

HAUNTINGS

by

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A THESIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Arts  
in the Department of English  
in the Graduate School of  
The University of Alabama

TUSCALOOSA, ALABAMA

2010

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## ABSTRACT

This collection is a representation of my work in the creative writing program at the University of Alabama from 2006-2010

## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my parents, my sister, my family and friends.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like thank the faculty, staff and graduate students in the Department of English at The University of Alabama. Your influence, guidance and patience made this possible.

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## Undead

Forty years ago, on June 14<sup>th</sup>, in the town of Vernon, Ohio, the dead rose from their graves. The people there kept it as quiet as they could. Took care of the problem themselves. They reburied and reburied the slow moving mass of bodies. Despite the cover up, years later, someone made a movie about the whole thing. But the people of Vernon ignored the pressure from the outside. They denied the claims that once upon a time, in their small community, the dead and living walked together. And, whenever someone came poking around, the townspeople buttoned their lips up, made sure the sod at the cemetery was green and fresh, the tombstones upright. They made sure to paint over the scratches on doors and windows. And no matter how hard the outside world pushed and prodded, the people kept their secret. If you asked one of them, they'd tell you it's easy. Not because the people of Vernon are naturally deceitful. Not because it has been so long since that first horrible night. But because, whenever someone comes around, they always ask, "Isn't this the place where the dead once walked with the living?" To that question, anyone in Vernon will answer, "No, no it is not" without the slightest fear of telling a lie. They can do this because in Vernon, the dead didn't only walk 40 years ago on June 14<sup>th</sup>. They walked again the following year. They walked the year after that. They keep walking.

Only, not all of them rose back up again. It seems that the undead, like the living, only get one chance. Every single walking corpse killed on that first night forty years ago remains buried to this day. While this might seem like good news, it isn't. While it might give you the impression that the people of Vernon are relieved, they are not. Because now that the old dead remain dead, the only things that walk on June 14<sup>th</sup> are the newly dead. For Vernon, the faces of the walking dead have long since been familiar ones. They, unlike the anonymous wave from

long ago, are still family. They do not suffer from excess decay or outdated clothing. Their muscles, embalmed and sealed airtight in coffins, still have spring to them. The recently dead do not stumble like drunks. In Vernon, they stroll calmly away from the cemetery and, perhaps because they are recently dead, seek out the life they once had.

“It’s complicated,” Anne says to her father. They’ve been talking at the kitchen table for hours, not really getting anywhere. In Anne’s lap, her fourteen month old boy, Ethan, squirms and waves his teddy in the air.

“Dada,” Ethan says over and over, giggling and burping.

Across from them, staring at a cup of coffee, his mouth hung open, eyes glazed over, is Anne’s husband Michael. Michael, as I’m sure you can guess, is dead. Anne holds Ethan tight. Her whole arm is wrapped around his midsection and, despite that, Ethan still jumps and bounces at the sight of his father. Michael is wearing the suit he was buried in. The shoulders are brown with dirt. He has pieces of grass in his hair. His skin is pale. Anne thinks it is strange that he doesn’t smell bad. She cannot blink when she looks at him. He doesn’t breathe, doesn’t moan or make any sounds, just sits and occasionally looks around the kitchen. Sometimes he focuses on Anne or Ethan, looking intently, leaning towards them like they are puzzles he must solve.

“I know it’s complicated,” her father says, “but you can’t just let him sit here all night long.”

“I don’t want him here all night. But just look at how happy Ethan is.” The young boy has not stopped smiling since Michael arrived. He hasn’t even seemed to notice that both Anne and her father have kept him two arms lengths from his father. Despite the distance, Ethan shouts and points and smiles. The more Anne’s father looks at Ethan, the more he worries. He was ten the first night this happened. Terrified, he helped his mother and father board up



windows with whatever was available. He remembers the first one he shot. He used a .22 rifle, a gift from his uncle. There was a rotten, stumbling thing in their parlor slowly bumping into a closet door. It looked like a battery powered toy robot, endlessly walking into a wall. When he raised the gun and fired, he struck the thing in the side of the head. It fell to the ground and stopped moving. A moment later, his mother grabbed his shoulder and, with his dad, they ran out into the forest where they traded hours hunting and hiding. Now, with his son-in-law sitting there, Anne's father doesn't know which night is worse.

Anne stands up and motions for her father to meet her in another room. They walk out, leaving Michael at the table. She knows it is late. And she knows her father is right to keep pushing her toward a decision. When he arrived, she saw him lean his shotgun against the house next to the front door. When he realized he'd been caught, he gave her a closed mouth smile she'd seen a hundred times before. In Vernon, it is an expression anyone older than 30 can summon on command. It means, *I am sorry. But I am also right.* They sit on the couch together. He takes her free hand and holds it. Neither of them says anything right away. The only sound in the room is Ethan's struggling until they hear a crash from the kitchen.

Anne's father stands up and motions for Anne to stay put, "let me go check it out." He reaches down toward his ankle and pulls out a small pistol.

"You better not." Anne says.

Her father turns to her before he leaves the room. "This is to protect me."

"He won't hurt any of us." Anne says.

Her father walks into the kitchen and finds Michael on his knees trying to put silverware back into a drawer he has pulled all the way out. On the floor, the drawer is upside down. Michael is slowly placing the spilled forks and knives on the upturned bottom. "It's fine,"

Anne's father yells into the other room, "everything is fine." He levels the gun at Michael's head and thinks about pulling the trigger. Memories of Michael and Anne's wedding rush back. He thinks of the night Ethan was born and the cigars he and Michael smoked in the hospital parking lot. They were pink but it was all he could find. Frustrated, he walks back into the other room and sits by Anne. "We have to do this," he tells her.

"Do what?" she asks.

"You know damn well what."

"Just wait a little longer." Anne says.

They sit for almost a half hour in silence. Anne thinks about her mother who requested to be buried in another county and still walked on the 14<sup>th</sup>. The police called her father and the two of them drove out to identify the body. The mutual embarrassment of the police, too scared to admit they killed what was already dead, and the family, ashamed of their terrible tradition, prevented word from spreading beyond the morgue. On the drive back to Vernon, her mother in the bed of her father's pick up, Anne dreamt that they could have talked one more time. She would have told her mother secrets she'd kept. She would have said she loved her. Said she admired her. She would have said all those things she supposes everyone wishes they could say. And her mother would have listened, smiled, and thanked her. Then, maybe there could have been more peace. Maybe the realities of the dead rising each June could be different than how people talked about them. Now, with Michael here for hours, slow and unresponsive, she knows that for once, the people talking were talking the truth.

"At least it won't be like your mother" her father says.

"It's just like with mom," Anne say.

"No. It isn't."

“How? How is this any different?”

“Because this stays inside the family.” Her father says.

He takes Ethan from her and sits him on his knee. “Say hi grampa, say hi grampa” he repeats to the boy.

“Hi groopa” Ethan says.

Anne walks to the front door and takes the shotgun.

“What are you doing?” her father asks.

“Can you help me get him outside?”

Anne’s father sits for a moment, stunned. “Are you sure? I can take care of him. You don’t even need to be here. You can take Ethan over to my house and I’ll call you when...”

“Thank you,” She says, “but I need to be here.”

“What should I do with Ethan?” he asks.

Anne’s father carries Ethan as they lead Michael into the back yard. Anne tells Ethan to say goodbye and the boy does, still giggling like Michael is simply leaving for work. Her father takes Ethan back inside and Anne and Michael stand in the yard together. I can’t tell you exactly what they shared in this moment. A conversation between the recently dead and the ones who still love them is one-sided at best. However, what Anne said, what each person in Vernon says when they face this moment is theirs and theirs alone. Still more personal is what they see in the recently dead as they speak. What they take as understanding or ignorance, intimacy or a great and wide distance. I can tell you, for certain, is that at the end of it, before dawn that morning, Anne shot Michael, making him dead for a second time. Her father helped her wrap the body in a black trap. Like her mother, they put Michael in the back of her father’s pick up and drove him to Vernon cemetery. It was the middle of sunrise when they arrived and, like every year, there

were extra men at the cemetery. They stood by the gate, lined up with shovels at the ready to help bury the recently dead.

## Sacrifice

The goats died overnight. An entire herd, 134, all dead now, curled in the field. The shepherd and his daughter walk down from their camp in the morning quiet, terrified from the lack of sound. They each take a set of shears from their belts and begin to cut the fur from the goats. They start with the necks and bellies. The softest material is there. They cut quickly, watching the glow of sunrise swell into the valley. “Cut quickly, before the sun and heat reach us. Cut while it is cold. Cut before there are flies to lay eggs in the hair.” The daughter does as she is told. The goats are bunched together where they fell asleep the night before. She kneels in the damp grass and pulls one in front of her. The body is limp. She remembers practicing on year-old kids, the way they moaned and cried when pulled from their mothers. They would bite and kick and she was not yet strong enough to grip the legs and force the animal to submit as she clipped the hair from its body. These goats, lifeless, seem like dolls. As she pulls one goat and then another out, clipping them fast and stuffing a burlap sack with fleece and hair, she closes each animal’s eyes before setting it, gently, into a pile.

Her father the shepherd simply throws his. He is working furiously, not stopping to wonder why this happened. To stop and think about it, to ask why it wasn’t just one goat, torn to limbs by some quiet wolf, not that, but the entire flock, all together, silent, untouched, to ponder it instead of work would be another kind of death. He must get the flock cleaned and save the coats before the rot sets in. Tomorrow, he will think about why. He will wonder if it became too cold or if some new poison took root in the valley. His daughter wonders now, wonders why this happened as her father pours the last of the kerosene from his lantern onto the pile of dead and freshly sheared goats. At sunset, he lights a match, and they all burn.

## **Cleve and Davis**

Cleve went down to the canal to fish and brag about his boy, Keith, throwing five touchdowns against Alliance the previous Friday. Davis was down there again. Cleve liked to tell people Davis looked like rotten dirt shaped into a man. Davis wore an old, oil stained cap and big rubber waders with no shirt. His dog, Cable, was swimming back and forth from bank to bank. There was rain over the weekend, and up from the spot where the men met to fish the spillways were open, dumping hundreds of extra gallons of lake water into the canal. There was barely any kind of shore to cast from, and when Cleve got out of his car, pole in hand, and saw only Davis and that crazy dog taking up the best piece of real estate, he almost packed up and went home.

He didn't because it was another day off, his hundredth in a row. Half the city had been laid off from Meadowlark Tool & Dye a few months ago. At first, they pitched in for one another, borrow this, stretch that, they were finding a way to keep their lives going. But slowly, people were leaving. Houses were going empty, a few each day. It felt like the place was receding into itself. This moment, only Davis and his dog at the canal, was enough to swell the pit in Davis' stomach. The small bank against the bend in the concrete walls of the canal used to be a favorite spot on a Sunday morning. It was a place for smoke and spit and bullshit and you might catch a fish or two in the process.

Davis didn't work at Meadowlark. He ran a small taxidermy business out of his garage and, with the exception of spending mornings at the canal, no one ever saw him outside his workshop or off his warped, wasp infested porch. Cleve took a turkey to him once, a tom that weighed 31 pounds and they sat on that porch while the hide dried out. Cleve spent the whole time swatting at the wasps but Davis just sat their through sundown letting them buzz around

him. Cable lay at his feet, only moving to yawn. Back then, Cleve was new to the town, still young, only married a year. It was the first and last time he sat down alone with Davis. He still remembers how, as the sun lowered to the horizon, Davis seemed to get bigger and bigger. By the end of the evening, Cleve felt like he was sitting a few feet from a giant that was planning on having him for dinner.

Cleve dragged his feet down the soft slope of the hill leading to the canal. This moment should have been a triumph. His son had put a hurting on Alliance that Friday. The boy moved the football at will, passing, running, dropping back on play action and faking out an entire side of traveling fans who drove up from Alliance to see what everyone knew might be the last game in a forty year rivalry. They won by 42. Cleve held his wife's hand so hard throughout that game he gave her a bruise and had to steam water and pour it into a big bowl with Epsom Salt to let her soak it. It made him feel terrible, but while the game was going he was tapping his toes under his boots he was so happy. Watching his boy scramble and dip, he felt light as a feather, clean too, reborn. Here, seeing Davis' stupid mutt, he wasn't back to earth, he was in it, waist deep and sinking.

He set his tackle and rod down near Davis' feet and took off his jacket, dropping it close by.

"Cleve," said Davis, nodding his head.

"Hello, Davis," said Cleve. And that was all the two men said for the next two hours. They took turns casting and reeling one after the next, dragging their lures and bobs across the flat bottom of the canal and catching nips from bluegill that picked like surgeons at the bait. You could go through fifty worms and not catch a thing the way the bluegill took their tole. Some of the fish even grew fat enough to keep. They made a decent meal, thick and firm from all the

worms they picked off hooks. For a long time they were peasant's food. A fish for beginners because the bluegill were opportunists. You didn't have to tease a bluegill. Didn't need to have skill with a rod to get them biting. You didn't even need to get up early or cast in the right places. Bluegill would swim out from under cover at noon and pick your hook clean, then coast back into some weeds. They were kid's fish. Now, to catch anything big enough to take home was a success. It was one less trip to the store, one less stopping in at the neighbor's house to see if they had leftovers.

Cable came out of water and shook himself dry at Cleve's feet.

"Shit, Davis, can't you keep this mutt of yours away from me. I don't want to come home smelling like wet dog."

"You won't smell like nothing, Cleve," said Davis. He talked two ways, happy and angry, but used the same crooked smile each time. Cleve knew him as a man who was as likely to strike you as hug you. There just wasn't much of a way to tell and Cleve had seen Davis send at least a dozen men down into the canal over what it was he never really knew.

