold, and the wind off the water blew in stiffly enough that the dry grass surrounding the Foundation bent uniformly like it pointed the way to something we couldn’t see. It still undulated in the dry whisper of useless protest.

I always assumed that the Foundation was the concrete remains of some military outpost. Sean thought that it was the unfinished mansion of some millionaire. “Why wouldn’t there be windows all over if it’s a mansion?” I asked him. He just kept walking ahead. No reply. A rare victory that I dared not press.

To a couple of kids, a set of concrete walls standing alone along the shore, with noother buildings in sight was enough to light our imaginations on fire. Whatever seeds of fancy got planted, the Foundation seemed proof of them all. It jutted out from the side of a hill. Though it stood modestly a foot or two above the ground at the hill’s

peak, as the walls stretched toward the sea, and the grade dropped, the walls rose higher until they towered over the tall grass below.

The walls split the ground into cells, or rooms, some of which you could get in and out of by simply stepping into them. But, at the far end, some dropped deep down from a dizzying height, and mysteriously didn't have doors or windows. Like the culvert, another concrete and colourless place to test each other's resolve. The rules stayed essentially the same from place to place – we would shame each other until one of us had to start, and then the other, of course, had to follow. To complete one *pass* of the Foundation, you had to walk the length of the back wall to where it reached the farthest up from the yellow grass, then turn around and come back. The walls were about six inches thick – just thin enough to force you to walk one foot in front of the other, like a tight rope. Wide enough that you felt safe close to the ground, but out on the far edges it was easy to get pussy-footed.

The first room of the Foundation had become something of a community trash dump. Hard to say why people decided to leave their garbage here, but over the years the concrete cells - the accessible ones at least - filled up with broken barbecues rusted through like bunt paper, sets of bald tires with their cords coming through, the springs of old mattresses. Once someone left a box of old Christmas lights. We drew a strike zone on the concrete and used the bulbs for pitching practice. Anything that had failed in its function people would leave there. The farthest cells were filled only with broken beer bottles, dead soldiers, as my dad would say, and a few trees that grew inside the

Foundation. The trees inside, sheltered from the salt wind, grew taller than the ones surrounding.

We sat at the foot of the Foundation out of the wind smoking cigarettes, the wisps of white smoke drawing over the hard angle of the concrete like a chimney. Sean, dressed insanely in shorts and a t-shirt, sat shoulder to shoulder with me, nuzzling in for warmth, and I had the rare satisfaction of calling him a homo and holding it over him. He affected a lisp and a limp wrist holding his cigarette, playing it off as a joke, and shivering in the wind.

The one lamppost on the dirt road that lead to the Foundation lit the concrete walls in a flat yellow light that monochromed the night below it. I stubbed my cigarette against the granite we sat on, and Sean flicked his with alarming force against the Foundation, making it explode in a starburst of burning cherry. "So, we doing this?" he asked, hopping up as the sunlight gave way to lamplight.

"Was about to ask you the same question, there, princess," I answered.

"Well, you were the one with a hard-on to get out here. Now, let's see that footwork," he hopped up on the corner of the concrete lip, egging me on. The lamp turned on and off with a timer, and only stayed lit for half an hour at a time. It scared us too much to run a circuit of the Foundation without the lamp, and we only did passes the first few minutes after it turned back on. We timed it once, standing in the dark with our light-up Timex watches.

"I'd be happy to go first. If you don't want to, that is," I said, and he took the bait. He jumped up, but Jesus, that smug look made me want to kill him.

Last time, Sean walked the wall and did it fast, like no danger could get to him. Like he had something in his brain that he could turn off. When my turn came around, I took a few steps out – not even that high off the ground – and I started to feel the panic set in. That time I *knew* I'd fall. Almost like I wanted to. I imagined every rough and rusted piece of trash below me collapsing under my weight. I could feel the push of the wind, pushing me out, aching to see me fall. I turned around and made my way back. "I knew you'd get pussy-footed!" he shrieked with glee, and punched my arm.

I couldn't let that stand, and this time, before Sean finished his dick wagging swagger, I jumped on the Foundation and started walking. I wanted to do it fast enough that Sean didn't have a chance to shit-talk me. I wanted to do it fast enough that my mind didn't have a chance to catch up with the stupid action of my body. I did it fast enough that I don't remember anything about it, except the feeling of the fir branches that grew up over the lip of concrete brushing against my ankles. And the feeling of invincible pride when I got back to Sean and jumped toward him off the corner of the concrete like I could finish him off with a flying elbow drop, mimicking the microphone wrestling sounds wetly with my mouth.

Even as I landed, Sean stood ready to jump up and run his course. He moved with the same abandon he had before – the same abandon I had tried to emulate. Certainly not pussy-footed. When he got to the far edge, instead of doing the straight line – there and back – he turned the corner, like he wanted to run all three sides of the Foundation. We'd never even considered trying to walk the length of the back wall,

closest to the ocean, where the fall was farthest on both sides, before coming back to ground level. He wanted to walk the whole border of the maw.

“What the hell are you doing?” I yelled. He didn’t answer, but kept plodding confidently forward. Sometimes stopping to look back and smile as he lingered out on the ledge.

The darkness, when it came, came all at once. We hadn’t realized that the sun already fell from the sky and we ran under lamplight alone. We played it out too long. The moon hadn’t come up yet, and I couldn’t see anything except the faint light of the village behind us, out over the trees.

“I can’t see,” I heard him say, timidly into the darkness.

“Sean, don’t move.” The lack of light magnified our voices. The dull hum of the lamp’s lidless eye had gone, and even the wind had stilled. I could hear soft sobs hidden in the darkness.

“Fuck,” he said in a small voice. Said not to me, but like a prayer into the wind.

“Sean?” I said, waiting for my eyes to adjust to the dark. “Just sit down. The light’ll change in twenty-nine minutes. You know it will. We can just wait it out.” I waved my hand in front of my face – I could smell it more than see it. I heard him whispering his litany of curses, laying breathily on the vowels, “Fuuuuuuck. Fuuuuuuuck. Shiiiiiiiit. Fuuuuuuuck.”

“Sean?” I asked, making sure he was still with me. I could hear the gentle pats of his sneakers crunching the loose gravel of the concrete ledge as he started walking again. “Sean. Just sit it out, dude. Light’s coming back.”

“I can’t stay out here,” I heard him whisper.

“Please, just stay put,” I pleaded.

A step, then another, then a scuffed step, like gravel underneath a skidding stop on a bicycle. Then the tinkle of glass breaking beneath his body. His screams took a few seconds to come. Before I fully understood what I had done, I found myself sliding along the wall, roughly on my stomach, like a caterpillar on a branch. In the darkness it felt like crawling through the culvert. I called out to find him and moved toward his voice. Reaching my hand down into the dark I slapped blindly trying to find him. Then I had a hold of him and I pulled – tried to drag him to the top turnbuckle, but I didn’t have the strength. His hands too wet, and the concrete too cold.

“Sean. Sean. I’ll come back, okay? I’ll come back soon.” I twisted my wrist to free myself of his wet grip, and left. He didn’t want to let go. He hadn’t said a word.

I ran down the dirt road in the dark, tripped once or twice. Tripping in the dark didn’t scare me then, but running full speed into the night, I remember felt like falling forever.

When I got back to the village, I ran to Guy’s, and knocked on the aluminum of his screen door in frantic punches with the back of my fist. He sat in his easy chair, watching the news and the blue light of the TV lit his face. He looked toward the window, but didn’t rise and went back to watching. I knocked again, but more

forcefully and with my whole forearm. I left a red smear on the white frame of his door, and the colour startled me.

“I’m not open, and I won’t sell you anything if yer knockin’ like that,” Guy yelled as he swung open the door.

I stood on his doorstep, seeing myself in the light, covered in blood, not knowing if it belonged to me or Sean.

“Christ on high,” Guy said, opening the door for me to come in. “What happened to you,” he said, sitting me down on the chair by his door hung with old caps and scarves.

“I need to call my dad,” I told him. He looked me over, lifted up my shirt and examined my scrapes. “Or Sean’s brother.”

“Where you bleeding?” he asked, checking my pupils to see if I had knocked my head.

“Sean’s hurt pretty bad,” I said. “I need my dad.”

Guy made the calls from his kitchen. I sat at his table, trying not to bleed on his placemats or seat cozies. He hobbled fiercely around his kitchen with a cane carved from the branch of a tree. He had a way of putting his weight on the cane and hopping in big, lunging motions. “Let’s go,” he said, holding the door open for me and grabbing his keys from the single hook beside the doorframe.

Cigarette ash covered the inside of his truck. Butts piled out from the dashboard ashtray, and from a second one with a beanbag bottom that he kept beside the air vents. As soon as he got the thing in gear, bits of ash flew up like a snow globe. “We have to

wait for your father,” he said, struggling with the steering wheel a bit. “I only have a step ladder. Not big enough for the job.”

When we got back to the Foundation, the light had timed out again. I shuddered at the thought of Sean waiting alone and broken at the bottom of that deep cell in the dark, and I had left him there.

When my father drifted up to the Foundation and got out of the car, he looked cold, chiseled from stone. I just stood there, in the light from Guy’s truck, my arms pink to the elbow. I couldn’t do anything, so I waited.

Dad’s headlights shone more brilliantly on the Foundation than the lamp did. While he untied the ladder from the roof of the car, I went back to Sean. The first time I saw him, in the yellow light. Blood covered him from the broken-bottle-cuts. The blood seeped blackly through his Hulk Hogan t-shirt. A cartoonishly muscled body printed over Sean’s own.

He stopped crying when he heard my dad. I wanted Sean to cry, so I could too, and hated him for not. Dad stepped atop the Foundation, swaying under the weight of the ladder, and his own drunkenness. When he stood beside me, he dropped the ladder in and crawled into the cell. When he came back up, he carried Sean out on his back. “There’s a tough lad,” he said when we all stood back on the ground. Sean sat in the dirt, his ruined body shivering. The lamp flickered back to life, and same light covered us all.

I ran into Sean the other day at the Pogue on Barrington Street. We had a drink, standing at the bar together. When he moved to step outside for a smoke, he propped

open the pack with a nicotine stained finger and offered me one. I haven't smoked in years, but Jesus, I took one. Doesn't take much to fall back into it.

We lit up under the yellow light of the streetlamps and the fog shrouded everything enough to throw the whole city into soft focus. The chatter of the other late-night drunks on Barrington made the stone and concrete feel like a living room. Closed in, like.

Up the street, toward Spring Garden, some art school kids yelled in shrill tones. I couldn't quite make out what about.

"Caught a fuckin' bad one today, bud," Sean said, not having to yell for me to hear, like he did inside the bar.

"How's that?" I asked.

"Guy I work with, Andy – you ever meet Andy?" he asked.

"Don't think."

"Anyway, we're installin' this big fucker of a picture window in a new house over near Chezzetcook. Andy's fuckin' around all day. Actin' like a goof. He's crackin' jokes and doin' these dances. I mean, he's gettin' the boys laughin' pretty good," Sean said smiling into the smoke of his cigarette. "Sometimes he just gets us to the point where we have to say 'Andy! Shut the fuck up and get some work done!' But he wasn't too bad today. At least until he started doin' one of his little dances on the far corner of a new deck. Except, some of the boards aren't nailed down yet and he falls right off that fucker."

Some meathead up the street pushed an art school kid because he said something clever. Nobody threw any punches, though.

Sean stepped on the butt of his smoke absentmindedly, like a practiced dance step, and lit another. His eyes glassed a little. He held the pack open for me again. I took another.

“He fell right into the fuckin’ plate window. There ya go, Andy. There ya fuckin’ go,” he said, trailing off a little bit. “Never seen that much blood in my life, man. Ribbons. Fuckin’ ribbons.”

“Christ,” I said, keeping an eye on the scuffle up the street, hoping it wouldn’t get bad. “He’ll be all right, though,” I offered.

“Depends on what you mean by all right, I s’pose,” he said to his cigarette.

“I mean, how long did it take you to heal up after you fell into the Foundation?” I asked.

“What?” He said.

One of the art school kids screamed ‘Fuck. You!’ at the crowding pack of meatheads loud enough to echo down the street like sharps in my ears.

“When you fell into the Foundation,” I tried again.

“That?” his eyebrows raised in recognition. “I mean, that sucked, but Andy’s... he’s really hurt.” After a minute, he clapped me on the shoulder, “S’good to see you again,” and walked back into the bar.

Someone stepped in between the kids up the street and they broke up into the night. I walked home myself smelling like cigarettes I don't smoke and lit by nighttime city lights.

Journalism Day

On the last day of August, Jenna and I wove our way through the streets of the city's South End. Under streetlights we picked through the piles of odds and ends left out on the curbside, and we talked about stories.

Every turn of the schoolyear the students play a citywide game of musical chairs, moving from one apartment to another. Jenna and I didn't move that year, deciding to stay-put in the home we'd made together. We did need a few items, or we had the space for them, anyway. Tired of tightening the legs of our dining table every time we sat down, we walked the streets, looking to trade up.

Jenna talked about a book on journalism that she'd bought at the Salvation Army that week. She could go on and on when it was just the two of us.

"The most important thing is that a story says the same thing the whole way through," she said as I tested the wobble of a chipboard bookcase, rocking it back and forth on the sidewalk. "If you change the intention of the narrative, you lose the reader."

I stopped to pick through a pile of loose boards, none of which matched the others. "So how do you know what the story is before you start telling it?" I set the boards aside, one by one, as I sized them up.

"Well, that's the investigation part. Like I've been saying," she said, following me to the next pile down the street. In the fog and the yellow light, the abandoned bed frames and broken chairs looked like dollhouse furniture. Piles of dull pots and pans

sitting on top of particleboard cabinets alongside old shoes. Looked like conceptual art pieces – found object art in some trendy gallery.

I wanted to salvage this good-looking wooden chair, but the legs splintered into useless shards. Too much effort to restore. Broken just beyond the hope of restoration. I let the chair go and it tipped over into the grass.

“No, I mean how do you keep the story consistent? Don’t you get contradictory reports and stuff?”

“Well, you have to be really careful that you represent everyone fairly or they can come after you. Legally. But I guess that’s the *angle* of the story. You’ve gotta make a judgment call on the angle.”

“So, you make it up?”

“No, you don’t make it up. But to write a story, you have to know all the facts well enough to figure out the proper angle. You have to see it from every side first, then make a decision.” Jenna walked around a neat pile of broken kitchenware.

“Everything has a story if you just bother to look for it,” she continued. “I bet if we picked anything out of this old junk,” she carefully kicked a box aside with her Keds, “like this compact,” plucking a slim silver compact from somewhere in the pile. “It didn’t start as a piece of junk in a pile of junk, it had to get here somehow. Somebody bought this new, and for a minute it was the most important thing in the world to them. And then a little while later the owner gets bad news over the phone and she drops it and breaks the hinge.” Jenna opened the silver wings of the compact into two separate pieces to demonstrate her point. “All you have to do is look for the story and you can

turn any old mess into something that makes sense. You just have to know how to make sense of it, that's the angle."

"But you're just standing in a pile of garbage making stuff up. That's not journalism."

"I'm not trying to convince you that a make-up compact is newsworthy. I'm just trying to make a point."

"But you're not psychic. And you can't ask the compact, right? So *you* have to decide the angle. You're not offering some purely objective fact," I said as I flipped through a box of books that had begun to bulk with moisture.

"She tossed the compact back into the pile. "I don't have to be psychic to know how to tell a story," she said.

"I didn't mean it like that. I just want to know how you decide." I moved toward her, but she'd already taken off down the street. She faded into the fog as she stepped out of the light of the streetlamp and moved toward the next island of dollhouse furniture. I found a solid wood shoe rack behind the boxes of books. A few of the joints wiggled, but I could fix it, good as new. I picked it up and called to her, "How about this one?"

She didn't turn, but called back. "Fine."

I pocketed the compact before standing to follow her.

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There are two distinct types of furniture that you'll find left out for curbside picking. First, you get the Ikea, Canadian Tire, Wal-Mart cheapies that the kids from

out West buy when they get to town and need to fill up the apartments their parents pay for. This kind of thing works okay, but usually gets pretty rough by the time it gets to be second-hand.

The other type is the far-out-of-fashion-but-sturdy furniture handed down to the maritime students from Grandma, their great-aunt, or lifted from the loft above Dad's garage. The discerning curbside picker hones in on these. The 1960s Sears end tables with cracked laminate top, the same yellow and brown floral print couch that every second family owned in 1982. Every once in a while some well-to-do South End family leaves out a legitimately nice item, a dining table, or a dusty wing-back, but you'd have to catch it as soon as it hit the street. Plenty of us patrolling neighbourhoods. Including the junk shop owners who drive company vans around and collect for their stores. The guy who owns the shop on the corner of Granville confided in me that on occasion he can sell the same item twice, or even three times.

The primary mental block people have when it comes to curbside culture is the connection with garbage. You don't want to see yourself as the kind of person who picks through other people's trash. Pollution through association. But, once you've gone out for beers on the money you saved by furnishing an apartment for free, it becomes a lot easier to walk through people's glances as you and a friend carry an old couch six blocks back home.

