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Six Stories

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Master of Arts in English

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SIX STORIES

JAMES SILVER

ABSTRACT

The six stories contained in this thesis were created during my graduate studies at Cleveland State University. All six stories resulted from different class writing prompts, and each exercise encouraged a new idea that was then work shopped and revised. Still, there is a common thread running through these stories: the writer. My interest in communicating and entertaining has always been present and well nurtured. I have had the good fortune to be in constant contact with that inner voice, both professionally and personally. These six stories represent a brief hesitation in sixty years of accumulated feelings, insights and beliefs. They do not represent a conclusion or a stopping point. In fact, they offer a snapshot of where I have been, and a glimpse of where I am headed. I am grateful for all of the stimulation and criticism I have received during my time at Cleveland State. It is from this point that I now push off and continue my growth as a writer.

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Introduction

I received my Bachelor's from The University of Tennessee in 1969. I entered the Cleveland State English MA program forty-six years later, and I hadn't been reading along the way, not literature. As soon as school started, the reading started, and so did the influence of authors. Sherman Alexie introduced me to the unexpected twist and to never be afraid of uncomfortable subjects. Lorrie Moore has allowed me to be silly and sarcastic. Donald Ray Pollock demonstrated the power of detail and simple honesty. John Cheever showed me how quickly a story can make us uncomfortable. Willa Cather taught me the delicacy of well-crafted language and the importance of setting while Nathaniel Hawthorne dazzled me with the complexity of a great story.

Some authors had a more profound impact on my writing. Tobin Terry and Sandra Cisneros showed me minimalism and fearless editing. Cisneros's "The House on Mango Street" is a small story told intimately by a young boy. When you're done reading, you don't feel she left anything out, yet the story is maybe six hundred words. Capturing large sections of mental real estate in a single sentence has always been an admirable quality for writers. Tobin Terry writes flash fiction. His "Gun Show Memorabilia" is one hundred and eighty six words. He writes, "Diversity at a gun show comes in the form of different ways to kill a man." I find so much communicated in so few words. These are some of the authors that taught me severe editing. I wanted to write

economically in “Tica,” “Scarecrow Knows,” and “The Handoff.” I have to believe forty years of writing thirty and sixty-second commercials has added to this style. Of course, my favorite quote comes from possibly Mark Twain, George Bernard Shaw, Voltaire, or most likely Blaise Pascal. It is usually summarized as, “I made this [letter] very long only because I have not had the leisure to make it shorter.”

Beyond minimalism, Alice Walker encouraged me to understand the power of simple, honest stories. Her “Everyday Use” demonstrates how well crafted, natural dialogue can deliver plenty of emotion and understanding, fully engaging the heart. I did my best to create believable dialogue in “Scarecrow Knows.” The emotion is developed through simple, honest conversation. Going over and over lines of dialogue until I could close my eyes and be transported to the scene paid dividends while hopefully drawing the reader deeper into the story. The conversation in the kitchen between Tessa and her mom would be one example:

“Why have we got to sell Porky?”

“Why do you think?”

“Cause we need the money to run the farm?”

“Then why did you ask?”

“It just doesn’t seem fair. Porky’s part of the family, he didn’t do anything.”

“It’s your question, I’ll leave you to answer it. Now, spoon that batter onto my cookie sheet—small mounds, two inches apart on all sides.”

Another example from the same story would be the sisters discussing *The Wizard of Oz*:

“How did she get lost like that?” Emma asked.

“Remember the tornado and all the wind and the house spinning? That’s how she got lost.”

“Who’s that?” Emma asked pointing at the TV.

“That’s the Scarecrow. He’s dumb as rocks, but not really, and he wants to go see the wizard so he can get a brain. Then he’ll know everything.”

I enjoy writing dialogue and feel it represents by most mature talent as a writer.

Barbara Kingsolver demonstrated the value of metaphor in portraying life lessons. In “High Tide in Tucson” Kingsolver tells the story of a pet hermit crab that sets up a wonderful metaphor for Kingsolver’s transition from Kentucky to Tucson. “When I was twenty-two, I donned the shell of a tiny yellow Renault and drove with all I owned from Kentucky to Tucson.” Kingsolver observes the crab’s period of diminished activity before it successfully adapts to its new location. She realizes her relocation underwent the same behavior including the feelings and emotions that accompany such a move. The ability to adapt was crucial for the hermit crab and Kingsolver in establishing new homes. I attempted to use metaphor in “Scarecrow Knows.” The young girl, Tessa, filled with questions, projects her fear of not knowing onto the scarecrow. She pretends that the scarecrow knows something she doesn’t, including her fear. As she comes to realize the baselessness of her fears, the scarecrow loses its hold over Tessa. In “End of the World,” Carl faces death over and over again demonstrating the endings and beginnings we all traverse. Sometimes we feel that a life event will be the end of us, yet we seem to get through it and wake to live another day. We all have the innate ability to carry on through it all. My hope was to allow the reader to recognize how our passages through crucial events can end up feeling like different lifetimes.

Raymond Carver introduced me to observation. His short story “What We Talk About When We Talk About Love” requires the reader to interpret the change of lighting, showing the passage of time and clarity, and the effects of drinking to show the diminishing understanding as the conversation progresses. I have used this in “Gone Fishing” where the characters’ judgment changes with the use of alcohol and drugs, moving the plot forward. The reader is left to evaluate the impact these changes have on the characters. In “Tica,” the narrator uses observation to create the environment for this story in Costa Rica. His subtle observations of the young boy develop our affections and allow us to quickly become attached to him.

The list is much longer because everything I read influenced me. Sherman Alexie suggested, “Read 1,000 pages for every one you try to write.” Thank goodness for a strong English Department at Cleveland State.

While I have been reading at CSU, I have also been encouraged to clean up some grammatical riff raff, and celebrate the potential clarity that good form can bring to literary creation. I’m learning how to track the development of a story, identify what techniques are being used and isolate what engages me as the reader. I have been welcomed into a supportive arena for writers here at CSU, where new and different are permitted. It’s that *all ideas are welcome* environment that offers security and tolerance for a new writer.

But, I’m not really a new writer. I have successfully created jingles, theme songs and radio commercials for over forty years. You could say that my short stories were very short: thirty to sixty seconds. In advertising, you learn to tell a story, moralize, and entertain—or at least engage—the audience. The creation of advertising can be done

creatively. I started my recording studio/creative service in 1975. That business is still serving clients today. Most business startup statistics point to a failure rate that exceeds ninety percent in the first three years. Success in business is a funny thing. We like to define success financially and then include a positive reputation. I've had both of those in my forty years of commercial advertising and jingle writing. The jingle client's happiness comes from the cash register. There is a double bonus when the community likes the jingle as well. I wrote a jingle over twenty years ago that is still on the air, and when people ask about it, their response is always, "Oh, I love that jingle," and then they sing it for me. My longest running jingle was on the air for twenty-eight years. In addition to past success, while enrolled at CSU last summer, I completed a jingle which is my most profitable, and is currently being considered for a national campaign. Enrolling in the MA program at CSU has enriched everything I know about communications while shining a light on the creative writing universe.

While I've been learning how to read and write, my most difficult task has been differentiating between fiction and nonfiction. One of my professors suggested that nonfiction has at its heart an unspoken agreement between author and reader, that there is some inherent truth to the story. Fiction, on the other hand, seems to be fabricated, like a good lie. My confusion about the two arises when I question the accuracy of any story, true or false. How good is my memory? What part of a story actually happened the way it is being told? That prompts me to consider everything as fiction. When I finish reading anything, I ask myself if it is fiction or nonfiction. I speculate, but I never know.

Lorrie Moore's "How to be a Writer" uses irony and half-truths to both entertain and inform the reader. I question whether this is fiction or nonfiction. Her use of humor

to bring insight influenced my piece “I Can Do That.” If there is nonfiction in my portfolio, it would be that piece. I play on the humorous, self-deprecating craftsman I know I am while bringing information and experience to the reader. The truth of any of the events is less relevant than the entertainment and lessons.

The stories in this collection are presented in the order of the six shuffled slips of paper that were pulled out of a hat. All I’ve learned about developing the message linearly in advertising has been lost in preparing my portfolio of stories. I’m very proud of that. I have no idea why any story would be first or last. These stories all represent explorations prompted by class assignments during my time at CSU. During my business career, my creative process has always been the response to a client’s prompt, one that sold the product or service. Seldom, if ever, was I a sit-down-and-see-what-comes creator. “I can Do That” was a replacement for an assignment I was having trouble with and humor is my go to. I still don’t know if it is fiction or nonfiction? “Gone Fishing” would be a coming of age story. “The Handoff” seems to be a classic foundling tale while “Scarecrow Knows” builds on family values. “Tica” explores slice of life with a side of drama and “End of the World” was me breaking down the boundaries and letting go.

When I write, I look to delight myself. If I like something, I can take it further. These stories were created and then edited to make them clearer, more readable and perhaps profound. Stephen King suggests writers start with a character and then see how that character responds to various situations. Plot will come out of that. My experience with dialogue allows my characters to show up while they are in conversation. But, I am not always patient when waiting for a plot to arrive and have been know to push it. I think “Gone Fishing” is the best example of this. It lacks the proper character

development of the father. There is also little personal background on the boy. The story's plot, which might be less than believable, is pushed ahead when the men are detained at the constable's and the boy is sent to stay with the deputy's family. We learn more about the boy, but in small pieces during his conversation with the other kids. It is with this conversation that the plot appears.

I've been developing my communication skills for more than forty years, working to improve clarity through accurate, concise language. It is my hope that the evolution has made it into my fiction writing, represented by these six pieces.

Gone Fishing

The Mounty pulled us over a hundred miles beyond the border. Dad and Uncle Bob had been drinking a few beers, no more than usual I thought; the big Lincoln Continental gently bouncing and swaying down the highway. This was the late 50's, so all the cars had those side vent windows allowing most of the smoke from the cigarettes to escape, nice for the kid in the back seat. I didn't mind sitting in the back, I was happy just to have this time with my dad. Uncle Bob was driving while my dad was plotting our course on the map. I was handing cold beers to the front when requested. Uncle Bob wasn't really my uncle, he was one of those friends of the family that are around so often he becomes adopted and labeled.

I had heard the siren approaching from behind. We pulled off the road to the right easing the Lincoln to a stop along the gravel. I didn't realize we were the perpetrators until I heard Uncle Bob spit out a "Son of a bitch!" It was late afternoon, the sky still summer bright even with the sun starting to settle behind the tall pines lining the road. The shined boots and pressed uniform of the Mounty gave this a very official feel. His approach was not unpleasant or threatening.

"Hello officer, sorry 'bout that; I'm sure I was probably a few miles an hour over the limit. It won't happen again."

“Driver’s license, sir. You weren’t speeding; you were driving erratically. Step out of the car, please.” Twenty minutes later we were sitting in the receiving bay of the Tipamisuag, Ontario constable station, waiting perhaps to be taken down to North Bay.

“What’s going on, dad?”

“They want to be sure we’re all right to drive up to Kipawa; that’s all.”

That’s all; it didn’t seem like that was all to the Mounty. I’d never really paid enough attention to my father’s drinking to have an opinion about whether or not he should be picking me up from a party or driving friends of mine home. He was my dad; I assumed he knew what he was doing.

Growing up with an alcoholic mother and father isn’t something you think about, it’s something you do. Everyone in the house has two voices: one’s quiet, unrepentant, disinterested; the other is loud, accusatory and threatening. Most of the kids have three personalities: one is angry, rebellious, and cynical; another is frightened, alone and ashamed; the third one daydreams about people being happy. You look forward to a fishing trip thinking that everything might be different now. But vacations are never really vacations, they’re just the act of taking the show on the road. You might just as well be back home. Life is something to be defended against. It doesn’t ever flow, it crashes on the rocks over and over again. You’re never sure if you’re going to capsize or not. I’ve got this scar under my left eye. It’s so thin and tiny you’d never see it. I was nine when my dad backhanded me. His ring cut deep. You don’t go to the hospital for stitches. He had taken a swing at my mother. It was the first time I ever saw this. I instinctively protested out loud. Must have been something I said.