"Davis, how come you let your dog swim back and forth like that?"

"I don't know that I could stop him if I tried. He takes to water, always has."

"He scares the fish."

"That so?"

Cleve took a few steps away from Davis. If there were other men out there maybe he'd stay up close. But if he went in the water, there would be no one to follow him and who knows where he might pull himself out, or if. "That is so. You know it yourself. You never catch anything when he's in there and neither do we."

Davis spit and looked at Cleve, "Who's we?"



“Well, they ain’t out here today, you know who I mean; Fulton, the Wheeler Boys, Ms. Jen...all of us.”

Davis put a fresh wad of Kodiak into his lip and nodded. Cleve decided to let it be. The dog wasn’t in the water anymore, and he wanted to pay attention to the water as his fly buzzed over it. Cleve wasn’t very good at fly fishing, but with the spillways open there wasn’t much hope with a lure and bob. The current would drag it away and against the bank, tangling the line in trees and weed. Down the canal, the bank the men cast from was littered with cut line and lures. It looked like someone’s tackle had blown up.

“I saw your boy play against Alliance,” Davis said.

“He played a hell of a game.”

“Maybe.”

Cleve stopped casting his line, drawing it in with both hands to keep it off the bank, “Maybe?”

“Yeah, maybe he did. If you ask me those boys from Alliance didn’t have any heart this year. Been rolling over for everyone.”

“They looked fine enough to me.”

Davis put his hands up in fake surrender, “Like I said, maybe. Just my opinion.”

Cleve thought back to a few years ago when Will Cunningham ran up 250 yards on Alliance. His father, Pat, couldn’t get a word in to brag about his kid with everyone at the fishing spot doing it for him. They said it was the best single performance they’d ever seen. He was getting offers to drink from flasks faster than he could breathe. Shook so many hands he never dropped a lure in the water. He just sat there, surrounded, having glory drizzled down on him like honey. That Monday at Meadowlark the manager even made an announcement

thanking Pat for raising such a fine son. They even doubled his lunch break so he could be next to the boy when a reporter took a picture of him for the AP. It was a state record and Pat Cunningham got the state record treatment. Cleve looked over at Davis and threw his line into the water. He watched it hit and fall in back to the tip of his rod cutting a quick shape out of the fast water.

They did it all at once, just closed up the plant. They had a union, but what good is a union when you don't have a job to fight for? No one in town talked about where the jobs went, only that they weren't around anymore. The bars filled for a few weeks and then emptied when tabs stopped getting paid. Jimmy Fellow's wife died when his still blew up. He was feeding the town from his basement. Even some of the guys who owned the bars were his customers. He was one of the first to go, even took his wife's body with him and went back down south to live with his parents who were both past ninety. Cleve was union secretary and was one of the few men on the board who didn't vote to disband once representatives from Meadowlark stopped coming to the meetings. That seemed to be the first real step toward an end. The first time the people in town realized that there was no one coming in to tape footage of thugs breaking their strike or clog their streets for the summer music festival.

"You gonna pick up that line?" Davis asked.

Cleve snapped the rod up before flicking his wrist and sending a shiver down the line that made it look like a snake flying up out of the water.

"Not bad," said Davis.

Cable jumped up at the sight of the line coming to life and leapt into the water. Cleve drew his lure back, not wanting to hook the dog who followed the neon yellow feathers of the

lure all the way back to the bank. “I’m telling you, Davis, I’m not gonna catch nothing with your dog down here all day.”

“Aww, he don’t mean no harm.”

“I know he don’t mean nothing. He’s a damn dog.”

“He knows more than you think. Takes after his daddy.” Davis pointed a thumb back at himself and let that strange grin curl up over his lips. They looked so dry they might crack open all the way across.

“That’s what I’m afraid of,” said Cleve, keeping one eye on Davis and the other on Cable who was sitting and panting at the feet of his owner, his dog-tongue blood red and hanging four inches out to the side.

“Me and Cable do just fine if you’re saying we aren’t so sharp. Is that what you’re saying?”

“You ain’t getting me in that water, Davis.”

“Put down your rod.”

“No.”

Davis set his down. Cable perked up, rising to all fours and pulling that tongue in. “See, I set mine down. How about you go and do the same.”

“I came down here to fish.”

“I did too. But now we’re talking. So set that thing down and we’ll talk.”

Cleve was about Davis’ size. But the man looked immense. His size came not from bone and tissue but reputation and the experience of being close to him. He smelled like bad wood. He breathed in rattles. Everyone in town had their story about him in a fight. Beating college kids passing through at Cappy’s Tavern or chasing tax men off his property with a

crowbar raised high above his head. He seemed to grow where he stood, dared you to cut the roots tying him to the dirt. It was difficult to call him a bully the way it was difficult to call tornadoes bullies. "I'm not doing it."

Davis reached over and with a single hand yanked the pole from Cleve. "There," he said, "now we're talking."

Cleve took a few steps back, putting himself at the edge of the canal. "Shit, Davis, no need for that."

"Ohh well now, you're the one who made the accusation. And I didn't want you distracted while we are trying to clarify things."

"Now, I wasn't accusing anyone."

"That is too bad." Davis reached out and grabbed Cleve's chest, picking him up easily. Cleve felt like a child. Cable began to bark as Cleve's feet rose up and dangled a foot off the ground. Davis held Cleve in the air for almost a minute, before throwing him into the canal. But as he rotated, Cleve grabbed on tight to Davis and pulled him down too. They hit the water together. Cable ran along the bank next to them. The two men struggled in the water. Each had the other under then they went down and back again. Cleve had both hands on Davis' head, he felt like an anchor trying to drag a ship to the bottom. Davis squeezed Cleve's chest with his arms, trying to blow all his air out. The two men spun and drifted and cut their backs on rocks and fallen branches. Cleve thought about real murder for the first time in his life.

## Flower Girl

It was called hell hole, which didn't make sense because it wasn't hell and it wasn't a hole. What it was, was a 20 foot in diameter drainage pipe that let a creek run underneath a grassy hill in the woods behind the high school. There were a hundred stories about the place. Most of them were started by high school kids to keep the junior high kids away. Then the junior high kids would make up stories to keep the elementary school kids away. Not that the elementary school kids were coming out in droves. Pretty much telling a 5<sup>th</sup> grader there was a place called hell hole was enough. But still, who doesn't like a good story?

My favorite story is about the Flower Girl. I must have heard it when I was in tenth grade because Jeremy told it to me and I know knew him around them. We would go down to the hell hole during study hall or after school and smoke pot. In spring, when it was sunny for a few days and the water stopped running through the pipe we would clean the muck out with rusted shovels and skate up and down the inside. If we took our time and got it all out you could ride a board all the way to the opposite side and back again, just carving up and down with the curve of the pipe. The boys used to see how high they could get and dream about riding a full loop all the way around. I just liked the unbroken concrete worn smooth by the water. I knew I was kicking up to high on the walls if I could feel the concrete grinding my wheels. Most days I was the only girl skating. The rest of the girls all stayed out of the pipe unless it rained. We put up lots of graffiti in all kinds of colors. We did upside down crosses and pentagrams, sprayed "keep out" in big letters on the side of the pipe near the fields where people stretched out on blankets and smoked.

If anyone had come along and seen us the legend of hell hole woulda been toast. But somehow, no one ever showed up. No cops, no moms, no little brothers and sisters all buttoned

up tight in parochial clothes. Nobody but us and skateboards and maybe a Sony cranked up and blaring. We liked to think it was all the legends that kept people away. There were a bunch of them. Some we started, some were around before our parents probably. In some of them hell hole was a portal to hell that local Satanists used to feed people to demons in exchange for money or power or whatever. People said they'd lure you in with a beautiful woman or money and, once you were in too deep, the exits at either end of the pipe would wink closed and you'd be stuck in the darkness forever. And there were a bunch about like, murderers and drug addicts and rapists who all lived in the tunnel together like some kind of weird tribe and ate people. A whole other group of stories had to do with huge animals, mutant dogs and cats that people threw away. They lived in the hell hole because there was toxic waste that made the animals huge and savage. They had to stay there because they needed the toxic waste to live.

Almost all of the stories were full of blood and punishment. It seemed that everyone had a friend who knew someone or had a cousin who died at hell hole. It would be impossible to prove because that cousin or whoever always went to St. Richards' or Lutheran West and you'd never see them. "No, it's true," some kid would tell you at the bus stop, "They get an extra day off because of the kid every year. My cousin knew him." Immediately, you'd call bullshit. Everyone did at first. But in the back of your mind you start to think it is true. And you want nothing more than to be there and see the huge, two headed dogs or hide in the bushes while a bunch of Satanists sacrifice some poor girl.

I didn't go for the first time until the summer before eighth grade, dipping down through the woods, walking bike trails my brothers talked about and seeing for the first time all the landmarks I'd heard people explain. The dead rock, which was just a big rock with red paint on it, but everyone said a priest killed himself on it because he used to force girls from Magnificat

give him blowjobs at confessional. Then you had to walk through this wall of vines that were alive and could grab you and pull you into the trees. Those are the only two I can remember real well. And after the vines is when you'd start to see empty beer bottles and maybe, if kids were down at the hole, hear music and shouting. I was terrified the first time. But once I saw the woods opened up into the clearing I relaxed. More than anything it was disappointing, growing up, hearing about all those nightmares just to find a bunch of kids my age sitting around looking bored. My older brother Carl took me on that first trip. When we arrived he looked at me and said, "Don't be a bitch, ok?"

Two years later, after I'd gotten pretty good on a board and could hold my smoke and knew how to find hell hole in the dark while I was drunk, I met Jeremy. He was handsome for a guy who hung out down at the hole. I don't want to say all the boys were a bunch of duds but really, these were the kind of boys who hung out in a dirty pipe for fun. I was that kind of girl too. But girls were in shorter supply and I kinda had my pick of the boys down there. So I picked Jeremy. Or he picked me. I don't really remember. I remember his hair, brown and curled with blonde tinges in the summer. His voice was calm just about all the time. Even when Tim Stark dislocated his shoulder trying to drop into the pipe off a busted piece of ladder Jeremy picked him up and talked with him like you and I would talk to anyone. He had a big scar on one of his cheeks from when he was little and fell through a window.

Maybe he made them all up himself, I don't know. But I never heard anyone else tell the stories Jeremy told about hell hole. He had his own, super gruesome versions of the human sacrifice stories. He said the dead rock was actually an altar for sacrifices. He knew about all kinds of rituals people would do on it. I think lots of people would think he was weird for that but the stories were great and I hope they were getting around and scaring the hell out of the

middle schoolers. But he had other ones too, ones he would tell when it was just him and me a few other people lying on blankets when the weather seemed to match up perfectly with the inside of your body. He called them myths and told them like he actually believed them. They were different from all the stories I heard when I was young. These had real people who had names, who lived on streets we knew, who had graves we could all go look at. And he was trying to pass them over on older kids, high school kids. The stories we told the younger kids were to keep them away. And I think some of ones Jeremy told were to keep us all around.

In the flower girl story, a girl named Sarah and her twin sister Clara are left home alone by their parents and accidentally let the family dog loose. Jeremy said their house was on Lakeview near the movie theater. He had the details down. The two sisters run outside after the dog but neither of them can see it. Sarah says she hears the dog in the distance and tells Clara to follow her. They both keep calling the dog's name but only Sarah says she can hear the barking. They wander into the woods and Clara starts to get scared. So Sarah suggests they start to pick flowers as they walk so when they get home they can give the flowers to their mother and father to try and make up for running off. Sarah still leads and swears she can hear the dog barking. And while Clara seems to want to go home, the flower picking calms her enough or distracts her or whatever and she stays with her sister. When they get close to hell hole, Sarah says she can hear the dog's barking getting louder. Still, Clara can't hear anything. Another storm starts to move in when they get close to the pipe and the thunder and lightening scare Clara. When Sarah jumps into the pipe to chase after the sound of the dog Clara goes with her but she keeps reminding her sister she can't hear the dog. The inside of the tunnel is dark and illuminated every few seconds by a flash of lightning. The thunder claps inside the concrete pipe are deafening. Clara reaches for Sarah's hand and tells her they have to stop and go home. Sarah,



still convinced she can hear the dog, tells her sister to wait where she is. Sarah says she will go deeper into the tunnel to look and come back when she finds the dog. Sarah gives Clara her flowers and leaves her there. Two days later, only Clara returns home. She is pale, her lips are blue and she will not speak. In her hands, she clutches two bouquets of freshly picked flowers that look as vivid and alive as any flowers ever have. According to Jeremy's story, she didn't let them go until a week later, when her family put a headstone over an empty grave for Sarah. During the service, Clara walked up to the stone, bent down on one knee and set the flowers down. When they left her hands they died instantly, shifting from blues, reds and greens to dried-up brown. Jeremy says it is why, even in the spring, you never see flowers down near the pipe. He also said that on the walk down to the pipe, sometimes in the woods in the evening, you can hear the sounds of children playing.

I know how stupid it sounds. We all knew. The first time he told the story it was late in the day. He was kind of drunk. "Who cares," people said, "Man, there are flowers all over the place." The guys were right, too. There were always little buds springing up in the grass.

"Those are weeds," Jeremy told him, "they're all just weeds."