The second mental block being the much more tangible issue of bed bugs. You learn to live in fear of those little fuckers. Nightmare material. Fumigation, and throwing out that good, free stuff that you've accumulated. Books in freezer bags for a

year. Bring in the bedbug dogs to sniff 'em out and see if you're really and for real rid of 'em. Thank god I haven't caught that grenade yet. Decent people make warning signs. The signs that say, simply enough, 'BED BUGS' strike the heart of the curbside picker more than any skull and crossbones WHMIS warning ever could.

You can't rely on everybody to act decent and put up the 'BED BUGS' warning, so sometimes you just have to live with the fear.

One night Jenna convinced herself, and me, that we contracted bed bugs from a lampshade that we found beside a warehouse on Strawberry Hill. She found a bug bite on the back of her knee and then her scalp started to itch.

"I knew it was bad news taking from an industrial area. Who knows what the story is with furniture over there. People don't live in those places!" she said, scratching as if she could scratch them out of our life before they found a foothold. "In storage, the place could be infested with anything and the owners wouldn't even know it."

We spent hours that night checking each other for bugs, like monkeys, naked under lamplight. She didn't find any marks on me. I checked her over three times, and combed through her hair, our new lampshade angled for clarity. When satisfied, we fooled around, had relieved sex, and fell asleep in the smell of each other's hair.

...

Of all types of curbside picking, the estate clean-out feels the strangest. Especially if you know the person. Most people will pay someone to cart away the junk

and take the good stuff off to auction if they don't want what their uncle / cousin / grandmother has left them.

Al's son knew what he had when his father left his collection to him. Al died a few days into September. His stuff lying out in the grass, by the curb of our street where the student middens hadn't even been completely picked up yet, made his passing seem real. Al didn't have a funeral, so the sight of his Tiger Oak dresser waiting on the corner to be taken away by a moving truck seemed like the closest I would get.

Al lived in a cramped apartment on the top floor flat of a small house which stood out on a street lined mostly with towering Victorians. We had him over for dinner every now and then. We tried to learn from him how to be good company. We met him for the first time at the Salvation Army at the foot of Queen Street. Certain faces stick out after seeing them often enough in the same place. It didn't take him long to single us out as fellow pickers.

"That's a great book," he said to me, pointing to the copy of *Death in Venice* in my hand. He went on to tell me about knowing Mann's daughter, Elizabeth who taught at Dalhousie. "She had *impeccable* taste," he said as Jenna walked into the conversation. "Much like you two, it seems," he said, gesturing to the dress that Jenna carried, draped over her arm. Jenna didn't say much – she let me do the talking - but I could tell that she fell in love with Al's opinions straight away.

When at our place Al told us everything about the books we owned but hadn't yet read, ready for us when we got around to them. Told us when we had done a good

job in picking some furniture, or when Jenna had put together a snazzy outfit from the thrift store. He knew the value of every piece, and the story behind it. “These couches aren’t worth much, but what a nice piece,” he said. “Hudson’s Bay carried these for six months in 1979 before the manufacturer went belly up. Not exceptional, but lovely. So of course, you can’t get rid of it.”

After he left, Jenna said, “Isn’t it great to have an audience sometimes? If the only people that know about our finds are us, it almost feels like they don’t exist.”

Al’s approval automatically elevated a piece in our esteem. But his silence cut.

Though he lived in a small apartment, he filled it with enough fine things to furnish Province House. He had a dozen desks and twenty tables crowding his living room alone. All of them antique and exquisite. Lamps with ornate shades sprung up around the room like trees in some genteel forest.

He carved out a small portion of this over-stuffed living room as a provisional sitting area near the entrance to his apartment. Two beautiful wing-back reading chairs that must have been from the nineteenth century, and an ornate Victorian chaise lounge. Not comfortable, but refined. Through the rest of the apartment, paths barely allowed passage through the clutter. One to the kitchen, and one each to the bedroom and bathroom. In the kitchen, piles of mismatched, but beautiful dishes stood in cupboards with their doors removed and on the counter. He served us tea in original Fiestaware mugs, but all three belonged to different sets and the colours didn’t match.

Chaotic, but Al kept the whole place immaculately clean. All the wood got polished and all the cushions vacuumed and the space smelled of Pine-Sol and lye. I

never saw him manhandle his collection, but he must have had a system, because things always changed from visit to visit. The enormous desks and tables would rotate and sit in completely different arrangements. Despite his slight frame, Al must have had enormous energy hidden somewhere.

Al took me with him a few times “to look for odds and ends.” He mostly shopped around at the thrift stores and the little junk shops of the south end and downtown. Once he found a teak Scandinavian end table at the Salvation Army. He showed me how to tell the real thing from the junk – the maker’s mark on the underside – if you can’t tell by the wood alone.

“You should learn about this stuff,” he said, “in case your accountant school doesn’t pan out.” His eyes looked to be on the verge of tears. I can’t tell if teaching me excited him, or that he had found the table. I never got near as good as Al at thrift store picking. Anyway, the prices are too high now that anyone can google what they have in their hand before they put a price tag on it.

Al’s son knew what his father had, so what we picked from the curb when Al died didn’t amount to a really good haul, but some surprises greeted us. “You’re getting rid of these lamps?” I asked Al’s son as he dropped them on the grass.

“Excuse me?” Al’s son seemed distracted, though I had his attention.

“The lamps. You’re throwing them out?” I repeated.

“They need a lot of work,” Al’s son said, as if that made them useless.

They only needed new wiring. I thanked him and took them home, along with a flower pot and an incense burner. We made a few more passes to see what else didn't make the cut.

On our last lap Jenna walked over to Al's old computer, boxed up and in the grass. "We've gotta take this" she said, as if *this* were the coup.

"I don't know, it's kind of a piece of junk. I mean Al had great taste, but that computer was purely function even when he bought it in 1990. Our phones have more memory than that thing. I wouldn't exactly call it a find."

"Well, I'm on the lookout for a typewriter so I can write without being distracted by the Internet. This serves the same purpose, right?" She said bending down to grab the box that held the computer parts and motioning with her head for me to pick up the monitor. The entire time we'd known Al, I had never seen him use his computer. He had it secreted away in a corner, in a space that seemed barely able to accommodate a computer at all. I can only imagine how the utilitarian plastic assaulted his sensibilities. Without the organized chaos of Al's apartment around it the computer seemed somehow indecent, alone in the street.

Jenna plugged it in at home and set up its clunky mouse and enormous keyboard on her work area. I went out in the hall where I'd stashed all of Al's broken lamps. I had set up a makeshift workshop for the other lamps that I had picked up that needed the same work. I sat with them and diagnosed.

Jenna wasted no time booting up Al's computer. The atavistic notes of Windows 95 opening struck deep into childhood memories. I listened to her clack the mouse for a few minutes, then silence as I untangled the tasseled fringe of a lampshade.

Later in the day, I went into the other room and I found her reading from a wall of text. "What's this?" I asked.

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Al befriended us both, but he and Jenna spent the most time together. Her eye could actually tell the difference between a handwoven rug and machine-woven one, between a mid-century modern table and a clunky knock-off. Once she found this rolltop desk at a junk shop downtown. The shop owner displayed old postcards in its pigeon holes alongside bowls of pins and other knick-knacks. When she came home she said, "I've just seen the most amazing desk, and it is only going for a fraction of what it's worth. Wanna come see it with me?"

At the shop, she displayed it like Vanna White showing off a grand prize.

"This is five hundred dollars..." I said holding up the tag, this fact containing everything that needed to be said on the matter.

"Yeah, but cleaned up a bit, it goes for thousands at auction. I mean, this is the biggest find we've ever come across!" she said, already taking the postcards from their places, like they alone formed the obstacle to ownership.

"Yeah, but five hundred dollars is five hundred dollars, and we don't have five hundred dollars. It'll take time to flip this, and we're getting in debt with my school.

This is a cool thing to come across, but not for us.” I put the postcards back where they belonged.

The next time we went to Al’s place he had the desk pushed in a corner awkwardly against another one of the same type. Al saw me looking it over and said, “I know that it’s a shame to have them both jammed up in a corner like that. Pieces like that need room to breathe.”

“I don’t know,” I said, “I don’t think that you need to do anything special with something beautiful for it to continue being beautiful. We get to see your collection.”

“That’s sweet of you to say.” He considered me for a moment. “But I know it’s a shame to hoard all these things up here. Sure, they bring me joy, but they’re not out in the world doing what they’re meant to do,” he said.

He produced a little cloth, like you would use to clean your glasses, and gently polished the desk. “I don’t like seeing this beautiful desk cooped up in a little room. Better to let it stay stuffed with postcards at that junk shop. It’s just that when I see something that I know the value of and that no one else does, I feel a kind of ownership over it. I want to see this desk restored and in one of those beautiful houses in the Hyrdostone, or maybe down in Lunenburg. Somewhere better than this.” He stopped rubbing the desk. “But I suppose buying them is the only way I really allow myself to be selfish anymore.” He didn’t have any plan to flip anything that he bought. He knew that he was just filling his cramped rooms until he died.

...

When I came in the room, Jenna closed the open window like a child looking at something naughty. Only the unnervingly solid blue of the Windows desktop remained open. “What’re you reading?” I asked.

She brought the window back up. “There’s nothing on here but text files,” she said. “I know that I shouldn’t have looked, that I should have just erased everything and started from scratch, but you know, I felt like whatever was in there, Al doesn’t give a shit now.”

I walked over to her desk, nice looking but cheaply made, the weight of the computer caused it to sway slightly as she used the mouse to navigate back to what she had open before. “All his letters. I think he typed them here and printed them out to mail them,” she said. Even Al’s use of technology seemed somehow antique. “There are hundreds of them, and I’ve only read a handful, but I don’t know if I should read any more,” she said.

...

Around this time, our apartment began to look more and more like Al’s. We stuffed it with furniture that we found free or cheap. Not all good stuff, but stuff I knew I could fix. It didn’t matter that we already had a kitchen table, I found one nicer than ours – if only we spent a little time re-finishing it. It didn’t matter that we owned four copies of *The Corrections*, when you find a perfect condition hardback, you grab it up. Al said that the ones with the Oprah logo on the cover could go for some cash. I’d sell it eventually.

I understood what Al had said about his feeling of ownership. And somehow, every time I found something in the world that I saw value in where nobody else did, I had a sense that I ordered the world a little more by taking it home with me.

As our collection grew and I got better at collecting, Jenna became more and more enthralled with the idea of journalism. She read and re-read that same journalism book, it seemed. She looked everywhere for stories, writing histories for all our curbside finds. As she exhausted the stories our *things* told, the circumference of her interest expanded.

I could see the change in her when she caught the scent of something that would make a good story. When the server at our local pub told her that someone robbed the register earlier that week, she didn't just paste on her sympathetic face and remark, "What a shame." Instead she followed up: "Really, how?" leaning in.

"I took an order outside, to a table on the patio, and they came in while James went to the bathroom," said the server.

"Do you know who did it?" she flipped her receipt over on the table and reaching in her pocket for a pen that wasn't there.

"I'm ninety-percent sure I know who did it, but we don't have cameras, so the police can't really do anything on just suspicions." The server crouched down beside our table now, so our eyelines levelled.

"So, no violence?" Jenna asked.

"No, nothing like that," the server confirmed.

The questions flowed one after another. “Daylight or in the evening? Could you see? Does insurance cover that? What did the police do?”

Her face looked alien to me as she pieced the elements together into a story in her head. A story that she desperately wanted to know, to have an angle on, to get to tell. But, ultimately a story for which she had no outlet. One that nobody asked for, and one that she had no business pursuing. As she asked her questions, I finished the dregs of my beer.

...

Funny what we tell our computers. I guess even before the Internet, they seemed like machines that we could trust with our secrets. Nothing about them suggests our stories will remain safe with them. But something about being able to type whatever you can't say out loud onto a screen must have some appeal. Delete it forever. Hold on to it. Send it out in the world.

Al's letters scrolled across the screen.

“We shouldn't be reading these,” I said. “Al treated us really well, and it isn't fair to sneak around on him like this.”

“I know,” Jenna said, clicking away. “But that's why I need to keep reading. I can't imagine Al saying these things. To anyone. Besides we aren't hurting anyone now by looking.”

I left the room and tried to find places for the lamps I had just finished repairing. The rest of them beautiful, but broken. I would have to put new sockets and

wires in the lot of them. I had a desk in the front hallway where I kept all the lamps that needed this treatment. It would only take a day or two to fix them all.

Jenna kept reading.

“Come here,” she called a while later. I went.

“Look, a bunch of letters addressed to us,” she pointed with the mouse.

I looked over the first paragraph: “...a cunt and a half-wit...”

“He never sent this to us,” I said.

“He must not have sent any of them,” she said, turning around. “It’s like years of screaming into a pillow. He wrote letters to everyone. All vicious. ‘... a cretin who shouldn’t be permitted to reproduce...’ Some of them are pretty hard to take, actually.”

“But he kept it all for himself. We didn’t know him at all.” I touched the screen with my index finger.

“We knew him, but only the part that he let us see,” she said, closing the file and scrolling through the next. “This is the rest of a story we could only see part of.”

“No,” I said, “this *is* the story. Al was a piece of shit the whole time.” I turned to go back to my lamps. “If I read another line, I don’t even know if I would want to keep the stuff we pulled from his goddamn lawn.”

“He wasn’t a piece of shit. He’s still the same person that we knew, the same person we spoke with over dinner. We just have new information that we have to try to fit into the story. We didn’t know the whole story he was trying to tell us. Now we can hear it.”

“I don’t think you should read anymore. You should delete these, babe. These aren’t for us, even if they have our names on them. I’m going to pretend that I didn’t see them.”

She read on.

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Not long after she’d read Al’s letters, Jenna told me her idea for Journalism Day.

“I just feel like everything I see hides some story, some angle that I haven’t exploited yet. If I can just crack it, I can understand things a little better,” she said from the couch Al said never to sell.

“I think I know what you mean,” I said, as I put up new curtains over the living room window. “Like if you can get the pieces of the story, you can make the world a little smaller.”

“Bigger, actually,” she said, her face contorted in a sad smile, reflected in the still un-curtained window.

Journalism Day was one day a week where she went out and tried to find a story. Not to publish them, or even necessarily write them up, but for her.

“I don’t know why, but I just want to be able to do this for myself,” she said. “Maybe if I get something good, I can take it to *The Coast*, or somewhere.”

“Do you want to publish them?” I asked. “You don’t have to, you know. You can do it as a hobby and enjoy it. I mean, even if you do write them up, you can just keep them for yourself. For us, I guess.”

“Maybe,” she said.

“Could be fun,” I said.

I started to think about her out in the city, alone, asking questions that people might not want to answer. “Maybe I can come along, too,” I said as I fitted the second curtain into place. “There, that’s better,” I said, changing the light in the room.

...

We both walked the city for a few hours, and I felt better that I had decided to come with her. The weather had turned. The leaves hadn’t started bursting into colour quite yet, but you could feel the change in the air, pushing them to the verge.

I brought along the little pocket compact that she’d thrown back like a small fish, just because it was broken. I’d finally replaced the hinge the previous night, and I wanted to surprise her with it. But first we had to finish with Journalism Day.

“Where to today?” I asked.

“I’m going back to Rogue’s to see if I could find out any more about their robbery,” she said.

“Again? What are the odds something newsworthy happens there again so soon?”

“Yeah, I suppose you’re right.” She slowed her pace but didn’t turn around.

“What about that new condo on Hollis Street?” she said.

“I mean, fine, but not much news there either,” I said. “We know about that from *reading* about it in the news.” We walked a few blocks. “Oh! do you want to pull into the Salvation Army real quickly, since we’re here?” I said.

“No,” she said.

“But we’re right here.”

“It’s fine, you can go,” she said. “I’m doing what I planned for today.”

We went on, and I watched her quietly as she continued shyly, as always, slinking from place to place. I knew she wanted to dive into a story, but that’s not the way cities work. In the city everyone hides their stories from one another. It’s true that when you walk down the street a dozen stories hide behind every door and window you pass, but doors and windows tend to stay locked. And as long as she didn’t find a story, she would stay locked as well.

I felt the weight of pride in the small gift in my pocket. I knew that I could cheer her up with it when she couldn’t manage to make the most of Journalism Day.

“If you find someone willing to talk to you, what are you even going to say your credentials are when they ask?” I asked her.

“I’ll think of something,” she shot back.

We moved from shops to offices to street corners. Sometimes she just bluntly asked the shop owners and clerks if anything strange had happened recently. Her blunt approach worked no better than her sly one.

We drifted down toward City Hall. My stomach growled that we’d missed supper. It was getting cold, but she refused to go home. We bought a couple of slices at Venus and sat on a chilled bench in Parade Square. We ate them quickly but they cooled off in the wind before we finished.