“The station at North Bay will be closed, what with it being Friday evening. You’re going to have to spend the night in town. I can’t put you back in your car until the hearing tomorrow. Car will be temporarily impounded.” That was the Mounty’s evaluation of our situation. What about football? Fall practice would start in three days; good thing I had my new cleats with me so I’d have a chance to break them in while we were away. This was going to be my first year at the high school; little chance to make varsity but lots of chance to be a part of a team. My mom was gonna go crazy if I didn’t show up Sunday night. She pretty much always assumed that my father was screwing up; never gave him the benefit of the doubt since they divorced. Still, more ridiculous was that Uncle Bob and my father were to spend the night in the constable’s office while I, being a minor, was to accompany one of the Mounties home for the night. What had my father done?

I remember a father/son rafting trip down the Youghiogheny River the spring before my twelfth birthday. Things went good for the first day and a half. The second night, my father drank a six-pack and then wanted to play mumbly-peg. He continued to drink as we started to play. I swear to you, it’s a knife game where you can easily stab yourself through the foot. I refused to play after I saw how drunk he was. There was a scary moment when he wasn’t sure how he wanted to react. Angry at my disrespect, he started for me, then hesitated. He must have seen my refusal as a kind of right of passage. We never talked about it.

The Mounty lived just outside of the small town on a kind-of-a country farm. There were small gardens in the front and alongside the home that had a white picket fence running down three sides. There were no large fields to be cropped and no large

barn with hay and horses, although there were some chickens and goats in the back. We entered the farmhouse by the side door and were greeted with a wonderful smell of some kind of pie or cake or something I'd be happy to eat. A warm, gentle woman with shoulder length brown hair was working in the kitchen. Her print dress and sneakers presented a casual energetic lifestyle. When she smiled, I could see some wrinkles around her eyes, but these I knew to be "laugh lines" from years of living a happy life filled with smiles.

"Well Carl, what do we have here?" I was explained and welcomed. Beth, the mother, showed me into the living room and affirmed that I must be hungry. I received bananas and blueberries along with some crusty bread and jam. The lemonade was homemade and the nutrition calmed me down. The blueberries tasted more delicious than I ever remember possible; they burst in my mouth, filling it with sweet tart blueberry juice. I was using my paper napkin after every mouthful. Beth and Carl held court in the kitchen. My gaze roamed around the living room while I wolfed down the berries, looking at the family photos hanging on most of the walls and across the fireplace mantel. The soft, comfy, overstuffed furniture filled the room that I'd bet would be cozy in winter.

There are certain moments in life that stand out because of the infinity of the experience; very open ended, no beginning and no end. What happened next was one of those moments. Down the stairs came Abbey Clancy. I stopped eating and allowed my mouth to hang open without claiming responsibility. Abbey walked up to me and grabbed my lemonade and took a large sip. "Mom makes the best," she said taking a big gulp. Still the mouth hung open. "You got a name?" Still the mouth hung open. My god she

was the most female girl I had ever seen. She was of a different species. She was tall and lean and tanned and without my realizing it, sexy. Her hair was loose and light brown, cascading down her shoulders and arms and covering a third of her face. My mouth now opened and closed in preparation for speech.

“I can show you around the neighborhood,” she said, “if you can walk.” I jumped to my feet and first realized that I was probably an inch or two taller than her. “I’m Danny. You’ve got a really nice home here, and wow, are you pretty.”

She laughed and curtsied. “Smooth talker. What’d you do?” Mouth moving, but no answer was coming out. She could see the puzzle on my face. “My dad didn’t bring you home for being a good citizen.”

“Oh, drunk driving.”

“YOU! drunk driving! I think you’ve got a few years to go for that story.”

“My dad and my uncle had a few beers too many. Your dad took ‘em off the road. They’re sleeping at the constable’s, I think.”

“Andy’s. That makes sense. Where you headin’?”

“We were going fishing, at Goose Lake Lodge.”

“You’ll be able to leave probably tomorrow. Come on, I’ll show you around as long as you’re going to be here tonight.” Abbey grabbed my arm and led me from the living room out the front door. Her hand was soft holding onto my arm. She could hold my arm forever. I could feel a vitality and assurance in her grip. My heart was pounding. My skin was tingling. My life was beginning, finally.

We stepped out onto a wrap-around porch with tables and chairs set out for extensive country viewing. She took me down the sandstone front walk, out the gate and

along a path that bordered the garden that was showing plenty of fresh veggies to come. I was dreamily tripping along feeling both proud and significant. Purpose filled me to overflowing. Abbey.

“You got a girlfriend?” Abbey asks me. Pulled from my fantasies, I thought to myself, yes, you, but that seemed inappropriate just yet. “No, I’m busy with school and football.”

Abbey stopped walking and turned to face me, hands resting on her hips. “Liar. I’ll bet you’ve never even kissed a girl.” Before I could answer, I saw another girl and a guy approaching on the path. “Say, Abs, whatcha got there?”

“Just a dead beat drunk my dad brought home.” Laughter. “Name’s Danny. Danny, this is Emily and Cory. So, are we going to party? I’ve got a couple hours til dinner.”

“Yeah, let’s head over to the creek. Ems got some bud, too,” Cory said. I was so pre-occupied drowning in my delusions, I never registered the conversation. Cory was older than me, taller, blond and much more developed. He had a sincere smile that seemed friendly enough and instantly drew me in. Emily was rounder, happier and friendlier than Abbey. She reached out and shook my hand and said, “We can help you get off the booze. We’ve got drugs.” She laughed and laughed, her body kinda bouncing. Her large round eyes were beautiful, welcoming in every way. Her shorter brown hair was cut close to her head but flapped a bit when she spoke or laughed. She had one of those faces you instantly feel comfortable with. I was taking nothing seriously, just loving the camaraderie and inclusion. Fishing and my father were a million miles away.

Everybody was in shorts and sneakers except me. Nothing fancy or bright or revealing, just kids in summer clothes.

The four of us joking and teasing followed along the path until it bent into a tree-shaded sand and rock descent to a small creek about 10 feet wide, a few feet deep. We all picked a rock to sit on, or like me, a tree to lean up against, big with smooth bark. There was a natural seat spaced out in the roots. The sand felt cool and damp, but not wet. I was amazed at how at home and relaxed I was with these three friends. I let my gaze make the rounds from Abbey to Emily to Cory. Nice kids, I thought. They'd be nice friends to have anytime. We talked about parents and school that would be starting soon for all of us. I was quiet, waiting to be addressed before speaking.

“Let's get this party started,” said Emily as she slid a small, foil wrapped package out of her short's pocket and tossed it to Abbey along with a pack of matches. I could see three or four thin cigarettes lying side by side like pencils in a pencil case as Abbey unfolded the foil. She lifted one out and held it in her mouth while she struck the match. When I saw her inhale the first puff and hold it in, a flood of classroom filmstrips and TV documentaries came pouring in; she was getting high, doped up, stoned. Within a matter of minutes, Emily, Abbey and Cory were all smiling and giggling and acting silly. I'd been passed the “joint” several times and finally accepted on the third go round successfully overriding my fears and conditioning. Nothing bad was going to happen here. I inhaled timidly, not knowing what to expect. To my surprise, there was really no burn in my throat. By my fourth “hit,” I was starting to feel a little dizzy or maybe light headed. It was easier to laugh and talk; I felt less concerned about what I said.

The initial apprehension was dissolving as a youthful excitement took over. It was that confident, greedy “toke” that I inhaled that caused a coughing fit lasting a couple of minutes. “You’ve gotta cough to get off,” Cory said with a big, silly smile. By the time I recovered, I was reeling; my head felt like it was in a slow irregular spin. Everything everyone said was funny, stupid funny. The dizziness had given way to a thickness in my limbs and mind; I would feel my toes, then my elbows, and then I’d be looking up at the leaves swaying gently in the tree above me. Whenever I wasn’t being distracted by a tree or the creek or a bird, I would stare at Abbey. She had become a goddess and I could not take my eyes off of her. “Hey, D-boy,” Cory said, “You’ve got drool coming out of the side of your mouth.” Roars of laughter.

“Emily, teach our friend here how to kiss a woman,” Abbey suggested. More laughter. Emily stood up and walked kinda sultry and sexy, swinging her hips over to where I was plastered back into the tree. She straddled my legs and sat down right in my lap. Her large brown eyes smiled at me and let me know I would be O.K. She smelled lemony.

“So, you want to learn how to kiss a girl, huh?” I was speechless, uncertain what my role was in all this. She rested her forearms on my shoulders and slowly leaned into me placing her lips gently on top of mine. They were soft and moist and warm. My mind vanished into a pool of electricity that sparked while our lips were touching. My momentary frozen surprise melted into the sensual rotation of lips moving in small circles around each other’s mouth. Then Emily opened her lips a bit and drew one of mine deeper into her mouth and then did the same with the other; like she was nibbling on them. My eyes were closed and I could hear muted “uh, mm” sounds bubbling up from

inside my body. My soul was released when Emily disengaged and sat back with a beautiful smile of self-satisfaction; I was speechless. “How’d you like that, kid?” All thoughts of Abbey were washed away in a revelation of love. Woos and whoas and whistles arose from the audience.

While I was still floating in a childish ecstasy, Cory pulled a cough syrup bottle from his knapsack. “This will trip you folks out.” He unscrewed the cap, took a swig and passed it. I had no fight left in me. Whatever it was, was going down.

“What’s this?” Abbey asked as she swallowed.

“Codeine cough syrup. I got it from my mom’s medicine cabinet. You’re gonna love it. They’ll only sell you a bottle like once every three months,” Cory said.

Emily took her swig while she remained on my lap and then passed the bottle to me. She waited for me to take a sip and then she placed another kiss on my mouth, and held it for a minute while we licked the syrupy liquid off each other’s lips. I had no idea how nerves transmitted information throughout the body, but mine were overloaded; there were surges of pleasure rolling through in waves. If there was nirvana, I was wildly close. Emily smiled at my euphoria, eased herself off my lap and held out her hands to help lift me up to my feet.

Abbey and Cory were stripping off their t-shirts and shorts, leaving only underwear, and bounding down to the creek. I watched with all my inhibitions rising up to fight me. Emily tugged me along through the sand until we were nearly creek side. She pulled her top off revealing a scant cotton bra, then stripped off her shorts leaving only her white panties. There was no acknowledgement or familiarity of what I was seeing. This was not a world I’d ever known or visited. It added to the surreal atmosphere, the

combination of drugs, euphoria and fantasy. As Emily released my hand and bounded into the water, I began weaving around in an approximate circle, stumbling forward towards the creek. I was moving faster and faster as I caught my ankle between two fallen branches and, with my arms flailing to unsuccessfully find my balance, my forward motion, restricted by my trapped ankle, accelerated into a fall as I went face down into the water. I smashed my mouth and nose and forehead into an indomitable boulder: stars, then nothing.

By the time I got home from vacation, school was underway. I had already endured a bunch of stitches and dental work. I missed football, but I got to see more of my dad, once my mom got over the sight of my face. Nothing changed at home. If anything, I think my mom drank more than I remembered, or maybe I just realized how much she was drinking all along.

I had a new confidence talking to girls. That naturally blossomed with all the questions about my vacation along with some sympathy for my scars. It kept the conversations flowing more easily. I told some fish stories about what had happened, you know, me becoming a stud, at least in my mind. I was invited to more parties and got familiar with six packs and shooters. That winter, I tried wrestling in high school, but I never could get the anger under control. The coach suggested I stick with football: defense always worked out well. When I saw somebody with the ball, nothing kept me from him. Things changed for me at school. I found out that colleges wanted good grades and good test scores, not only to let you in, but also to increase the chances for a scholarship. School became a way out. For me, that was going to be heading out forever.