I don't know if he was right about the tiny white things being only weeds. There were dandelions, lots of them. I know those are weeds but for the rest, I just couldn't say. I know there weren't any roses or violets. Nothing like those big Easter bouquets or the prom corsages my sister wore that looked like a big mound of vanilla soft serve. And yeah, the story was mostly crap, but I always loved it. At least it wasn't about people eating one another on the same patch of grass where Jeremy and I tumbled and kissed. At least it was different than the stuff my parents said went on down there. Different from the names my friends and I got called when we walked down the hall at our school or the looks people gave us at mass. It isn't a happy story but

it isn't terribly sad either. At least Jeremy let someone live at the end to tell it. It wasn't all bashing people's head with rocks and the whispers of the devil.

## The Tiny Chapel

He wanted to get married in a cathedral. She wanted to get married in a tiny chapel. They agreed on everything else. So, when the time came to decide they called their best man and maid of honor to stand as witnesses and flipped a coin. Heads was for the cathedral and tails was for the tiny chapel. “No cheating,” he said. “And no going back either. No matter what happens.” The four of them met at a middle sized church mostly because it seemed like a funny place to decide this sort of thing. Inside, the ceilings were vaulted and high with nothing breaking the open space except two rows of lights that hung 20 feet above the pews. There were large stained glass windows depicting the Stations of the Cross.

“This is a beautiful church,” the best man said.

“It’s too small,” said the groom.

“Far too big,” said the bride.

The maid of honor held the coin in the vestibule. It was an old quarter she pulled from the cup holder of her car before everyone went into the church. Both the bride and groom agreed to let the bride call the quarter in the air and that it should hit the ground rather than be caught. The side facing up once the coin settled would be the decider. When the maid of honor flipped the coin in the air, the bride said, “tails.”

While it flipped in the quiet of the church vestibule, the groom thought about Notre Dame in Paris. He had never been, but knew his family would have enough money to send anyone they asked to Paris for a weekend for their wedding. He didn’t know if Notre Dame did that sort of thing but he was sure that, if they played their cards right, they could book it. If it couldn’t be Paris and Notre Dame, and he hoped it would be, because Paris on his wedding night seemed like a wonderful idea, he thought about Christ’s Church in Dublin as a backup. Again, he wasn’t

sure if Christ's Church was available for weddings, but had read an interesting article about the catacombs beneath the church in a magazine once. While not as perfectly balanced and beautiful as Notre Dame, he thought the boxy design of Christ's Church might make his wife more comfortable. She was always fussing about money. And while they almost always agreed on things, her modesty was a constant barrier. He had money. And he liked to spend it on her. He wanted to show her finer things, extravagant things. He thought this would make her proud. Also, she was beautiful and he was just handsome enough. It made him think crazed and sad things. And his money was one thing she would have a hard time topping. It was his way of being beautiful. He tried not to think about buying love, he tried.

Coin in the air, her choice made, the bride was hoping for her tiny chapel. She wanted to find a way to tell the groom that she didn't care that he was rich. She wanted their service to be intimate so she could focus on him and he on her. She wanted to see her mother's face clearly, to wear a modest dress and not worry about posing herself for the best photograph to go in the socialite magazines her fiancé was always talking about. She could see it in his face sometimes, that he didn't think he was good enough for her. At first, it was cute. He was doting and loyal and gave their young relationship a kind of consideration she had never seen before. He didn't push, didn't make a fuss, flattered her gently. But, over time, it was clear his confidence was faltering. He began making cutting remarks about himself at dinner. Started to promise to get things right the next time when she felt he'd gotten it right all along. He worried more and sometimes it seemed he was jealous of things that didn't exist. He always asked her who she was talking to on the phone. At the beginning, it felt like he was interested in her life. But a few times, she got the feeling that he was scrambling to keep up. Then there was the money, which more and more it seemed he used to show how worthy he was.

The maid of honor and the best man thought the bride and groom were a perfect couple. The best man was proud of his friend for finding such a beautiful woman to marry. When the two were dating, he told the groom many times to ask before a handsomer man came along and took her away. In fact, many of the groom's friends said things like that. Even his father had said something to the effect. All jokes, of course, all in good fun. Also, the best man complimented the groom on marrying a girl who came from a family with less money. "It makes things so much easier," he told him. "She won't ever be untrue because she'll lose the lifestyle you can provide." The best man had seen some of his other friends marry at the same social level and it rarely worked out. The relationships ran cold and filled up with politics. This one was for love and the best man admired that kind of choice. He was so proud of his friend.

The maid of honor was happy the bride found someone who loved her. Sure, he wasn't the best looking man she had ever seen, but he adored the bride and constantly showered her with gifts. The day they got engaged, the maid of honor could not stop staring at the bride's ring. She was hoping for a huge wedding. She had heard the groom talking about Paris and had already submitted paperwork for a passport just in case. "You're being so stupid to want such a small wedding," she told the bride. "You can have whatever you want. It can be in any building in the world. You can have the kind of wedding every little girl dreams of." The maid of honor secretly hoped to meet several of the groom's friends and family. She stood a better chance of that if the wedding was large. "Do they know anyone who is royalty?" she once asked. The maid of honor thought the bride was so lucky.

The coin landed on tails, displeasing everyone but the bride. The groom immediately started to think of ways to convince his bride to reconsider despite their earlier promise. The maid of honor hoped maybe the reception would be a fantastic affair. The best man had problems

with small spaces. And it wasn't only the 3 people in the vestibule who were disappointed. The groom could hardly calm his mother when he told her the news. The bride's mother and father, both terribly excited by the success of their daughter, couldn't bring themselves to tell their friends and family what the daughter had done. "It is almost worse than having her call the whole thing off," said the father. Of course, none of these sentiments were ever explicitly stated to the bride. No one ever pulled her aside and put the question of relocating the wedding to her. The bride chose a small chapel in Ohio that comfortably seated twenty.

The bride and the groom would not stay married forever. After nine years, they would divorce when the groom admitted to having an affair. Later, he would explain his actions as "revenge." People would ask, "revenge against who?" And the groom would reply, "On myself." The divorce would be civil. Each party would be kind and the bride would ask for nothing though the groom set up a trust for her worth millions of dollars. For many years, she did not touch the money. The groom would check the balance frequently and become depressed when he saw no withdrawals. The bride would eventually remarry. She had three daughters and used the trust money to send them to fine schools. By the time this happened, the groom had long since stopped looking at the balance of the account.

Still, they both had fond memories of their wedding in the tiny chapel. The bride had been serious. The chapel was comically small. They each had vivid images of the look on their partner's face when they said "I do." And, strangely, the groom's parents, the bride's parents, the maid of honor and the best man came around to the idea of the tiny chapel once they stood inside it. The service, which was short, made a lasting impression of happiness on the few people who were lucky enough to see it.

As he got older, the groom became more and more full of regret. It just seemed to be the most comfortable thing. And while he regretted other things more, his actions to dissolve the marriage were always high on the list. On what would have been their 25<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary, the groom bought the tiny chapel, locked it up, and sent the key to the bride. Of course, it was only a gesture. It didn't make everything between them right again. Didn't return them to that place they once occupied with one another that was theirs and theirs alone. Still, the bride appreciated the gift, and was thankful for it.

## The Challenger Deep

Collins looks out of the port viewing window at the bottom of the ocean. A few feet behind him, curled up in his pilot's chair, his co-crewman Teller counts down the landing. The inside of the observation room of the bathyscaphe *Mystic* is small, not much bigger than a walk in closet. The craft itself is massive. The majority of the boat, nearly ninety percent, is ballast, pressurization tanks. Many of the tanks are filled with gasoline to add weighted buoyancy. With the liquid, they can ensure a slow, deliberate sink. When looked at in cross section drawings, the room the two men are sitting in looks like a basketball attached to a giant bomb. And it might as well be a bomb, the pressure, both inside and outside, would be enough to crush or explode just about anything you can think of. Each inch the craft descends puts more and more weight on the structure. The cumulative strength of the ocean presses from all sides. This descent, the first of its kind by a manned vessel, has been 4 hours of painful creaks and dings. The temperature drops with the craft. Currently, a few meters from the bottom, it is 46 degrees inside the observation space. Collins rubs his hands together for warmth, straining his eyes at the dark murk through the window while Teller continues to count down. "Six meters," he says.

While his colleagues at the surface and, most likely his co-pilot would laugh at him if he ever admitted it, Collins hoped this dive would yield a glimpse of something fantastic. This is a depth only previously seen by instruments, by computers that calculate the time it takes for sound waves to ricochet back to the surface from the deep. When he was young, he read storybooks full of giant, domed cities and hidden civilizations evolving totally hidden from men. The craft is so close to the bottom now that this grand image is all but gone from Collin's mind. The flood lights on the craft already illuminate the sea floor. It looks like a dirt soup. It is the bottom to be sure, but it seems as fluid as the water around them. At four meters, directly below



the craft, Collins sees something that looks like a flounder swim away from the light into the darkness. “Confirmed sighting of a biologic,” he says to Teller.

“Log it,” Teller says, “Any idea what it might be?”

“Some kind of flat fish, maybe six or seven inches from nose to tail.”

“Typical bottom feeder?”

“Affirm,” says Collins.

“I was kind of hoping they’d be holding tridents,” says Teller.

“If it’s a Merman, it is the ugliest one of them all.” He writes the sighting down in the log book between measurements of depth and pressure. He flips back to the beginning of the log and runs down the list, nothing but numbers until this, a single, tiny fish. And while visual proof of life at this depth is significant, it certainly isn’t the exotic, alien creature Collins wanted to encounter. The fish, flat and wriggling, didn’t look much different than the Halibut he and his boyhood friends used to catch off the Massachusetts coast. Collins feels better about his hopes for the deep after Teller’s mention of tridents. Serious or not, at least those kinds of thought cross his co-pilots mind too.

The bathyscaphe groans when the two men are close to touch-down. And while the boat has been aching like this throughout the descent, this one is longer, more pronounced. “Easy,” Teller whispers as he gives more throttle to the aft propeller. “Less than one meter,” he says to Collins. Collins logs this under the sighting of the biologic. A few minutes later, they are resting on the ocean floor.

Teller contacts the surface, “*Pinta*, this is *Mystic*, we are at touch-down, do you copy, over?” The *Pinta*, named after one of the ships that sailed with Columbus on his historic

journey, has been in sporadic contact with the *Mystic* since the descent began. At this depth, it takes over ten seconds for a signal to travel to the surface, and another ten for a return message.

“You think we’ll get to them from down here?” Collins asks.

“No clue. We’ll just have to wait and see.”

“Hell of a place to get caught alone.”

“It isn’t so bad. At least it’s quiet.”

Collins waits for the return message looking out through the window for other signs of biologic life. He logs possible crustaceans, possible echinoderms. The touch-down kicked up a cloud of silt that makes it difficult to see more than a foot outside the window. The material doesn’t seem to settle so much as slowly separate and drift to allow for better vision. Collins is impressed by the slowness of it all.

“We are pioneers,” he says.

“Yeah, Lewis and Clark,” says Teller just before the static chirps in with a message from the surface.

“Roger, *Mystic*, this is *Pinta*, message received. Congratulations gentlemen. Begin ascent at the ready.”

The two men ping sonar and allow the computers time to calibrate the results. They each eat a chocolate bar in celebration. “Pioneers,” Collins says, “we’re just down here drawing maps.”

“Well, what did you expect?” asks Teller

“The city of Atlantis.” Says Collins.

“We’ll go see it next time. Right now I want to sleep.”

After twenty minutes they begin to drop ballast and start their ascent. Collins is thinking about anything but sleep as the ocean floor gets further and further away. At the bottom of his log book, the measurement of depth reads, 10, 911 meters. Those measurements are only a few meters off the previous sonar sweeps that led them to this portion of the Pacific. In a briefing before the dive, a research assistant put things into perspective by telling Collins and Teller that, assuming the calculations were correct, if Mt. Everest sat at their destination depth, there would still be two thousand meters of ocean above it. Collins imagined standing on top of the mountain, looking out over a vast expanse of deep blue.

Collins will tell stories to his son and daughter about the fantastic things he saw at the bottom of the ocean. He will tell them he and his friend Teller went to the deepest part. A part no one had ever seen before. He will leave out measurements of depth, the flat fish and the chocolate bars and replace these things with fields of glowing coral. He will tell them about fish the size of school busses and huge crabs that walked across the ocean floor like herds of cattle. As the children grow up they will read and hear things that make them question the stories their father told them. They will question him with facts presented by teachers and friends. "I know what I saw," he will say, adding a smile to show the kids that maybe he embellished a little. But one thing he will never share will be that feeling he had at the start of the dive. Despite all reason, for a few hours, he hoped to see something unexplainable. Even as he logged entry after entry of depth and pressure, as he calculated rate of descent, oxygen use, survival time, he won't even tell how hard he strained his eyes on that window, waiting for the deep.

## Struck

Before she was hit by lightning, Megan was married. She met her husband Will in high school at a mixer between an all boys school and her school which was all girls. They danced the Electric Slide together and he brought her punch and, during the final dance of the night, he kissed her cheek. They were married the day before he left for the service. They wrote letters for nine months before he returned. On his first visit home Megan became pregnant. Will did not see his baby until he'd lost his left hand to shrapnel.

Before she was hit by lightning, Megan's son, Nick, stayed out too late. He was almost never home by curfew. Megan routinely arrived at work depressed and exhausted from arguing with him late at night. He would drink and lie to her face about it. Sometimes, money would disappear from her purse. Her husband and her son would get into worse fights about it. Once they broke a coffee table. Another time, her husband punched his wounded hand through the dry wall next to her son's head. Nick had called his father a, "dumb gimp." Megan slapped her son once during a fight over him wanting to use her car. He was sneering and angry. She hit him out of sorrow.