She sat beneath the anachronism of Britannia holding her laurel wreaths before the spire of city hall rising above us. I reached in my pocket and offered her the compact.

She took it, and thanked me. She opened it and looked at herself in the little mirror, then put it in the big pocket of her coat beside her notepad.

“I’m going inside,” she said.

“Great,” I said, hurt that she’d been so casual with my gift.

I didn’t follow, because she’d come out straight away. I stayed on the bench and waited. Men and women in expensive clothes crossed the parade ground on their way back to their cars and condos. I tried to imagine what thoughts rolled through their heads, but couldn’t think of anything beyond hurrying home to get out of the open air and the wind. Getting back to where they could manage the world on their own terms. They were closed books aside from that.

I waited long enough that the sun began to go down and the street lights came on. The windows of the occupied offices lit up with a soft fluorescent glow. I got up and went to the side entrance of city hall where I could see the entire front hallway from west to east.

Jenna stood there in her good, AI approved clothes under the fluorescent light with a notepad in hand talking to some councilman or another. Beautiful furniture lined the hall on both sides, on display for anyone. The city kept it all as well taken care of as any armchair or rolltop could hope.

The light faded from the courtyard, and the wind started to bite harder. I tried the door, but it was locked. After hours. I watched her through the window in the big wooden door as she forgot herself more and more. She wasn't in her head, but out in the world, and she stood on equal footing with the man in front of her. I wondered what story she could piece together from the stray bits she collected in there. What story she wanted to tell and what angle she was going to take.

What problem did she need to work out, right from beginning to end?

"It isn't just the angle," I remember her saying. "But once you have all the information, you have to understand what it adds up to. A story becomes complicated when you're too close. And especially then, you don't know what its saying until it's over. Things surprise you."

I gave a little knock on the window of the door. They both looked my way, then she asked him another question.

The Punch

First, the broken tooth. Four years ago, Sean head-butted me in the face and I got that copper taste in my mouth. It moved through my sinuses like a wave before I even felt the pain. My tooth fell on the rug between us, bouncing once. So much smaller than it felt when it was in my mouth.

Sean scooted on his ass back across the carpet and put his hand over his mouth. Over *his* goddamn mouth.

“Holy shit! I’m sorry,” he exhaled, getting up and backing away. “I didn’t mean to,” he said from two strides away.

“Just go,” I said, plucking the piece of tooth from the carpet. I held it in my palm and delicately picked the strands of carpet fluff from it.

“Shit Dunc, you okay?” he asked, moving even farther from me.

“Get the fuck out of here,” I said as coolly as I could, enunciating my words and closing my fist around my own tooth, so I wouldn’t lose it. Sean trotted out the back of the house, smacking the screen door and letting it *phhhhhht* behind him. I didn’t see him the rest of the day. I had to tell Mom myself. Told her that I fell down. Fell down on my tooth!

I spent the rest of the day waiting under the dull fluorescents of the dentist’s office, not wanting to pick up a magazine because I had to hold on to my tooth.

Sean sneaked in late that night – I heard the screen door farting away – and went right to his room, slinking away from me, and our parents. I couldn’t eat solid

foods for the rest of the week. Like a kicked dog, Sean kept his eyes on his own plate during meal times. No matter how hard I glared over my bowl.

At thirteen and fifteen, fights between us lost the flavour of fun. They started tasting like broken mouths.

When we were kids, we fought all the time. Not always all-out, I'm-going-to-get-you type fights, but sometimes it came to that. Like the time he hid my shoes, and I couldn't go to the movies with Mike Matheson. I said, "Why did you do that, you friggin' baby," and he lost it on me. Couldn't stand me calling him a baby. We rolled around the living room until we wore ourselves out. Couldn't *really* hurt each other. Just little kids. Wouldn't really hurt each other. Still brothers, after all.

But when one of us did hurt the other, like the broken tooth, the pain immediately changed the tone. Not just that Sean got scared of being in trouble – he never gave a shit about being in trouble – but when your brother is in pain, it sobers you. Maybe sobers you more than experiencing the pain.

Not this time.

This time, he kept coming at me. And I didn't know what the fuck to do as he came at me, nose broken and bleeding.

I brought Amanda home that day. I knew her from high school, but didn't get the guts to really talk to her until we saw each other in the Intro to Sociology lecture theatre, Tuesdays and Thursdays. Knowing someone even a little bit in a room full of strangers makes it a lot easier to walk up and start a conversation.

During the first lecture she kept underlining what the professor said verbatim, in her textbook and leaning over to show me. I liked the smell of her shampoo. But, I mean, he was just repeating whole chunks of the book from his slides. After giving us the plagiarism lecture! I took her book and drew a cartoon in the margin of someone flushing dollar bills down the toilet.

She let out this huge “Ha!” and we both slunk in our seats as the whole theatre, professor too, turned to us.

She used to wait for her dad to get off work to drive back to the bay after class. I started driving her home instead, so she wouldn’t have to wait all day to get back out of the city. When the conversation lulled during our rides I would always put on some Beatles CDs.

“I can play this one on guitar,” I said, turning up the volume on “Help!”

“I know,” she said, “you tell me every time that you put it on. And “Day Tripper,” and...”

“I’ve just been playing it lately, I guess,” I said.

“I love it,” she said. “Such an upbeat song, but the lyrics are depressing as hell. It’s an actual cry for help, dressed up like a pop ditty.”

“Yeah, pretty bleak.” I turned the song down a bit so I could hear her.

“Not bleak, exactly, but getting there,” she said. “He’s just trying not to let himself go. Like he knows what’s on the other side of letting go.”

I turned the CD back up and listened to the guitar part. I still couldn’t get it just right. “Maybe I can play it for you sometime,” I offered.

“Can you show me how to play it?” She said. “I know the drum parts, but I want to know how every piece fits together.”

“Sure!”

When we got to the house, a pot of chili warmed on the stovetop, but no cars in the driveway. I led Amanda in, and asked if she wanted a drink of anything. “No thanks.” She looked beautiful in the afternoon light. The thought of making a move flew through my mind, interrupted by a G chord coming from upstairs.

“The hell?” I said as I bounded up the stairs. I heard a few more chords and some noodling coming from my room.

“Yeah, you just cycle through the effects by tapping the pedal,” Sean’s voice explained to someone sitting on my bed.

“What do you two think you’re doing in here?” I said, blowing into the room.

“Hey! I wanted to show Rick your setup in here. He’s a hell of a player, man,” Sean said, moving around the room excitedly. “He just figured out the solo from that Yeah Yeah Yeahs song. He figured it out in no time.”

“It’s pretty straightforward,” Rick said, like learning something by ear is no big deal.

“Well, why don’t you get him to show you on his own guitar?” I said to Sean. Rick put my guitar down on the bed and moved away from my stuff.

“He did show me on his guitar. At his house. But we’re not at his house right now, and we have a guitar here, so stop being a shit and let him rip out some tunes.” Sean moved like he wanted to pick the guitar up off my bed.

“Duncan, why don’t you show me how to play the song now?” Amanda’s voice cut in from the door frame.

“We don’t have a guitar. *I* have a guitar, Sean. My guitar, and I don’t understand why I would come home to someone else playing it.”

“Listen, sorry Duncan. I didn’t realize it was a big deal. Maybe I can bring mine over sometime and we can jam,” Rick offered, hands up.

“It’s just a guitar Dunc,” Sean said in that snotty way of his. “Rick’s a good player, he knows how to treat a guitar.”

“How do I know that?” I said, turning off my amp and unplugging my guitar. “I don’t know him from Adam,” I said.

“He isn’t just some random person in the house, he’s my friend, Dunc,” in that snotty voice again. “And he’s a real guitar player.” Sean pushed my shoulder to turn me around. A *real* guitar player.

I slapped his fucking hand away from me and put my guitar back down on the bed. He pushed me again, harder. Not like he wanted my attention this time. I lost my balance, and stumbled back a bit into Amanda who stood behind me. The first time I touched her.

“The fuck do you think you’re doing?” I said, getting my balance and grabbing him by the collar and trying to move him toward the door. Get him out of my room. Out of my face.

But he grabbed me and started pushing back, and then we got into it. We fell into the hall, and slipped on the carpeted stairs. I could feel us going down together.

Both of us trying not to fall, but for all our effort we only managed to crash down on the landing next to the kitchen.

I got my feet under me and stood up, holding Sean tight in a headlock. “Do you give?” I asked. He wouldn’t. He twisted around like a weasel and leveraged himself against me, started pushing his way out of the headlock. Must have looked like he was ready to rip his own head off. And he made all these crazy choked noises. I had a good hold of him, but started to pick me up with these little lifts. It messed my balance all up and we both tumbled into the kitchen.

I went head first into the stove, spilling chili all over the goddamn place. All over the white stovetop, the counters and the linoleum. The element started smoking like crazy and everything smelled like char.

“You moron!” I said. “Look what you did.”

He came at me again, and we smacked into the cupboards, which made a godawful clacking sound every time we made contact. That’s about when the gloves came off and we really went into one another. We started hitting the walls so hard, it felt like we’d break the house. It really shook a few times. The smoke alarm started going off about the time that we got to the door.

He pushed me right out the screen door, which didn’t *phhhhhht* that time. I had a second to pick myself up before he rushed outside after me. “That’s it. I’m done,” I said as he kept on coming toward me.

“Like hell,” he said.

“Sean. Done. No more,” I said. And I hate myself for this, but my voice cracked right then, and I couldn’t muster any tone of voice worth listening to. He went to grab me, and he couldn’t listen to reason, even if my voice hadn’t cracked. I gave him a sharp pop in the nose. I thought to wake him up. Smack some sense into him.

Anything but that.

I think I broke his nose. He bled an awful lot. He went down with that shot, but it didn’t slow him any. He just got sloppier. A little more unbalanced. The blood smeared over his mouth looked like a sunburn where he’d wiped it. He stumbled, fought gravity hard, and then came after me again.

My knuckles throbbed. Almost hit him again, but I couldn’t close my fist. It swelled faster than I would’ve imagined, and it felt clumsy, like it had turned into a mitten.

I had meant to end the fight with that punch. Meant it as an older brother saying *that’s enough. Or don’t you see how far you pushed me? Far enough to hurt you.* A scream in the private language that we’ve spoken our whole lives. He didn’t seem capable of translating any sort of message then, no matter how plain.

He started swinging at me with these big haymakers. Wide arching punches meant to knock me over. Knock me right out. Still off balance and sloppy in his approach. Mad enough that he told me the arc of every punch in that private language. Didn’t even have to be fluent.

“Stop, Sean. Stop,” I pleaded after it looked like he might have punched himself out.

“Fucking kill you,” he said under his breath, panting. Didn’t sound like him anymore. Didn’t sound like Sean talking to me.

“Stop. I don’t want to fight you.”

I sidestepped another wild punch, and began to walk backward, down the hill, away from the house. He spun around with a blind backhand and caught me perfect on the tip of my chin. Half an inch higher, if he hadn’t just grazed me, it would have been a knock out. Worse, maybe. I fell backward down the hill, rolled over. I couldn’t stop myself from tumbling. I slid the last few feet in the wet, muddy grass at the bottom of the hill, then just let myself slump in the mud. Until I felt the sting of Sean’s shin catch me in the ribs.

He had fully let go. He wasn’t lying, he did want to kill me.

I managed to crawl out of the mud. I stopped trying to fight back at that point. Just did my best to keep Sean from really hurting me. Or himself. I held him down as best I could. But he bucked like he had no end of energy, and goddamn he was hard to hold, slicked with mud.

He got on top of me, sat on my chest, and I felt myself sinking into the ground. Felt the mud flood my ears. Could taste it, indistinguishable from the metal tang of blood. Mine, Sean’s. He pulled me up by the collar and raised his fist. I played the only angle I could – I spit mud in his eye. Not my proudest moment.

I managed to scramble away, kicking him into the mire. I ran as fast as my body let me, back to the house. I didn’t stop to look behind, I just ran.

When I got inside and locked the door, I didn't stop. I knew he was seconds behind me, and he'd go around to the side door. I slipped through the house on sloppy feet, beat him to the door, and locked it. Heard him banging.

I sat, back against the locked door, his pounding coming through, thumping in my spine. I could hear him cursing me from the other side. A pool formed beneath me.

Amanda sat on the stairs. Rick had already taken off, so she was alone in the house with me.

"My father is on the way," she said.

"I'm sorry," I said.

The noise outside subsided, and Sean took off somewhere down the shore.

Amanda went outside to wait for her ride.

That night, after I showered, after I cleaned the chili, after I put the smoke alarm back on the wall and cleaned the mud off the door, I sat down with my guitar. I plugged headphones in through the amp, so I could play in private. The tone of the chord I strummed didn't sound anything like George Harrison. I unplugged all the effects and played it clean. Started from scratch.

I got out the book of Beatles chords from above the bed and leafed through to find where I'd left off. I plucked out a few notes of "Help!" but they sounded naked without the jangle I'd fine-tuned for the song. The sound in my ear didn't sound right. The pick impossible to hold in my swollen mitten hand. The guitar felt wrong. Like I didn't recognize the feeling of the wood I'd held a thousand times before.

I flipped the page and read the music for the next song. Another one I know well. “You’ve got to Hide Your Love Away.” The chords came simply – G,D,F,G,C, repeat. The clean sound reset in my ears, and fit the shape of the song. I didn’t need to adjust any variable. No need to learn the solo, no need to find the complications. I could just strum the chords and hum along. Even my damaged hands moved easily over the fretboard to make the shapes. It sounded right because it felt right.

I played it over and over that night. I lost myself in it like a prayer. Like a mantra. The feeling of the guitar came back. The action felt right the more I played, remembered how the strings liked to move. The pain in my hand dulled. I could make the guitar do what I wanted it to do, long as I didn’t stop playing that song.

I played for a long time. Sean stayed out somewhere into the night. I stayed up and waited for the sound of the screen door. After a while I started to wonder what it would sound like with accompaniment.

Right on the Line

I walked into the woods, where the stunted scrub pines grow so close together that I had to push through them like a field of turnstiles. Each brush-through kicked up the scent of sap and needles. It all looked grey and dead but that smell told the truth. Green life fought everywhere to rise above the grey, struggling to grow into barren spaces.

I made my way into the Crown land that bordered the highway and into the middle of the province. Communities dot the shores of Nova Scotia, but the middle of the province has, for the most part, stayed as forest. Empty and unfinished. Except for the thousands of camps slapped together by kids and drinkers and nominal hunters looking for a fall back zone in their lives. Rough tarpaper affairs, just water-tight, and dark as caves inside. The farther into the woods you go, the fewer of them you're likely to see. Toward the middle of the province, even these provisional outposts tend to peter out and give way to logging roads or untouched land.

The sight of the clear-cut winded me. My memory of this place had trees thick in every direction on all the rises and falls of the land. Now all knocked down and trucked away. It hit hard and unexpected as hearing that a friend had died. That they had been dead a while already. The land remains, but undeniably lesser than before.

At the top of a steep hill – I hesitate to say mountain – falling down into a small valley, only big enough to have a bog, and not a river at its bottom, I saw miles and miles of clear cut, nothing but a carpet of brush cut offs and unsaleable wood, stumps

and, where I could still see through to the ground, mud and rutted tire tracks. The entire constellation of camps and shacks that orbited the communities along the shore found and dug out of the ground. Weeded.

I walked around in it for a bit, divining by memory, but I couldn't find my way in the changed landscape. I depended on finding the trail and the mile markers of familiar camps along the way. I wandered to where I thought I'd built my camp and sniffed around for a while for boards left behind, maybe my old potbellied stove that I'd hauled in on a makeshift sled. Nothing. Ploughed underground? Taken away?

I walked over another hill and found a cultivated patch in the next valley. All the brush cleared to the sides in a square like snow shoveled off the pond for hockey. All the stumps up-rooted and hauled. A Stone Age garden, planted in roughly even rows. I should have known it on sight, but it seemed so alien that I wandered into it without thinking. A little pot garden. Not huge, but quite a bit of money for its owner. When the wind would cut out, the smell came in, thick and familiar.

I stood in the smell and listened to the wind blowing unchecked in the valley, riffing through the leaves. Over the tops of the plants, I saw someone cresting the hill and I walked in the other direction, heading back to the highway. Half-way up the hill on the other side, I heard him yell in clipped *HEY!*s after me. I ran. Nothing there belonged to me anymore. I ran and hoped that the owner didn't recognize me, and I made a point not to look back at him. Took care not to recognize him.

He had the right to make a couple of bucks, and I didn't want him thinking otherwise. At the top of the hill, I turned back into the wind, saw a denim jacket

moving among the swaying rows. Checking on his plants, ensuring they stayed unmolested. A shepherd among his flock.

They knocked the whole forest down and only left one patch of grass for some old guy to wring a few bucks out of. Someday it might grow into something else, but for now, the mud crusted up the soles of my shoes. The soot left on the brush from fires that rolled through the hills after the clear-cut left black pastel marks on my pants. I looked like the first draft of something when I came out on the gravel road where I'd parked. I stood filthy beside my truck, thought about taking my pants off before getting behind the wheel so I didn't fuck up my upholstery. Instead I took the rain coat from the back and laid it over the seat.