I Can Do That (No You Can't)

As I was wrestling with the molded plastic package holding the weather-stripping, the sharp edge of the container gashed my palm. There was some blood, but I didn't really need stitches. There are thirteen million serious injuries from home repair projects each year with fifty-five thousand deaths: that's twice the number of car related deaths and four times the number of homicides. No one seems concerned that more people die from home repair projects than automobile accidents and murder and the reason why is because home repair is going to top three hundred and twenty billion dollars this year. I know I'm going to make my fair share contribution.

Do-it-yourself home repair is damn near a necessity if you own your own property. It's part of what makes home ownership worthwhile. If you aren't willing to participate in do-it-yourself home repair, then home ownership is going to be a much more expensive, less gratifying proposition. I grew up in a Jewish household. Jewish men don't usually do home repair; they spend that time with lawyers, doctors, accountants, and then they play golf. When something goes wrong in a Jewish household, there is a black book by the phone with a list of *guys* who you call depending on what kind of catastrophe has occurred. If there's a leaky faucet, the black book will have a *guy* who does plumbing. If the furnace quits, there's a *guy* who handles HVAC issues. That's why

if you've ever overheard two Jewish men talking about any kind of home repair, it sounded something like this:

“My front porch light is not working.

“Did you check to make sure the switch is on?

“Yeah. I even got on a chair and replaced the bulb. Nothing.”

“Call me when you get to the office. I've got a *guy* who does electrical.”

Jewish men have never been known for being handy or particularly coordinated for that matter. A Jewish man and a hammer is not a good combination. In that last example, the man getting on the chair was completely out of character, and engaged in a life-threatening situation.

Growing up with a Jewish father, I was never really exposed to tools or what you might be able to do with them. Any home repair education I received was because I happened to walk into the bathroom while the plumber was replacing the leaky shut-off valve on the toilet. I would watch and ask questions until the plumber would suggest I go watch cartoons. I didn't even know where I would find a hammer in our house. This brings me to home repair Tip #1:

1. *For any home repair that needs to be done, call your guy. If you don't yet have a guy, call a state-licensed, bonded tradesman who drives a panel truck or van with the company name and phone number painted on the side, preferably “So-and-So and Sons” although that can be a double negative if the sons are idiots.*

Are there issues and problems with home repair people? Yes. I'm not sure what it is, but if you've worked with the trades you know that call backs are sporadic, arrival times are simply suggestions and a large portion of the home repair population is comprised of men who decided that they could pick up a few extra bucks doing home repair, even though they are actually out-of-work car salesmen, or two beer drinking college buddies who haven't found a career yet, or your next door neighbor who is simply the helping type, or lonely. If you follow home repair tip number one, you'll soon have your own list of *guys* who can fix anything and everything.

When people buy a house, all of the dreams and fantasies that surround home ownership surface. It's your house, your property and you can damn well do whatever you want with it. If you decide that the front hall crystal chandelier doesn't speak to your manliness, you can replace it with a hand-carved wood one with colored lights—heck—you can carve it yourself if you like. If your wife can't see the kids playing in the backyard while she's doing the dishes, you can replace that 4 x 4 window over the sink with a bigger one, twice the size, maybe one that extends out into a terrarium, or how about a bay window; everybody's always saying how nice a bay window is. I know. I've been there. But, nobody ever listens to me. Home Repair Tip #2:

2. *Remember that all home repairs begin with the thought "I can do that" accompanied by the additional thought, "And, I'll save a lot of money." Research has proven that these thoughts are not based in fact, and in fact, history has continually proven this to be true, so, they're false. Remember, the great flood of 823 BC was probably started by someone who thought he could fix a leaky faucet.*

Who doesn't think they can push around a floor sander and refinish their hardwood floors? I mean, who the hell can't do that, right? I remember early on in my first home ownership, I found a dripping faucet in the garage one spring. I decide that I'd lived long enough under the shackled, precautionary fears of my ethnic upbringing. Heck, the Jews helped build the pyramids, albeit they were slaves at the time.

So, I figure how hard can it be to replace a faucet on the garage water supply? I go to the local hardware store, one with knowledgeable people who understand the older homes in my neighborhood. The guy—no, not my *guy*—asks if it's the packing or the washer. I realize I'm already in over my head. He tells me the whole faucet is cheap enough, so I might as well replace the complete piece. He shows me a few choices and I'm good to go. On the way home, I start thinking about the faucet in the garage, which we never use, and the one on the side of the house, which we use all the time. Why not put the brand new faucet on the side of the house and take that older one and put in in the garage? Great idea. I can do that. See Tip #2.

I head to the basement to find the pipe wrench that was left behind by the previous owner. It's huge, probably twenty inches long, weighing at least ten pounds. The jaws of the wrench can be opened to grab a four or five inch pipe. I march to the side of the house and prepare for the enormous satisfaction of do-it-yourself home repair. By the way, this outside faucet is connected to a pipe that extends about a foot and a half out from the house. Who ever put it there figured that was a good idea so it would be more accessible through the shrubs lining the side of the house. I clamp my

antique pipe wrench onto the faucet and apply pressure to unscrew the older faucet that had solidified its relationship with the pipe over several years. This was my first lesson in torque. The mammoth pipe wrench, with little effort, twisted the entire pipe, faucet and all, shearing it off back into the wall inside the house, probably two feet inside. The result was a busted pipe inside the house, above the plastered ceiling. Cost to remove the ceiling, repair the pipe, re-plaster the ceiling and replace the faucet, which never needed to be replaced in the first place: \$1160. It took two separate “guys” to do this job. This brings us to Tip #3:

3. *Home repair estimates follow a simple formula: $R + T + \$ = D$. Most home repairs will take longer, cost more and turn out worse than you had imagined. (R is repair project; T is time involved; $\$$ is self explanatory; and D is level of destruction, disappointment, dejection, and damage.) See Tip #1.*

You probably think I’m exaggerating, but I’ll leave my email at the end of this and you can get back to me to apologize. Plan for the worst and expect worse, or whatever you want to call it.

Those who attempt home repair know the importance of having the right tool for every job. That’s not just a Home Depot theory; it’s based in fact. Having the right tool is like having the key to start your car, or a tooth brush to brush your teeth. Things aren’t going to go well or be easy without them. I had a couple visiting from Australia once. The man was a farmer in his prior life. Not only did he have incredible core strength, he knew how to do a lot of repairs. Farmers are like that.

He's walking around my backyard that has lots of flowerbeds and huge expanses of ivy. The sprawling ivy bed closest to the house had worked its way onto the brick and up to the top of that side of the house. He tells me that the ivy will take over everything and damage the brick and I should remove all of it. He'd be delighted to help.

The next morning I get into my grungy jeans and t-shirt and meet him in the backyard. He asks me if I have a mattock. I say "What?" He says "Mattock." I figure it's an Australian accent thing, so I ask again, "What?" He asks to see my yard tools, which include a rake, snow shovel, flat-blade shovel, and a couple hand tools for gardening. He says, "Let's go to your hardware store." We get to the store, tell the clerk what we want, and we are directed to the yard tools. My friend surveys all the tools hanging and lined up until he finds a mattock. He picks it up with satisfaction and says, "One should do." For those of you who don't know, a mattock is a pick-axe like tool that has a curved blade on one side that has a straight edge, kinda like the claw on a claw hammer. You swing it down into the dirt, cutting whatever's there with the straight edge and then pull back dragging whatever was in the ground along with it. It's an amazing tool to clear a bed. The next couple hours were filled with sweat, dirt and some blood. Picture being bent over at the waist continuously lifting the mattock just over head high, swinging it down into the ivy and dirt and then pulling back towards your feet. You're thinking it sounds like things were going pretty well, and so was I. At about two hours, as I was bent over in the pulling phase, my back locked up and I went down. It was muscle spasms. I spent the next four weeks on muscle relaxers in order to be able to walk around. My guest had to leave

town a couple days later so I maintained the ivy bed until we sold the house ten years later. Here's Tip #4:

4. *There are three HR (home repair) axioms. Axiom One: if the home repair involves a screw and you don't have a screwdriver, that repair should not be attempted. Axiom Two: if the home repair requires a block and tackle and you don't know what that is, this project should not be attempted. Axiom three: if the home repair involves water, electricity, gas, heavy machinery, torches, two people, cutting, breaking, an appliance that your wife wants fixed because she uses it all the time, gluing, cementing, calling upon God, sanding, sawing, one person holding while a second person performs a task, grinding, ladders or any other activities that involve any combination of these, the home repair should not be attempted.*

The most important thing about Tip #4 is that if you don't know what you're getting into, don't go. The mattock experience not only demonstrates Tip #4, it also points to another important lesson. Adding another person to a home repair project does not insure success.

My best friend and his wife came over to visit one winter evening. We had a beautiful fire going in the living room fireplace. My friend and I are in the basement when he decides we should tear down the ceiling to "open up" the feel in the basement. There was that plaster ceiling you might remember from the faucet incident. Long of the short, he talks me into it and we take a hammer and a crow bar, which he carries in his car trunk, and attack the ceiling. In older homes, the plaster is

spread over lath, which is a narrow, thin strip of wood—8 feet long but only 1/8 inch thick and one inch wide. Remember, the lath has been holding this plaster in place for 80 or 90 years and has had plenty of time to dry out. After we have a part of the ceiling torn down, my friend suggests taking the lath boards up and burning them in the fireplace. Great idea. We do just that, stacking the lath all the way up to the flue, or I could say we filled up the fireplace, which has glass doors that we closed. Next thing I know, we're in the basement, tearing down ceiling when we hear a loud explosion up stairs. We run up to see that the unbreakable glass fireplace doors have exploded from the extreme heat of the 80-year-old lath burning like the fires of hell. Glass crystal popcorn everywhere. The cost to replace the glass doors was \$485. I can't begin to tell you how much it cost to have the basement finished. We didn't get to the rest of the remaining ceiling, so there was a series of *guys* to handle demolition, trash removal, framing, electrical, painting, and finishing. It was spread out over a year and a half. Whatever the cost was, it was paying for a job that never needed to be done. Was I happy to have my rec-room "opened up?" Sure, I've been one of those pigs in you-know-what ever since. Here's Tip #5:

5. *Asking your neighbor Joe or other neighbor Sam for advice or help will not necessarily improve the quality of your home repair, or the likelihood that a home repair project will succeed. In fact, research has shown that two meatheads are never better than one. See Tip #1, 2 and 4.*

My friend offered to pay for the glass doors, but that was not the point. You get the point, right? I can't tell you how many things I have broken, ruined and made worse by my enthusiasm to fix, improve and make better. It doesn't seem to matter what kind of project it is, it's just the nature of the beast. This leads us right into Tip #6:

6. *Remember, electrical home repair projects frequently lead to electrically related accidents such as electrocution, fire, damaged fixtures and damaged appliances. See Tip #1. This can be expanded out to include the fact that plumbing home repairs will frequently lead to drowning, flooding, soaking, ruining and other likely water related damage.*

This penchant for home repair goes deep in the psyche of mankind. Even women get involved. What's important to know is that the rules don't change for anyone. Are there creative, handy men and women out there? Of course, but they have all worked their way through a thorough understanding of these home repair tips.

By the way, the propaganda we are subjected to on a daily basis regarding the unimaginable gratification of home repair only makes this story that much more poignant. I remember a heavy snowstorm in early November, 1998. It hit our well-treed neighborhood especially hard. The heavy weight of the early snow did severe damage to all of the trees caught with their unfallen leaves. I had two trees down in my yard. The initial sadness of having lost two of our trees spawned the brilliant idea that we would call a tree service and have them cut up the dead trees and then leave

all the wood for our fireplaces. That idea morphed into the idea that I'll just go buy a chainsaw and do it myself. You've gotta love the male mind. See Tip #1, 2, 4.