Before she was hit by lightning, Megan did all the housework. Her husband never held a job for longer than 6 months but never had trouble finding work. He would take anything that would allow him and his hand some kind of purpose. When he wasn't working he was drinking at the VFW. Megan learned how to fix leaks. She repaired the drywall after it was punched. She cooked with herbs from a garden she dug and maintained herself. She learned how to do oil changes in her driveway. She shoveled snow, salted the front step, mowed the lawn, vacuumed, swept. She cleaned and folded endless piles of laundry. She became practiced at removing blood stains from clothing.

Before she was hit by lightning, Megan told herself she had everything she needed. When her friend Cindy brought pictures from her family's vacation to Mexico, Megan made comments about the photographs that made Cindy feel guilty. Megan became good at finding things in life she didn't need. She stuck her nose up at convenience and leisure. Her friends took her in small doses because Megan made them feel small and petty for their book clubs and their newfound interest in wine. On the rare occasions Megan went out with them, she became quieter and quieter as the night went on. Often times she became sad when her friends talked about sex, about having it and not having it, about things they had tried and liked or didn't like but did sometimes anyways for their husbands. Megan sat back in her chair when her friends talked about their husbands confiding in them or crying. Megan had seen her husband cry a thousand times. But it was never in the ways her friends described. His was private. Something he did in the bathroom when he thought the house was empty.

Before she was hit by lightning, Megan loved television. She spent most of her time at home and had a television in 3 rooms. She liked soap operas and talk shows and the evening news and game shows and prime time dramas. She had too many favorite shows to count. At the grocery store, she quickly read through *Soap Opera Digest* in the check out line, always putting it back when it was her turn to pay. She liked villains and talking to the characters on the screen. She even enjoyed reruns. Especially if they featured a character she once hated. She enjoyed knowing how and when that character was leaving the show. It didn't matter if it was divorce and murder or accident, Megan felt like she had something to hold over that person as long as they were on the screen. Her favorites were day long marathons. Sometimes she would have all three televisions on the same channel and drift from room to room doing chores but never missing a line of dialogue.

When she was hit by lightning, Megan was in her back yard digging out grubs from her garden. It was late afternoon in August and the storm came quickly. It blew south from the lake and in an instant the temperature dropped ten degrees and wind started shaking the trees above Megan's head. She only had six inches or so of bed to dig through, so she decided to try and get it done before the rain began to fall. She thought getting fresh rain on the bed might be a good thing considering she'd spent most of the afternoon turning up fresh soil. She had just finished digging and was brushing the dirt from her shoes when she felt suddenly light. It was as if something was lifting her without her actually leaving the ground. Her skin felt alive. All around her was blue and dancing. It was like nothing she had ever felt or seen. So brief and strange was this moment that, had this sensation not been followed by chaos, Megan would have taken a step towards the door and forgotten the feeling entirely as one would do a sudden chill on a warm night.

After she was hit by lightning, Megan woke in the back of an ambulance. She asked the EMT's what had happened but they did not answer. The ambulance was going very fast, taking turns quickly enough to make the IV bag hanging above her move back and forth. The two EMT's were shouting numbers back and forth. One of them had his hand on her wrist and the other was rubbing the paddles of a defibrillator together. "Again in, ten, nine, eight, seven..." she heard one saying. She wanted to tell them to *stop* but couldn't. Her mouth felt like it was filled with foam. Instead, she tried to lift her head but could not because they had her strapped down. Both EMT's were looking at one another, not at her. They could not see her eyes open, straining for recognition, full of questions and fear. And as one of them brought the paddles down to her chest he saw her eyes were open and stopped for a moment to listen for the beeping of her EKG.

There was none. The second EMT, his hand still on her wrist, said he felt no pulse. They undid her restraints and she sat up and looked at the strange expressions on both of their faces.

“Shit,” she said.

“You’re OK, miss.”

“Shit. My head.”

“You’re OK, we’re going to the hospital. Miss, can you hear me?”

“Shit.”

“We called your husband, he’s going to meet you at the hospital.”

The EMT’s kept asking her questions, but after that last statement about her husband Megan could no longer hear them. She noticed that the EMT’s were now just looking at her. They looked at her like children do to their teachers. It was like she was lecturing them, scolding them. She could feel her lips moving, her jaw moving, her tongue dashing out syllables, but she heard none of it. This lasted until the ambulance stopped at the entrance to the hospital. Both EMT’s seemed stunned by something. Then, just before the doors to the ambulance opened, Megan felt like someone kicked her in the chest. The first thing she heard was the sound of herself gasping for air. The two EMT’s, puzzled, quickly moved her out of the ambulance and into the hospital where they transferred her to a nurse before jumping back into the ambulance and driving off. When Megan arrived in her room a nurse plugged her into another EKG, she heard her pulse the moment the machine turned on. She’d heard that slow beeping on television a hundred times. But never before had she heard it as her own.

After she was hit by lightning, Megan told the doctor she felt fine. He told her the lightning hit her arm near to where she was holding the hand shovel. She had some minor burns near her wrist but other than that, he told her, she was fine. She explained to the doctor what

happened in the ambulance. She told him about not having a pulse. She told him about the hearing loss and how she seemed to be speaking without thinking about doing it. She even described how the EMT's looked as proof that she was saying something. Then, she talked about the feeling she had like she was getting hit in the chest. "It was like a mule or something. It felt like someone took a swing at me with a baseball bat." She said.

"Ms. Taylor, these kinds of sensations are not uncommon after a serious trauma." The doctor told her.

"You can say that again." She told them.

"Excuse me? he said.

"Uncommon."

"Well, lightning strikes are rare things but..."

"No, I mean that other stuff. The stuff I told you. I've never felt anything like it."

"As I said before, Ms. Taylor, this was a very serious situation. You could have some neurological complications."

"Am I going crazy?"

"I seriously doubt it. But we should get you scheduled for an MRI as soon as you feel up to it."

"So you want to see if I'm crazy?"

"Absolutely not."

"Then why the tests?"

"To ensure that you are safe. And that you leave this hospital with the same understanding of your capacities as you had when you came in." Throughout the conversation, Megan's husband sat in the corner of the room in a chair with his head down. He used his



baseball cap to cover up his hands which. His jeans and shirt were dirty. He wiped his tears away with his sleeves.

“What do you think about all this?” Megan asked him. She was surprised by how cold the words sounded when they came out.

“I think we better do what the doctor tells you.”

“Where’s Nick?” she asked.

Megan’s husband paused and tried to look thoughtful. “I don’t know.” He said.

After she was hit by lightning, Megan’s MRI came back clean. She spent one night in then hospital. Her husband stayed until 10 pm, then left to go to work. He said he’d be back to pick her up on his way home. When she got in the car, she had to kick empty beer cans out of the way so her feet could rest on the floor. She frowned as she looked down at the pile. In the passenger side cup holder was a cup of coffee, full and warm. When her husband got in the car he pointed to it and said, “That’s for you if you want it. Two creams, two sugars, just like you like.” he said.

After she was hit by lightning, Megan found her son playing video games in his room when she arrived home from the hospital. She knocked on his door, “I’m busy,” he yelled.

“Nick,” she said, “I need to talk to you.”

“Well, that’s too bad. I said I’m busy.”

Downstairs, Megan heard her husband open the refrigerator door. She heard the pop-top of an aluminum can. She heard him open the back door and walk into the yard. “Damn it, Nick, open the door.” She pounded on it with her fist.

“Jesus. What?”

She put her hand on the door frame so he could see the medical bracelet they'd given her at the hospital. "Aren't you curious where I've been for the past 24 hours?"

"I thought you were out."

"Since when do I go out?"

"I don't know. Now, maybe?" he said.

"I spent the night in the hospital." She looked over his shoulder and saw that the inside of Nick's room was unusually clean. His shelves were full of books instead of the books being left wherever he dropped them. He'd arranged his videogames and models, even had his bass on its stand instead of in his bed where she usually saw it. Stepping in, she asked, "did you vacuum in here?"

Nick sat back down and started playing his game again.

"Nick," she said, "I am impressed. This looks very nice."

"Are you Ok?" he asked, not bothering to look at her.

"The doctor says I am."

"Good."

After she was hit by lightning, Megan met her husband in the back yard and sat next to him in the grass. In the time it took her to talk to her son, her husband drank three beers. They were sitting in the spot where she'd fallen and he told her he was sorry. He apologized for many things. And she believed him. And they cried together and sat in silence for awhile resting on one another. She mentioned how Nick cleaned his room and her husband told her that Nick was the one who found her laying out in the yard with the rain coming down in buckets on her back. Said Nick was the one who called 9-1-1. She told him she had just talked to their son upstairs and he never mentioned it.

“Was he nice to you when you talked to him upstairs?” her husband asked.

“No,” she said, “well, maybe by his standards.”

“Such a little prick...a day after he finds his mother face down in the mud.”

“Will, relax. Maybe he’s just scared.”

“Maybe.”

“At least his room is clean.” she said. They sat in the grass for two more hours. The afternoon was cool. They drank beers together. Megan noticed how her husband drank two for every one she had and it made her feel sick inside. He asked her about what happened in the ambulance. She said after thinking about it for a day she wasn’t sure if it was real or not. She told him that it felt real yesterday and that today, it all seemed like she dreamt it. But the truth was, she was certain of all of it.

After she was hit by lightning, Megan noticed that the relationships in her home were once again back to normal. After her stay in the hospital, things were good for awhile. She felt closer to her husband than she had in years. And while her son was still sullen and rude, he came home on time and, at the very least, avoided his father. It wasn’t an ideal turn around, but she would have liked to see it become the norm. But, over time, attitudes changed back. Her husband started to spend more time at the VFW and her son turned the volume up on just about everything in his life, from music to his voice to his looking for excuses to disobey his parents. Megan found her way back into her routine of television and house work. But she couldn’t work her way past the feeling in her blood before the lightning hit.

After she was hit by lightning, Megan got a letter in the mail with no return address. It read;

Hello,

My name is Calvin Thurston. I responded to a 9-1-1 call at your address on 8/15.

My partner and I found you unconscious at your residence. You woke up while we were transporting you to the hospital. Just before we arrived, you repeated the following phrase several times.

*I am almost alive and I don't want to come back.*

I know this is none of my business. But you didn't seem to understand what you were doing.

C. Thurston.

-

After she read the letter, Megan felt like a million volts had just run through her.

## **Drink Any Deadly Thing**

Water that was more pure and clean than nothing at all. Beer. Beer from the town where I'm from. Beer from China, Taiwan, Belgium, Britain, Ireland. Wine from California and France, from sweeping green valleys dusted with fog and stuck on sunset. Bourbon so strong it goes down like lava falling into the ocean. Vodka made with water from the frozen palace in Dr. Zhivago. Gin with W.C. Fields in a public park while snow fell around us and neither could crack a joke. Mescaline mixed into tea or Sunny Delight. One time with a medicine man high atop a mountain in Peru. Another time behind a 7-11 in Detroit on Devil's Night with a woman named Stilt. Baijiu, Chicha, Soju, or Damassine that smells like blessed berries and sugar. Absinthe sitting next to a statue of Poe. That night, I didn't have two nickels to rub together. A drop of LSD in a fountain Coke while watching the Kinston Indians mount a 9<sup>th</sup> inning rally. Crushed mushrooms and warmed water from Lourdes. Once, I walked into a desert and let the sun beat all the liquid out of me. I dug my hands into the sand beneath plants and sucked on the damp earth. I tried to pull a cactus open with my bare hands. It was almost as wonderful as drinking island coconut milk, I cut the tough skins open with a shark's tooth. Milk from whatever will give it. One time, a bear. Suicide fountain drinks. That's one squirt of everything until the cup is full. Fruits and Vegetables, gagging on a Durian elixir I was told would break a fever. I was in Malaysia, hunting the Orang Mawas. It's their version of Bigfoot. I wanted to drink its blood. The locals say it is sweeter than the North American version and adds a year to your life. At a Medicine show in the Everglades, I paid a man two hundred dollars for a vial of the blood from the cross of Jesus Christ. The small glass held tiny, dried flakes. I mixed them with swamp water and said a prayer for my mother. A drop of venom on a filament of Black Widow silk made heart turn inside out. I had to turn it back with the tears of a ghost. My

favorite thing is Lemonade. And I believe I had the perfect glass of it once at a petrol station in Johannesburg. They got the mixture just right. It can't be too sweet. You'll ruin it. I had a wife once, but I drank her up. Children too, tilted back and down and hatch. Jobs, I've had a hundred and tasted each on my tongue. I am fat and listless but every cup I see is half full. Look out for me. I'll drink you up too.

## Rapture

It is Wednesday morning and the Saw Mil Tavern is full to capacity. Terry, the owner, rushes up and down the mahogany bar pouring free drinks into any cup he can see. The customers are elated and drunk. They slur and list and laugh mid swallow and cough up bile onto the floor. They dry heave, still laughing, and rise up wiping tears from their eyes, huge smiles on their faces.

At the back of the bar, in a small booth, sit George and Nancy Mason. They are both 43. They have been happily married 23 years and have two daughters, Lilly and Deborah, 19 and 21 respectively, one at Dartmouth one at Princeton, respectively. George is handsome for his age. His dark, thick hair has traces of grey that hint at a rare combination of maturity and virility. He is an Oncologist and though the job takes up much of his time he has always flawlessly balanced the demands of his professional ambition with his deep love for his family.

Where George is good looking for his age, Nancy is stunning. She could have been a model at 17 and could be one today. She is a defense attorney for the city and, through example, has given her daughters the gift of unwavering confidence and pride. George and Nancy do not drink, do not swear and, where other couples would seem prudish, George and Nancy make their lifestyle seem almost avant-garde. They are charitable. They go to church every Sunday. And last night, Nancy and George Mason were left behind.