All the way home, I kept eyes for any cars that might belong to Denim Jacket trying to follow me home. Like approaching an animal, when they feel cornered they become dangerous. I left not knowing if Denim Jacket felt cornered.

The trees along the highway bothered me; their façade offered a thin front of western shopfronts on an old movie set. Convincing on screen, but on set you saw them as the phoniness of the cardboard cut-outs. Just some cheapie exploitation movie. Just a line of trees on one side, the ocean on the other. At least nobody can fake the ocean – endless as the night sky, impossible to stake a claim on. You can stay on a boat for a while, but you can't build yourself a camp – can't pretend that you could carve out a piece. It's just the ocean. Take comfort that it can't be conquered or picked clean. You can't just knock that fucker down.

I had heard it around that Billy Morash had come home from Vancouver. He'd moved away after high school, and got himself into TV. A big deal the way people talked about it around here. He never showed up in front of the camera, or anything like that, but we knew the names of the shows he worked on. Even if none of us watched what he made, the idea that he was a part of the TV world stuck in our heads. When he did come back, everyone was all smiles and glad hands. That he'd brought a boatload of jobs along with him didn't hurt his reception. He came back as part of this reality show that went out on the boats with the fishermen. They cut all the footage together to make it look like the waves in the bay blew up like the mouth of hell. Like the most dangerous job in the world.

Billy had the reputation growing up as a little softer than some of the other kids, so he had a hard time in school. Once, as kids, Mike Newcomb, Billy and I walked along the shore to find a dead seal we'd heard washed up on the rocks. We found it hollowed out and rotting and the smell was hell from twenty paces. Mike poked at it with a stick, which didn't do much. Nothing but the husk of what had once been a fat body. Its eyes already eaten away, and a swarm of flies hung thick about the skull. It made me sick to my stomach to see flies buzzing in and out of its empty sockets. Billy said, "Oh, I can't bear to look at it."

He always caught shit for speaking so properly, and Mike and I laid into him. "Oh, I can't bear it!" we laughed, backs of our hands pressed limply to our foreheads. That came to be the thing that defined Billy. He never heard the end of it. In the

moment it made my life easier to have that to hold on to, so that I didn't have to admit how sick the sight of the flies made me.

I could see Billy from a way down the road as he walked toward the house. I opened the door before he had a chance to knock. Invited him in for some tea. "Jesus, s'good to see ya again!" he said. "I've been away for so long. It's nice to be home for a stretch."

Once we got comfortable, he got down to it. "So, I'm here to make that show, right. And the production wants to hire a bunch of the boys from the area to work on set. Nothing major, but it's good work for a bit. Mike tells me that you haven't been out on the boats this year, so I's wonderin' if you wanted to pick up some work until we're done shooting." He sat across the table from me smiling, and I said, yes, I surely wanted to. The show smelled of bullshit from the beginning, but when Billy asked if I wanted a job, I happily shut my mouth.

Most days it was as simple as carrying stuff on and off the boats, and most of the guys I worked with were pretty good guys. Actually one of the best jobs I've had, especially as I didn't have to leave the bay to find work. For a man who doesn't own a boat but wants to stay home, this kind of job comes about only rarely.

The first day of shooting, we went out on Mike's boat. The spray from the waves splashed us warm and invigorating. If you know the feeling of winter spray your body will react out of muscle memory and flinches with every splash. But when the water lands warm on your skin and you know the ocean's going easy on you – that is a beautiful feeling.

I hadn't been out on a boat for quite some time, and forgot the sound the tethered traps make as they go over the side. The thwack of traps hitting water, and the pings of the rope in between as it pulls taut. Inexorable once they set to going.

Billy directed everything and Mike didn't mind. When the boat hit a bit of chop, Billy would take Mike and the boys aside and tell them to make it seem like they were getting tossed around by a Nor'Easter. When they hauled in a good catch, he told them to act like they saw the first rain in a hundred days. Everyone played along. With the money from the show, they nearly got paid twice for every lobster they hauled in.

Would have been a good deal even if they didn't catch a bloody thing.

As a kid, Billy never sounded like one of us. He always spoke properly – never dropped his 'g's and sounded more or less like he was born on the CBC instead of St. Margaret's Bay. But on the boat, when he talked to the boys, I could hear him laying the accent on pretty thick. It came natural, it wasn't like some leprechaun-cartoon impression of an Irishman, or a Foghorn Leghorn southern accent. It sounded right, aside from the fact that I knew him to speak properly before. I stood in the boat, tossing things up to the guys on the wharf, grabbing the production's stuff, but also helping out Mike and the crew along the way. We cracked jokes as we went along. But I could hear Billy off to the side, telling the same jokes in the same voice. He'd hear Mike say: "settin' the traps today took forever, but bringin' them back in took *two* fuckin' forevers!" Then Billy'd say the same thing to one of the crew when we got back to shore. It didn't sit right with me somehow. I couldn't say exactly why.

Nearing the end of the season we all went out on a grey day. Billy says to Mike, “We need to get some inserts to fill in places where we don’t have the footage. You mind if we get you and the boys doing some odds and ends?”

“Course not, captain,” Mike says, and the boys all laugh.

So, Billy has them doing this and doing that. But then he says he wants to make it look like the waves lash up, and about to knock us all overboard.

“That’s about as calm a sea as yer likely to come across, there,” said Mike helpfully.

“Don’t worry. We can make it look good. We’ll shake the camera a bit,” Billy said rocking his hands by way of a demonstration. “You ever see Star Trek?” he asked.

Well, that got a laugh out of the boys. “Yes, we can do a Star Trek for ya, Billy. Not a problem,” Mike says, getting ready for his cue. Then Billy’s camera man shook the goddamn thing, and we all bumbled around like idiots.

Other than that, the first season went by without much fanfare. A small show that Billy told us wasn’t guaranteed to get picked up for more than a short first season. We had a little party at Mike’s house out at the end of the point there. The production sprung for some kegs of beer, and a stage and PA system. Rick Melanson and everybody with a guitar came down and took their turn on stage in Mike’s backyard. They sang whatever songs they knew. After a few beer Mike convinced me to get up and play one.

I started into a Rankin Family tune, and after a verse or two I noticed Billy, off to the side of the crowd, swaying drunk, tapping his pointy toes along with the rhythm

of my guitar. He stood on an outcropping of granite near the shore, just watching me. He may as well have had a camera right then. It doesn't make sense, but before I caught his eyes I was just singing a song, but after, I was performing. The crowd spread all over the house and the yard, only a handful of folks dancing in front of the stage. The lights were all pointed up at me. I looked out over the bobbing heads to Billy on the shore. Behind him the water just looked like a void there in the distance. Like existence just ended at the shore and you could walk off the rocks into outer space and float away. On dark nights like that you know the ocean's there to hear it, but I couldn't hear anything over the guitar and my own voice in the PA. But you can't stop playing. You have to stick it out until the dance is danced, then you can hand the song off to the next person.

The summer passed quickly as summers do. The cold wants to hurry back to us as quick as it can, jealous lover that it is. Billy and the crew returned, and sooner than expected. They got the go-ahead for a second season before the first had even aired. They came back for the fall lobster season with hopes that the harder weather would make for more drama. It did a bit, I suppose, but it never lived up to the harsh they wanted for the cameras. The seas can be cruel around here, but nothing like you see on those other shows in Alaska, or Siberia, or wherever. They had to try a little harder than expected to make things dramatic. Had to lean a little more on what Mike and the boys said about what was happening than what came across on camera.

The first season began to air while we filmed the second. The production came again to Mike's house and again they sprang for a few drinks, a few snacks. Quieter

than the wrap party, and indoors mostly, except for the few smokers that Mike's wife Cindy insisted go outside to do their business. No way, she said, was she going to let them smoke that old weed in her house. Not with her daughter, Sue, right there. I sat on the couch with Mike and Sue to watch the first episode. The room all cheered when they saw themselves, each other, on the TV. The music sounded like familiar, down-home music, but the cuts flashed by fast, and it all felt like some pumped-up version of the truth. When the 'plot' started in proper, it was just us onscreen. Our lives. No pretending we didn't see something of ourselves in the mirror of the TV. Playing the parts of ourselves. We sat there, watching a show set in Mike's house, while sitting on Mike's couch. Dizzying.

I watched the show through to the end. Clapped a little along with the rest of the crowd, when it finished. Everybody was all high off watching themselves and each other. Mike turned the TV off, and I could see us all, smiling and clapping like seals in the black reflection of the dead TV. I stayed for a bit, drank a few of the free drinks, shook a few hands that jabbed out in front of me, then I left. The next day I didn't show up for work. I didn't have a plan of action. I just didn't feel like going back.

I stayed indoors for a few days. I'd done it before. I had a few drinks, and I suppose the folks around knew me as the type to hold up with a bottle every now and then. Nobody bothered me for a couple of days. Mike came on the third. "How you holding up in here, buddy?"

"Doing fine." Mike sat down on the coach, and I walked around and picked up after myself a bit.

“Billy’s been asking after you. Wants to know if you’re coming back,” he said as he picked a pack of unopened smokes out from his front shirt pocket and laid them on the coffee table.

“Yeah, I don’t know. I think I’m going to take a little time, that’s all,” I said. Sitting down in the chair across from him.

“Well, I’m just the messenger,” he said. “But I want to remind you that it’s Sue’s first communion tomorrow. I know that everybody would be happy to have you there.” I sat forward and pinched the first cigarette out of the pack and said I’d be there. Mike patted me on the knee as he got up to go.

The next day, when I got to the church, someone with an expensive-looking camera was taking Sue’s picture. She posed beneath the birch trees that arch over the church’s driveway. Sue, in her new dress and the church behind her, all white as clouds against the grey and green of the morning. She shivered back into her jacket between camera set ups. I stopped on the way by.

“Hey Suzie. You look real pretty today.” She squirmed further into the down of her jacket beneath the compliment, and I walked on.

The door to the church glowed otherworldly as people passed through. The wide-open doors showed the warm yellow light inside, and it stood out strong against the blue-grey of the sky. When I walked in, I noticed the production’s lighting rig set up to the sides of the pews. I suppose a little girl’s communion can be made into drama too. I took a seat and waited for the service. I’m no good in churches. As soon as they start talking, I never understand. I’ve had the motions memorized since childhood, so

it's easy enough to fake my way. Rise here. Sit there. The lighting rig made the church seem even smaller. You could see the dust falling through the beams of light, slowly through the whole service. And that light drove the flies wild. I could barely pay attention to Sue up there, with all those flies buzzing around in that big empty space between us.

The next day I walked down to the government wharf to where they loaded up Mike's boat. I caught Mike first and told him how nice the service was. Billy next and told him I wouldn't be coming back. "Well bud, you gotta do what you need. I understand that. No sense in pushin' something if it ain't workin'." I said that was true and I appreciated his understanding, shook his hand and left.

When I got home, I picked up another bottle. I was going to set into a drink again, but I didn't want to just then. Looking around my own home, I realized that almost nothing in it was mine. The furniture, the books and records, hell, even some of my clothes, all leftovers from my father. He'd left me everything when he died, and I just moved in like nothing'd changed. Twenty years ago, and here's me, trying to move forward through time without changing a thing. Trying to live out a life that didn't exist anymore.

I watered a plant that my father had potted just before he died. It was huge, and took over an entire corner of the front room. Its branches were so long that it had grown over the screen of the old man's TV. I thought about trimming it down, but standing in front of the plant with scissors in hand, I decided to let it grow however it

was going to grow. I grabbed the bottle and left the house. Maybe the smell of the pot that shook some of those old feelings out.

The guys from the film crew and the local boys bonded almost immediately over the fact that they all loved to smoke up. Joints rolled right on the boat at the end of the day. Catch dropped off and filming wrapped. They stayed on the boat into the night, cracking jokes and passing joints. That was a more powerful glue than anything else. Giggles rolling out with the smoke from the cabin under the sodium street lights that yellowed everything after the sun went down. Conversations about whether some version of this too should go into the show. More laughs, more smoke.

I walked back out to the little valley, bottle of Captain Morgan in hand, to look for my camp again. I knew that when I ran into the Denim Jacket, I wanted to have a peace offering ready. Only a few months after my first run-in with him, but this time the ground felt more alive. Saplings sprouting where the brush was sparse enough to let in the light. You could already see how the forest was going to grow back in. A few years to go, but soon you wouldn't even know that it had been ripped up like this. Might be worth putting a camp back here. Stake out a good spot and keep to it.

I wandered for a good while. Lost again in the landscape where everything had been equalized. Blown over. Ditched and rutted. I could only navigate by the peaks and rises of the hills. After a time I found my way back to the pot garden. The sun was still high in the sky, and I just sat, opened the bottle and waited. A few hours. I heard Denim Jacket before I saw him. Every step of the way there is some snap or clack of dry branches and the rustle of rust coloured needles falling like snow between the

twisted debris. “Just camping out a while?” he asked as he walked up to his little hardscrabble oasis.

“Just a pit stop,” I assured him, raising the bottle. He took it and drank a bit.

“Not much to see out here,” he handed the bottle back.

“Pretty bleak,” I said. Sipped.

“Why don’t you come on back to the house?” he offered.

I followed him back up over the crest of the hill. His clothes were filthy. Boots caked in mud, looked like they hadn’t been unlaced since they rolled off the factory line. The seat of his pants stained. His hair matted and shoulder length, exploding in greys out from his weathered cap, which bore the logo of a trucking company I’d never heard of. He looked like he’d grown out of the ground. Or, I thought, as the mud sucked his footsteps, like he was maybe returning to it.

We followed the ridge a while, and came to a valley, the bottom of which still had a small stand of trees. Smoke rose gently from them. As we got closer, I could see a camp cobbled together from the material of a dozen different camps. I could recognize some of the good lumber that I had got for mine – leftover from when Mike finished building his house. The windows from another. Chimney pipe from a third. The trees spaced enough to give the feeling of a yard, and not just camouflage once we got close enough. He had thinned them out in roughly even rows, so they looked natural from a distance, but almost like Roman columns from the front door. Inside wasn’t much, but I recognized my old stove, bits pieced together from the memory of

my camp. He had things ordered as neatly as he could, but it didn't smell good. Animal smells.

On the back wall, shelves from floor to ceiling. All packed with paperbacks. Lots of the cheapie drugstore novels, but also classics. Most of a wall covered in orange spines. Neatly stacked, despite being stained with earthen fingerprints and moisture bloating. I picked one off the shelf and leafed through it. "Swallow a toad every morning and you'll be sure not to encounter anything worse throughout the day," he spoke from the corner that served as the kitchen as he took his lone cup down from the wall. "That's what the man in that book says. Seems like goddamn good advice, but I guess I never got very good at swallowing the toads," he said as he poured off half the bottle into his cup. He handed it back to me. I held the half bottle in my fist and looked back at the rise of the hill through his stolen window. Thought about the line of trees that stood near the highway hiding the fact that the woods had been hollowed out. Nothing right on the line but the line itself. You had to choose to be on one side or the other.

So Many Pictures

Hank unwrapped the gift. A framed black-and-white photo, not professionally developed, of apples arranged on a kitchen countertop. He could tell at once that the photo showed Doris's countertop in Doris's kitchen.

"Remember last year, you told me to pay attention to the everyday stuff? How they can look just as important as anything else when you turn 'em into a photo? I think about that a lot," Doris beamed as Hank held the dollar-store frame in one hand, crumpling wrapping paper in the other.

"Sure. Sure," he said, working up a smile. "That sounds like my philosophy to a T."

"You going to invite her in, or not, Hank?" Helena called, walking from the kitchen into the entranceway.

"Won't you come in, Doris?" he replied to Helena. "Look at the lovely picture that Doris has done for us," handing the frame over.

"Awww, aren't you sweet, Doris. Thank you. Now, please, you'll have a cup of tea."

"I don't want to cause a bother," Doris said, already walking toward the kitchen.

"Silly, you're no bother." Helena went in for a hug, making Doris tense slightly before raising her own meaty arms to enclose Helena's slight body. Doris hugged her gently, as if afraid she'd wouldn't survive a real one.

Their cottage had the unmistakable smell of a closed house. Why, Doris wondered, does *not* living in a place leave such a distinct odour, when we barely register the smells of a lived-in home? They had propped open all their windows and the closed-in smell began to bleed out, replaced by the familiar summer salt breeze.

They had stocked their kitchen with new-bought groceries. Much more than they would need for a four-week stay, Doris thought, as she took a seat at one of the stools that ran along their kitchen island. How could they eat that many apples in a month? Why five types of tea? What could you need three bottles of olive oil for?

“You have to tell us all the news,” Helena said, rinsing mugs from the cupboard.

“Yes, we haven’t heard anything since last year.” Hank stood the picture frame on the counter beside the radio, tuned to the classical station, but playing almost too low to hear.