So, I headed over to one of the big box houses and after browsing the chainsaw aisle, and asking a few questions, I was the proud owner of a Poulan chainsaw. That led to a gas can, chain-bar oil and a pair of heavy-duty gloves. I got home and read the directions about how to check chain tension, fill the gas and oil compartments, watch the branch weight while cutting, and how to start the saw. I already had safety goggles and ear protectors. I fired that puppy up (I don't talk like this, but have noticed that people who use power tools do.) Remember, there was a foot of wet snow on the ground. I remember my best friend explaining to me how he had gotten the scar across his cheek. "A chainsaw kicked up and bit me." Colorful, huh? I held that in mind as I started sawing off smaller ends of branches to get my feet wet, which were already wet from standing in foot deep snow.

I'm writing this story so you know I didn't kill myself, but as I worked my way down the first tree, slipping and sliding and occasionally falling down with a running chain saw in my hands, I heard myself asking, "How could they sell an idiot like me a deadly tool like a chain saw?" This was the beginning of my foray into power tools, a very dangerous adventure. I got about a third of the way down the tree and was set in sumo-tree-cutting posture for balance. My left leg forward, right leg back, squatting with the chain saw ready to cut. The trunk here is about a foot thick. I look left and right and the weight looks to be balanced for the cut. Although the chain saw didn't "kick," as I was halfway through the trunk, the weight shifted, catching the saw between trunk halves. Then, the trunk snapped apart with the left side coming down

on my ankle. I walked with a crutch for three weeks. Final cost, hell, I don't know. You've got the chain saw and peripherals, tree service and clean up. The chain saw, barely ever used, was sold with the house. Here's Tip #7:

7. *Home Depot, Lowes, DIY and other such do-it-yourself, home repair, box house organizations were created by the communists in order to weaken the structural integrity of America. The same is true of all cable TV home repair shows. The basic premise is that we all can do any kind of home repair project with the only repercussion being immense joy and satisfaction.*

Take a look at Europe or the Far East. They have buildings that have been around for hundreds, even thousands of years. Now look around the backyard of these box houses. We have replaced stone, brick, clay and mortar with plywood and fiberboard. What once was copper and lead, steel and iron, is now plastic and fiberglass. Walk around a house today and it sounds like you're in a carnival fun house, or there's a noise level so high it's like being outside. Have you noticed that we tear down homes and buildings that are ten, twenty or at best forty years old? Now, do you think I'm exaggerating?

Go visit these box houses or watch those TV shows. You will find yourself wanting more tools, more powerful tools and bigger tool storage units, and believing that you need it all. My friend has four sets of cordless power tools. Each set has a circular saw, drill, electric screwdriver, light, impact wrench, reciprocating saw, grinder, etc. They range in price from a few hundred dollars up to nine hundred

dollars and it doesn't have to stop there although he did. All of these have a rechargeable power source. You can spend thousands and thousands of dollars on tools and just get started. And, each one carries with it a silent promise that your life is going to be happier and more fulfilling with each and every new tool. You'll also find a warning on each and every tool which takes us to Tip #8:

8. *Drinking alcohol or taking drugs will not improve a home repair project. In fact, research has shown that home repair quality declines in direct proportion to the amount of alcohol or drugs ingested.*

I don't think I need to address that one. I personally think more of you folks; after all, you're reading this story. I do want to leave you with one last, important tip though. There seems to be some kind of connection between tools, home repair and the male sex organ. I've never really researched this but from my personal experience, there might be some validity to this notion. Tip #9:

9. *The belief that there will be more sex and better sex for anyone who participates in a home repair project is false. Research has shown that most home repair leads to less frequent sex due to the time spent attempting to repair what was broken or ruined during the original home repair project. See Tip #1.*

One fall day, my wife dragged me outside to show me the wood shutters on our front windows. "Those need to be painted," she said. "I want to put a spotlight on the

house for the holidays and with all my wreaths and decorations, those will stand out like a sore thumb.” I explain to her that anything I do will result in a sore thumb, but she didn’t buy it. She gave me that “come on love, come hither” look which still worked at that point in our relationship, and, as you can tell from previous episodes, I’d gained some confidence in my home repair skills, even though nothing had ever really worked or gone well. It’s all about belief. Besides, I don’t have a painting shutters *guy*.

So, I called my friend, Scar Face, and he told me I didn’t want to scrape and paint all my shutters because they’re 60 years old. What I wanted to do was replace them with fiberglass shutters that would never need to be painted. Humph. Why didn’t I think of that? He told me to measure the shutters I have and then go to my closest box house and buy six sets of shutters matching the sizes. By the way, this would require me climbing a thirty-foot extension ladder the previous owner had left in the shed. For your information, unintentional falls from ladders lead the home repair injury list: one hundred and sixty thousand of them a year. See Tip 1, 4, and 5.

But I’m smarter than that, and I’m educable. I told my friend thanks, looked at my wife and told her I didn’t care if we never had sex again, ever.

I have done my best to warn you, or educate you as the case may be, but I am sincere in the advice I offer. I’m the last person to say you can’t do something to someone who wants to try. Go ahead. You might be one of the lucky ones that is blessed with common sense, coordination, a bottomless wallet and a patient wife. The combination is as rare as a rose bush in January. Remember to spray WD-40 on all of your water supply valves every fall. Clean your gutters, or call your gutter-cleaning *guy*.

Don't let water get anywhere but down the drains. And, tighten every loose nut, bolt and screw you can find. This list of home repair tips may seem silly to some of you, but for those of you who might have a Jewish background, be extremely clumsy, physically challenged, or mentally arrogant, this list of ten tips will be most useful. I wish you the best of luck (you'll need it).

I leave you with Tip #10:

10. If you insist on doing your own home repair, I recommend having good medical insurance, knowing how to get to the nearest emergency room, keeping a well-stocked first-aid kit nearby and reading up on the psychological impact of self-induced failure syndrome. The belief that there will be an enormous sense of self-satisfaction connected to do-it-yourself home repair is false. In fact, research has shown that failed home repair may be the single greatest cause of tool related suicides.

You can do it! (No you can't)

The End of the World

Carl never thought of himself as particularly significant. He never had a burning desire to be recognized as special. And now that he was facing the end of the world, nothing seemed to have changed. He was on the front line tending to the wounded and helping carry away the dead. That's what he did, without any judgment or misapprehension. Carl was a foot soldier, doing his job, without complaints or drama.

He had noticed the new structures in their environment: massive, black squares of menace standing between where he was and where he needed to go. There were three of them and they had entrance accesses around the entire dark perimeter. He never gave them a thought. He didn't piece together their arrival with the coming doom.

Today there were more dead than yesterday. Carl would work more, sleep less. His quarter inch body was lean and skeletally strong. His metabolism allowed him to go hours without food or water.

The little girl dropped crumbs of the pretzel onto the wooden floor. The floor was swept almost every day. She stood thirty-two inches from head to toe; twenty-three pounds of curiosity had just begun to get up off her knees and walk. Her thin, amber hair usually dragged the floor, gently sweeping the dust. But now, upright, she towered over her environment.

“Don’t touch those, sweetie. Those are not for you,” her mother said.

“Aaannnyyyeh,” cried the child.

Carl heard the child but thought nothing of the sound. He was carrying another dead body to the midden, a kind of refuse dump. The child saw Carl about three feet away. She waited, judging her distance before attacking. With a gurgle and an “eeehheh!” she crossed the distance to run through the universe that the ant was occupying. Carl never looked up. The little girl had misjudged the distance, missing her chance and was whisked up into the air by her mother. “I said no, sweetie.”

Carl needed food. He smelled the pretzel crumbs and followed the scent to dinner. His jaws closed on a large piece, enough to feed him for hours. He never put the other ant down. A large shadow blocked out the light, like a cloud in front of the sun. Carl’s two hundred and fifty thousand brain cells reacted by accelerating and racing erratically. The paper towel stabbed from above catching the last section of his left back leg, tearing it from it’s joint. Carl’s trajectory became circular as he struggled to escape, but he was slowed with only five legs. He let loose a spray of formic acid to no avail. The paper towel stabbed again, crushing his head and thorax.

Where did you come from? Why did you stay?

Where will you go, when you go away?

Carl woke up angry. He went to bed angry. Carl was an angry man. And even when he was being nice, he was angry about being nice. He felt small and insignificant. Carl knew that he was killing himself and taking every drop of joy out of his life in the process. Who would do such a thing? Carl was angry about the anger that always seemed to be at the surface of his personality.

Carl hated his job as a patient advocacy counselor at Memorial General Hospital. Sometimes he had to meet people face to face and listen to their problem.

“I can’t feel my feet.”

“I understand, Mrs. Simmons. How long have you noticed this?”

“Since the operation on my back. I think they messed me up.”

“I’ve spoken with the doctor and the surgeon. They both said that your surgery went very well. The x-rays show the improvement. They said you might experience some tingling or numbness and that was nothing to worry about. You should continue your rehab and take pain medication if you need to.”

“That’s another thing. I keep running out on my refill. Can’t you fill it for me, or do something about that?”

“What kind of medication were you prescribed?”

“Oxycodone, for about two weeks with one refill.”

“That’s a Schedule II narcotic, I believe.”

“Yeah, well, I can’t ease the pain without it now, can I?”

“Excuse me. I’ll just be a minute.” Carl quietly exited the conference area and went to report the results of his counseling to his supervisor. Hopefully Mrs. Simmons would be investigated. Carl was angry with people who wanted to take advantage of the medical profession.

Carl’s anger accompanied him into every minute of every day. He didn’t kick the cat when he walked by, but he wondered how that would feel. He didn’t lay on his horn when the light turned green, but he thought about it. When he was faced with the question of being an organ donor on his driver’s license, he immediately declined. *Why the hell*

would I let them take one of my organs and give it to some clown who probably doesn't deserve it? For Carl, everyone was a clown. So when he drove through the green light at the intersection of 18th and Neubert, he was not surprised to have the Hunyadi sedan T-bone him on the passenger side. The metal hitting metal crashed together, screeching and crumpling, startling Carl.

Idiot! Carl thought. What did surprise him was the Hyundai bursting into flames. It was like magic. First, there was just a smashed front end holding his attention at the passenger side door, then, *whoosh*, the whole front end burst into flames, like the devil himself struck the match and threw it onto a charcoal grill with too much lighter fluid.

Carl jumped from the driver's seat of his blue Ford Taurus and stood looking over the roof of his car at the Hyundai. There was a woman driving and a teenage girl in the passenger seat. They both were sitting back with their heads tilted in either direction, unconscious. Carl started yelling at them to get out as he backed away from his car. There was no movement in the Hyundai. He stood still for a few seconds knowing that these people were clowns, and for his own safety he should move away from the burning car.

Then, Carl lost all sense and ran around the front of his car to the passenger side door of the Hyundai. He grabbed the door handle and yanked like he wanted to pull it off the door. The door was locked. He ran back to his car, popped the busted glove compartment and grabbed a screwdriver. He raced back to the Hyundai and jabbed the screwdriver into the corner of the passenger side window. A thousand jewels burst as the window parted. Carl pawed at the inside of the door, grabbed the handle and pulled the door open. He reached across the girl to the seatbelt and unlatched it. The girl slumped over onto the seat. Carl lifted her arms, bear-hugged the girl and slid her out of the car

onto the pavement. “Come on,” he screamed to no one. Then he reached back inside the car, unlatched the woman’s seatbelt and pulled her across the seat to the edge.