George takes a sip of his double vodka tonic and winces before taking the glass back hard and swallowing the whole thing. When he is done, he breathes for a moment like he is emerging from underwater. He tosses the cup on the floor where so many other cups have gathered. "This is bullshit" he says.

Nancy slides her drink to his side of the table. "You take it, I don't think I can."

George picks it up and sets it down in front of Nancy, “Of course you can, it was the rapture, it happened, you can do whatever you want.”

“Well, I don’t think I want to then.”

George drinks Nancy’s double rum and Coke even faster than his vodka tonic. “Waste not, want not.” he says.

Nancy turns her head away as George loosens his tie. She sighs and tries to imagine where her daughters’ cell phones rested as they rang and filled with messages from mother and father. Perhaps one or both of them were out when it happened, maybe even on the phone at the time. Maybe, when it happened, Lilly’s phone fell into the street and was crushed by a car whose driver had been saved. She is happy for her daughters, relieved, even, that they were chosen. She is worried about George. His anger has been growing since it happened. Their life hasn’t been perfect, but she has never seen him so incensed before.

George catches his wife ignoring him and nudges her with his elbow, “C’mon, judge not lest ye be judged, right? I mean, what can possibly happen?”

“I don’t want to be here” she says. There are people from the front door up to George and Nancy’s table. When George and Nancy arrived, a waitress brought them their drinks. Now the waitresses are drinking. In the crowd of adults, Nancy can see two children, a boy and a girl, passing a bottle of hard lemonade back and forth, giggling and stumbling. “We should go home,” she says.

“What’s home?”

“Our house.”

“Right, yes, of course, the house didn’t get saved either. Thank God for that.”



Nancy stares at the children. The boy, no more than 8 years old, looks like a depression era street kid. He is wearing a brown newsboy cap and a small blue pea coat. The girl, just a bit older than the boy, is wearing a pink and white summer dress. Her brown hair is pulled tight into two pigtails. They dance to the music together, jumping from side to side, smiling and laughing.

“Hey, are those kids over there?” George asks.

Nancy looks away from the children, “Where, dear?”

George leans across the table, squinting, “Right there, like, fifteen feet away, right in front of you.”

The boy and girl lock arms and are spin around, pinballing off of adults who try not to spill their drinks when the kids knock into them.

“Look at that,” Nancy says.

“I don’t like that. That isn’t right.” George says.

“All of a sudden you care?”

George looks back at Nancy and slumps into his seat. “You know, now that you mention it, I guess I don’t.” His smile is big and fake.

Nancy can see he is hurt, but she isn’t sure by what. She isn’t sure where his anger is coming from or where it will go. She is terrified because unlike him she feels fine. She does not like this bar or these people. But she did not like bars before last night and still doesn’t today and, to her, this is a good thing. Across the room, the boy and girl let go of one another and tumble to the ground. A woman runs over to the girl and picks her up, scolding the child and taking the almost empty bottle of lemonade out of the girl’s hand. Nancy smiles, then sees the boy get up and run to his bottle.



## Short Biography

Abby Greenaway was born in Marceline, Missouri in 1932. Her father, John Greenaway, was a plumber and, after the war, worked on a coal chute. Her mother, Helen Greenaway was a nurse who, after retirement, went on to briefly curate the Marceline Walt Disney Museum. As a child, Abby performed well in school. She excelled in mathematics and, after high school, attended the University of Wisconsin. Upon finishing her studies in Madison, she accepted a position as a cartographer's apprentice under John Byrne in northern Michigan.

When their collaboration first began in 1956, Byrne was known only in small trade circles. He frequently published dubious papers in mid level cartography journals and was considered something of an eccentric for putting more emphasis on artistry than on the finer points of measurement. Despite this, (at the time) unflattering distinction, Byrne is, to this day, one of only four American map makers to be formally recognized by the London Cartographic Society. "People see maps as they see hammers and wrenches," he said in a letter to the society in 1952. "But a hammer cannot choose how it strikes the nail, nor can a wrench dictate the direction in which it rotates around the bolt. Maps are different. A map can change everything it touches."

The apprenticeship was difficult. Abby's training at the University had not prepared her for Byrne's methods. She did her best to reconcile her formal training with Byrne's aesthetics. When her apprenticeship was completed Byrne wrote, in a letter to a close friend, "My student will be leaving soon, and though she seems too attached to her rulers and tape measures, her work on paper demands a certain, unique attention."

Byrne taught Greenaway to draw maps by hand, to illustrate them carefully with a fine pencil or quill pen, on large paper across a larger table. He instructed her to travel through an

area several times to feel the space and convey it on the page. His reason being that the average man or woman does not experience the world from above, but on a more intimate level and, therefore, maps should communicate that feeling, regardless of perspective.

Byrne and Greenaway's relationship ended when Greenaway accepted her first commissioned work, a street map for a small, pioneer-era town in Nebraska. The city council of Gatefaith, NE paid well and referred her to another town of similar size and shape and from there her career became a series of short trips to ancient towns and villages across the Midwest. She began to specialize in street maps, a subject Byrne had spent the better part of his career ignoring/insulting; "A road is an abomination, a scar against a gentle landscape, streets, city blocks, are cancer." So deep was the rift that, when Byrne died in 1964, Greenaway was reportedly not present at the funeral, despite Byrne's daughter Rose making several attempts to contact Abby.

Abby Greenway married in 1966 to Geoffrey Field, a city comptroller in Lincoln, Nebraska. Their courtship was swift and, almost a year from the date of their marriage, Abby gave birth to her only son, Stephen. Throughout her life she traveled as work dictated and after settling in Lincoln her trips began to extend in length. Towns in close proximity rarely need several maps and when these maps were completed the next customer was typically further away. Her work spiraled out across counties, then states, but never across new land, new designs. The Midwest was not kind to her work, "Sometimes I feel cursed working here," she told the *Lincoln Journal Star*, "The towns are all the same, a square or green in the middle and streets spreading out in even lines north, south, east and west."

Greenaway refused to adapt as cartographic technology changed. She rejected automation and industrial printers. Her business suffered as customers began to demand more

flash while at the same time prizing accuracy and low cost. It was during this period that Greenaway went through her most troubled, and creatively stagnant phase. In 1975, she and Geoffrey divorced. Geoffrey was awarded custody of Stephen and after the trial, Abby returned to Missouri to teach at *Chillicothe Community College*.

In 1980, a small gallery in Chicago collected a retrospective on mid-twentieth century cartography containing several pieces of Greenaway's work. She reportedly arrived to the opening drunk, and had to be escorted from the building after starting a shouting match with a *Sun Times* critic who referred to her work as, "pastoral" and "quaint." As she left she yelled, "It wasn't my fault those puritans didn't know about circles."

Between the incident in Chicago and her death in 1996, Abby Greenaway produced only two additional works. The first is a street map done for the Chillicothe City Hall as a gift in honor of the Fourth of July holiday, 1986. The map is rudimentary and, although her color scheme and design techniques remain vivid and clear, the work lacks the warmth that won her recognition early in her career.

The second piece, *Budapest, West Bank*, marks an incredible departure for Greenaway in both style and subject matter. Although the details surrounding the work's creation remain unclear, we do know that on March 19, 1991, Greenaway flew on Delta flight 1245 out of Omaha, destination, Paris. She spent just over a year in Paris during which she held a job as a tour guide. She left Paris in the summer of 1992 and moved to Budapest where she remained for the next two years. Little is known about Greenaway's time in Budapest. Unlike her residence in Paris, there are no records of her renting or purchasing housing and no known record of employment. With the exception of *Budapest, West Bank*, the only proof of her actually living in Hungary are the stamps in her passport indicating dates of arrival and departure.

Abby Greenaway was, for her entire career, a map maker. But to call *Budapest, West Bank* simply a map is to call the *Sistine Chapel* a ceiling. Rumors abound concerning her creation of the work. The most popular being that, while in Budapest, she began a furious study of Byrne's ideas concerning experiencing a place and recording the information as one sees it before creating a map. Greenaway did have access to her notes from her time spent with Byrne and the decision to create a work of such scale does conjure thoughts of John Byrne's more eccentric projects. In any case, *Budapest, West Bank* is a singular work of creative cartography and possibly the only work of its kind by an American in the twentieth century.

The piece is roughly six feet tall and thirteen feet across. On the right edge snakes a long, vivid blue line representing the Danube River. Centered across the top of the piece, rendered in calligraphy, is the work's title, *Budapest, West Bank*. These two markers serve as a way for the viewer to orient his or herself to the piece which is composed of a single, unbroken line tracing out streets, alleys and pathways through the entire city west of the Danube. The canvas is large, but the line is no bigger than those generated by common, ball point pens. Tests have shown the ink to be Iron-Gall, likely mixed by the cartographer herself and applied with a quill. The uniformity of the line, combined with the assumed application method of dipping a stylus into ink and then carefully creating width via pressure, makes this already impressive work all the more so.

Debate still continues as to whether, *Budapest, West Bank* was created over time or in one, extended, maddening session. Greenaway devotees would certainly rather believe the latter, placing the event alongside acts of artistic showmanship like Da Vinci's famous "perfect" circle. It is the position of this author that no single person could create a work as accurate and astonishing as, *Budapest, West Bank* in a single motion. But I must also mention that, time and

time again, the piece has been carefully examined, X-Rayed etc... and, time and time again, no scientist, restorer or historian has been able to agree on a single place where the artist raised her pen, then set it back to continue her work.

## Raw Music

It was Saturday, early evening. They set up the music under the gazebo near the duck pond. The field in front of the stage was dotted with families on blankets and elderly people in lawn chairs. The Mayflies came the night before, thousands of them flying south from their birth at the lake shore. The paper said the bloom was so large it showed up on radar as a cloud moving against the wind. They stuck to everything, blacked out sides of buildings and found their way into your hair and your mouth, settled on the lip of every cup, dotted skin like bad tattoos. People walking through the tall grass to lay down a blanket kicked up clouds of the things. They were enough to drive you crazy.

It was my weekend with my son. I picked him up from his mother's house in Kurtland that morning. I took him to get ice cream. I knew he was too old for that but I didn't know what else to do. Across from the ice cream stand was a church that got famous a decade ago because of a suicide cult. One of the dead fell onto the pipe organ and played a single note into the night for over an hour. It was how the town first heard the crime, waking in the middle of the night to a sustained baritone. Some walked downtown and stood at the doors just listening to it. But no one went inside until the morning. The priest who found the bodies refused to bless the dead.

My boy, Trenton, liked Neapolitan once but today he hasn't touched his cone. Mayflies are buzzing around his hand looking for a taste. "Those bugs are gonna make a meal of you." I tell him.

"They don't bite." He says and wipes his hand clean on his jeans.

"Use a napkin or those things will never leave you alone."

"Sorry." He says.

"You show up all covered in flies at the fair and they're gonna throw you in the lake."



He rolls his eyes. This kind of thing used to work. Only a year ago he would laugh and play along but now he doesn't. He'd dyed his hair a sick kind of blond since the last time I saw him. On his black t-shirt was a cartoon of a man hanging from a noose. I get two weekends a month. All it does it make the boy age in exponents.

"You doing good in school?"

"Yes, sir."

"What grade are you in now?"

"Eighth."

"You know your multiplication tables?"

"We did those, like, three years ago."

"Well that doesn't change anything. Do you still know them?"

"Yes, sir."

We drove west on I-90 against the lake into Medina and then south to the fairgrounds. I took him every year, first when he was a child and we were a family. His mother and I were on the high side of teenage. We used to go all together when he was a baby. We'd pass him back and forth between bands or while one of us wanted to eat. A few years later he was in a stroller and we could just let the boy sit there. By then, though, things were already turning sour and most times she would keep her hands on the cart, let me toss a few balls at some bottles and then complain that her feet hurt. So we'd spend the rest of the day in the field in the grass listening to groups that revive old kinds of music; doo-wop, bluegrass. They were never much good but the tune gave us a reason not to talk. Trenton usually fell asleep.

"I don't want to go to the fair," he says in the car.

"Why not?"

“Because it’s dumb.”

“It’s tradition.”

“But it smells like shit there.”

I’d never heard him cuss before. “When did you start talking like that?”

“Dunno.”

“You talk like that around your mother?”

“No.”

“But you do around me?”

“I guess.”

I could see he wasn’t ashamed, only afraid. The bugs were splashing all over the windshield and before long I had to turn on the wipers so I could see. I pushed the button for fluid but all the thing did was buzz and sputter. The dry blades stroked back and forth and just spread the bugs around until I was looking through a thin green film. I clicked on the radio to an oldies station. Trenton just rolled his eyes when he heard the music. I bet he was thinking, *old man, old music*. After a few minutes he reached his hand out and started to play with the dials. The static was sharp and not much else was coming in. Eventually he settled on some rap station from the city.

“So is this what you like?”

“Not really. But it’s better than what you had on.”

“...the hell do you know about ... Jesus Christ who the hell do you think you are?”

He cracked the window down and let a little air in the car. His hair was getting long, maybe an inch of his shoulder. He looked arrogant with the wind blowing it all around, more

vital and strong than I could imagine a boy of mine being. For a moment I got so proud I thought I might cry.

“These bugs suck.” Trenton said.

The guys ushering cars into the parking lot were no use. All they did was wave their orange wands at the swarms coming and going around their heads. Eventually, after sitting in front of a particularly confused guy I just drove around him and found a spot away from everyone else. When we got out I started walking away from the gate and Trenton went the other way. “This way,” I said.