Doris literally kept a record of the news of the community. A scrapbook in her bag contained all the good-news clippings about the village that she’d clipped from the *Herald* throughout the year. On facing pages, an article about Johnny Mosher’s daughter, Lisa, winning bronze in freestyle swimming at the Commonwealth Games, and a notice concerning Hank’s retrospective at the Tate.

“Oh, nothing too exciting around here. You know us, just keeping ’er on an even keel,” Doris offered.

“That’s why we love it here,” Hank said, taking sheaves of cured meat out of their butcher paper wrappings. “Gets to the point where I almost feel like I can’t breathe until I get back here in the summers.”

“Geeze, some blue in the face most of the year, I ’magine!” Doris said, almost reflexively, and coloured deep red in the second before Hank and Helena began to laugh.

“We’re starving, Doris. We just got in. Hope you don’t mind if we tuck into some charcuterie that we picked up on the way down. Feel free to pick,” Helena offered as she poured Doris tea.

“I’d love some charcuterie,” Doris said, experimenting with the natural bouncing rhythm of the word before sipping the aromatic drink that she hardly recognized as tea.

You can find Doris hung in galleries all over the world. Or rather, you can find Hank’s portrait of her. Black-and-white and stark in its contrasts and unmistakably Hank’s, the photo shows Doris perched on a chair in her own kitchen, feet on the spindle, hands clasped before her. She looks to the window that frames the image on the right – to the washed out white of the world outside. That photo became something of a calling card of Hank’s.

Doris recognizes something sad in her portrait. But when she stands in her sitting-room studying the image, she can never quite decide what makes it sad. Her thighs look fat, she doesn’t care for that. So do her arms, bared in her sleeveless summer blouse. But she can’t get mad about an honest accounting of her figure. The

woman in the photo, sitting in the home her parents left her, beside the stove where she cooks her own meals, speaks some truth about Doris. She can't deny it, but that truth escapes her.

Hank had come to her house alone and asked if she minded him taking her picture.

"I may not even use any of them," he said. "But if I do, it might go out all over. You okay with that?" he asked as she put the kettle on to boil.

"I always wanted to see the world," she said.

Hank's movements suggested some alchemy to Doris. He moved deliberately and with ease around her home, camera held in front of his face like a mask. His speech remained casual and present as it had before he began, but separate from his, machine-like and efficient body.

"How you doing?" he asked as he snapped into a series of postures, from angle to angle, to see where he could see her best.

"I thought you'd have some lights, or those reflector things you see..."

"All I need is the camera." He stepped forward to reposition her head like a barber looking for missed strands of hair. She turned her face, nearly chin to shoulder, toward Hank and Helena's cottage sitting perfectly at the top of the hill.

"Perfect," he said.

"Why do you want a picture of me, anyhow?" Doris asked, holding her position.

“Could you just push that pack of cigarettes into the light, please? Perfect. Back out the window, please.”

The kettle began the slow build of its whistle.

“Just a few more,” he said before she could get up to take the kettle from the burner. She could smell the hot metal of the kettle, like ozone. “Just a few more.”

...

As Doris stood in the door, ready to leave after tea, she looked once more at her picture frame on Hank and Helena’s countertop. She built her courage and asked if Hank, and Helena of course, would like to take a look at the photos she’d taken over the past year?

“Sure. Sure. You come back for dinner one of these nights,” offered Hank. “Take them out then.”

“Yes,” stammered Doris as she turned to go through their front door, and turned again just outside to say, “Thank you, and thank you,” before walking out of the flat yellow of the floodlights on the side of their cottage, and into the darkness of the night, toward her own house. She moved delicately through the dark over their yard and through the thorny, mixed brush that marks the property line between them. The wind had picked up and she could smell the salt of breaking waves, though she couldn’t see for the dark. She had a chill by the time she got in and got her own lights on.

“You take a lot of friggin’ pictures to get one picture, don’t you?” she remembered asking Hank while he took her portrait. He agreed with a nod of the head,

and continued snapping and winding in measured bursts. “Lot of pictures to get one picture,” she said again to herself.

She grabbed a knitted afghan from off her couch and draped it over her shoulders against the surprising cold of the summer night. She walked back and forth in her sitting-room like a cat hunting something as yet unseen. She followed the path on the rough, hardwood floor between photos laid out. Her kitchen floor covered with achingly similar shots. She would stop every so often and moved a photo slightly with her big toe, like she hoped to catch it unaware in an act that showed its true character. “Lots of pictures to get a picture,” she said.

Stopped over a photo that she’d taken of Duncan Roberts walking down her walkway toward his truck, she narrowed her eyes in thought. The framing skewed to an odd angle. Duncan’s figure blurred in a way she hadn’t intended. The contrasts didn’t work. Too many greys and not a full spectrum from deep black to pure white. Muddy. Maybe if she printed it again...

She dropped the photo to the floor, careless of the previous order.

Back on the path of hardwood through the photos to her kitchen, she turned the handle of the faucet for a glass of water. Only a spit came out before she heard the pipes groaning. “Shit. Shit. Sonofabitch.” She yelled at the house as she rushed to the basement to turn the water pump off.

She sat in the grit of the unfinished basement floor beside the pump and calculated if she would have enough water by morning to develop another roll of film

on the enlarger sitting across from her that she bought from the school board when they shut the high-school down. Not much rain this summer. Hard to tell.

...

The wait wore on Doris. Made her days both longer and shorter. Drew out the minutes, but gave her something to look forward to. She spent her work hours paying attention to her pocket, waiting for the feeling of her phone buzzing against her leg. She stood in the same place for days in her orange hard hat and her visibility vest, so everyone could see her holding the sign that told them to “stop” or go on “slow.”

She finally got the message on her lunch break. Listened to Helena’s voice inviting her for dinner on the following Saturday. “Of course you must come before we close up for the season.” Doris sat beneath the shade of a tree in the dappled noontime light, her feet in a trench cut from the earth, sitting on the soft grass that formed the top lair of the cross-sectioned earth. She wiped her hands as best she could in the grass to keep the screen of her phone clean of worksite dust before playing the message again.

Doris finished her sandwich and threw the plastic bag into the trench, like they all did, kicking dirt over it and letting it get paved over later. She put her lunch bag away in her backpack and took out her camera bag, nearly the same size, nearly the same shape. She leaned back on the sod-top of the trench to get the best angle she could of the other flaggers sitting in a row under the shade of the tree, feet in the trench, shooting the shit while the light of the midday blazed away beyond them. She cut timid angles in her safety vest and caught candid conversation and gesticulations from her co-

workers down the trench. A nice shot of Sandy whispering in Jane's ear, her thumb and forefinger tugging on her sleeve.

Colinda, who sat closest to Doris, noticed the camera first. She pouted and pointed her elbow to the sky in a parody of a pin-up girl pose for a few shots. "What on the world you doin'?" Colinda asked, biting into her plum.

"Just taking pictures," Doris said.

"What the hell you want pictures of us for?"

Doris stopped. "I don't know," she answered. Colinda threw her plum pit into the trench and kicked dust over it.

...

With the sun still high in the sky, Doris walked back up the hill to Hank and Helena's cottage. The insects in the brush all around made nervous sounds as she climbed the hill, going slowly for the last part of the distance to let herself catch her breath before she got to their door. She had her camera bag with the photos that she liked best tucked under one arm and a two-litre ice cream container under the other. She filled her lungs with the smell of Barry Whynott down the road burning his back field as she got her wind back.

"Awww, you brought us dessert. So thoughtful," Helena said from the front deck.

"I did," Doris said between deep and quiet breaths.

"We don't usually have ice cream. This should be a real treat," Helena said, cocking her head.

“Not ice cream,” Doris said. “Just the container. I brought berries.”

“Oh?” Helena said.

“I pick blueberries along the old road, behind the fire station. A million bushes back there.”

“S’that right?” Hank said, coming out to meet her. “Have to go check it out for myself.”

“You don’t have to,” chimed Helena. “By the look of it, we have enough berries to keep us in pies for a while. And all organic, too.”

“I go every year around this time. My mother made me pick berries. She said *you can go play after you’ve picked enough berries for the winter*. I would come back to her with a bucketful and say, *that enough?* She’d say no, and I’d go out and get another bucketful. Big buckets for a little kid, too,” Doris said, using the ice cream container to show the size of the bucket in her memory. “I’d bring that one back and plead *that enough?* She’d say *nope*, and I’d go back again. Took me a long time to figure out that we could never get enough blueberries for winter. Could pick every bush clean and we wouldn’t have enough. Make preserves with it, you see,” she handed the container over to Helena. “Guess I’m just in the habit now.”

“Well, thank you, Doris. That’s very nice,” Helena smiled as if in sympathy.

Doris made it through dinner, a delicious, but not very filling dinner. One duck does not go very far between three people. Hank never asked to see Doris’ photos.

They sat on the deck and looked out over the whitecaps breaking in a warm wind. Doris had a glass of wine that made her tongue feel dry and numb. Expensive. Hank and Helena did most of the talking.

“Did you enjoy your show at the Tate?” Doris asked, immediately humbled by the enormity of the show by saying it out loud. Hank smiled as he always smiles. Same Hank, but saying this out loud made the distance between them real. The full realization of Hank’s fame caused a hiccup in Doris’s mind, like the lights dimming when the dryer starts up.

“Lovely, Doris, lovely. I didn’t have any new work to show, so I didn’t have much to worry about. Just show up and accept the love of some very generous people.” Hank motioned to refill her glass. Doris flattened her hand over the mouth of the glass, shutting it up.

“Saw it in the newspaper. *The Herald*, there. They made it seem like a very grand... thing. Affair, I guess you’d say.”

“We had a lovely time, yes,” Hank said, holding Helena’s hand on her knee.

Doris drained her wine, and reached for her camera bag. “Would you mind, Hank,” she said placing it on the table, “if I took your picture? Both of your pictures?”

“Fine with me,” Hank said, putting his glass down, clinking the bottom against the glass tabletop. “Right now?”

“Right now,” Doris said with a laugh that surprised her.

Doris brought the camera to her eye and took a snapshot of the couple sitting across from her at the table, wine glasses blurry between them, hazing the bottom of

the frame. She lowered the camera, lens pointing to the ground and almost thanked them.

“Away from the house, I think,” she said instead.

“Sure. Sure.” Hank and Helena got up.

“Down where the hill crests. The light’s right over there with the sun going down,” Doris said, and showed them where she wanted them to stand. She snapped and wound and moved around to find the right angles, getting a bit winded in the process. When she looked through the eyepiece, she didn’t think of them as Hank and Helena, but as image. Doris didn’t take a photo of the moment, but how it looked. A couple a few years older than her with the sea breaking into white waves and spray behind them.

“Look to your right. Down the hill,” she called out to them, crouching in the grass.

“Perfect. Just a few more. Perfect.”

...

They shuttered the cottage a few days later. Doris at work the whole day, missed them leaving. She’d see them next year, maybe. Once or twice.

Doris didn’t use any water the following Saturday. Sunday she woke up early to tape the garbage bags over the foundation windows in the basement and seal the cracks in the door at the top of the stairs so she could start developing the film from the past few weeks.

She measured out the developer and the stopper in careful amounts into their colour coded trays, taking care not to overfill or waste any of them. She started the faucet and let it bathe the film.

Later, under the red light that filled her makeshift dark room, the first of the photos emerged. Hank and Helena standing together in two dimensions and greyscale. They slowly showed up on the paper like underwater ghosts in the developer. Their forms came in grainy and slightly out of focus. Their feet out of frame. The white caps of the waves didn't stand out against the glare of the setting sun shimmering on the top of the sea.

So many pictures to get one picture.

Just Down the Road

When my father's friend Don stayed out in the bay on Fraser's Island I kept hearing my father tell my mother that he went out there to *dry out*. I had an image of him laid out on the beach like a smoked fish on a rack. He spent about two weeks living out on Fraser's and my dad brought him out water and food every couple of days. He sat and talked with him for a while every trip to ease the loneliness, but they both knew that he needed the loneliness – why he wanted to strand himself out there in the first place.

Dad took me along once, out in the old aluminum boat. Don's tent flapped in the salt spray along with the long grass that grew on the leeward side of the island, and it looked like the ruin of a battlement. Don wore an old flannel with neatly cuffed sleeves and blue jeans. I remember his clean-shaven face and the deep, tidy furrows of his hair. He didn't talk much. I tried my best not to focus on the pattern of cigarette burns on the back of his hand. They blurred out the shape of some unwanted tattoo.

After a bit, I took my fishing rod and stood on one of the rocks near the shore casting it into the sea without any real thought toward catching anything. I stayed there until Dad wanted to leave. I remember feeling embarrassed, but I'm still not sure for who.

Don fell off the wagon not too long after that. Luke's Island looms right up beside Fraser's, and in the summer, Luke's has some kind of party almost every night of the week. I only heard about it years later, one of those moments when you realize a

gap in the narrative teases you, and you have to ask your father to you to fill it in: “what happened to Don that summer?”

He said, “Don went over to Luke’s and got hammered with some guys he knew and that’s that.” He stood there, in the garage, neck craned over a chain-link that he tried to bend back into shape. He kept his glasses on and answered without turning around, his words punctuated by his body tensing to contort the uncooperative metal. I didn’t push the issue any further and let the radio fill in the gap in conversation. For Dad, Don was like a project that just didn’t turn out.

I always pictured Don swimming the distance between islands. Fraser’s and Luke’s have sandy beaches that mirror each other and only half a kilometre or so separates them. I can imagine him sweating out his sobriety, staring out at party fire after party fire. He must have heard their voices carry clean over the water, close as neighbours. The Don of my imagination figures that he doesn’t even remember the things that made him want sobriety so badly that he would put the tire blocks on his life and stay out on Fraser’s. He wades out and starts swimming toward the light of their fire, its reflection on the dark water like a carpet rolled out for only him. That doesn’t make any sense though. One of his drinking buddies probably just pulled a boat ashore and hauled him aboard like a big fish.

Fraser’s is the rougher and the smaller of the two islands, with thick brush over most of it – why the bulk of the traffic goes to Luke’s. Luke’s beach stretches the length of the leeward side, and a grassy clearing balds the centre of the island leaving enough growth ringed-round to create a wind break. Laying in the absolute dark of the

clearing, after everyone's gone to bed, with no sound but the waves, you can imagine yourself perfectly alone in the world as you drift off to sleep.

A couple months after Michael and Angela announced their pregnancy, we decided to plan a trip back to the island. John, Les and I thought we should surprise Michael and plan a night out on the island before the kid came.

We went around to Les's parents' place, just up the road from Michael's, and his father loaned us his Boston Whaler for the weekend. We thanked Les's folks and politely tried to decline the tea and cookies, served on his mother's china that they offered over and over before they went down to the launch to load up. We putted over to Michael's and cut the engine a little before we reached shore. We landed, pulled the boat up the launch and sneaked up to the house. John couldn't stop laughing, and he would break out into histrionic, wheezing guffaws to gall us. "Shut-the-fuck-up," Les kept repeating, nearly as loud.

Michael owned an old saltbox on the waterfront. When his father retired and his parents moved to a condo in the city, they left him and Angela the house, along with the boat and the lobster licence. The house and the property well looked after, and looked like an idealized version of what every home probably did a hundred years ago. The house and property that everyone who grew up in the bay secretly thought they would live in someday.

We ran toward it on either side of the gravel path so that our boots wouldn't make noise. Angela left the back door open, and we filed in and made our way upstairs. We couldn't stop the wood beneath our weight from creaking on the stairs, but

it didn't seem to give us away. We ran into the kitchen and grabbed Michael, lifted him up and carried him through the front door onto the lawn where he got a hold of John's neck and started wrestling him to the ground. He saw us coming, saw us creeping up like a pack of cretins. We dragged him out on the lawn, a tangle of limbs. John kept yelling, "It's a press gang, Mikey. I hope you're ready to sail."

An hour later we reached the island. None of us knew much about boats, especially Les, whose father never let him take the boat himself. But he stood there at the helm, like the captain, barking orders that no one was keen to carry out for him, and following them up with overly-elaborate, threats of violence when we didn't. "Johnny, stack those coolers under the seat there, would ya?" And "Johnny, I'll fuckin' brain ya if you keep ignorin' me." We landed, got everything ashore, and spread out to find driftwood for a fire. Our shoes and our jeans wetted to the shin, so we went barefoot in the sand.

Michael and I went off to the windward side of the island, and left John and Les near the camp to fuck around. The wind whipped up a bit, but it came in fresh and the sun warmed us. We walked along on the loose, smooth stones that the sea shot ashore endlessly, our ankles twisting under our weight on nearly every step. We collected armloads of dry, grey wood pulled from tangles of seaweed that clung to them like impossible seaman's knots. Some of it deadfalls and wind broken branches, some of it manufactured and cut into precise pieces, but all of it left adrift to season in the seawater. We made a pile on that side of the island and then transported it back to camp

piecemeal when we had enough. We joked as we worked, mostly opprobrious insults aimed at John and Les, said loudly enough that we hoped they would hear.