“Get that girl to the sidewalk,” someone yelled. “We’ve got the other one.” At that moment two men reached around Carl and hoisted the woman from the car. Sirens filled the air. Carl dropped to his knees, began to cry, and then tipped over unconscious.

“Carl. Carl.” He heard his voice through a dream. “Carl, it’s Brenda. Come on buddy, give us a sign.” Carl stirred, his head slightly bouncing, coming to his senses. He opened his eyes to a familiar sight. He was lying in a bed in a patient’s room at Memorial General. He’d know the putrid green color anywhere. “Hey Carl, you gave us a scare there.”

“What the hell’s going on here?” Carl asked.

“Well, welcome back buddy,” she laughed. “We got you a private room.”

Carl became aware of being aware. His lower back ached and twinged when he moved.

“You’re a hero, Carl! It’s all over the news. There’re TV people waiting to interview you. You’re a hero.” And that’s how Carl came to the end of his world. They let him out of the hospital that evening. His friend had asked for one of the hospital fleet cars so that Carl could drive himself home. He slipped out the service entrance, avoiding the media. They were waiting for him at home. Carl drove past his house to a neighboring community through the back streets to his favorite Chinese restaurant.

“I’ll have the Chicken Lo Mein please.”

“Ah, Mister Carl is a big celebrity. I saw your picture on TV. Big hero. Like some tea?”

“Bring me a Tsingtao and a glass please.”

“No tea for Mr. Carl?” Carl waved his hand and stared at the Chinese zodiac animals on the placemat. He appreciated the language barrier that made it comfortable not to talk. Carl hated talking. His beer arrived and while sipping, Carl realized his neck was sore also, probably from the impact of the accident. Carl didn’t care. His soul was sore.

“Would Mr. Carl like a fortune cookie,” the waiter asked as he set two cellophane wrapped cookies on the table. Carl handed over his credit card, grabbed a package and pulled the cellophane apart. He broke the cookie in half, popped half in his mouth and unfolded the fortune. “Prepare for the worst – expect the best.”

By the time he got home, the media had dissipated. One lone TV truck with a light on inside the back waited to ambush him. Carl pulled up his drive into the open door of the garage. He thought about leaving the car running while he closed the garage door, but he didn’t. He went through the walkway into his house where the front door was banging. “Mr. Anderson, we want to ask you a few questions. That’s amazing what you did today. May we come in?” The phone started ringing as Carl slumped onto the couch.

“If you don’t leave, I’ll fire this shotgun through the damn door.” Carl heard mumbling and shuffling outside.

“I’m Tom Ryant from Channel 6 News. We’ll come back in the morning, sir. We just want to get your story.”

Carl rest his head on the sofa back, listening to the incessant ringing of the phone. He got up and took the receiver off the cradle, hearing a tiny voice in the earpiece calling *Hello, Hello?*

The next few weeks were hell for Carl. Newspaper, TV, and radio wanted to interview him every day. The husband and son of the mother and daughter begged Carl to let them come over and meet him to thank him for the miraculous deed. The hospital urged him to take a few weeks off and recover slowly. The insurance company had dropped off a loner and had Carl sign a stack of papers regarding the accident. The agent wanted to thank Carl for being such a model citizen. He was told to ask if they could interview Carl for a commercial. There were even religious fanatics that would gather outside his house wanting him to come speak to their church groups believing him to be the next coming of the Messiah. The phone rang again. Carl recognized the number. "Hello."

"Carl, it's your mother."

"Hi Mom"

"You don't want to speak to anyone? Not even your own mother?"

"It's nothing, Mom. I just need some time to myself."

"That's what you always say. You spend all your time alone. Come over here for lunch. I want to see you. No one will bother you here."

"Maybe tomorrow. I'll call you in the morning." Carl put down the phone, walked to the window where he could see the few remaining die-hard reporters who were hoping he would come out and talk. He walked to the kitchen and opened the refrigerator door. He was out of almost everything. He'd have to go to the store sooner than later. He sat down at the breakfast table to make a list for shopping. He wrote *hate hate hate*, over and over, gouging the pencil lead into the paper. He broke the pencil in half and threw the pieces across the room. "Why?" he cried out.

He walked out back towards the garage. A woman came running at Carl from the side of the yard. She was yelling at him, something about Satan.

“You think you’re a saint or something, but you’re serving the devil. You’re nothing special.” He turned to face the screaming woman, trying to understand what was happening. She lunged at Carl with a large kitchen knife. He put his hands out blocking the thrust at his chest. The woman’s arm swung wildly left, then right, coming back at Carl’s waist, piercing the abdomen. He doubled over and dropped to the ground trying to fend off the next thrust. The blade rose and as the woman came down towards his stomach again, Carl pushed at her arms. He could feel the rage. The knife slashed across Carl’s arm and plunged into his thigh, severing the femoral artery. Carl cried out, grabbing at his leg. He tried to sit up, then passed out.

*Looking and finding and wondering, too,
What is this difference between me and you?*

Carl opened his eyes, raised his head and, as he unfolded his wings, he stretched his full form upward and forced his wings down lifting himself into the air. His yellow-grey eyes focused on the movement below on the forest floor. Without thought, Carl floated down, wrinkled legs extended ending in talons that grabbed the weasel and pierced the skin. In one continuous, graceful motion, Carl swooped back up, carrying his prey to safety. Carl never considered that today was the end of the world. The rabid weasel twisted in his grip, the razor sharp teeth barely gashing at Carl’s leg.

*The rains storm and the wind blows
Where it stops, nobody knows.*

Carl bolted upright in bed. Today was the day. He rubbed both eyes with the first knuckle of his forefingers bent into a fist. *That feels so good*, he thought. He threw back the covers and slid off the mattress onto the floor. *Today is my birthday!* He stripped off his pajamas and pulled clean clothes from his bureau drawer and threw them onto the bed. He ran naked down the hall to the bathroom to start his day.

Downstairs, his mother heard the commotion. “Carl, you brush your teeth,” she yelled up. Carl’s mother was thoughtful and attentive. She was thirty-six years old and happily divorced. Her son was a kind, gentle soul who appreciated all of her hard work and sacrifice. And even though it was Carl’s birthday today, she would have to disappoint him again. She simply could not afford the video game box he wanted. Her ex dragged her to court every three months claiming she wasn’t paying her fair share of child support. Even if she didn’t lose, she lost the money wasted in court costs.

Carl bounced into the kitchen. “When do I get my presents, Momma?”

“You’re going to eat your breakfast, go to school, and spend the afternoon at the sitter’s until I pick you up. Then, we’ll have you’re favorite spaghetti dinner and open some presents before cake. How’s that sound?”

“Aw, I have to wait ‘til then?”

“Come sit with me while I finish my coffee. Your eggs are getting cold.” Mother watched her son spoon forkfuls of egg into his hungry mouth. Between bites he would look up at her and smile. He tossed his dark hair to the side with a shake of his head.

“Get your backpack and hop in the car. It’s time to go.” Mother set the dishes in the sink and turned around looking for her keys on the counter.

Carl stood outside in front of the car looking up at the morning sky. The thick haze would burn off as the sun rose higher; at least that's what the weatherman had said. He had no way of knowing that the haze was being formed by a chemical reaction, a kind of chem trail cloud injected into earth's atmosphere by the visitors waiting patiently, cloaked beyond detection in space. By tonight, a deadly virus would permeate the entire planet, killing all life. It was the end of the world.

*Row, row, row your boat
Gently down the stream*

The greenish goo shivered ever so slightly in the container. It was most likely the vibration of the holding machine that caused the substance to quiver. There was consciousness within the green that sensed a Carlesque quality that was indefinable. It had no forming boundary before the glass container, and no life beyond. It was the last day of development for the goo. It was the end of the world. A greyish-blue arm reached for the container and seven fingers wrapped around the glass. The arm elevated and tipped the container perfectly to empty the goo into the waiting opening at the top of the torso. Every last drop slid down the opening. The goo would circulate inside the torso of the greyish-blue thing, nourishing life. What would become of the goo, well, no one knew.

*I am, therefore I think, it seems
Inside a thought, lies the world of dreams*

“Why don't you save some eggies for somebody else?” Carla asked.

“Why don't you mind your own business, bitch,” her sister replied.

Carla jumped to her feet slamming her chair into the cabinet, fists clenched.

“Stop it you two!” Mother stepped up to the table separating the energy. “I’ve got bread toasting for both of you.”

“She thinks she’s special, just cause she fights. Fuck her,” sister complained.

“Damn it, we’ve been over this. Carla fights because that’s what she does, just like you wait tables. Let it be.” Mother brought the toast to the table as Carla stayed on her feet.

“I’m going over to the Center and won’t be home for dinner. Mentor’s making the team a meal tonight. I’m sorry, mom.” Carla headed upstairs to pack.

“She’s nothing special.”

“Girl, you’re getting on my nerves. Finish up and get to work.”

Carla walked downtown to the Center for workout, meetings, and dinner. She was still simmering. Nineteen years of being teased, taunted, and bashed around left some scars. Big sisters could be ruthless. But the end product wasn’t an angry woman; Carla was mean. She had learned to stand her ground and if somebody pushed, she’d push back harder. Her reputation had led to a tryout at FIGHT, the world class fighting team that competed throughout The Province. Carla was in her second year and was undefeated in eight fights. Three of her opponents were dead. Two others would never fight again. Saturday night was going to be Carla’s biggest challenge yet. She was facing Mage Fay, a woman with a twenty-five pound weight advantage that had put down over forty straight opponents. Saturday night couldn’t come soon enough for Carla.

She tramped into the Center, changed and went straight to the heavy bag. Hands up for guard she slammed the top of her foot into the bag about head high. Right foot,

right foot, right foot, right foot, right foot. Then she went left, over and over again. She was amazingly fast.

Mentor called the Team to the benches. “Alright ladies, Saturday night’s card is posted on the board. Show up and fight, or say goodbye to your career. Take Friday off, all of you. Tonight I want you all going through takedowns, flying leg locks, and escapes. Don’t slough off and don’t ask for mercy. Tomorrow night you’re all taking punches in the ring. I’ve got plenty of food on the table upstairs, so get to work and earn it. Carla, see me after. GO!”

Carla hung out until the girls dispersed. Mentor sat next to her on the bench. “You’re not good enough to win Saturday, Carla. Fay’s too strong. You can skip town now, or limp out on Sunday, if you survive.”

“Yeah, thanks Sir. You’ve been an ass since the beginning. I wouldn’t expect anything else.”

“It’s the end of the world for you, sweetie.”

It was finally Saturday night, but as each number brought her closer to consciousness: *three, . . . four, . . . five*, Carla’s chances faded. Carla tried to open her eyes. Bright light broke through the slit on the left. She had to get to her knees. Her right eye was throbbing and wouldn’t open. Could this be possible? Two years of training wasted? Months of beatings and bruises. She fought for her life. Muscles screaming from torturous workouts pushed further and further by a sadistic *Mentor*. FIGHT was supposed to be an honor, a way out of the endless poverty and sickness. Carla was big and tough and disciplined. She grew into a ruthless monster that never quit. She had become a local hero, but she was just a bum. This was the truth of FIGHT.

Carla's anger had not been enough. The leg sweep had torn her ligaments in the left knee. As she wobbled, ready to fall, three punches drove her to the mat. The fighter stomped on Carla's leg, breaking the bottom of her femur and pushing the bone through her flesh. Blood spurted. She kicked her legs trying to right herself and roll over. *Eight, . . . nine. . . .* She got herself to one knee when something blocked out the light. Fay's two hands, fingers threaded together, came slamming down from above. The impact broke the glia limitans lining that protects the brain and allows it to function after concussive impact. The bell clanged and split the noise. The crowd cheered, but not for her.

The stretcher carried her away, but Carla was long gone.