“But the gate is over here.”

“We aren’t using the gate.”

They auctioned livestock at the fairgrounds more times a year than they brought a circus to town. At the south end, out near an overgrown racetrack, were stock pens stretching out for half a mile. The closer we got the more I realized that this place really did smell like shit.

“Dad, where are we going?”

He was dragging behind now, walking half limp. “Pick up the pace.” I said, not looking back.

I pulled a good knife from my boot when we got back behind the empty pens and jimmied open the lock on a rusty gate.

“Are you breaking in to the fair?”

There wasn’t much I could say to that. In the past I’d always paid but today I thought maybe some light B&E would endear me to the boy. Maybe I’d have a shot at being the cool dad for a minute. I opened the door and an old chain fell from the lock to the dirt. He stood back for a bit but I just kept on walking until, eventually, I heard him run up behind me.

“Why are we breaking in?” he asked.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, why not pay?”

“Look around you, would you pay for this?” He looked ashamed. So I opened my wallet and showed him the flush of twenties so he knew that, if I wanted to, I could pay for it.

“Where did you get all that?”

“Payday.” I said

“So you got a job? When? Where at?”

There was an excitement in his voice at the thought of me having some respectability tucked away somewhere so I lied to him.

“Jim Stevens is letting me work a few hours in his auto shop. Just tune-ups and things.”

“Since when do you know about cars?”

“I know plenty about cars.”

“But you don’t even know how to put washer fluid in yours.”

“I can put washer fluid in.”

“Then why is your windshield covered in bug guts?”

I think he had me pretty much figured out. But at least we were talking and I got him saying more than two syllables a turn. I gave him a smile and said, “Well that’s just how I like it.” He let me go on the money after that. Truth is I won it at a card table but I couldn’t tell him that.

We went to the field to hear some music and found a spot where the grass was matted down by a blanket someone had removed. The music was forgivable. Once again it took the place of conversation. Something about it made Trenton restless. Maybe it was the bugs swirling

around everywhere but he became uncomfortable. He got up and said he was thirsty. Said he wanted a Coke, walked off and didn't come back.

When he was three his mother and I lost him in a mall. We agreed that one of us should stay where it was last we saw him and the other would go to customer service and make an announcement over the PA. My wife was the one who went and I stayed. I was fine while she was around but once she walked off to get some help I went all to pieces. It was a big place, crowded because it was the holidays. I could have walked off with a big screen TV and no one would notice. Who could notice a kid getting carried out? Even if he was throwing the fit of his life screaming, "Daddy. Mommy," until his throat was sore it wouldn't do much good. People see children throwing tantrums all the time. My wife came back a half hour later with Trenton up on her shoulders. He'd gotten back behind Santa's Village. When they found him he was trying to eat a fake candy cane.

I was laying flat out on the grass watching the Mayflies swirl above me when Trenton sat down. He looked the same as before, no bruises or anything, at least not that I could see.

"Sorry," he said.

"For what?"

"I ran into some kids from school."

"Fine."

"You're not mad?"

"I guess I don't know what I am right now." And I really didn't. A guy was setting up on the stage. He was tall and thin, wore blue jeans and carried a guitar worn from strumming. I was mad at the boy. But here he was, fine. I tried to sneak a look at his eyes. If it were me I'd have been smoking out in some empty auction stable or sneaking beers from people's coolers.

“You been drinking with those kids from school?”

“No, dad.”

“Smoking?”

“No.”

“Were there girls?”

“What does it matter?”

I sat up, “So there were?”

“Yes.”

“How many?”

“Dad, come on, it isn’t any of your business.”

“It sure is my business. You leave me sitting here for two hours. I don’t know where you are, what you’re doing, dead, alive, whatever...”

“Jesus, you sound like mom.” He started to get up by I grabbed him by the back of his jeans and pulled him down.

“Sit your ass right there and don’t move again.”

He pulled his legs up to his chest and did his best to ignore me by watching the tall man check his mic.

“How is your mother?” I asked.

“Fine.”

“Fine? That’s it?”

“Why don’t you ask her yourself.”

“Because I’m asking you, that’s why.”

I was working my way towards, *is she is seeing anyone*, but the boy wasn't taking the bait. On stage, the tall man was getting ready for his first song. It was an old blues number from the beginning. The tall man was covered in bugs, with the sun down the lights in the Gazebo attracted every insect at the fairgrounds. Someone hung a zapper near the stage which was now caked over and appeared to be smoldering. But the man kept playing, even as bats began to drop in from the darkness for an easy meal. He stood there, plucking an easy tune and tapping his right foot before drawing a deep breath and starting the song. His voice sounded old, full of dust and scratches. He didn't sing so much as chisel notes out with his throat. You could see the stress of it in his neck, his chest. When he rolled his eyes back and began to howl, the whole frail cage of him looked ready to burst.

“He doesn't look so good,” said Trenton.

“Keep watching,” I said, “it gets worse.”

## The Devil on Both Shoulders

Once he brought my sister into it, I hit the man over the head with a bottle. I do not have a sister. And once the glass broke I could hear the bar stools around me slide back fast and screeching. Then all the men started getting up like, “what the fuck did you do that for, bitch?” The guy I hit fell to the floor slowly. He caught his balance more than once, swaying, dancing glass eyed. He had blood coming out of his head before he hit the floor. I held the broken bottle in my right hand, brought my left back, and crushed his nose in, sending him backpedaling into a pool table.

The jukebox played Eartha Kitt. And this was supposed to be a place for tough men. And this was the place my daddy told me is where you go if you were looking for a fair fight. So I came here and found one and won it, easily. Maybe I played dirty. Maybe I shouldn't have found this one, young and handsome, now rolled up on the floor. He has shoulders as broad as the reach of a sunset. I never asked him if he had a girl. Just sat down next to him and began a routine I know so well from getting tricked into love. It isn't hard to excite someone. This one got excited and his blood is still draining. But it isn't a gusher. We're both lucky for that. Lord knows I don't want to kill the young thing. You don't shoot the fawns. Everyone knows that. When I sat down next to him I gave him a wink. Over time, I let myself slide to him like a tidal wave beginning in the middle of the ocean. I threw my leg over his. I nibbled his neck. And then, when he was hard, I reached down and grabbed his cock and laughed and told him and it was the smallest ever. The bartender overheard, laughed, and yelled it out to the rest of the bar. I suppose this is all part of the fraternity of men. They few, they proud, they band of brothers.

Once I said it, that big strong boy recoiled from me like I'd put my cigarette out on his knee. Then he raised his voice. And I raised mine. And a small circle of dart throwers formed



around the two of us. But they were not dart throwers anymore. They were dart *holders* and a lucky bunch too. They had front row seats. Me and him screamed. And he slapped me and drew a small cut in my lip. A couple people yelled out to stop the whole thing, “awww, hell” I heard someone say. I hadn’t planned on going too fast. I wanted, maybe needed, a few rounds. I might have been nice to take a couple in the spirit of bar brawlers the world over. But a rage came on, hard and steady as a foundation. I reached for a bottle and busted it over him. He is on his side now, passed out. And there are some men around him. One is holding a blown out match stick under the boy’s nose. The smell of sulfur makes me sleepy. I look around, holding the neck of the broken bottle like the edge of a cliff. They are asking me why I just did that. Why I up and brained that young man. I have no answer. He isn’t bleeding anymore. There, just there, his eyes open up and he moans. Someone will take him to the hospital. Their eyes are all over me. They can see I want more. They can see I have a dozen rounds left.

## Good Fortune

Caroline came to the carnival alone. On her way home from work, she noticed it from the highway. Before she went in, she thought about calling a friend but couldn't think of anyone to spend the evening with. She ate cotton candy, won a plush teddy bear, and when a man couldn't guess her weight, she rode the Ferris wheel for free. On her way out, she stopped in a small, red tent with a sign above the entrance that read: "palm readings". Below the script was a poorly drawn hand, at the center of which was a single blue eye.

The Fortune Teller closed her eyes and motioned for Caroline's hand. Caroline extended her hand across the purple velvet table and the Fortune Teller wrapped her hands around it slowly, suspending it for a moment before turning it palm up. Caroline did her best to conceal a smile as she looked around the room and saw a crystal ball, tarot cards and many unnamed jars filled with all sorts of liquids and powders. The Fortune Teller opened her eyes and concentrated on Caroline's palm. She gently set Caroline's hand down on the table, covered it completely with hers and said, "I have seen your death."

"What?" Caroline asked, withdrawing her hand from the table.

"Your death, I have seen it."

Caroline began rubbing her palm with her thumb, trying to massage away whatever writing the Fortune Teller saw.

"Does this disturb you, child?" the Fortune Teller asked.

"Yes. It does," said Caroline.

The Fortune Teller's face drifted into a smile. "Do not fear death. It is a part of life."

"But I'm only 31." said Caroline.

"Yes, I saw that as well. You are very young and beautiful."

“But I am going to die?”

“Yes.”

“Am I going to die soon?”

“Yes.”

Caroline slumped back in her chair, feeling cheated. “So that’s it then, end of reading?”

“I am afraid so.”

“Well, do you know how I am going to die?”

“Yes.”

“How?”

The Fortune Teller sighed, “In a traffic accident. There will be a truck filled with chemicals. It will crush you.”

“Do you always begin the readings by telling people when and how they are going to die?”

“No, it is only in special cases.” The Fortune Teller stood up. She wore a long, blue and purple robe with her hair pulled back under a silk scarf. The Fortune Teller turned and reached for a small box on a high shelf and Caroline noticed how vibrant and full it her hair was. It ran the length of her back, strong brown with not a single gray hair. The Fortune Teller returned to the table and opened a jewel encrusted box from which she removed a smooth, black stone.

“I suppose you want me to buy that? For protection.” said Caroline.

The Fortune Teller slid the rock across the table, “No, it is yours if you like it.”

“What does it do?”

“It is a charm, very old. And it will give the one who possess it spiritual peace.”

“What is spiritual peace?”

“It could be nothing. Could just be something I make up. Or not.”

Caroline reached out and took the stone. She concentrated on its coolness, the smooth surface, the weight, more than she expected. She held it, humoring the Fortune Teller. Then she opened her purse and tossed the stone in as she would a handful of change.

“Now, dear, it is getting late. I grow tired. Please, leave, so I may rest.”

Caroline shook her head at the old woman and stepped outside. She began to walk down the midway and with each step she became more and more angry at the Fortune Teller. *Who opens a palm reading by forecasting a death?* She thought. *Why couldn't she lie about finding wealth and happiness. How can a Fortune Teller keep their job by only offering bad news?*

Caroline turned around. She threw open the curtain and was startled by the bright light inside. Above the velvet covered table hung a single light bulb on a string. The tarot cards and crystal ball were gone, in their place, a paper plate and an empty coffee mug. There was a doorway near the back of the room, she could see light coming through its base and the movement of a shadow. When the door opened the Fortune Teller emerged in the same blue and purple robe. Where once flowed long brown hair there was nothing. The scarf was gone as well, revealing a balding head. The Fortune Teller stopped and looked at Caroline, “Hello again,” said the Fortune Teller, the voice deeper now, distinctly male.

“You liar,” said Caroline.

With the exception of his bald spot the Fortune Teller did not appear old. The parts of his face not caked with make-up and latex appeared youthful and strong. He reached for one of the jars on his shelf and began to spoon its dark contents into the coffee cup. After two spoonfuls he walked to the back room and returned with a steaming pot, quickly pouring the hot water into the cup.

“Would you like coffee?” he asked.

“No.” Caroline found a chair near the entrance to the tent and sat down making sure to keep her back straight, her eyes full of intent.

“It’s terrible anyway.” said the Fortune Teller.

“I don’t believe this.” Caroline said.

“I know what you are going to say.” said the Fortune Teller, smiling.

“Is that supposed to be funny?”

“A little bit.” He took sip of coffee. “You came back to yell at me. At my reading.”

“Well, yeah.” said Caroline.

The Fortune Teller sat down at his table and began to stir his coffee. He motioned to the seat across from him, “Sit, please.” Caroline walked over and sat down. “My name is Timothy,” said the Fortune Teller offering his hand. Carline did not take it. They sat in the tent quietly for a minute, each looking over the other in the light.

“You know, I’m not even mad,” said Caroline.

“Why is that? I think I would be furious.”

“In mean, there is no way your reading can be right. And you had me going pretty good.”

“Actually, no.” said the Fortune Teller between sips of coffee.

“But you’re a fake. You dress up like an old woman and lie to people.”

“That’s half true” said the Fortune Teller. “Yes, I do dress up like an old woman. But my readings are sound. They have been since I was a boy.” The Fortune Teller stood up and walked into the back room, “Are you sure you don’t want anything to drink?” he asked.

“No.” said Caroline.

Timothy came back with a grilled cheese sandwich on a spatula and flipped it down on the paper plate. He took a bite, jerking his head to tear the strands of melted cheese apart.

“So, if your readings are correct, why are you dressing up?”

“People expect to see certain things when they come here. I present those things. I wouldn’t get any business at all if I sat here in a t-shirt and blue jeans.”

“Have you ever been wrong?”

“No.”

Caroline stood up, “I’m just going to leave. But that’s a terrible thing to tell someone. That they are going to die. Couldn’t you have made something else up, something else to get me to leave so you could eat your dinner?”

“I didn’t make it up.” said the Fortune Teller before he folded his paper plate and tossed it under the table.

Caroline left and drove to her apartment upset. She felt used, the victim of a joke and one she paid to have played on her at that. She thought of the calm in the Fortune Teller’s voice as he told her, a second time, that she would die. She fell asleep angry that night and woke up several times filled with frustration and doubt.