After dropping an enormous load of wood on the pile, Michael took a pack of cigarettes from his breast pocket. His clothes, not particularly colourful, seemed to pop in the bright summer sun against the grey and green backdrop of the stone and brush behind him. The flame he touched to his cigarette threw no light. “Thanks for doing this,” he said, pursing his lips and blowing the smoke into the wind, not minding that it blew back onto him.

“It was mostly Les. He’s the one who has to answer for the boat when we set it on fire later tonight.”

He coughed out a little laugh, visible in staccato smoke. His smile washed out like a rivet in the sand. “This is all fantastic, I mean it, but does it feel a little strange?” he asked, making as if he were paying close attention to where he ached. Eyes on the tip of his cigarette, and following the ash as the wind takes it.

I shrugged and said, “Why?”

We all took it hard when Matheson died. At the time I couldn’t deal with it – didn’t even go to the funeral. Nobody said anything, but I know that John and Les had always been weird about my aloofness then, and now, I guess. I hadn’t even remembered. My shoulders slumped, remembering how much of a drunken mess I had made of the first anniversary of his death, the last time we were all together.

“Three years,” he said, letting the butt drop between smooth stones. “I just wanted to make sure you were all right. I’m glad we’re all here together.”

When we brought our first load of wood back around to the camp side of the island, John and Les were in the process of cutting down a tree. “What’re you morons doing?” Michael called from down the beach just as the skinny pine fell, its tip splashing into an oncoming wave.

“Firewood!” Les yelled back.

“That’s fresh wood, it isn’t going to burn, dipshit,” I said as we finished covering the distance.

“It’ll burn,” John said proudly.

“Well you guys have your own fire with that and see where it takes you,” Michael said with a laugh. “There’s a pile of good wood on the other side, why don’t you take a break and go grab some of that.”

I hadn’t seen any of these guys for nearly a year. Before Matheson, Les, Michael and I lived together in town, and we five saw each other nearly every day. John and Les still live together, and just sort of carry on with our nineteen-year-old life. When I became conscious of my routine, going to work every day at the same time, coming home every day at the same time, and realized that weeks, and months sometimes slip away without my even noticing, I envied them. Rarely did that take the form of picking up the phone, though. Always made more sense to me to get to bed early and re-commit myself to the routine that took me like a current.

It was the month before the trip to Luke’s that Les called me and proposed the idea. I was drinking a beer and listening to a podcast featuring some friends chatting, when he called. When I saw his name show up I almost didn’t answer. Felt like it

would be a project in itself to get back to where we were the last time we had talked. The rapport didn't come as easily as it had. But I answered, and he made me laugh immediately. I sat there on the new tweed couch that I was still paying-off, and I talked to him for an hour. I got up and walked around the empty apartment as if orating to the reading lamp or the couch cushions. When we hung up, we had a sketch of the plan, and I sat back down, but I couldn't get back into the podcast, so I went to bed. No mention of Matheson's day, but thinking about it now, he couldn't possibly have forgotten.

By the time we'd set camp, we were already well into the beer. I sat a little away from the fire for the heat, facing the mainland. Strange how it looked like it was right there, and all the trouble of getting here brought us almost no distance at all. After a lifetime of looking out at these Islands, they begin to look monolithic, like mountains rising out from the sea. It's only when you come to them and look back that you realize how small they all are. How close. Nothing to them really.

Porcupine quills spread about in the sand, like matchsticks. From the mainland the island seemed too small and quiet to have anything living on it. There was the proof though. There were animals all over the island, hiding somewhere, waiting until we decided to pick up our bottles and throw our trash on the fire and leave, before they came back out to sniff around the sand and see if we left anything good behind.

By sundown, John's refrain had become a satisfied repetition of, "Man I'm fucked up," as he sat in the sand, watching the sunset, beer in hand. He broke off long enough to say, "Look! Look, there's porpoises." And there were, a school of them

bobbing up in the water, not too far off shore in the sunset. “Beautiful,” he said. “Like they’re dancing in the sunlight,” he pointed as if we might miss some important aspect.

“That is the dumbest fucking thing I have *ever* heard,” said Les as he pushed him over in the sand and put him in a headlock.

“My beer! Don’t spill my beer, you prick!” John said, forgetting about the porpoises entirely.

After dark, a fog rolled in. It felt like a heavy mist, and though it wasn’t raining, everything got damp. It erased the mainland from view and dropped a pall of grey over the blackness of the night. We descended into drunken complacency. Everyone’s speech became listless, as if nothing they said bore any relation to their meaning. When we had temporarily given up, and let the limp sizzle of the fire speak for us, we heard a sound down the beach. Les stood up with the hatchet in hand. “Jesus, Les, what’re you doing?” Michael said, standing up with him.

Then we heard a clipped “HEY!” roll.

“Hey,” replied John, still seated by the fire, beer still in hand. I stepped back from the fire a bit to let my eyes adjust, and saw a figure walking toward us.

“Hey!” it repeated. “You boys having a party?” it said, slurring a bit.

“Yeah,” Michael said. “We’re camped out here for the night. Still plenty of room down on the east side of the island though, if you’re looking for a spot. Over on the other side of the swamp.”

“That Mike?” the figure asked.

“Yeah, who’s that?” The figure walked up into the light of the fire.

“Holy shit. Glen?” Michael asked.

“Put that axe away, Les. You scared the shit out of me. Walking up to the sight of that, I thought I was a goner,” Glen said.

“Jeeeesus Glen, what’re you doing out here tonight? Shouldn’t you be up the road, raiding your brother’s fridge? ” Les said.

“I saw your fire from the shore. Thought that might’ve been your dad’s boat, too. Figured I’d take a little spin out after I had my dinner. See if I could crack a few with the old boys.” Glen stood unsurely on the sand in big winter boots and wore a winter jacket with the hood up. Everything tattered except for an expensive looking button-up shirt. He sat down hard into the sand, like a scarecrow falling off its post.

Dad always hated Glen, would just call him a fuckup and leave it at that. But I know he and Dad were tight with Don at one time. Everybody had to put up with Glen though, because of his knack for finding parties wherever they may be. Only so many places to party in our community, but there always seemed to be one just down the road. Couldn’t turn away a neighbour, even if he was a pain.

“Cold?” John asked grabbing a handful of Glen’s ratty winter jacket and shaking him playfully.

“Never been *too* prepared,” Glen said. “Mind if I join you?” We made room and everyone sat down again. “Your dad’s not out here with you, is he Les?”

“No, we just took the boat out for a bit.” Les groped around in the dark for his beer, which had tipped over.

“Must be a special occasion then. You sure you can handle it?”

“Managing,” Les said.

“You wouldn’t have an extra one of those, would ya?” Glen asked, nodding his chin to Les’s beer.

“Over in the cooler.” Glen stood up shakily and trod over to help himself.

“Your dad ain’t here, is he?” Glen asked me.

“Wouldn’t find him here,” I said.

“I ’spose not.” Glen cracked his beer open. When he returned, he fell back into his spot, and he drank half of it in a gulp, then asked about the felled tree out on the beach.

“Firewood,” John said.

“Yeah, for next year.” Michael said. Glen nodded and finished off the beer, tossing the bottle on the fire before getting up to grab another, groping around in the firelight.

He made himself at home, and stayed, talking mostly to Les, asking about his father, his mother, and how things were going at the plant. We got back to the bullshitting banter that we had lost before he showed up. “You boys knew that Matheson boy died a few years back, didn’t you?” he asked Les as he dropped his hand from a height with a Doppler whistle. We all shut up, and the rift in the conversation closed like two water droplets merging.

“Yeah. We did,” Les said for us.

“I ran into his father the other day at the Legion. A shame, he seemed like a nice kid. More like you lot than his parents,” he said. “What a way to go,” he said. “Hard way to go.”

“Yup,” Les said sharply to end the conversation. I thought for a moment that I was going to just keep sitting there and ignore it, but I had to get up and leave. I walked, stumbling through the dark, back to the clearing where we pitched the tents. Glen asked for the hatchet, and I could hear the hollow sound of him hacking at the felled tree. It resonated over the island, and even back at camp, sitting on the log that looks out over the stony end of the shore I could still hear it.

The fog was lifting a bit, and I could make out the hazy outline of the moon’s reflection stretching back to the mainland. After a few minutes I heard a rustling in the dark, coming up the path behind me. “That you?” Michael asked.

“Right here,” I said. He walked closer, bare feet feeling through the loose dirt in the dark.

He held a beer to my shoulder and sat beside me. “You remember how Matheson would always sing that song whenever we would pick him up? Every goddamn time he got in my car, he would sing it. Remember?”

“Night they Drove ol’ Dixie Down.”

“That’s the one. I never got the joke, but he just kept doing it and doing it.” Michael lit another cigarette next to me, the flame the only light in the world apart from the moon.

“He sang it to call you a racist for hating rap,” I said. Michael didn’t say anything. “Like you were a Confederate sympathizer,” I explained. “That’s also why he called your car the General Lee.”

“Is that right?” Michael kept his eye on the ocean. “Son of a bitch,” he laughed. “Listen. Don’t let that old drunk get to you. He probably doesn’t even know what he’s saying right now. Another beer and none of us will, right?”

“I know,” I said.

“I know you know.”

“I think about him. Think what if I could have been there and driven him home that night. If he didn’t drive, it would have been different,” I said.

“Can’t think like that. There are a million variables. If it hadn’t’ve been that night, he would’ve found another way to do it,” he stubbed his cigarette on the stump where we sat, leaving only the light of the moon.

“What? Found another way to get in a car crash?” I asked the darkness in Michael’s direction.

“We’re talking about the night he killed himself?” Michael said. “Too many variables. You can’t think about how you could have changed it, it’ll drive you crazy. What car crash do you mean?”

I couldn’t answer. I just sat there in the rising moonlight.

“Well, come on back when you’re ready. It sounds like we’ve got Glen pacified.” Michael said. I listened, and the hacking had stopped.

Michael felt his way back to the fire, and I stayed, sipping on my beer. The fog was gone, but it had started to rain a bit, and the sound of droplets falling in the trees around me felt like a mocking chorus. When I did start back toward the fire, the group looked so small against the darkness of the night spread out behind them like a stage curtain. Glen was passed out in the sand near a pile of rough-hewn logs some of which were charred black but unburnt. The three others sat in a semi-circle around the fire, laughing.

I went back to the camp, struck my tent and gathered my things. I left a note, scrawled on the inside of a beer case jammed in the zipper of Michael's tent, then walked the shore to find Glen's boat. He'd pulled it up on the beach and tied to the root of a pine with rope that was rough in my hands. At first I just pushed it into the water and let it float, still tethered to the island. It felt good to float on the open ocean, but still know that I was secured to something. An old aluminum row boat, like the one my dad used to have. The sound of the water plashing against the hull soothing me. I thought that I'd let the sound lull me to sleep. But I started thinking, *What car crash?* and I couldn't.

I imagined them all sitting around the fire talking about him. I took out my cell phone, and looked through my contacts. But I just kept seeing his name listed there no different from anyone else's. Just one among the list.

The rain cleared and the moon shone bright enough that I could navigate my way back to shore, so I rowed toward Shapley's River. I faced the island as its shadowy outline became smaller and smaller. The fire was the single point of light on the

horizon, and as it shrunk into the distance it seemed like if I went far enough it would look like any other star shining dimly in the dark.

When I was near shore, I took my hands off the oars and dipped them into the water where the mouth of the river empties into the sea. It was fresh and cool and I rinsed my hands and face with it before pulling Glen's boat ashore, leaving it at the top of his slip. I climbed the embankment, pulling weeds out by the roots as I scrambled up. When I got to the shoulder of the road I started walking toward my parents' house. I could use the hidden spare key to get in, and sleep in the guest bedroom. It was only just down the road.

I tried to sober myself up as I walked. Tried to walk a straight line and think sober thoughts. It was getting close to morning, and I didn't want to have to cross paths with Dad, who's out of bed by five without exception. If he caught me stumbling in, I know he wouldn't say much, but he wouldn't have to. All he'd have to do is ask where I'd come from. *The island with the boys*, I'd say, and he'd nod his head and go off to work on whatever he had in the garage. I'd not mention Glen. And certainly not Don. Say as little as I could and crawl off to sleep away the drink.

Deep into the morning, I walked the highway between streetlamps. Nobody on the road travelling in either direction for a half an hour or more. I plodded along, still drunk despite my will not to be, accompanied only by the rustling of nighttime animals in the bushes along the shoulder. On long stretches I walked the centre line, and that felt like I was the only person in the world.

When I came to the place where Matheson's car left the road, I stood on the gravel shoulder, over the ditch and looked through the darkness. Same as a thousand other spots on the side of the road between here and the city. The tire marks were gone, the gravel had settled again under the weight of a couple winters, and the broken branches leading into the woods had grown in. *What car crash?* You would have to want to know. I drove home drunk as many times as he had, filled with whatever we were filled with besides booze. And I don't have to wait for nightmares to imagine myself in that passenger's seat, laughing along with him until the moment the car leaves the pavement. I know exactly what it would feel like. What would I have said to him? What do I want to say to him?

Finally, a car did pass. There are no streetlamps on that stretch of road, and the headlights burst into the darkness so I couldn't see anything after it passed. I stood still on the gravel shoulder so I wouldn't fall into the ditch. When I started walking again I saw more headlights in the distance coming toward me. I turned from their light, which cast my shadow tall like a funhouse mirror over the trees and bushes that *didn't* mark the spot that Matheson died. The shadow moved and changed shape in front of me. When the lights were close, the car slowed nearly to a stop and rolled beside me for a moment. The driver's side window slinked down, and a woman spoke from inside. "Where ya headed honey?" She asked.

"Oh, just down the road here," I said.

"Come on in and I'll take you," she offered.

“Thanks” I said “But I’m nearly there.” She drove past and pulled a U-turn then pulled up beside me again.

Through the passenger’s side window: “Come on, no sense in walking all that way. Let me give you a ride,” she rolled along beside me, veering a little, side to side.

I stopped for a moment, then got in. “Thanks, I’m just up ahead.”

She looked at me hollow eyed and alone. She smelled like rum. A lei hanging from her rear-view and little hula dancer on the dash. She offered me a cigarette. “I’m lonely,” she said.

Raymond

Raymond runs his route and looks at the lights. He looks to find their patterns and thinks of them as stars. From the driver's seat he draws lines with his eyes and finds constellations hiding among the coloured bulbs, smiles at connections he knows nobody else sees, and nobody else could. The blue of the just-past-sunset half-light blurs his vision through the fogged windshield. The bulbs twinkle for him just enough to distract his driving. Tires edge the white line as he drives by.

He stops at the yard of a big tipper. The strings of lights that outline the doors and dormers, his shrubs and walkways, look to Raymond like the skyline of some big city he'll never see. The little white lights at a neighbour's house look sombre in comparison, like candles at a vigil.

A stack of Christmas cards sit in the passenger seat, and they splay themselves into an unruly angular shape as Raymond makes corners. Raymond always keeps the interior of his car immaculate. But because they aren't part of his day to day routine, he doesn't think to bring an elastic or an envelope to keep them all together. Anyway, he thinks, there's something festive in seeing them jostle in the seat beside him.

He runs his route for the second time today. The first time, well before sun up. He always finishes his route before sun up, but in the winter it becomes easier. The papers come off the press after 1:00, and he usually has them by 2:00 or 2:30, even if they run a bit behind. Other drivers like to wait, sleep in a bit, then handle the deliveries, but not Raymond. "Make hay while the sun shines," he chuckles to himself.

For other drivers, delivery is a second job, padding their pockets. Raymond, on the other hand, delivers to nearly a thousand homes and makes his living from delivery and delivery alone. He stays awake the night and doesn't sleep until his route is finished, speeding through the blue or golden gloom of the sunrise.

Yesterday the front page splashed plane crash details from Florida. A big story. Christmas tragedy, sad thing. Imagined that we would see that on the front page for weeks, Raymond thinks. He remembers the Swiss Air crash and the media vans, and the front page stories piling up from that for months. Seems strange to him that in only one day the front page has moved on to another story. Goes against the pattern. He wouldn't have predicted it, but that is what the holidays are about, he thinks. They break the smaller patterns up with larger ones.

Today, an article about the missing autistic girl has all the headlines. Her face repeated a thousand times over in Raymond's back seat. Disappeared just before Christmas. People want to talk to each other about her on Christmas Eve when they all get together with their families, or with friends at the Christmas party.

That bigger pattern – tradition. And the tradition calls for people to come together. Breaks up the little patterns of the day to day, everybody with their heads down, doing different things, like they were on different planets, thinks Raymond.

The talk radio station plays softly over the car speakers. He doesn't listen to music for the most part. He likes to have voices in the background, whatever they might be talking about. But today even the talk station has let some music trickle in. He keeps the volume low as he pulls up near the next house. Jingle Bell Rock.