*Something remains each time you go
Why can't I see this? Why don't I know?*

Carl stirred, sensing motion. He wasn't sleeping; Carl hadn't slept in over eleven thousand years. He was adrift in a black sea. Tiny specks of light appeared and disappeared from awareness. His body was in gentle orbit surrounded by millions of the same. There was motion; there was direction.

And then, uneventfully, it passed. Carl had no thought or concern; the event horizon was undetectable, just the difference between life as he knew it and inevitable doom. For Carl, he was fine, but he wasn't. The increase in his speed of drift was unnoticeable, just the advancing acceleration towards the center.

Would he continue decomposing? Temperature was rising, increasing towards a million, billion, billion, billion degrees. Molecules, atoms and particles began to alter, but Carl persisted, now without choice. Had there ever been choice? Structural orbits began to break down, still Carl continued, onwards into the darkness.

Next stop, Singularity.

I'm on my way home, you see

I'm on my way home to me

Tica

Some places are better for storytelling than others. When you're sitting at a bar or tavern, throwing back a few, it's easier to listen patiently to your storyteller. That's not the case for this one. I was waiting to go into court for my divorce and no matter what anyone tells you about how happy or sad a relationship might be, when you stand in front of the judge and tell him, "Yeah, we messed up," it's sad. So, I'm sitting on one of those benches outside the courtroom waiting and this guy is sitting on the bench across from me, and he looks worse than I feel.

We make eye contact and for some reason I ask him, "Are you O.K.?" He hesitates, nods yes and says, "No." There's a part of me that regrets having asked.

"I just got back from a vacation that didn't go so well," he says.

I just nod.

"Let me ask you something," he says. "People die all the time, right, but most of 'em don't matter to you or me, maybe none of them matter at all. I mean, is there someone whose death would hit you hard, you know, make a difference in your life?" He pauses here, "Do you ever think about that?"

He takes a pack of cigarettes out of his shirt pocket and taps one out of the pack.

"I don't think you're allowed to smoke in here," I say.

“I wasn’t thinking about that question when I landed in Costa Rica,” he continues. “I was ready to blow off some steam, vacation my ass off. It’d been one hell-of-a-year, but that’s another story. So, I arrive in Costa Rica and take one of those rinky cabs to the hotel, right on the beach, just like you’d want. All the cabs there are old American trusties like Camrys and Accords and Malibus. I don’t know how they get parts: big black market there, but especially in drugs.” He fishes around in his back pants pocket and pulls out a small jack knife. He opens the knife and cuts off the filter of the cigarette. He folds the knife closed and puts it back in his pocket.

“I love a Marlboro but I just can’t get the kick I want through a filter. It’s like, well, it’s not the same thing. So the cab lets me off in front of the hotel and I stand there looking at this small two-story joint that’s dark inside the lobby. I turn around and see these pastel-painted buildings, all two-story up and down the street. It doesn’t really feel like paradise. I turn around again to go in the hotel when this kid takes my hand and says, *Ola mister*, blah, blah, blah in Spanish. I shake my head. *I guide you. I show you everywhere. I get you good smoke.* He’s maybe ten or twelve, skinny, but not malnourished. He’s got a sparkle in his eyes. I look at the hotel knowing that the ocean is right behind it. I look down at this kid and say, ‘Sure, but not today. Look for me tomorrow.’ The kid holds my hand and pats the top of it with his other hand. *I be here early and wait for you. You call me Tica.*”

My storyteller stops as he fishes in his pockets again and pulls the two front ones inside out. “Shit. You got a match?”

“I’m pretty sure you can’t smoke in here,” I tell him.

“I’m not gonna smoke it, I just go through all the motions.

I toss him a pack from my case as he continues.

“So, I check in at the hotel and get a second floor room with a balcony over the street. It’s not noisy, but not quiet either. I see Tica in a group of other kids, maybe ten to sixteen years old. I change into my suit, grab a towel, and head down to the beach. The hotel opens right onto the beach. There’s a cheesy, make-shift bar set up right outside the hotel, so I grab a beer and trek through the dirty sand to a spot where I throw down the towel and take off my sandals. I’m standing there staring off into the glimmering water, wondering if there’re any sharks, when Tica comes up to me and says, *You want drugs tonight? Feel good and celebrate.* ‘Yeah, get me some smoke and rolling papers. Meet me at the cafe across the street in a couple hours.’ I hand him a twenty and trust that he’ll show. *Thank you mister. I need this money. My brother’s sick and shakes. Money let momma buy medicine.* ‘Sure kid.’”

He mashes the cigarette in his hand, drops it in the trashcan, and pulls out the pack and taps out another.

“The ocean in Costa Rica is perfect: the color, the temperature, the sand, the waves. It’s a model for any vacation. I take a swim and look forward to some weed from Tica later. It’d be nice to get a buzz with the sunset and warm breeze. I need to relax and let go of some shit.”

He takes the pocketknife from his back pocket and opens the blade which pulls all the way out of the knife and drops onto the floor. “Piece-a-shit knife.” He picks the blade up off the floor and carefully slices the filter off the cigarette. He puts the blade with the knife on the bench beside him.

“I swim a bit, lie on the towel and head in to change. I shower off and go down to a decent dinner of fish, rice, and beans. They’ve got beer on tap and some island kinda music, all relaxing to me. I head out to the street and see my little buddy. He runs up and hands me a bag with some weed and papers. There’s also a chocolate cookie in the bag. *Smoke good. Cookie get you high a long time. Slow, you know. You want girls? My sister works.* I laugh, ‘Yeah, no. Where do you live, Tica?’ He starts to explain and point to where he lives running on in Spanish. I shrug to let him know I don’t speak Spanish. *I live in room with momma, sister and brother, over there.* He points down the street to I don’t know where. ‘Do you go to school?’ *No school, just get money for momma. I see you tomorrow for more, yes?* ‘We’ll see,’ I tell him.”

He draws on the cigarette.

“Three days go by and I don’t see Tica. I’m out of weed and the cookie was gone the day before. I go out of the hotel and over to the group of kids on the street. ‘Any of you know Tica?’ The kids look at each other shuffling their feet, shrug and then scatter. I call after them but they’re gone. I go back into the hotel and ask the desk clerk if he’s seen the kid, Tica, anywhere. He stares back at me for a minute, then reaches behind on the table and opens an English newspaper to the back. There are four lines saying that a Costa Rican boy named Tica Salas was stabbed yesterday buying drugs. The authorities suspect a gang threat to warn other kids of trespassing in their territory. The funeral is tomorrow at 10 AM at Christ Church in Salto. I ask the clerk where that is. He tells me to take a cab.

He takes out another cigarette, reaches around for the blade lying on the stool, cuts the filter, and puts the cigarette in his mouth.

“I grab a bite to eat in town and return to my room to change. I make my way down to the beach and sit, looking out at the ocean: peaceful, calm, and quiet. I’m not thinking about anything but this kid, Tica. I go inside and lie in bed ‘til I drift off. I can hear the kids yelling and playing in the street out front.

“I wake up early next morning, dress and head downstairs to get a cab, some dirty old Camry. The driver asks why I want to go to this church. I tell him a friend had died and I want to go to the funeral. He says he’ll hurry to get me there in time. We drive for forty-five minutes, up into the countryside and then down into a worn-down mess of houses with faded paint and laundry hanging out of the windows. He pulls up in front of a tiny church and points. He tells me he’ll wait for me. I nod.

“Inside the church there are a dozen people, poorly dressed, heads bowed. The minister is speaking Spanish slowly and quietly. I understand nothing, but everything. He reaches the Amen and the others repeat it. They gather around a small coffin, singing some simple melody, grab the sides, turn, and walk down the aisle past me out the door. *Entre tus manos, me amigo*. They’re singing, . . . and I’m crying. After they’ve gone, I keep humming that melody, trying to imagine what the words mean. It went like this:”

He sings some words in Spanish, “Entre tus manos, me amigo” humming most of it. The deputy calls my name. My ex is coming down the hall with her lawyer.

Scarecrow Knows

Standing in her flower print cotton dress, hair falling straight to her shoulders with one tiny green beret, her favorite dark green flats containing her urge to run, Tessa stared at the small blue box in her hands, turning it over and over. No matter how hard she tried to pretend it wasn't true, things were different now. Her father's arm draped over her shoulders, pulling her tight into his hip, refusing to let her feel alone.

“Why, daddy?”

He gently whispered, “I don't know, honey. Maybe God knows. But we'll get through this. I promise.” He squeezed her even tighter, but she was already outside his reach.

She shoved the blue box deep down into the front dress pocket where she knew it would be safe, wrapped in her heart and carrying its important answer.

The monotone murmuring through the early spring sunshine began to lose its energy, closing in on a chorus of “Amen.” Two by two, family and friends walked by either side of the hole dropping handfuls of earth onto the box, landing with a soft thud. *We cover you with our love, preparing you for your long rest, but we will never forget you.* Tessa walked back to the car with her dad and little sister, Emma. Her dad walked

slowly, stopping for hugs, voices quietly supporting a man who had lost everything. The sun warmed the air while forcing the cars to sparkle and the eyes to squint.

•••

Tom struggled to find meaning. How was he going to raise two small girls? How was he going to get up in the morning? Life became a day-by-day puzzle, broken down into minute-by-minute pieces. He took a leave of absence from teaching, spending most of his time with Tessa and Emma, refusing to let them out of his sight. It lasted for about two weeks until Tessa suggested they buy a new pig, a pig they could keep as a pet forever. There were a few friends who came around to bring meals or sit for coffee, but there was always an empty seat at the dinner table.

Tessa and Emma took to growing up without a mother and supported each other as best they could. Both would ask Tom endless questions about life and death and God. Both wanted to know who was running things and how come their mom was gone. The house felt empty, the garden suffered, the girls were enrolled in the local school and somehow, time went by. Memories began to fill in the empty spaces in their lives: memories that brought Cheryl closer and held her tighter.

∞

The needle rose and fell like a caterpillar creeping along, the black thread trailing behind leaving a ragged suggestion of a small oval in the center of the burlap feed sack.

“Is that the mouth?”

“Ha ha, you could call it that, but it’s just a suggestion. I’m still amazed this actually works.”

“Isn’t there another way to scare away the crows?”

“Well, we could have you stand out there in the garden and yell and screech at them.”

“Momma!”

“Hand me that old red flannel shirt of your father’s over there. That should give this fella a smart look for spring, don’t you think?”

“Hey, I still wear that shirt,” Tom protested, noticing for the first time what was happening while he sat in an overstuffed armchair reading the Register.

“Not anymore you don’t.”

“I don’t understand why he has to look so spooky. It’s not Halloween,” Tessa said.

“It’s a bunch of rags and straw, Tess.”

“Why do you try to make the face so real looking?”

“Well, as long as we’re putting this ole fella out in the garden, we might as well give him some personality. I’m about done here. Why don’t you get your book and we’ll read for a while before bed.”

Tessa unfolded herself from the couch, paused with another question rising inside then lumbered up the stairs. She stopped in the bathroom to brush her teeth and then grabbed the “The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian” off her desk. It was a pretty good book, and Tess needed to finish it plus two more before her mom would let her take a “spring break.” Summertime on the farm meant more work, later bedtimes and lots of outdoor barbeque.

∞

“Keep the wheelbarrow close so you don’t have to pitch so far.”

Tessa scooped the fork under the manure and heaved it into the wheelbarrow.

“Like that, Tom?”

He stopped shoveling, broke out the big smile acknowledging the tease, then gave his daughter a *what’s wrong with you, girl* look. “Silly. It’s an art Tess, you only scoop the wet straw or straw with manure. You’ll get the hang of it.”

Tessa loved doing chores with her dad. She didn’t love chores, but she loved being with her dad. He made everything you had to do, easier. “Horses sure can poop, pop.”

“Finish up Sadie’s stall while I get another bale to spread. Porky’s waiting on breakfast.”