She awoke the next day feeling refreshed. Her muscles were sore but also felt fit and clean. She called work and took the rest of the week off. Three days later, she was killed when a truck carrying pesticides broke through the median and struck her car head on. She spent her first day off at home, watching movies and looking through old photo albums. When the sun went down she decided to go to an art museum. There was a string quartet playing in the lobby. She accidentally sat down on a couch that belonged to Queen Elizabeth. The second day her brother called. They talked for two hours without reminiscing a single time. On the third day she

went to the beach, a place she hadn't been since she was a child. She met a handsome young man and convinced him to let her try his windsurfing board. She spent the rest of the afternoon trying to stand and failing again and again. She caught a breeze one time. It pulled her smoothly across the white caps and felt like flight. When the truck hit, she still had that feeling coursing inside her, she was weightless, laughing hysterical.

## **The Black Book Charms**

*Smythson Writing Paper and Notebook: \$285*

On this paper you can draw just about anything. Goats, for instance. The forgiving thickness of the page allows additional pen pressure to diffuse across the writing surface. The overall effect is one of clear, strong lines no matter the quality of pen. In addition, our blending process creates a page semi resistant to ink-run. Meaning, should you lose concentration while working through a memo, perhaps due to food borne illness, this paper significantly reduces the instance of a smudge. This is, if you'll forgive my bravado, the premier paper. But what good is paper without a reliable folio in which it may be housed. Again, sir, like our paper, I assure you this notebook is like no other. If, in a blind rage, you were to strike your wife across the face with it, I dare say she might thank you for it. Our leather covers are both supple and strong. Do not think for an instant, sir, that we must trade one for the other. The opposite is true, as one rises, so does the other. Such is the magnificence of our manufacturing. Imagine yourself opening the notebook, feeling the texture of the cover before resting your hand on a sheet of pillow-like, saffron colored elegance. Yes, we do use real saffron in our dying process but it should not enflame your saffron allergy. The remnant characteristics of all our dyes are negligible at best. In fact, many of our red shades are drawn from various concentrations of hawk's blood, witch hazel, and human bone. Yet, to this day, not a single customer who has purchased these products has claimed any insight into the future, nor have their curses become more powerful.

*Montegrappa Fountain Pen: \$530*



Writing utensils bought in bulk from the myriad of office supply chains suit most fine. Their writing, Bartleby like, dutiful, repetitive, is of a kind necessary to this world but not admired. And, as the dominance of word processing continues to dull the art of penmanship, soon the sun will set on the white-barrel round stick and oddly named but ubiquitous crystal ball pen. One day they shall all die out to be dug up from earth as stone, as dinosaurs. Relics of a civilization that no doubt once was but has long since ceased. Their uses will be miscataloged. Their museum exhibits will fail to excite the hovering mass of children escorted through the museum halls of the distant future as information is beamed their young cerebellums. Surely, all extremities will have atrophied to grotesque nubs and the dust of a hundred global wars will have obscured the use of these pens so far as to have them identified as primitive weapons. Sir, should you wish your possession a different fate. Should you wish that your method of communication remain elegant and personal through the ages, this should be your pen of choice. The craftsmanship and lines, ergonomically suited and measured for your hand by a trained expert, will know no rival. Dare we say that had John Hancock owned a pen of this caliber the Declaration of Independence would today have an extra page to account for his signature. The materials of construction are of the highest quality and all but guarantee the accurate placement and cataloging of this instrument as one of writing. It is true that long after your pages have dried and turned to dust the pen that wrote them, this pen, will live on as a tribute to your work and the work of others. You may rest assured that the wars will come and the dust will settle but this pen will remain. And perhaps, should you chose a cryogenic burial, you will one day have an opportunity to reclaim this device when the technology of revival is at hand.

*Barney's Leather and Chrome Rubik's Cube: \$195*

Diversions are important. Games, puzzles, riddles, tiny activities in the newspaper or on television, they help us refocus ourselves. They help us to relax and pass time. Think of the spoon bender who can conjure great gusts of wind with his thoughts. He performs concentration

on the spoon, working so hard sweat forms on his brow. Then, from nowhere it seems, on a clear day while the sun shines down on a green park, a wind picks up. People's blankets fly up. Children's kites lift them and drag them across the grass until the children let go and the kites sail away. Dust whips and stings the skin. People have to cover their eyes to avoid the tiny projectiles blowing past. Quickly, while the gathered crowd is at their most agitated, the spoon bender runs his free hand over the top of the spoon and bends it at a perfect angle. The wind dies down. The people refocus on the spoon bender who is now relaxed and holding a bent spoon in his hand. They applaud and stuff a rusted coffee tin labeled, "tips" with dollar bills. He has no power on the spoon. Yet, his actual ability seems more fantastic than any small alteration of an eating utensil could ever be. But the breeze and wind are familiar things. However destructive, the people in the park would not pay for a breeze but, you don't see a man bend a spoon every day, do you? You don't. And you never will.

*d'Avenza Cashmere-and-Silk Blazer: \$3,250*

Ask not what you can do for this jacket. Ask what this jacket can do for you. In this case, it can do just about anything. It can't make you fly. But its top quality materials and tailoring will give you the sensation that you are floating. It won't get you the girl. But it will get her attention with its exquisite fit and soft shouldered design. It won't get you the job. But the

confidence you feel with this blazer wrapped around you will help you nail the interview. It will not make you a better dancer. But it will get you beyond the velvet rope and, once inside, however you decide to dance will dictate what dancing “is.” This is the coat that goes best with beef priced to market. They teach valets to recognize this jacket as it signals the owner of a fine, fine automobile. Look at the buttons, look at the stitching and shape. The hanger this jacket hangs from was designed by a retired NASA engineer. And so precise is the relationship between jacket and hanger that no other jacket will hang from the hanger and from no other hanger with this jacket hang. If there were to be cocktails on the moon, this is what Neal Armstrong would have worn. True, this jacket will not make you an astronaut. But it will take you places very few people have ever gone. For instance, while many jackets will garner an invite to Buckingham Palace, only a blazer of this quality will allow you to view the garage, which is filled with many expensive cars as well as a ladder, and stacks of dusty boxes containing the school report cards of a century’s worth of royals.

*Vilebrequin Swim Trunks: \$245*

Never get these wet. Walk on the beach, fine. Sit by the pool, fine. Drop the anchor of your sloop 200 yards off the coast of Nantucket, of course. But do not get these shorts wet. Should the shorts get wet, you will not lose your shorts. In fact, these shorts are wonderful when wet. The micro-mesh fiber lining is designed not to ride or cling when either entering or exiting liquid. The finely stitched, tri-color embroidery goes with the quadruple died base colors

wonderfully. The dyes are engineered to stay vibrant while damp. Both are specially prepared to resist fading should you encounter a hot tub or estate pool in which the chlorine has not been properly managed. Some say these shorts look better when wet. They do not grip or pull or show. They accentuate, they hint. These shorts are mannered in their revelations. But I insist, do not get them wet. A man of your stature has no business playing in the water. How old are you? How much land do you own? Even if the yacht is simply rented, who are you to leap from its stern with boyish glee? No. Remain on the sidelines while the others frolic and play. Let them complain of water in the ear and various deposits of salt. Let their hair become tinted with chemicals. Be patient, and the true nature of these shorts will be revealed. They will make you a focal point. You will sit high and dry while the rest splash and play. Always from just outside their field of vision, there you will be. Relaxed, composed, as if you've always simply been there. As if leisure was your vocation, your calling. Kick back, have a bit of lemon with your tonic water. Tan evenly. Be gracious. Be charming. Lie through your teeth. Until one day, when the time is right, they will clear the entire ocean so that you might have a dip.

*Jacob & Company World GMT Watch: \$15,800*

This watch tells Time what time it is. Of course, I am exaggerating slightly as this watch will not reorganize the orbit of the earth around sun. No, that is a task equal to the heavens alone. And yet, you may find that when this particular time piece is clasped about your wrist, those around you will allow for a certain punctual malleability. Yes, should you be accused of being tardy to an important event, simply raise your sleeve and observe the diamond studded bezel, the gold date indicator, the flawless, elegant movement of the hands. Late or not, late by minutes, hours, even days, those around you will notice your timepiece and be compelled to forgive you

because surely, a man with this type of watch can never be incorrect about the time. It must be their mistake. Perhaps that scatterbrained secretary of theirs simply confused the date and time of the meeting. It would be like her to do so, wouldn't it? And she has had instances like this before, thought never to this degree. In any case, one look at that watch and all doubts of your fault will be put to rest leaving subordinates and superiors equally mystified and searching for an explanation. Imagine how advantageous it will be to arrive late, or even early, to a meeting and have the other party completely stymied from the get-go. You will be half way to your pitch before their brain settles the matter. And by then, you have them. At the risk of being crude, I'm sure you can also see the social applications of a timepiece with this kind of pedigree. For the married man, no more anniversary remembrance nonsense. For the bachelor, I suppose the possibilities are endless. She need only ask the time and you will have her ensorcelled! This package includes three interchangeable leather arm bands so you may coordinate the timepiece with your attire.

*Anthelios 40 Melt-In Sun-Screen Milk: \$29.50*

Your sensitive nature is no laughing matter. In addition to owning several guns, you enjoy aroma therapy. You played football in college while, at the same time, worked part time as a yoga instructor. Once, you disarmed a would-be mugger of his knife, earning accolades from your then girlfriend, Cynthia. But, later that night, at Cynthia's home, you cried genuine tears at the memory of feeling helpless. Eventually excusing yourself for a nice, warm bath. And in that bathtub yet another one of your particularities was apparent, your sensitive skin. Because, in that moment, you realized that all of Cynthia's bath products would leave you irritated and itchy for the rest of the evening. You then departed Cynthia's loft and headed back to your own. The

relationship, already strained despite your heroism, eventually fell apart. These circumstances are apparent. We understand them. And we also understand that sensitive skin is nothing to take lightly. We have engineered our sun screen to accommodate even the most temperamental dermis. Perhaps if Cynthia shared, or even bothered to understand your condition which, if I may say so, is merely a physical extension of your winning personality, she might still enjoy your company. But alas, her loss is womankind's gain. And the smooth, healthy, acne-free shine of your shoulders, back and forehead will be evidence of that gain. Naturally, we, the makers of this product, prefer it be showcased primarily on private beaches or within international waters. We ask cordially that it never be applied or displayed on or around America's Great Lakes.

*Thom Browne Cotton Seersucker Shorts: \$1,500*

You sweat because you are a man. You sweat because you work. Because you take the stairs to the 100<sup>th</sup> floor or, at the very least, take the stairs for the final ten flights. You sweat because the winter months demand layers and the summer months are when business in your industry is at its peak. You sweat because you hiked to Machu Picchu on holiday while the others all took a train. But there are times when sweat can be, well, frowned upon. A romantic picnic on a Venetian Gondola is no place for a bead to fall from your nose and into the bowl of strawberries from which you feed your beloved. This is not a place for sweat. Neither is the space in front of your nanny's bedroom door, where you knelt to peer through the keyhole and first discovered masturbation. A man now, one who has masturbated many times, one who has known love

many times, you appreciate and understand that there is a time for sweat and time for, well, not sweat. For the not sweat times, these shorts are essential. Their light, airy texture and functional side pockets are ideal for those moments when wetness and odor on or around the groin is most unwelcome. Indeed, there are times when, despite your best efforts, you will be expected to be both active and, moments later, dry and inoffensive. And these shorts are the skeleton key to performance in those times. Absorbent, quick drying, and playfully fitted, there is not a better set of short-pants made on this earth and that is a guarantee. Available in a wide variety of colors and lengths with our patented gentle zip technology, they represent the pinnacle of comfort and serve as a much welcomed booster of confidence for active men of all sorts.

*Bottega Veneta Silk Pocket Square: \$150*

While once carried for hygienic purposes and known commonly as a handkerchief, the accessory has since evolved into an item of decoration and is now commonly referred to as a pocket square. The purpose now is two fold. Firstly, the pocket square, when chosen and coordinated with the proper eye, adds an element of flair and uniqueness to an ensemble. Secondly, the pocket square gives a nod to a bygone era where the answer to the collection of brow sweat and nasal fluids was a personal, handmade thing. An object of elegant appearance, often dotted with the initials of its owner, and practical use. While it may unsettle one to think of a pocket square as such, its legacy is one of soilage on the most gentlemanly of terms. It beckons both the user and viewer to remember chamber pots, leeches, amputation, ether, the laboratory of Joseph Lister, the forefathers of modern hygiene. Now, far from disposing of our kerchiefs, we have invented multiple ways to wear them. There is the one-point fold along with its brethren the two-point,



three-point and four-point. There are the Cagney, Cooper and Astaire, all named for the stars who popularized their use. Certain designers have even taken liberties attaching chains or bedazzling the square with jewels. Yet, at its most basic, the article is a throwback, a tribute. And, should one chose to join the tradition, the choice in maker must be of the finest quality. Our square, created by those who know it best, designed and displayed in the spirit of King Richard the II, widely credited as the inventor of the article, stands as a testament to refinement. Additionally, should one need to vacant one's nasals into the cloth, ours are cold-water machine washable and guaranteed not to bleed their dyes to other fabrics.