Raymond doesn't usually let the lack of light bother him. He doesn't usually get to see the sun that much anyway. But tonight it glums him. He thinks that the light must be the real reason for the season. What to do with such a gloomy time of year except decorate it? The sun has entirely gone now, and the last bit of lingering blue has fallen from the sky. The coloured lights of the house in front of him glow like little psychedelic flames. His car sits on the gravel shoulder of the road, just inches away from a guard rail that stretches out and around the bend, glows in his headlights. Down the embankment, past the border of half frozen salt ice that stretches along the shore, the ocean sparkles. But nothing compared to the lights of the house across the road.

Raymond can see into the living room – the tree-lit figures silhouetted by the television – but he doesn't want to intrude on their evening. He picks the card that he received from this house out of the pile, reads the printed message, and the signature of the husband and wife. Kids never sign. He has recorded the sum of twenty dollars with the round head of a dull pencil on the left hand leaf of the card. A good tip. The house looks modest, but their lights do not. Never the wealthy that tip-out well, Raymond thinks, but the good tippers seem to be the best decorators. Another correlation that Raymond sees. Another pattern. He places the card on the bottom of the pile and pulls away from his spot on the side of the road and continues on to the next house.

The holiday tip-out is what makes it so Raymond can live off this job. He has expenses that he can put off or run up for the rest of the year. He knows that he can make up for it by January. He may be the only one who doesn't go into the red over the holidays. Raymond against the pattern.

Before he left to run his route tonight, he gave his landlord rent until March. The small wad of bills he tucks into the carved out pages of his encyclopedia (volume 'deccan to electron') is not enough to do much with. He could not, say, catch a flight to South America and have a holiday. But, it covers Raymond's expenses. That is to say, he has a pack of premium cigarettes in his breast pocket.

Stew, the landlord, asked Raymond if he would come to his son's Christmas party this evening. He did so as Raymond counted out twenties onto the worn wooden top of Stew and Cathy's dining room table. The question made Raymond flush and lose count and have to start over again.

"I'll think about it," Raymond said in between flicks of twenties on the table. Stew asked Raymond over to dinner every time they spoke. Kept trying to get Raymond out of the cottage that he rents from Stew down the hill from his home. Raymond likes Stew fine. He likes Cathy, his wife, too. He just likes keeping to himself.

"Another package of yours came to the house again yesterday. I signed for it again. Hope you don't mind," Stew said, taking a large cardboard box out of the front room and placing it on the table.

"Thanks," Raymond told him.

"What're you always getting shipped in, anyways?" asked Stew.

"Drink powder," said Raymond. "You can just make these shakes instead of havin' a whole meal. Saves a lot of fuss."

"Yeah. But you're not supposed to live off those, right?"

“Nah, I know. I have other stuff too.” Raymond snapped an elastic over the counted wad of twenties. “But easier than making a whole meal. It just saves some trouble.” He handed the money over to finalize the transaction.

At forty, and despite being boyish about the face, Raymond’s natural leanness had lately started to make him look drawn. Gaunt. His skin a little grey. The look of a dog that needed taking in. A good meal.

“Why don’t you come and take your dinners with Cathy and me,” Stew said, not yet taking the money between them. “Cathy always makes too much damn food. I feel like I’m throwing food out every day.” Stew ran his hand through his white hair. “We’d love the company. This house always felt empty to me without kids hiding somewhere.”

Stew and Cathy’s kitchen, small as it is, has always been the focal point and social space of their home. To Raymond, the house felt far from empty even then, with the two of them sitting there. He could hear the rising and falling sound of tires passing over the thin layer of wet snow on the road in front of the house. He had a feeling of love for Stew then that made him get up and leave immediately. He left Stew sitting there like a statue of Daedalus with an ashtray and a rum & coke.

Raymond finishes his route for the second time, but he hasn’t gone home. Not much to do tonight at the cottage. When he began renting the cottage, Stew had listed it as a summer rental. But Raymond just stayed on through the year. Better to stay and see what happens out in the world tonight Raymond thinks. Out where the lights are.

Raymond parks his car alone in the Swiss Air memorial parking lot. The single sodium bulb of the streetlamp off to the side casts everything in an eerie gold. The temperature dropped a few hours ago, and the bit of snow that has fallen since looks like confectionary dusting. A white Christmas tonight, but by morning it will melt back to grey.

A second car pulls into the parking lot, a few spaces away from him. Probably kids out smoking pot, Raymond thinks, but does not wait to find out. He turns the key in his ignition and drives out, slowly, making tracks in the snow, alone on the road to Peggy's Cove.

He stops and blocks the narrow road in front of the lighthouse and takes in the view. Peggy's Cove is pretty deserted on a winter night. It looks like the negative of any of a million photos of it. Dark and cold and empty. However, the beacon of the lighthouse is lit and the green light keeps Raymond in the Christmas spirit. The green cast to everything competes with the yellow radiating from the swarm of sodium bulbs in the parking lot.

Raymond stays parked in the road, though he knows he shouldn't, and lights a cigarette. He turns up the volume of the talk station, now that the music has stopped. Mostly pre-recorded stuff now, but punctuated by news reports. Always leading with the lost girl. Then something about tracking Santa for the kids. NORAD keeping tabs on the old guy in case he gets out of line, Raymond supposes. Sounds like a tragedy in the making.

What a burden it must be to have autism, he thinks. Going through life, unable to make yourself understood to others. Unable to understand them. That poor girl out in the world alone, and she doesn't know what to do with the whole world in front of her. Just lost. Alone. On Christmas, no less.

Raymond flicks the butt of his cigarette out the window and the wind takes it, leaving an arc of embers as it goes down among the rocks. The waves are crashing in now, and the white snow in Raymond's headlights disappears into their black swells a million flakes at a go. A large wave crashes out of the darkness and breaks into Raymond's view all at once, and he is sure he sees a flash of purple somewhere in the midst of it all. Like the purple of a little girl's winter jacket.

He thinks back thirty-five years to the colour of Anne-Marie Burchill's winter coat. It must have just been the liner. He remembers her shivering in it because it wasn't enough to keep her warm when the wind whipped the snow in her face. He forgot his own chill when he saw her, and wanted to give her his own jacket, but couldn't for fear of what the other kids would say about him. *Raytard. Raaaytaard.* What a spotlight it would put on him. So he let her be cold. Her shivering purple jacket-liner and the snot running down and freezing on her lip still sticks in Raymond's mind when he gets cold. He didn't do anything for her, and now some part of him is always shivering.

The night's getting colder and the waves colder than ice. That jacket wasn't enough to save you from a chill, let alone the will of the ocean breaking on the blunt,

naked shore. The beacon of the lighthouse shines on Raymond as he steps from the car. The parking lot still empty, and Raymond is the only one to see. The only one.

He walks down the embankment and climbs down onto the slick stones, wet with algae and frost. Black rocks a death trap on the best of days. As soon as his hands touch the rough granite, and the chill saps the heat from his hands he's sure of what he sees – a little girl's jacket down among the waves breaking now ten feet, now more. He scrambles over the bare stone on all fours, like an animal out of its element, tenuous and careful. He knows that to fall is to die, but he never looks to the waves breaking into foam at the base of the stone, or the endless black of the sea and the night sky broken only by the twinkling of phosphorescence and stars beyond. Wave spray hits the back of his neck and makes him shudder.

Raymond wants to call her name, but can't think of it. He's heard it and read it dozens of times today, but it doesn't come to him. He starts calling out for Anne-Marie instead.

He circles the lighthouse over and over, looks in the cracks between rocks where a child could hide. He frets and panics himself as the image of a child alone, so cold at night fills his head over and over. The white foam of the waves smashing, looks sickly to Raymond – green and yellow in the artificial light before they disappear back into the sea. He gets as close as he dares to the edge and scans the blackness of the water and the spray of the waves for another glimpse of a purple jacket that wasn't warm enough to fight the wind.

He follows the shore, surer and surer as he goes. Surer and surer that she must have fallen in. He has to get to her before the current sweeps her away.

He scurries back to his car, which he left running with the heater on. His fingers red as burns and raw from the rocks. His knuckles stick out like white caps as he takes the wheel. The talk radio station spits out celebratory sounds, but he'd turned it back low, just under the range of comprehension. Just low enough to sound like nothing but white noise. Raymond finishes the loop of the parking lot and drives toward the nearest place he knows he can find people – Stew's son's party.

Only a short drive, but outside the scope of his route and he drives unsure in the dark. He rarely comes this way, and everything looks unfamiliar. Raymond navigates by the light of the Christmas bulbs that twinkle as he passes. When he arrives, cars are parked everywhere along the side of the road and he has to leave his car hundreds of metres from the driveway. The road looks like a city street, though there isn't another house for miles.

As Raymond scuttles toward the house his heart beats fast. He hasn't thought about what he has to say. Stew and his son and a few others are standing outside, gathered around a side door, smoking. A motion activated flood light turns on as he approaches and he stops like a deer in the light.

"Is that Raymond?" Stew's silhouette says. "Holy mackerel! I didn't expect you'd show." Raymond tries to talk but his words are caught, or rather he can't form them fast enough out of his feelings.

“What changed your mind to bring you ’round tonight?” a silhouette with the voice of Stew’s son asks while exhaling a puff of smoke into the light. Raymond stops. “Well, come on in and let me fix you a drink.” Raymond moves forward, and when he comes close enough that the light no longer shines in his eyes, and he can speak without hollering, he tries to speak again. Stammers.

“I saw... I found the girl. That girl on the news. The autistic one in the purple jacket.”

“*You* did?” Stew’s son says, laughing. He turns and pops his head inside the door, calling for another friend to come hear. “Why did you leave her after you found her?” he asks. Raymond scans the faces of the crowd, all expectant and open. The friend from inside opens the door to the group. “This is the guy,” Stew’s son tells him, pointing to Raymond. “The guy that found the little girl.”

“You’re a hero,” the friend says. Raymond tries to say anything – he needs them to come with him to help. To get their boats ready to go out and look for her – but those thoughts smash against his teeth when he tries to talk them out. “You’re all over the TV,” the friend says. “At least the girl is back, though they don’t know how yet,” he says.

“But I saw her in the ocean,” Raymond says weakly.

When he enters the house through the side door, the light in the kitchen hurts his eyes. Everything white as fresh snow, and the light bright and unshaded. His boots leave shadows of grey slush on the linoleum. It seems to him that every direction he turns another face hovers over him. Every set of eyes on him as the friend announces

him as the guy who found that little girl. They take him to the television and sit him down in front of the news.

The girl sat cold by the highway and a nice man drove her home. That was all she could say about the situation, but her family stood tearful and effusive before the cameras in their thanks to the mystery man. All eyes swivel toward Raymond. Stew's son's wife fixes him a plate of cold cut dinner rolls and potato salad, and Stew's son's friend brings him a rum and eggnog. Okay, thinks Raymond. Okay.

Everything Begins as a Memory:

Nostalgia as Epiphany in the Contemporary Short Story

Alexander Macleod's recent short story, "Lagomorph" ends with a peculiar image – the narrator, David, registering a look of recognition on the face of his pet rabbit. The rabbit, Gunther, seems to recognize the sound of David's estranged wife's voice coming over the phone. Being cognizant of this look on the face of his pet causes David to go through a sort of anagnorisis. In this moment, David has a sort of uncanny experience which encapsulates the entire emotional arc of the story. In modernist literary criticism, this moment would be known as an epiphany – an instant of sudden insight. In recent years the concept of the epiphany has been troubled by critics, but I believe that it provides an essential structuring agent in the contemporary short story, and has the potential to be re-thought as a critical tool.

In her 1993 essay, "After Epiphany: American Stories in the Postmodern Age," Miriam Marty Clark brings Jean-François Lyotard's suspicion of metanarratives to bear on theorizing the short story. Clark argues that instead of characters in a story being confronted with a metaphysical insight, which the epiphany would purport to show, the contemporary short story tends to conclude with a moment of "self-redescription," in which the "metaphors of discovery give way to metaphors of self-recreation" (341). That is to say, in the contemporary short story, the totalizing, or revelatory quality of epiphany could just as easily be said to be shattering a character's identity or world-view, as acting as a cohering agent. Clark says that instead of getting to some truth of a

given situation, or revealing the *real* self, the epiphany brings into relief “a succession of selves” (341), necessarily mediated by the situation. I argue that this critique of epiphany as a critical tool is fair, even essential.

It is notable that, although Clark seeks to problematize the notion of epiphany in short fiction, she still maintains it as a structuring element of the genre. Though she proposes the contemporary short story as insisting on “new ways of knowing and telling” (Clark 343), I believe that her ideas regarding the literary epiphany apply backward as well. For instance, her idea of epiphany as a moment of self-redescription applies just as well to Joyce’s story “Araby,” from *Dubliners*, which is the ur-text of the literary epiphany. Nicholas Birns says that “the theories of ‘epiphany’ associated with the work of Joyce highlighted the short story’s ability to produce luminous, enigmatic endings that revealed not just a turn in the plot, but revelations about life, art, or experience” (25), which does not necessarily presume an attempt at fostering a metanarrative. The boy’s disillusionment at the sight of the bazaar, in “Araby,” is a sudden confrontation with the disorienting reality of his immediate world, and his possible futures. This moment of disillusionment certainly acts as the catalyst for a self-redescription in the character. Clarke’s criticisms seem more suited to a rethinking of how readers and critics approach epiphany in short fiction, than a description of a wholesale change in the nature of the device between the modernist and postmodern periods. That is to say, if the concept of epiphany is broadened to include the self-redescription proposed by the postmodernists, it can provide a powerful tool in theorizing the short story.

I propose thinking about the literary epiphany through the ideas of three thinkers who diverge in many ways, but whose thought converges in this area. Specifically, the concept of *experience*, borrowed from 20th century German phenomenologist, Hans Georg-Gadamer, Freud's concept of the uncanny, and literary theorist, Svetlana Boym's concept of nostalgia. Boym's larger project of conceptualizing what she termed the "off-modern," is a way of reconsidering unexplored avenues of modernist thought in which "tradition, reflection and longing, estrangement and affection go together" (*Future of Nostalgia* 13). In her book Boym offers a mediation between the modern and the post-modern conceptions of the world. In this off-modern spirit, I take the structure of Freud's uncanny and use Boym and Gadamer to reconceptualise it in order to describe something of an off-modern epiphany in the contemporary short story.

I here argue that the uncanny, as indicating the strangely familiar, in contemporary fiction acts as a distillation of meaning in the short story. Structurally, the uncanny moment is expressed as a sudden confrontation of the character with something that facilitates, or brings about their own self-redescription. If the structure of short fiction is based on the epiphanous moment, it means that in some way the story form is structured around the phenomenological experience of the character. Thinking of the uncanny as a strangely familiar experience of a character maintains the structure of epiphany, but complicates the modernist metaphysics implied by the teleological structure of epiphany.

Boym posits that nostalgia is a longing for a place that doesn't exist – a fiction created by our own memories, both as individuals and societies. This feeling becomes

particularly powerful when it is laid over specific places, people or objects who come to stand in as short-hands for these fictions, private or shared. A necessary dissonance comes when there is a fracture between the symbolic nature of nostalgic feelings and the independent reality of the things we graft them onto. In narrative terms – a character has a desire and the mechanism of the plot is to confront them with this desire, but in a manner which they could not have anticipated. The drama comes in seeing how their relationship to the object of desire changes in its presence. This relationship is an essential organizing principle in fiction, but can also be theorized, again through Boym’s concept of nostalgia. Here, I am interested in the structure of Boym’s argument, as she points out that nostalgia gained currency as a concept in the eighteenth century as a medical term. And in the course of attempting to treat the condition, “doctors discovered that a return home did not always treat the symptoms. In fact, once at home, the patients often died” (“Discontents” 12). Confrontation with the object of desire can be dramatic, but almost always points toward some deeper desire not realized through this confrontation. As Boym says of the patients who did not benefit from their homecoming, “the object of longing occasionally migrated to faraway lands beyond the confines of the motherland” (“Discontents” 12), with the emphasis not on materiality, but the subjective *experience* of the individual.

Here I would like to introduce Hans Georg Gadamer’s notion of *experience*. Both German terms *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung* translate into English broadly as *experience*. Though the split between these two designations of *experience* is not unique to Gadamer’s thought, it becomes a necessary distinction in his work. There is an

essential distinction between the terms often conflated in the English translation.

Erlebnis connotes a sense of having a particular experience, such as encountering a piece of art or having the experience of going on a trip. These experiences are particular and specific. On the other hand, the concept of *Erfahrung* connotes a broader notion of experience; that is, the experience of being a student, or one's experience as a woman. *Erfahrung* should be thought of more in terms of a cohesive life experience, something that is overarching and constitutive of an identity rather than a specific encounter.

For Gadamer there is a sense in which *Erlebnis* is necessarily constitutive of *Erfahrung*. If applied as a means of deciphering fiction specifically, this movement from *Erlebnis* to *Erfahrung* serves as an effective structure for thinking about the arcs of characters in a story. The brevity of the story-form necessitates that a specific experience (*Erlebnis*) dictates the structure, and comes to stand in for the character as a whole – their *Erfahrung*. The moment of epiphany in modernist literature worked so well because it acted metonymically for the entire action of the narrative. In fact, Peter Brooks contends that “the key figure of narrative must in some sense be not metaphor but metonymy ... the movement from one detail to another, the movement *toward* totalization under the mandate of desire” (91), with the idea that experience is the structuring element of narrative. The protagonist explains their own *Erfahrung* via their *Erlebnis* and the reader stands as a judge of the relationship between the two and understands the truth of this relationship, whether this coincides with the character's understanding or not.