“Dad, are you really gonna sell Porky at the fair?”

“Tess, we’ve been over this. Porky’s living out a destiny, just like you and me.”

Tessa started singing, “Destiny, you an me, me and you, pitching poo.” She dropped the pitch fork and bent over laughing.” Tom shook his head and walked over to the loft ladder.

“Get done and fetch those eggs. I’m getting hungry.”

“I’m on it, Tom,” Tessa laughed squinching up her face. She ran up to her father and hugged him and then headed out of the barn to the hen house.

∞

74 acres in southern Iowa was home for the family. The white clapboard house had four bedrooms and two porches, one that walked out to a wrap-around. The winter sky here could go steel gray for days at a time with a foot of snow always a possibility. Summers were warm and breezy with plenty of time to grow a bountiful garden.

Tomatoes, lettuce, carrots, squash, kale, peppers, potatoes and peas nourished the family all the way through the late summer harvest. Tom leased most of the land to a neighbor who planted about 55 acres of corn and alfalfa for hay. In exchange, Tom got a few bushels of corn and enough hay for their barn animals and mulch for the garden. He taught some on-line psychology and English at The University of Iowa and Kaplan U. With the food they grew and two incomes they never really wanted for much. Tessa and Emma were home schooled.

∞

She was filthy from the barn chores. Muck the stalls, brush down the mares, feed the goats, pig and chickens, and gather the eggs. On her way back to the house, he was always there, waiting at the center of the garden: black hat, big button eyes that seemed to follow her everywhere, roughly stitched mouth, straw-filled shirt and pants blowing in the wind. Strings dangling with sticks and pieces of aluminum and tin all tied together rattling and clicking, making an other-earthly sound. How did the scarecrow know she was uneasy with him? She shrieked nonsense and parts of songs she knew as she ran past the garden and on up to the house.

“Tessa, run your bath,” Cheryl shouted from the kitchen as the front door banged. “Dinner’s in twenty minutes. Get clean and help with the table setting.”

Tessa loved baths; it felt so renewing to wash all the farm off. The rest of her life awaited. Her mother had laid out soft towels and fresh sweats. Dinner with the family would be quiet tonight. Tomorrow was weigh-in at the auction. Her dad had one pig that had been pampered for almost two years. Everyone in the family spent time with the pig, feeding, cleaning or just talking.

Tom and Cheryl had met at a neighbor's Fourth of July barbeque twelve years ago. It took months of calls and meet ups before anything clicked. Cheryl was editing for the Des Moines Register while working on her short stories, and Tom worked hours that were anti-social.

Fate has a way of making things happen though and Tom and Cheryl were victims. After a few months of half-hearted calls and a couple of beer dates, Cheryl was offered an opportunity to be included in an anthology of rural short stories. She was unclear about which story to send in, so she wanted an unbiased reader to offer some input. Her barbeque party friend Denise suggested Tom. Cheryl was doubtful that Tom could offer a truly creative view as a psych teacher, but Denise told her to enjoy his company and worry less about his critiquing skills.

Once Tom had had a chance to read a few of the stories, he and Cheryl met up at the coffee shop to go over his impressions. He did very little talking, mostly asking questions about the stories and Cheryl. It was one of those questions that threw her a curve. One of the stories Tom had read was about a woman who was always second-guessing herself as a mother. She was frightened that she wouldn't know how to raise her kids to be good people, happy people. "What are you afraid of?"

"What makes you think I'm afraid?" asked Cheryl with a bit of an attitude.

"Well, it's your story and I think you're too familiar with the subject to be making it all up. I mean you're a really good writer, but this is too well told to be imagined by you."

Cheryl was impressed. The comment was insightful. “Maybe you should stick to the suggestions and stay out of my business, sir,” she said with a massive, ear-to-ear smile on her face. “Do you like the story or not?”

“I like you,” Tom said. “The story’s O.K.”

Cheryl backhanded his arm playfully and pushed herself away from the table. “I’m getting a refill. Interested?”

“Forget that. Let’s go to Sammy’s and get a couple beers. Reading all this sappy garbage is killing me.”

Cheryl did a double take, making sure he was kidding, then burst out laughing. Her unusual quality of being able to laugh at herself was very attractive to Tom. She pulled him up by the arm and said, “You’re buying after that cruel comment.”

∞

She shifted her weight onto one leg, standing in flip-flops, yellow shorts and a solid bright green t-shirt. Her finger dove into the cookie batter, formed a hook and rose to fill her mouth one more time while her mother’s back was turned.

“I want you to promise me you won’t spook your sister again. Do you hear me, Tess?” Her mother looked over her shoulder to see her daughter unable to answer with a mouthful of cookie batter. She said nothing, simply staring at the stuffed, guilty smile on Tessa’s face. She used her one clean finger to wrap her hair behind her ear. “That’ll be enough. Those are for desert.”

Once her mouth unstuck the glob from her teeth, and she had swallowed enough to talk, the question came. “Why have we got to sell Porky?”

“Why do you think?”

“Cause we need the money to run the farm?”

“Then why did you ask?”

“It just doesn’t seem fair. Porky’s part of the family, he didn’t do anything.”

“It’s your question, I’ll leave you to answer it. Now, spoon that batter onto my cookie sheet. Small mounds, two inches apart on all sides.”

“When am I going to get married, momma?”

“What! What’s filled your head this morning? You’ve got no business thinking about that at your age. Marriage is a long way off for you. Besides, you’ll get married when that becomes the next thing to do, and not before.”

“But how will I know when it’s the next thing to do?”

Cheryl shrugged, “Scarecrow knows.” Her mother took the empty bowl from Tessa’s headlock and shoed her daughter out of the kitchen. The last finger full poked into the child’s mouth. “Go get your sister cleaned up for lunch and make sure your bedroom is tidy, her’s too.”

∞

Tessa sat cozy on the family room couch watching television with her younger sister, Emma. Emma was not supposed to be watching TV this late, but Tom and Cheryl were finishing up work and rather than head up to bed, she had plopped on the couch with her sister. Emma was big for her age and her full head of thick, brunette hair gave her the appearance of being older. She adored her big sister and never passed up an opportunity to spend time with her. “See, Dorothy is following the yellow brick road to the wizard who’s going to help her get back home.

“How did she get lost like that?” Emma asked.

“Remember the tornado and all the wind and the house spinning? That’s how she got lost.”

“Who’s that?” Emma asked pointing at the TV.

“That’s the Scarecrow. He’s dumb as rocks, but not really, and he wants to go see the wizard so he can get a brain. Then he’ll know everything.” Tessa didn’t enjoy watching TV with her sister. It was one question after another.

“Does our scarecrow have a brain?” Emma asked.

“How would I know, silly? Maybe. I’ll bet he knows you’re going to be in trouble if Mom catches you up. Go on.”

∞

Tom and Cheryl brought the rest of the food to the dinner table. Emma and Tessa were buttering their rolls. The table already held tomato-cucumber salad plates and a pitcher of ice tea and one of milk. Cheryl put down the steaming bowls of roasted potatoes and broccoli. Tom set down the barbequed chicken and ranch dressing.

“Who’s hungry?” Tom asked.

“I don’t want any green stuff,” Emma declared.

“Of course you want some broccoli,” Cheryl corrected.

“I finished Huck Finn today. That’s a pretty good book,” Tessa shared. “Please pass the potatoes.”

Tom laid everyone’s favorite chicken part on her plate. “I want to thank everyone for helping clean out the tool stall today. I am forever in your debt.”

“I love you, daddy,” said Emma.

“I’ll take a week off from chores,” Tessa said. Laughter all around the table.

∞

The county had a live stock auction three times a year. Pigs, goats, hens and horses usually filled up the bid card in spring. Tessa sat with her dad in the sellers' bleachers away from the bidders. As each animal was brought out for bidding, Tessa wanted to know how much it would go for. Tom answered four times. Finally, he offered a solution. "Take this livestock list, and here's a pencil. See how well you can guess the sale price on each one."

"How would I know?" Tess asked.

"That's the game, Tess. See what you *do* know." Porky was brought out and quickly sold at the end of some fast bidding. Tessa was agitated.

"Why did we bother to raise a friend and then sell him for money?"

"We didn't, Tess. You're the one who made Porky your friend."

"It feels like we lied to him. What will they do with Porky? Is he going to feed a family?"

"I don't know, Tess. Why don't you go ask the man who bid him up?"

"Dad!"

"Sometimes a farmer will take a boy like Porky and breed him."

"You mean Porky could have lots of wives and piglets?"

"For awhile. Come on, let's get our payoff and head home."

"Are we gonna get another pig for the farm?"

"Are you ever going to stop asking questions?"

∞

Her mother sat her on her lap and pulled her close. Two arms wrapped around the growing, pre-teen girl, refusing to every let go. She rocked the child left and right in a small circle. She was singing her favorite song:

*It's in every one of us
To be wise
Know your heart
Open up both your eyes*

The youngster melted into the eternal safety of her mother's arms. Nothing could ever make her feel better than this. The song cut short.

"Tess, I've got something I want you to have."

"Sure, momma."

She produced a small, blue box from her apron pocket. "Your grandmother gave this to me when I was just a year or two older than you are now." She let her daughter turn it around and around in her small hands. "This belongs to the Clayton women." Tessa opened the lid on the box revealing a silver ring with a small, square-cut diamond set off by two rubies on either side.

"Ooohh," Tessa cooed.

"This is what we give to the man we're gonna marry. We let him take it from this box and put it on our finger when it's time."

"It's beautiful, momma."

"It *is* beautiful, sweetie. Great Grams had good taste."

"I can't wait to get married. What's it mean to be married?"

"I couldn't begin to tell you. You'll run into that one all on your own."

"I want to marry a man just like dad. I want to live in the city, and I don't ever want to have to do chores again."

“Best of luck to you, sweetie. How about you take this box and put it somewhere safe. It’s yours now. I’m gonna get your sister ready for bed and then I’ll come tuck you in.”

∞

It was early evening turning into dark. Cheryl was headed home from the Register having put the last two edited stories in the system for print. Coming at her from the other lane was one tired, older grandpa driving his son’s truck home from the neighbor’s. He managed to doze off right there on Highway 16. Cheryl was too late cutting the wheel to ditch the car. Grandpa survived.

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Tessa pushed the sofa across the floor to the other side. She stood back, looked at the sofa, then turned around and looked at the empty space behind her. The fireplace was too far away. “This is no good.” She turned the sofa one-quarter turn, sighed and fell back into the cushions, her chin dropping to her chest. The door chime rang. “It’s open.”

Nick came in sporting a new white button-down and a plain red tie. His dusty brown hair flopped across his head, softly framing a pair of bright, brown eyes that had fire inside. Nick was not over weight, but he had a fullness to his stature. He wore thin rimmed glasses more as an intellectual statement than a need to see better. “Moving furniture again? Why can’t you let it be?”

“You’ll be glad I’ve figured this out when you want to sit in front of the fire and make your clumsy moves.”

“Come on, Tess, we’ve got to get over to your Dad’s.” He walked over to her, pulled her up and wrapped his arms around her. Her stare found the floor as her shoulder

length brown hair swept forward on either side of her face. She let herself be drawn into the embrace. Tears welled up in her tender green eyes, but she didn't cry. "Tess, you O.K.?"

"I can't believe you're finally going to meet my dad. It seems like such a big step."

"We've been dating for almost a year. I can't believe you've kept me from him."

"My mom and dad were special for each other. What makes you think I think you're special enough to meet my dad, mister?"

"That's not it, is it?" He held her close and waited.

"I still miss my mom. Whenever I visit dad, it's always there, right in the center of every conversation. He feels he let her down, and me and Emma."

"I'm sure he'll have plenty of questions for me to distract him," smiled Nick.

"My dad has never gotten over her being gone, and even though I'm not living there anymore, he still keeps me close."