*Sterling-Silver Crook-Handle Bespoke Umbrella with Silk Canopy: \$2,295*

Of course, our first wish is that you never need use our umbrella. Surely, a lifetime of sunshine and warmth is preferred to the sloshing of puddles and errant chills. And while I cannot guarantee a consistency of sun, this device provides shelter from inclement weather such that user many never notice the rain save for the puddles we hope he is observant enough to avoid. And, if you follow my logic and find the product as satisfying as I do, perhaps it would not be terribly out of bounds for me to state that yes, in a sense, our umbrella turns rainy days into something else entirely. Not sunny days, no, for we do not deal in hoodoo. Yet, this barrier to the elements is so exquisitely balanced and weighted that it can barely be said to give weight to the hand which holds it. In addition, the canopy, constructed of finely spun imported silk, is tuned in such a way that the sound of droplets colliding with it is reverberated away from the holder rather than channeled down toward him. I am sure you have noticed with other umbrellas that, in a downpour, conversation with another person standing a canopy's distance away is difficult at best. Our goal is and has always been to make this product nearly invisible when in

use, creating a sensation that maybe it has only just rained rather than feeling rain all around. And, as we all know, if it has only just rained, sunshine must be on the way.

*A. Testoni Suede Driving Shoes: \$425*

This product, I assume you, is essential. Yes, it is a shoe for driving. Yes, you are correct, you can easily drive in your walking shoes, in your running shoes. I have even heard tell of men who drive with no shoes whatsoever. But this product is necessary for three reasons; first, comfort, while it may indeed be possible to drive in all manner of shoes, boots, or galoshes, none can match the feel of pressing the gas and break in a shoe designed specifically to do so. These driving shoes are constructed with a high middle arch, shaping your foot naturally despite the lack of significant weight application on the sole. Second, the quality of shape allows creates a breathable atmosphere that dries quickly. We are positive, regardless of the duration of drive, odor will not be an issue. And our third category, status, of course, it may seem gauche to flaunt ones lifestyle to such a degree but this particular item presents a bit of a quandary for the go-getter and tax bracket jumper. Yes, it will differentiate you. Yes, when your neighbors find out you have shoes simply for driving your car they will be impressed and, hopefully, mimic you. That desire to be the first kid on your block never truly diminishes, does it? But, just as this shoe may put you a step ahead, it will also, in certain company, leave you behind. At the highest echelons, the top one percent, the zenith, a man who owns driving shoes admits to transporting

himself from place to place. This is, in some places, unacceptable. For your currency to be good in these environs, you will need racing shoes, piloting shoes, submariner shoes. And you must leave the driving shoes under the Christmas tree for your chauffer. But still, today, they are cannot-do-without. One must look at them as a plateau which leads to the base of a tall mountain. You must sprint across before you begin your ascent.

*Globe Trotter Carbon-Fiber-and-Kevlar Onehundred&ten Case: \$3,525*

To call this a suitcase is to call Jesus Christ a man. And I dare say those who do both should be suitably dealt with. Created using machinery as old as time immemorial, people say one can see the work of ghosts in the stitching. And, as a competent rival to our time honored assembly process, we use only the most modern materials. At the nexus of these two paths we find a travel case more luxuriant than most human dwellings. This is travel storage for men who travel abroad for organs they themselves need. It is fit for a cursed monkey claw with a single wish left. The apparent weightlessness of the case rivals the air around it and its outer shell shares aerodynamic qualities with vehicles tested on the Bonneville Salt Flats. Should you need to ditch the case over water or uncivilized land, each is equipped with a unique GPS signature available only to the owner to aid retrieval. Battery life exceeds four years so you are free to reclaim your parcel whenever you see fit. It comfortably fits four days of attire assuming only two pairs of shoes are taken and comes standard with an outer coating designed to blur airport scanners. Of course, a bomb is a bomb is a bomb and we wouldn't want to make travel less safe. Mechanical devices will be visible enough we assure you. But certain other goods may look as laundry does, as a ball of socks or a stack of folded shirts. Travel wheels are standard for smooth movement in and out of customs. False bottom available by special order.

*Tom Ford Silk Cummerbund: \$300*

Only certain occasions dictate the use of a Cummerbund. A shame, wouldn't you say? The name comes from the tongue twisting Urdu word for *waist* as the item was originally invented by the British in India looking to modify their attire in hopes of striking an accord with the heat. Still, today one rarely sees the piece in use. You might even say, like the appendix, this is a vestigial article at best. Unlike other such items, kerchiefs, pocket watches, monocles, the cummerbund or cumberbund, is slowly becoming an inert piece, worn mostly at the urging older codes of style. Yet, even at its most popular, its most en vogue, the cummerbund was purely an aesthetic device. So, I see no reason for its demise or the stigma associated with its use in black tie. Honestly, I feel the article is due for a rebirth. We should seek to free it from the shackled irony with which many young men wear it. And, accordingly, this may bring a greater change in public style. Helping to make it more apparent who is and who isn't of a certain stock. This is not to say we should bring back monocles or pocket watches, their obsolescence is well documented. And I will leave the pocket square alone as it has found a place in coordination. But the function of the cummerbund as a symbol of status and restraint has yet to find a rival. Who doesn't enjoy the straight line it creates up and down a man's form. Even the very obese may find that slight tug on the midsection a comfort. Maybe as a reminder that they have some work left doing? The critique is that it all comes back to status. To that I say, of course, where else would you have it be?

*Zegna Cotton Shirt: \$225*

The reason no one shows off their Fruit of the Loom is because the logo is on the back of the collar. No man wants a woman looking down his back from where his neck meets the rest of his frame. Dignity does not reside in that location. How can you be expected to charm when all she can see the dune-like rise of your spine as it pushes up against your skin. No, we must have our logos visible, preferably on the left breast, near a pocket. That location is the beach front property of the casual button down. It is a territory known well by tiny, grinning alligators as well as men swinging polo clubs. And to wear a shirt that is blank is to invite questions of where it came from, who made it, why did you choose it? These queries often distract and may divert conversation toward avenues that are less than productive assuming your preferred conversational topic is not what your parents did for a living. Then again, there is a question of modesty with a shirt logo. It is my estimate, and this may be conservative, that the logo should not exceed half an inch from top to bottom and side to side. Perhaps there are some casual shirts that may break this rule but then the casual shirt is an entirely different matter and carries with it its own particular pitfalls. For a dress shirt, I believe the signature of its maker should be small, dignified. One should be careful to choose a shirt of modest color with a bright logo in the hopes that parties who look at you will recognize the shape of the logo and not need to strain their eyes distinguishing the brand. Once, I met a curious man whose clothing bore no tagging or naming of any kind. His suit was wonderfully fitted, the fabric fine, full at the elbows and knees. I observed him cautiously, eventually daring to ask where he obtained such a pleasing array. You

can imagine my surprise when he told me he made the apparel himself. Yes. Himself! Down to his loafers! So, I am sure from this brief anecdote you can see the importance of well identified dress, for while I always remembered that well suited man, my recollections are of entirely the wrong temperament.

*Ray-Ban Aviator Large Metal Sunglasses \$139*

A hangover can be avoided, but why? I never understood those who would take being miserable while socializing, or being miserable not socializing, *over* being miserable the following day. It makes little sense to me how, when a truly affable gathering is taking place, some choose to sip tonic and whittle the hours away in some dark corner discussing the comings and goings of their spouses. And I fail to see the merit, when the hosts have gone so far as to provide a fountain of champagne, in retiring early so that one may enjoy the hours of the day before noon. Perhaps I can condone this behavior on a weekday, especially if one's daily commitments are connected, in one way or another, with one's income. But a Friday night, really? True enough, those next morning can be dreadful. Sometimes, I maintain only the sensation of the previous nights imbibing sloshing this way and that inside me. Other days seem not to begin until the sun has already begun to set. And even then I spend my evening working up the strength to look at an egg. There have been miracles to be sure. Most occurred in my youth but, now and again, despite the march of age, there are mornings when I awake unburdened despite my excess. These are the true gifts of life indeed. The only thing that makes these times sweeter is on the still rarer occasion when a clear headed rising is accompanied by the realization that I share a bed with a lovely woman and have not, as I can see, soiled that bed. A look at my nightstand will reveal all the common recovery aids; aspirin, bismuth, milk of magnesia, a carafe of temperate water. Also, I keep sunglasses at the ready. There is nothing quite like venturing outside unprepared with the previous night's deeds still weighing on the skull.

*Clive Christian Number One For Men Pure Perfume \$2,350*

Who needs this? What kind of scent could be so awful as to require a cover up this select? Even Laurence, after his military victories and great trek across Arabia made due with an ice cold drink and a shower. Fishermen, sopped with ocean rot, have wives and mistresses. Or at least that is my understanding for I know no fisherman. The amateur pugilist, his apartment full of reeking bandages and agar-like piles of laundry, makes due with tap water and Palmolive. Though I have no first hand experience, I am sure water and bleach are enough to sanitize the gloves of the men laboring inside the abattoir. And that smell, all those tiny pieces of parts, must be dreadful even at its least invasive concentration. Surely, these are some of most offensive odors one can imagine. But those who incur them have, for the most part, made due with common washing techniques and solvents. So who would need to go to such great lengths to avoid offending the olfactory calculations of those around him? Perhaps a defrocked priest or a murderer awaiting execution could use a scent of this caliber to gain favor? Though I can't imagine either being able to afford it. Warlords and great generals, dignitaries, the "over there" set with all that blood rising against their conscience. Yes, I agree with their decisions and lament the terrible sleep they must get. A scent like this could act as a powerful calmative. Although I suppose their power and adoring millions must, to a certain extent, perform a similar role. Puzzling, this small vile, so rarified, dare I say I want it only to say I have it? It does smell nice, something like oranges. These days my nose isn't what it used to be. No matter, I will purchase a half dozen.

*Christofle Silver Condom Holder: \$656*



Silver has the highest electrical conductivity of any element. Because of its antibiotic properties, in the early twentieth century, it was a common practice to drop a silver dollar into a bottle of milk to extend the drinkable life of the milk. On a similar note, silver is currently the preferred material in the construction of catheters. I am sure you will not be surprised to find out silver is also the luckiest substance on the planet. Some say the only way to truly protect against unwanted fertilization is abstinence. They may be correct. But they are also terrible bores. I do not encourage intercourse willy-nilly. But a total lack seems just as dangerous. Here is the meeting of sophistication and responsibility. This small case fits three prophylactics comfortably and protects against bending and puncture. It will fit nicely into any pocket and its subtle weight offers a clear reminder that you are prepared for both unexpected and expected intercourse. Given its unassuming appearance and simple, elegant style, this case also offers a level of discretion uncommon in products of this kind. Should it fall out of your pocket at work or during dinner, casual observers will see little more than a trinket, possibly mistaking it for a money clip. The subterfuge, while in no way measurable, exists.

*Armand De Brignac "Ace Of Spades" Rose: \$600*

Never mind that the bottle was designed for specific use by a fashion house. Never mind that the label for each bottle is made of real pewter and hand polished before boxing. Never mind that each box for each bottle is shipped in an individual black wooden box created to represent the quality of the bottling process. Never mind that the bottle for our blanc de blancs champagne is made of silver yet, the rose is more rare. Never mind that the blend of pinot noir, chardonnay, and pinot meunier are drawn from separate vintages selected based on their high quality. Never mind that renowned wine critic José Peñín gave this product an unheard of 98/100 points. Never mind that Reims, where the grapes are grown, was instrumental in the coronation ceremonies of French monarchy. Never mind that Joan of Arc was there to witness the crowning of Charles VII. Never mind the labyrinth of caves beneath the city where, in certain cases, champagne is aged. Never mind that these caves were once used by Christians hiding from Roman sentries. Never mind that Eisenhower accepted the unconditional surrender of the Wehrmacht, May 7, 1945 there. Never mind toasting to friends and family. Never mind breaking the bottle over the bow of a new ship. Never mind the hot air balloonist who, upon landing, presents the owner of the land on which the gondola settles with a bottle of champagne. Never mind the host whose honor it is to pour the last drop. Never mind the bubble sneeze. Never mind the rocketing cork and the ensuing overflow. Never mind the tuxedo rental. Mind the bride, only her. Never mind the groom.

*Tiffany & Co. Magnifying Glass: \$350*

Any famed man of mystery will tell you the key to being a man of mystery is in doing away with as many mysteries as possible save the mystery that surrounds you. Houdini knew this and always did his best to debunk his competition. The same goes for James Bond, who was a real man who fictionalized himself to maintain anonymity. As the code of the mystery man goes, you would be hard pressed to find finer examples. I would also watch out for them should you make attempts at mystery. Everyone says they are dead but I remain unconvinced. You must also become adept at sniffing out chicanery. Keep your eyes and ears tuned to the footsteps of pickpockets and the double talk of confidence men. Be patient, with both them and yourself. Always, always, always expose a fraud in public. Make sure there are witnesses and, if need be, an adequate paper trail. Never, never, never reveal your role in the debunking of another man of mystery. It is a great and noble enterprise, a wonderful hunt playing out across continents for all times. There is a fine prize at the end of it. Total disappearance. Your mystery turns to lore and fable. Your competitors speak your name in hushed tones, as if you are still in the room posing as the smoke from a pipe. You will be loved by thousands and be completely alone. Or, you will be terribly popular, intrigue is a lovely segue. Learn the elegance of fingerprinting. Learn how to eliminate traces of yourself by setting out to discover the traces of others. Grow a magnificent beard as quickly as you can, make friends, then shave it without notice. They will all hardly recognize you. A man of mystery should never keep a steady girlfriend. That said, an abundance of partners is also very risky. Your very worst enemy is the proof that you are anything at all. Once it was much easier. Today, a child is proof enough. Nothing should scare a man of mystery more than the terrible spectre of family. This advice, while insufficient, should be more than enough. A final word, make sure to own a magnifying glass that costs over \$300. I will leave it to you to find out why.