In his essay, "The Nature of Knowledge in Short Fiction," Charles May defines short fiction in contrast to the novel, saying that long fiction establishes "the primacy of 'experience' conceptually created and considered; whereas short fiction, by its very length, demands both a subject matter and a set of artistic conventions that derive from and establish the primacy of 'an experience' directly and emotionally created and encountered" (328). I align my own sensibilities with this assertion, especially in that it places importance on the reported experience of characters. According to May, the novel would be the realm of *Erfahrung*, while the short story is the realm of *Erlebnis*. I would contend that both are necessary for any fiction to work at all, but that the short story, because of its brevity, is more likely to be structured around the conceit of a particular experience standing in for the whole. The movement in a short story is from the immediate lived experience to the overarching narrative experience of a character, and the story's brevity dictates the way readers encounter this narrative movement.

The concept of *experience* does not suggest a metaphysical truth about the human condition in any specific instance. By narrativizing experience, the truth of epiphany as lived experience, not the truth of the insight gained through it, becomes the point. In fact, with this structure my argument is that there is a necessary suspicion of the insight gained. In prizing experience as the interpretive mechanism the reconstruction of a meta-narrative Clark fears is frustrated. The open-endedness of the epiphany and the contingent, provisional nature of self-redescription ensures that this approach to interpretation does not fall into the problems pointed out by Clark and the post-modernists.

Here, Freud's notion of the uncanny becomes useful as a way of referring to the transition from one form of experience to the other. A character's recognition that something *other* is connected to, or even constitutive of the self, is another way of speaking to the Gadamerian shift outlined above. The central metaphor used by Freud in his work *The Uncanny* is that of the haunted house. The reason that the symbol of the haunted house has such symbolic weight is because of its familiarity – literally the hominess (*heimlich*) – of the house as symbol. When an element of discomfort – or otherness – is incorporated into the very symbol of familiarity, the subject experiences it, not as merely something strange, but as something which has the capacity to make them feel strange. That is, the unsettling effect of the uncanny cannot be brushed aside as merely *other*, but is necessarily constitutive of the self. In fiction, when the character comes to some understanding of this relationship, there is a moment of recognition or anagnorisis, leading to self-redefinition, in Clark's terms.

What I am most interested in concerning Freud's uncanny is not the specifics of his interpretation, but the structure. Freud says that a person can experience the uncanny as “the workings of forces hitherto unsuspected in his fellow-man but which at the same time he is dimly aware of in a remote corner of his own being” (14), or stated another way, a person being disturbed by an outward experience because they see some unexpected part of themselves reflected in the experience. The uncanny encounter is the realization of something, seemingly external, that leads to a self-redescription. In the essay Freud deals with the literary uncanny in a way that focuses on the unambiguously uncanny, presenting images from fairy tales and scary stories. However, I propose that

thinking about fiction through the lens of phenomenological uncanniness is much more productive and that limiting the application of the uncanny to the effect on the reader severely limits its usefulness as a critical tool. The character experiencing something uncanny is essential to conceptualize the uncanny as it relates to the epiphany as the structuring event of the story. The uncanny effect, or lack of effect, on the reader is of secondary importance.

In Madeline Thien's titular story from her collection *Simple Recipes*, the narrator is the daughter of Malaysian immigrants living in Vancouver. She reflects on her childhood, watching her father expertly prepare food. The father is introduced as a loving and, from the perspective of the child, a harmless, convivial older man prone to fatherly jokes. Through the course of the story he becomes violent with her brother over a dinnertime row, caused by the brother not wanting to eat the prepared dish. What begins as a heated moment and an act of seemingly impulsive violence, soon escalates into a cold-blooded bamboo caning. At the moment of crisis, after the narrator has confronted the reality of her father's potential for violence, she reflects: "I want to stay where I am, facing the wall. I'm afraid that if I turn around and go to him, I will be complicit, accepting a portion of guilt, no matter how small that piece" (18).

This example from Thien eschews any overt uncanniness, but hews close to the structure of the uncanny that Freud proposes. Freud says that "*heimlich* is a word the meaning of which develops towards an ambivalence, until it finally coincides with its opposite, *unheimlich*" (4), which describes the way that Thien's narrator relates to her father. It is precisely the conflation of the familiar and the inexplicable that causes her

reaction. This encounter with her father's violence makes clear that the incident is formative of her life experience, and defines her as a character. The tension also comes from her nostalgia, in the sense that I read it in Boym. The pain that spurs this particular self-redefinition comes not only from a concern for the well-being of her brother, or the fear of her father's violence, but from the shock of the transition from one state of understanding to another. In a minor way, my own story "The Punch," bears a relation to this structure. Duncan, the narrator, is shocked by the potential for violence that exists between him and his brother, Sean. It is not just that he realizes that a potential for real violence exists between them, but that fighting for the first time with adult bodies fundamentally changes what a "fight" between them means. Not understanding that they cannot use their bodies in the way that they had their entire lives posits their own bodies as the uncanny element. Duncan and Sean, then, enact a kind of reverse-nostalgia, in that both fight with their adult bodies, but within the context of their childhood antipathies.

Every protagonist in my collection feels the pressure of this *unheimlich* dynamic to one degree or another. The protagonist from "Raymond," and Grant from "Everything Begins as Memory," are, perhaps, the most salient examples. Both experience this uncanny moment as a literalized re-visitation from their past – a haunting, in a manner of speaking. The belated realization of the importance of aspects of their own past, or the integration of the same into the narrative experience (*Erfahrung*) of their lives becomes the site of dramatic tension. This tension comes

directly from the characters' nostalgia – the unintegrated symbolization of their own past as a place that calls to them for some form of – necessarily impossible – return.

The roots of the word *nostalgia* are in the Greek words *nostos* for homecoming, and *algia* for longing. From its etymology, the term is more comparable to our current notion of *homesickness* than of the, now more broadly applied, concept of nostalgia. Boym contends that “nostalgia appears to be a longing for a place, but it is actually a yearning for a different time” (“Discontents” 8), and thereby claims nostalgia as a temporal notion. It is the yearning not for home (*nostos*) but for the way that home was.

The distinction that Boym makes here is important, because it underscores the essentially impossible nature of nostalgia. If nostalgia is a temporal concept and not a spatial one, there can be no return – it is a desire for which there is no fulfillment. Boym goes on to complicate things further, re-inserting the concept of spatiality into *nostalgia* by positing the notion of the “off-modern” as *adjacent* to nostalgia, but she does so in an indirect way. She says that the concept of off-modern, “confuses our sense of direction ... [and] allows us to take a detour from the deterministic narratives of history” (“Discontents” 9), which opens a *space* in which those cultures and places considered marginal or provincial can make use of nostalgia – the impossibility of homecoming – as a creative force.

In Samuel Archibald's story “Antigonish,” from his story collection *Arvida*, Boym's concept of the off-modern and nostalgia comes to the fore. The story concerns two friends from the titular town of Arvida, Québec, who spend all their free time

road-tripping. The story finds them rounding the Cabot Trail in Cape Breton at night in a rainstorm. The passenger, Menaud, is fast asleep, but the narrator pushes on with the trip so they can check it off their sightseeing list. The driver sees a woman in white standing between the road and the cliff side. When he pulls over and leaves the car to see if she is okay, she has disappeared. This moment of true uncanniness draws from popular legends of ghost hitchhikers, but there is never any indication one way or the other how the reader is meant to interpret the event. Was it a ghost? A suicide? A hallucination? This moment is unusual of the uncanny in short fiction in that it comes near the beginning of the story. The sighting of the woman in the white dress does, however, seem to be the structuring element, or epiphanous moment in the story, and prefigures the disappearance of Menaud from the narrator's life: "After 1971 I never heard from Menaud, I don't know if he was alive or dead," (24) he tells us of his one-time friend.

Archibald's use of the inexplicable vision of someone in danger seen from a car window has a clear connection to the climax of my own story, "Raymond." As well, the structure of a momentary encounter with the uncanny prefiguring the real dramatic tension of the story is a technique that I also use in my story "Journalism Day." In that story, it seems as if the most important moment of uncanniness comes when the narrator reads the opprobrious comments Al had written about him and his girlfriend Jenna. This diary creates a catalyst for Jenna's interest in investigative journalism and, moreover, for her increasing independence and growing self-esteem. However, the real moment of epiphany is only implied, and begins with the narrator physically separated

from Jenna by a locked door. She has begun to grow beyond their relationship, and the narrator both can and cannot see that growth.

Of course, Boym in no way denies the destructive potential of nostalgia, especially in populations which feel themselves to be marginalized by, or swept up in the larger trends of progress. She accounts for the destructive potential by making another important distinction between types of nostalgia – between restorative and reflective nostalgia. Boym says that “restorative nostalgia protects the absolute truth, while reflective nostalgia calls it into doubt” (“Discontents” 13), allowing for a stream of nostalgia that has the capacity to be self-aware and therefore playful and creative, as well as the more dangerous stream which is taken up by those unable or unwilling to let the past go. At its worst restorative nostalgia leads beyond provincialism to all manner of chauvinism and nationalism. At its most benign it can account for neuroses in those who seek to indulge in it as a means of control. Again, this attempt to control and order one’s surroundings I see as a major failing in the narrator of “Journalism Day.” His attempts to impose order on his life has influenced the way that he relates with Jenna, though he cannot see it.

There is an inescapable conflation of place and time in all concepts of nostalgia. It is at this nexus of theorizing place and temporality that most of the stories in my collection find – at least some – of their tension. Ideas of regionalism are necessarily inflected by ideas of past-ness. It seems impossible to have a regional literature without this conflation. Even if one were to write a regional literature that is intentionally forward-looking, it would certainly be conspicuously incomplete – or wouldn’t be

regional. In his essay, "Images of Prairie Man," Eli Mandel makes this relationship specific by stating that a child's vision of the world, especially retrospectively from adulthood, "surely is the essence of what we mean by a region, the overpowering feeling of nostalgia associated with the place we know as the first place, the first vision of things, the first clarity of things... The child, then is the focus of nostalgia for the place that was – and regional literature is then a literature of the past" (206). This quotation from Mandel echoes Boym's notion of nostalgia as a temporal concept. What is more, conceptualizing regionalism in this way ties it not only into ideas of nostalgia, but also prizes the experience of the individual as constitutive of identity. For example this relationship is literalized in the moment Grant from "Everything Begins as a Memory" thinks that he is losing his son Jack in his own childhood back yard. The folding of the temporal and the spatial in this moment provide the instance of uncanniness in that story.

Making the distinction between reflective and restorative nostalgia is also an essential to many of the conflicts in my collection. For many of my characters, the anagnorisis that they undergo has some relation to this distinction. The narrator from "Right on the Line," is clearly resentful of the loss of some perceived sacredness, and the exploitation of the same. His tragedy, as I see it, is his incapability of moving from a restorative to a reflective nostalgia. As Boym says, "The rhetoric of reflective nostalgia is about taking time out of time and about grasping the fleeing present," and this grasping is both impossible and potentially destructive. The character Grant from "Everything Begins as a Memory," is perhaps the guiltiest of the particular sin of

“grasping at the fleeting present,” in which he indulges as an attempt to order and control his life. His attempt to freeze the key elements of his life bears a relation to the collector’s impulse. If he can gain the ability to return to some artefact of his past in a particular way, then he gains the ability to return to the moment of originary emotion, or at least the perception of that ability. His impulse is toward saving the moments of his life. The conscious intention is to collect them as material for his films but really, Grant wants to be able to spatialize his experience, to make a map of his emotional life – of his interior experience – which he can follow and return to.

On the other end of the spectrum is the character Doris, from “So Many Pictures,” whose struggle comes more in the form of growing pains as she moves from restorative to reflective nostalgia. She consciously makes the attempt to be cosmopolitan, and move to a more self-reflective perspective. For example, her defensive explanation of the hand-picked blueberries she generously brings to supper, and the tension she feels in trying not to seem provincial. The more worldly and playful regional-nostalgia conflation that Boym proposes is displayed very clearly in a short literary non-fiction piece from the Irish writer Kevin Barry, who says of the folks in his hometown, “when Cork people laughingly refer to the city as ‘the real capital’, the laughter is just a mask, or a defence mechanism – they are in fact utterly serious” (6). I read this through the lens of reflective nostalgia, and see Barry as giving the reader both the reality of the situation – Dublin, in every way, has distinctly achieved its status as capital – and the justifiable feeling of locals for their own home. Barry exemplifies the positive action of the notion of reflective nostalgia in that it accepts reality

consciously without necessitating it be accepted emotionally. This kind of nostalgia is precisely the attitude toward spatial ideas that the narrator in “Right on the Line” is incapable of internalizing as the narrative closes, and he holds the mug of rum and has to consider if he wants to be away from the currents of change as badly as Denim Jacket does.

Boym says that “nostalgia is a rebellion against the modern idea of time, the time of history and progress. The nostalgic desires to turn history into private or collective mythology, to revisit time like space, refusing to surrender to the irreversibility of time that plagues the human condition” (“Discontents” 20). However, I make an important distinction here. Reflective nostalgia is akin to acceptance of the passage of time, which opens up space within a discourse for nostalgia. Reflective nostalgia is able to comment on the modern idea of time – to criticize it – without resorting to the violence necessary to try and impose stasis upon it – it does not resist the passage of time, but neither does it flow along with it unquestioningly. She states that “Re-flection means new flexibility, not the reestablishment of stasis” (“Discontents” 15), and solidifies another important distinction between reflective and restorative nostalgia – the relation of each to temporality. Restorative nostalgia attempts to create stasis and freeze things in time, while reflective nostalgia allows for the flow of time and the necessary changes that this flow entails. In fiction the test comes when characters are confronted by something emblematic of their past. This direct confrontation with the past is the site of anagnorisis in fiction – it is never *new*

information which causes this realization, but rather information which has some effect of changing the character's relationship with their own past – their own narrative.

In Kris Bertin's story "Is Alive and can Move" from his collection *Bad Things Happen*, the reader does not have to imagine how to read the moment of anagnorisis as uncanny, because it is unambiguously so. The protagonist, Buddy, suffers from alcohol psychosis as he attempts to sober up and maintain his job as a night janitor at a university. The strange events of the story are made stranger by the fact that the first-person narrative perspective only allows the reader to experience events through Buddy's skewed view of things. When he sees a bunch of young men, drunkenly carrying a woman out into the night, the reader isn't sure if this event is real or not. When Buddy sees a panel from a comic book come to life, we are more certain of how to interpret his perceptions. Like Archibald does in "Antigonish," Bertin does not give the reader answers as to the 'reality' of these situations. The central, element of the uncanny in Bertin's story concerns the building Buddy is tasked with cleaning – he is convinced, as the title suggests, that it is alive and can move. After a particularly intense episode of psychosis, precipitated by relapse, Buddy returns to the building, newly sober again. Though his mind is clear, he remains suspicious of the building, still thinking that he can see evidence of it having moved. Buddy's experiences (*Erlebnis*) build to an impossibly convoluted experience (*Erfahrung*). Similarly, in my collection, the narrator from "Just Down the Road" is incapable of fully integrating the reality of his friend's death because he is incapable of accepting that it was a suicide. Everyone else in his social circle understands this interpretation of the past. When he is

confronted with the truth of Matheson's death it comes to him as an uncanny moment. The "news" so shocks him that he abandons his camping weekend with his friends, and attempts to return home on his own. In the eerie morning light, walking towards his parents' home on the same road that Matheson died, the narrator must work especially hard to recognize the past event, and simultaneously walk past it as he advances toward his childhood home. His inability to deal directly with the suicide leads to an incredibly convoluted *Erfahrung*, and one that he only understands as a lonely and isolating occasion.

Peter Brooks in *Reading for the Plot*, bemoans the use of psychoanalytic theory to postulate some supposed unconscious to attribute to characters in a narrative. He is suspicious of the critic attempting to posit "the occult motivations of the characters" (112). While this argument seems reasonable enough, I still would like to push back against it. It is clearly a purposeless task to analyze a text based on information that is not there, or can only be presumed to be there. However, in my thesis stories, and perhaps generalizable beyond those, the images of the narrative provide a reasonable facsimile of a protagonist's *experience*. In my story, "Foundation," the material realities of the narrator's world give a sense of his interior reality. I don't want this interiority to come across merely as environmental determinism, but as a sensory record of his immediate *experience*, structuring his *Erfahrung*. I read this proposed *experience* as a structuring agent in these stories. To attempt a diagnosis, or pure psychoanalytic reading of a character is purposeless, but inferring a reflecting mind into a character becomes essential to the process of reading character as "a succession of selves."

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