"I don't want him to feel I'm competing with him. I just want to him to know I'm out here looking after his baby girl." Tessa wiped her eyes on Nick's sleeve. "Sure, go ahead. I was going to do wash tomorrow, anyhow. You gonna be O.K.?"

"I'm fine. Let me change and we'll head out."

"I told Emma we'd pick her up on the way. She agrees it's time for me to meet your dad and she said the casserole came out great and for you not to worry."

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Standing barefoot in her well-worn jeans and John Deere t-shirt, Tessa stared at the small box in her hands. It spoke of lifetimes, sliding around in drawers, pushed out of the way by garments of desire and necessity; but the well-worn blue felt couldn't cover

the memories which clung to her like a comfortable cotton dress. They circulated in her bloodstream sharing space with all that keeps the heart alive. She looked up at Nick with her deep green eyes, loving eyes, but she was looking through him, focused on some other time and place.

“Tess, do you want to say something?”

Words assembled and dissembled inside her head, encyclopedias of stories raced by, but he couldn't hear that. He was waiting for words. “You know my mom would have liked you.”

“I hope so, sweetie.”

“I want you to have this,” she said, holding out the box. “I mean, me.”

Nick's puzzled face couldn't settle on the right expression for the moment. He took the box, flipped back the lid and stared. “Tess, are you asking me to m—marry you?”

A quiet, nervous laugh erupted. “Are you really going to ruin a beautiful moment like this with a question?”

“Hell YES! I mean, no, not a question. Hell yes I want to marry you. Aren't I supposed to ask you?”

Who Knows?

The Hand Off

They say we remember everything. Everything that has ever happened in our lives is buried in our subconscious. I don't know who *they* are and I can't personally testify to the truth of that statement, but all the sadness in my life seems to stem from one moment, which I'm not sure how well I remember.

My foster parents, Marjorie and Frank, are carrying me into a lawyer's office. Marjorie, with her sweet smile and mid-western good looks, is wearing a suit which is much less common for her than the usual flowered print dress. She's a couple of pounds over weight, but that only adds to her softness and warmth. I notice that I'm not hearing her ever present "Hmmm's" and "Mmmm's" which she utters while reflecting upon or questioning the current situation, or acknowledging the rightness of it. Frank, fedora in hand, is a good eight inches taller than Marjorie, standing nearly six feet, very trim, but not thin. His job as shift supervisor at the plant helps keep him in decent shape.

Their energy seems tight and conflicted today, ever since we woke up. Until this morning, life was rolling along with a very pleasant routine: bottles, diapers, hugs and kisses, and lots of horsing around with patty-cake and counting toes and pointing and naming, all the routines that make up the excitement of my daily existence, regardless of how minimally I participate.

It has been a good six months with lots of love, nourishment and attention. How do I know this? I know this because I'm a happy baby with a loose, freely offered smile and a peaceful demeanor. I'm easy going, so-to-speak, but all that's about to change.

Mr. Schlesinger's law suite is very practical and efficient. There is nothing lavish or superfluous with either the office or the man. A Brooks Brothers suit and a pair of well-polished wing tips allow him to be appropriately dressed in court or at his desk: a gentleman of a lawyer. His spectacles are thin and almost invisible.

Inside the lawyer's office, after some preliminary, quiet conversation and some papers being signed, the mood of my foster parents changes from a forced geniality, which was the overriding sentiment today, to a real sadness. I can feel this sadness rising like a wave about to crash on the shore; only this wave is going to crash on my heart.

Being an adopted child, almost my entire relationship with my biological mother was conducted in utero. My birth was the first and last I would see of the woman who carried me for those last nine months. She was very young at the time of my birth, more of a girl than a woman. But how can the ability to carry a child, obviously a woman's project, be carried out by a girl? Doesn't the ability to do the thing create the truth of the doer? "Do the thing and you will have the power," said Emerson.

This young woman, tired from the last sixteen-hour event, was quietly resting, holding her attention on the nurses as she watched them clean me up. She didn't really want to see me, or get to know me or grow attached in any sort of way, which I'm sure was best for both of us. But she was happy and relieved that this part was over and

confident that she was doing the right thing. There didn't seem to be any shame or remorse that a mistake might have been made or that she was to blame.

After I was born to my mother, I was immediately handed off, probably to a nurse who would have placed me in the nursery. How long I remained there is not known to me, at least not in my conscious mind. What took place that morning—or was it afternoon—happened so quickly and easily that I cannot recall any unusual qualities surrounding the event. Was my birth mother sad? Sorry, I can't remember. I was too busy trying to shield my eyes from the bright lights and orchestra of sounds, some of which were familiar, if not in a new and harsh way. This was over fifty years ago and no one was trying to soften the environment by dimming the lights.

I was carried off to the nursery where there was quite a gathering. Some of the cribs held unhappy newbies, crying and clenching their fists in a kind of muted rage. Not me. I was content to kick my legs out, wave my fists in the air in a modest form of celebration, and drool. Goodness, I could drool, and the wetness on my chin never seemed to bother me, at least not until I was a few years older. I don't have any sense or memory of missing this "mother" with whom I had been so intimate for the last nine months. I mean, if you think about it, I'm inside that womb all by myself. Whatever muted sounds I heard did not register as clear communication. Did I share her every feeling and passing emotion? I'll get back to you on that one.

So the nursery is rocking with the usual clamor of cries and tears and squeals and gags. There's a regular rotation of handlers, some more gentle than others, but the nurses and care takers are all about the residents being lifted, bounced, patted, rocked and jiggled. Considering the trauma of the event which these kids have all been through, there

seems to be plenty of cooing and gurgling. Then there's the feedings: regular and bountiful. No one's going hungry here, even the fussy ones get enough milk or formula down to begin the long growth period ahead. Some of the inmates are rolled out and down the hall during feeding time. Some of us just stay put and relax into our new life. There was no inter-nursery communication between the babies: no groups or clicks being formed. Each of us was wondering what in the world was going on, and even that only came to mind for a second or two each day.

A few days passed like this until I was called out. My bassinet was rolling, which was new for me because I was one of the permanent residents in lock down. Now, here I was rolling out of the nursery and down the hall in a direction that was unfamiliar. The nurse and I passed through a pair of double doors and then later into an office with several new faces present. Conversation was light and excited. There was laughter and an overall happy energy. I was feeling it. Some of the conversation was medically driven and questions were asked and answered. "How was I doing?" This I believe was health directed. "When should I be fed?" "What should I be fed?" "How was my disposition?" I was passed from one person to another, nurse to doctor, doctor to social worker until I finally ended up in the tender, loving arms of my foster mom. That felt good. That felt very good, and cozy, and secure.

The next several days were a welcome change from the hospital nursery. Home meant better lighting, quieter surroundings, and more comfortable accommodations. My room was painted a pretty pastel and there was a mobile hanging above my crib. The sounds were all soft and soothing so I was able to catch up on my sleep, which had dropped to sixteen hours a day in the nursery.

I was attended to a bit more immediately if I fussed in any way. Being the only baby present made me special, as far as I could tell. I mean, picture going from a nursery where there are fifteen babies being cared for by four nurses or attendants. Now, transition to a home, a beautiful home where you are the only one in need of any attention what so ever. You get the idea.

As the days turned into weeks, I could sense a routine developing which kept me clean, dry, well fed and entertained. I had a growing sense of family, of belonging and being a part of something greater and more solid than just myself. Besides Marjorie and Frank, there were a few other people who would come and go. Older people, younger people, loud people, and people who wanted to grab me and hold me themselves. I never really minded being passed around, but I was always glad to be back in Marjorie's arms when all was said and done. Frank was a kind, gentle man and he always wanted to lift me higher, make me squeal with glee and spin me around, sometimes to Marjorie's consternation, but even when I brought my last meal back up all over Frank's shirt, I never held it against him or felt mistreated in any way. As families go, this was a happy one as far as I could see, and I loved being a part of it.

As the weeks rolled by, I turned over in my crib, sat up by myself and finally crawled. I heard Marjorie tell some friends that I was a very early crawler. That was a big deal. Not that I felt imprisoned or anything, but being able to head out on your own is a wonderful moment of freedom. I cannot describe the exhilaration I felt that afternoon. Marjorie remained close by and was calling out all kinds of encouragement and laughing louder than I had ever heard before. These were the good old days. This was six months. I

did everything I could to please Marjorie and Frank, everything was a constant expression of my appreciation for what was.

It came up on me fast. Six months of life and growth and wonder. I can't imagine any new born having a more wonderful first six months. As a milestone, six months meant nothing particular, but it meant everything in my life because I was running out of time. Life as I knew it was about to change.

So, here we are in Mr. Schlesinger's office. Something's going on and I don't know what it is. I have never seen Marjorie or Frank behave the way they are now. More muted conversation, more papers to be signed, and then I can feel a breaking energy. It begins with Marjorie's arms which are holding me. Frank is standing close, his hands on both of us. He is rubbing Marjorie's back and gently squeezing my leg. Mr. Schlesinger's secretary calls on the intercom and says, "The Starks are here." Marjorie is starting to tear up. Frank is starting to tear up. I start to turn my mouth down into a pout and then I tear up, and I don't even know why. It's like the right thing to do.

The secretary enters the room with two new people I have never seen before, and walks over to us. All these people tell each other their names and smile and shake hands and chat uncomfortably. The Starks are nervous as hell. They are a bit older, very well dressed, and visibly excited. Mrs. Stark is babbling a mile a minute. She's on and on about how cute I am and how big I am and how much she wants to hold me. Mr. Stark is a smaller man than Frank and not quite as interested in having me in his arms.

Mrs. Stark, Evelyn, again asks Marjorie if she can hold me. Marjorie holds me out to her, as if an offering and Evelyn takes me in her arms. These are not arms that offer

security or warmth. These arms are reaching through and tearing at a fabric that has been tenderly woven over the last six months. These are not my mother's arms.

It's over quickly. Marjorie and Frank walk out of the room together, without me. They don't stop to look back, they just walk out the door and away. And then, they are gone. I am left with Mr. Schlesinger, his secretary, and the Starks. Evelyn is holding me in her arms. I kick, I twist, I cry out. She holds me firmly, not in a vicious way. She sits down on the office sofa and seats me on her leg. She's bouncing her leg and saying squeaky words like, "That's a good boy. You're doing great. You are so big. What a good boy." And I cry.

Some time passes, me crying, wailing hysterically, with toys and rattles and crackers waving in my face. For a moment, I feel bad for Evelyn who is left to sooth this wild, miserable baby. My tears flow heavily, then I gasp for air, and then I wail again. The pain is so deep; I can't find any comfort. I'm not sure I understand why I am crying, but that doesn't stop me.

Finally, enough time passes and I have begun to cry myself out. I'm exhausted and I can't keep this up much longer. Mrs. Stark, Evelyn, is uncomfortably tolerant and patient. She has had me screaming in her face for what must have been half an hour. We both need a break. I fall into her chest and whimper and moan. She rubs my back and talks softly hoping to settle and sooth me. Mr. Stark and Mr. Schlesinger have been quietly talking, signing more papers, and trying to finish the business at hand, whatever that may be. Where are Frank and Marjorie? Why haven't they come back for me?

Days, then weeks, then months go by. The life I once knew has vanished. I am a resident in the Stark's home. I have a sister, and I have a dog. I have a back yard with a

swing set, and I have a small automobile that uses my legs and energy for locomotion. I have plenty of food, a very nice bedroom, and fresh diapers whenever occasion arises.

What's not to like?

Who am I? I am Benjamin, Benjamin Stark.

Years later I would listen to my mother, Evelyn, tell stories about what a good baby I was. "I could put Benjamin in his play pen and he would amuse himself for hours. He never cried." She didn't realize that I was in shock wondering what exactly had happened, what had I done wrong? At least that's how *I* remember it.